



A FAUX LOVE  
NOVEL

*Fake it  
For Glory*

WESTON PARKER

# **FAKE IT FOR GLORY**

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A FAUX LOVE NOVEL BOOK 11

WESTON PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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# FIND WESTON PARKER



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## DESCRIPTION



### **Romance is a waste of time and energy.**

I'm not going deep with anyone. Let's keep things on the shallow end of the pool.

Where it's easy to get out when I'm ready.

Besides, my focus is on bigger things. Things that actually matter.

Like changing the world.

Until I need a sexy fake date to round out my image.

Ridiculous as it is, it's my only option.

Something about me being aloof and arrogant. What? Me? No...

But my date is more than a role to fill.

She's everything I've avoided in life so I don't settle down.

And she's trouble.

She's keeping a secret from me that could destroy my reputation.

And my business.

Trusting her might have been a mistake.

But loving her?

That's beyond faking at this point.

**This girl has her claws in me, and I hate to admit that I love it.**

## Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

Also you get a FREE novel when you join, cause, why not?

See you on the inside...

[Get it HERE](#)



## MERIDA

I gathered my notebook, pen, and a tablet and started the trek across the bullpen of the bustling media office.

Everyone wanted the scoop on the best entertainment stories that had erupted over the weekend. Furiously typing fingers clattered on keyboards, papers rustled, and journalists chattered loudly into their phones as they interrogated their sources. The smell of coffee and fresh pastries intertwined, creating a comforting, familiar smell that had become part of my Monday morning routine.

I moved with purpose, keeping my chin up and my notebook and tablet clutched to my chest. I was a petite person and went easily ignored or unnoticed in a sea of tall, beautiful people. I had to elbow my way past a trio of sports guys gathered around the water cooler, who didn't stop talking even as I apologized for stepping on one of their massive feet. I continued on my journey, my destination the large corner office where the boss reigned. The Monday morning chaos made it hard to make a straight line to his office. Not to mention, my desk was about as far from the office as possible.

“Good morning, Merida.”

I smiled and waved at the young woman who wrote about the latest fashion trends. Other journalists were already hard at work, their faces illuminated by the soft glow of computer screens as they furiously typed away, racing against time to meet their deadlines. It was always like a horserace to see who could get the hottest stories posted online first. The first one out of the gate would have their article referred to, tagged, and

retweeted over and over and over. Every set of eyes that read the article was money in the bank. If the headline was juicy enough, the reader would subscribe to the publication. That meant more money.

“Excuse me.” I gently touched another journalist’s shoulder as I passed.

“Hey, Merida,” he said. “Have a good weekend?”

“Not too bad.” I continued on my way.

Phones rang incessantly, their shrill tones cutting through the din. Reporters answered with a sense of practiced urgency, their voices modulating as they spoke to sources, chased leads, and confirmed facts. If I was being honest, I was a little jealous of their exciting jobs. My job wasn’t nearly as thrilling. I was a fluff writer, hence my desk way out of the bullpen. I was an outsider.

I knew they didn’t respect me. They were nice but they didn’t see me as one of their counterparts. I was essentially one of the high school kids we invited to work in the office every summer. I was a small step above the intern fetching coffee for the real reporters.

I made my way to the CEO’s office, knocked, and cracked it open a couple of inches.

The CEO, Herman Moore, sat behind his desk. He didn’t look up from his computer screen, which cast a glaring reflection on his glasses, but he gestured for me to come in. Dalton Weir sat on the other side of the desk with one ankle propped up on his knee and his notepad in his lap. He looked the part as star of the company, which he was. He got to write the hard-hitting stories and his pieces brought in more clicks than all other reporters combined. If I could pick whose career I wanted to emulate most, it would be his. I just wanted one piece of the pie. One shred of the glory. I had the talent.

I just needed the opportunity.

“I’ll let you get to it.” Dalton got to his feet. He flashed me a smile and winked. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I stepped out of his way to let him pass and took the seat he’d vacated. I drummed my fingers on my tablet in my lap, waiting for my boss’s attention. His fingers flew across his keyboard.

Finally, he glanced up at me, and the corners of his eyes crinkled with a smile. “Morning, Merida. Want a coffee?” He nodded to the far side of his office where a new espresso machine gleamed. “I can make you a latte. Dalton is better than me, but hey, I can give it a try.”

“I’m not here for coffee, Dad.”

“Oh?” He cocked his head and pushed back from his computer. Finally, I had his attention. “What’s up?”

Dad to me, Herman Moore to the world. I was one of two children. Technically, I was the only human child. The newspaper, *Full Disclosure*, was my sibling. A sibling I was very jealous of. It was pretty embarrassing to compete against a newspaper. Even more embarrassing? The paper took priority most of the time.

*Here goes nothing.*

I balanced my notebook and tablet on my lap. “I have a pitch.”

“What is it?” He looked back at his screen, peering at it over the frames of his glasses.

I fidgeted with my notebook spine. If anyone thought I got the job because of nepotism, they would be mistaken. My father didn’t believe in me. He gave me the job out of duty, but that didn’t mean he thought I could actually be a journalist. Not a serious one anyway. He always gave me the proverbial pat on the head before sending me back to get out of his hair. Prime example, as soon as the word “pitch” left my lips, he’d gone back to his computer and subconsciously decided this would be a waste of his time. It stung more than I wanted to admit.

“I want to do an in-depth opinion piece about Jensen Loxley.”

“No.”

“Dad, listen—”

“No,” he said again. “We’re not publishing anything with his name on it. I don’t want anything to do with that man.”

“It would be an opinion piece,” I pushed.

“No.

“Jensen Loxley is making waves with this new AI he’s developing,” I continued. I was desperate to do the story. “Writing a piece about him will bring his work front and center. Right now, only the people in his social circle, the other wealthy elites, are paying any attention to what he’s doing. I want to get the word out about what he’s doing with AI. Everyone should know, not just a select few who go to the right clubs and rub elbows with the movers and shakers in this world.”

He shook his head. “We’re not going to give him any more press. He appeals to a certain group and it’s not our readers. Stick with what you know.”

“I know a lot,” I said quietly.

“You’re doing a great job writing the advice column,” he said. “Aren’t you working on some fall decorating articles? That’s what our readers want from you. Pumpkins, twinkling lights, DIY’s. Right? That’s the term? DIY?”

“My readership is nonexistent,” I argued. “No one is reading that drivel. I want to write something people will read and learn something new. Something people will care about.”

*Something I care about.*

“Didn’t you tell me about some new candle or something?” he said. “That’s new.”

It was difficult to be dismissed as irrelevant in general, but to have it done by your own father really hurt. “I’m ready for more,” I said quietly. “I’m ready to write a real story beyond the best seasonal home décor or the new candle scents. I want to write something juicy. I’m bored. Really bored.”

“You have to pay your dues,” he said.



“And I will, but I can’t do that if I don’t write,” I insisted. “Why don’t I write the piece and you can decide if it’s worth publishing?”

“You’d be better served writing what you’ve been assigned.” He said it like he was my boss and not my father. The conversation was over as far as he was concerned. Once again, I’d been shot down. I was forever doomed to write fluffy garbage.

“Fine,” I said and got to my feet.

His focus remained on his computer screen, my dismissal issued. I left his office with slumped shoulders. Dalton sat at his desk, which had the prime position outside my father’s office. It was a hierarchy. Those with desks closest to the boss’s office were more valuable. They were like royalty.

The further away from the main office you got, the lower in class and value the reporters got. My desk was the furthest you could get, which was a clear statement about my value to the publication.

Dalton looked at me with his warm brown eyes filled with sympathy. I knew he meant well, but I was sick of the sympathetic looks. I was sick of people patting me on the head and promising it would get better.

“How’d it go?” he asked.

“As expected,” I muttered.

He offered a small smile. “It’s going to happen for you. You’re going to find that one story that you can sink your teeth into. It’s going to blow his socks off.”

“Unfortunately, he doesn’t seem interested enough to even look at what I might write,” I said, sighing. “He never wanted me to have this job.”

“That’s not true,” Dalton said.

“It is. He gave me the job because it was either I work for him or I go back to working at the coffee shop, and my shiny journalism degree would have sat on the shelf for the next five years. I was a pity hire.”

As I walked back to my desk, I couldn't shake the feeling of inferiority. It hung over me like a cloak draped over my shoulders, making me want to crawl into a hole and hide. The newsroom buzzed with activity, but I felt like a spectator watching from the sidelines.

I couldn't help but compare myself to the other reporters who were churning out stories at breakneck speed. They had the fire in their bellies, the passion that made them chase after the truth. I was just going through the motions, waiting for a decent story to ignite my spark.

As I sat down at my desk, I saw the blinking cursor on the screen but couldn't bring myself to type anything. I didn't want to write about "Happy Fall Y'all" signs or the many shades of fucking orange.

I wanted to write something that mattered, something that would make a difference. But how could I do that when I didn't even believe in myself? Dalton was right. I needed to find that one story that would blow everyone's socks off, but where was it?

I thought the story of the billionaire tech guy threatening to help robots run the world was a worthy story. It certainly got my attention. I wanted to dig into it at least. If my father didn't want me to write about Jensen Loxley, maybe I could find something else about AI that was relevant to today's news. Then, I could sprinkle in some Jensen content. Loxley was a hot topic right now. Just mentioning his name would bring in clicks.

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. The chatter around the office and the phones ringing or vibrating across desks became too distracting. I exited off the document I'd been working on for the story about the tech billionaire. I needed a paycheck and that was not the story that was going to get me paid.

I sighed and read the first few lines of the article I was writing about trending home fragrances for fall.

"Joy," I murmured. "Pumpkin. Cinnamon. *More* pumpkin."

Jealousy clawed at me as I eavesdropped on a couple of the women who covered entertainment news. Apparently some A-list celebrities were caught cheating on their spouses. They were so excited to write their content. I wanted to be thrilled to write something. I thought I loved writing and journalism in general, but lately, I'd been rethinking everything. I was twenty-nine. It wasn't too late to switch professions.

Unfortunately, I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. The only thing I wanted was writing. But if no one read what I wrote, what was the point?

A paycheck. That was the point. Instead of being pissed and jealous of my coworkers, I grabbed my earbuds from the drawer and put them in. I put on my motivational music playlist and got busy writing about pumpkin spice and everything nice.

*Gag.*



**S**o many cameras.

I smoothed out my suit and tried to assess where I should look. After all the interviews I'd done over the past few weeks to market my new AI tech, I should be used to having all eyes on me. Truth was, I felt like an imposter. A poser.

My comfort zone was in a lab or behind a computer, not exposed to the world. My inner nerd wanted to disappear. But things had changed. People were interested in me the man, not me the tech developer. I wasn't the quiet dork in the back of the class anymore.

I was a god.

Beside me, Esther Eves closed her eyes as the makeup artist patted powder over her face. The bright lights in the studio apparently highlighted imperfections she didn't want people to see.

"No thanks." I held up my hand when the makeup woman turned to me.

I wasn't about to wear makeup. I didn't care if I looked wrinkled or washed out.

Esther smiled. "Ready?" she asked.

I nodded.

She pasted on a huge, fake smile as the man behind the camera held up three fingers and started to count down. When he hit one, the studio audience erupted into applause.

I smiled back at Esther, playing along with the performance. I had never been one for attention, but now it seemed like it was all I was getting. The lights blinded me momentarily, and I blinked a few times to adjust to the brightness. Then I cleared my throat and sat up straighter in my chair.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Jensen Loxley!”

The applause increased. I nodded, feeling a little uncomfortable. “Thank you.”

Esther launched into an animated introduction of my current AI project. The crowd hummed with curiosity. Her attention shifted from the camera to me and she clasped her hands in her lap. “So, tell us, Jensen, everyone wants to know about this AI you’re developing. Will robots be taking over the world? Will they keep our houses clean?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Not quite. I’m not interested in giving AI programs a physical, capable body. I’m not interested in robots, either. My goal is to create an AI program that makes our lives a little better.”

“How?” She cocked her head to the side. “Speak in layman’s terms. People really want to understand why we’re being told to be afraid of AI. Is it as bad as we’ve been warned?”

“I don’t feel all AI is dangerous,” I explained. “In fact, what I’m working on is designed to assist with tasks that are too difficult or time-consuming for humans. Imagine an AI program that can analyze data faster than a team of people, or a program that can monitor your health and alert you to potential issues before they become major problems. That’s the kind of AI I’m developing. Think of it like your mother checking in on you, reminding you to make your doctor appointment or keeping you on task if you have a project due. It can set deadlines and help you stay on track. If you have something you purchase often, like a gallon of milk, my AI will remind you to pick up a gallon of milk on your way home. It’s more of a companion program that you set up to suit your needs.”

The audience seemed to relax a bit, their attention focused on my words. Esther leaned forward, her eyes bright with interest. “That sounds incredible, Jensen. But what about the concerns of AI becoming too intelligent, developing a consciousness of its own? Plus, I don’t know if I like the idea of my mother reminding me to take my birth control.”

The audience laughed at her joke.

I shrugged. “We don’t need to worry about my program getting too smart. AI programs are only as intelligent as we make them. And as long as we keep a close eye on their development, we can ensure they don’t become a threat. Besides, my AI program is not designed to think for itself or form opinions. It’s simply a tool to make our lives easier.”

Esther nodded, seemingly satisfied with my answer. “What you describe sounds a lot like my Google assistant,” she said. “Isn’t the technology already out there?”

“My AI would work with existing assistants for one month,” I explained. “My program would learn a person’s habits and routines and improve upon those daily activities. It would help manage a person’s time and find ways to make their life just a little easier.”

“I’m definitely getting the helicopter-mom vibe,” Esther said, laughing, which prompted a response from the audience.

She was doing her job. She was giving me a chance to explain my project. So far, the interview was pretty tame compared to some of the more difficult interviewers that wanted to try and make me look stupid or maniacal to drive their biased dangerous AI story.

“There are some people in the world who need a helicopter mom,” I said. “It’s not about taking over someone’s life or nagging. It’s an assistant, if you will. It’s a support system. I didn’t design the technology to run anyone’s lives. It’s not going to do the laundry and the dishes, but it can remind you to do those things. Let’s face it, not all young adults released into the wild are really ready for it. Even grown adults with busy schedules and demands need reminders to take care of themselves.”

“Are you saying you are hoping to mother the world?”

“Not personally.” I chuckled. “I don’t trust myself to take care of anyone. I don’t even have plants. My tech is more of a nurturing tool. Think of our older members of society. They could use a little help as well. It’s meant to be a gentle guidance. It’s not going to boss anyone around.”

“I bet you have someone special in your life that acts as your guide,” she said, smiling. It was an attempt to get me to open up about my personal life, something I never did. I had no interest in making my life public fodder.

“I have an assistant,” I said, smiling. “Several, actually. However, for those that can’t afford to hire an actual assistant, my AI is a cheaper version that doesn’t spill coffee on you.” I waited a second for the audience to laugh at my joke. There was an incident in the papers a week ago about how I supposedly berated a lowly assistant for spilling coffee on me. It wasn’t true and it was eventually debunked when it was pointed out I was on the other side of the country during the alleged incident.

“You seem like a very agreeable man.” She flashed a sexy smile. “I never believed the story.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling just a little uncomfortable. “Anyway, my tech will take the initiative and handle everything from booking dentist or doctor visits to making sure the person actually shows up. Not to mention the benefits for school.”

“School?” she repeated. “Are you suggesting students can use your tech to write reports and do their math?”

I grinned. “Definitely not. There will be failsafes to prevent that from happening. I’m saying it can help with time management. Students these days have tests, extracurricular activities, clubs, sports and so on. The assistant can budget time for studying and keep them on task for a project due at school while keeping their extracurricular activities straight. This is also going to be very helpful for parents juggling several kids’ schedules along with their own work. It is an



expert at helping you manage time and figure out when to work hard and when to take a break.”

“And you’re sure you can’t program it to make a mean martini?” Esther joked.

“I’ll leave that to the others,” I replied easily. “My goal is to make time management a little better. I want to help people feel better in general. It’s not an extra pair of hands or a maid. It’s a coach, assistant, parent. Whatever you might need a little help with.”

She laughed. “Can it help me quit smoking?” Her laughter filled the studio, with members of the audience joining in.

I smiled, really feeling it in my toes. I appreciated the valid questions and a chance to talk about my tech. “It can.”

“You’re joking,” she said, eyes narrowed skeptically.

“I’m not,” I said.

“Please tell me more.” Esther made the gesture for me to continue.

“I’ve programmed the assistant to help people quit smoking. It can give reminders, track progress, and provide motivation. And if you slip up, it won’t judge you. It will just help you get back on track.”

Esther’s expression softened. “That’s actually really impressive. How did you come up with the idea?”

I didn’t like talking about my personal life—ever. “It’s just one of those things I thought could be helpful. Like I said, I have assistants. I know I would struggle without someone reminding me where to be at a given time or about a project I want to work on. It’s all about staying motivated and on track. I mean, how good does it feel to reach a goal?”

The audience clapped while Esther kept her practiced smile in place. “I think you might have convinced me to embrace all of this new technology. As long as I don’t have a beautiful robot checking out my boyfriend or making me look bad.”

“No robots here,” I assured her. “Just the tech. But who knows what the future holds?” I added with a playful wink. “Maybe we’ll have robots that can make martinis and help you quit smoking at the same time.”

This elicited a round of laughter from the audience, and I felt a sense of satisfaction wash over me. This was why I did what I did, to make people’s lives easier, to help them reach their goals, and to spread a little bit of joy.

“Tell me, what are we calling this wonderful gift?” she asked.

The audience went completely quiet. One of the camera operators slowly moved, telling me my face was front and center. “Lox,” I answered with a smile.

The audience erupted into cheers once again. Esther laughed. “Fitting.”

As the show wrapped up, I made my way backstage, greeted by the rest of the production team. I had survived another television appearance. My publicist and assistant rushed over.

“You did great, Jensen,” Carl, my publicist, said and patted me on the shoulders.

Susan, my assistant, handed me my phone. “Good job. The car is waiting. You have that podcast in twenty.”

“Do we have time to get something to drink?” I asked as I was gently guided toward the back door.

“I’ll have something delivered,” Susan answered.

“I’ve got the questions the interviewer will be covering,” Carl said.

They ushered me into a limousine. Susan gave me a cold bottle of water while Carl started giving me the right answers to the questions. I couldn’t imagine trying to navigate my life without Susan, Carl, or the team that kept me moving forward through the day. I wanted everyone to have the same advantage I had when it came to having some help staying on track.

“Coffee?” Susan asked.

“What?” I blinked trying to switch from the answers Carl was grilling me on to what Susan was saying.

“Do you want your usual coffee?” she asked. “I’m having it delivered to the studio.”

“Oh, yes, please,” I said, nodding. “Thank you. In fact, buy some for everyone. Donuts too. Or fruit. Whatever you think would be best.”

She nodded as she speed-typed on her phone. “Done,” she said and put the phone down before turning her focus to what I was wearing.

Susan had been with me from the start. The woman was no-nonsense. Her hair was always in a tight bun and I was pretty sure she was only a few inches shorter than my six-three stature, but I couldn’t say for sure. She always wore black heels and some shade of gray pant suit or dress suit. She didn’t take shit from anyone. She came off as cold and unfeeling and no one would dare fuck with her, but I knew she was really a big softie inside. She had a soft spot for me, but she wouldn’t hesitate to kick my ass if she thought I was stepping out of line.

“Thank you,” I said, smiling. “Seriously, thank both of you guys. You know how I hate this stuff.”

“Of course,” Susan replied. “That’s what we do.”



## MERIDA

I wanted to bang my head against my desk. My fingers had been poised over my keyboard for a good thirty minutes but there was a disconnect. More like a malfunction. My brain would not come up with words. The article I was supposed to be writing was stilted and dull. I had zero interest in pumpkin-spice anything and was struggling to show any enthusiasm for the topic.

I leaned back in my chair and let my eyes wander around the bullpen in search of inspiration. The TV mounted in the corner was on the usual morning show. Sometimes, our publication was referenced, and it was a chance to catch breaking news. I saw the man that I was anxious to investigate—Jensen Loxley.

I got up from my desk and got a little closer so I could read the closed captions. He was talking about his AI. It was the story I craved to investigate and write about. I was about to go back to my desk to watch on my phone when Dalton noticed me.

He smiled and picked up the remote that was always on his desk. He turned up the volume. Everyone in the bullpen knew what that meant—shut up. Something big was happening and it was important to hear. I walked even closer, giving Dalton a thumbs-up to thank him for helping me out. I listened to the man talk about how his AI was going to be a mother to everyone.

I watched the man closely. Not only was he crazy smart, but he was also ridiculously attractive, which was why he was such a hot topic right now. My father didn't get it.

Jensen Loxley was the total package. Black hair perfectly styled in the latest rockstar fashion with it just a little longer on top. His square jaw exuded strength and confidence. He was clean shaven today, but I had seen pictures of him sporting a bit of a five o'clock shadow, and damn did it do something to my insides. The thick black brows and eyelashes made his green eyes stand out. The man could have been a model. He was that hot. Women went gaga for him. He wasn't even my type and I was hot for him.

"This is going to be a disaster," I heard someone say.

I reminded myself I was supposed to be listening to the story, not ogling the man sitting so casually in his bespoke suit and Gucci shoes. Jensen smiled at the camera. The temperature in the room went up at least twenty degrees. The women were all slack-jawed, with a couple of them fanning themselves.

"How does someone get that much beauty and that big of a brain?" One of the fashion writers shook her head. "Seriously, he is the definition of the total package."

"Maybe you could focus on what he's saying," one of the guys muttered.

"He's going to create a robot species that takes our jobs," someone said. "Remember that Will Smith movie? This asshole is the guy that's going to make it happen."

"You could use some guidance and discipline in your life," Dalton countered.

"No way," one of the younger people said. "I think it would be cool to have someone doing the stuff my mom used to do. I hate making dentist appointments or appointments in general. I hate talking to the people over the phone, so I usually just don't do it. If that thing had my birthday and social security it could pay my bills and cancel all the stupid

memberships I somehow get signed up for. I keep the memberships because I hate calling.”

“That’s a very good point,” I said, nodding.

I listened to the interview before it went to commercial break. It gave me the itch to write. I quickly walked back to my desk. The fall scent article was still sitting half written on the screen. I switched over to the article I really wanted to write. Jensen’s name was in bold at the top of the page. I closed my eyes for a second, inhaled, and let my fingers do the talking. They flew over the keyboard as the words flowed from my brain to the tips of my fingers.

The opinion piece was going to be a hot topic. I just knew it. I made sure to use the keyword Lox to grab everyone’s attention. It was all everyone was going to be talking about. Jensen Loxley had just broken the internet, so to speak.

I kept the piece focused on the tech and left out the fluff that so many of the other pieces got distracted with. Yes, the dude was gorgeous, but it was his brain that interested me. I wanted to know what made him tick. If I could get an interview with him, it would make the article really hot.

The back of my chair moved. “Doing it anyway?” Dalton said with a small laugh.

I looked up and saw him reading over my shoulder. I quickly minimized the document. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He laughed and moved to sit on the edge of my desk. “I’m not going to say anything. I think you should write it. From what I saw, it’s good.”

“It’ll never go anywhere. It’s just something I want to write. If I have to write about candles all day every day, I’m going to cut my fingers off. I need to feel like I’m doing something with the fancy degree I got. Anyone can write about scents and decorations. I just want to do the job I’ve wanted to do since I was a little girl. I know it’ll never get published, but just to make me feel better.”

“I think you should write it,” he said. “Seriously. Write it. I’d love to read it when you’re done. I want to see what you can really do. I have a feeling you’re going to be some serious competition. You might take my job.”

I snorted. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen. My father sees you as his golden goose.”

“You’re going to get there one day, Merida. You’ll find your groove. You’re going to find your lane and you are going to own it.”

“Thank you for the support,” I said, smiling. “Maybe *you* can be my dad.”

“Hey, I’m not that old. Actually, I want to run something by you. Come back to my desk with me.”

I followed Dalton to his desk, curiosity getting the best of me. As we walked, I couldn’t help but think about what he had said about my writing. Could it really be that good? Could I really be competition for him? The thought was both exhilarating and terrifying. I had yet to be taken seriously as a journalist. My father barely even read what I wrote.

At his desk, he pulled up a document on his computer. “I’ve been working on this project for a while now,” he said as he motioned for me to take a seat.

“What is it?”

“Have you ever heard of a place called the Faux Agency?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Faux as in fake?”

“Yes. It’s a matchmaking company for the rich and occasionally famous.”

I wrinkled my nose. “You’re writing about a matchmaking company? That does not sound like your typical story.”

He smiled, his eyes flashing with mischief. “There’s a lot more to this story. This company doesn’t really focus on matchmaking. They provide dates. The woman that runs the place has inadvertently made matches, but the whole premise is based on men, and a few women, paying for dates.”



“You mean an escort agency,” I said.

He grinned. “The woman insists it’s not escorts in that sense. It’s a professional date. The women, and a few men, are chosen or selected based on the client’s preferences. They attend a function or date or whatever and are paid a healthy sum.”

“So, it is like a madam?” I whispered.

Dalton raised an eyebrow. “In a way, yes. But it’s all above board and legal. The Faux Agency has been around for years, and it’s been notorious for catering to the wealthy and powerful. The woman who runs it, Della Fontenot, is quite the character. She won’t talk to me. I’ve tried several times. Look at my title. This is going to reel in readers.”

“Playing with Fire: the Heat and Deceit of the Faux Agency,” I read aloud.

“Isn’t that seductive?” he said, grinning. “Come on, sex sells. This is a hot story. It’s got all the elements that earn clicks. Sex. Intrigue. Rich people.”

I laughed. “As usual, I’m sure you’re going to be the star of the show. It’s good. Good job.”

“It’s not finished yet,” he said. “I need more.”

“More?”

“I need to understand how it works,” he said in a low voice. “I haven’t been able to get anyone to talk. I need an inside scoop.”

“What are you going to do?”

He looked at me with a slow smile. “How do you feel about going undercover and checking this place out for me?”

I stared at him with confusion. “What?”

“I’m lacking in the application requirements.” His gaze dropped to my boobs that I had covered with a scarf. At least, I thought that was what he was doing. The girls tended to be obvious no matter how I dressed them up or down.

“Me?” I asked with surprise. I could feel my cheeks turning red. “You want me to apply?”

“I need someone who can get on the inside. Someone who can go undercover and see what’s really going on at the Faux Agency,” he said. “Someone who’s not afraid to use their feminine wiles to get what they want.”

I hesitated. “I don’t know, Dalton. This sounds risky. What if I get caught?”

“You won’t get caught,” he assured me. “I’ll make sure of it. And besides, think of the story you’ll be able to tell. It’ll be the scoop of the century. And who knows? Maybe you’ll even enjoy it.”

I chewed on my lower lip, considering his proposition. It would be a huge risk, but he was right. The story would be incredible. And I could use the experience. “Do I get a byline?”

He grinned. “Look at you negotiating. We’ll see what kind of information you can dig up.”

“You mean we’ll see if I can get in the program,” I countered.

He laughed. “Trust me, you are not going to have any trouble getting in. Dress for success.”

“Say it, Dalton,” I teased. “Say you want me to wear something that shows my cleavage.”

“I’m a gentleman. I would never say that.”

“But you would mean it.”

“So, do we have a deal?” he asked. “Are you willing to go undercover? It’s all in the name of journalism.”

It was so far out of my comfort zone. I did everything I could to minimize my feminine curves because I wanted to be taken seriously. Now, Dalton wanted me to use those curves to get a story. I wouldn’t be the first person to use my God-given assets to get what I wanted and I wouldn’t be the last.

“Fine, I’ll do it,” I said. “Only because you’ve been nice to me and you agree not to tell anyone about the story I’m writing.”

He extended his hand. “It’s a deal.”

“Maybe. I think so. I need to look at this place a little closer. I want to make sure I know what I’m getting into.”

“I would never send you into harm’s way,” he said, laughing. “You might even make some quick cash.”

“Is that ethical?” I asked.

“Making money?”

“Making money by lying,” I whispered.

“Consider it a perk,” he said, shrugging. “My main focus is the process. I want to understand how these women are selected. What do they do to get in? How do they make five grand by going out to dinner with a guy?”

“Five grand?” I gasped in total surprise. “Seriously?”

“Five grand is child’s play,” he said, laughing. “From what I’ve uncovered, some of these women make upwards of a hundred grand.”

“No!” My eyes nearly popped out of my head. “For real? What do they do to make that kind of money?”

He flashed a wicked smile. “That’s what you’re going to find out.”



I ran the program, looking at the coding and reading it like someone would read a book. I saw bugs that would prevent my AI technology from running correctly. I saw the little things that no one else could see. My job was to find the bugs and send them off to my developers to fix. I couldn't afford to roll out the technology if it was littered with problems. It had to be perfect.

I scrolled through the code, my eyes scanning every single line of text. It was a tedious job, but I was determined to find every last bug. After hours of searching, I finally found it—a single missing semicolon that was causing all sorts of errors.

I quickly sent off the bug report to my developers and waited anxiously for their response. In the meantime, I decided to take a break and grab a cup of coffee. As I walked to the break room, I couldn't help but think about the potential of my technology. It had the power to change the world, but only if it was flawless.

I sat down at my desk with a fresh mug. No sooner did I take a delicious, caffeinated sip than my door opened. My sister, Hattie, walked in with a cardboard tray with two coffees. "How did I know you were in need of a blast of caffeine?"

"Oh, the good stuff," I said and got to my feet. I pushed the mediocre breakroom coffee to the side and eagerly accepted the coffee she offered. "Thank you."

"So, I saw you Monday," she teased.

“You saw me?”

“On the morning show,” she said and sipped her coffee. “You did good.”

“Why does it sound like you’re about to add, *but I could have done better?*”

“Because you could have done better,” she said.

“How so?”

“You were speaking geek.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

“It wasn’t bad,” she said like it was a compliment. “I guess you can’t take the geek out of the kid. It doesn’t matter how much money you have or the fancy suits you wear.”

I balled up my napkin and tossed it at her. “Very funny.”

“Okay, you’re a nerd. There’s no fixing that. I’ll still love you, but we need to talk about your calendar. We’ve got a busy few weeks.”

Hattie worked as my other assistant, and she was more like my mother. She had a soft nature. She told me what to do but was gentle. She was more like my other half. She knew me. She knew all about me.

Hattie knew about those things I didn’t like to talk about. She knew the hell I went through when I was growing up. My sister was the popular, gorgeous cheerleader and I was the geek. I had no friends. I was an ugly duckling. I was the super-smart nerd that graduated high school at the ripe age of fourteen. I was a square peg in every sense. Hattie was the one that helped me navigate social norms. She was the one that ran interference when my awkwardness became too obvious.

“We?” I asked. “*We* have a busy few weeks?”

“You know what I mean,” she said. “You’ve got a lot of publicity stuff on your plate, and I just want to remind you this is what you asked for. I warned you this might be a lot. Are you sure you’re up for stepping into the spotlight?”

“I’m fine. I can handle it.”

That was why I had Hattie at my side. She looked after me. She understood just how much I hated the whole idea of being in the public eye.

“Okay, we have the official launch party at Madison Square Garden, but before that, you have a series of events before the big shindig.”

I couldn't help but groan. “Small talk.”

Hattie gave me a sympathetic smile. “Yes, small talk. But you know the drill. Smile, shake hands, and try not to offend anyone. You're a genius, but you're also a public figure now. You can't just hide in your office and avoid people forever.”

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. “I know, Hattie. I'm not a total recluse. I just... I don't like all the attention. It's overwhelming.”

“I understand,” she said. “But you're also a young, successful entrepreneur. People want to see the face behind the company. They want to hear about your plans for the future. They know you're crazy smart. They need to feel okay about putting their future in your hands. You need more investors to achieve all the goals you have. Your AI is going to change the world. Have you realized that?”

I nodded, feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment swell within me. Hattie was right. My AI had the potential to change the world. And I had worked tirelessly to make it happen. But now that it was actually happening, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of doubt. What if I wasn't ready for all of this? What if I failed?

Hattie must have sensed my unease because she gave me a reassuring smile. “Don't worry, you've got this. And I'll be right here with you every step of the way. This is a big deal. You need more support to achieve the big dreams you have. Part of getting people to invest in your dream is selling the dream. I know you're going to do everything you set out to do.”

I groaned and shook my head. I heard her hesitation. “What now?”

“I think you should consider something I know you don’t want to think about,” she said. “You need to impress the world.”

“I thought I did that.”

She slowly shook her head. “No, you need to *impress* them. You need to win people over. Right now, you come off very, um, clinical.”

“Clinical?”

“You speak geek.”

I rolled my eyes at Hattie’s words, but deep down, I knew she was right. I had spent so much time focusing on the technical aspects of my AI that I had forgotten about the human element. I needed to find a way to connect with people on a more personal level if I wanted to win them over.

“So, what do you suggest?” I asked, looking at Hattie expectantly.

“Well, for starters, you could use a makeover,” she said matter-of-factly.

“A makeover? Seriously?” I raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

“Yes.”

I smoothed down my suit jacket. I wasn’t arrogant, but I also didn’t think I was barking up the ugly tree. Plenty of women found me attractive. Hell, it was one of my greatest problems. I truly needed a stick to beat them off with. They could come on pretty damn strong at times.

But Hattie was right. At least partly. I did need to impress the world, but a makeover was not going to do it. I needed to connect with people on a deeper, emotional level. I needed to show them that my AI was not just a technological marvel, but something that could change their lives for the better. I needed to tell a story.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked with a sigh.

“You know I love you, right?” she said.



That was code for she was going to be very blunt. She was going to cut my heart out without even trying in the way only a family member could without getting their ass chewed out.

“Just say it,” I said. “Your words are just words. That’s the benefit of being me. I don’t care. I grew a thick skin a long time ago.”

“You’re unlikeable.”

“Ouch,” I complained, slapping a hand to my chest. I knew it was going to be brutal, but I may have underestimated just how brutal.

“I like you. I love you. You’re my big brother. I’m saying people that don’t know you have a hard time relating to you. Yes, you’re smarter than ninety-nine percent of the world and you’re more handsome than at least eighty percent. That’s what makes you difficult to like.”

I frowned with confusion. “That’s dumb. People shouldn’t care about what I look like. I’m selling tech, not me.”

“I know,” she said, nodding with a gentle smile. “But there’s more to it than that. You’re not very approachable either.”

“Again, that’s dumb,” I said. “No one has to like me. They just need to like my tech. If they want the fluffy stuff, they can talk to you or Carl. I’ve got a whole team of PR professionals that can handle that kind of thing. I don’t have to be anyone’s best friend. I just have to churn out a really good product that works as promised.”

“It wouldn’t hurt for you to clean up your image a bit,” she said.

“My image is fine,” I said. “I’m scandal free.”

“You’re a bit of a cold fish,” she said. “You’re this guy that’s all about your tech. Not just any tech. You’re putting out stuff that’s going to change the world. You’re breaching the barrier of the human mind and you’re doing it on your own, like a lone wolf.”

“I am a lone wolf,” I said.

“You’re kind of a jerk,” she said, lowering her eyes. “I mean it. You’re a real dick. You don’t have anything to do with people. You just work on your tech and work on your tech. I love you but that’s because I know you. You tend to be standoffish and people see you as a cyborg. They need to see you as a real human that cares about the future of the human race. Right now, it’s easy for people to assume you’re all about getting rich by replacing humans with robots. You have to humanize yourself. You’re all about your work.”

“That’s life,” I said. “Some of us are dedicated and others aren’t. I’m dedicated. That’s what it takes. That’s why I’m successful.”

“You don’t have any friends,” she said. “You don’t have anyone you can talk to. You don’t talk to anyone.”

“I talk to you,” I said.

“That’s not the same thing,” she said. “I’m your sister. I’m not a friend.”

“I have Christian. He’s my friend.”

“True,” she said, nodding. “But that’s not quite what I’m getting at.”

I rolled my eyes. “A woman.”

She nodded. “Yes. A woman. Someone to soften you. A woman that makes you look a little more human.”

“A woman.” I mused over the idea. “You think that’s the magic bullet?”

“Yes.”

“Hattie, you know how women are. They see my face and my money. They don’t see me. I’m just a means to an end. I don’t like women.”

“Fine, we’ll get you a man.”

“Oh no.” I shook my head. “I don’t want a man. I’m saying women don’t like *me*.”

“I beg to differ,” she said, laughing. “I’ve seen plenty of women fall all over themselves to get to you.”

“No, you’ve seen them try to get to my money. I don’t know how to dumb down my vocabulary or give a shit about who’s fucking who in Hollywood. I’ll admit, I’m not the most popular guy and that’s cool. I’ve never been popular.”

“But we can fix that,” she said.

“I’m just being honest. I’m not popular but that’s because I’m different. I’m not a follower. I’m not a sheep.”

“You’re a wolf,” she said. “You’re a lone wolf.”

“I’m an asshole,” I said, laughing. “That’s why I’m not popular.”

“Whatever,” she said. “You’re an amazing guy who’s changing the world. You’re creative. You’re smart. You’re tolerant and open-minded. You’re so giving. You’re kind.”

“You have to say that because you’re my sister,” I said, laughing.

“Maybe, but I have an idea.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I am not letting you set me up on a blind date. We did that already and it was a fucking nightmare.”

“No, this is different. Have you ever heard of the Faux Agency?”

“No.”

Her face lit up and I knew I was in trouble.



## MERIDA

I was a nervous wreck. This was not what I did. This was so far outside of my wheelhouse I didn't think it could have gotten any stranger. I was sitting in my car, staring at the door for the agency I was supposed to be investigating. My stomach had a million butterflies fluttering around. This was so not my thing. I wanted to be an investigative journalist, but I really never considered the investigating part of things. I didn't think I was very good at lying. I couldn't say I had ever really put it to the test before.

I doublechecked the address Dalton had given me. It was the right place. It just seemed so normal. Like a typical business office. From the outside, it could be a clinic or an accounting office. It didn't look like a whore house.

Dalton assured me it wasn't a whore house, but I couldn't help but be a little suspicious. It certainly felt like there could be some whoring going on. Who the hell paid a woman five grand to eat dinner? There had to be a catch. There had to be a perk the men paid for. It was like one of those massage places that offered a lot more than a deep tissue massage.

I pulled out my phone, took a picture of the building, and sent it to Dalton. I needed to make sure I was at the right place. A few seconds later, he called.

“Go in,” he said.

“I can't.”

“You can't go undercover if you don't actually go in,” he pointed out the obvious. “All you need to do is go in. I've

heard there is an application of sorts. Your goal is to take notes on the process. How does someone become one of the escorts? Do you get to choose your clients? Who are the clients? If you can find out that last bit, we're good."

"I don't know," I groaned.

"They're not going to know who you are," he assured me. "Just get as much information as you can and get the hell out of there."

"What if they ask for my ID?" I asked. "Do I use my real name?"

"That's up to you," he said. "There's no reason you can't use your real name. They aren't going to know who you are."

"True," I muttered. "It's not like I'm a successful reporter or anything."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I know, I know. I think I'm out of my league here, Dalton. I don't know the first thing about going undercover. I should have gone to spy school."

He laughed again. "It's not as bad as it seems. You're not really undercover. You're an average person checking out a lucrative job opportunity. How else do they attract women to the agency? I've seen advertisements, so they expect people to come in off the street. You're not doing anything wrong or illegal. You're just going in to get some information on the process. They don't need to know you're going to expose what they do."

I gnawed on my lower lip. "I cannot believe I'm doing this. If my parents ever found out I was going to an escort agency, they would absolutely die."

"No one needs to know," he said. "This is how a journalist gets stories. She goes out there and chases them down. The stories don't fall in your lap."

"But this is *your* story," I reminded him.

"We're collaborating," he said, laughing. "You can do this. I'm not expecting you to actually become one of the escorts

and go on a date, but if you happen to run into one of the ladies that is an escort, you could ask her what it's like. Make it sound like you're genuinely interested. The key is to ask questions without asking. You don't want it to be an interrogation."

If I wanted to stop writing about home décor, I had to get comfortable doing things like this.

I took a deep breath and nodded. Dalton was right. I had to put my fear aside and embrace this opportunity to get a good story. After all, I was a journalist and this was my job. I couldn't let my insecurities get in the way of my career aspirations.

"Fine, but if I end up in jail, you have to bail me out. If he finds out I'm in jail, tell him I was buying crack."

He laughed. "Crack?"

"I prefer he think I was buying drugs than going into an escort agency," I said.

"Deal."

"I'm going in," I said, sighing.

I ended the call and got out of my car. I crossed the street and stood in front of the door for several seconds, trying to gather the courage to go inside. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the tinted glass. My body looked distorted, but it wasn't all distortion I was seeing. I was seeing my wide hips and big chest. I was wearing black leggings with a black blouse that hung enough to cover my big ass. My mass of curly hair was clipped back as always.

I did not look like a high-end escort. I looked like a woman who spent her time indoors and alone. I didn't write a fashion blog because my idea of fashion was anything that fit right and didn't accentuate my body. If I could find a way to make burlap bags fashionable, I would do it.

This was a waste of time. There was no way I was even going to get my foot in the door. These people hired beautiful women that could be seen on the arms of the wealthy elite. They didn't hire women like me. I didn't fit the mold, literally

and figuratively. No billionaire was going to want to see me in a little black dress and take me to a swanky party to make his friends and colleagues jealous.

It was a mistake. I wasn't the one. Dalton would have to find someone else to go undercover. I was about to run and leave when the door was flung open, whacking me right on the nose. I stumbled back with my vision blurred.

I blinked rapidly, trying to clear my vision. I tasted blood in my mouth and instinctively brought a hand up to my face. The door had hit me hard, and I was sure my nose was broken. I stepped back and tripped over my own foot. I felt myself falling but there was no stopping it. I landed on my ass.

"Shit, sorry about that," a voice said. "Are you okay?"

I looked up and saw the shadowy figure of a man standing in front of me. He was tall, at least six feet, with broad shoulders and a chiseled jawline. He had short, dark hair—I thought. My eyes were struggling to focus. He was wearing a tailored suit that hugged his muscular frame.

If I was dead, this was heaven. I rapidly blinked, trying to clear my vision, but the tears were streaming down my face. The tears were involuntary.

"Are you okay?" he asked again. "Let me help you up. Shit, I'm so fucking sorry. Fuck me. I'm such a fucking idiot. I'm sorry. I can't believe I did that."

I nodded, still unable to speak. He reached out a hand and helped me up. My knees were weak, and I had to hold on to him to steady myself.

"Let's get you inside," he said, taking my arm. "I'm sure we can clean you up and get you feeling better. I'll get some ice."

I nodded again, feeling like a complete idiot. I couldn't believe I had just made a fool of myself in front of this incredibly handsome man. I grunted, not able to form words. My face felt like it was the size of a basketball.

He led me inside, and I immediately felt out of place. The dim room made it even harder for my vision to focus. I blinked



several times. Dark walls, dark furniture, and just dark. Or maybe it was just my vision was going dark because I was going to pass out. It was really hard to say for sure.

“Excuse me!” he shouted and left me sitting in a chair. “I need some ice! Please!”

My face hurt. Really hurt. I touched my nose and winced. I didn’t taste blood, but I couldn’t be sure my face wasn’t shattered. I felt numb. I touched under my nose, checking for blood. My brain was running in circles. I was still trying to figure out what happened. I got knocked on my ass. I knew that. I was certain I was at Faux’s.

Did I really let myself get knocked on my ass? I was so embarrassed. Only I could manage to humiliate myself in such a dramatic way.

“Here,” the man said.

A moment later I winced in shock and pain as ice came into contact with my skin. “Ouch.”

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he said again. “I’ll call an ambulance.”

“No! I don’t need an ambulance. I’m fine.”

I breathed through the pain. One deep breath after another. Unfortunately, being unable to breathe through my nose made it hard to practice the breathing exercises I learned in yoga.

“Are you sure,” he said softly. “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

I opened my eyes once again and found myself staring into the deepest, sexiest green eyes ever. For a moment, I wondered if I was in a dream. Maybe I was a little concussed.

“I’m okay,” I said and lowered the ice pack a little bit.

My eyes focused and I realized who I was looking at.

*No way. No. Freaking. Way.*

My attacker and rescuer stared at me. I wanted to melt into the chair. I felt like such a complete idiot. Only I could run face first into Jensen Loxley. Rather, the door that Jensen Loxley was opening.



I felt like such a jackass. No matter how cool I thought I was, stupid shit like this always put me right back into my gawky fourteen-year-old self. I was the dork. The goofy, clumsy kid that people called Gumby. I felt more like a Jerry Lewis character—a throwback to my dad’s favorite old movies. I probably could have made a fortune playing the dumbass in films. I wouldn’t even have to try.

“Are you okay?” I asked again.

The poor woman had tears streaming down her face. Her mascara was running and the look of shock on her face was horrible. I felt so, so, so bad. Her eyes locked on mine. She probably hated me. I would hate me if someone knocked me on my ass.

“Fine,” she muttered.

“I don’t see any blood,” I said as if that was a good thing.

She was still staring at me, which made me very nervous. I had a recognizable face. She was probably counting the dollars in her head. She was going to sue the shit out of me. I supposed she had every right to. I had just bowled her over and probably gave her two black eyes.

“Can I touch it?” I asked.

“What?”

“I want to see if there’s a bump,” I explained. “Just to see if it might be broken.”

“Broken?” Her eyes widened.

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t think it is. I mean, I’m not a doctor but it doesn’t look broken. It’s not crooked or anything.”

I realized I was talking myself into a bigger hole. I needed to shut up instead of giving her more ideas on what to sue me for.

“I’ll call an ambulance,” I blurted out. “I’ll of course cover the bills. Whatever it takes.”

“I don’t need an ambulance.”

“Are you going to sue me?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

“What? Why?”

“Because I assaulted you.” If my attorney was here, he would kick my ass for being such a dipshit. I may as well open the checkbook and write her a check. I didn’t need to be in front of a judge or jury. I was very capable of convicting myself.

“I’m not going to sue you,” she said, sighing.

That was a huge relief. Assuming she was serious. Now that it appeared she really was going to be okay, there was a little room to be irritated and skeptical. Maybe she had set me up. She purposely stood in front of the door to make me hit her.

“Why were you standing there?” I asked.

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes narrowed. “You mean standing in front of a door that I intended to open? I don’t know, maybe because I know of no other way to open a door other than to stand in front of it and open it!”

“How long were you standing there?”

“As long as it took to get nailed with the door you threw open! Who opens a door like that? Are you running from something? I didn’t see a rabid dog on your heels.”

I bit back a smile. She was a little on the feisty side. While she glared at me, I took a moment to get a good look at the woman I nearly knocked unconscious. She was very pretty in a very authentic sort of way. Her face was framed by soft curls and her skin glowed with a natural beauty. Her almond-shaped brown eyes sparkled with a contagious warmth. Full lips that were free of any lipstick were pressed together in a firm pout. She reached up and pushed one of the curls from her face while glaring at me.

The sparkly silver necklace she wore caught my eye. Technically, it wasn't the necklace that caught my attention. It was where the necklace sat nestled between her very, very bountiful breasts. She took a deep breath, her chest swelling as she did.

I was such a man. I was looking at her boobs. I quickly put my attention back on her face, but it was too late. She saw me looking. I winced, knowing I was not winning any points with the woman. Before I could do anything else to make a complete ass of myself, Della appeared.

My meeting with Della had gone exactly as I expected it would. There was no way I was going to let her set me up on a blind date. I was on my way out the door to call Hattie and tell her it was not an option. There was no way I could pay someone to pretend to be my girlfriend. I was a little frustrated when I threw open the door. I should have been paying attention.

“Can I help?” Della offered.

The woman was in a vibrant purple dress with several thick, beaded necklaces. A silver belt hung low around her waist. A series of silver bracelets went up her left arm. The woman was not afraid to accessorize. It looked like she reached into her jewelry box and put on everything she could find.

“I'm fine,” the woman said again.

“Are you sure, dear?” Della asked with concern. She looked from me to the woman I practically knocked out.

“I’m sure. Thank you.” The woman’s curt reply did not make me feel any better. Her eyes were still fixed on me. I assumed she realized who I was and was thinking about all the money she could sue me for.

I felt a pang of guilt, realizing how rude I must have seemed. I quickly tried to make amends.

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

“What happened?” Della asked.

“I was leaving and pushed open the door,” I started to explain.

“He threw open the door like the hounds of hell were at his back,” the woman replied.

“Oh my,” Della said, smiling. “I hope I didn’t frighten you.”

“No,” I answered with humiliation.

“What about you, dear?” Della asked the woman. “Were you walking by?”

“No, I was coming in here... to apply for a job.”

My attention on the woman changed. She wanted to be one of Della’s girls? For some reason, I assumed she would never do anything like that. She seemed so normal. Put together. Like she was a professional and wouldn’t bother selling her services.

“Of course.” Della’s face lit up. “I should have known. You’re a lovely woman. I just know you’re going to be very popular.”

Jealousy surged through me, shocking the hell out of me. Why in the hell was I jealous? I didn’t even know the woman’s name. I had already decided I wasn’t going to be involved with the agency.

“Thank you,” the woman replied softly.

“Would you like to come into my office?” Della asked. “I don’t have an appointment for another hour. We can get you

all signed up and get the process started to run the background check.”

It was one of those moments in life—the kind of moment that made you feel like you were about to do something that would change the trajectory of where your life was headed. I had a split second to decide. It was crazy and completely out of character for me, but I saw what I wanted and I was going to go for it. I had already made an ass of myself. I may as well go all in.

“Five hundred thousand,” I blurted out.

Della and my mystery woman both looked at me like I’d farted.

“Pardon?” Della asked.

“I’ll pay five-hundred thousand,” I clarified. “I came here to hire a date. I want her.”

“Me?” The woman looked confused, and she touched her head. I assumed she was looking for some sign of a bump or other head injury.

“You choose this young woman?” Della repeated. “We haven’t even gone through the application or background check.”

I looked directly at the woman still slumped in the chair with her nose red and her mouth hanging open. “What?” she asked.

I nodded as the idea took hold. “I’ll make it up to you. For knocking you on your ass—Butt. I’ll hire you. I’ll pay you five-hundred thousand for the job.”

“Five—” She started and then stopped. “What? Really?”

“Yes.”

Della was beaming.

“I, uh, think I should still do the application and stuff,” the woman said. “It’s part of the process. I think it’s important to follow the process.”

I smiled at her. She was cute when she was flustered. “Of course, we can still go through the process. But I want you to know that I’m serious about this. I need a date for a very important event, and I want it to be you.”

She looked at me for a moment, then glanced at Della. “Is this allowed?”

Della’s smile turned into a smirk. “I don’t see why not. He’s willing to pay the fee, and you’re still going through the process. It’s a win-win situation for everyone.”

The woman nodded slowly. “Okay, then. I’ll do it. Today?”

“Today?” I repeated.

“You don’t need me for a date today, do you? I’m not exactly dressed and I think I might have some swelling. My nose.” She gingerly touched the bridge of her nose. “It’s sore.”

“No, not today.”

“Why don’t we get you into the system?” Della said. “I’ll run the background to cover my end.”

“Your end?” the woman asked with confusion.

“My agency is the best in the world because I take very good care of my clients and my girls. Everyone has to feel safe. I don’t want to ruin my reputation by skipping a simple step. Are you opposed to a background check?”

I was glad Della had her wits about her because I would have skipped right over that. This was why I needed someone to watch out for me. I clearly jumped without thinking. In my position, I had to be careful. There were too many people out there that would jump at the chance to take advantage of me. They would try to get their hands on my tech or find a way to blackmail me. Hattie was always telling me to be careful. But she was also constantly encouraging me to start dating to make me look more human and less cyborg. I seemed to be struggling to find the balance.

“No!” The woman sat up a little straighter. “It’s fine. I’m not a murderer or anything. I was just, uh, I didn’t know. It’s



good to know you have covered all the bases. I'm anxious to get started."

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt at how easy it was to convince her to agree to the job. She would get paid, and I would get a chance to prove to Hattie that I was trying to make an effort to be more human.

"Great. We'll get started right away," Della said with a smile, trying to put her at ease.

The woman got to her feet and swayed just a bit. I quickly reached out to steady her.

"Thank you. I'm fine. Really, I am." She smiled and it was like someone turned the sun directly on me. This was going to be interesting.

"Wait." I stopped them from walking away.

Della and my future date both stopped and looked at me. "Yes?" Della asked.

"I don't even know your name," I said with a small laugh.

The woman laughed too. I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. This whole thing was probably going to blow up in my face in a bad, bad way.



## MERIDA

I held out my hand, a friendly smile on my face. “My name is Merida.”

He took my hand, his grip firm and confident. “You’ll be hearing from me soon.”

Then, without another word, he turned and left. I watched him go, feeling a strange mix of excitement and nervousness.

“Follow me,” Della said. “Let’s get this going. That is a man with a mission.”

I walked into Della’s dark office. It felt very goth.

The walls were painted a color so dark it almost looked black. Dark furniture with eclectic trinkets sat on the wall of shelves. I committed every detail to memory in order to pass it along to Dalton for his story.

Della motioned for me to sit down on a velvet chair. She sat down behind her massive desk and smiled. “What a day.”

I laughed. “Definitely.”

Alone with Della, I touched my nose. “My nose really hurts,” I said with a small laugh. I put on a brave face for Jensen, but it was very sore. It was throbbing. “I seriously have the worst luck. If it wasn’t for bad luck, I would have no luck.”

Della chuckled and raised an eyebrow. “Bad luck? Do you not know who that man was who offered you a job?”

I couldn't help but laugh at myself. "Oh, I know exactly who he was, Della. Jensen freaking Loxley."

The name alone sent shivers down my spine. I couldn't believe I just met the tech billionaire, the elusive genius behind Loxley Technologies.

What were the odds that Dalton's article on Della's agency led me straight into the arms of the man I was desperate to write a story about? It felt like fate, a destined encounter that could change everything.

Now, I had a decision to make, and it wasn't a difficult one. Taking the job might just give me an up-close and personal look at his life, his world of innovation and secrets. The world absolutely *no one* had ever gotten close to. The man was notoriously private and here I was, being invited inside. Hell, not just invited. He was offering me half a million to do it.

I turned to Della with a mischievous grin. "I'd be stupid not to take it, right?"

"I can't possibly decide that," Della said. She handed me a tablet. "Typically, I arrange the dates based on the answers I get from the application."

"This is the application?" I asked and took the tablet.

"Yes. It's a series of questions about what you like and personality questions. I meet with the clients and the women who will be dates. I am a very good judge of character and am proud of my track record for setting up the perfect dates. I don't have any disgruntled clients or escorts. I'm very good at what I do."

*And humble.*

"Do all of the clients pay the kind of money Jensen is offering?"

She laughed and shook her head, causing the dangling earrings she wore to catch the light. "No, but I've had many clients pay very large sums of money."

“Are your clients all as wealthy as Jensen? I mean they must be if they’re paying big money.” I needed to try and get as much information as I could. My eyes dropped to the tablet. The questionnaire was loaded on the screen. I quickly scanned it, looking for something salacious. It looked like one of the online dating apps I signed up for years ago.

“I provide services for a wide range of clients,” Della replied. “Most are affluent, but not all.”

I nodded as I checked this box or that with the stylus. “How do you keep the escorts from talking about the rich and famous men they’ve gone out with?”

“There is a very strict non-disclosure agreement!”

I looked up and saw I had offended her. “I was only wondering how you protected both sides,” I said, smiling. “That’s a great idea.”

Della relaxed and smiled back at me. “Yes, it’s very important to protect the privacy of our clients. We take that very seriously.”

“And your employees, I hope.”

Della nodded. “Absolutely.”

I finished up the questionnaire and handed the tablet back to her. “Do you get a lot of famous men in here?”

“Famous?”

“Like politicians or celebrities?” I asked. “There was a governor candidate about a year ago that showed up to an event with a beautiful woman. No one knew who she was. Was she one of your girls?”

“I take client confidentiality very seriously,” she said in a firm voice. “There are severe penalties for anyone who breaks the confidentiality agreement. Just like the clients are not allowed to tell anyone their date is a paid escort, the escorts are forbidden from ever discussing who they’ve gone out with.”

I sighed, realizing I wasn’t going to get anything more from her. “Fair enough, I get it.” I decided to steer the

conversation in a different direction. “Can you tell me about the job Jensen Loxley offered me? Why does he need a girl on his arm? Am I allowed to know that? I assume he met with you and is officially a client.”

“He is,” she said, smiling. “Jensen is about to launch his AI program, and he’s going to be promoting it at a series of high-profile events. Image is everything in the tech world, and his needs softening. That’s where you come in.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued but still a bit puzzled. “Softening his image? What does that have to do with his AI program?”

Della leaned forward, her tone conspiratorial. “Merida, you see, the tech industry can be quite cutthroat and competitive. Jensen’s known for being brilliant, but he’s also known for being, well, a bit of a recluse and a hard-nosed businessman. He needs to change that perception. Having a pretty girl like you on his arm at these events will humanize him, make him more approachable and relatable. It’s all about image these days.”

I digested the information, realizing that this opportunity might be even more significant than I thought. “So, it’s not just about being a date for him? It’s about his public image?”

Della nodded. “Exactly. It’s a strategic move to present him as a different kind of tech mogul, one who’s not just about the cold, hard numbers and algorithms. And who better than you to help with that, Merida? It’s a six-week schedule of events he’s looking to have a date for. Are you going to be available?”

“I don’t know,” I murmured.

“I think you are exactly the kind of young woman he needs on his arm,” she said, smiling. “I probably would have come to the same conclusion after I reviewed your application.”

That was not what I was expecting. I didn’t know if I was really capable of softening anyone’s image. “Me?” I asked softly.

“You,” she said, nodding. “When a client handpicks their date, who am I to deny them?”

“How does this work?” I asked.

“Normally, I would review your application and match you with a client. In this case, I simply need you to sign the NDA and the form giving me permission to run a background check. I will keep your application in the system to use for future clients.”

“So, the same woman can go out with several different clients?”

“Of course,” she said, smiling brightly. “Some are recommended by their friends.”

It was all information pertinent to Dalton’s story. “But I don’t decide right now, right?” I asked.

I supposed I had cold feet. I was only supposed to be getting in the door and researching the process. I wasn’t planning on actually going on a date. I sure as hell wasn’t counting on getting paid that kind of money.

“You don’t need to decide right now, but I think it’s important we let Jensen know right away. He’s clearly eager to get the ball rolling on this.”

“Of course,” I said, nodding.

“I’ll get the background run,” she said, smiling. “Assuming there’s nothing to find, it will be a quick search.”

I got to my feet and thanked her before practically running out of her office. Before I even realized what I was doing, I did exactly what Jensen did. I threw open the door in my hurry to escape. I understood why he had been in such a hurry. My heart was pounding with adrenaline pumping through my veins. I couldn’t believe I just did my first undercover work. It was exciting and terrifying at the same time.

I sat in my car, still buzzing with excitement and nerves after meeting Jensen Loxley. It was time to make a decision, and I knew I had to call Dalton and fill him in on the unexpected turn of events. But there was one thing I couldn’t

bring myself to mention—how much money Jensen had offered to pay me for this gig. It was an astronomical figure, and I didn't want Dalton to think I was in it solely for the cash. The deal was to find out what the application process was, not actually go on a date.

I couldn't really explain why, but I didn't want anyone to know. Plus, technically, I did sign an NDA. I wasn't supposed to talk about it. Going out with Jensen was for me. It was my chance to get to know him. How I was going to use what I learned in my story was another matter. With the NDA, I would have to be very careful about the information I used in the story I wanted to write. I could always cite anonymous sources, but it was still going to be very tricky.

That was something to worry about later. I had yet to decide if that was what I was for sure going to do. It wasn't about the money. It was about the man and the story. And a lot about the man.

I was a red-blooded woman and Jensen Loxley was a smoke show.

I dialed Dalton's number. "Merida, how did it go?" His voice was eager, and I could sense his anticipation.

I took a deep breath. "It went better than I could have imagined."

"Did you meet the owner?"

"Oh, yes," I said, laughing. "She's quite the character."

"And did she let you fill out an application?"

His excitement was contagious. I wanted that feeling. I wanted to be on a hot story and really getting somewhere. "Yes, I did. In fact, I met Jensen Loxley, and he offered me a job."

There was a brief pause on the other end, and then Dalton's voice practically crackled with excitement. "Merida, that's incredible! Are you serious?"

"I am," I said, laughing. "It was all by chance. It just happened. I don't know if I'm going to do it, though. I told



you I would come here and find out what the process is. I don't know if I'm ready to actually go on a date."

"You absolutely have to do this. When will you ever get an opportunity like this again? You'll find out about the inner workings of the agency and you'll get to interview the subject of your article! You have to!"

I couldn't help but smile at his enthusiasm, but I had to bring up a significant obstacle. "Dalton, you know my father forbade me from writing this article. He'll flip if he finds out."

Dalton didn't miss a beat. "Merida, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. This is a chance of a lifetime, and you can't let it slip away."

I considered his words for a moment and then made up my mind. He was right. This was too big of an opportunity to pass up. "You're right, Dalton. I'll do it. But I don't want to seem too eager. I'll wait a couple of days before calling Della and accepting the deal through the agency. That way, I can learn about the next steps without jumping in headfirst. And my background check has to clear."

"Background check?" he asked.

"Yes, it will all be in my notes," I said.

Dalton chuckled, clearly pleased with my decision. "That sounds like a good plan, Merida. Keep me updated, and we'll figure out how to handle your father when the time comes. This is going to be a game-changer for your career. And mine. I cannot wait to finish this story."

As I hung up the phone, I couldn't help but feel a mix of excitement and trepidation. This was my chance to be a real reporter. I was going to be the first reporter to get up-close and personal with Jensen Loxley. I didn't know what all the job entailed and how many times I was expected to go out with him for the kind of money he was offering, but I was looking forward to finding out.



I sat at my desk, trying to focus on an intricate piece of code, but my head wasn't in it thanks to my sister. Hattie was pacing my office. She was going to drive me crazy. She was impatiently waiting for my "girlfriend" to arrive. Since it was her big idea, I wanted her involved in this process. I didn't know the first thing about hiring a woman to pretend to be my girlfriend. It was out of my comfort zone. Way out. Hattie thought it was a great plan, so now she could handle the details.

I sighed, looking up from my computer screen as Hattie continued to pace the room. Her heels clicked against the hard floor, echoing throughout the space. She was nervous. I could tell by the way she kept running her hands through her hair. I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Sit down before you scuff my marble floors," I complained.

She dropped into a chair and started drumming her fingernails on the armrest. I was pretty sure she was intentionally trying to drive me crazy.

"Hattie! I'm trying to work here!" I exclaimed, hoping to get her to stop.

She shot me an apologetic look before standing up again and continuing her pacing. I couldn't take it anymore. I stood up and grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her to look me in the eye.

“Hattie, calm down. Everything will be fine. The woman will arrive soon and we’ll be able to get this over with,” I said reassuringly.

Hattie nodded, taking a deep breath and trying to steady herself. I let go of her shoulders and went back to my desk, trying to focus on work once again.

Hattie continued to fidget, her eyes darting around the room as if she was looking for a way out. I could tell that she was having second thoughts about the plan we had concocted. I leaned back in my chair, watching her closely.

“Hattie, it’s going to be okay. Although I’m not sure why I’m the one trying to convince you after you spent so much time trying to tell me this was a good option.”

“I just don’t know if this will work,” she said more to herself than me. “This might not be the best idea. I’m nervous.”

In my mind, she was a little late to the nervous party. I was the one that resisted the idea. She was the one that insisted it was a great plan. Now, she wanted to have second thoughts? The woman was already on her way. If I backed out now, I was sure she would sue me for the nose thing. And if I was being completely honest, I was kind of looking forward to getting to know the woman.

“What if people find out you hired this girl?” Hattie asked. “What if she exposes us? What if she’s a loose cannon?”

“You are the one that wanted me to do this,” I reminded her.

“What if my suggestion makes your reputation worse?”

I sighed and gave her my attention, which she obviously needed. “This is the right move,” I assured her.

“If this goes bad, you’re going to hate me,” she pouted.

“I made the decision on my own. If it bites me in the ass, it’s not on you. I didn’t follow the process Della laid out. I made my own choice. I can’t blame anyone but myself.”

As I spoke, Hattie seemed to calm down a bit. She took a deep breath and looked at me with a small smile.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m just being paranoid. It’ll be fine.”

I nodded, relieved that she was on board again. This plan was too important to back out now. She convinced me I needed to rehab my image. I never realized my image was such a problem until she pointed it out, but here we were.

The woman I hired was supposed to be a professional and we had to rely on her to be discreet. I couldn’t believe I was actually doing this, but I had to admit, I was excited.

Finally, Susan announced via the intercom that Merida had arrived. I was suddenly nervous. Hattie got to her feet and gave me a onceover. “Smile,” she ordered. “You need to make a good first impression.”

“I’ve already met her.”

“That didn’t count. She was probably delirious after you knocked her on her ass. This is your second chance to make a good first impression. Try not to push her out the window or anything.”

“Not funny,” I muttered.

The door opened and Susan escorted Merida inside. I saw the skepticism on Susan’s face. “Thank you, Susan.”

“Do you need anything?” she asked, like she wasn’t sure the woman belonged. I didn’t tell Susan about my arrangement with Merida. The fewer people that knew, the better.

“We’re good.”

She nodded once and left, closing the door behind her. Merida stood in my office looking very nervous. She was dressed casually in jeans, sneakers, a loose jacket, and a scarf that almost swallowed her whole. I was surprised at how beautiful she was. Her curly brown hair was pulled back from her face in a large clip. Her full lips looked like they were made for kissing. Getting the chance to see her without a big red nose was a totally new experience. I liked what I saw. For

the most part. I wasn't sure why she was dressed like she was headed to Alaska.

"I'm Hattie. Jensen is my big brother. And I'm his assistant. Kind of. It's nice to meet you. Jensen filled me in a little about how the two of you met. I hope you don't hold that against him."

"It's nice to meet you," Merida said, smiling. "It was an accident. I survived."

"How is your nose?" I asked.

I could sense the unease rippling off her. She was nervous and it was adorable. Her nerves made me want to pull her in and reassure her that she was in good hands here. I wasn't a creeper. She wasn't in danger.

"It's fine," she said, smiling nervously. "No real harm done."

"Good," I said, nodding. "I really am sorry about that."

"Have a seat, please." Hattie directed her to the large sitting area in my office.

I followed them and took a seat in one of the chairs. Hattie sat in another one with us both facing Merida on the couch. Merida's hands were clasped together. She was squeezing them so tight her knuckles were turning white.

She was nervous. I felt out of place and it was my damn office. I couldn't imagine how she was feeling.

I cleared my throat and leaned in. "Merida, thank you for coming. I know this must be overwhelming for you, but I promise you're in good hands. I assume this is your first, uh, date?"

She nodded. "Is it your first?"

"It is," I said, nodding.

Merida took a deep breath, and she visibly relaxed. We were both a little anxious. I wasn't sure what to expect. I imagined it was even scarier for her. I was in the position of

power. She was the one agreeing to go out with a total stranger.

“I know this is crazy awkward,” Hattie said with her usual smile. “I just wanted to meet you and make sure this arrangement goes smoothly.”

“I understand,” Merida said, nodding.

“I’ve scheduled some time for us to do some shopping together,” Hattie said, getting right down to business. “I know my brother best and I think I can help pick out things that would match him and his sense of style.”

Merida frowned. “Shopping? What for?”

Hattie glanced at Merida’s outfit before snapping back to her eyes. “Clothes.”

Merida shook her head. “That won’t be necessary. Della gave me a five-thousand-dollar allowance to build a wardrobe for the contract. I won’t wear jeans. I just, well, I didn’t think I had to dress up for the meeting today.”

“You didn’t,” I quickly interjected. “You’re fine. Hattie is referring to the events we’ll be attending. Della gave you the list of dates, correct?”

Merida nodded. “She did.”

“Great,” Hattie said, smiling brightly. “But these are some seriously swanky events, and five grand isn’t going to cut it. Not when you’re on my brother’s arm. His everyday suits cost more than five grand. Don’t worry. It will be fun to get to know each other and do a little shopping.”

“I need to spend more than five thousand?” Merida asked with the color draining from her olive skin tone.

“I’m paying,” I added. “You’re welcome to keep the clothes when this is done. I know how Hattie shops. I would never expect you to pay for anything. Consider it a job perk.”

“Are you available tomorrow?” Hattie asked.

“Uh, I can be,” Merida said a little nervously.

“Good. I have to run. Why don’t we meet here tomorrow, same time? We’ll go shopping and make sure you have everything you need. It will be fun. Try not to look like I’m dragging you in front of a firing squad.”

Hattie left the office and it was just the two of us. The fire burned in the gas fireplace in the corner. It was a nice touch to my office. Hattie recommended it. Sitting in the chair with Merida on the couch made it feel like we were relaxing in my living room. It did help make things feel a little more casual.

“I’d like to go over my expectations,” I said, all business.

“Expectations?” she asked.

“For when we are together,” I said. “I have a lot of eyes on me. These events are very important. I can’t afford to make a single misstep, which means my date can’t either.”

She nodded, her big brown eyes holding an intelligence I truly appreciated. I was glad she wasn’t flighty or an airhead. I needed someone who could hold a conversation and not ask a lot of dumb questions. “I understand.”

“First, there can be no socializing one on one with another man during our contract,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow. “While we’re together?”

“No, period. I’m photographed often, which means there is a good chance you’ll be photographed with me. I can’t have you with another man and getting photographed with him. Rumors about you cheating on me would fly. That’s a distraction.”

“Okay,” she said in a tone that made it clear she wasn’t buying it.

“Absolutely no answering questions to the media about me or my AI program,” I went on. “No tardiness. Ever. I cannot stand people that are late. You have the schedule and I expect you to do what you need to do to make sure you are ready on time.”

“I can do that,” she said, nodding.

“Also, no excuses. I expect you to attend all events.”



“What if I get sick?”

She was testing me. “You would have to be very sick not to show up. This is going to be an intense six weeks. I need to know right now if you’re going to be able to commit to the job. I cannot afford to have anything go wrong. There is way too much to lose here.”

“I understand,” she said with a flash of irritation.

“Finally, no personal questions,” I said. “This is a professional arrangement. It’s not an actual date. We don’t need to get to know each other.”

She stared blankly at me. I could see a myriad of emotions crossing her face. I realized I might have come off a little abrupt, but I couldn’t afford to have there be any misunderstandings. I didn’t know how this whole fake dating thing worked.

“Those sound more like rules than expectations,” she snapped.

“You can call them whatever you want, but that’s how it’s going to work. Agreed?”



## MERIDA

O kay. There it was. Didn't take long for the rich douchebag alter ego to rear his ugly head. I shouldn't be surprised. The guy was notoriously standoffish. Everyone knew it. Jensen Loxley didn't talk to anyone. That was why he was such a mystery. I should have known he wouldn't talk to anyone because he was convinced he was way above us little peons. I understood why he needed an image makeover.

The guy was a dick.

"I'll be a good little girlfriend, my lord." I bowed my head.

He narrowed his eyes.

I smirked. I couldn't help but give him a little grief. It wasn't like I needed him to like me. I didn't even care if I got the money. Technically, my job was done. I could get up and walk away and it would be no skin off my nose. I wasn't the one that needed to fix my image in order to get a little richer than God. "Should I add 'no jokes or sarcasm' to your list of demands?" I asked sweetly.

He took a deep breath. "I have a small margin for humor."

The way he said it, with no color to his voice, suggested it wasn't true, but I nodded. "Got it. The boss has a margin for humor."

I saw him flinch and knew I was pushing his buttons. I probably should have toned it down, but I did not like being dictated to. He was treating me like I was a peon to be ordered

around. Just because he was going to be paying me, it didn't turn me into a piece of property for him to control. That was not in my DNA.

“There's one more thing,” he said.

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I kept myself from doing it. “And what would that be?”

“I expect you to be dressed a bit nicer whenever you're in my company.”

I balked, physically recoiling from his insensitive words. Was he serious? “What's wrong with my clothes?”

He gestured up and down my entire outfit. “It swallows you whole. I want to see your shape. Right now, you look like a box.”

I felt my face burning, my entire body hot as he studied me. “I—”

I couldn't finish the sentence. I didn't know what to say to that.

“I'd rather see your legs and hips, and I would like to see your waist. I know there is an incredible body under there and you'd better get comfortable showing it off, because Hattie will be dressing you to the nines for our events.”

I felt naked. I was fully clothed with nary an inch of skin exposed, but I felt completely naked. I squirmed a bit, trying to find a way to cover myself despite him demanding I didn't.

He looked down at my shoes. “And never wear those around me again.”

I looked at my trusty white sneakers. Well, they weren't all that white anymore. But they were very comfy and cute and a total staple in my wardrobe. We lived in New York. I had to do a lot of walking. Everyone wore tennis shoes. “I don't—”

He held up a hand. “Are you really going to pass on five hundred thousand dollars because of a pair of sneakers?” he asked.

I *so* wanted to tell him to take a flying leap out of his thirty-third-floor window. I wanted to tell him to kiss my ass. I didn't need his stupid money. I didn't need him. "Are you telling me you never wear sneakers?"

"Not on the job," he countered. "This is a professional business office."

"I walked three blocks to get here," I shot back. "Not all of us are chauffeured around. Some of us peasants actually have to use our feet to get around."

"Almost everyone in my office takes the subway or walks to work," he said. "Not one of them wears sneakers."

"Have you ever walked a mile in heels?" I snapped.

"No, but I know it can be done," he said.

I gestured at his Gucci dress shoes. "Let me guess, those are what, a few grand? They probably fit like a glove. The insoles are comfy. Your toes aren't pinched. You don't have to worry about them sliding up and down your heels and rubbing them raw."

"They are quite comfortable," he said, nodding.

My eyes went to the window. I let myself enjoy a little fantasy of him swan diving out the window. But then I remembered my chance to do a real story on him. The world was going to know what an asshole he was.

"Fine, no more white sneakers," I muttered. "The money you pay me can buy me new feet."

He wanted a smoke show? Well, that wasn't going to read well in the article I would write about him. That was not going to read well at all. I could almost taste the revenge I would get when the world read about who he really was. It was no wonder he had to pay someone to go out with him. I would say you couldn't pay me enough, but half a million dollars certainly made his asshole-ness easier to swallow.

"Good," he said, nodding. "Please, listen to Hattie when you are out shopping."

“What does that mean?” I asked with disdain dripping from every word.

“Hattie is a professional shopper. She will help you find suitable clothing. She’s been shopping for years and knows how to make anyone look good. She’ll know how to dress you in a flattering way.”

“I’m not paying for another set of clothes,” I said.

“I know. That’s why I’m paying for them,” he said.

“You don’t get to decide what a suitable wardrobe is for me.”

“Actually, I do,” he said, smiling. “I’m paying you to be my pretend girlfriend for a few weeks. You need to fit the part. You need to look like a woman I would date.”

“And I don’t,” I muttered.

“It’s not that,” he said and softened his tone a little. “It’s just that I’m going to be surrounded by some of the richest men and women in society. I have to impress them, which means I need the woman on my arm to be equally as impressive.”

It was insulting to be told you didn’t measure up. I wasn’t enough to be his girlfriend. Talk about a blow to the ego. I dealt with enough feelings of not being good enough. I really didn’t need him to remind me. But this was a job. A gig. I was undercover.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll lose the sneakers. I’ll do my best to fit into whatever mold Hattie creates for me, but if I show up looking like a stuffed sausage, don’t complain.”

“You could never look like a stuffed sausage.” His voice was deep and the look on his face was full of heat.

My heart skipped a beat. There was no way Jensen Loxley could find me attractive. Right? That was silly. He was hot and rich and could have any woman. At least until he opened his mouth and then I understood why he was paying me to pretend to be his girlfriend.

“Glad you think so,” I said and pulled my attention back to the task at hand. “What else is on the agenda for today?”

“Nothing more for today,” he said. “I have a meeting. I’ll need to schedule a meeting to go over the details.”

“What details?”

“My itinerary for the next week,” he said. “We’ve got a busy month ahead of us.”

“Will you be laying out more rules?” I asked with some irritation.

“Do I need to make more rules?” he countered. “I assume you can conduct yourself like a lady when we’re at these events. No cussing. No flirting with anyone. And definitely no drinking. I won’t be seen with a drunk woman at any of these events.”

“What if I want to drink?” I shot back with attitude. “Is that what you’re saying? That I can’t drink?”

“I’m giving you a set of rules. If you can sip champagne without getting drunk, fine. I will not have you tipsy and potentially saying something that exposes our little arrangement. You can follow them or you can walk away from the job, but I’d hate to see you go because you’re too stubborn to adhere to the rules.”

“Well, I don’t like the rules,” I said. “I don’t like the fact that you think you can just buy women for a week and then throw them away.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you suggesting this is something I do often?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, do you?” I was going to get information about him one way or another. I didn’t intend to write a smear piece on him, but if he was a dick, I couldn’t lie to the public. I wanted to write an honest piece that accurately painted the picture of who the man really was.

“I’ve already told you I’ve never done this before,” he said and I sensed there was some embarrassment.

“Anything else?” I asked with a sigh.

“No,” he said. “However, I think I should point out this is a business arrangement. You should respect that. I’m only telling you what I expect from you in the job I’ve hired you for. It’s nothing personal.”

“I get it,” I said, shrugging. “You’re a demanding man.”

“I’m a man that has high standards,” he replied. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Have a good day.”

I left his office without another word. I was annoyed with the rules. I supposed it was part of the job but it grated on my nerves to be told how to dress by a total stranger. It was insulting. When he looked at me, he saw the same frumpy person I did. He made it clear my insecurities weren’t just in my head.

I left the building and stepped onto the sidewalk. There was a chilly breeze and I could smell the fall in the air. Soon, we would have snow on the ground. I looked down at my shoes and wondered if he expected me to walk through the snow in high heels.

A man brushed past me on his way into the building. And then I was jostled from the other side. I stepped back and took a moment to watch all the people hustling up and down the busy sidewalks. I was on Fifth Avenue with the movers and shakers of the world. I looked at the women, judging their outfits. They all looked like they stepped off the pages of a Bloomingdale’s catalog.

That was what Jensen wanted from me. I didn’t own a pencil skirt. I didn’t own anything close to what the women in his office wore. My style was all about hiding my voluptuous curves. My mother always told me a lady never showed too much skin.

I wanted to be more like the women that worked for Jensen. I wanted to let him see my assets but I was also embarrassed by my curves. Maybe there was a better way to look less frumpy without showing too much. Hopefully, Hattie was a miracle worker.



I went home instead of going to the office. I told my dad I was working from home after doing some research. He didn't need to know the research I was doing was for an entirely different article than the one he wanted me to write.

As soon as I got home, I went to my closet. I stared at the black and dark blue tops I tended to wear. Most of my pants were leggings or some version of them. I had a style that I thought worked for me. Now, I was going to have to change that up. I was both nervous and excited. I wanted to try a new look, but I was also terrified to change who I was.

"Embrace change," I reminded myself. Nothing changed unless I initiated it.



I stepped into the dimly lit private club, the soft hum of conversation and clinking glasses filling the air. The place had an air of exclusivity, the kind of spot where you needed a secret handshake just to find the bathroom. The scent of expensive cigars wafted through the air.

The club had a cigar room, and while there were air purifiers throughout the lounge area, it was still present. It was part of the ambiance of the place.

Only a select few were allowed membership in the club. Either you had to have money, which was my case, or you had to come from money. There was an actual pedigree request.

The lounge had no windows. It added to the mysteriousness of the place. It took my eyes a second to adjust. I scanned the lounge area that was set up with overstuffed chairs and couches. I didn't see Christian and turned my attention to the table area to find him.

Spotting him at the corner table, I made my way through the crowd. Christian, with his signature goofy smile. He was staring at his phone, telling me he was texting someone. I slid into the plush leather chair across from him.

“Am I interrupting?” I asked dryly.

He grinned and put his phone away. “Nope.”

The waiter approached, and we placed our drink orders. As we waited for our beverages, Christian leaned in with a mischievous glint in his eye. “So, I’ve been hearing some wild

stuff about this Lox AI program you've got cooking up. You've been keeping busy, huh?"

I chuckled, leaning back in my chair. "You know me, always working on something. But yeah, Lox has been my baby for a while now."

Christian's curiosity was palpable. He leaned in closer, lowering his voice. "I've heard it's the next big thing, man. Everybody's buzzing about it. What's the deal?"

I couldn't help but smile at his enthusiasm. I was proud of my project. "Well, let's just say Lox is going to change the game, Christian. It's like nothing you've ever seen before."

He raised an eyebrow, a sly grin forming on his face. "Can you give me a little taste, or is it all hush-hush?"

I laughed, shrugging it off. "I wish I could spill all the beans right now, but we're keeping it under wraps for a little while longer. Trust me, though, it's going to be worth the wait. I don't want to release it until it's absolutely perfect. I don't want to be the guy having to explain bugs and issuing forced updates to fix what should have been handled before it ever hit the market."

"I get it," he said. "It's cool. To be honest, that whole AI thing freaks me out a little."

"It's not scary," I said with a laugh. "Robots are not going to take over the world."

Our drinks arrived and we both took greedy sips before I went back to the topic at hand. "But seriously, Christian, Lox is going to be revolutionary. It's not just another AI program. It's an interactive experience. You can talk to it, ask questions, and it will respond like a human being."

Christian's eyes widened in disbelief. "No way. That's insane."

"It is," I said, excitement building in my chest. "And that's not even the best part. Lox is designed to learn from its interactions and improve over time. It's like having a personal assistant that actually understands you."

Christian leaned back in his chair; his mind clearly blown. “Damn, man. I can’t wait to see it in action. You really outdid yourself this time.”

I grinned, feeling a rush of pride. Christian was one of the toughest critics I knew, so his praise meant a lot. “Thanks, man. It’s been a lot of hard work, but I really think it’s going to be worth it. What about you? You’ve been off the grid the last couple of weeks.”

His face lit up and I knew what was coming my way. “I’ve been seeing a new lady lately. She’s something else.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh yeah? What’s she like?”

Christian loved women. I didn’t think he had ever met a woman he didn’t like. He fell in love every other week. We couldn’t be more different when it came to the dating world. He was outgoing and easy to talk to. He had the one thing I lacked—charm. It came so easy to him.

Christian let out a hearty laugh. “You know how I like a little adventure in my life, right? This girl, she’s a real firecracker. I met her at a buddy’s birthday party out in Montana a few months back. She’s got that wild spirit you’d expect from a Montana girl.”

I couldn’t help but grin, picturing the scene. “A Montana cowgirl, huh? Sounds like trouble.”

He nodded, his eyes lighting up with a mix of excitement and bewilderment. “Trouble and then some! She’s hell on wheels, Jensen. I mean, she’s the kind of girl who’d challenge a tornado to a wrestling match and win.”

I chuckled, genuinely curious now. “Is this the one?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but she’s definitely something,” he said, grinning.

“Tell me more.”

Christian leaned back, swirling the ice in his glass as he thought for a moment. “She’s unpredictable, and she gives me a bit more than I bargained for sometimes. But you know

what? I kind of like it. It's like trying to solve a puzzle with no edges, no corners. She's just so different. She's not like any of the women I've ever met here in the city. She can ride horses and dance her ass off. She looks hot in her faded jeans with no makeup and even hotter when she dresses up at night."

I raised an eyebrow, amused. "You like the challenge, don't you?"

He grinned, his eyes filled with a mix of amusement and fondness. "Exactly. I can't figure her out, and I don't even know if I want to. It keeps things interesting, keeps me on my toes. I've never met anyone quite like her."

"Maybe I need to head to Montana and see if I can find me one of those women."

"I don't know if you can handle a cowgirl," he said, laughing.

As I listened to him talk about the whirlwind romance, I couldn't help but be happy for him and a little jealous. Life was full of surprises, and it sounded like he was in for one wild ride with this rowdy chick from Montana. He was right though. I didn't think I could handle someone like that.

"What about you?" he asked.

"What about me?"

"Got a woman yet?"

"Not exactly," I said. "But I've got something to tell you."

"Uh oh, why does this sound bad?"

"It's not bad," I said. "At least I hope it doesn't get bad. Have you ever heard of the Faux's Agency?"

"The what?"

"Faux's," I said again and kept my voice down. "It's an escort agency."

His eyes widened. "Seriously? You hired a hooker?"

"No! That's not what it is. They're escorts."

“Hookers, ladies of the night, whatever name they go by, it’s all the same,” he said. “I’m not knocking it, but I’m just surprised that’s what you’ve resorted to. I know a few women that would be happy to go out with you.”

“It’s not that kind of escort,” I said again. “They are professional dates. They just pretend to be your girlfriend or whatever. There is no sex involved. It’s nothing but business.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “If you say so. What about it?”

“I went ahead and hired a girl to play my girlfriend.”

His eyes widened, and he nearly choked on his drink. “Wait, what? You hired a fake girlfriend? Why in the world would you do that?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at his reaction. “Because I don’t have the time or energy to find a real girlfriend,” I said. “Hattie convinced me to do it. She said my image is shit, and if I soften it, things will be better. I’m getting ready to launch that new tech. I’ve got all kinds of events I’m scheduled to attend. Hattie wants me to look like a normal person.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t look normal?”

“She said I look like a cyborg,” I muttered.

Christian burst into laughter. “When do I get to meet this fake girlfriend of yours?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “If I have any say in it? Never.”

He blinked in surprise. “What do you mean, never? Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to subject her to the chaos of meeting my friends and work people. She already met Hattie. That’s enough. It’s all just an experiment, remember? I’m only doing this to make me look more approachable.”

Christian leaned back, shaking his head in disbelief. “You, my friend, are certifiably crazy. What if this lady runs to the tabloids and tells them you’re paying her to pretend to be your girlfriend.”

“She signed a contract saying she won’t,” I said. “We both did.”

“I guess if that’s how you want to play this,” he said.

“You think it’s a bad idea?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s not conventional. It’s not like I have a better idea. If this is what you need to do, then go for it. Who knows? It might work out for you.”

“It’s not like I’m expecting to find true love with her.”

“But what if you do?” Christian asked with a goofy grin.

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, man. This is just an arrangement. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Christian looked at me for a long moment. “Just be careful, okay? You never know what kind of trouble you might get yourself into.”

“I will,” I said with a nod. “Thanks for the concern.”

“Did you meet this woman?”

“Yes.” I sipped my drink. “I ran into her. I mean that very literally. I smacked into her at the dating agency. I hit her hard.”

“Please tell me you’re lying,” he groaned.

“I wish I could,” I said, sighing. “I figured I may as well pay her before she sued me. And she looks like someone I would probably date.”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “It’s weird that you would just hire a girlfriend.”

“When you think about it, it’s clean and easy,” I said. “I don’t have to worry about calling her or making sure she’s happy. I don’t have to make promises.”

“You make it sound like she’s a dog,” he said, laughing.

“I would have to take care of a dog,” I said. “I don’t have to take care of Merida.”

“Merida? That’s her name?”



I nodded. “Yes.”

“You know, when you talk about her, you get this look in your eyes,” he said.

“I doubt that,” I said, scoffing.

“Do you like her?”

“I don’t know her. We met today to go over what I expect from her.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Why does it sound like you are treating your girlfriend like an employee?”

I didn’t get the joke. “Because she is.”

“Alright,” he said, laughing again. “I know nothing about these arrangements. I will have to take your word for it that you know what you’re doing.”

“I appreciate your trust in me.”

We finished another drink before I decided to call it a night. I needed to be at the top of my game tomorrow. I couldn’t afford to be tired or hungover when I was embarking on what was going to be the biggest thing I had ever done. I couldn’t afford to make any mistakes.

But as I walked out of the bar, I couldn’t help but think about Merida. Her full lips, luxurious curves, her sharp wit, and her confidence. It was hard not to be drawn to her. But I had to remind myself that this was a business arrangement. Nothing more, nothing less. I couldn’t let myself get too attached.



## MERIDA

**I**t had been an unusual couple of weeks since I'd seen my mother. Normally, we'd get together at least once a week, whether it was for a casual glass of wine, a shopping spree, or a cozy dinner at her place. But life had a way of getting hectic, and time had slipped away from us. I didn't want to neglect her, though.

I was an only child, and with my parents divorced, I tried to do my best to give them an equal amount of my time. I didn't want either of them to think I was favoring the other. Since I worked with my dad, it seemed only fair that I got together with my mom at least once a week. I knew she was lonely. She had never remarried or even dated anyone seriously after my father.

As I parked my car outside her beautifully landscaped two-bedroom home in the Bronx, I couldn't help but smile. The house was *so* my mom. She was a simple woman. She didn't need to have a big house with brand new appliances and a housekeeper. She liked to take care of herself. It was a place that always made me feel at home. It was a small house but it wasn't like she needed a lot.

I knocked on the door, and moments later, my mother greeted me with a radiant smile. "You don't have to knock," she said and gave me a big hug. "I'm so happy to see you. I feel like it's been forever."

I returned her hug, feeling the comfort of her embrace. "I know, Mom. Life's been a whirlwind lately. I'm sorry."

“I know you’re busy,” she said as we walked inside. “I’m just lucky to have you come by. So many of my friends have children they don’t see for years. I think I’m very fortunate to have you so close by.”

That made me feel guilty. I needed to do better. You only got one mom and I knew life was short. “I feel lucky to have my mother so close.”

“I made chicken and fettucine alfredo,” she said. “I thought we could sit in the solarium. I love being outside with the beautiful fall colors.”

“That sounds like a great plan,” I said. “Can I set the table?”

“Already done.” She smiled and gently shooed me out back.

I stepped into the small solarium. The heat was on, which was always confusing to the brain. I was outside in the cold, but I was warm. The solarium was the whole reason she bought the house. Her garden was all tilled with straw over the bed. My mother had an amazing garden. She spent her days tending to it, reading, and living a very peaceful life.

The vibrant autumn hues of maple trees with their auburn and copper leaves formed a natural canopy overhead. The scene was like something out of a storybook, a serene and picturesque setting that made me forget about the hustle and bustle of the city. I was glad she’d found somewhere that made her happy.

My townhouse was in a very busy neighborhood. It was never quiet. Even though her neighbors were close, it felt like she was all alone. It was peaceful.

I sat down and poured us each a glass of wine from the bottle she had put on the table. I sipped the red wine and thought about what my life would look like when I was her age. Would I be single? Would I have children to stop by and check on me?

At the rate I was going, it didn’t look promising. I was twenty-nine and had no romantic prospects. My only date was

with a man that was paying me to go out with him. And he was kind of a jerk.

“Here we are,” Mom said as she carried out a dish. My mother had prepared a homecooked meal, and the aroma filled the air.

“It smells amazing,” I said.

We dished up and got busy eating. It was so good to eat a homecooked meal. When I was at home alone, I usually popped something in the microwave.

As we ate, my mother turned to me with a smile. “So, have you met anyone interesting lately?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

I groaned inwardly, knowing exactly where this conversation was headed. “No, Mom, I haven’t,” I replied, taking another sip of wine.

My mother sighed. “Well, you’re still young. You have plenty of time to find the right person. Don’t rush into anything.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not rushing into anything, Mom. I just haven’t found anyone who’s worth my time.”

Eventually, I was going to have to tell her about the whole fake-girlfriend job thing. But not tonight.

She nodded, understanding. “I know, dear. It’s hard to find someone who fits into your life. But don’t give up hope. Sometimes the most unexpected things can happen.”

I frowned, not really wanting to think about it. My love life was a mess, and I wasn’t sure if it could be fixed. But for now, I was content to sit with my mother and enjoy her cooking.

“I’ll keep waiting,” I said.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“What?”

“What’s going on?” she asked again. “I know you too well. I can tell there’s something on your mind. Is it work? A man?”

“It’s work,” I said, sighing.

“Your father?”

“Mom, I don’t want to burden you with this,” I said.

“It’s not a burden. I want to know what’s going on in your life. I’m here to listen.”

I took a deep breath. “Dad will never take me seriously! Ever.”

I rambled on, unleashing a verbal torrent of all my grievances regarding my father’s lack of faith in my abilities. It felt good to vent, to get it all off my chest, but as the words poured out, I couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt for dumping so much negativity about my father on my mother.

“He is never going to let me write anything that means anything,” I said. “I’m so sick of the fluff pieces. I feel like he only gave me the job because he had to. He could care less if I actually write anything with substance. I will always be the fluff reporter. I’m the one that fills in the blank spaces at the back of the paper or in this case, that website. I just want to write something that matters.”

My mother listened intently, her expression softening as I spoke. When I finished, she reached out and took my hand. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I know how important your writing is to you.”

I nodded, feeling a lump form in my throat. “I just don’t know what to do. I feel stuck.”

“Maybe it’s time to start thinking about other options,” she suggested. “Have you considered freelancing?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know anything about freelancing.”

“Well, it’s worth looking into. There are plenty of opportunities out there. You could write for different publications, find your own projects, and really explore what you want to say with your writing.”

I furrowed my brow, considering her words. “I don’t know, Mom. It sounds like a lot of work, and I don’t even know

where to start.”

“You won’t know until you try,” she said with a smile. “And besides, you’re a talented writer. I have no doubt that you’ll succeed if you put your mind to it.”

I couldn’t help but smile back at her. “Thanks, Mom. You always know how to make me feel better.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” she said.

A sheepish expression crossed my face. “Sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to go on like that. I know you still care for him, and you wish things had gone differently. I don’t mean to unload on you about him. I know how hard it is to hear about him.”

My mother smiled warmly, her eyes filled with understanding. “There’s nothing to be sorry for, Merida. It was a long time ago. I want to hear about your life. What are you going to do about the article he won’t let you write?”

I hesitated for a moment, contemplating my response. Finally, I mustered up the resolve to speak the truth. “I’ve decided that I’m going to write it anyway.”

Mom’s eyes twinkled with a mixture of pride and support as she lifted her glass of wine. “That’s my girl.”

In that moment, I felt a rush of determination. “Thanks, Mom. But what do I do when I finish the article?” I asked.

She shrugged. “You shop it around.”

“Do you think Dad would blacklist me?” I asked.

“Oh, I doubt that,” she said, smiling. “He wants you to be successful.”

“I’m not sure about that. If he did, wouldn’t he let me stretch my wings and fly? He is keeping his thumb on me. He’s clipped my wings.”

My mother reached out to take my hand, her expression serious. “Merida, you can’t let your father hold you back. You’re a grown woman, and you have the right to pursue your dreams. If writing this article is what you want to do, then do

it. If your father tries to stop you, you'll find a way around him."

I nodded, grateful for her words of encouragement. "You're right, Mom. I can do this. And if Dad tries to stop me, I'll just have to be more cunning."

A wicked smile crossed my mother's face. "That's the spirit! You come from a long line of strong and cunning women. We don't let anyone hold us back."

I laughed, feeling empowered by her words. "I won't let anyone hold me back, Mom. Not even Dad."

We finished our glasses of wine in comfortable silence, both lost in our own thoughts. As the evening wore on, I couldn't help but feel grateful for my mother's support. She had always been my rock, and I knew that without her, I would never have had the courage to pursue my dreams.

"I should head home," I said after helping her with the dishes. "I have a busy day tomorrow."

"You never told me. What story are you working on?"

I flashed her a wicked smile. "It's a secret—for now. You will be the first person I let read it before I shop it around."

"Now, I'm intrigued," she said, grinning.

"Let's see if I can do anything with it. Maybe Dad is right and I'm not ready for anything big."

"Yes, you are," she insisted. "Don't think any other way. You've always held yourself back. You are a beautiful, smart young woman. Don't hide."

"Thanks," I said and gave her a hug. "I'll call you sometime this week. I have a busy week."

I started the drive back to my townhouse.

Now it was twice today that people told me to stop holding back.

Although my mother had been much nicer about it than Jensen. I was almost dreading seeing him tomorrow. He wasn't a pleasant man. I couldn't understand why he chose me



to be his fake girlfriend. If he found so much wrong with me, why pay me so much money to be on his arm?

I spent the rest of the evening thinking about Jensen and what he really wanted from me. He was always so cold and distant, never letting his guard down. I couldn't help but wonder what kind of man he was behind closed doors. Was he really the ruthless businessman that everyone made him out to be, or was there something more to him?

I went to my closet to find something suitable to wear tomorrow. My white sneakers sat in the corner of my room. I couldn't wear those. I scanned my shoe rack. My shoes were meant to be comfortable, not fashionable. I quickly put together an outfit that I hoped would satisfy his many demands.



I was at work, my heart pounding in my chest as I stared at the monitor, the code scrolling in front of me. Something had gone terribly wrong, and we were way past the point where we should be facing a crisis of this magnitude.

I went over it a good ten times before I let the panic and anger set in. This could not be happening. How had someone managed to fuck this up this badly? I slammed my hand against my desk and got to my feet.

I was suddenly very hot in my once comfy room. I shrugged off my jacket and tossed it over the chair. Then I rolled up my sleeves. This was serious. This could destroy everything I had been busting my ass to do over the last year. I stomped out of my office and toward the area where the developers worked. It was a series of desks inside cubicles.

My frustration was boiling over as I approached them. “Conference room, now!” My voice carried over the flimsy walls that were several inches shorter than I was.

Everyone’s heads popped up. Most of them were wearing glasses and had looks of genuine concern and I hoped a little fear. They all knew how damn important this was. I walked into the conference room with the team of five scurrying in behind me. I didn’t bother closing the door. I wanted the whole office to know just how serious I was about making sure the launch was absolutely fucking perfect. There would be zero mistakes.

“This is unacceptable!” I snapped, my voice filled with irritation. “We can’t afford to have these kinds of issues at this stage. What the hell happened?”

I could feel the tension in the room, my developers exchanging nervous glances. But I didn’t need finger-pointing. I needed solutions, and I needed them immediately.

“I don’t pay you all to twiddle your thumbs and screw around,” I continued, my tone harsh. “I pay you to leave your mark on the most state-of-the-art AI program the world has ever seen. I expect exceptional work, not mediocrity. Is that clear?”

“Sir—” One of the developers calmly moved to close the door until I shot her a glare and stopped her in her tracks before she could get it all the way closed.

“No! I don’t want to hear the same tired fucking excuses! We’ve been working on this thing for months! Months! How the hell do we get weeks from roll out and this shit wasn’t found?”

My voice was rising with each word, my frustration bubbling over. The developers were shifting uncomfortably in their seats, eyes downcast. I could see the fear in their eyes, and I knew I had to rein it in before I lost their respect.

“Look,” I said, my voice softer, “I know this is a difficult project. We’re pushing the boundaries of what’s possible here. But that doesn’t mean we can afford to let things slip through the cracks. We’re better than this. We’re the best damn team in the business, and I know you can rise to the occasion.”

“The problem is—”

I held up my hand to stop him from finishing his sentence that would absolutely include some kind of excuse. “Don’t.” My voice was so low I barely heard myself. “I don’t want to hear any fucking excuses, is that clear?”

Just as I was about to let my frustration boil over, the door to the conference room swung wide, and Merida walked in. She stopped in her tracks, her eyes widening as she took in the

tense scene. Her eyes locked on mine before she surveyed the room.

“That’s all,” I said. “Get to work and figure this shit out. No one is leaving this office until it’s fixed!”

I stomped out of the conference room. When I looked back, Merida was still in the conference room looking just a little shell-shocked. With a quick motion of my hand, I beckoned her to follow me into my office. Once we were both inside, I gestured for her to close the door behind her, and she did.

She raised an eyebrow, her expression a mix of curiosity and concern. “Jensen, do you always treat your people like that?”

I glanced up at her, my mood dark and stormy after the earlier debacle with the team. “If they screw up? Yeah, I do.”

Merida shot me a dirty look. Her disgust for me was written all over her face. “You know, maybe this kind of thing is why people think you need softening. If you weren’t so tough on your staff, you wouldn’t need to pay half a million bucks to keep a nice girl on your arm for the cameras.”

I clenched my fists, feeling my anger rising at her words. How dare she insinuate that I needed a woman to soften me? “Excuse me?” My voice was a low growl.

Merida stood her ground, her eyes flashing with defiance. “You heard me, Jensen. Maybe if you weren’t such an asshole, you wouldn’t need to pay a total stranger to put up with you.”

I advanced on her, closing the distance between us until we were almost nose to nose. “Careful, Merida,” I warned her, my voice dripping with venom. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t know me. You don’t know what kind of pressure I’m under. You’re playing with fire.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve learned guys like you are a lot of hot air. You curse and shout and act like you’re this big bad ass. When push comes to shove, I’m guessing you’re a big pus \_\_\_”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” I warned.

“Pushover,” she said defiantly.

It was a better choice of words than I thought she was going to use. “Tell me, Merida, when was the last time you programmed an AI? What kind of experience do you have starting and owning your own flourishing tech company? How many people are watching you and waiting for you to fail simply because you’ve been so successful and they’re jealous?”

She snorted, her arms folding across her chest. “Listen to you, talking about your own success like it’s some kind of plague. If you’re so bothered by your success, why do you keep trying to impress everyone? Maybe you should take a vacation instead of trying to pack your schedule with events you don’t want to do.”

“I’m not saying my success is a plague,” I shot back. “I’m saying people are hoping this tech fails. I’m not going to give them the satisfaction. I pay those people out there a lot of fucking money. The least they can do is make sure shit is done right!”

“I’m not one of them!” she shouted. “You don’t have to keep paying me, you know. You can fire me right this very second and I’ll be gone. I’ll be happy to walk away from this disaster.”

“Then do it,” I said, folding my arms across my chest, mirroring her defiant stance. “Walk away. You’re right. I do owe you something for your time. I’ll give you whatever you want for the rest of the day. Let’s see, how about fifty thousand?”

Her eyes widened in shock. “You’re crazy. I’m not taking your money.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. “You already signed the contract.”

“I didn’t sign it in blood! I can quit this shit show anytime I want.”

I turned to level my gaze at her. She was challenging me. I should have told her to get the hell out, but dammit, I enjoyed

the challenge. No one talked to me the way she did. Except Hattie. This little firecracker was not the meek little mouse she pretended to be. I could see that now. Those big, brown Bambi eyes were deceiving. I would bet a million dollars she was a wildcat in bed.

“Do you really want to quit?” I asked her in a husky voice. “You’re worried about being alone with me?”

“No,” she answered. “I’m worried your image is going to need a lot more than me to rehab.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I’ve got an entire staff of people that worry about my image. Your only concern is showing up to the events wearing something other than what you have on now.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “My God, you are an asshole.”

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t have to like me. You don’t have to be nice to me. But for the love of God, stop insulting me. I don’t actually need your money. I agreed to this job because I wanted the experience. I really can walk away. Do you want to take a chance finding someone else? I’ll make sure Della knows how much of a dick you are. She might just fire you. I read the contract. Every damn word. There is a code of ethics. So far, you’re brushing right up against the line and we haven’t even gone to one of your precious events. You’ll be left high and dry.”

She did make a good point. I walked to my desk and sat down. I leaned back in my chair, letting out a frustrated sigh. I hated that she was right. The whole PR charade was a necessary evil, a charade to maintain the image of the company and my own public persona. But it grated on me, having to pretend to be someone I wasn’t.

“You’re not wrong, Merida,” I admitted, rubbing my temples.

She gave me a sympathetic look, her eyes softening. “Sometimes a little kindness goes a long way, both in the

office and in life. You don't have to come out swinging every time. I'm not attacking you. I'm telling you what I will put up with and what I won't. If you ever talk to me like you talked to those people, I will walk. I don't care where we are or who's watching. Be nice. Or at the very least, be a decent human being."

I couldn't help but let out a chuckle at Merida's comment. "Noted, but for the record, I didn't hire you for your public relations feedback. I've got experts for that."

She shook her head like she had given up on me. I was used to the look. Hattie directed it my way all the time. I glanced down at her feet, I noted with some relief that she wasn't wearing white sneakers. Dodged that bullet. However, the plain black flats she had on weren't much better in terms of making a fashion statement. I was about to say something that I was sure she would take as an insult, but I believed in setting clear guidelines. She just wasn't getting it.

Just then, Hattie walked into my office, and her timing couldn't have been better. I gestured toward Merida. "Hattie, perfect. Take Ms. Moore shopping. I never want to see those ugly shoes again."

Merida rolled her eyes once again. "Do you have a foot fetish? You should have included that in your bio."

"I have a standard," I replied easily. "Your footwear looks like something I would find in my grandmother's closet."

"Well then your grandmother has great taste in shoes," Merida said.

Hattie burst into laughter. "I see he's in a good mood."

"You should have seen him five minutes ago," Merida muttered. "It would be nothing short of a miracle if his staff doesn't mutiny."

"Jensen, we've talked about this," Hattie warned. "I see your sleeves rolled up. I know what that means. Behave."

"Just take her shopping," I growled.



“Come on, we’ll leave the grump to glare at his computer,” Hattie said and hooked her arm through Merida’s.

“Close the door!” I called out.

Merida’s head popped back into my office. She gave me a sweet smile and then slammed it closed. I supposed I deserved that.

Maybe, just maybe, with Merida’s quick wit and Hattie’s fashion sense, I could pull off this fake girlfriend thing. Merida was good on the fly. She wouldn’t get caught in a conversation and struggle to come up with a story about how we met or who she was.

Now if I could just get her to look the part, I’d be all set.



## MERIDA

**S**hopping with Hattie was an adventure I wasn't sure I was prepared to handle. I felt like I was caught up in a tornado. The woman was crazy.

She was a total heathen in the first boutique we went to, pulling out clothes, shoes, and accessories like there was no tomorrow. I felt horrible for the mess she was making. I was doing all I could to run behind her and hang things up and put things back, but it was no use.

As we strolled through the racks of designer clothes, I couldn't help but feel out of place in most of the outfits she picked out. I was more of a jeans-and-tee kind of girl, and the high-fashion world was a foreign land to me. She could look at a dress and immediately know the designer. I didn't even know the designers she was talking about.

I did not fit into the billionaire crowd. My parents lived comfortable lives, but this was a whole new level of luxury. I wasn't sure she knew who she was shopping for. The dresses and pants she pulled from the racks were things models would wear, not a woman of my size. I found myself walking through one high-end store with several hangers around my neck. I felt ridiculous. Every once in a while, Hattie would stop, look me up and down, and add another hanger to my neck.

"I like you in red," she declared.

"I don't really wear red," I replied.

"You should. You will. Black is fine, but you need color. Green is another beautiful color on you. I like white, too."

I didn't know what she saw but I supposed I had to trust her. She was a beautiful woman and her style was classy and fun at the same time. Maybe that's what I needed—a stylist. I thought I was dressing for my body style, but maybe I was doing it wrong. I didn't like shopping. It was always so depressing to go into a store and see the little mannequins all dressed and cute and then I tried on the outfit and looked like a potato. I shopped online. I went with what I knew and rarely tried anything different. It was too disappointing to get my hopes up for a new style only to discover it looked horrible on me.

Hattie, on the other hand, reveled in it. She spun around, holding up a daring red dress. “Oh, Merida, you have to try this on! It's so sexy.”

Sexy. I couldn't remember the last time I used that word to describe myself. “I don't know,” I hesitated. “It looks a little small.”

“It's supposed to be,” she said, laughing. “Trust me, you're going to look hot.”

I didn't think so, but I took the dress and headed to the fitting room. Hopefully, once she saw just how ridiculous I looked in the get-up, she would understand why I chose the clothes I did. Then, we could get this shopping spree over and done with. I was already exhausted and ready to go home to my quiet townhouse.

I slipped into the dress, adjusting it in front of the mirror, and stepped out. I didn't even bother looking at my reflection in the mirror. I was sure my hips looked as wide as they felt and my boobs were barely contained by the fabric pulled tight. One sneeze and there would be a disaster.

Hattie's eyes practically sparkled with her face lighting up. “You look absolutely stunning, Merida. Seriously, this dress was made for you. I knew it. I have an eye for this kind of thing. It has not failed me yet.”

I gathered the courage to turn around and face the three mirrors positioned in a semi-circle in front of me. I actually had to look over my shoulder to see if there was someone

behind me. I looked back at my reflection and realized it was really me. How in the world did I look this good? I turned this way and that, studying my reflection from every angle. It was hard not to feel a boost of confidence as I saw myself in a way I rarely did.

Maybe Hattie was onto something, pulling me out of my comfort zone and helping me see myself in a different light.

“What do you think?” Hattie asked as she stood beside me.

“I think I’ve never worn anything like this,” I replied. “I would have never picked this for myself. Ever.”

“That’s because, like most women, you are dressing to hide your perceived flaws instead of dressing to show off your beautiful body,” she said. “Sometimes, you need an outside pair of eyes to see what you can’t.”

“Thank you,” I said with a heartfelt smile. It meant a lot to have a stranger tell me I was beautiful.

“You’re welcome, now get back in there. We’ve just gotten started!”

We continued our shopping spree, and as Hattie took over yet another boutique, I couldn’t help but feel grateful for her enthusiasm. She might have been a heathen in the stores, but she had a knack for making me feel beautiful, something I hadn’t felt in a long time. She knew what she wanted and she was spending an obscene amount of money, so I supposed that bought her a little forgiveness from the salespeople.

As Hattie and I sifted through racks of clothing, my curiosity got the better of me, and I couldn’t resist asking the question that had been on my mind after the incident at Jensen’s office.

“Hattie, what’s your brother’s deal?” I asked somewhat tentatively. It was clear Hattie and Jensen were close, but they were so different. Hattie had to see her brother’s character flaws. “Why is he such a jackass? No offense.”

Hattie let out a light giggle, and her smile was as warm as ever. “None taken, Merida. It’s a question I’ve asked myself many times.”

She paused, her fingers running through the fabric of a blouse she'd picked up. "Jensen is a complicated enigma. He's not easy to get to know, but once he lets his walls down, he's a pretty decent guy. He just happens to carry a very large chip on his shoulder."

I nodded, understanding that there was more to Jensen than met the eye. "What's with the chip, then?"

Hattie sighed, her expression thoughtful. "It's a long story, really. He's been through a lot, faced his fair share of challenges and disappointments. It's made him guarded, and sometimes that comes off as being a bit... prickly. He sets such a high standard for himself. Failure is not an option. He refuses to accept mistakes as mistakes. To him, a mistake is one of the worst sins a person can commit. He demands excellence. Period. He hates when he fails to do what he set out to do."

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy for Jensen, even though I'd often been on the receiving end of his sharp words. "Basically, I shouldn't take anything he says personally? I don't know how to deal with him."

Hattie smiled again, a glimmer of affection in her eyes. "You give him time, space, and a lot of patience. And maybe, just maybe, he'll let you in. Underneath it all, he's a good person, Merida. You just have to get past the exterior."

I supposed I could understand that a little, but there seemed to be more. I wanted to know why he was such a perfectionist. What made Jensen Loxley tick? That was all information I hoped to learn for the article I wrote.

"Oh, this is the one!" Hattie exclaimed and pulled out another dress. "Yes, yes, yes! Try this on!"

My initial reaction was hell no. It was not my style. But then everything I had tried on thus far wasn't my style and it actually looked pretty good. I had to trust the process. As usual, the dress was very daring. I barely looked at myself in the mirror. I no longer trusted my own eyes. I was going to leave it to her to tell me if it looked good or not.

I stepped out of the dressing room in the sleek dress. It hugged my figure in all the right places, and I felt a sense of confidence wash over me as I looked at myself in the mirror. Hattie's eyes lit up, and she clapped her hands together. "Merida, that's it! That's the perfect dress for this weekend's gala event for tech billionaires and investors. You'll turn heads, I promise."

I smiled, genuinely touched by her enthusiasm. "Thanks, Hattie. You have a knack for this fashion stuff. I know you like it and I think I like it, but what about Jensen? He seems to have a particular look he's going for. Is this going to be okay?"

"It's perfect," she said, smiling. "Now, we need to get you some shoes. No flats."

We spent another two hours buying heels and accessories for the many dresses and outfits Hattie put together. I could tell she was having a blast. Shopping was definitely her thing.

"Let's go get a snack," she declared. "I could really use a smoothie. There's an amazing juice bar right here."

We sat down with our green grass smoothies or something she promised was going to make me feel like a whole new woman. The curiosity that had been eating at me resurfaced, and I couldn't hold back any longer. "Hattie, why is Jensen's chip so large?"

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"You said Jensen had a big chip on his shoulder," I clarified. "Why is it so big?"

Hattie chewed the inside of her cheek for a moment, and I wondered if I shouldn't have asked. But then she sighed and began to speak, her voice low and thoughtful.

"Between you and me, Jensen's had some trauma in his life that he never dealt with properly. He's never been much of a people person. He was bullied mercilessly growing up, and since he was so smart, he was always in classes with kids way older than him, so socially, he was always out of his depth. Making friends just wasn't his thing. He was more invested in creating, building, and dismantling. Figuring out what made

things tick. It's why he hates not succeeding in what he sets out to do. All those older kids did what they could to make him feel like he wasn't good enough. It wasn't cool."

I listened intently, absorbing every word she said. "That would be very hard."

"Any need he had for a companion was filled by our father, who was a mechanic. I suspect that's where Jensen acquired his passion for fixing things. Our father was a good man, but once he got injured at work and had to go on disability, he lost sight of himself and his purpose. He got sour, angry, and bitter. He started drinking. By then, Jensen was in his early twenties, and try as he might, he couldn't save our old man from himself. Jensen had it in his head that if he just did a little more or was a little better, he could pull Dad back. He wanted our father to snap out of the funk he fell into. He thought if he could show him how successful he was, Dad would wake up one day and want to be part of our lives again."

I hung on every word, my heart heavy with the weight of the story. "Where is your father now?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

Hattie gave me a sad smile. "Buried in Greenwood Cemetery."

My heart squeezed thinking about Jensen never getting through to his dad. I understood him a lot better in that moment.





Sitting in the back of the limo, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of anticipation. I was waiting for Merida to come out of her townhouse. I glanced out the window, observing the small, charming building that was her home. It was sandwiched between other similar homes. I was certain a person could stick their arm out their window and into their neighbor's house. The neighborhood wasn't great, but it was middle class. It made me curious about what she did for a living. Not that it mattered.

I checked my watch. I wasn't going to be happy if she was late. Then she appeared, descending the stairs, and I was struck dumb by how ravishing she looked.

Her dress hugged her curves in all the right places, and her hair cascaded down her back with her curly hair relaxed into soft waves. My breath caught as I watched her approach, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride that she was with me tonight.

I hurried out of the car to open the door for her, and as she tilted her head back to look up at me, her eyes threatened to drag me under. "You look incredible," I managed to say, my voice husky with admiration.

Merida grinned, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "You clean up nice, too."

As she settled into the limo beside me, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement and wonderment. The night was young, and I was in the company of a woman who had the

power to leave me utterly captivated. This gala event was bound to be unforgettable, and I couldn't have asked for a more stunning companion to share it with. Seeing her in that dress told me I made the right decision when I chose her. She was going to knock the socks off everyone we encountered. People hated me because I was rich and wanted to change the face of technology. Now, they were going to hate me because I was with the most beautiful woman in the room.

As we settled into the limo, I felt the nerves creeping in a bit. The decision to show up with a woman to the gala was pretty bold. I had a reputation of going stag to just about everything. Years ago, I tried to take dates but it always ended badly. Either they were bored and begging to go or they scanned the room like a shark eyeing a barrel of fish. I was the appetizer. They used me to get into the swanky galas, but it wasn't me they wanted. They wanted someone that would buy them the moon and not ask for anything in return.

"You know," she began. "I realized there's so much I should know about you, being your girlfriend and all. It would help me play the part convincingly, don't you think?"

I couldn't help but chuckle at her straightforwardness. "You've got a point there. So, what would you like to know?"

She looked at me with a playful glint in her eye. "I don't know. I guess we should start with things that are important, like are you deathly allergic to anything?"

"No," I said, smiling. "You?"

"Nope."

"You have one sister?" she asked.

"Just the one."

I hesitated for a moment, thinking about my family, a topic I rarely discussed. "I come from a small family. My mother passed away when I was young, so it's just my sister and me."

Merida's eyes softened with understanding. "I'm sorry to hear about your mother." She nodded. "I guess I should know how old you are."

“Thirty-four,” I replied. “You?”

“Twenty-nine.” She was quiet for a second.

I could see her trying to decide what to ask next. I wasn’t good at dating in general. I definitely didn’t know a damn thing about speed dating. What should a girlfriend know about her boyfriend?

“Do you like seafood?” she asked.

“What?”

“I assume there will be appetizers at this thing, right?”

“Of course,” I said, nodding.

“I, as your dutiful girlfriend, would probably put together a plate for you,” she said. “What appetizers would you want and which would you decline?”

She was better at this than I was. For some reason, that made me a little jealous to know she was a pro at dating and navigating all the awkward getting to know you stages. Her playful banter made me feel at ease, and I found myself willing to open up to her more than I had with anyone in a long time.

“Well, I’m a fan of shrimp cocktail, but I can’t stand anything too spicy,” I said. “And I’m not a big fan of oysters, so I’d probably pass on those.”

Merida nodded thoughtfully, making a mental note of my preferences. “Good to know. I’ll make sure to bring plenty of shrimp cocktail for you. What about wine? Are you a red kind of guy or something else?”

I chuckled at her enthusiasm. “I’m not really a wine guy, to be honest. I prefer a nice cold beer.”

“A beer guy, huh?” Merida’s eyes lit up with amusement. “What kind of beer?”

“I like IPAs, but honestly, anything cold and refreshing will do the trick.”

She nodded, taking in my response. “Got it. So, you’re a thirty-four-year-old IPA-loving guy who doesn’t like spicy

food and oysters and prefers beer over wine.”

I smiled at her summary of me. “That’s me in a nutshell.”

Merida grinned back at me, her eyes sparkling with amusement and interest. It was nice when we weren’t fighting.

“How did you get into the tech business?” she asked.

“I think it kind of fell into me,” I said.

“Explain,” she encouraged.

I wasn’t sure it would ever be brought up in casual conversation, but if it did, it was better if she knew.

“I was a nerd,” I admitted. “A huge nerd.”

“I doubt that,” she said, laughing.

“You’ve really never heard my story?” I asked.

“No.” She shook her head.

My story was kind of my secret. There had been various articles and unauthorized biographies, but I knew Hattie never talked and I sure as hell didn’t. Anything those people wrote about was hearsay. No one heard it from me.

“Well, as a kid, I was much more interested in taking apart my father’s computer and putting it back together again before he got home from work, just to see how it worked. I took apart tablets and laptops. My dad put the word out if anyone had broken electronics, he would take them off their hands to keep me entertained.”

“Really?” she said, smiling. “That’s very sweet.”

“My dad worked two jobs to put me into a tech school for gifted kids,” I went on. “It was where I thrived. It was an environment more suited to my talents and abilities. It got me out of the advanced classes at my old school. The move to the new school separated me from the bullies in my old public school that targeted me for being so different. I went to school with kids several years older than me. I graduated four years early and earned scholarships to study at any university of my choosing. I had offers from MIT, Yale, Berkley, everywhere. But I was pretty much done with school. My dad told me I

learned all a teacher was going to teach me. He encouraged me to get out into the real world. Instead, of going to college, I got a job at Google as a junior developer when I was only seventeen.”

“No shit?”

I laughed. I was used to that reaction. “It’s the truth. I am a real geek.”

“You and I both know you’re not a geek,” she said dryly. “How long were you at Google?”

“I was recruited out of Google by a small start-up,” I answered. “I liked my job at Google, but I felt like I was being held back. I was put in a box and told what to do. It was too easy. I needed to stretch my wings. I didn’t care that the startup wouldn’t pay shit. Once I got out of Google and was allowed to do more of what I wanted, my growth and knowledge grew rapidly. Then one day I started my own side project inspired by my greatest passion of all: AI. I know it’s a controversial subject, but it’s going to happen. I love it. I love the possibilities. I love that it’s something no one else has done. I get to pave the way. Some people can’t wait to see what the next wave of tech will bring, while others fear this kind of progress. I see it as a huge opportunity to improve quality of life across the globe. My goal is to make AI accessible to all consumers as a true companion to help make their lives easier.”

She was hanging on my every word. I knew I could go off on tangents when I talked about my work. Hattie called it my geek speak. I couldn’t help it. It was the one thing in life that truly excited me.

“I did see you on TV last week,” she confessed. “Lox, right?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“People are afraid of robots taking over the world,” she said, smiling. “Robots tend to be smarter than us and they don’t have human emotion that might affect a decision.”

“My tech has nothing to do with taking over the world,” I assured her. “My first step is to get people to trust the tech. To understand how much it can help them, without taking over. My next step is to integrate that same program into other districts, like healthcare, road systems, travel, etc.”

She nodded. “I get it. It sounds good.”

“But you don’t believe me?”

“No, I do, but I guess it’s just a little scary,” she said. “It’s not that I don’t trust you. Are you going to implant chips in our hands?”

I laughed. “You know, people make that sound like a bad thing, but imagine you’re in a car accident and your wallet is missing in action. A paramedic could scan your chip and have all the information he needed. There would never be another John Doe. I can see why people might be afraid, but I promise that we’re not implanting chips in anyone’s hands. Our goal is to make AI work for people, not against them.”

She seemed to relax a bit at that, and we continued talking about my work for a while longer. She seemed genuinely interested, which was not something I was used to.

“I think you have some big goals,” she said.

“I do,” I said, nodding. “Alright, my turn. What about you, Merida? What do you do for work? And hobbies? What are your favorite pastimes? Do you like seafood, just in case I bring *you* a plate?”

She looked a little shocked. “I’m not a picky eater,” she answered my last question first. “I like to try anything. I do love spicy food. I like wine, but I also like beer. Some of the IPAs are a little too strong for my tastes, but I love doing those beer sampling trays. Those are fun.”

As our conversation continued, I couldn’t help but feel a growing sense of connection with Merida. It was as if we were peeling back layers of each other’s lives, and I found myself genuinely enjoying the process. Perhaps this charade of being a couple for the gala event wouldn’t be as burdensome as I had initially thought.

“What do you do for a living?” I asked. “Is your family here in Manhattan?”





## MERIDA

Jensen's questions about my work and family were like landmines, and I had to sidestep them carefully. I couldn't risk him finding out that I worked for *Full Disclosure*. So, instead, I steered the conversation toward safer topics, ones that wouldn't give away my true identity.

"I love to write," I began, my voice enthusiastic. "It's my way of expressing myself and making sense of the world."

Jensen's brow furrowed slightly, but he didn't press for more details. Instead, he seemed genuinely interested as I shared other aspects of my life. "I enjoy dancing, movies, cooking, and, well, comfortable white sneakers. They're my go-to footwear for pretty much any occasion."

Then, out of nowhere, Jensen burst out laughing, startling me. I blinked at him in surprise, not sure what had triggered his sudden amusement.

He noticed my confusion and managed a smile. "I'm sorry, Merida. It's just... I can't believe you're into white sneakers. It's not what I expected. What is your attachment to them?"

I couldn't help but join in his laughter. It was an unexpected moment of lightness, and it felt good to share a genuine laugh with him. It was as if, for a brief moment, we could put aside the charades and just enjoy each other's company.

"I don't think it's an attachment," I said. "It's just that they're comfortable and functional. I'll have you know I walk a lot. I have seen plenty of people in the city that wear

comfortable, sensible shoes when they are on their way to work.”

His lips quirked. “Sensible shoes should be left to nurses and old ladies. Or for the gym. Not for young, beautiful women.”

I felt my cheeks burn a little. It was a simple compliment but it meant a lot coming from him. “I wear heels. Sometimes.”

“I like those heels,” he said, nodding toward the black strappy sandals Hattie picked out for me.

“Your sister is a professional shopper,” I said, laughing.

He groaned. “Don’t I know it.”

“Does she dress you?”

He chuckled. “No, not entirely. She pointed me toward a tailor. She said my suits didn’t fit me right and I could afford to have custom suits made that fit me.”

I didn’t have to wonder why he needed bespoke suits. He was very tall and slender but it was clear he was also built. The suits looked damn good on him. As did the tux he was wearing.

“She knows what she’s doing,” I said.

“She should. She’s been spending my money since I started making it.”

We arrived at the event, hosted at a super fancy hotel in the heart of the city. The grandeur of the venue left me utterly breathless, and I couldn’t help but feel a little like Cinderella attending the ball. There was a red carpet leading to the front doors being opened by doormen wearing black suits and pristine white gloves. Handlers followed behind men and women dressed in gorgeous gowns and tuxedos. Photographers were busy snapping pictures as the couples posed.

“Jensen, this place is absolutely gorgeous!”

He leaned in closer, his lips brushing against my ear. “Just wait until the one in Paris.”

I gasped, my heart doing somersaults. “We’re going to Paris?”

Jensen put a reassuring hand in the small of my back, guiding me through the entrance where photographers eagerly snapped pictures of us. “Didn’t you read the schedule I had Hattie make up?” he asked, amusement tugging at the corners of his lips.

I bit my lower lip sheepishly. “I, uh, skimmed it. I’ll definitely give it a more thorough read tomorrow.”

As we stepped further into the dazzling event, I couldn’t help but feel a mix of excitement and anticipation. Paris sounded like a dream come true, and I couldn’t wait to see what other surprises this glamorous evening had in store for us. I thought the job was going to be a drag. I had no idea it was going to be so luxurious. I truly felt like I was in a dream.

“I would suggest you read it thoroughly,” Jensen said quietly. “You might find more surprises.”

Every word felt like a caress. We stepped into the opulent event. The room was filled with the rich and famous, all dressed in their finest attire, sipping on champagne and nibbling on hors d’oeuvres. The air was thick with the scent of perfume and cologne, and the sound of laughter and chatter filled my ears. I couldn’t believe that I was here, among these people, living this life.

Jensen led me through the crowd, his hand resting on the small of my back. I felt the heat of his touch through the thin fabric of my dress, sending shivers down my spine. We stopped at a table, where a couple was already seated, their faces familiar to me.

“George,” Jensen said and put a hand on the man’s shoulder.

The man got to his feet and shook Jensen’s hand. “It’s good to see you,” the man said. “I wasn’t sure you would

come tonight. I hope we can chat later. I'd like to run a few things by you."

"We'll talk," Jensen said and steered me away from the table without introducing me.

"Jensen," I said through a smile.

"Yes?"

"I'm supposed to be your girlfriend," I whispered. "The normal thing to do would be to introduce me to the people you speak with."

He stopped walking and looked at me with slight horror. "Shit. You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"It's fine." I smiled again and gently patted his arm. "I just want to make sure this looks normal. I think people might have a hard time believing I'm anything to you if you ignore the fact I'm on your arm."

"You're right," he said, nodding. "As you've probably figured out, this isn't really my thing. I'll do better."

We didn't get ten feet before another man approached us. Jensen did his best to introduce me to as many people as he could. I felt like I was on the arm of a major celebrity.

I was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer number of people clamoring for Jensen's attention. It seemed like everyone in the room wanted a moment with him, their curiosity about his AI and special requests evident in their eager inquiries.

"Is it customizable?" one person asked.

"Can we pick the voice of our companion?" another inquired.

I stood by his side, almost invisible amidst the throng of admirers. Nobody seemed to pay me any attention, which was expected given the circumstances. I was just the girlfriend, after all.

However, Jensen made a point to introduce me to the founder of the tech gala, billionaire tycoon Reid Reese. Reid

was a tall, impeccably dressed man with an air of confidence that bordered on arrogance. He leaned in to kiss my hand, his lips barely grazing my skin, and welcomed me to what he referred to as “the upper crust.”

I found his gesture and words somewhat off-putting, but I managed to maintain a polite smile. “Thank you, Mr. Reese. It’s a pleasure to be here.”

Reid Reese’s smile widened, and I could tell he relished the power and prestige of his position. As he continued to chat with Jensen about tech innovations and investments, I couldn’t help but feel like an outsider in this world of elite entrepreneurs and billionaires. But I was determined to play my role and navigate the evening with grace and composure, even if it meant enduring the sometimes eccentric personalities of the upper crust.

They were not my people. For some reason, I felt protective of Jensen. After what Hattie told me about their family growing up and getting the other half of it from Jensen himself, I didn’t think these were really his people either. He was just trying to fit in. I wasn’t going to leave the man alone in a room full of sharks.

“I’m going to get you that plate of appetizers we talked about,” I said. I had my hand on his arm, looking at him in a way I hoped looked like an intimate exchange between two lovers.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“We’ve been here for over an hour,” I whispered.

Jensen looked at me and his expression softened. “You’re right. I’m just a little overwhelmed. This is the kind of thing I hate.”

I nodded, understanding his discomfort. “I know, but you’re doing great. You’re charming and intelligent, and everyone here is lucky to be talking to you.”

He smiled, and I knew I had succeeded in boosting his confidence. I took his hand and led him toward a group of people who seemed to be discussing the latest advancements

in virtual reality technology. As we approached them, a man with slicked-back hair and a tailored suit turned to us, his eyes scanning us up and down. He extended a hand toward Jensen.

“Hello there, I’m Vincent. And you must be Jensen, the rising star in the tech world,” he said, his voice oozing with smugness.

Jensen shook his hand, but I could see the discomfort written all over his face. “Yes, that’s me. It’s nice to meet you, Vincent.”

Vincent turned his attention to me, his eyes lingering on my curves. “And who is this lovely lady?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “I’m Jensen’s girlfriend, Merida. I was just going to take advantage of the delicious appetizers.” I gave Jensen a quick kiss on the cheek and walked away.

I was starving. I had been watching the food go by and couldn’t wait to get my hands on some of it. I wanted to enjoy every aspect of the swanky party.

I picked up two plates and scanned the many offerings. Where to begin? All of the options looked delicious. Despite my enthusiasm, I did my best to be as proper as I could. Jensen wanted me to help him make a good impression, and diving into the finger foods face first would probably be frowned upon.

After carefully selecting appetizers for each of us, I turned to face the crowd. It didn’t take me long to find Jensen. He was the center of attention. His dark head was several inches above everyone else gathered around him.

I took a moment to watch him as he talked with his many admirers. He was doing a good job pretending to be cool, but I knew he was out of his element.

I walked over to him and handed him his plate. “Here you go, honey. I got us some of the mini lobster rolls, truffle fries, and some of those fancy meatballs.”

Jensen’s eyes widened in appreciation as he looked at the plate. “Wow, you know how to pick out the good stuff.”

“Why don’t we go sit down?” I suggested. There was no way he would get a moment’s peace if he stayed in the thick of things. I didn’t wait for him to answer. Taking his hand, I quietly led him away, finding a table near the back of the room.

“Thanks,” he said. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

“I didn’t want you to get shitfaced,” I joked.

He chuckled and sipped his champagne. “I haven’t heard that in a while. But I’ve developed a bit of a tolerance for this stuff. I’ve learned the art of sipping while making it look like I’m putting it away.”

I giggled and sipped my own drink. “Well, aren’t you fancy?”

He shrugged and shot me a smile. “You’re looking pretty fancy yourself tonight.”

The conversation flowed between us as we enjoyed the delicious food and drinks. It was nice to have a brief break from the chaos of the party.

“You’re doing well,” I told him quietly.

“What?”

“I know this isn’t your comfort zone, but you’re doing very well. People are really interested in everything you have to say.”

“People are interested in my money,” he corrected. “When I wanted money to get my tech off the ground, most of these people laughed in my face. Now that I can buy and sell them ten times over, they want to work with me. The only reason I don’t tell them to kiss my ass is because I need their connections to make this thing work. They want me for my money and I need them for the connections they can give me. It’s a mutually beneficial relationship.”





The night was going remarkably well. My main objective of making an appearance with Merida by my side had been a success, and I had managed to do some valuable networking as well. Having her on my arm had a calming effect on the typically intense female attention I usually received at these events. She also gave me a sense of support as well, like I wasn't out here alone.

I almost believed we were a couple. I had to admit I liked the attention she gave me. It felt good to have someone looking out for me. Someone other than my assistant or sister.

As the night progressed, Merida and I found ourselves sitting alone on a secluded balcony, overlooking the city skyline. The cool breeze brushed through her hair, making it dance around her face. She looked stunning, even more so than usual.

“Thank you for agreeing to come with me tonight,” I said, breaking the comfortable silence between us.

“Of course. I mean, you are kind of paying me.”

“Very true,” I said, laughing. “I always need backup at these events, and I have to admit, having you here with me made it easier.”

Merida smiled. “Are you okay?” she asked.

I smiled and nodded. “I'm good, thank you.”

We sat outside for a few minutes before it was time to go back in. The alcohol was flowing and the music had gotten

just a little louder. This was the part of the night that different connections were made. The business was out of the way and now it was time for the inevitable hookups. It was the part of the night I hated the most.

One thing I really couldn't stand about these gatherings was the constant barrage of advances from single women. A lot of guys thought I was crazy for not appreciating the attention, but it was obnoxious. I didn't have anything in common with the women. A lot of them wanted to talk about shit I couldn't care less about. I knew they didn't want to hear me and my geek speak. That left exactly one thing for me and a woman to talk about and there was usually very little talk involved.

I had no problem attracting attention, but my work was my baby. I was passionate about it, and I knew I couldn't change the world if I allowed myself to be distracted by a nice set of legs or a charming smile. The truth was, even if I had been interested in dating, I didn't have the time for it. My new tech demanded my full attention, and I had made sacrifices to get it to where it was. It was my life's work, my dream, and I couldn't afford to let anything come between me and my vision for the future.

Merida looked at me and smiled. I knew she understood, but I also knew that she was different from all the other women here. She was smart, funny, and most importantly, she understood my passion for technology.

As the night went on, I found myself gravitating toward her more and more. We talked about our dreams, our goals, and our passions.

"Jensen Loxley!" A man approached me. I recognized him but didn't quite remember his name.

"Hello," I said, nodding with my arm going around Merida's waist. It had become my default whenever I needed to talk to someone.

"We are all looking forward to seeing that tech," the man said.

I was trying to remember the guy's name. I could remember code I saw ten years ago, but names were always a weak spot for me.

Merida spoke up before I could embarrass myself. "We're excited to show it. It's been a long time coming."

The man nodded and walked away. I turned to Merida and thanked her with a smile.

"You don't have to thank me, Jensen," she said. "I'm happy to be here."

I felt a sense of relief wash over me. It was nice to have someone who understood what I was going through.

As Merida and I continued to mingle with the tech elite, I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief that tonight, at least, the distractions were minimal. With her by my side, I was able to focus on the connections and opportunities that mattered most for my company and the groundbreaking AI program we were developing. I didn't have to politely push away the advances. I didn't have to claim to be busy for the next twenty-two Saturday nights.

Merida was very good at small talk. I sensed she was a little uncomfortable, but she played it off very well. She smiled, shook hands, and doled out compliments to the other women giving her the stink eye. I loved that she brushed them off without giving them the satisfaction of shrinking under their nasty glares.

As the evening progressed, I couldn't help but notice Merida's restlessness. The live band was playing some pretty old-fashioned stuff. The typical orchestra music I had come to expect at things like this. The dancing wasn't the kind of thing you would ever see in a club today. It was more like the parties from three-hundred years ago. The kind of parties that included ladies wearing dance cards around their wrists and huge dresses with corsets on underneath.

Her foot was tapping to the rhythm of the music, and she was softly humming along, lost in the melody. I remembered

her mentioning her love for dancing in the limo earlier, and an idea began to form in my mind.

I extended my hand. “Do you know how to waltz?” I asked her.

She laughed. “I’m embarrassed to say I do. When I was younger, my parents put me in ballroom dance classes.”

“Would you like to dance?”

She looked pleasantly surprised by the offer and nodded with a bright smile. “Do you know how to waltz?”

“Hattie made me learn a few years ago,” I replied. “She wanted me to blend in with these people.”

“Then I would love to,” she said, smiling.

I led her out onto the dance floor, my confidence growing as I remembered the steps to the simple waltz. As we glided together, her eyes sparkled with delight, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride in having made her evening a little more enjoyable.

The night was young, and the music had changed to a more upbeat tempo. “That’s my cue,” I said.

“Your cue for what?” she asked with a laugh.

“I can waltz, but I’m not much of a dancer.”

“I’ll lead you,” she said, smiling. “Dance with me.”

I was helpless to deny her. She wasn’t even my girlfriend and I was unable to resist her.

“Fair warning,” I said and pulled her back into my arms. “If I stomp all over your feet, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind,” she said. “I just want to dance. It’s been too long since I’ve gotten to dance.”

The look on her face was way too much for me to resist. I wanted to see that pretty glow. Her smile lit up the room. Being with her made me feel drunk. I’d been sipping champagne most of the night but it was not going to my head. She was.

As the music started, I followed her lead, and we began to sway to the rhythm. The way she moved was entrancing, and I found myself lost in the moment. Her body pressed against mine, and I could feel the heat rising between us. It was as if we were the only two people in the room, and nothing else mattered.

I twirled Merida around, her dress flaring out gracefully. She giggled, her cheeks flushed with excitement. I couldn't help but notice the way her body moved so effortlessly, the way she fit perfectly in my arms. It was as if we were meant to dance together.

As the song came to an end, I pulled her closer to me, my hand resting on the small of her back. She looked up at me with those mesmerizing green eyes, and I knew that I wanted her. I wanted her in a way that went beyond just dancing.

"I need to get a drink," I said and stepped away from her.

For a moment, I had gotten caught up in the moment. I had forgotten all of this was fake. She was just a woman having a good time with me.

"Do you want something?" I asked.

"Um, maybe a wine spritzer," she said, smiling.

As I walked toward the bar, my thoughts began to race. I couldn't shake the way Merida had made me feel on the dance floor. I wanted her so badly it hurt. I could feel the ache in my groin as I thought about her, and I knew that I couldn't just let her slip away. I had to have her.

I ordered the drinks and leaned against the bar, watching as she made her way over to me. She took the wine spritzer from my hand and took a sip, her eyes never leaving mine.

"You're a really good dancer," she said, her voice low and sultry.

A shiver ran down my spine as I looked at her. "So are you," I replied, my eyes flickering over her body. The curves she hid in the bulky clothes were on full display. I had known they were going to be good, but damn, I couldn't have guessed

just how sexy she was. I liked a woman with some meat on her bones. The curves, the boobs, all of it was driving me crazy.

There was a moment of silence between us, the tension building with each passing second. I had to do something to get my mind off the idea of being with her. It couldn't happen.

I took my glass of scotch and downed it in one gulp, trying to calm myself down. But it was no use. The alcohol only made my desire for her stronger. I was pretty sure there were rules about sleeping with the woman I was pretending to be dating. That might actually cross into prostitution territory. I didn't want to do that to her or myself.

Whatever I was feeling, I had to push it down and forget about it. It was just a momentary lapse in judgment, nothing more.

"Incoming," Merida said with her glass to her lips to shield them from view.

I stood up straight, understanding her message. Another investor reached out, slapping me on the shoulder while giving me a hearty handshake. "Jensen Loxley! You've done it. You've really done it!"

I smiled, trying to appear as confident and happy as possible. But my mind kept drifting back to the woman beside me. I couldn't stop thinking about her full lips, her curves, and the way her eyes twinkled when she smiled. It was like she was playing a game with me, and I didn't know if I was winning or losing.

"Who is this stunning woman?" the man asked.

"This is my girlfriend, Merida," I said with a proud smile.

I had said it so many times, I was beginning to believe it. Every time I introduced her as my girlfriend, the lie became easier to say. It felt natural. That was dangerous. When she and I inevitably "broke up" I wasn't sure what I was going to say. I had a feeling I was actually going to be disappointed. Sad, really.

As the night went on, I found myself drawn to her more and more. We laughed and danced together, and I couldn't

help but feel a spark between us. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't help the way I felt.





## MERIDA

The evening had been a whirlwind of elegance, dancing, and laughter. But as the night wore on, the ballroom became stiflingly warm, and I found myself in need of a breath of fresh air. I loved dancing. I always felt so alive.

I didn't care if I wasn't the best dancer. I just loved music and letting it take over my body.

The crowd had thinned out a bit but those that remained were taking full advantage of the band and the bar. I was genuinely surprised by how fun Jensen was. I expected him to be a real stick in the mud, but he seemed to be enjoying the dancing as much as I was.

We received plenty of compliments about how much fun we appeared to be having. At least, I was having fun, and I didn't think Jensen was faking it. No one could act that well.

"I need some fresh air," I said while fanning my face.

"Me too," Jensen said, smiling.

His hand slid to the small of my back where it had been most of the night. We made our way outside, the cool night air a welcome relief after the warmth of the crowded ballroom. I took in a deep breath, feeling the gentle breeze against my skin as we stood on the balcony once again. The night had been amazing. It was much better than I expected. I had convinced myself it was going to be a miserable evening with Jensen being a total pompous dick all night.

It was just the opposite. It was easily one of the best nights I had had in a long, long time. I was almost able to forget it was all pretend. Jensen was attentive and kind of funny when he let go of that cool façade he wore. He let himself have fun on the dance floor. It was nice to see him come out of his shell a little. No one was going to bully him. Not anymore. He was free to be exactly who he was.

“It’s nice out,” I said.

“It’s a little cold. Do you want my jacket?”

“It feels good,” I said, smiling. “Thank you.”

After a few minutes, he turned to me. “I think we’ve made enough of an appearance. It’s late. I never intended to stay out so long. Are you good if we call it a night?”

“If you’re ready, I’m ready,” I said, nodding. “But don’t think I’m asking you to leave. I just wanted some fresh air.”

“No, no.” He shook his head. “I’m ready.”

We went back into the ballroom and casually made our way to the exit. Jensen was stopped a few times but managed to extract himself from any more conversations about his tech or what his next project would be.

As we stepped out of the building, the street was dark and quiet. The only sound was the click of our heels against the sidewalk. We walked in silence toward the parking area, enjoying the cool night air. The city was beautiful at night.

“I’m so ready to get out of this get-up,” Jensen complained as he loosened his bowtie, leaving it hanging around his neck. “We stayed a lot longer than I planned. How are your feet?”

I laughed at the question. “Pinched.”

“I bet you’re craving some fluffy slippers, right?”

“It’s like you read my mind,” I teased.

“You do wear slippers, don’t you?”

I was a little embarrassed. But considering he already knew my preference for sensible shoes, I didn’t think it could get much worse. “I do. You don’t?”

“No,” he said, laughing. “Not my thing.”

“You think I’m an old lady,” I said, sighing.

“No, I think you like to be comfortable and could care less about fashion.”

“I think that’s an insult,” I joked.

He shook his head. “No, I like when someone isn’t afraid to do what pleases them. I like that you don’t feel like you have to conform.”

“Because you were always an outsider,” I said.

“Maybe a little. I didn’t conform and it’s worked out very well for me.”

“I do like some fashion,” I said. “It’s just, well, I’ve never been the type of person that wants to attract a lot of attention. I like to be comfortable. I gave up trying to win people over with what I’m wearing.”

“I’m sorry to have made you dance and wear the heels for so long,” he said, pointing to the limo we arrived in. It was parked alongside several other limousines. When we arrived at the car, there was no sign of the driver. Jensen’s irritation was palpable, his brows furrowing as he muttered under his breath. I, on the other hand, remained surprisingly unfazed. It wasn’t like I was actually going to turn into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight. I didn’t have anything to do tomorrow.

“It’s alright,” I assured him. “We can wait. Is the car unlocked?”

He tried the back door, opening it and leaning down to look inside. “Not here,” he said. “I thought he might be taking a nap or something.”

“I’m getting in,” I said. “I have to get these shoes off.”

We climbed into the back of the limo. I immediately took off the heels and flexed my feet. “We have some time to kill, and we don’t have to perform anymore, right? Let’s break open this champagne and relax.”

Jensen's annoyance seemed to melt away at my words, and he nodded in agreement. "You're right. A drink or two won't hurt."

I poured us each a glass, the bubbly liquid glinting in the soft glow of the limo's interior lights. As we sipped our champagne, the atmosphere grew more relaxed. Jensen leaned back in the leather seat and stretched out his long legs in front of him. He shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it onto one of the other seats.

"I bet he's playing cards with the other drivers," he muttered. "This isn't the first time this has happened. I should get a new driver."

"I imagine it gets pretty boring sitting around," I said.

Jensen nodded in agreement and took another sip of champagne. His eyes never left mine as he set his glass down and leaned closer to me. "I had a good time tonight," he said in a thick voice.

"You sound surprised," I said, smiling.

"I am. I hate these things. I hate schmoozing and pretending to like people whose names I can't remember. But being with you made it bearable."

His voice dropped even lower as his hand found mine. The touch sent a shiver down my spine, but I didn't pull away.

"I'm glad I could be of service," I said with a coy smile, leaning in closer to him.

Our eyes locked, and the tension between us grew. I could feel his breath on my face. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, waiting for his lips to meet mine. I told myself it was just a kiss. We wouldn't take it any further than that. After dancing with him all night, it felt like foreplay. The energy in the back of the limo was practically sizzling. I could feel it.

Jensen's lips finally met mine, and I felt a jolt of electricity course through my body. The kiss was gentle at first, but soon the passion between us grew and it became more urgent. I could taste the hint of champagne on his tongue as he

deepened the kiss. I ran my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer.

Our bodies were pressed against each other, and I could feel the heat emanating from him. He broke the kiss for a moment, his breath coming out in short gasps.

I felt like a teenager making out in the backseat. It was incredible. I loved the taste of him. His lips were perfect. His hands slid down my arms and back up again before his mouth reconnected with mine.

I couldn't get enough of him. He was like a drug, and I had become addicted. His hands roamed over my body, and I could feel the heat building between my legs. I moaned softly into his mouth as he traced the outline of my ear with his tongue.

My hand squeezed his bicep, giving me an idea of just how strong he was. His muscles were there, but he wasn't a hulking man.

I wanted him. I wanted him now.

I pulled him closer to me. He reached down to cup my ass. I gasped as he lifted me up from the seat and into his lap. His lips closed over mine again, and he pulled me even closer to him. His hands slid up my dress. I felt his fingertips graze over my bare thigh. His kiss was urgent now, and I could tell that he needed me.

My power was intoxicating. I loved the way he was looking at me as though I was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. His eyes were wild with lust. It made me feel powerful. I moaned softly as his fingers made their way up my thigh.

He kissed down my neck, tugging at my dress as he went. Soon enough he'd pulled down the front of my dress, exposing my breasts. His eyes locked with mine as he lowered his mouth to my breast. I arched my back, giving him full access to my body.

I felt the heat building inside of me. I was practically dripping wet just from his touch. He sucked on my nipples, pulling a moan from deep within. His fingertips traced circles

around my thigh, and I spread my legs wider apart. His fingers pressed against my inner thigh, and I could feel him trying to find a way inside me. He was teasing me.

He pulled away from my breast, but only to look at me. His lips curled into a devilish smile. I was breathing hard. My entire body was shaking. He looked down at my exposed breast and then back at me. The heat I saw in his eyes made my toes curl.

I moaned softly and arched my back. His mouth once again went to my breast. He sucked the nipple between his teeth with his hands moving up my back. His fingers massaged the tense muscles he encountered.

I reached down with one hand and tugged at his shirt. I wanted to feel his skin against mine. As soon as I'd pulled his shirt off, I ran my hands over his chest. His muscles tensed with every touch.

I pulled away from his mouth and slid down his jaw and over his neck. I reached for his belt buckle, but he grabbed my hand and stopped me.

“No,” he said. “Not here.”

I turned to look at him. He was serious.

“I don't care,” I said.

“Yes, you do,” he said. “Not here. Not now.”

I pouted but understood. We were surrounded by people. I could hear voices in the distance. While the windows were completely blacked out, it was still risky. But I supposed that made it more exciting. I was good with making out. It was all very, very good.

I kissed him, placing my hands on his face and holding him steady while my tongue took over his mouth. Our lips continued to move against one another, our breath coming in short gasps. I could feel his erection against my leg. It would be so easy to hike up my dress and unzip his fly. But he was right—this was not the place.





**M**y hands dropped to Merida's waist as she straddled me. The interior lights along the edge of the limo gave me an amazing view of her. I wanted to throw her on the bench seat and fuck her until we were both crying out with pleasure.

But I couldn't.

I wouldn't.

We were in the back of a limo in a busy area. People were walking by us, completely oblivious to what was happening inside the limo. The last thing I wanted to do was start rocking the damn thing. That would attract way too much attention.

She leaned forward, pressing her hands against my chest. Her breasts pressed against me. Her nipples were hard, pointing right at my lips.

Merida rocked her hips, grinding against my cock as I played with her nipples. I opened my mouth, taking a mouthful of her ample breast. I sucked on it, causing her to lift her hips.

"Fuck, yes," Merida hissed.

Her language turned me on. Everything about her turned me on. I grabbed her hips and slid her forward. Dry humping probably wasn't cool at our age, but it felt so damn good.

She grabbed my face, ripping my mouth from her breast and slamming her mouth against mine. Her tongue was insistent, prying my lips apart as she forced it into my mouth.

Merida was an expert at making out, and her aggressiveness turned me on. I loved the way she was so demanding without being forceful. I kissed her back with just as much energy and passion.

My cock was aching as we kissed. I slid my hands down to her ass and grabbed her meaty cheeks. I squeezed her ass, pressing her closer to my groin as I ground my cock against her.

“Oh, God, Jensen,” Merida moaned into my mouth. “If we get caught, I’ll never forgive you.”

“I know,” I groaned. “But I can’t help myself.”

We continued to kiss with our hands roaming over each other. We were both starving, desperate for more. I felt it would be okay if I gave her a little relief. Just a little teasing with my fingers. I had no doubt I could make her orgasm with very little effort.

I dropped one hand to her calf and slowly slid up her smooth leg, back to the inside of her thigh where I explored earlier.

Merida opened her legs just a little more as she straddled me, giving me access to her pussy. I slid my hand over her center, feeling her wetness through the fabric of her panties.

Merida moaned softly as I teased her pussy. I slid a finger under the edge of her panties and pressed it against her mound. She rolled her hips forward.

“Don’t stop,” she groaned into my mouth.

I slipped my finger between her lips and Merida cried out. I curled my finger, rubbing against her clit before sliding it between her lips again. I pressed my finger against her clit firmly, rubbing it in fast circles.

Merida was panting, sucking on my tongue and groaning into my mouth. She was riding my finger as I rubbed her clit. I slid my other hand under her breast and cupped it, pinching her nipple between my fingers.

“Jensen, oh my God,” Merida moaned.

Merida was grinding against my hand, riding my finger as I rubbed her clit. Her pussy was soaking wet. I could feel her juices running over my finger as I teased her.

“Oh, fuck,” Merida groaned. “Oh, God, Jensen, I’m going to come.”

Merida pulled back from our kiss and buried her face in my neck, moaning as she rode my finger. I could feel her pussy throbbing against my finger as she came. She held herself against me, panting as she recovered from her orgasm. I held her tightly against me, enjoying the feeling of her riding my finger.

I slid my finger out of her and kissed her neck, then up to her lips. She kissed me, wrapping her arms around me and holding me tightly.

“That was incredible,” she moaned as she pulled back. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, kissing her again. “I’m glad you liked that. But I want something in return.”

Merida looked at me for a moment, biting her lip. Her eyes flashed with lust as she realized what I was asking. “You want me to go down on you, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice a little hoarse. “I want you to suck my cock.”

“Okay,” Merida said.

I kissed her again as she slid off my lap. She knelt in front of me while I leaned back against the seat. A couple from the party walked by the limo, pausing for a moment. Merida and I both froze, watching them from behind the blackout tint.

“They can’t see us,” I whispered.

She looked up at me with a naughty smile. “This is kind of exciting. I feel like we’re breaking the law or something equally bad.”

I undid my belt, reminding her of what she was doing. My cock ached with need. Merida’s hand brushed against my

stomach as she quickly undid the button and slid the zipper of my pants down.

I sucked in a breath when she wiggled my underwear down. The elastic waistband brushed over my cock, causing it to jump. I was so sensitive. So ripe for the moment.

“You’re so hard,” Merida said with her breath washing over me. My cock jerked once again.

She wrapped her hand around my shaft and squeezed gently. My hips jerked in response. She slid her hand up and down my cock, then leaned forward and licked the tip. I moaned, gripping the back of the seat. It felt incredible. Better than I had ever imagined.

“You’re so sweet,” Merida said, wrapping her lips around the head of my cock.

She sucked up and down the shaft, teasing me. I was so hard that it only took a minute for her to get me close to the edge. I grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her back. “Wait, I can’t. I’m too close. Give me a second.”

My cock ached and twitched. I was going to orgasm in an instant if she kept that up. I had to have her. I was so ready.

“Lean back,” she encouraged. “Let me do this for you.”

I let go of her hair and leaned back, watching her. She smiled and kissed the sensitive spot where the head met the shaft. Her tongue rolled over the head of my cock in tiny circles, making me thrust my hips forward in response. I grabbed her shoulders and ground myself against her. Merida licked her lips and took me deep into her mouth.

Merida sucked and licked and twirled her tongue around me until I had to pull her back. I was so close to exploding. I needed to stop her before it was too late.

“Wait... wait... I’m so close,” I said, panting.

Merida leaned forward and kissed my thigh. “You want it?” she asked with a wicked smile.

I nodded, still holding on to her shoulders. “Yes, I want it, but—”

It felt so wrong and yet so right. My eyes squeezed closed for several seconds until I heard more voices. My gaze focused on the older couple walking toward my limousine. They were staring at the windows but I knew they couldn't see inside. I couldn't explain the feeling of getting blown in plain sight but they didn't know. It added an element of danger that made everything so much hotter.

Her hot, wet mouth was working up and down my cock while my fingers twisted in her hair. She was moaning like she was the one getting sucked off. I loved that she loved it. Every moan from her vibrated against my dick, sending jolts of electricity through my body.

"I'm going to come," I warned her.

Her lips tightened around me and she bobbed her head faster. I could feel the muscles in my legs tensing as I thrust my hips forward. Merida moaned and took it all, sucking and slobbering all over my cock while I shot my load into her mouth. I groaned and watched in fascination as she swallowed every last drop. I sat back, my chest heaving up and down with my body still twitching from the release.

Merida leaned back and looked at me as she wiped her mouth. She looked pretty damn satisfied with herself.

I was about to push her back and dive face first under her dress when I noticed someone walking toward the limo.

"Shit, it's the driver," I said and quickly stuffed my dick in my pants and zipped up.

Merida giggled and climbed into the seat opposite me. I watched her take a drink from her glass with a cocky, pun intended, grin.

I opened the back door just as the driver was lighting a cigarette. "Mr. Loxley!"

"We're ready to go, if you are," I said sarcastically.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry. I went in to use the bathroom."

We both knew that was bullshit. I got back in the car and sat beside Merida, who was still smiling.

“That was close,” she said, giggling.

“Too close,” I said.

The driver got in the front seat.

“Miss Moore’s house, please,” I said before putting up the partition.

“More champagne?” Merida asked quietly.

I smiled and shrugged. “Why not?”

She leaned forward and grabbed the bottle from the bucket. She refilled my glass and topped off her own. We leaned back against the seat. Neither of us said much of anything. I didn’t know what to say. What did one say after getting a pretty damn good blow job? *Thank you* seemed a little cheap.

The longer we didn’t talk, the tenser things got in the back of the limo. I could feel the heat radiating off her body. Her scent filled my senses. Although she’d given me a damn good orgasm, I wanted more. I wanted to be inside all that sweet warmth. I wanted to hear those soft moans as she came.

I leaned over and kissed her, my hand brushing over her breasts.

Then I remembered where we were. I pulled back and scooted over a few inches. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“I’m not.”

“I shouldn’t have done that,” I muttered and turned to look out the window.

“Done what?”

“Any of it.”

“If we’re being honest, I think it’s fair to say I did the bulk of it,” she said, laughing. “You were just an innocent man sitting in the back of his limo when I came along and—”

“I got it,” I said and adjusted my cock that was coming back to full attention despite what she’d done to me minutes ago.

I looked out the window, watching the city lights slowly moving by. This was supposed to be a professional night, but now I felt lousy. The whole thing was a mistake. I hoped she didn't think I used her. Or hired her to be my personal sex slave.

"Stop thinking, Jensen," she said softly. "I had a good time. We had a good time. Please don't make this weird."

I nodded. "I'm trying not to."

"It's not like it has to be anything serious," she said. "You didn't do anything wrong."

I was glad she felt like that, but I felt like a jackass. I was pretty sure I broke some unspoken rule. I wished I could come up with a good excuse for my behavior. Unfortunately, all I had was the fact I was a man and she was a gorgeous woman. It wasn't exactly rocket science. *Me man. She woman. Let me beat my chest.*

I leaned back in the seat and let the rest of the ride pass in silence. The car pulled up to her house. The driver got out and opened my door. I got out and moved to the side. He opened the other door and held out his hand to help her out. She slid out, quickly adjusting the dress and meeting my eyes.

"I'll walk you to your door," I said.





## MERIDA

**W**hen the limousine dropped us off at my doorstep, I felt like an exposed nerve, raw and electrified by the intensity of what had just transpired. Jensen, ever the gentleman, walked me to my front door, his presence comforting in the midst of my mounting confusion. Comforting and distracting. I couldn't believe I had gone down on him in the back of the limo. That was a first. I had never and would likely never do anything like that again. I still couldn't explain what came over me. He was unlike anyone I ever met. He made me feel sexy and beautiful. Never before had I felt pretty.

"Thank you," I murmured. "I had a good time."

I could barely catch my breath with him standing behind me. I could feel his breath brushing over the back of my neck. It made the hair on my arms stand up. I involuntarily shuddered. I could still feel his lips on my breasts. His fingers inside me.

I fumbled with my keys, my trembling hands betraying me as I struggled to unlock the door. It was as though my fingers had turned to jelly, and I couldn't get a grip on anything. A soft sigh of frustration escaped me.

"I'm fine," I told him. "You can go. This lock is tricky, but I'll be fine. I'll get in."

Jensen, observing my pitiful attempts, took pity on me. "Here, let me help," he said. His voice once again sent chills down my spine.

With practiced ease, he unlocked the door and held it open for me to enter. I hesitated for a moment, my gaze locking with his. What had just happened between us? It felt like a whirlwind, a passionate storm that had swept us up in its tempestuous embrace.

“We must have been drunk,” I blurted out, trying to make sense of it all.

But when I voiced my uncertainty, Jensen’s response caught me off guard. “I’m not drunk,” he said, his tone steady and sure. “Not even a little.”

I licked my lips nervously, my own thoughts racing. “Neither am I.”

There was a charged silence between us, and I couldn’t deny the attraction that still hung heavily in the air. I felt like he was waiting for something. Or maybe that was what I wanted to think. Did we kiss goodnight? That made it feel like an actual date. This was not a date. I was essentially an employee.

“I should go,” he said but made no move to actually leave.

I saw his gaze drop to my lips. I immediately licked them and tasted him. Another shiver chased down my spine. I had it bad. I was hot for him.

I had no business lusting after a man that was way out of my league. I didn’t want to fool myself into thinking he liked me for anything more than a quickie in the back of the limo. Not that I thought that was a bad thing. It was good for me. I was the one that hungrily went down on him. I didn’t hold him responsible in the least.

“Would you like to come in, Jensen?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. The moment I said the words, I wanted to take them back. I felt like a damn fool. I couldn’t even remember if the house was clean.

His eyes bored into mine, searching for something I couldn’t quite comprehend. And then, with a slow nod, he stepped over the threshold into my townhouse. The door

closed behind us. I probably should have thought more about my choices for that night, but it was too late now.

But before I could utter a single word of doubt, he reached out, his warm hand catching my chin and gently lifting my face to his. I looked into his green eyes and saw no doubt. He wanted me. “What about your driver?” I whispered.

“I’m sure he’ll figure it out,” he replied.

His lips met mine in a searing kiss, and all thoughts of insecurity and doubt fled my mind. I froze for an instant, overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment. Jensen’s kiss was possessive and hungry, igniting a fire within me that I hadn’t known was possible. I thought the kiss in the limo was amazing, but this was so much better. So much hungrier.

Before I knew it, he had kicked the door closed behind us, his lips never leaving mine. He murmured against my mouth, his voice husky with desire. “Where’s the bedroom?”

My heart raced as I let my instincts guide me. Without a word, I took his hand and led him down the dimly lit hallway to my bedroom, a mix of anticipation and nervous excitement coursing through my veins.

“You’re okay with this?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Thank God,” he murmured. “Turn around.”

I did as he asked. He slid the zipper of my dress down. I pulled my arms back and let the bodice fall forward.

My dress dropped to the floor. I stepped out of it, standing before him in nothing but a black lace bra and matching panties. He ran his fingers down my back, sending a shiver down my spine. I closed my eyes and waited for him to touch me.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” I whispered back, overcome with emotion. I wanted him to touch me, but I also wanted to savor this moment. I felt like I needed to memorize it in my brain so that I could replay it later when I was alone and lonely.

“Do you have any idea how fucking gorgeous you are?”

I shook my head, but I knew my cheeks were flushed with color. I was embarrassed by the way he was looking at me, but I couldn't deny it. I felt gorgeous.

“Can I see you?” I asked quietly.

He smiled and started to unbutton his shirt. I batted his hands away and took over the unbuttoning. He was my gift to unwrap. I pushed his shirt off his shoulders and took a moment to admire the chest that was at eye level. He was gorgeous.

His bare skin was a stark contrast to my black lace bra. His muscles were well defined. I reached out and ran my fingers across his pecs. I wanted to see him. I wanted to touch him.

“I can't wait,” I murmured and reached behind me to unclasp my bra.

He let out a low growl. “Take it off.”

I did as he asked and let the bra fall to the floor. I stepped out of it and turned to face him.

His eyes traveled the length of my body, and then he looked into my eyes. He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to the skin between my breasts. I sucked in a breath.

Gently, he kissed my right breast, moving his way to my nipple. He took it into his mouth and started sucking. I let out a low moan and threw my head back.

He started flicking it with his tongue. I moaned loudly, knowing no one was going to hear me. A surge of heat rushed through me, awakening my senses. I could feel every inch of my skin. The sensation was almost painful. It was a good kind of pain. My body felt like it was on fire.

“More,” I whispered.

He put his hands on my waist, pulling me close so that the bare skin of our upper bodies touched. He kissed me again, his lips gentle against my own. It was a kiss of adoration, of worship, and it made my heart swell with emotion. I felt like the most beautiful woman in the world. He pulled back from the kiss just slightly, a wry grin on his face.

“I want to taste you, baby,” he murmured. “You tasted me. Now it’s my turn.”

I nodded, and he dropped to his knees in front of me. He pulled my panties down my legs, allowing me to step out of them.

I heard his breath hitch and looked down. His eyes were a dark green as he looked up at me. He gave me a wicked grin and buried his face between my legs. I gasped and clutched his hair. He had no mercy as he buried his tongue inside me. I was too aroused to be embarrassed. I wasn’t thinking about anything but the pleasure he was giving me. My hands clenched into fists in his hair as he brought me to the brink. I was so close. I could feel my desire for him building, my body desperate for release. My legs began to shake. I was afraid I was going to fall on top of him.

I threw my head back and cried out as I came. I felt him kiss my inner thigh and smile. I stood there for a second, panting and feeling like I was floating.

He got to his feet and quickly undid his pants. There was a frantic nature to it all. I turned away from him and went to my bathroom.

“Merida?” he called out.

I came back with a condom. He smiled and took it from me. He had it on in a second. We stood facing each other for several seconds. It was a moment that would change everything. Sleeping with Jensen wasn’t something I took lightly. Not sleeping—sex.

“We can stop,” he said.

“No!”

“Thank God!” He was on me in a second.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. He pulled me into his arms and kissed me with enough passion to ignite the room on fire.

He pushed me backward until my legs hit the bed and I was falling. His hand was on my back, guiding me down. He fell on top of me, nudging my legs open with his knee.

He kissed me again, his tongue caressing mine. I could taste myself on him. It was the best aphrodisiac. Our naked bodies slid together. His was all hard muscle and mine all soft and pillowy.

He reached down and grabbed my hips before pushing the head of his cock to my opening. I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him into me.

I cried out into his shoulder as he began to thrust into me. I didn't even care if my neighbors could hear me. I just wanted to be as close to him as possible.

I grabbed his ass and dug my nails into him. He groaned and thrust harder. The headboard banged against the wall. He let out a string of curses.

I lifted off the bed, meeting him thrust for thrust. I felt my body building again. I knew I was going to come again. I wanted to be with him when it happened. I pulled him into a kiss and rubbed his tongue with mine. He thrust faster. I felt him reach between us. He circled my clit with his thumb.

My body tensed. I felt the orgasm building. My breath came in ragged gasps. I grabbed his shoulders, digging my nails into his back. I felt him tense and then he exploded inside me. We both cried out in pure ecstasy.

Our skin was slick with sweat. He was heavy, but I didn't mind. I loved the feeling of his body on top of mine. He kissed the side of my face and then my neck.

"Holy shit," he breathed and shifted the bulk of his weight off me. "Damn."

I giggled softly. "Agreed."

His arm was draped across my breasts with his face buried in my neck. I didn't know what to think. I didn't want to think. I just wanted to be in the moment.

"I should go," he said.

"No." I shook my head. I didn't want him to leave yet.

"Are you sure?"

“Positive,” I said. “Stay.”

“I should probably tell the driver,” he said with a laugh.

“Yes, you should.”

“Stay right here,” he said. “I’ve got to find my phone. Don’t move. I’m going to come right back here and I want you to be just like this.”

He rolled out of bed and found his pants. I watched him pull out his phone and tap out a text message while in the buff.

He was so hot. Gorgeous.





Lying in bed beside Merida, I couldn't help but steal a glance at her but then looked back at the ceiling above us. Her breath was still coming in uneven, soft pants, and her brown curls were spread out wildly across her pillow. I was still in a bit of shock that I was lying in her bed at all. This was not the way I expected the night to go.

We had crossed a line, but I didn't regret it. How could I? I was still enjoying the afterglow. My body felt like I had been through a deep tissue massage. Every muscle had been worked and was now completely relaxed. I was sated. The feeling was incredible. I didn't want to move.

Merida shifted beside me, stretching out one arm and smiling. She looked like a satisfied woman. I smiled at her and let my gaze wander around her room. The room wasn't what I had expected. It was colorful and mismatched, as if she hadn't quite figured out who she was yet. The walls were adorned with various pieces of art, each with its own story to tell. It was like she bought whatever she was in the mood for and didn't care if it matched or not. Then again, I wasn't going to claim to be some great decorator. I paid someone to decorate my apartment.

But what caught my attention most was her dresser, where a laptop sat beside a stack of files that overflowed with documents. It was a little chaotic and looked like something I would expect to see from an author. I could totally see her sitting at a desk with pencils stuck in her wild curls and glasses sitting on the tip of her nose.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I turned my gaze to her. “What’s all that?” I asked, nodding toward the laptop and the stack of files.

She seemed to hesitate for a moment. “It’s nothing, just work stuff.” She wouldn’t look at me when she said it.

I couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. She hadn’t told me what she did for a living, and her abrupt response piqued my interest even more.

“Work stuff, huh? Care to share?” I asked, my tone playful but genuinely curious. After all, there was so much about Merida that I still didn’t know, and I was eager to unravel the layers of her life. She had managed to avoid most of my questions earlier in the limo. She gave me some very generic answers, but I realized she never really told me who she was.

Merida stammered for a moment, her expression shifting from uncertainty to a hint of amusement, before finally revealing what she did. “I’m an editor for a magazine.”

I was genuinely intrigued. “Oh, what magazine?” I pressed, eager to learn more about her life. It was a little strange to be lying naked in bed with a woman I didn’t really know. I supposed even that wasn’t strange, considering I often chose to keep the women I took to bed at arm’s length.

But Merida was different. I wanted to know her. There was something about her that drew me in. I wanted to know what she liked and didn’t like. I could see there was so much more to her than the gorgeous curves that hooked me from the very beginning.

She hesitated for a moment, as if debating whether to share the details. “You probably wouldn’t know it. It’s a column for women who want to pursue simple, meaningful living by slowing down.”

I furrowed my brow, not quite grasping the concept. “Simple, meaningful living by slowing down? What does that mean?”

Merida let out a soft, musical laugh. “I wouldn’t expect someone deeply entrenched in the tech world to understand,”

she replied with a teasing glint in her eyes. “But it’s about finding contentment in the quieter moments, embracing a slower pace of life, and seeking fulfillment in simplicity. It’s about ditching the tech.”

I burst into laughter. “I think you just broke my heart.”

“Sorry,” she said, giggling.

“We couldn’t be more opposite.”

“I’m not saying I shun all tech,” she explained. “I’m saying there have to be moments we just be quiet. Our phones do not have to be attached to our hand or face. Tech is great, but it’s nice to have a minute to be in the moment. To listen to the trees blowing in the wind or the silence in general.”

I couldn’t help but be intrigued by her choice of profession. It was a stark contrast to my own world of innovation and rapid advancement. But there was something alluring about the way she described it, and I found myself wanting to know more about this side of her life that she had chosen to keep hidden until now. I understood the idea of being in the moment. I had to take a step back now and then. My world could get very loud and very complicated.

After the passion that burned between us, lying beside Merida in her colorful and mismatched room, I felt a newfound closeness and openness that made me more willing to share. It had been a long time since I had been with a woman that made me feel anything. I felt safe. I felt like I could talk to her about my thoughts and feelings without judgment.

“This is nice,” I murmured. I didn’t actually mean to say the words aloud. They kind of slipped.

“Nice?” She smiled and put her hand on my chest.

“Lying here with you,” I clarified. “It’s been a long time since I’ve stayed longer than a few minutes after the deed was done.”

“You mean basking in the postcoital bliss?” she joked.

“Yes.” I grinned and turned to face her. “I guess I don’t take the time to be in the moment. Not that I’ve had a lot of moments with a lot of women.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I repeated.

“You’re a pretty good-looking guy.” She shrugged. “You’re successful. Why don’t you have a girlfriend? I would think you would have a long line of women who want to be with you.”

I sighed and shook my head. “I work a lot. I don’t have time to devote to a relationship. I don’t want to be distracted by a relationship. I have a lot of things I want to accomplish and a woman would get in the way.”

“Harsh,” she said, laughing.

“You know what I mean. I would want to be a good boyfriend, but I don’t think I would be. My time is spent working on the AI tech. I live and breathe it.”

“I’m sure a girlfriend would understand if you were busy at work,” she said. “A good woman is supposed to support you.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe that’s just what I tell myself. It’s easy to say I’m too busy.” I paused, choosing my words carefully. “Truth be told? I don’t really like people. I don’t know how to talk to them. I get bored and my mind drifts and then I look like I’m ignoring them. I suppose I am. My mind is always thinking about my tech or what I could do other than listen to a bunch of shit I couldn’t care less about.”

Merida laughed at my admission. It felt good to be able to share my inner thoughts. “I guess I can understand that, but human connection is important. I’m sure you like some people.”

“Most people tend to rub me the wrong way, get under my skin. They always want something from me, or they want me to fit into this idea of who they think I should be.”

Her silence hung in the air for a moment, and I couldn't help but wonder if my honesty had made her uncomfortable. I didn't mean to complain. I knew I had no right to complain. I was very fortunate. I had everything I could possibly want. Bitching about being wealthy and wanted wasn't exactly endearing.

"I guess that would be hard," she said after a long pause.

"It's just made it really difficult to trust anyone," I tried to explain. "I have very few people in my life I feel like I can be myself with. I guess what I'm trying to say is thank you. Thanks for being a normal person."

Once again, she went completely silent. I hoped she didn't think I was pouring my heart out and asking for anything. I sounded like a sap. Sex one time did not make a relationship. I was paying her to be my girlfriend.

I was about to tell her to forget I said anything when she pulled away from me. She sat up and looked over her shoulder at me.

"Maybe you should go." Her voice was so soft, I almost didn't hear her.

"You want me to go?" I asked. I was pretty sure she asked me to stay, which was why I had sent my driver away.

"I think that would be for the best," she said. I watched her pull a blanket from the end of the bed and wrap it around herself.

Suddenly, she was very modest. It made me ashamed to be naked in her presence. I hopped out of her bed and scrambled to find my clothes. I sent the driver a quick text, hoping he wasn't home for the night. Fortunately for me, he was down the road eating a very early breakfast. He promised to be back in a few to pick me up.

"Is everything okay?" I asked her.

"Fine," she said, smiling.

She followed behind me as I walked to the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said.

She shook her head. “No, I can’t. I have to work this week. I’ll make sure I review the schedule. I will of course be at any events you need me to be at, but I don’t think there’s anything that requires my presence this week. I’ve got the wardrobe I need.”

It felt like I’d been slapped. “Of course,” I said, nodding once. “I’ll go. Goodnight.”

I stepped outside into the cold early morning. Mist blew in front of me as I rubbed my hands together.

“Goodnight, Jensen,” Merida said and closed the door behind me. I heard her throw the locks and knew I was officially dismissed. She didn’t even wait long enough to see if I had a ride.

I felt pretty damn used.

But as I walked down the steps of her townhouse, I couldn’t help but remember the way she had moaned my name only thirty minutes ago. She had been passionate, wild, and untamed. I wondered how someone who could make love like that could be so cold and dismissive of me afterward.

As I waited for my driver to arrive, I couldn’t help but question our arrangement. Was this a huge mistake? I didn’t think I was the type to fall head over heels in love, considering it hadn’t happened yet, but what if I did fall in love with her and she broke my heart?

My driver finally arrived and I got into the car, my thoughts still swirling around in my head. As we drove away from Merida’s townhouse, disappointment flooded me. I had been hoping for something more from her, something deeper than just a purely physical relationship. But it seemed like that was all she was interested in. That and the ridiculous amount of money I was going to pay her to pretend to like me.

As we drove through the city streets to the upper west side, I tried to focus on other things. But my mind kept going back to Merida and the way she had made me feel earlier that night. I couldn’t deny that there was a strong attraction between us,

but was it enough to sustain a real relationship? Was she even interested in me like that?





## MERIDA

I couldn't put off going to the office any longer. As much as I had enjoyed my whirlwind week with Jensen, reality beckoned, and my work demanded my attention. I had played hooky far too many times, and it was time to catch up on everything I had neglected. I could only pretend I was working from home so many days.

My father's text message yesterday was curt and to the point. It basically said my ass better be in my chair or I didn't need to bother coming back. I couldn't blame him. Fortunately, he gave me so little responsibility, I only needed a day to finish the article I had been slacking on. I wasn't going to tell him I could get my work done in a day when he was paying me for a full week.

I grabbed my usual coffee at the little place on the corner. I noticed people looking at me. Men were actually checking me out. It was so abnormal. I kept looking down to make sure I didn't forget to put pants on. The outfit was one Hattie picked out. I wasn't sure if I was allowed to wear the outfits when I wasn't with Jensen, but Hattie made it sound like I could. It was a bold outfit for me, but it was normal for other people.

As I made my way through the bustling streets of downtown, I couldn't help but feel a rush of excitement. It was exhilarating to be out in the world, dressed in this new way, and to feel the eyes of strangers on me. I had been so afraid to show off my curves. Hattie had unzipped my cocoon and I came out as a beautiful butterfly.

As I entered the building where our office was located, I felt a twinge of nervousness. What would my colleagues think of me? Would they judge me for the way I was dressed? I knew it was unlike anything I had ever worn before. I was bound to attract some attention.

*I hoped.*

As soon as I walked through the office door, I was bombarded by an excited Dalton. “You’re here!” His eyes practically sparkled with curiosity as he cornered me. “Where have you been? I thought you might have quit or gone underground.”

“I was working on that other job,” I said without saying too much.

He gently pushed me back a few steps. The rest of the office was already humming with the usual Monday morning craziness. “Merida, spill the beans!” he urged, practically bouncing on his toes. “Tell me everything you’ve learned about Jensen Loxley. Are you working on the story?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his enthusiasm. “It’s been a total whirlwind,” I began, my voice filled with excitement. “It’s only going to get crazier. He’s taking me to Paris in a week, then Dubai right after that. And in three weeks, we’re off to Singapore. It’s insane!”

I went on to tell him all about Saturday night, minus the sex of course. I quickly told him about the extravagant shopping spree and the surprising discovery that Jensen could be genuinely funny when he let his guard down. I found myself smiling as I spoke. The week with Jensen started off rocky, but I understood him better. I understood why he was so reluctant to talk to a reporter or anyone. He was afraid they wouldn’t see him. It was easy to talk to him and think he was arrogant and a jerk, but that wasn’t true.

Dalton’s expression was one of concern. I thought he would be happy for me. Instead, he carefully pulled me away from the bullpen area, walking me to Siberia, AKA my desk. “Merida, you’re making the most egregious mistake in the new journalist handbook.”

I blinked, trying to comprehend what he was telling me. “What do you mean?”

He shook his head, as if he couldn't quite believe what I had allowed myself to become entangled in. “You're getting too close to your subject, Merida. You have to detach somehow. You can't be a part of the story. You're reporting on the man. Don't get caught up with him. He's the story. You're falling under his spell.”

Dalton was right. Jensen was my topic, my headline, my big-break story. But as Dalton's words sank in, I realized that I had let myself become enamored by the man behind the story, the whirlwind of glitz, glamor, and flashiness that had so quickly ensnared me. The sex. How could I forget the sex. It had been incredible.

“You're right,” I said, sighing.

How had I let myself get caught up in all this? I had been so focused on proving my worth to my father, on achieving the story of a lifetime, that I had failed to see the line I was crossing. Jensen Loxley wasn't just the funny guy whisking me away on a whirlwind trip around the world. He was my ticket to success, my chance to shine as a journalist. I was going to have to betray him, and that didn't give me the warm and fuzzies. He told me people were always trying to take advantage of him and I was planning to do that.

“It happens,” he said, smiling. “He might be a good guy. Your piece doesn't have to be a smear article, but it needs to be honest and unbiased. You can't let your feelings for him dictate what you write. If that's the kind of piece you're going to write, it's just another fluff piece. It's not hard journalism. I thought that's what you wanted to do.”

Dalton was right, and that realization weighed heavily on me. I had to find a way to detach and refocus. I needed to keep the boundaries between subject and journalist intact. The story was everything, and I couldn't afford to let my emotions cloud my judgment any longer. I liked the man, but I needed to write an objective piece that stated facts.

“You’re right,” I said, sighing. “He is a good guy. I don’t want to badmouth him.”

“It’s not badmouthing if you write a piece that is honest,” he said softly. “Are you getting too close?”

“No.”

“Why are you spending time with him?”

I gnawed my lower lip. “It’s a good way to get information.”

“He’s paying you?”

“I have not taken any money from him,” I said. “But I took the job. It was the only way I could get close.”

He let out a low whistle. “Damn, girl, you are walking a fine line.”

“I haven’t actually taken the money,” I said. “I took the job, but I only get paid at the end of the contract.”

“Be careful,” he warned. “Are you going to do this anonymously?”

“No. I want the byline.”

He sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Be careful,” he said again.

“I will,” I said. “I’ll be okay. I can do this.”

Dalton looked me up and down in my sleek pantsuit. “Is that a new outfit?” he asked, his tone tinged with curiosity.

“Yes.”

“Looks expensive,” he commented. “Is this part of the shopping spree?”

I nodded in response, my cheeks warming slightly. “Yes.”

Dalton let out a sigh, and I couldn’t help but wonder what he was thinking. “For the record, you look good. Really good. But be careful, Merida. You’re treading on some very thin ice. I think you need to pull back a little.”

I appreciated the compliment, but it sounded more like a warning. Before I could delve further into the conversation, my father called me into his office. I excused myself from Dalton and made my way to my father's office, wondering how I would explain my recent absence. I knew he wasn't going to be happy. This was the downside to working for your dad. He could be pissed twice as much.

My father raised an eyebrow as I entered, concern etched across his face. "Merida, where have you been?" he inquired.

I quickly closed the door. I didn't want the entire office to hear my father yelling at me. I wanted to preserve some of my dignity.

Thinking quickly, I offered an explanation. "I wasn't feeling well," I replied, hoping to divert his attention.

He nodded, though his expression remained stern. "Well, you have your advice column due today," he reminded me. I wasn't surprised he didn't ask if I was okay. That was not his concern. He was all about the publication. It was why he and my mother divorced. If I didn't work for my father, I doubted we would have a relationship at all.

"Right," I said, my mind racing. "I'll get it done. Anything else?"

He muttered something and returned his attention to the screen. I quickly retreated to my desk. I didn't want him to ask any additional questions. I didn't like to lie. I was supposed to be a journalist and I knew the job required a little mistruth to get a subject to open up. So far, I had not needed to use any of my lying skills.

I sat down to put the finishing touches on my fall scents article, but the lure of my article about Jensen Loxley proved too strong to resist. It began with a simple detail, a pair of white sneakers, and soon it took on a life of its own. My creative muse kicked in, and I was determined to uncover the story behind the man who had turned my world upside down.

I couldn't shake off the memory of Jensen's piercing green eyes and chiseled jawline. It was as though my blank page had

become a canvas, and his image was the only thing I could paint on it. I knew it was not healthy, but I couldn't help it. I had never felt this way before.

As I typed away on my computer, I found myself lost in a sea of thoughts. I couldn't concentrate, and my mind kept wandering back to the night with Jensen. He was so much more than the image he presented to the world. He was a lot more complicated.

I understood him. In a lot of ways, I was the same way. I hid behind my bulky clothes and he hid behind the image he created for himself. He wanted people to see him as standoffish and unapproachable because he didn't know how to talk to them.

But with me, it was different. He had opened up to me without trying to hide behind his usual façade. And in that moment, I had seen the real Jensen. The Jensen who was vulnerable and unsure of himself. The Jensen who was not afraid to let his guard down and show me his true self.

I closed my eyes and leaned back on my chair, letting out a deep sigh. I was torn between writing what I knew was going to be a damn good article and betraying the trust Jensen had given me. It was a rock and a hard place.

Part of me wanted to make it okay to write the article because I couldn't believe he actually liked me. He was going to be finished with me the moment the job was done. What we had wasn't real.

But the other part of me couldn't betray Jensen's trust. He had opened up to me in a way he had never done before, and I couldn't just use that vulnerability for my own gain. I had to make a decision, and soon.

For now, I would write the piece. It was fun. It felt good to exercise my creative muscles. I loved that I could write about the little things that might have seemed insignificant but actually mattered.



Sitting comfortably in my private jet, I leaned back into the plush leather seat, the hum of the engines surrounding me with a sense of familiarity and luxury. I liked to think of myself as a regular dude, but damn, money could buy comfort.

The private jet was something Hattie encouraged me to buy a few years ago. I resisted at first. I didn't want to be one of those rich douchebags jetting around the world on my private jet, but in this instance, I was happy to accept my status as a rich douchebag. Flying around the world once a week was only doable when it was done in comfort, and I was in total comfort on my jet.

Hattie was seated across from me, a tablet in hand, ready to give me the rundown of our upcoming events in Paris. Susan was on the phone handling whatever it was she handled. I was a man that required two assistants to keep my life running smoothly. Twenty years ago, I never would have believed I would be so successful and in such high demand. People went out of their way to ignore me most of the time. Now, the entire world was clamoring to have a few minutes with me.

“Jensen, we've got a packed schedule in Paris,” Hattie began, her tone as composed and efficient as always. She proceeded to detail the meetings, gala events, and networking opportunities that awaited us in the City of Light.



I listened attentively, nodding occasionally as she provided me with key information and reminders. I only needed to half-listen. She and Susan would remind me of every event in time for me to get ready. Paris was a pivotal stop in our whirlwind tour, a chance to connect with influential figures in the tech world and showcase the potential of Lox.

As Hattie spoke, I couldn't help but notice Merida across from me. She was engrossed in her work, her fingers dancing gracefully over the keyboard of her laptop. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, and she seemed entirely absorbed in whatever she was doing. Her dedication to her work was admirable, and I respected her commitment.

I liked that she didn't need me to hold her hand or constantly give her attention. She asked if it was okay if she brought her laptop so she could work. I loved how she asked if it was okay if she worked on her day job stuff while she was with me. I liked watching her work. I knew the look on her face. I got it too when I was onto something. She was completely in the moment. When I was working on new coding, I would go hours without eating. Hattie told me she talked to me and I never remembered it.

I couldn't see her screen, and I didn't want to intrude by asking. From our previous conversations, I assumed she was working on something related to her "simple living" column. It made sense, given her passion for the topic. She had made it very clear she believed in what she wrote.

As Hattie continued with her briefing, I allowed myself a moment to appreciate the dedication of the people around me. I would be nowhere without them. I was grateful for their hard work and support. But my thoughts kept drifting back to Merida. Yes, I was paying her, but I believed there could be something else. Something more. It was a little scary to let myself think of it, but what if she and I could be together? She would be a force beside me.

"After a late-night interview, we'll be up early and heading for Dubai for the yacht show," Hattie continued.

I waved her off. “It’s fine. I don’t need details. Merida is trying to work. She doesn’t need to hear all of this. You can just tell me when and where I need to be.”

However, to my surprise, Merida shook her head, her beautiful brown eyes filled with genuine curiosity. “Quite the contrary,” she said, her voice carrying a hint of intrigue. “I’m actually quite curious. A yacht show seems very, uh, opulent. Very royal. How does this align with your mission of helping people?”

Her question gave me pause. It was a valid point. I understood why she was asking. I made a pretty big deal about helping people with my tech.

“They want his technology,” Hattie answered.

“They do?”

“Yes,” Hattie answered again.

I scowled at her. “She doesn’t care.”

“No, I do,” Merida said. “You sold your technology as this great help to people that needed a little help with their daily lives. How does yacht technology help anyone?”

“The technology isn’t necessarily going to help everyday people,” I explained. “But the yacht owners are a demographic of people I can tap into for investments. I make their lives easier and they thank me by investing. That gives me leeway to make the lives of other people better.”

Merida nodded, seeming to understand.

Suddenly, Hattie’s voice broke through my thoughts. “Any questions about the schedule?”

“What? No. You’ll remind me what to do and where to be.”

She rolled her eyes. “You would be lost without me.”

“Yes, I would,” I said, grinning.

“I’m drinking on the flight over,” she said as she got to her feet. “I’m officially off duty. Don’t ask me for anything.”

After Hattie left, it was just me and Merida near the front of the plane. Hattie and Susan were in the back, giving us as much privacy as possible in a small cabin.

“Do you need anything?” I asked her.

She looked up from her screen and smiled while her fingers continued to type. That always freaked me out when my secretary could type while looking straight at me and have a conversation. It was creepy, like their head and fingers were not connected.

“I’m good,” she said in a voice that was just a little higher pitched than normal.

I nodded. “Okay. If you need anything, the attendant will take care of you. Blanket, pillow, wine, whatever you want.”

“Thank you,” she said and kept typing.

I looked out the window. It was just after dawn. When we arrived in Paris, it would be early evening. I had some grand plans for her. I’d been to Paris a few times before, but this was going to be different. I was getting to see it with Merida.

I opened my own laptop to work on a few things. Merida’s fingers flew over her keyboard, the clacking a soothing sound amidst the dull roar of the plane’s engines. The flight was uneventful. It was like we traveled the world together all the time. It was a comfortable silence. We ate a late lunch together before we both went back to work.

When we arrived in Paris, I couldn’t help but feel a surge of excitement. I loved the city. It wasn’t just the romance. It was the history I loved. I was determined to share its magic with Merida.

I loved that I could do this for her. My wealth wasn’t something I liked to flaunt, but if I could use it to impress a woman like Merida, I was going to do it. I planned on giving her the five-star experience. She was going to be left in awe.

We walked toward the waiting car. Hattie and Susan had their heads together. I could only imagine what they were discussing, but I suspected it was my schedule. We climbed into the limousine. Merida’s face was practically glued to the

window. The driver made his way through the busy Paris streets. It was dark, making the city lights appear even brighter.

We made our way to the Peninsula Paris, a lavish and opulent hotel that was sure to leave an impression on Merida. The grandeur of the place was something to behold, and I could only imagine the wonder she must have been feeling.

As we entered the lobby, I could see Merida's eyes widen with amazement. The decor was a mix of classic and modern, with marble floors and chandeliers hanging from the high ceilings.

"I'll get us checked in," Hattie said.

"This is incredible," Merida gasped. "I would take pictures but I would feel like a total tourist."

"You are a tourist," I said, smiling. "Take a picture. Take twenty."

"I am in absolute awe," she said, laughing. "It's stunning. Just absolutely gorgeous."

Hattie returned a few minutes later with our room keys. "I am going to my room and soaking in the tub. Goodnight."

Susan waved and walked away.

"I'll show you to your room," I said to Merida. "Rather, I will follow you. My room is a few doors down from you."

As we reached the top floor, I walked her to her suite, a luxurious space that exuded elegance and sophistication. I turned to her and watched as she drank in the sight of the room. I had made sure she had a suite. I wanted her to be in the lap of luxury. Maybe it was stupid to try to impress a woman who I was paying to be my date, but maybe I wanted to increase my odds of getting her to stick around after the contract. "There should be a change of clothes waiting for you in there," I said.

"What?" She looked confused.

I smiled. "Hattie picked it out. She said she knew what you would like."

She laughed. "I brought a suitcase filled with clothes."

"Yes, but tonight is special," I said, smiling. "Freshen up, and I'd like to invite you to meet me in the L'Oiseau Blanc restaurant for dinner in two hours."

"What is that?" she asked.

"It's a rooftop restaurant with a beautiful view of Paris," I replied. "It's one of my favorite places in the city. The food is amazing, but the view? The view is going to blow your mind."

Merida's eyes sparkled with excitement. "I can't wait. Thank you so much."

I nodded and turned to leave. "I'll see you in two hours, then."

As I walked away, I couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. Merida was impressed with the hotel, and I knew she would be even more impressed with the restaurant. I was going out of my way, with Hattie's help, to give Merida a night she would never forget.

I walked to my suite down the hall. My bags were waiting for me. I took a moment to appreciate the opulence of my suite.

My thoughts kept drifting back to Merida. There was something about her that intrigued me. Maybe it was her fiery spirit or the way her laughter sounded like music to my ears. Whatever it was, I found myself wanting more of her. It was more than sex that I wanted, but if she wanted to climb into bed with me, I wasn't going to turn her down. Hopefully, this time, she wouldn't kick me out of bed while I was still basking in postcoital haze.

As I started to get ready for dinner, I couldn't help but fantasize about what the night might lead to. Maybe after dinner, we could take a walk along the Seine, or perhaps I could show her my favorite spots in the city that only locals knew about. The possibilities were endless, and I intended to make the most of them.



## MERIDA

**M**y suite at the Peninsula Paris was nothing short of breathtaking, an immaculate haven that seemed to stretch on forever. It was a world of luxury, filled with amenities and comforts beyond my wildest dreams. As I moved through the spacious room, I couldn't help but be overwhelmed by the sheer extravagance of it all.

Everything in the room was designed with taste and elegance. The king-sized bed was adorned with plush pillows and silk sheets, and the curtains were made of the finest velvet. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting a warm glow on the space. The floor-to-ceiling windows offered a stunning view of the Eiffel Tower, which stood majestically in the distance, twinkling in the night sky.

As I sank into the soft armchair, I couldn't help but feel a sense of indulgence washing over me. The room was so luxurious that I felt like a queen. This was how the one percent lived. It was easy to want this in my own life. What I loved most was the fact that Jensen wasn't really ostentatious. He was quietly rich. He liked the finer things in life, but he wasn't taking a bunch of selfies and posting it to social media to show off just how rich he was.

I got out of the chair and went into the bedroom.

True to Jensen's word, a stunning red evening dress was elegantly laid out on the bed, accompanied by a pair of exquisite shoes, diamond earrings that glittered like stars, and a Swarovski-studded clutch that sparkled in the soft lighting of

the room. It was as though I had stepped into a modern-day princess story, and I couldn't help but feel like I was living in a dream.

I laughed and shook my head. "Oh, Hattie."

She had missed her calling. She needed to be a stylist. Running her brother's life was beneath her. She could dress the stars. Hell, she could dress royalty.

After showering off the plane ride, I put on the dress and was immediately in love with it. I felt a little like Jessica Rabbit. My curves looked sexy instead of vulgar, and the dress hugged me in all the right places. I slipped on the shoes and felt like I was walking on clouds. The diamond earrings reflected the light beautifully, and the clutch completed the whole look. I felt like a million dollars.

I turned to face my reflection in the ornate mirror. The woman staring back at me was a far cry from the ordinary journalist I had been just a short time ago. It was a surreal transformation, one that left me feeling both excited and slightly disoriented.

I started to clip my hair back and then stopped. The hair pulled back was the old me. The new, va-va-voom me was going wild tonight. I put a little product in my hair and left my curly hair loose.

It was time to join him. With a deep breath, I made my way up to the rooftop of the hotel. The anticipation of what lay ahead filled me with a sense of wonder and curiosity, and I couldn't wait to experience the magic of Paris from high above the city.

As I stepped into the restaurant, I was met with a breathtaking sight. The entire restaurant, with its panoramic windows overlooking the City of Light, was completely empty except for one person—Jensen. He sat at a table near the window wearing a slick black suit perfectly tailored to his frame. His eyes sparkled with mischief.

In the background, the Eiffel Tower was illuminated, its lights dancing in a mesmerizing evening light show. It was the



most enchanting view I had ever seen, a scene straight out of a fairy tale. And yet, my gaze was drawn irresistibly to Jensen, who greeted me with a charming smile.

“What is going on?” I asked.

“I thought it would be nice if we could have a private dinner,” he said.

I laughed and shook my head. “This is definitely private.”

“Please, have a seat,” he said and pulled out my chair.

We sat down at the elegantly set table, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of wonder at the exclusivity of this experience. The entire restaurant was ours for the evening. This was what it was like to date a billionaire.

“I took the liberty of asking the chef to prepare something special for us,” he said. “Do you like French cuisine?”

I laughed. “I imagine I do. Does that include French fries?”

“We won’t let the chef know you said such blasphemous things,” he teased.

“I am looking forward to trying anything served,” I said. “After all, I’m sitting in one of the most beautiful places in the world. I could eat burnt toast and it would taste good.”

Jensen chuckled, amused by my words. “I’m glad to hear that. But I assure you, the food here is exceptional. The chef is a master of French cuisine.”

As he spoke, the waiter appeared, carrying a silver tray with two glasses and a bottle of champagne. He set them down on the table and poured us each a glass.

“To a wonderful evening,” Jensen said, raising his glass to me.

I smiled and raised my glass to meet his. The bubbles tickled my nose as I took a sip, the taste crisp and refreshing.

As we sipped our champagne, the waiter returned with the first course—a delicate crab salad, topped with a drizzle of

citrus vinaigrette. The flavors burst on my tongue like fireworks, and I couldn't help but moan in pleasure.

Jensen's eyes locked onto mine, and I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks. I tried to compose myself, but the way he was looking at me made it difficult.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," he said, a sly grin on his lips.

"I am," I admitted. "This is incredible."

"I'm glad you think so," he said, his voice low and husky. "Because there's so much more I want to show you tonight."

As the evening unfolded, we enjoyed a sumptuous five-course meal, each dish a masterpiece of culinary artistry. The wines that accompanied our meal were unimaginably expensive, a testament to the extravagance of the evening.

"Tell me about your goals for Lox," I said. "What are you really hoping to achieve?"

"It's just like I said," he said, shrugging. "I want to start with the basic stuff."

"Assisting people in their daily lives," I said, nodding.

"Yes. I plan on expanding the AI program into various domains, including healthcare, roads, travel, and more."

"How is Lox going to work in the healthcare industry?" I asked.

"It's still in the pre-development phase, but my ultimate goal is to create an AI program that can anticipate medical needs but also build innovative solutions."

I shook my head. "I think it goes right over my head. I don't get it."

"My program will have the ability to analyze medical data more efficiently than humans," he explained. "Not that it can replace human doctors, but it can put together data quicker than a human can. It will read all the test results, medical histories, and symptoms and provide a diagnosis in seconds. It

will also recommend treatments and medications based on the patient's medical history.”

“That sounds incredible,” I said, my mind reeling at the possibilities. “But what about privacy concerns?”

Jensen shrugged it off. “We have a team of the best security experts working on that. We don't take privacy lightly. I have the best people working for me. If we can develop this AI, we can create an impenetrable defense system.”

“I believe you,” I said. “I watch a lot of medical dramas. I know a lot of the big excitement is trying to figure out the mystery illness.”

He smiled, his eyes flashing. “Not with my AI. Imagine how much more efficient the healthcare system would be. We could save hours of wait times. Cut down on painful days and weeks waiting for results. We could cut the costs associated with unnecessary tests and repeat visits to try and find out what the problem is.”

“I guess that *would* cut down on costs,” I said.

“Which would lower insurance premiums.”

“And that's how you help the little people,” I said, smiling.

“It's part of it. It's a small step, but it's a step.”

I nodded, impressed by the thought that had gone into the project. “What about the other domains?”

“Roads, for example,” he said. “We plan on using Lox to analyze traffic patterns and develop more efficient routes for drivers. It will also be able to predict accidents and warn drivers ahead of time to avoid them. This will not only save time but also reduce the number of accidents on the road.”

“That's amazing,” I said, my mind already imagining how much easier my commute would be with Lox at work. “And what about energy?”

Jensen's eyes lit up. “Energy is where Lox really shines. We plan on using it to analyze energy usage patterns and develop more efficient ways of generating and distributing energy. With Lox, we can reduce energy waste and increase

the efficiency of energy production, leading to a cleaner and more sustainable future.”

It all sounded very futuristic. I liked the idea of sitting back and letting AI take over, but there was a weird, icky feeling I got when I thought about it too much.

“What if it made a mistake, one with potentially dire consequences?” I asked him. “What if it gave a wrong diagnosis? Or misread a highway plan or something? A doctor has to rely on what he sees. A tone of voice or the nonverbal clues. Things an AI wouldn’t be able to pick up on. It’s the human element. I’m worried AI might replace the human part of things.”

He shook his head. “The integration of Lox in healthcare isn’t the removal of the human element but the creation of a partnership. I think that medical professionals could work alongside Lox, learning how to leverage its capabilities to their advantage rather than fearing its presence. We’ve been tossing around some ideas that will allow the doctor to input observations—the human element.”

My frown deepened. “I don’t know. I think I understand the concern people have. A little fear could be healthy when dealing with something so new, particularly when it’ll have access to vast amounts of information. I worry about the mistakes. Imagine if Lox tells someone they have an incurable brain tumor? They go out and blow all their money and maybe make horrible decisions only to find out there was a mistake.”

Jensen flashed a confident smile. “That’s the point. It won’t make a mistake. It can’t. It’s not human.”

His unwavering belief in Lox’s capabilities and his vision for its role in healthcare left me both concerned and intrigued.

“I trust your intentions,” I said. “But I have concerns.”

“Do you know how many mistakes are made every single day in the medical world? How many diagnoses are missed and people die? How many people are treated for one illness when the symptoms are caused by something else? I get that

people are scared of the unknown, but I don't plan on becoming an evil mastermind. I promise my goal is to help."

I nodded slowly, considering his words. He had a point. The medical field was far from perfect, and if an AI could improve patient outcomes, then it was worth exploring. But still, I couldn't shake the feeling of unease.

As if sensing my hesitation, Jensen leaned forward. "Look, I know this is a lot to take in. But trust me, Lox has undergone rigorous testing and has been proven to be highly accurate. And of course, it's not going to replace doctors entirely. It's just another tool in their toolkit."

I nodded again, still uncertain. But as we continued to talk, I found myself slowly coming around to Jensen's way of thinking. Perhaps Lox could be a valuable addition to the healthcare industry.

"I cannot imagine what your brain must look like."

He laughed and took a drink of wine. "Trust me, it probably looks like a spider web inside another spider web. My mind is a hot mess."

"I think it's sexy."



**A**s the meal drew to a close, I realized that our conversation had been dominated by discussions about Lox and my vision for its future. What struck me as very refreshing was Merida's response to the topic. Normally, when I talked about my program, people tended to smile, nod, and offer effusive praise for my innovative ideas and incredible mind. But Merida was different. She was asking critical questions, expressing uncertainty, and challenging my perspectives. I loved that she wasn't afraid to say it to me. She was fierce. She was not going to just accept anything at face value.

And I couldn't help but relish every moment of it.

In Merida, I had found someone who wasn't content to simply accept my ideas at face value. She was willing to dig deeper. She had questions. A lot of questions and she wasn't going to accept some generic response. If and when it was time to go public with Lox beyond the assistant capability, I wanted her to be the one to test our marketing campaigns. She wasn't going to hold back. Her skepticism was a welcome departure from the usual responses I encountered.

I had always believed in the importance of critical thinking. I dealt with plenty of skepticism, but the resistance to my AI was more about fearing change. Merida's willingness to challenge me only fueled my excitement, and I couldn't wait to engage in more thought-provoking discussions with her in the days to come. She was the kind of person that made me think.

As the evening wore on, our glasses of wine seemed to multiply, and our conversation about AI grew more intense. It wasn't an angry exchange, but rather a heated one, filled with passion and conviction. Merida expressed her concerns about AI, asserting that it was leading humanity in the wrong direction.

"I like the idea of AI," she finally conceded. "I really do, but in a world rife with division and destruction, I believe there is one crucial element AI could never provide."

I tilted my head, genuinely curious. "And what's that?" I asked.

"Empathy," she replied, her voice carrying the weight of her convictions. "Empathy is needed to weigh more than just facts and figures. What if a highway cuts right through a memorial of some sort because it's efficient but it's not taking into consideration the human element?"

I nodded slowly, pondering her words. "Well, I have empathy," I stated.

Merida shrugged. "Me too, but how does your empathy help AI? Most humans have empathy. That's why we're human and AI isn't."

I leaned forward, trying to convey my point. "Lox is me," I explained. "Essentially, it's my brain written in code. My intentions. My desire to help. Isn't that enough empathy for you?"

She sighed, and her response was laced with a sense of resignation. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Her words lingered in the air, and I couldn't help but feel the weight of the ethical and moral questions surrounding the development and deployment of AI. Our conversation had taken an unexpected turn. She wasn't saying anything I hadn't heard before. It just hit different when she said it. She was not going to back down without making me see her point of view. I *did* understand her concerns, but I had already weighed them into my tech. I was certain I was on the right path.



“AI might excel at offering solutions to practical needs, such as booking therapy appointments or setting up schedules, but it’s incapable of addressing something deeper, something residing in the very core of human existence.”

“Empathy,” I said.

“Yes, but it’s more than that. Look at people nowadays. You probably don’t ride the subway, but it’s already like sitting with a bunch of drones. Everyone is looking at their phones. No one talks to each other. No one notices if someone is sad or suffering. We’re losing our ability to connect with each other on a fundamental level, and I fear that AI will only exacerbate that problem. If we don’t even have to call a human to schedule a doctor’s appointment, that’s another human connection taken away.”

Her words hit me like a punch in the gut. She was right. AI was about efficiency and practicality, but it lacked the emotional depth that made us human. As much as I believed in the potential of Lox, I couldn’t ignore the fact that it could never truly understand human emotion. It was just a machine, after all.

“I see your point,” I said slowly. “But what do you suggest we do? We can’t just stop developing AI altogether. Even if it scares the shit out of people, it’s good. It’s going to make lives better.”

Merida leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m not saying you should stop developing AI. But you need to be more conscious of how the population of the world uses it. We need to make sure that we don’t lose sight of what makes us people. We need to make sure that we use AI to enhance our lives, not replace the things that make us human.”

I nodded, thinking about her words. “So, what do you suggest I do?”

Merida leaned forward, excitement creeping into her voice. “Is there a way to incorporate emotional intelligence into AI? Can you create machines that can understand human emotions and respond to them appropriately? You would need to make

sure they don't replace human connections, but rather enhance them."

I furrowed my brow, mulling over her suggestion. It was a daunting task, but it was also intriguing. If we could create machines that could understand human emotions, it could revolutionize the way we interact with technology. It could make it more human-like, more relatable.

"I think you might be onto something," I said slowly. "But it would require a complete overhaul of the way we approach AI development. It would require us to focus not only on efficiency, but also on empathy and emotional connection."

Merida nodded, a smile spreading across her face. "Exactly. You need to make sure that AI doesn't just understand human emotions, but also responds to them in a way that is appropriate and sensitive. It's not just about making machines that can do more, it's about making machines that can connect with humans on an emotional level."

I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement at her suggestion. It was a challenge, but it was also an opportunity to push the boundaries of what AI could do. To create machines that were not just efficient but also empathetic and emotionally intelligent.

"I think we can do this," I said, a smile spreading across my face. "It won't be easy, but it's a challenge worth taking on. I might be able to do that, but don't you think that might scare people?"

"How?"

"Having a computer know when you are sad or to talk to you like it loves you?"

"Imagine you're an elderly shut-in," she said. "You have no one to talk to day after day. A friendly voice would go a long way to making someone feel a little better."

I nodded, understanding what she was saying to a point. I personally would be a little freaked out if my house asked me if I was feeling okay or tried to make friends with me. I had

seen it in movies and futuristic, sci-fi shows, but that wasn't my initial intention with the technology.

The waiter returned before I had a chance to express my concerns. It was time for us to leave. "Thank you so much," I said, smiling at the man.

"You're very welcome, sir."

Merida got to her feet and I was given another full view of her in the gorgeous red dress. It was hard to focus on anything when her boobs were practically spilling out the top. I quickly looked away, feeling my cheeks flush with embarrassment when the waiter noticed.

As we walked out of the restaurant, I couldn't help but steal glances at her. She was stunning, and I couldn't shake off the image of her cleavage from my mind.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, noticing my behavior.

I quickly shook my head, trying to focus on the conversation we had just had. "Yeah, sorry. I was just lost in thought."

She smiled, seemingly unaware of my moment of weakness. "I hope you know I'm not criticizing your technology. Not at all. I think it's really good. I just get a little crazy when I think about robots running the world."

"Not robots," I said as we stepped into the elevator. "My tech wouldn't be in a machine. It's basically like the boxes and gadgets we have now."

"Your tech might not be, but once you put it on the market, everyone is going to be rushing to copy it."

"True," I agreed. "Are you suggesting I don't move forward?"

"No! Not at all!"

The elevator doors opened to our floor. We stepped out and quietly made our way down the hall to her room. She had gotten me thinking. I hoped I wasn't making a huge mistake. My goal was to improve lives, not make them worse.

We stopped in front of her door. She looked up at me. Softness and empathy, the very things she talked about, were in her eyes. “I’ve upset you,” she said.

“No.” I shook my head. “You’ve given me a lot to think about. I won’t pretend I fully understand it, but I guess I kind of get it.”

She placed her hand on her chest, as if to emphasize her point. “You don’t get it,” she said. “Think about it this way. A dog’s love is a need, but it could never be replaced by AI. You can’t come home after work and have a deep, meaningful conversation with a robot. You can’t hug a robot and feel the warmth of another person. There are certain things that only humans can provide.”

I nodded slowly, taking in her words. “I see what you mean. But what if we could create robots that could provide companionship and love?”

She smiled sadly. “That’s the thing. Love and companionship aren’t things that can be created. They’re things that are felt. And there’s no technology in the world that can replicate that.”

Her analogy hung in the air, and I couldn’t deny that there was truth in her words. While AI could undoubtedly serve as a tool for convenience and practicality, it was a fine line between turning us all into cold drones and keeping up the human connection.

“I get it,” I said, nodding. “I think some people are always going to be hesitant, but you’ve given me some talking points I’ll have Hattie put into my next interviews. I want to make sure people can keep the tech separate from life in general. It’s an assistant, not a substitute.”

“Perfect!” Her face lit up. “I love that tagline!”

“Thank you,” I said, laughing. “You came up with it. Like everything in our world, it should be used widely with your eyes wide open. People have to decide how much it’s involved in their lives.”

She gazed up at me, her eyes meeting mine. “My eyes are wide open,” she whispered. “I see you. I see the goodness in you. I understand your motivation.”

Then, without another word, she leaned in and kissed me. The world around us seemed to fade into the background as our lips met, and for that moment, there was nothing else but the intoxicating sensation of her kiss.

As she pulled away, she looked up at me with a glint in her eye. She smiled at me, and I knew that I was in trouble. I had never been one to fall in love, but there was something about her that made me want to take a leap of faith.



## MERIDA

“**W**ould you like to come in?” I asked.

It was a bold move. Part of me cautioned against it. After all, I was playing with fire. This was supposed to be a story. I wasn't supposed to let myself get involved with the subject I was writing about.

But dammit, he was so hot. His kisses turned me into a pool of warm heat. One more time in Paris couldn't hurt. It was Paris, after all. It was supposed to be all romance and hot sex. I had a perfectly willing partner. One more time. That was all I needed.

He hesitated, and I wondered if he might be a little irritated with me for giving him such a hard time about his AI.

“I would love to come in,” he answered and brushed his knuckles across my cheek. “But mostly, I want to tear that dress off you.”

My heart raced as he spoke those words. I knew I shouldn't be doing this, but I couldn't resist his charm. I took his hand and led him into my suite, my thoughts clouded with desire.

Once inside, he pushed me against the wall and kissed me passionately. His hands roamed all over my body, sending shivers down my spine. His hips pinned me against the wall. His kisses and touch were different from the first time. I could feel his frustration. He was irritated with me for challenging him. He expected me to smile pretty and not give him my true opinion.

I slid my hands between us and pushed him away from me. He looked surprised. I grabbed his tie and jerked him toward me. Our mouths slammed together. I needed him to know I had a brain. I had opinions and I wasn't about to keep my mouth shut. I did that enough in my life.

No more. I had things to say.

I shoved him against the wall and smashed my breasts against his chest as our kissing intensified.

He grabbed my wrists and pinned my arms over my head. I wriggled my hips against him, trying to break his grip. It was futile. He was in control.

He pushed away from the wall, and once again, I found myself pinned to the wall with my arms high above my head. His mouth covered mine while his other hand squeezed my breast. I groaned in ecstasy.

“Fuck me, Merida.” His words sounded like he was in pain.

I wiggled against him, rubbing my breasts across his chest and pressing my crotch against his. I could feel his erection and was desperate to have him, but not yet. I wanted to play.

I bit his ear and whispered, “You have to earn it.”

I squirmed against him, smiling when I heard his breathing quicken. He squeezed my breast before jerking the fabric of my dress away. He kissed my nipple through the lace bra. My body jerked at the touch.

“Do you like that, Merida?” He pinched my nipple and twisted.

My answer was a soft moan. He sucked the nipple into his mouth and gently pulled.

He released my nipple and looked at me. “I said do you like that?”

“Yes,” I said breathlessly.

He moved to my other breast and sucked. Suddenly, he dropped my hands and spun me around. My cheek rested



against the wall while he unzipped my dress. He was not gentle as he jerked it down. A quick, playful swat to my ass was followed by his lips pressing against my spine.

He moaned. “You have the most perfect ass.” He kissed it while his hands squeezed. His fingers slid between my legs and he massaged my clit. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the sensation of his lips and fingers. He squeezed my ass and kissed my spine. His fingers danced over my clit, sending delicious sensations through my body. My face pressed against the wall, my hands as well.

Suddenly, I felt a finger sliding inside me. I whimpered at the feel of his penetration. He slowly pumped his finger in and out while he continued to kiss my spine.

“Do you like that, Merida?” He groaned against my shoulder.

I nodded against the wall. Little whimpers escaped my throat as he took me higher and higher. When the orgasm hit, a quiet cry of pleasure escaped my throat.

He turned me around and kissed me again. My hands went to his pants and jerked them open. I was suddenly frantic. I needed him inside me. I managed to get them open and pushed them down his hips.

“Wait,” he murmured against my lips. “I need to go to my room. I need a condom.”

“I have some,” I whispered.

He stopped and pulled back a few inches, his gaze meeting mine. “You brought condoms?”

I winced. “I did. You did, too?”

He grinned. “I did.”

“I thought, well, I wanted to be prepared in case—”

“Let’s just say in case you and I hooked up again,” he said. “I don’t want to think about you hooking up with anyone else.”

“Of course, you!” I gasped with surprise. “There is no one else.”

His eyes flashed with something dark. “Really?”

“Duh,” I said. “Get naked. I’ll get the condoms.”

I was a little offended he thought I was going to be picking up men while I was on this little trip. Seriously? Did the guy think I was that easy?

I unzipped my suitcase and stuck my hand in one of the pockets. I had brought the condoms because I thought there could be a chance this exact situation happened and I didn’t want to get caught in the heat of the moment and have to shut things down.

“Merida,” he said, sliding his hands down my hips. “I’m sorry. I’ve offended you.”

I held up two condoms.

He laughed and pulled me to him. “You have a lot of faith in me.”

Jensen had gotten naked. I really, really liked the man naked. His hands slid up my back before he kissed me again. The feel of his mouth on mine was intoxicating. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my body into his. His hand slid between us and cupped my mound. He rubbed my already sensitive clit, causing me to jump.

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” he said. “But I’m damn glad I’m the only one getting to enjoy this beautiful body.”

“And why did *you* bring condoms?” I asked.

He grinned as he unhooked my bra. “Because I was really hoping I could do this with you. Only you.”

That was all I needed to hear.

He slid my bra off and lowered me to the bed, then stripped off my panties. He knelt between my legs and kissed my inner thighs. His breath tickled my skin and caused me to giggle. I put my hands through his hair and held him to me. He

gave me a little nip before sucking my clit between his teeth. I jerked against him.

I tossed my head back and forth as he feasted on my sweet spot. I arched my back, begging for him to give me more. He slid a finger into my pussy and pulled it out, then pushed it in again. I squirmed against him, loving the way his mouth felt on me. He pushed two fingers into me and started pumping them in and out. My breaths came faster and faster.

“Wait,” I moaned. I didn’t feel like I could handle another orgasm so soon.

That only seemed to encourage him to move faster. My head rolled back and forth on the bed. I jerked against him as my orgasm slammed into me. My body rocked as I rode it out. He turned his attention to my nipples. My body twitched uncontrollably. It was almost too much pleasure.

He pulled back and tore the condom wrapper open with his teeth before quickly sliding it on. I blindly reached for him, pulling at his shoulder to bring his mouth back to mine. He kissed me as he pushed inside me with one smooth stroke. We both let out long groans.

He held himself up on his elbows as he started pumping into me. I raised my hips to meet his thrusts. I loved the way he felt inside me. I knew I’d never be able to be with anyone else and feel like this. He pulled out of me and turned me over onto my stomach. He pulled me up onto my knees and entered me from behind.

His body slammed against mine, nearly knocking me flat on my face. I whimpered and pushed back against him. He leaned over me and sucked on my shoulder. His warm breath made goosebumps rise all over my skin. I moaned as my orgasm built up in me again.

Tears came to my eyes. I was never going to get tired of this. I could stay here forever. He pulled out of me and flipped me onto my back. He slid inside me again. He started thrusting into me with everything he had. I bit my lip to keep from screaming. It felt so good. I couldn’t believe how good it felt.

His thrusts got faster and faster. He tensed up and gasped as he came inside me.

I pulled him against me, holding him close as his hips jerked. I kissed the side of his face and neck. We were both drawing in short gasps of breath. I loved feeling his weight against me.

He moved his face, kissing me once before sliding off me. “Tell me now, are you kicking me out of your bed?”

He was joking. I totally deserved the question after the last incident. “No.”

He let out a breath. “Thank God. I don’t think I could walk right now. You milked me dry, woman.”

I giggled and patted his arm. “I think that’s the other way around. I’m pretty sure you fucked me boneless.”

He popped his head up and looked into my eyes. I was immediately embarrassed for speaking so boldly. “Sorry,” I murmured.

He smiled, tracing his fingertip down my nose. “Don’t be sorry. It was hot.”

I smiled back at him, snuggling up against him. “You’re so sweet.”

He kissed my forehead. “Time for a nap. I’m exhausted.” He yawned and pulled my body against his.

“A nap?”

“Sleep,” he said. “I’m going to pass out. I’ll try and wake up early enough to sneak back to my room.”

“Why?”

He didn’t answer for a few seconds. “Hell, I don’t know. I don’t have to sneak anywhere. Go to sleep, Merida. We have a busy few days.”

I smiled and let myself enjoy the moment. I was lying naked next to what was easily the sexiest man alive.

I snuggled against him, feeling my eyelids grow heavy. He was right. We had a busy week to get through, and I'd need my rest if I wanted to keep up with him.

I could feel his steady breathing against my face. His arm was draped over me. Once again, just like last time, I felt guilt creep in. I shouldn't be sleeping with the man I was investigating. If he found out, he was going to be horrified and pissed. He was going to think I only slept with him to get close. I needed to decide whether I wanted the man or the prestige my article would bring. One was a guarantee I would have what was likely the best piece written about him. But it guaranteed he would never want to talk to me again.



As I settled into my seat on the flight to Dubai, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement mixed with trepidation. The interview from the night before with the late-night talk-show host in Paris had taken an unexpected turn, and I was about to relive it all over again. Hattie was always one to do a bit of Monday morning quarterbacking. She was going to tell me what I did right and wrong. Carl would have emailed her a list of things to cover as well.

Merida was on her laptop with a Coke and a tray of fresh fruit. She looked pretty comfortable and natural sitting on my private plane. She glanced up and smiled at me before returning her attention to her work.

Hattie pulled out her tablet and sat beside me. "Okay, ready?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, sighing. "Am I?"

"It's not bad." She laughed and started playing the video.

I hated watching these things. Seeing myself on TV was awkward. When I looked at myself, I saw the geeky kid from high school. I didn't see the man I was. I cringed when I saw my crooked tie.

"Why didn't you tell me my tie was crooked?"

"It's fine," she said. "Stop nitpicking. This thing is gold. It has already gone viral, trending everywhere online."

I cringed. "Why? Are people pissed about the AI?"

“No! It’s not the tech questions you answered or the innovative projects you discussed,” she said, smiling. “It was the human element. You’re human!”

“I’ve always been human,” I said dryly.

“Not like this,” she said, smiling.

I knew what had changed. I had a girlfriend. Kind of.

I glanced over at her. She looked a little embarrassed. I knew she had watched the interview. I fell silent as the video played. I found myself cringing when the host began asking the inevitable questions. Who was this mystery vixen by my side? Where had she come from? How had we met? And, most importantly, was it serious?

The host’s grin widened as he leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “Come on, Jensen, spill the beans. You’ve kept your personal life locked away for years, but now you’re parading this stunning lady around. Tell us everything!”

The host’s enthusiasm in the interview had made me laugh. I never realized just how invested people were in my life. Even though my stomach churned with nervousness, I did my best to answer the questions. Watching the replay of the video was strange, but it was the look on my face that surprised me. I was grinning like a damn idiot. My smile never left my face the whole time he was talking to me about Merida.

“You look so happy,” Hattie said.

“You do,” Merida commented.

“I told you this was a good idea,” Hattie said, grinning. “All you needed was a little humanizing. You’ve played your role very well, Merida.”

Merida blushed again. “Thank you.”

“You two actually look like a real couple,” Hattie went on. She paused the video when the show put up a picture of me and Merida together at one of the parties we’d attended.

I couldn’t help but chuckle at the still frame of us. Merida was wearing a sleek, black dress that fit her curves perfectly, while I had on a formal suit that complemented her attire. I



remembered that night very well. It was the night I realized I was crazy about her.

She didn't know that. I didn't want to say anything because it confused me. I had never had such feelings and wasn't even sure what I thought I felt was real.

"Okay, let's get back to the interview. Your story was good." Hattie picked up her notebook. "The only pointer Carl wanted me to pass along was the next time someone asks you about Merida, offer a little anecdote."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"A story," Merida chimed in. "Right?"

"Yes," Hattie said, smiling. "It can be something about how you guys were at dinner the other night and you realized your AI could make the service better or you two know someone—"

"I got it," I said and stopped her. "Lie."

"No, not lie," Hattie said. "Like right now, you're on the plane together. You can mention something about a show you watched together or a song you heard."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not going to talk about my personal life. It's bad enough I have to expose this part of me as it is. They have enough information."

Hattie frowned but pushed play on the video once again. The interview had caught me off guard, that much was clear, but to someone who didn't know me, I probably looked casual.

I couldn't help but replay the events of the past few days in my mind. The talk-show host's probing questions, the audience's eager anticipation, and Merida's presence by my side all felt like a whirlwind. I felt like I stepped into someone else's body.

But watching the interview, I realized I had handled myself fairly well. It was strange how the unexpected revelation about my relationship with Merida had taken center stage, but I had no regrets. It was exactly what Hattie said it would be. People

were seeing me in a different light. It would help make people feel more comfortable with my AI. They didn't see me as a cyborg threatening their way of life.

I watched the interview with the hum of the jet engines providing a soothing backdrop. The host's questions had been relentless, yet I found myself answering them honestly and with a newfound sense of vulnerability. Merida had become someone very special to me very quickly, and that truth had spilled from my lips without hesitation. It was a strange sensation, talking about my feelings in front of an audience and countless viewers online. But it felt right, as if I had nothing to hide.

"She's as much a mystery to me as she is to the public," I'd said, my voice calm but tinged with warmth. "And honestly, I'm enjoying taking things slow and getting to know her. I know it probably sounds trite, but we would really like some privacy as we navigate our new relationship."

I smiled as I heard those words again. They were true, every single one of them. Merida was a mystery, an enigma wrapped in intelligence and grace. Our relationship *was* new and I *did* want privacy.

The flight attendant came by, offering a selection of beverages. I chose a glass of scotch, sipping it slowly as I continued to replay the interview. Hattie provided commentary about my body language and advised when I was supposed to use different voice inflections.

The questions about our relationship, our shared dreams, and our future together had been a revelation, not just to the public but to me as well.

"Over two million views," Hattie said with a laugh.

I leaned back in my seat, a sense of contentment washing over me. The world now knew about Merida and me, and that truth had brought us closer. She thought it was fake, but I hoped I could convince her otherwise when the contract was over.

I couldn't help but feel excited about what lay ahead.

Hattie put the tablet away. “You did well!” She laughed and patted me on the shoulder. “One interview and a couple of appearances and you’ve changed your entire image. Damn, I’m good.”

I rolled my eyes. “Next time *you* can do the interview.”

Hattie offered another satisfied grin, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. “You knocked it out of the park, Jensen. Seriously, way to fly by the seat of your pants and give the people what they want to hear. Good job.”

“Thanks.”

She got up and moved to the back of the plane. Merida was smiling at me. “You really did do very well,” she said, nodding. “I saw your interview a couple of weeks ago. Last night was totally different.”

“Let me guess, I looked human.”

She laughed. “You always look human, but last night you *sounded* human. You really did a great job. Not just about our so-called relationship. You explained the AI really well. I think people understand it better. You were very passionate in the way you talked about it. It sells.”

“Thanks,” I said. I considered telling her how I felt but didn’t want to freak her out. There would be time for that later. I didn’t want to scare her off.

But deep down, as I spoke those words of gratitude about Merida, I realized something important. I wasn’t saying any of that to appease “the people” or to fulfill some celebrity obligation. The words I’d spoken during the interview, about Merida and our relationship, hadn’t been scripted or rehearsed. They had flowed naturally from my heart because they were the truth.

I wasn’t just giving people what they wanted to hear. I was sharing a genuine part of my life, something deeply personal and significant.

My thoughts drifted back to Merida, the woman who had entered my life like a whirlwind, turning it upside down in the best way. My feelings for her weren’t manufactured for the

public's consumption. They were real. I couldn't wait to see what happened after the media tour and the job was done.

We all worked in silence for a few hours, only stopping to snack or take the offered drinks from the flight attendant.

As the plane touched down and taxied toward the gate, I was actually looking forward to spending another day with Merida. We would get separate rooms, but I had a feeling we would end up in the same bed. We usually did.

As we made our way to the waiting car, Merida went back to the plane to get her phone.

"Hattie, I need to tell you something," I said.

"What? Please don't tell me you've changed your mind about the yacht event. I know you don't like these things, but it's important."

"No, not that. I just thought you should know that what I said during the interview, about Merida, it wasn't just for show. It's the truth."

Hattie smiled, her eyes reflecting understanding. "I know, Jensen. And that's what made it so powerful. Your authenticity came through, and people connected with it. It was real, and that's what matters most."

"But it would be better if we kept that between us," I said.

"You told the whole world," she reminded me.

"You know what I mean."

"I do," she said and squeezed my arm. "I do know. Just be careful."

I didn't get to ask her why she was telling me to be careful. Merida joined us and we climbed into the car. She yawned and leaned her head back against the seat. "Tired?" I asked.

She gave me a coy smile. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

Hattie coughed once. I had no doubt in my mind she suspected there was more going on than we were admitting.

“You don’t have any events tonight,” Hattie said. “You both have time to catch up on some sleep.”

We arrived at the hotel, and Merida and I checked in and headed toward our separate rooms. But as we reached the corridor, she grabbed my hand and pulled me closer to her.

“I don’t feel like sleeping,” she whispered into my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

I pulled away, trying to ignore the heat rising in my cheeks. “Merida, we can’t just—”

“Why not?” she interrupted, her voice low and seductive. “We always do.”

I hesitated, knowing that Hattie was probably watching us from afar. But Merida had a way of making me forget everything else. I gave in and followed her into her room. As soon as the door closed behind us, Merida pushed me against the wall and crashed her lips into mine. I wrapped my arms around her waist, deepening the kiss. She tasted like wine and the grapes she ate on the plane. I couldn’t get enough of her.



## MERIDA

**T**he extravagance of the past few days had been nothing short of spectacular, but I knew I had responsibilities waiting for me back in the real world. I spent the day working on a bunch of columns for the publication. I was actually ahead. I was hoping it would be enough to appease my father. He'd been pissed I took the week off. He was so used to me just doing whatever he said.

I couldn't tell him I was in Dubai. He would never understand. I sent the last article for my column and breathed a sigh of relief. It was done. That should keep my dad at bay. It wasn't like he and I interacted a lot while we were at work. Half the time, he didn't even know I was there. It was only when I made my presence known that I actually got his attention, and even then it was very brief.

After sending the article, I quickly finished dressing for the yacht show. I was wearing one of the dresses Hattie picked out for me with this event in mind. It was a pretty lavender dress that flowed around me. It was flattering and made me feel pretty. I pulled my hair up and put on the earrings Hattie had also picked out.

My phone buzzed with a text notification just as I was about to walk out the door. It was from my father, and his message was anything but friendly.

"You're making me look bad," his text read, filled with a hint of frustration. "No other employee would get away with this kind of behavior."

I sighed, my fingers quickly dancing across the screen as I typed out a reply. “I sent you the columns, Dad. I’m still working, just not from the office.”

His response was swift, the words curt and unforgiving. “I can only give you so many chances, Merida.”

I stared at the message for a moment, feeling a pang of guilt and frustration. My father had always been a formidable figure in my life, and the pressure to live up to his expectations weighed heavily on my shoulders. But this Dubai trip had been an opportunity I couldn’t resist. The Jensen Loxley story was going to be huge, especially when it was revealed I was the one he gushed about in the interview.

I took a deep breath, composing my thoughts before typing my reply. “Dad, I promise I’m working on something important. Please trust me on this.”

There was a knock on the door. “Shit,” I murmured.

I quickly opened it for Jensen. “I’m almost ready,” I told him with a quick kiss. “Just a second.”

I walked into the bathroom and waited for my father to reply. His response was slow in coming, and I felt a growing sense of anxiety. I knew my father’s patience was running thin, and I couldn’t afford to let him down. Finally, his message arrived.

“You’d better be at your desk by Monday.”

The weight of his words settled over me. I let out a heavy sigh. It was a stern warning, a reminder that my choices had consequences. But I couldn’t help feeling a glimmer of determination. This trip to Dubai was basically work. I was learning a lot. If my father would just give me a little leeway, I could show him what I was doing.

I popped my head out of the bathroom. “Jensen, I need to make a quick call. Can I meet you in the lobby?”

He nodded, concern flickering in his eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, fine,” I said, nodding. “Just work stuff.”



“Of course. Take your time.”

He left the room, giving me a chance to call my dad. This was something that needed to be said and not texted. My heart was pounding in my chest as I dialed my father’s number. He picked up after a few rings, and I wasted no time getting to the point.

“Dad,” I began, my voice steady but tinged with a hint of anxiety. “I’m working on a story, a big one. I can’t give you all the details just yet, but I promise it’s going to be incredible. When it’s done, you’ll want to publish it.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and I could sense my father’s skepticism. He was a man who valued results and practicality above all else. “What kind of story, Merida?” he finally asked, his tone cautious.

I hesitated, not ready to reveal all the intricacies of my plan just yet. “It’s... well, it’s big. It’s something everyone is going to want to read. It’s a big story, Dad. Huge. But I need a few more weeks to pull it together, to make it truly groundbreaking.”

“I’m sorry, Merida, but I can’t do that. People are noticing, and I can’t keep extending favors. You know I love you, and I respect your talent as a journalist, but it’s time for you to spread your wings in the real world, not just coast on the connections we have.”

I was stunned, unable to process the words that had just come out of my father’s mouth. He wasn’t exactly supportive, but this was genuine. “What does that mean?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, but you’re fired.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as the reality of the situation hit me like a sledgehammer. I knew I wasn’t the most valuable player on the team, but I didn’t think he would fire me. I was keeping up with my work. It wasn’t like it was earth-shattering information I was putting out. I couldn’t find the words to respond, my voice choked with emotion.

“Dad,” I finally managed to whisper. “I don’t know what to say.”

There was a heavy silence on the line before he spoke again, his voice tinged with sadness. “I hope you understand, Merida. It’s time for you to forge your own path. You’re not happy here. You think there’s more to give? Fine, but it won’t be here. I love you, and I believe in you, but sometimes tough love is necessary.”

The call ended, leaving me standing there, my phone clutched in my trembling hand. My career, my sense of self, had been built on shaky ground, and now I had to confront the reality that I was on my own, with no safety net to catch me. My dad was the only one that would give me a job and now he just yanked it from me.

It was not what I expected, but I supposed I shouldn’t be surprised. My dad was known for being very tough. He didn’t take shit and he didn’t let people get away with anything. I was no exception. I always complained about my job, but I wasn’t really prepared to lose it. A shitty job was better than no job.

I pulled myself together and headed down to the lobby to meet Jensen. I lost one job, but I still had another one to take care of. Jensen spotted me and immediately started toward me. My eyes met his concerned gaze. I forced a smile.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Is everything okay?”

Tears blurred my vision, and I hastily wiped them away, feeling vulnerable and raw. I shook my head.

“Merida, are you okay?” he asked, his voice filled with genuine worry. He put his hand on my arm and gently pulled me away from the hustle and bustle in the massive lobby.

I attempted to hide the storm of emotions churning within me with a shrug. “I’m fine, Jensen. Let’s go look at some obnoxiously large boats.”

He chuckled and gave me a quick kiss. “Don’t let the yacht owners hear you calling them boats. They’ll get mad.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at the pretentiousness of it all. “Oh, I’m sure they’d be devastated,” I replied, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked again. “We can come up with an excuse for us to cancel.”

“We can’t. Your sister would kill us both. We have to go. I’ll be fine.”

“You look beautiful,” he said.

It did make me feel a little better. “Thank you. I promise I’m fine. I won’t let you down. I am prepared to wow them all.”

Jensen’s smile widened as he slipped his arm around my waist. “Then we’ll go.”

He led me out of the lobby to our waiting car. The marina wasn’t far. I did my best to keep a brave face on. The car pulled to a stop. The first thing I noticed was the parking lot filled with ridiculously expensive sports cars. Lamborghinis, Maseratis, and plenty of Mercedes and other luxury cars.

The cars were awesome, but the yachts that lined the pier were even more impressive. I didn’t know much about cars or yachts, but I was guessing we were looking at over a billion dollars’ worth of cars and boats. Yachts, I corrected myself. I wouldn’t want to offend a billionaire by insulting his vessel.

Jensen took my hand and helped me out of the car. “Do you own a yacht?” I asked him.

“No, not yet. I’ve thought about it, but I’m not sure I would have time to ever use it.”

He held my hand as we strolled along the dock, the evening breeze ruffling our hair. I couldn’t help but appreciate the distraction he provided. This was an important event for him.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked.

“Yep,” I said, nodding. “I see champagne and hors d’oeuvres. I can get through anything with good food and alcohol. I’m guessing these people know how to do food right.”

Jensen chuckled. “You’re not wrong about that. But trust me, it’s not just the food that’s impressive here. These people

are the elite of the elite. And you're going to have to impress them with your winning personality. I'm counting on you to be enough for both of us. I think we both know I'm not going to win any personality awards."

He led me toward a towering yacht at the end of the pier. The name on the side read "The Empress." I couldn't help but feel a little intimidated. This was a whole different world than I was used to.

As we approached the gangway, a tall, imposing man stepped forward to greet us. "Welcome aboard The Empress," he said, his voice deep and authoritative. "I am Captain Reynolds. Mr. Loxley, we're so glad you could make it."

Jensen shook the captain's hand and then turned to introduce me. "Captain Reynolds, this is my girlfriend, Merida."

The captain gave me a curt nod. "Pleasure to meet you, Miss Merida."

As we climbed aboard the yacht, I couldn't help but feel like I was in a dream. The opulence and luxury of the interior left me speechless. Crystal chandeliers sparkled overhead, plush velvet couches lined the walls, and there was even a grand piano in the corner of the room.

Jensen must have sensed my awe because he leaned in to whisper close to my ear. "Just wait until you see the view from the top deck."

We were led to a group of people standing near the bow of the yacht, glasses of champagne in their hands. Jensen greeted them warmly, introducing me as his plus-one. They all smiled politely and raised their glasses in salute.

As I sipped my champagne, I couldn't help but feel like an imposter. These people were clearly used to this type of lifestyle, while I was just a middle-class girl trying to make a name for herself in the big city. But Jensen seemed to fit in seamlessly, laughing and chatting with the group like he had known them for years. I knew it was part of his role-playing. He wasn't really comfortable, but he put on a good show.

Jensen and I wandered among the ostentatious displays of wealth, and he regaled me with stories of some of the most famous yachts and their eccentric owners. It was an escape from my own thoughts, a momentary reprieve from the harsh reality I faced.

But despite the laughter and the beauty surrounding us, I couldn't shake the feeling of loss that lingered in my chest. My father's decision had left me feeling a little hurt. Getting fired by your dad was different than just getting fired.



The event by the pier was a spectacle of extravagance that matched the towering yachts that lined the dock. The opulence was overwhelming, even for someone like me. It wasn't my usual scene, and to be honest, I was as put off by the display as Merida was. But I had to put on a show, a façade of enthusiasm, because that was expected of me.

As we stepped onto yet another yacht, I plastered on a smile, nodding politely to the sea of wealthy men and women who greeted us. They all knew who I was, of course. My reputation as a tech visionary had made me a household name in certain circles. And now, they all wanted a piece of my expertise, a chance to integrate my cutting-edge AI technology into their extravagant yacht computers.

I shook hands with some of the wealthiest individuals on the planet, their eyes gleaming with anticipation. The allure of having the world's most state-of-the-art AI companion on their yachts was too enticing for them to pass up. They wanted a taste of the future, a taste of what my technology could offer. Everyone wanted to be the first one to have the newest toy. My AI was the coolest thing coming out and they all wanted their hands on it.

“So good to see you, Mr. Loxley!” one man exclaimed, his grip firm and authoritative. “I've heard incredible things about your work. We simply must discuss the possibilities of integrating your AI with our yacht systems.”

I nodded, my smile unwavering. “I am interested in discussing that further.”

As we continued through the crowd, the conversations and introductions blurred together. Each person had their vision of what my AI could bring to their world of luxury and excess. They wanted their yachts to be more than just vessels. They wanted them to be marvels of technological innovation. They wanted to look cool. They wanted to be the envy of the rest of the world. They had so much money, they were bored. They lived to spend money. I hoped like hell I never got like that.

Merida walked beside me, her expression mirroring my own discomfort. We exchanged knowing glances, silently acknowledging the surreal nature of the event. But we soldiered on, putting on a good show for the sake of diplomacy and opportunity. She smiled and shook hands. She said the right things and complimented the arrogant men.

It was in moments like these that I was reminded of the responsibilities that came with my position. I had the power to shape the future, to revolutionize industries and change lives. These people didn’t need my technology—they wanted it. And while the extravagance of this world wasn’t my cup of tea, I needed their investments to make sure I could get my tech into the hands of regular people.

The lavish event continued to unfold around us, a glittering spectacle of wealth. I could feel something was off with Merida. She wasn’t acting her usual self. Whatever had happened, it was weighing on her. Merida was distant. Every chance she could get away from the crowd, her nose was buried in her phone.

I couldn’t help but notice the change in her demeanor ever since she answered the door. Her usual enthusiasm had been replaced by an air of detachment, and it was clear that something was bothering her. I had a hunch it had to do with the conversation she didn’t want me to know about.

At one point, I noticed her grabbing another glass of wine from one of the waiters. I gently touched her arm. “Merida,



maybe you should slow down with the wine,” I suggested casually.

She turned to me, her eyes flashing with irritation. “Jensen, you can tell your employees what to do, but you can’t tell me what to do. Got it?”

I raised my hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. Just looking out for you, that’s all. Is everything alright?”

“Stop asking me that! You have your own shit to worry about. I’m going to drink my wine and try to get through this, alright?”

I recoiled slightly, taken aback by the sharpness of her response. It was so different. I didn’t want to escalate the situation or cause a scene in front of the influential guests, so I backed off, reluctantly conceding.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

Merida took another sip of her wine, her eyes fixated on something in the distance. I needed to find out what was going on with her, but I didn’t want to push her too far. Instead, I decided to take a walk around the party, hoping to clear my head and find some inspiration for my next project.

As I wandered through the crowd, I couldn’t help but feel out of place. Yes, I had as much or more money than some of the people here, but I still felt less sure without Merida at my side. It was crazy how quickly I had begun to rely on her support at these events. Now I felt alone.

I heard her laughter and looked across the deck of the yacht. Merida had her hand on the arm of a young man. I didn’t remember his name, but I knew he was the son of one of the yacht owners.

I clenched my jaw, biting back my own frustration. Merida was a fiercely independent woman, and I respected that about her. But the distance that had crept between us left me feeling uneasy. She was cold and detached. Usually, she would give me a sweet smile or give me a look that said she was in my corner. I wasn’t getting any of that tonight. She acted like she wanted me to stay as far from her as possible. She was giving

her attention to another man. That was one of my strict rules—no flirting with any other men when we were together.

I had to confront her about it, but I didn't want to cause a scene. I walked over to them, trying to keep my composure.

“Excuse me,” I said, my voice steady. “Merida, can I talk to you for a moment?”

Merida looked at me with a raised eyebrow, as if she was surprised to see me there. “Sure,” she said, her voice cold.

I took a deep breath and led her away from the crowd, toward the side of the yacht. We stood there in silence for a moment, the only sound coming from the waves crashing against the hull of the boat.

Finally, I turned to face her. “Merida, I know you've got something going on, but flirting with another man in front of me is crossing a line,” I said, my tone firm.

Merida let out a sigh and rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. Don't be so dramatic. We're at a party. I was just being friendly.” She said it while dismissing me like I didn't matter.

I shook my head, feeling frustrated. “You know how I feel about this. It's disrespectful to me and our relationship,” I said, my voice rising slightly.

Merida's eyes narrowed. “Relationship? What relationship? You're paying me to pretend to be your girlfriend.”

Her words hurt. I let myself believe it was more than that. I was certain she felt something for me as well, but maybe not. Either way, a deal was a deal. “I'll remind you of the rules,” I said in a stern voice.

“Excuse me?”

“I made it very clear that while I'm paying you and we are together, you can't flirt with another man. Get his number and call him in a month if you can't help yourself.”

She glared at me and then defiantly downed the rest of her glass of wine. “Yes, sir. Anything else, sir? Do I need to

actually kiss your ass or will it be okay if I just kiss your cheek?”

I had pissed her off, but in that moment, I was pissed myself. “Just please remember what we’re doing here.”

“Got it.” She saluted me before making a big show of spinning on her heel and walking away.

As the evening wore on, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something had shifted between us. This morning when I climbed out of the bed we shared at the hotel, she’d pulled me back. We made love and then we had breakfast wearing nothing but our bathrobes. That was not the woman I saw now.

I cringed when I saw her reach for another glass. I knew her pretty well and she didn’t drink much. She was going to be smashed if she kept it up.

I was engaged in a technical conversation with one of the yacht owners when I heard a commotion that drew my attention away from the deal-making and the clinking of champagne glasses. I turned, scanning the crowd, and there she was—Merida—right in the center of a heated argument with none other than Reid Reese, the founder of the tech gala who had coined the term “upper crust” to describe his social circle. His face was a portrait of incensed indignation, while Merida’s expression held a fierce determination.

*Shit.*

I couldn’t make out their words from where I stood, but I could see the tension in the way Merida gestured vehemently and Reid’s clenched fists. The surrounding guests had formed a tight circle around them, their eyes wide with fascination. Merida had given me a glimpse of that temper of hers. What I saw happening was a lot more than a little frustration.

She was mad.

Suddenly, Reid’s gaze landed on me, and he snapped his fingers as if summoning a servant. “Loxley, come control your woman.”

The words cut through the ambient noise like a blade, and I felt a surge of anger and embarrassment. I hurried toward

them, my jaw set as I approached the scene. Merida was fiercely independent, and I had no intention of “controlling” her, but this was not the time for starting arguments.

Before I could reach them, Merida’s voice rang out, sharp and clear. “The money you paid for this boat could have done a lot of good for people in need!”

The statement hung in the air like a challenge. These people gave out a few thousand dollars a year and considered their debts to society paid. They felt like they were generous and magnanimous and were free to spend their billions without any guilt.

Reid’s face turned a shade of red that matched the carpet beneath our feet. He shot me a venomous look, his voice dripping with condescension as he addressed me.

“Get this woman under control,” he seethed.

Those words set Merida off like a spark igniting a powder keg. She squared her shoulders, her eyes flashing. I watched as people started snapping pictures and filming her, the situation rapidly spiraling out of control.

I rushed forward, extending a hand to take hers, to guide her away from the scene. But she yanked her hand away from my grasp and stormed off down the pier, her anger palpable in every step.

My frustration simmered beneath the surface as I shot an icy glare at Reid. “If you don’t want people to think you’re a jerk, maybe you shouldn’t say things like ‘control your woman,’” I said to him, low enough that the whole party couldn’t hear. “That might fly in some places but not where we’re from. Don’t you ever talk about Merida like that again. I don’t handle her. I don’t control her.”

Without waiting for his response, I hurried after Merida, my heart heavy with concern for her and the rift that had now widened between us.



## MERIDA

**M**y heart was still pounding with anger as I stormed down the pier, away from the infuriating scene with Reid Reese. What an insufferable jerk! The condescension in his voice, the audacity to refer to me as if I were some sort of property to be controlled—it was beyond infuriating. Jensen didn't do a lot to shut him down. I knew where I was and I understood the value of women was a little different than I was used to, but Reid was American. He knew better. The asshole thought his shit didn't stink. I would have loved to have pushed him off the stupid boat and watch him ruin the thousand-dollar shoes and that ugly ass rug on his head.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Dalton's number, my fingers trembling with rage. He picked up after a few rings, his voice filled with surprise and concern. I didn't know what time it was in New York and I didn't care. I could admit I was a little drunk and my concern for breaking social etiquette was pretty much at zero.

"Dalton!" I practically shouted his name when he picked up.

"Merida?"

"I have to talk to you," I blurted out.

"Merida, what the hell happened?" Dalton asked, clearly taken aback by my tone.

I couldn't hold back the frustration in my voice. "My dad fired me, Dalton. He fucking fired me!"

There was a stunned silence on the other end of the line before Dalton finally managed to speak. “Fired you? Why? That doesn’t make any sense!”

I quickened my pace, striding down the pier toward the beach with the lights and music from the yachts behind me. My mind was a whirlwind of emotions. “I don’t know, Dalton. It’s like he’s suddenly decided to cut all ties. I need you to talk some sense into him. I sent in my article for the week. I sent in more content than he asked for and he fired me!”

Dalton let out a sigh. “I’ll do my best, Merida. He doesn’t realize what he’s passing up on if he lets you go and doesn’t publish the Loxley piece on *Full Disclosure*. You are still working on that, right?”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me. “Yes! I told him I was working on a big story. I told him it could be a game-changer but he told me to spread my wings or some shit. Spread my wings? He’s the one that clipped my wings!”

“He told you to spread your wings?” he asked.

“Yes! Seriously? You know what, fuck it. I am going to spread my wings alright. I’m going to run the piece on my own. I don’t need him to publish it. By the time I’m done with it, everyone is going to want exclusive rights to my story. He’s so going to regret this.”

“Look, before you do anything crazy, send it to me,” Dalton said. “I’ll edit it and give you tips if you need them. It’s always a good idea to have someone else get eyes on something you write.”

Jensen called my name from behind. I turned to see him hurrying toward me, his expression a mix of concern and determination. I couldn’t avoid him forever, but right now, all I wanted was some space to clear my head and regain my composure.

“I’ll call you back, Dalton,” I said into the phone before hanging up. As Jensen approached, I couldn’t help but wonder what he wanted and whether I was ready to face him in my current state of fury.

The tension that had been simmering inside me boiled over. He looked just as pissed as I felt. Except he had no reason to be pissed. I was the one that had been disrespected by a slimy snake. I was the one that people ignored all night unless I was on his arm. They couldn't give a shit about me. I was just the woman that was meant to be seen and not heard. Hell, some of them didn't even want to *see* me.

“What?” I retorted, my voice sharp with anger.

“Is five hundred grand not enough to keep your temper in check?” he snapped.

“My temper is not the one that needs to be kept in check,” I shot back. “You need to put a leash on your buddy. He’s an asshole.”

He didn't back down, his eyes locked onto mine. “I warned you what this place would be like, and you went in there guns blazing, got drunk, and picked a fight.”

I seethed, my cheeks flushing with a mix of frustration and embarrassment. “I’m not drunk,” I shot back defiantly.

Jensen’s brows furrowed, and his tone turned accusatory. “I saw you get five separate drinks. Your eyes are glassy, and your cheeks are red. If you’re not drunk, what the hell is going on?”

I gritted my teeth, standing up straight. “I am not drunk. I’m just frustrated. I’m tired of being treated like a piece of meat by a bunch of overpaid assholes. No matter what I do, they just see me as a piece of ass. They look at me like someone who’s being paid half a million to be on your arm. I know what they think about me. They think I’m a gold-digger.”

“You can’t go in there like you did and expect to come out unscathed.”

“I wasn’t unscathed. I was reamed,” I said, my anger returning. “He was rude, condescending, and I don’t need that from anyone.”

“I’m not trying to be an asshole. I’m trying to keep you out of trouble,” Jensen said, his voice cold and unwavering.



I struggled to keep my voice steady, but the tears stung my eyes. “You’re not being a jerk. You’re being a dick. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself. I don’t need anyone to control me.”

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with,” Jensen said, his voice dropping. “You pissed off the wrong guy, and he wants you gone. He thinks you’re a pain in the ass. If you remember, you’re an extension of me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I know.”

“You’re drunk. Let’s go back to the hotel.”

“I’m not drunk!” I protested, but even as I said it, I knew it was bullshit. I was a little drunk.

“I’ve been with you long enough to know you don’t drink like this,” he said. “You’re drunk. Deny it all you want, but it doesn’t change the facts.”

Suddenly, the dam of emotions I had been holding back burst open, and tears came. The anger, the humiliation, the overwhelming sense of rejection—they all welled up within me, and I couldn’t contain them any longer.

Jensen’s expression shifted from anger to concern. He pulled back slightly, a look of discomfort crossing his face. But he didn’t leave me standing there alone. Instead, he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and guided me away from the beach, back toward the hotel.

“Okay, let’s go to the hotel,” he said quietly. “I know you and there’s something going on. I won’t pry, but you can talk to me if you want.”

I wished that were true. “I need a drink,” I muttered.

He chuckled. “That’s the last thing you need.”

If he only knew. I wasn’t going to say it out loud, but I was thankful for the distraction. And I was thankful that he didn’t ask me what I was thinking or feeling. I was too tired to explain it all right then.

I wiped the tears from my eyes and hoped they wouldn’t reappear. I wouldn’t let them. I couldn’t. No one was going to

push me around.

No sooner had I wiped the tears away before more appeared. I felt so foolish. Jensen kept his arm around me while he pulled out his phone with his free hand. I listened to him talking, ordering the limo to pick us up immediately. It was moments like this that I remembered he was super rich. He was humble but he was also wealthy and could order people around.

“The car will be here in a couple of minutes,” he said. “We’ll get you back to the room and into a hot bath.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted.

“I’m sure you are, but we’ve been going pretty hard for days. You’re exhausted. I’m tired. I’ve put you into this position.”

“No,” I said, sighing. “I’m okay.”

“Yes, you are.” He was placating me and we both knew it. In that moment, I was too drained to care. He was right. We had been going nonstop for a good seventy-two hours.

“Okay.” I sighed, conceding. “A hot bath sounds nice.”

He gave me a gentle squeeze. “Good.”

We got in the limo. Jensen took me back to the hotel. I spent the entire ride staring at my hands. I was so tired and frustrated that I didn’t know what to do. I kept running through the scene over and over in my head.

The worst part was that I was partly at fault. I let him get to me. I let my emotions get the better of me. All I had to do was walk away from that asshole. Instead, I let him goad me. It was all stupid. The alcohol did have a little to do with me having a short fuse, though, too.

“Here we go,” Jensen said quietly.

He took my hand and helped me out of the car. We made our way to the elevator with him keeping my hand firmly in his. He seemed like he was afraid I might escape. But it felt good.

“I’m going to fill the tub and then I’ll order you some dinner,” he said.

“I’m not hungry,” I replied.

He chuckled as he slid my key into the door. “You may not be hungry, but you only ate a little bit at the party. Trust me, I’ve dealt with a lot of hangovers. Eating something before you pass out is going to lessen the hangover.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I don’t want to have a hangover.”

He smiled. “No one does.”

He walked into the huge bathroom of my suite. The water turned on and a moment later the beautiful scent of lavender filled the air.

He was a good man. I knew he was good. I felt bad for getting angry with him. He didn’t do anything. It was that asshole Reid. If Jensen had heard the way he spoke to me, he would have shut him up.

“Merida?” I blinked and saw Jensen standing in the doorway of the bathroom. “Do you need help getting out of the dress?”

“No.” I shook my head.

He smiled. “Get in the tub, I’ll order you something to eat.”

I walked into the bathroom and inhaled. The bubbles smelled amazing. I could feel myself relaxing a bit. I quickly undressed and slipped into the hot water. I was still sniffing and trying to regain my composure.

“Relax,” he said and put a lit candle on the edge of the tub. “We’ll talk after you’ve gotten something to eat.”

I sank into the soothing water, the tears still trickling down my cheeks. Jensen’s presence was a comfort, even if I didn’t fully understand the emotions swirling inside me. For now, all I wanted was a moment of solace, a reprieve from the chaos of the evening, and a chance to gather my thoughts before facing the uncertain future that lay ahead.



**A**s Merida soaked in the warm bath, her tears gradually subsided. I couldn't shake the feeling that I had missed something important today. Her abrupt change in demeanor, the heated argument with Reid Reese, and her subsequent breakdown left me bewildered and concerned. I didn't know how to help her if she wouldn't talk to me.

I took a bottle of water to her, then left her alone. The room service would be delivered shortly. Until then, I needed to give her some space. This was not something I was used to dealing with.

I needed some advice, someone who could help me navigate the complex situation. I decided to call Hattie. She would know what to do or at least have a suggestion. She was staying in the room next to mine. If I had to call her, she would be over in a hurry. She always said she was more human than I was. I needed her now.

I stepped onto the balcony and dialed Hattie's number, waiting anxiously for her to pick up. When she answered, she sounded like she might have been asleep.

"Hattie, I need some advice."

"Are you at the yacht party?"

"I was. I'm back in the room now."

She groaned. "What happened?"

"Uh, it's probably going to be something you're going to have to clean up tomorrow," I said.

“Oh no, what did you do?”

“Technically, it wasn’t me,” I told her.

“Merida.”

“Yes, something happened with Merida today before we went to the yacht event,” I explained. “She was upset. I don’t know what it was. She put on a brave face, and I thought things were going to be cool. Clearly, I was wrong. She wasn’t herself. She was angry and drinking a little too much.”

She let out a long sigh. “What did you do?”

“It wasn’t me,” I defended. “Something back home.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know all the details, but she got into it with Reid Reese.”

“That guy is an asshole,” she muttered. “He gets into it with everyone because he’s such a dick.”

“Yes, he is and Merida told him so, along with a few other choice words. I don’t know what started the argument, but I think Merida definitely ended it. Reid called me over. The fucker actually snapped his fingers. He told me to get my woman under control.”

“Oh my God, I hope she kicked him in the balls,” Hattie muttered. “What the hell is he thinking? Who does he think he is? If he ever talks to me like that, it will be the last words he mutters with all his teeth in his mouth.”

I laughed. “Honestly, I think another two minutes and she would have popped him in the mouth.”

“Okay, okay,” she said calmly. “Damage control. I can handle that. I’ll call Carl and Susan. We’ll say it was a misunderstanding or a joke depending on how bad it is.”

“That’s not why I called you,” I said. “Something is wrong with Merida. She’s—I don’t know—upset. She’s in the tub. She broke down after the incident but I don’t think she’s crying about Reid. She seems off. Not herself.”

“Did you ask her what was wrong?”

“Yes, but she doesn’t want to talk about it,” I said. “What do I do?”

“Jensen, just talk to her. No AI talk, no problem-solving, no Mr. Fix-It. Just listen. She needs your shoulder, not your opinion or your advice. You don’t have to fight her battles. I’ve spent a little time with her. She’s an independent woman. She is solid. She doesn’t need you to fix it, but she needs you to be there.”

Her words struck a chord with me. I had a tendency to approach situations with a problem-solving mindset, but maybe that wasn’t what Merida needed right now. Perhaps she needed someone to simply be there for her, to lend an ear and offer support without trying to dissect or fix everything.

“Okay,” I said. “Good. I can do that. Thank you.”

“Good luck,” she said. “I better get started on the Reid Reese thing.”

“Thanks, Hattie. Goodnight.”

Room service arrived a minute later. I ordered a couple of club sandwiches for us. It was the only thing I could think of that she would like. I didn’t think now was the right time to try any foreign cuisine. I ordered coffee, juice, and tea. I wasn’t sure what she liked, but I wanted to do all I could to keep her from a hangover. I debated going into the bathroom to check on her but opted against it. I didn’t want to smother her.

Instead, I waited. I quietly paced and wondered what Reid said to her. The guy had no filter. He truly believed he was this glorious creature walking the earth and everyone should bow down to him. I hoped like hell I never got to be like him. He was everything I never wanted to be.

Hattie knew to slap me silly if I ever let the money go to my head. Reid needed someone like that in his life. Someone to pop that hot air balloon he called a head.

Merida emerged from the bath looking more composed, her earlier tears replaced by a sober expression. “Hi,” she said, her voice soft.

“Hi,” I said, smiling.

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt for how I had acted earlier, my frustration getting the best of me. Now, as she stood before me, I knew it was time to make amends.

I cleared my throat, my tone sincere and apologetic. "Merida, I'm sorry for how I acted earlier. If you want to talk, I'm here to listen. If not, I'll go. I'll give you space if you want it. And please don't think I'm trying to be bossy, but I've dealt with my fair share of hangovers. So please try to eat and drink as much juice and tea as you can. It will make you feel better. We'll delay our departure tomorrow and you can sleep in. I think we could all use a late start."

She met my gaze, her eyes searching mine for a moment before she finally spoke. "I got fired today, Jensen."

That explained a lot. "I'm sorry."

She sat down, looking lost.

"Here," I said and handed her one of the sandwiches. "Trust me, you're going to feel better. What happened?"

"My boss, who just happens to be my father, fired me."

"Why?" I felt a surge of guilt, knowing that it was likely my presence in her life that somehow contributed to this situation.

She looked at me and took a small bite of her sandwich. "He said I was taking advantage of him because he's my dad. He wasn't happy I've been out of the office so much."

My gut reaction was to offer solutions, to try to make it right, but I remembered Hattie's advice—to just listen. So, I swallowed my instincts. "That must be really hard. I'm sorry."

Merida's shoulders slumped, and she let out a sigh, as if a weight had been lifted off her chest just by sharing her burden. It was clear that she needed someone to confide in. "I was trying to do my job. I sent in my articles. I don't know how to make him happy. I've always been a good worker. This really took me by surprise. He's made me feel like I'm disposable. He told me he loved me but I needed to spread my wings."



I might not have all the answers, but I could listen. I took another bite of my sandwich, unsure what to say to her. I could try to fix it, but that wasn't what she wanted. So, I listened as she told me about the job she hated and how her father never really trusted her to write anything of real substance.

Merida's deep brown eyes met mine. "Jensen, I'm sorry for today. I didn't mean to blow up the event like that, and I'm sure there will be backlash in the media. I'm so sorry. I did the exact opposite of what I was supposed to. I'll do a formal apology or whatever."

I reached out to gently place a hand on hers and offered a reassuring smile. "Merida, we can worry about all of that tomorrow. Right now, what matters is that you're okay."

She let out a soft sigh, her gaze shifting to a distant point on the horizon. "My father..." She trailed off as if the words were too heavy to bear.

I stayed silent, giving her the space she needed to talk or not talk.

"He's always been so hard on me," she continued, her voice barely above a whisper. "He doesn't believe in me. I've been trying for so long to prove myself to him, and it's like nothing I do is ever good enough. I just want him to see me as someone he can rely on like his other writers. I know I'm not as good as some, but I'm not quite the dumpster fire he seems to think I am."

Merida's words hung in the air, heavy with the weight of her frustration and pain. I listened as she sniffled, her emotions raw and exposed. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I don't need to be dumping all of this on you. I'm fine. I am. I know I have something good, really good. It's going to be so good and he missed his chance."

I wasn't sure what she was talking about. She seemed to drift away, her eyes fixed on the wall behind me. At least she was eating and downing the orange juice. At least physically, she was going to feel better soon.

“Well, at least you have that half million to fall back on now that you’ve lost your job,” I said with a goofy smile in the hopes I could lighten the mood.

Merida looked at me for several seconds before staring down at the remainder of her sandwich. I couldn’t quite decipher the expression. There was sadness and guilt. “I don’t think you’re going to want to give me the money when all this is said and done.”

I shook my head with confusion. “What do you mean?” I asked. “Do you really think I would go back on a deal?”

“No, but you will,” she said quietly.

“Not me,” I assured her. “That’s not who I am.”

She finished her juice and stared blankly at the wall once again.

“I wish I could make it all better for you,” I said and ran my hand over the back of hers. “I don’t want to fix it for you, but I want to make you feel better. That’s something I know I can do. I would be happy to distract you.”

My heart ached as I looked into her eyes, the vulnerability I saw there tugging at my own emotions. I hated to see her hurting, and I wanted to do something to make it better. Hattie said I shouldn’t offer to fix her problems. I wouldn’t, but I could make her forget for a few moments. I could make her feel good and send endorphins rushing through her. That should help a little.

I rose from my chair and moved behind her. My hands went to her shoulders, gently massaging. Her head fell to the side, exposing her neck. The smell of lavender washed around me. I leaned down, pressing my lips to her soft flesh in a tender kiss. She sighed and reached back to gently pull at my head.



## MERIDA

**M**y body was relaxed after the soak in the tub. The robe was comfy and made me feel like I was wrapped in a warm embrace. But Jensen's lips on the side of my neck were what made me feel really incredible. His hands rubbed down my arms, gently squeezing and reassuring me with every touch.

I didn't deserve him. But damn, I needed him. I needed his kisses. I needed his body. I turned to look at him standing behind me. "Make love to me," I asked quietly.

He smiled and dropped a kiss on my lips. "Anytime."

I rose from the chair and faced him. I looked into the green eyes that had mesmerized me from the first moment I saw them. My hands pressed against his chest, feeling the strength under the fabric of his shirt. He towered over me, making me feel small and delicate. And safe.

I had never felt this way with a man before. I had never felt so protected. His hands pulled at the belt on my robe, letting it fall away. The robe parted down the middle, exposing my body. My fingers went to the buttons on his shirt and slowly undid them one by one. He didn't say a word. It was only the sound of our breathing in the room.

Once the shirt was open, I pushed it open and immediately pressed my lips against his chest. I almost wept with the feel of his skin against my lips. It was so warm and smooth. I pushed the shirt off his shoulders and stepped back to look at his body. He was muscular and tan. He had just a hint of a

happy trail leading from the middle of his abdomen to his pants. I ran my hands over his chest, feeling his muscles ripple under my touch. He stood perfectly still and let me explore his body.

His cock pressed against me. I could feel his need and knew he wanted to touch me but he didn't. He let me take my time, giving me the control.

I let my hands follow the dark trail down until I reached his waistband. I quickly undid the button and slid the zipper down. His hips twitched, but he still didn't touch me. I pulled his pants down around his lean hips until they fell to the floor. Jensen stepped out of them and kicked them to the side.

I stared at his cock. It was hard and thick, pointing straight out in front of him. I let my hands stroke the shaft, watching it jump under my touch. I wanted to taste it. I wanted to feel it slide into my mouth. I dropped to my knees and wrapped my hand around the base of his cock.

It bobbed in front of my face as I gently stroked the shaft back and forth. I brought my lips closer, not touching but getting close enough to feel the heat. I gently squeezed his balls, pulling a low moan from him, and I loved knowing I could make him feel so good.

I ran my tongue up the length of his shaft, tracing the thick vein. I could feel his pulse pounding. A thrill ran through me, making me feel powerful.

I kissed the head of his cock and looked up at him. He was watching me with a half-smile on his face. I opened my mouth and slid him between my lips. He moaned as my wet mouth enveloped him. I sucked, letting my tongue trace the thick vein along his shaft.

“Merida,” he groaned.

I loved hearing his voice filled with desire. I pressed my tongue against the underside of his cock, feeling it jump. My hand stroked the base of his shaft as I bobbed my head up and down on him. I could feel him getting closer to the edge as his cock twitched and pulsed in my mouth.

I started to stroke his balls and my head bobbed faster. He was breathing deeply, moaning with every breath. I knew he was close. Before I could finish him off, he pulled back.

I looked up at him and saw so much tenderness in his eyes it made my heart skip a beat. He took my hand and gently pulled me to my feet. His hands cupped my face and held me steady while his mouth slowly touched mine. His tongue traced my lips, gently asking for entrance. I opened for him, just as I always did.

I wrapped my arms around him as his tongue explored my mouth. His hands moved down to my ass, lifting me off the floor and grinding me against his hard cock. I moaned into his mouth as he moved me against him in a slow torturous rhythm. He was teasing me, tempting me, begging me to take him inside me.

I broke the kiss and brought my head down to his neck, nipping and kissing his skin. His moans fueled me. He buried his face in my neck. He pushed my robe down my arms, leaving us both naked. Our skin-to-skin contact felt like a million kisses. I moved my head back to his mouth and kissed him, my tongue slowly sliding against his. He carried me across the room and laid me on the bed.

Once again, his heated gaze sent flames racing over my skin. This time was different. I felt the shift. This was what making love was all about. He was showing me how much he cherished me with his body—by empowering me to take my time and set the pace.

I saw the hunger in his eyes when his gaze dropped lower. I slowly opened my legs for him with zero shame or embarrassment.

He knelt between my legs, one hand pressed against my stomach while his other pushed against my thigh, opening my legs wider. His mouth closed over me. I arched my back and whimpered as his tongue circled my clit. He sucked on my tender bud, teasing it with his tongue. His hands gripped my ass, holding me against his face. He buried his face into my pussy, nibbling and sucking on my clit. I moaned as the

pleasure started to build inside me. I dug my fingers into the covers, grinding my pussy against his mouth.

I needed to feel him inside me. I pulled at his arms. “Please, Jensen.”

He looked up and seemed to understand. He started to roll away. “Not this time,” I said. “I just want to feel you inside me. I won’t get pregnant.”

“You’re sure?”

I nodded. “Yes, please.” I grasped his cock and stroked him from base to tip. “Please.”

He moved between my legs, holding himself above me. It looked like he wanted to say something. I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to share our feelings in that moment. I just needed him inside me. I wrapped my hand around his cock and guided him to my entrance.

His cock head teased my opening. I moaned and moved my hips, trying to get him to enter me. He stayed exactly where he was while I pushed my hips up and down, trying to force him deeper.

“Please, Jensen,” I begged him.

He groaned. “I can’t take it.” I felt his cock twitch against my pussy.

He thrust into me. I cried out in pleasure. He started moving inside me, pounding his hips against mine. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper into me. I clawed at his back.

He moved faster and deeper. I begged him for more. He groaned and started kissing my neck. I felt his teeth, then his lips as he kissed my neck. I cried out as my orgasm built inside me.

“Fuck, Merida.” He thrust into me with his arms shaking. I felt him swell inside me. The pleasure was almost too much for either of us. Never in my life did I think there could ever be anything this amazing.

“Come for me, Jensen.”

He put his mouth on mine and kissed me as he came, grunting and vibrating as his hips jerked. My own body erupted into a million pieces. Stars burst behind my closed eyes. I heard myself keening, but the sound felt so far away.

He held himself above me, then rolled to the side. He wrapped an arm around me, pulling me close. He kissed my forehead and nose and then my cheek. His breathing was just as labored as mine.

“Shit,” he murmured. “I think I blew a few brain cells.”

I laughed softly. “What?”

“My brain imploded. Too many pleasure neurons bouncing around short-circuited my brain. I think I blacked out for a second.”

I laughed again. “We should do that again.”

“You’re insatiable,” he said with a grin in his voice.

“I think that’s the orgasm talking.”

He laughed. “You’re right. We should do that again. Once I recover. But first, we should rest a bit. We’ve still got a crazy schedule.”

“Sounds good to me.” I nuzzled his chest.

His hand gently rubbed up and down my arm as he settled into slow breathing. I wanted to go to sleep, but the guilt was creeping in.

What the hell was I doing? I was falling for the man I wanted to expose. I didn’t know if I could finish the article. It felt like a betrayal to him. He had opened his life to me and I was repaying him by writing about his secrets.

I was a journalist. At least, that was what I wanted to be. That was all I wanted. I wanted people to read something I wrote and talk about it. I wanted to be the one starting conversations at the water cooler with my hard-hitting journalism.

I wanted to create content that people would enjoy and feel like they learned something from. I didn’t want to tear people



down or expose the man that was just trying to do what he loved.

It wasn't who I was. I didn't know *what* I was anymore. I was lying to everyone. Jensen deserved better. If he wanted to keep his secrets, that was his business. I had no right to expose him. He wasn't a bad man. He was private and had baggage. It was not my place to tell the world about Jensen's rough childhood and the pain he suffered losing his father.

But if I didn't write the article, I would never be taken seriously as a journalist. Maybe I could do both. Write the article and then apologize to Jensen for exposing him. What was that saying, act now and apologize later?

But even thinking about doing that had me twisted in knots. I didn't think I could do it. Dalton was right. I had gotten too close to my subject.

There was no way I could publish the article. I was going to be jobless with no chance of a serious career. Jensen was right. I could go through with the job and get paid enough to carry me for years.

Maybe Jensen and I had something real. I could be his real girlfriend. I wouldn't mind tagging along with him. We did have fun together. But if my identity was going to be Jensen Loxley's girlfriend, where did that leave me?

I wanted to be out there. I wanted my career to take off. I wanted to be a success at something. I didn't want to live in the shadows. I wanted the respect from other journalists and most importantly, my father.

"It's going to be okay," Jensen murmured against my ear. "We'll figure it out together."

If only he knew what I was really mulling over, he would kick me out of his bed and his life for good.



**T**wo days later, in the bustling heart of Singapore, Merida and I found ourselves in the chaotic whirlwind of a massive tech conference. It was one of those events where people acted like they had just discovered fire, except this time it was AI-powered toasters. Go figure.

I was supposed to be giving a speech. I hated giving speeches, but this one was going to be extra tricky. Carl had flown in to help manage the media storm I found myself caught up in.

I sipped my Coke in the greenroom while I waited for them to call me on stage. Hattie was staring at her tablet and grimacing. “It made the Tonight Show,” she muttered.

Merida groaned. “Great.”

“It’ll blow over soon enough,” I assured her.

Apparently, someone had used their cell to record the argument between Merida and Reid at the yacht show. The video had gone viral. Reid Reese was a very well-known person all around the world. He had a terrible reputation, but people tolerated him. When a guy could buy a small country and still have money left over, he tended to gain power, whether it was deserved or not.

It didn’t take long for the video to get picked up by the mainstream news after being shared on social media. Anything with my name attached to it tended to make big waves. Everyone wanted me to screw up. They couldn’t wait to see me crash and burn.

“Oh no,” Merida moaned when Hattie started the video.

The host made a few jokes about pit bulls needing to be kept on leashes. He was obviously referring to Merida. I was ready to issue a cease and desist and use whatever legal means I had to make it stop. I didn't appreciate anyone talking shit about her.

Merida was watching the video through her hand clapped over her eyes. “You know you're still watching,” I said. “You may as well watch it once and be done with it. I don't know if anyone ever told you that you are still visible even if you can't see us. We can see you.” I was teasing her, trying to get her to laugh it off. It wasn't nearly as bad as she thought. At least, not yet. Reid had yet to make a statement on it.

She peeked out from between her fingers and shot me a half-hearted glare. “Very funny, Jensen. I can't watch it.”

We turned our attention to the tablet as the Tonight Show host introduced the segment with great enthusiasm. “Ladies and gentlemen, you won't believe this epic showdown in the tech world! It's Merida Moore, AKA, Jensen Loxley's lovely lady, vs. Reid Reese!” A dramatic pause was followed by a drumroll. Seriously, the guy could make folding laundry sound like an action movie.

The clip started playing, and there was Merida, standing her ground like a superhero missing her cape. Her chin was raised and her shoulders back as she took on Reid Reese with nothing but sheer determination and a sprinkle of sass. The audience erupted into laughter and applause as they watched the viral showdown unfold.

“You're a pompous asshole!” Merida's finger came dangerously close to touching Reid's nose.

He took a step toward her, and even though it was just a video, I found myself lurching forward to protect her. This was my first time watching the video through. I was stunned to see the insults Reid lobbed at her and the way she handled herself.

“Wait until you see this part,” Hattie said with a laugh.

I leaned in closer to the tablet, my eyes fixed on the screen. Reid had just made a snide remark about Merida's intelligence, and she wasn't having any of it. She retorted with a witty comeback that left the audience in stitches.

Reid's face twisted into a scowl, and I could tell he was getting agitated. Merida, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying herself. She had a glint in her eye that I had never seen before, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride and admiration for her.

The tension between them was palpable, and I found myself holding my breath as I waited to see what would happen next. Merida was holding her own. In the video, I saw the look on Reid's face. He was shocked. No one ever stood up to him, but my little curly-haired, curvy victim put him in his place.

Reid took a step forward and clenched his fists. "You think you're so smart, don't you? Well, let me tell you something, sweetheart. You're not even close to being on my level. You're just a pretty face with nothing to offer."

I felt my blood boil as I watched Reid's misogynistic behavior. Merida didn't deserve to be talked to like that, no matter what he thought of her. The audience was rolling with laughter as the host of the late-night show pretended to be afraid.

I couldn't hold back my laughter either. "Merida," I said with a shake of my head. "No wonder he was calling me for help. You look like you're going to kick his ass."

"She should have," Hattie said. "What an asshole."

Merida playfully punched my shoulder. "You're not helping, Jensen."

But she couldn't hide the smirk that tugged at her lips. It was the kind of smirk that told me she secretly reveled in the madness. She had enjoyed herself. As the segment ended, Merida finally let out a relieved sigh. "Well, whatever happens, at least people got a good laugh out of the situation."

“Now, are you ready to hear some of the comments?” Hattie asked. “Carl sent me an email with some of the comments that have been liked and shared over and over.”

“Oh no,” Merida groaned and hung her head. “If they call me fat or ugly, please don’t read them to me.”

“Fuck that,” I growled. “No one thinks you are fat or ugly.”

I took Merida’s hand in mine, expecting the worst but hoping for the best. Hattie’s smile told me it wasn’t as bad as I assumed. As Hattie read the tweets and comments flooded in, it became clear that the anticipated bad press had never materialized. In fact, people seemed to be rallying behind Merida, applauding her fiery attack on one of the world’s richest men.

They saw her as the champion of a voiceless demographic, the average middle-class folks who had been pushed to the sidelines for far too long. And they loved her for it.

“Here,” Hattie said and handed Merida her tablet. “Read for yourself. You’re kind of a rock star.”

Merida’s eyes widened as she read through the overwhelming support. “Jensen, you won’t believe this,” she said, her voice filled with disbelief. “People are actually on my side. They think I did the right thing.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her. “Well, Merida, maybe you just became today’s hero. Reid Reese has had his boot on the neck of a lot of people for a long time. He’s wealthy and powerful, which he thought made him untouchable. Good job. I’m proud of you.”

She chuckled, her cheeks tinged with a rosy hue. “I never thought I’d be considered a hero, but I’ll take it.”

Meanwhile Hattie, who had been bracing herself for a PR nightmare, let out a sigh of relief. “Thank the internet gods for small miracles,” she muttered under her breath.

Merida shot her a grateful smile, and Hattie returned it with a nod, knowing that this was one crisis she wouldn’t have to mitigate. I liked that the two of them were friends. It made it

easy for us to spend time together. Hattie never actually acknowledged there was anything going on between me and Merida, but she knew. She knew and she didn't seem to mind a bit.

And then there was me. As I watched Merida's reaction, the way her eyes sparkled with a mix of surprise and joy, I couldn't deny the overwhelming attraction I felt for her. I admired her intelligence, her passion, and her fearlessness in the face of adversity. But now, seeing her as a champion for the underprivileged, as a force for change, I found myself drawn to her in a way I hadn't before. She didn't just challenge me to be a pain in my ass. She was the kind of person that stood up for what she believed. She didn't care who she was talking to.

She was the kind of person I wished I could have been when I was younger. She didn't take shit from anyone. Merida was a woman of principles and conviction, someone who wasn't afraid to take a stand for what she believed in. And that, I couldn't help but find incredibly attractive. If I didn't have to go out and give a stupid speech, I would drag her back to the hotel and sink deep inside her and stay there forever.

"I'm going to check on things," Hattie said and jumped to her feet. "I'll knock when it's time for you to go on."

She left the room and closed the door behind her. I knew what she was doing. She was giving us a few minutes alone. I cleared my throat, trying to shake off the growing warmth in my chest. "Merida, I admire your drive and intelligence, but today, I'm even more impressed by your strength. You are not a woman to be pushed around. I hope you know how valuable you are. I think your dad will understand one day as well. Just keep fighting."

She turned to me, her eyes locking onto mine, and for a moment, it felt like the rest of the world faded away. "Thank you, Jensen," she said, her voice equally soft. "That means a lot to me. I hope this doesn't blow up in your face."

"If anything, you just earned me a lot of free publicity," I joked. "It's a good thing."

As we continued to scroll through the messages of support, I couldn't help but hope that this unexpected turn of events would bring us even closer together. There was something undeniably romantic about being on the same page. We were a team.

There was a knock on the door before Hattie stepped in. "You're on."

Merida gave me a quick kiss and squeezed my hand. "Kick ass," she said, grinning.

Stepping out onto the massive stage of the tech conference, I couldn't help but feel a rush of excitement. The energy in the room was palpable, and the thousands of eager young minds in the audience seemed hungry for every bit of knowledge they could absorb. It was the perfect setting to share my passion for our product and the tech world in general. One time, not all that long ago, I was one of the faces in the crowd listening to Steve Jobs. Now, it was my turn.

As I started my talk, I could see the audience's eyes lighting up with enthusiasm. They were here to learn, to be inspired, and I was determined to give them my best. I spoke about our product, its potential to change lives, and the endless possibilities it offered to the tech-savvy minds of the future. I didn't technically write speeches, but I had a general idea of what I would say. Merida and I had gone over talking points. I used a lot of the stuff she contributed. As Hattie kept implying, I needed to sound more human and Merida did that for me.

The open-question segment was equally invigorating. The audience bombarded me with questions, and I did my best to answer each one, feeling a deep sense of connection with these young tech enthusiasts. It was moments like these that reminded me why I loved what I did.

Finally, as my talk came to an end, I received thunderous applause that filled the auditorium. It was a humbling experience, standing on that stage, knowing that I had shared something meaningful with these eager minds. I was pretty sure I had changed a few minds about AI. It was all about explaining how it helped rather than making it seem like the



thing that was going to save the human race. People needed to be eased into it.

Backstage, as I caught my breath and wiped the sweat from my brow, I heard a familiar voice behind me. “Jensen!”

Merida was approaching, a mischievous glint in her eye. She reached out and took my hand, her touch sending a pleasant shiver down my spine. “I’ve got something planned for you,” she said, her tone filled with excitement.

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh? What’s this all about?” I asked, curious and a little bit surprised.

She flashed me a playful smile, her eyes dancing with anticipation. “Consider it my way of making up for the yacht drama,” she said. “I’ve realized that I should do something nice for you for a change. You’ve taken me on this whirlwind tour of the world. It’s the least I can do.”

I chuckled, touched by her gesture. “You don’t have to, Merida. You being here is enough. I dragged you away from your life and cost you your job.”

She shook her head with a coy smile. “No, Jensen, I want to do this. Trust me, you’re going to love it.”

With that, she led me away from the bustling backstage area, and I couldn’t help but wonder what surprise she had in store for me.



## MERIDA

Taking Jensen's hand, I led him out of the bustling tech conference and outside to the waiting limo. There were a few photographers waiting to get his picture. He waved but kept moving. I heard my name shouted a few times. They were asking about the Reid situation. Hattie told me not to answer any questions. Anything I said could be twisted and the viral video of me yelling at Reid would gain more traction. A little publicity was fine, but I couldn't dominate the headlines and take away from Jensen's tech launch.

As we settled into the plush leather seats, Jensen turned to me, his dark eyes intense. "You handled that like a pro."

"Hattie told me to keep my head down and keep moving," I said, laughing. "I have no intention of being the star of another viral video."

Jensen chuckled and his hand found its way to my thigh, his thumb idly tracing circles on the fabric of my dress. "You always know how to handle things," he said, his voice low and smoky. "That's why I need you by my side."

I felt a thrill run through me at his words, my body responding to his touch. I leaned in closer to him, my lips brushing against his ear. "And what else do you need me for?" I whispered, my hand sliding up his thigh.

Jensen's breath caught in his throat, his eyes darkening with desire. "Everything," he said.

I laughed and gently pulled his hand from my thigh. It was easy for us to get distracted. Tonight was not about that.

“How are you feeling?” I asked him.

“Good,” he said, nodding. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be.”

“You seemed very relaxed,” I told him. “I think the crowd really appreciated you talking in a way everyone could understand. It was good.”

“Did you see any of it?”

“All of it,” I replied with a bright smile.

Jensen leaned in and pressed his lips against mine, the kiss deepening as he pulled me closer to him. I felt his hand slide up my thigh again, his touch sending shivers through me. I was about to lose myself in the moment when a knock on the car window interrupted us.

Jensen pulled back with a sigh, his hand still resting on my thigh. I turned to see Hattie standing outside the car.

“You need to get going,” she said, her eyes flickering between us and jerking her head toward the cameramen all clamoring to get a picture of us getting hot and heavy. Unlike the limo back home, this one didn’t have the blackout windows.

The driver pulled away, having to stop every few feet as people took pictures, waved, and shouted at Jensen. I kept my head down.

The throngs of people all wanting to talk to him and the buzzing excitement were exhilarating, but I wanted to create a different kind of memory for us tonight. One where we could just be ourselves, without the pressures and expectations of the tech world. I wanted Jensen to unplug. The tech conference was the last stop on our international tour. We flew home tomorrow. Before we did and he had to hit the ground running again, I wanted him to have some peace and quiet.

“We’re going to my room,” I said. “After the interruption last night, I think it’s safer.”

Unfortunately, an employee at the hotel had given up Jensen’s room number. A few fans managed to get by security

and knocked on the door. There were people congregating outside the hotel as well.

Jensen sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t think we’ll be able to get in without drawing attention to ourselves,” he said. “Let me call Hattie. She’ll get security to take us in through the kitchen.”

“You do that a lot?”

He nodded as he held his phone to his ear. When we got to the hotel, we were driven around to the delivery entrance. I *felt* like a rock star as security quickly rushed us in through the kitchen. Once inside, we used the employee hallway to the stairs up to our floor. I was laughing and a little out of breath as we walked down the hallway.

“That was crazy,” I said.

“I should have warned you that can happen sometimes,” he said with a sigh.

As we entered my hotel room, I couldn’t help but feel a nervous flutter in my stomach. I wanted to surprise him, to show him that there was more to life than endless meetings and high stakes deals. Or AI. Not everything needed to involve technology.

I turned to him with a grin. “Welcome to my humble abode for the night,” I said, gesturing to the room.

Jensen chuckled as he looked around. “It’s not so different from mine, you know.”

We had slept in his room last night. It seemed silly to keep getting a room for me when we both knew I was going to end up with him, but Hattie booked the rooms before we left the States. And I supposed it was a safety net in case one of us decided to skip a night.

“It’s no different, but it’s not going to attract adoring fans,” I reminded him.

“Good point. Although you’re more of a celebrity than I am right now.”

“Ah, but my room is not in my name,” I said, smiling. “It’s under Hattie’s.”

“True. So, what’s this big surprise?” he asked while looking around the room.

“Why don’t you get comfortable?” I said. I picked up the phone and dialed room service. I had already spoken to the concierge and let him know what I wanted. He promised it would be handled.

“Get comfortably naked?” Jensen grinned.

I laughed. “Actually, no. I have something for you.” I grabbed his tie and led him to the room. On the bed were matching pajamas.

He gave me a funny look. “What’s this?”

“Pajamas,” I said, smiling. “We’re getting comfy and staying in. We’re not going anywhere but right here. No one is going to call you. Hattie is handling all of your calls. No one is going to text, call, or email you. Well, they might email you, but you’re not dealing with it.”

He smiled and slowly nodded. “Okay. This is different.”

“Different is a good thing,” I said with a smile. “You need different.”

We both quickly changed into the new pajama sets. He looked pretty sexy in the black plaid bottoms with the drawstring. The black T-shirt was a tight fit. A few minutes later, room service delivered my requested order. A tray filled with juicy cheeseburgers, crispy fries, and ice-cold sodas.

Jensen’s eyes widened in surprise as he took in the spread. “Merida, you didn’t have to do this.”

I silenced him with a finger to his lips, a mischievous glint in my eye. “I know I didn’t have to, but I wanted to. Consider it a taste of my lifestyle for once.”

We settled in, wearing our comfy pajamas, and I couldn’t help but notice how relaxed Jensen looked. It was as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, if only for a moment.

We sat on the floor with our food spread out on the coffee table.

“When was the last time you did something like this?” I asked as we both dug into the burgers.

He took a thoughtful bite of his burger before answering. “God, I can’t remember. It had to have been when I was a kid, maybe with my dad.”

I smiled, feeling a connection forming between us. “Well, then, I’m glad I could bring a little bit of that back for you tonight. That would have been over a decade ago,” I said, my voice filled with genuine surprise. “Tell me more about your dad, Jensen.”

As I listened to Jensen speak about his father, I couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of empathy wash over me. It was as if a window into his soul had been opened, and I was invited to witness a part of his life that he hadn’t shared with many. The vulnerability in his voice was palpable, and I knew that this was a big moment for him.

He took a deep breath, his gaze distant as he shared. “My dad was, and will forever be, my hero. He was a good man who would help anyone who needed it, no matter the cost. He taught me the difference between right and wrong, how to forgive, how to move forward. Even when I was going through all that hell at school, he always told me to keep moving forward and not to worry about what the other kids said.”

I could hear the sadness in his voice, the weight of his memories pressing down on him. “But when he got injured at work and went on disability, something inside of him sort of cracked. Without his work, he didn’t have a purpose anymore, and without purpose, he stopped taking care of himself, stopped seeing himself as worthy. He spiraled. He was not the man I remembered growing up. It sucked watching him deteriorate. Hattie and I tried, but he didn’t want help.”

“I’m sorry.” I reached out and gently touched his hand, offering silent support as he spoke.

“By the time I was twenty-four, my father had passed.”

My heart ached for him, for the pain he must have endured watching his father’s decline and feeling helpless to stop it. “I’m so sorry, Jensen,” I whispered, my voice filled with genuine sympathy.

He looked at me, his eyes reflecting the depth of his pain. “It was the worst thing that has ever happened to me,” he admitted. “For a long time, I was angry with him, felt like he gave up, like my sister and I weren’t good enough for him to stick around for. But I know now it was much more complicated than that. My father had demons we never knew about and will never know about. If I could have waved a magic wand, I would have done it. I would have done anything to help him. It pisses me off that he didn’t think he was worthy of being on this planet if he couldn’t work and contribute.”

I moved around the table and leaned my head against his shoulder. “But you know that isn’t your fault. Everyone has their own demons. You can’t fight them for anyone.”

“Thanks,” he said, smiling. “I suppose I know that, but I just wish I could have gotten through to him.”

We finished scarfing down our burgers and fries. It was so different than the caviar and champagne diet we’d been on. I missed the greasy food.

We leaned back against the couch with our bellies full. He wrapped an arm around me in a tender embrace. “Thank you for tonight, Merida,” he said. “It’s nice to feel normal for once.”

I couldn’t help but giggle at his words. “Oh, don’t be fooled, Jensen Loxley,” I teased. “There’s nothing normal about you.”

He smirked at me, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Is that so? And what makes you say that?”

I leaned in closer to him, my lips brushing against his ear. “Well, for starters, you’re filthy rich and incredibly handsome. Not exactly the average Joe.”



He chuckled, the sound vibrating through my body. “I suppose you have a point there. But you’re not exactly normal yourself, Merida. You’re a writer, a dreamer, a woman who doesn’t conform to society’s expectations.”

I smiled at his words, feeling my heart swell with warmth. “Thank you, Jensen. That means a lot to me. I never really fit in growing up either. I guess what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“I know the feeling,” he said, his hand rubbing gentle circles on my back. “Sometimes it’s hard to find your place in this world. But I think we’ve done a good job finding it.”

I looked up at him, my heart racing as he leaned in closer. His lips brushed against mine, soft and sweet, and all too brief.

“I think you might be right,” I whispered, my eyes locked on his.



**I**t was good to be home. Good but weird. We got home yesterday. I didn't realize how weird it was going to be to sleep alone after almost a full week of Merida in my bed.

I stared out the window, lost in thought as my mind drifted back to the time I had spent with Merida. The way her silky hair felt against my fingertips as I ran them through her locks, the way her body fit perfectly against mine, and the way her lips tasted on mine. It was all so exhilarating.

But now, as I stood in my quiet apartment all alone, I felt a sense of emptiness. It was like a part of me was missing, and I couldn't shake the feeling. I didn't know what the rules were. Was I allowed to ask her to stay over with me? If she did stay over, did I have to pay her? That would be too weird. I wasn't going to pay her to sleep with me.

The door buzzed, alerting me to Christian's arrival. I opened the door to my penthouse perched high above the New York skyline on billionaire's row. The view of Central Park from my living-room windows stretched out like a sprawling emerald carpet. It was ostentatious and way too much for one guy, but I couldn't resist. It was a gorgeous apartment with a view that was worth every penny. And I liked the clout. I was proud of my achievements, and I didn't mind spending a little money to live like a king.

Christian was standing in my personal lobby with a six pack of one of our favorite IPAs. He made a big show looking me up and down. "You're alive and well."

“You didn’t think I would be?”

Christian handed me a bottle as he stepped into my luxurious home and looked around with mock horror. “Jensen, your place needs a makeover. I mean, seriously, when are you going to get some decent furniture in here? It looks like a total slum in here.”

I chuckled at his playful banter, closing the door behind him. “Always the interior design critic,” I replied. “I’ll have you know that minimalist chic is all the rage.”

He grinned, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Well, then, consider me old fashioned.”

I led him to the living room, where sleek modern furniture adorned the space and the floor-to-ceiling windows showcased the stunning view. I walked to the bar in the corner and grabbed a bottle opener. I opened my beer and tossed the opener to Christian.

He caught it effortlessly, popping the cap with practiced ease. “So, what’s the plan for tonight?” he asked.

I shrugged, settling onto the couch. “Nothing,” I replied. “I’m spent. I have been busting my ass. I need a night in.”

Christian took a sip of his beer, savoring the flavor. “You know, if you ever get tired of this place, you can always trade up. I heard there’s a new penthouse on the market for a cool billion.”

I laughed heartily. “Oh, sure, let me just check my piggy bank for loose change.”

We settled into the plush couches, sipping our beers and catching up on the latest gossip in our very small group of friends and acquaintances.

“What happened with Reid?” he asked. “That shit was wild.”

“I take it you saw the video,” I said, laughing.

Reid was well known in our circle. Christian was comfortable financially, but he wasn’t at billionaire status. That made him “lesser than” in Reid’s eyes. Christian could

care less about Reid's opinion of him, but there was tension between them. Always had been.

He nodded. "I did see the video. About fifty times. I couldn't stop watching the part when Reid begged you to come get your woman. Have you seen how bad he's getting roasted?"

I shook my head. "Hattie was prepared to go full court press and shut down the story, but it worked itself out. We read a few comments, but I try not to read too much of that stuff."

Christian chuckled. "Yeah, I don't blame you. The internet can be brutal."

I finished my beer and leaned back into the cushions. "She laid into him," I said, grinning. "How did you see the video?"

He laughed and looked a little embarrassed. "Tik Tok."

I rolled my eyes. "I cannot believe you watch that drivel."

"You're a tech guy, you're not supposed to shit on technology," he said. "You have to know what your competition is doing."

I scoffed. "As if that's my competition. I'm playing chess, they're playing checkers."

He laughed at my arrogance. It was true. My tech was on an entirely different level than some silly video platform.

"That's the woman you got from the dating agency?" he asked.

"You make it sound like she's a pack of beef," I said. "I didn't get her."

"You hired her."

"Yes, but that's not what it's about. I mean it is, but it isn't. She's more than just some chick I randomly hired."

"She's a badass, Jensen. I was cheering her on."

I couldn't agree more. "She absolutely is," I said proudly. "She's been a driving force behind this project, and I couldn't

have asked for a better fake girlfriend. She surprises me on a daily basis, and I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing."

"Sounds like you think it's a good thing," he said. "You're smiling. A lot."

I nodded with the smile still on my face. "You know, Christian, there's something about her that I find incredibly refreshing. She believes in people, in right and wrong. She's an optimist, trustworthy, dependable. What you see is what you get with her. She doesn't care about appearances or money. You know how many women I've taken out. All of them wanted to go to the most expensive restaurant and order the most expensive dish with the most expensive bottle of wine."

Christian raised an eyebrow, a teasing glint in his eye. "Sounds like you're starting to fall for your hired girlfriend, Jensen."

I laughed, unable to deny the truth in his words. "I don't know about that, Christian, but what I see? It drives me wild with need."

He let out a hearty laugh. "It sounds like you've got it bad."

"I've got something," I muttered.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say you've slept with her," he said.

"I'm not about to kiss and tell."

He laughed. "But you have."

I leaned back in my chair, contemplating the unexpected feelings that had surfaced. "You know, it's not just about the hired girlfriend thing. It's more than that. It's about who she is as a person. She's got that same inspirational quality that my dad had. She's not just a woman I'm paying to be at my side. She's someone who's making me question what I want in life."

Christian studied me for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "Sometimes, the most unexpected people come into our lives and change everything. It's the ones who

challenge us, who make us question ourselves, who have the power to leave the deepest marks. It's been a while since you've met anyone that will challenge you."

"I know," I said, nodding. "I guess it's refreshing. I like that she's not afraid to speak her mind. I don't think she's afraid of anyone. She doesn't get intimidated. If you saw the video of her facing off against Reid, you've seen her bravery."

"Finding someone like Merida is a rare and beautiful thing," Christian said, smiling.

I couldn't help but agree with him. Merida was unlike anyone I'd ever met before. She was fearless, confident, and unapologetically herself. She challenged me in ways I never thought possible, and I found myself drawn to her in a way that scared me.

"Are you guys an official couple?" he asked. "I saw that interview you gave and you put on a pretty big show. I thought that's all it was, a show."

I shrugged. "That was what I thought it was, but when I started talking, none of it was rehearsed. It just all came out. It was exactly what I felt."

He laughed. "I never thought you'd be the one to fall so fast and hard."

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I mean, technically, we're still in the trial period. But I don't really care about the label. I just know that being with her feels right."

Christian nodded in understanding. "Labels don't really matter in the grand scheme of things. What's important is how you feel with her. If being with her makes you happy, then that's all that should matter."

"Thanks."

"Where is she at in all of this?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, shrugging. "We haven't had the conversation. It's weird, but it feels like we've been together for years. It's all very easy. I don't have to try to be anything other than who I am. She's like someone I would have grown

up with. Nothing like the women that people keep pushing at me.”

“Not me,” he said defensively.

I gave him a look. “What was that beautiful goddess you set me up with a couple months ago? Tina? Tonya?”

“Taryn,” he said, smiling. “She was hot.”

I got up and got two more beers for us. “She was looking for a guy to pay her bills. Do you know she asked if I would buy her a purse? We were walking into the restaurant, and she saw some purse another lady had. She asked if I would buy it for her!”

Christian laughed, clearly amused. “She wanted a sugar daddy.”

“No shit. At dinner, she looked up the purse online, it was five thousand fucking dollars. We hadn’t even had dinner and she was asking me to spend that kind of money on her. It was crazy.”

“Okay, she might not have been good for you, but she was pretty.”

“Yeah, well, not for me,” I said.

Christian chuckled. “You know, I think you’ve found the real deal this time. I’ve never seen you so smitten before.”

I smiled, thinking about her. “Yeah, she’s amazing. I can’t get enough of her.”

“That’s it,” he said, raising his beer. “To love.”

“To love,” I echoed, clinking our bottles together.

“What’s with the tech?” he asked. “Lox.”

“It launches in two weeks,” I said with a sigh. I was both anxious and dreading the launch.

“Is it ready?”

I winced. “Ready, but I’m always worried about the last little things that always come up. Every day until we launch is going to be intense. It’s crunch time.”



Christian nodded, understanding the pressure of launching a new product. “Well, I’m sure it’ll be a huge success,” he said encouragingly. “You’ve put so much work into it, and it shows. You should be proud of yourself.”

I grinned, feeling a sense of pride bubble up inside me. “Thanks, man. With all the press I’ve been doing for it, it has to be perfect.”

“That’s a lot of pressure to put on yourself.”

“I know, but it has to be perfect. Do you know how many people would love to see me crash and burn?”

He nodded. “You’ve made yourself a target. That’s what happens when you’re at the top.”

“It’s kind of a shitty feeling,” I said. “I’ve busted my ass to get to the top. I’ve had to claw my way up, pushing back against everyone that wanted to tear me down. It’s cutthroat. I have no doubt Reid is going to be gunning for me now. I cannot afford a single mistake.”

“No, you can’t.” He shook his head. “You put yourself in a hell of a position.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.



## MERIDA

Visiting my mother's house was a source of comfort. As I walked through the door, I was immediately greeted by the soothing scent of cinnamon, a stark contrast to the bustling world I had just left behind on my globetrotting adventure with Jensen. She was making her infamous apple turnovers. I loved when my mother baked.

"Mom?" I called out.

I walked down the hall to the spare bedroom which she used as her office of sorts. The boutique she owned, but only worked in part-time, was one of the hobbies she loved.

"In here!"

My mother was hunched over a worktable strewn with fabric samples and sketches. She looked up and her face lit up with a radiant smile as she saw me.

"You're here!" she exclaimed, rushing over to embrace me. "It's been too long. I've missed you."

I returned her hug, feeling the familiar comfort of her presence. "I've missed you too, Mom," I replied. "I've been traveling like crazy, but I wanted to make sure I stopped by to say hello. I keep telling myself I'm not going to go so long between visits, but then life happens."

She pulled back and looked me up and down, her keen fashion designer's eye taking in every detail. "You look stunning, as always, dear," she said, a hint of pride in her voice. "I like this new look on you."

I glanced down at myself, feeling a bit self-conscious. I was wearing some of the clothes Hattie had picked out for me during our travels and a pair of heels that made my feet ache. My feet seemed to hurt all the time now, a reminder of the constant hustle and bustle of trying to keep up with Jensen's busy life.

"Thanks, Mom," I replied with a smile, trying to ignore the pain in my feet. "I've been keeping busy."

She looked me up and down. I saw the critical look.

"What?" I asked defensively.

"It's just, well, this doesn't look like you."

I laughed. "Because I wouldn't normally dress like this."

As my mother studied me with a scrutinizing eye, she broke the silence with a comment that caught me off guard. "You look good, Merida," she said, her tone slightly hesitant.

I arched an eyebrow, always attuned to the nuances in her voice. "But?" I prompted, sensing that there was more to her comment.

She sighed, her gaze searching mine. "But you don't really look like, well, you."

I blinked, surprised by her observation. My mother had always been supportive and accepting of my choices, so her comment struck me as odd. "What do you mean, Mom?" I asked, trying to keep my tone casual.

She hesitated for a moment before speaking. "It's just that you seem different. Like something has changed about you."

I waved her concerns away, putting on a brave smile. "What are you working on?" I asked in an attempt to change the subject.

"Just the usual spring fashion stuff," she replied. "Come on. Let's go get one of those turnovers. You can tell me what's going on, and don't say nothing. You're my daughter and I know when there is something going on in your life."

I should have known I wasn't going to get anything past her. I followed her back to the kitchen. She gestured for me to sit down while she served up the apple turnovers with cold glasses of milk. I took my first bite and groaned with ecstasy. "How are you such a good cook and I inherited none of your skills?"

"Practice, my dear. Remember, I had a little girl and a husband to cook for. I cook with love. That's the magic ingredient."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," I said, laughing.

"But it's true. Now, stop stalling. Tell me what's going on."

I didn't want to tell her about Faux's but it was part of the story. She was going to ask questions. I couldn't tell her half the story.

"I've met someone special, someone who has turned my life upside down in the best possible way. I've been traveling with him."

"Is that the man in the video?"

I groaned and dropped my head. "You saw?"

"Sweetie, I'm old, but I don't live under a rock. One of my friends' daughters sent it to her and she sent it to me. I had no idea you were going to Dubai! I thought you might be working on a story."

"I kind of was."

"What does that mean?"

"Oh, Mom, it's such a mess," I said, sighing.

"Start with the beginning," she encouraged softly. "I've got all day."

I sighed, feeling the weight of my conflicting emotions. "It's complicated, Mom. I've been working on a piece about someone I've grown close to, someone who's more than just a job. It's making me question a lot of things."

“Would this someone be Jensen Loxley?”

“Yes. But it isn’t what you think.”

“Tell me what it is,” she said. “Clearly, it’s weighing on you. You know you can trust me to keep your secrets.”

“I do trust you, but I really need you to keep this one a secret. You have to. I’m under a pretty strict NDA. If I talk, I could be legally responsible.”

“An NDA?” She took a drink of her milk with her eyes gazing at me over the glass. “Now you have to tell me.”

“I was helping Dalton with a story he’s doing,” I started. “I was just supposed to sign up and get an inside look at the application process of a dating agency. I didn’t even get through the door when Jensen hit me.”

“Hit you?”

“It was an accident, but he offered me the job. He hired me to be his escort.”

The blood drained from her face. “His *what?*”

“No, no, it’s not that kind of an escort. I was just supposed to pretend to be his girlfriend for a few events.”

“Merida, I’m not blind,” she said. “I might be a little old, but I know you. I know what it’s like to be in love. You’re sleeping with that man.”

“I am. I was. I mean, I did but it has nothing to do with the money. I don’t know what happened. He’s not the man I thought he was. He’s kind and generous. Despite being ridiculously wealthy, he’s very down to earth. He has a lot of pressure on him. I like him. He’s a good man.”

“He’s who you are supposed to be writing about, though?”

I nodded. “Yes. I’ve actually written the article. It’s not perfect, but when Dad fired me—”

“What?” She slapped her hand on the table. “Your father fired you?”

“Yes. He got mad because I was taking too much time off. He fired me. I told him I had an amazing article he was going to want to publish. He didn’t care. He told me to spread my wings. I called Dalton and he told me he would look over my article and we would publish it another way.”

She slowly nodded. “You wrote an expose article on the man you’re in love with.”

“I didn’t say I’m in love with him,” I said.

“You didn’t have to.”

“I didn’t say I was going to publish the article,” I said. “I wanted to. It’s a damn good article. It would be the one that put my name on the map. I would love to have Dad read it and think it was amazing. He would be so mad he didn’t get the chance to publish it first. I want to make him regret firing me.”

“But?” she prompted.

I blew out a breath. “But I’m confused.”

“Because you feel like you’re betraying the man.”

I nodded, feeling the weight of my emotions pressing on me. “Yes, Mom. More than that. He’s become someone I care about deeply. And I don’t know what to do.”

She gave me a reassuring smile. “The answer is simple, Merida. You do the right thing.”

I let out a sigh, knowing deep down that she would say that. “I knew you’d say that, Mom. I think I just needed to hear it.”

She nodded with a knowing look. “So, you have to tell him, right? You need to tell him how you accidentally ran into him or he ran into you. Even if you don’t run the article, you need to be honest with him.”

“What if he never talks to me again?” I asked. “He is going to feel so betrayed.”

“If you can explain the details to him, I think he might understand. You might have started out with one intention, but

he won you over. Your feelings for him are real. Does he feel the same way about you?"

"I don't know. I think there might be something there. He acts like he genuinely cares about me. We talk—a lot. He's been very open and honest with me, which makes the article a million times worse. He has so much on his shoulders. I like being at his side. I like helping him navigate his crazy life. I know this thing started out as a job, but for me, it's evolved."

"Talk to him Merida," she said. "I like seeing you happy and in love."

"Mom, you keep saying I'm in love. I don't know if that's what this is."

"I do," she said, smiling. "You need to talk to him, sooner rather than later."

I nodded in agreement. "You're right. I think I'll wait until after the launch. I don't want to add to his pressure. This is going to be a surprise to him. I don't want to stress him out. I haven't run the article yet, so no harm has been done. I'll tell him after his launch."

My mother's wisdom was a guiding light in my life, and her advice was always grounded in a strong sense of ethics. "You can't go wrong when you do the right thing."

Feeling a sense of resolution, I took out my phone and sent a quick message to Dalton. "Halt on the article," I texted. "Don't even read it. I'm not going forward with the story. I'll explain more later."

As I hit send, I knew that the road ahead wouldn't be easy, but I already felt better. Jensen was a reasonable man. He would hear me out. I would explain everything between us was real. I wrote the article before I realized how I felt.

"I can't wait to meet your young man," she said, smiling. "You look happy. And I do like the outfit. After I saw the video of you, I did a little Googling. I saw a picture of you at an event. You looked gorgeous. You have really found your stride. I'm so glad you're stepping away from the boxy clothes that hid your beautiful figure."



I grinned at my mother's words, feeling a warmth spread through my chest. It was true. I had finally found my confidence and style. And it was all because of Jensen. He had seen me, truly seen me, and had encouraged me to embrace my femininity and my curves.

"I owe it all to Jensen," I admitted, blushing slightly.

"Well, he sounds like a keeper," my mother said with a chuckle. "I can't wait to meet him and see for myself."

I smiled, feeling a sense of anticipation bubble up inside me. I couldn't wait to introduce Jensen to my family and friends, to show them how happy he made me feel and how much he had changed my life. As I looked at my phone, waiting for a response from Dalton, I couldn't help but feel a sense of dread. What if Jensen didn't understand? What if he thought I was using him for a story?

But then I remembered my mother's words, "You can't go wrong when you do the right thing." And I knew that telling Jensen the truth was the right thing to do. I just had to find the right words.



**I**t was going to be a good day. I could feel it in my bones. We were in the home stretch for the tech. I spent hours poring over the little details and felt good about it. I kicked it back to the developers and they were fine-tuning it all once again.

It was a back-and-forth game. They worked on it and sent it to me. I tweaked it and sent it to them. By the time we were done, we should have it perfect. I knew it was tedious and my team was probably ready to scream with all the constant redoing of the tiniest bits of code, but that was how I worked. Only the best. It had to be the best.

I pulled my cup of coffee from under the machine and inhaled before dumping in some of the flavored cream Merida got me hooked on. I took my coffee to the balcony that stretched around one corner of my penthouse. That was a rarity and another reason I bought the place. I loved being outside. It was cold, but I didn't mind. Judging by the billowing gray clouds coming in from the sea, it was going to rain. We were being set up for a cold, dreary day.

And I didn't mind a bit.

From far below, I could hear the typical sounds of Manhattan. It was loud with sirens screaming, car horns honking, and people shouting. But up here, high above the city, it was peaceful. I took a sip of my coffee and leaned against the railing, enjoying the view. The city spread out

before me like a blanket of concrete and steel, and I felt like the king of it all.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, letting the cool air fill my lungs. I got a little melancholy thinking about my dad. I wished he could see me now. I would have bought him an apartment just like this, but that wasn't what he would have wanted. I had a feeling he would prefer a house up north. He'd kill me if I tried to buy him a mansion but I could buy him a decent house with a large chunk of land with a pond. He could fish, garden, and do whatever he wanted. I would make sure he had a big shop to tinker in.

I didn't know what I believed in, but I hoped my dad was up there somewhere looking down on me and Hattie. I wanted him to see we were okay. He did everything he could to set us up. Without him busting his ass to get me in that school, I didn't think any of this would be possible. It pissed me off that he didn't get to see the fruits of his labor. He didn't get to live in the lap of luxury after working so hard his whole life.

I shook it off and went back inside. I needed to get to the office. There would be time to be sad later.

As I stepped into the bustling office, the excited energy in the air was palpable. My team members, the developers, and everyone else involved in our project were hard at work, their faces lit up with anticipation. The launch was just around the corner, and we were all feeling the pressure, but more importantly, we were feeling the pride and excitement of what we had accomplished. This was going to be our biggest launch yet. My other tech had been good, but this was the kind of thing that could make or break me. If I failed, I could kiss my company goodbye. People didn't forget. They would turn their backs on my tech, and I would have to lay off hundreds of employees. I could always do a rebrand like so many other tech guys, but I didn't want to.

I wanted to do it right the first time.

"Morning, everyone!" I called out, my voice filled with enthusiasm.

A chorus of greetings and cheers echoed around the office as I made my way through. The developers were huddled together, going over the final details of the tech, their eyes glued to the screens filled with lines of code. There was a sense of focused determination in the room, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride for the team I had the privilege of leading.

I trusted these people—for the most part. Ultimately, it was my responsibility to finalize everything. I was the one that had to take the hit if something failed. I was the final approval. If we went through the rollout and there were bugs, it fell on me.

I sat down at my desk and turned on my computer, ready to dive into the last-minute preparations. As I scanned the reports and checked the numbers, I couldn't help but feel a knot forming in my stomach. This was it. The moment of truth. The moment that would define my career and the future of my company.

I ran through the code, reading it like someone would read a book. AI was tricky business. It wasn't like I could fall back on my training. I didn't have any training. I was the guy leading the way.

The weight of the responsibility was almost too much to bear. But as I checked and double-checked the code, I knew that we had done everything that we could. This was our masterpiece, our magnum opus. And it was going to change everything.

I went out to the huddle where the developers were busy working.

“Hey, guys,” I said. “How's it coming along? I want to make sure everything is perfect.”

They looked up at me, their faces filled with exhaustion and excitement.

“It's almost there,” one of them said before yawning. “Just a few more tweaks and we'll be ready to send you another run for you to look over.”

I nodded, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. We had put in countless hours of hard work, and it was all about to pay off.

“Alright, let’s do this,” I said, clapping my hands together. “We’ve got a world to change.”

“This is going to be huge,” Sarah said. “Once this is released, you will have literally changed the world.”

“Not me,” I said. “Us.”

“It was your idea,” one of the devs said. “You gave this idea life. We’re just the people that got to work on little bits and pieces.”

“But it’s good,” another one said. “It’s going to work. The bugs we see are unlikely to be seen or realized by any of our users. But we’re going to get them all.”

I nodded, feeling a sense of excitement building within me. “That’s what I like to hear. I have no doubt that we’ve created something truly revolutionary. You guys know the drill. Check, double-check, and I’ll be the triple check. Don’t send me anything you don’t think is perfect. Failure is not an option. If we fail, it’s not the two hundred people that answer phones and do payroll that will be to blame. I believe in holding people accountable.”

It was a quiet, barely veiled threat. Things got very serious.

“I trust you guys,” I said.

“We’re not going to let you down,” Sarah said.

In the midst of the chaos, I couldn’t help but feel a profound sense of gratitude for the people I worked alongside. I hired the best developers in the world. I attracted them because they knew I was the best. We were birds of a feather, naturally drawn to one another because we were the best at what we did.

As the excitement in the office continued to build, I was focused on the final preparations for our product launch. The developers and team members were buzzing with enthusiasm, and I was in the midst of a meeting when my assistant

informed me that Merida had arrived and wanted to speak with me privately.

I excused myself from the meeting and quickly made my way to the front of the office to greet her. When our eyes met, I couldn't help but smile. "Merida, it's nice to see you," I said, my voice very casual. I kept it professional.

She returned my smile, but there was a hint of something in her eyes that caught my attention. "Jensen, can we talk privately?" she asked, her tone slightly serious.

I nodded, my curiosity piqued. "Of course, let's go to my office."

We stepped into my office, and I closed the door behind us, tinting the windows to ensure our privacy. Turning to face Merida, I couldn't hide my anticipation. "What's on your mind?" I walked toward her and put my hands on her hips. "I missed you."

"I missed you," she replied.

"I'm going to be busting my ass the next few days, but I hope we can see each other soon."

She took a deep breath, her gaze meeting mine. "Jensen, there's something I need to tell you."

"Merida, you can tell me anything. You know that." I slid my hands up her sides. I was hungry for her. I wished I could bend her over my desk just then. I would have to settle for a kiss. My lips brushed hers, but she pulled away.

Something was wrong, and I could sense it in the tension that had suddenly gripped her. "Merida," I asked softly, pulling back a little. "What's wrong?"

She looked like she had something big on her mind. I assumed it was something about the new stories making their rounds. It was part of the gig, but I understood how upsetting it was to have your personal life splashed all over the internet.

"Merida—"

Suddenly, the door flew open with a resounding bang. I turned to see Hattie standing there. Her face was flushed, and

she appeared out of breath, a stark contrast to her usual composed self.

Before I could even ask what was wrong, Hattie practically exploded. “Jensen, there’s something important you need to read.”

I exchanged a quick, puzzled glance with Merida before turning my attention back to Hattie. “What’s wrong, Hattie?” I asked, my concern growing.

My assumption was it was something about Reid. The guy was probably trying to come at me or Merida. He was such a damn loser that he had probably gone on a media blitz badmouthing me and her. I wasn’t worried. We already had the court of public opinion on our side. Carl could handle it. With as much money as I paid the guy, he could spin the story again.

Hattie hesitated for a moment, her eyes locking onto Merida’s. I wasn’t blind. I saw the anger. She was pissed, and if I had to guess, I would say she was furious with Merida. That didn’t track. The two of them were buddies. “I need to talk to you alone,” Hattie insisted, dismissing Merida with a snotty glare.

I frowned, feeling a sense of urgency. “Hattie, whatever you have to say to me, you can say in front of Merida,” I insisted.

Hattie stiffened, clearly reluctant, but she eventually nodded. “Fine. Why not? She should be here for this. In fact, I want to see what she has to say.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Hattie, are you mad at me?” Merida asked.

Hattie stepped forward and thrust her phone at me. “Read it.”

I took the phone which was open to a news article published by *Full Disclosure*. I vaguely knew the site. It was a little bit gossip and a little bit real news. I rarely read it. I felt it was beneath me. But as I read, my heart sank. My eyes



scanned the headline as I read the horrifying words aloud. “My Month with Jensen Loxley.”

My blood ran cold, and I turned to Merida, my eyes wide with shock. “What the hell is this?” I demanded, my voice filled with a mixture of anger and confusion.



**C** *rap.*

I couldn't believe my eyes as I stared at the article on Hattie's phone. "My Month with Jensen Loxley," blared the headline, and I felt like the world had suddenly gone off its axis. Why had this article been published?

I could feel the anger rolling off Hattie. She was ready to claw my eyes out. My heart pounded in my chest. I was pretty sure I could feel a vein throbbing in the side of my neck. This was exactly what I didn't want to happen. For a brief moment, I hoped I was in a nightmare. In fact, it was very similar to a nightmare I had the night before.

Jensen was staring at me with a look of horror and hurt. I scrambled to explain, but the words caught in my throat. I was just as confused and shocked as he was, and I didn't have all the answers. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't deny it. It was right there in black and white. A photo of me and Jensen at the first tech gala accompanied the article, which pretty much took away any deniability I may have had. Add in the byline and I was convicted of the horrible crime.

My mind raced as I reached for the phone, hoping to make some sense of the situation. There was a tiny little thread of hope there was someone else that wrote the piece. I needed to see if the words were the same as the ones I wrote. I knew it was ridiculous, but I was desperate. Before I admitted to anything, I had to be absolutely certain it was as bad as it

looked. But before I could even touch it, Jensen snatched it away from me.

His eyes flew across the screen, and I could see the anger and anguish building in him. “Forces his employees to work under abusive conditions? Belittles me for wearing inexpensive white sneakers? Insists on controlling what I wear?”

His voice cracked with emotion, and his face drained of all color as he looked up at me. The pain and betrayal in his eyes cut deep, and I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. How could this have happened? How could someone I had grown so close to do something like this? Yes, I wrote the article but I didn’t release it. I would never do that. I told Dalton not to do it. There had to be some law against publishing an article without permission.

Unfortunately, Dalton gave me credit for it. I wrote the damn thing, so it wasn’t like I could claim innocence. I was guilty. I was the cause of the pained expression on his face.

“Jensen, I swear, I had no idea this article was going to be published,” I stammered, my own voice trembling with shock and disbelief. “I don’t know what happened. I’m sorry!”

Hattie was seething. Her anger burned just beneath the surface, turning her skin a rosy pink shade. “It’s pretty clear what happened.”

“I didn’t mean for this to happen!” I cried out.

My words seemed inadequate in the face of his anger and hurt. He had every right to feel betrayed, and I couldn’t blame him for it. I reached out to him, my hand trembling as I touched his arm, but he pulled away, his expression a mixture of anger and pain.

I had never seen him like this before, and it tore at my heart. I wanted to explain, to make him understand that I would never intentionally harm him, but the damage was done. The article was out there, and there was no going back.

Tears welled up in my eyes as Jensen’s anger and disappointment washed over me. My throat tightened, and I

struggled to find my voice. “Jensen, please,” I whispered his name. “I didn’t. I don’t know how this happened. Let me explain.”

He paced back and forth, his face a storm of emotions. He had every right to be furious, and I couldn’t blame him. But I needed him to understand the truth, to know that I would never intentionally hurt him.

“Hattie, give me the room,” Jensen barked.

“No way,” Hattie said defiantly. “You need a witness in here. Hard telling what she’ll say next.”

“Go, Hattie!” Jensen’s voice boomed around the office. My stomach flip-flopped as the weight of his anger was made clear.

“Fine, but for the record, I think you’re a snake,” Hattie hissed. “Don’t let her get out of this, Jensen. This is inexcusable.” Hattie’s eyes locked on mine. I saw a flash of hurt. “I should have known better. I’ve always been very good at picking out the snakes. I’ll know better next time.”

She walked out of the office, slamming the door behind her. I focused my attention on Jensen. He had stopped pacing and had his back to me. He stared out the window with his hands in his pockets. I could see the tension in his back and shoulders.

I took a shaky breath and started to try and explain things once again. “I went to the Faux agency as a favor to someone else. I had no intention of writing an article about you. But when I ran into you, when I got to know you, I knew there was a real story there. I’m a journalist for *Full Disclosure*, and I thought I could finally write a meaningful piece, something more than the advice columns my father had me pinned down in. I started the article on you before I ever met you. I didn’t set out to get close to you. I was curious about who you were. It wasn’t supposed to be negative.”

He said nothing. He didn’t look at me. I thought it was safer if I stayed where I was.

My voice cracked, and I wiped away a tear that had escaped my eye. “Jensen, in the beginning, you were just a subject for an article, but as I got to know you, you became more than that. You became someone I cared about. Someone I didn’t want to hurt. That’s why I decided not to run the article.”

I watched as Jensen’s anger seemed to waver. He turned to look at me. The fury I saw minutes ago had been replaced by a mix of confusion and hurt. It was a vulnerable moment for both of us, and I hoped he would see that I was being honest about my intentions.

“I didn’t want any of this to happen,” I whispered. “I never meant to betray your trust. I swear I will fix this. I will put out a statement explaining the article was just a draft idea. I haven’t read it, but I’ll fix this.”

As I looked into his eyes, I prayed that he would find it in his heart to forgive me, to understand that I had never wanted to cause him harm. The weight of my actions hung heavily between us, and I could only hope that he would see the truth in my words and find a way to move past the pain I had unintentionally caused.

Jensen’s laughter cut through me like a knife, and my heart sank as I watched the anger and frustration in his eyes. “Then why the hell is it out there for the world to see?” he demanded, his voice laced with disbelief. “Do you have any idea what this will do to me? To my launch?”

He raked his fingers through his hair, his anguish and anger on full display. I had never seen him like this before, and it was tearing me apart. “I never meant for any of this to happen!”

“It doesn’t matter what you meant to happen! It happened. You wrote it. You smeared me. You used me to get a story! You’re a hell of an actress, Merida. You fooled me. I believed you were a genuine person. I am a fucking idiot. I fell for your bullshit hook, line, and sinker.”

“It wasn’t bullshit,” I said. “I didn’t want the article published. Once I got to know you, I realized you’re a good

man.”

He shook his head with disbelief. “I cannot believe it. I just can’t believe how fucking stupid I was. All that time I thought you were working, you were writing about me. On the jet, you were writing your little smear piece and I just sat there feeding you. Literally feeding you!”

I couldn’t even comprehend what was happening. My brain was shutting down to protect myself. I was witnessing the devastating consequences of my actions. There was nothing I could do to stop it. It was watching a speeding train heading down the rail to a massive canyon with no bridge. My life was careening off a cliff.

“Oh my God,” I breathed softly as I slumped in a chair, my face in my hands and my shoulders shaking from the sobs that were wracking my body. Jensen didn’t say anything. He simply stood there, watching me cry. It was like he had been completely drained of emotion. He looked like he felt like I deserved his wrath. He had to think I was the lowest piece of scum on the planet.

I was.

I just didn’t know what to do. I felt like I had no control over anything. I had no control over my emotions. I had no control over the fallout.

“You need to go,” he ordered.

I looked up at him through watery eyes. “Jensen, please. I’m sorry. I don’t know how to fix this. Tell me what to do. I’ll do it.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, his voice low and filled with desperation. “You might single-handedly destroy the biggest tech launch of the century because you wanted a scoop.”

My eyes welled up with tears as I pleaded with him. “Jensen, please, just hear me out. I didn’t do this. I don’t know how this article got published, but I promise you, I had nothing to do with it. I think I know who might have done it, and I’m going to get to the bottom of it. Just give me some time.”

He looked at me with a defeated expression, his anger giving way to resignation. “Time?” he whispered, his voice heavy with the weight of his predicament. “I’m out of time, Merida. The deed is done.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks, and I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I had never wanted to see him like this, so defeated and hurt. His trust in me had been shattered, and there was nothing I could do to turn back the clock.

“Get out,” he said, his voice filled with a mixture of anger and sorrow. “Just get out.”

Tears streamed down my face as I turned and walked out of his office, the weight of my actions heavy on my shoulders. I had a long and difficult road ahead of me to uncover the truth and make amends, but in that moment, all I could feel was the overwhelming sense of loss and regret.

I closed the door behind me and paused for a moment. Jensen’s phone buzzed on his desk, and my heart ached for him. I wiped the tears from my eyes and quickly made my way toward the exit.

Hattie was standing by the elevator, looking at her phone. She glanced up at me as I approached. Her sneer cut deep. She had always been so friendly toward me. I didn’t just betray Jensen. I betrayed her. My article was going to hurt everyone in the office, especially if the launch failed.

“Hattie—”

“Don’t,” she said. “Don’t you dare say a word to me. You are not welcome here. I’ll make sure security has your name and picture. Get the hell away from me and my brother.”

A lump formed in my throat and I swallowed hard. She stomped away. I pushed the button for the elevator. The doors opened and I rushed inside, slamming my hand against the button to close the doors. I needed to get the hell out of there.





The chaos around me was suffocating, and I felt like I was drowning in a sea of panic and anger. It took a good twenty minutes for my body to stop vibrating with the betrayal. A part of me, that part that fell hard for Merida, kept telling me it was okay. There was an explanation. But she had betrayed me in the worst way possible.

My heart was broken, as was my soul. The one time I took a chance on someone had blown up in my face.

I stumbled into my chair and sank into the buttery leather. I could hear the buzz of my busy office. I had no doubt in my mind the article was sending shockwaves through the whole building. The people that worked for me were reading all about my deepest, darkest secrets.

She had exposed me. It would have been better if she stripped me naked and made me walk through my office and out into the city streets. That would have been better. My body was just the outside. She wrote about the inside. She exposed who I was under the bespoke suits. My world had been shattered into a million pieces.

I sat there for a while, numb and unable to comprehend what had just happened. My mind was racing with a million thoughts, but I couldn't seem to grasp onto any of them. I felt like a shell of a person, hollow and empty. The betrayal had cut deep, and I didn't know how to move forward from it.

But then, something inside me snapped. A fire ignited in my chest, and I knew that I couldn't let her win. I couldn't let

Merida destroy me and everything that I had worked for. I had to fight back.

I grabbed my phone and dialed my lawyer's number. "I need you to do whatever you can to stop the article that was published about me today."

My lawyer promised to look into it but told me not to get my hopes up. Apparently, free speech was protected.

I hung up and tried to get my shit together. I thought back to all the moments I had shared with Merida, all the times she had looked at me with those beautiful eyes and made me feel like she truly cared about me. It all felt like a lie now.

There was a soft knock at the door before it pushed open a few inches.

"It's me. Don't throw anything at me." Hattie walked in carrying a tall white cup and a paper bag. I knew exactly what it was. "Banana milkshake, onion rings with extra fry sauce, and an order of jalapeno poppers." She put it on my desk, then unwrapped the straw and stuffed it in the cup. "Drink."

"I'm not hungry."

"Drink the shake and eat," she said. "You need comfort food. You eat while I talk."

I took a drink of the shake. Whenever I had a shitty day at school, Dad would either take me out for a banana shake or make one at home for me. It wasn't just good. It was like getting a pat on my back from my dad. This morning, I wished he was still alive to see my success. Now, I was glad he wasn't here to see me falling on my face.

"How bad is it?" I asked.

She cringed. "It's not great. Carl will be here soon. Susan is putting together a statement. The phones haven't stopped ringing. I've directed my phone to go straight to voicemail. We need to come up with a plan."

"She cost me the launch," I said.

"Not necessarily. We'll get ahead of this. I need to reread the article. I was too pissed the first time. We'll pick through

the piece, find the problems, and formulate a counterattack. We'll spin it. You know Carl is a master at his job."

"I need to meet with the department heads," I said. My brain was shifting from shock to action.

"I have it scheduled in thirty minutes."

"Good. Thank you."

"I need to go to my office to, well, to figure out what comes next," she said. "I'll see you at the meeting. Try and take a deep breath. We're going to get through this."

I sucked on my milkshake while scanning email after email. Shit was hitting the fan. I couldn't focus on the tech because I was putting out fires. The article had spooked the people that I was partnered with. I had maintained a very good, clean reputation. I had never been tainted by scandal. In one fell swoop, Merida had destroyed years of hard work.

It was a wild couple of hours. I was grateful for the milkshake Hattie brought me earlier. It was the only thing keeping me going.

Hattie and I were operating at full speed, trying desperately to contain the damage that had been unleashed upon my reputation. Investors were pulling out left and right, their faith in me shattered by the damning *Full Disclosure* article.

All the success and goodwill I had built during my marketing tour had evaporated into thin air. Nobody wanted to align themselves with the man they were reading about in the newest *Full Disclosure* column. The allegations, the twisted stories, they were like poison, spreading doubt and mistrust like wildfire.

I couldn't escape the mounting pressure, the weight of it all bearing down on me. Hate mail flooded my inbox, and social media was a battlefield of anger and accusations. The carefully crafted image I had worked so hard to maintain had crumbled, leaving behind a trail of disappointment and scorn.

Every phone call, every email, every news article seemed like another blow, another reminder of how far I had fallen in

the eyes of the public. The stress gnawed at me, a constant presence that left me feeling on edge and powerless.

The road through this would be long and arduous. I would have to fight tooth and nail to rebuild the trust I had lost. But in that moment, all I could feel was the anger and frustration that threatened to consume me as I grappled with the fallout of a single article that had turned my world upside down.

Her actions reminded me why I was a recluse. She was exactly why I trusted no one. I let her weasel her way into my life and I was going to be paying a high price for that moment of weakness.

Hattie came into the office carrying a stack of papers and balancing two coffees in her other hand. “Caffeinate,” she ordered.

“Let me guess, you have more bad news,” I said.

“It’s not great news.”

She sat down, and once again, we went over the next round of attacks. The article was being spun by every other publication ever established with sources coming forward. It felt like I was in a battle and facing wave after wave of attacks. Just when I thought I was finally through the thick of it, another attack came in.

The air in the room was thick with tension, and it felt like we were on the brink of a disaster that was spinning out of control.

But then, like a breaking dam, Hattie’s frustration erupted. Her voice cracked and she quickly buried her face in her hands. “I can’t believe this happened,” she muttered, her voice heavy with self-blame. “This is my fault.”

My own anger and stress surged as I watched her break down. She had been a rock throughout this ordeal, tirelessly working to manage the crisis, and seeing her like this tore at my heart. Hattie didn’t cry. She was always a pillar of strength beside me.

“Hattie,” I said, my voice laced with frustration. “This isn’t your fault. We trusted the agency. We trusted Merida.

None of us could have seen this coming.”

She looked up at me, her eyes filled with regret. “I should have known better,” she whispered. “I should have been more cautious. I thought we could trust them, especially Merida. She seemed so kind, and I thought she was good for you. You seemed so happy.”

I knew that Hattie was shouldering an immense burden of guilt, and I wanted to reassure her that she wasn’t alone in this. “Hattie,” I said firmly, “we’re in this together. We’ll figure it out. Right now, we need to focus on containing the damage. We can’t change what happened. It happened.”

As I spoke, I couldn’t help but feel the weight of the situation pressing down on me. The anger and stress were ever present, but I knew that we had to keep moving forward, no matter how daunting the road ahead might be.

I looked at Hattie, her face marked by tears and frustration, and I felt my own anger and stress bubbling beneath the surface. I couldn’t afford to let those emotions consume me right now. There was too much at stake, and we had to keep the ship afloat.

“We can cry about it later,” I told her, my voice steady but tinged with frustration. “Right now, this has nothing to do with Faux’s. We need to focus on damage control.”

Even though I wore a tough exterior, I was seething inside. This betrayal stung like nothing else, and it dredged up old feelings from when my father had started slipping away from me. The sense of trust that had been shattered was all too familiar.

Did I ever really know Merida at all? Was everything we shared just a ploy to get close to me so she could write a story? The questions swirled in my mind, but I couldn’t bring myself to read the full article. The thought of seeing those words on the screen, the allegations and accusations? It was too much to bear.

For now, I had to compartmentalize my emotions and focus on finding a way out of this mess. The anger and stress

would have to wait, pushed to the back of my mind as I grappled with the reality of the situation.

It was unforgivable, and I knew that I would never be able to trust her again. Hell, I would never trust anyone again. But right now, that didn't matter. What mattered was getting ahead of the story and minimizing the damage as much as possible.

“We need to reach out to our legal team,” I said to Hattie, my tone clipped and businesslike. “They need to start working on a response to the article. I called my lawyer already, but that's for my personal protection.”

Hattie nodded, her face a mix of determination and sadness. “I'll get right on it,” she said, her voice low. “But what about Merida? Can you sue her? Can the company sue her?”

I shook my head, my jaw tight. “My lawyer didn't think so, but there is the NDA she signed at Faux's. He called me a bit ago and said he was reaching out to Della.”

“Good. Nail her ass.”

“We might also have some room to go after her and the publication for talking about the tech,” I said. “It might be a stretch, but we can at least try to prevent them from divulging any more information about it.”

Hattie nodded, her eyes hardening with resolve. “We'll do whatever it takes to protect the company and your reputation.”

I appreciated her loyalty, but deep down, I knew that the damage had already been done. The article was out there, and no matter how hard we tried to mitigate it, the public would have their opinions. And the worst part was that some of those opinions might be true.

“Carl said he's been fielding calls from just about every morning show host. He thinks you need to go on before she does.”

“She's doing the media rounds?” I felt the blood rushing from my face.

“I don’t know,” she answered with sadness in her voice. “But that’s the usual process. Her story has blown up. She makes the rounds, and the story gets a second wind. This isn’t going to go away anytime soon.”

“You think I should push the launch,” I said.

“I don’t know yet. But we might need to consider it.”





## MERIDA

**I**t took me several hours to get myself together. After Jensen kicked me out of his office, I bawled. I cried my heart out in the privacy of my home. I never really understood what it meant to have a broken heart. I knew now. My heart hurt. I felt physical pain. Every muscle in my body felt like it had been pulled and twisted. Nothing felt right.

I woke up this morning with the intention of taking Jensen lunch at the office. I knew he was working hard to get everything ready for the launch. I was hoping to steal a few kisses and wish him luck. I never would have guessed this was the way my day was going to end up.

Jensen had come into my life when I wasn't looking for anyone. He swept in and changed my world. He showed me so much happiness and excitement. I never thought a nerd like me would ever get to be taken around the world on a romantic trip on a private jet.

When I had no more tears left to cry, I got up and took a look at myself in the mirror. I looked like hell. It was time to take action. I was furious. Now that I was seriously dehydrated, I was pissed and ready to kick some ass. I slapped on some makeup to hide the bulk of the damage left by my crying jag. I put in some eye drops to hide the bloodshot eyes and left my house.

I stormed into the *Full Disclosure* office, my anger simmering just beneath the surface. I didn't bother with pleasantries or greetings as I went straight to Dalton's desk.

My emotions were raw and unbridled. He was focused on his screen, his fingers flying over the keyboard. He didn't even see me because he was so involved in what he was writing.

I slapped my hand on his desk. He jumped and looked up at me. "Merida!"

"What the hell did you do, Dalton?" I demanded, my voice sharp and accusing.

Dalton, with his cheeky grin and innocent demeanor, reclined back in his chair, clearly reveling in the chaos he had caused. "Hi."

"Don't you dare," I hissed. "What. The. Actual. Fuck!"

"Woah," he said, holding up his hands. "What's going on."

"What did you do?"

"The article," he said, smiling. "I did what needed doing. I think the words you're looking for are *thank you*."

"How?" I asked. "How in the hell did you get him to run it? *Why* did you run it? I told you not to! I told you to review it."

"I pitched the story to your father as my own," he said with a smile. "He took one look at it and was immediately thrilled with it."

My mouth dropped open. I couldn't believe he betrayed me like that. I thought of him as a mentor. For a moment, I understood a fraction of what Jensen was feeling. To know it was so much worse for him almost sent me into a crying fit again. I took a deep breath. "You're disgusting. I can't believe you did that. You passed my work off as your own?"

Dalton's grin widened, and he nodded. "Guilty as charged. And when he approved it, I had the pleasure of explaining that it wasn't mine after all. It was yours."

The audacity of his actions left me speechless for a moment. I had trusted him, and he had betrayed me in the most underhanded way possible. I couldn't help but feel a burning anger toward him.

I took a step closer, my voice trembling with fury. “You had no right, Dalton. This is my life, my reputation. You had no authority to do anything with that article. It was mine.”

Dalton’s grin faltered for a moment, and he looked at me with a hint of remorse. “Merida, I didn’t think it would blow up like this. I thought it was just a story, a scoop that would boost your career.”

My anger didn’t waver. “Well, congratulations, Dalton. You got your scoop, but you also destroyed everything I had built with Jensen. You’ve left chaos and devastation in your wake.”

I turned and stormed away from his desk, my heart heavy with anger and regret. I couldn’t believe the mess I had been dragged into, all because of someone I had considered a friend and ally. I stomped back to my desk to collect my personal things. I wasn’t sure if my father would have had my shit packed and tossed or not. I supposed I wasn’t all that surprised to find it was exactly how I left it. He didn’t even bother cleaning out my desk. That was how insignificant I was.

Dalton followed me to my desk. “Merida, I don’t know why you’re angry. Your article is on fire! It’s burning up the internet.”

I glared at Dalton, incredulous at his audacity. He had just confessed to manipulating the situation for his own gain, and now he stood there, acting as if he had achieved some kind of grand victory. Like I should be thanking him for destroying my world.

“I didn’t want it published. I told you not to publish. I told you to forget about it. I can’t believe you did it anyway. I’m so pissed at you, Dalton. I can’t even put into words how pissed I am.”

Again, I was given a brief walk in Jensen’s shoes and how he must have felt when he saw that headline.

“You should have seen your father, Merida,” Dalton gushed, his enthusiasm grating on my already frayed nerves. “He was so proud of you. He’s been getting calls all morning

about the piece and you. Everyone wants to know who you are. You were right. This was your big breakout article. I told you a piece of spaghetti would stick eventually!”

I was torn between anger and confusion. My heart was hammering in my chest, and it felt like it was breaking all at once. My father was proud of me? The man who had always pushed me into writing advice columns, who had never truly recognized my talent as a journalist, was suddenly proud of a story that had wreaked havoc on my life and Jensen’s?

I struggled to find words, a mixture of emotions swirling inside me. “Proud?” I finally managed to utter, my voice laced with anger and disbelief. “Dalton, you have no idea what you’ve done. My father being proud of me is the last thing I wanted. This isn’t how I wanted to make a name for myself. I destroyed a man. That’s not something I will ever be proud of.”

Dalton’s enthusiasm waned as he realized the gravity of the situation. “Merida, I didn’t think it would go this far,” he stammered, his expression shifting from excitement to regret. “I wanted to help you. I wanted you to feel the pride and satisfaction that comes from having your hard work recognized and praised. It wasn’t supposed to hurt you.”

But it was too late for apologies or regrets. The damage had been done, and I was left grappling with the repercussions of his actions. My relationship with my father had taken an unexpected turn, and the future was uncertain. I couldn’t bring myself to be happy I finally had my father’s respect when I lost the respect of a man I loved. A man I loved but never got the chance to tell him how I felt.

“You have to talk to him,” Dalton said.

“What?”

“You need to talk to your dad,” he said. “Let him heap praise on you. It’s what you’ve been fighting for. You earned it. You deserve the accolades.”

As Dalton grabbed my hand and practically dragged me to my father’s office, I couldn’t help but feel a mounting sense of

anger and frustration. He seemed utterly oblivious to the turmoil he had caused with that article, and now he was acting as if he had orchestrated some grand triumph.

When we entered my father's office, I was met with a booming welcome. "Merida, my girl!" my father exclaimed, his tone far warmer than I had ever heard it. He ushered me inside and poured a drink, a gesture that was completely out of character for him.

"Have a seat, have a seat," he said, gesturing toward a chair across from his desk. "I want to hear all about it. How did you pull this off? How did you get someone as uptight as Loxley to spill his secrets? I mean, you published information that's never been shared before, and with Loxley himself as your source!"

My anger flared at his words. He had no idea what had transpired, how this article had become a nightmare for Jensen and me. But my father seemed oblivious to my frustration as he continued to boast about my work.

"You hit every note perfectly," he declared with pride. "I loved the drama, the high stakes of his AI launch, your own personal concerns about Lox, and even the more emotional parts, like him losing his dad."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Hearing him lay out my article in a cold manner made me want to vomit. My father, who had always dismissed my journalistic ambitions and pigeonholed me into writing silly fluff columns, was suddenly praising me for an article that had caused so much harm. It was infuriating and disheartening all at once.

I took a deep breath, struggling to find the right words to respond to him. A wave of nausea washed over me. This was spiraling out of control far too quickly, and I could feel the mounting anger and frustration welling up inside me.

"Merida, what's wrong?" Dad asked. "You look like you're going to be sick."

"Dad," I began with my voice trembling. I took a deep breath to steady myself. "You have to pull the article. Dalton

was only supposed to read and edit it. He didn't have my permission to publish, and things are more complicated now. I didn't want to run the story."

At first, my father seemed to think I was joking. He raised an eyebrow, a disbelieving look on his face, but when he realized I was serious, he shook his head. "Merida, we can't pull this now," he said firmly. "It's made too big of a splash. You need to get on board. It's already out there. You can't just take it back."

"I want it pulled," I said with more authority. "I will write a retraction. It's my article and you didn't have the authority to publish it."

"That's not how this works," he growled.

I felt a surge of anger and frustration. My father was so focused on the success of the article and the attention it had garnered that he couldn't see the damage it had caused. It was as if he were blind to the turmoil it had unleashed in my life.

"Dad this article is ruining my life and Jensen's. You have to pull it."

He ignored me. "We're going for celebratory steaks tonight. It's something I do with all my top writers who make me money."

I wanted to scream, to make him understand the gravity of the situation, but it was clear that he was not going to back down. In that moment, I felt utterly powerless, trapped in a situation that was spiraling out of control, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

"I can't, Dad."

"You can, and you will," he ordered. "I have to talk to legal. We've been getting some calls about the piece. I'll see you at dinner."

I sat, frozen in place, as my father walked past me and out of the room. I wanted to scream, to throw something, but instead, I sat quietly.

“Merida, this is a good thing. Sometimes, you rock some boats and people don’t always like what you write, but it’s a story. It was all true, right?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t my truth to tell,” I whispered.





I felt like I'd been hit by a truck. The momentum I had built for the launch was gone, and in its place was a gaping void of uncertainty and devastation. The *Full Disclosure* article had slammed the brakes on everything I had worked so hard to achieve, and it was a bitter pill to swallow. It was a wildfire in a forest that hadn't seen rain in years. Once the match was lit, there was no stopping it. It would take another force of nature to stop the hemorrhaging.

Hattie had been in tears multiple times throughout the day, and I had been helpless to comfort her. The weight of the situation was crushing, and it seemed like I was running around like a chicken with its head cut off, trying to salvage what I could. Never before had Hattie let anything get to her like this did.

I knew it was the guilt. She encouraged me to go to Faux's. She wanted me to have a woman on my arm to soften my image. I didn't blame her. I was the one that chose Merida without bothering to find out who she was. Della had called me a couple of times and I never returned her calls. I assumed she was calling to work out the payment or to see how things were going. Now, I wondered if she was calling to warn me who Merida was after she ran her background check.

It wasn't Hattie's fault I slept with Merida and it was definitely not her fault I ran my big mouth in front of what was a virtual stranger. I carried that blame. It was my fault. My choices had led us to where we were.

My staff, who had been so dedicated and enthusiastic about the launch, were drowning under the stress of the fallout. It was heartbreaking to see their spirits dampened by the chaos that had erupted in the wake of the article. I had to find a way to rally them, to reignite their motivation and belief in our project.

But as I looked around at the disarray, the anger and frustration building inside me, I couldn't help but feel like I was standing at the precipice of a disaster that I had no control over. The road ahead was uncertain and treacherous, and I had to find a way to navigate it, no matter how daunting the journey might be.

As the end of the day drew near, I found a quiet moment to lean against the wall out in the bullpen, away from my office. The chaos of the day was finally starting to subside as people began to sign off their computers. I decided to confront the most painful part of the *Full Disclosure* article—the section where I was portrayed as a bully who berated my staff.

I liked my people. Yes, I got frustrated and I probably didn't handle it in the best way. I supposed I never really considered how it might make them feel. I had a pretty good employee-retention rate. Most of the people that worked for me had been with me for years. If I was such a monster to work for, wouldn't they have left?

But it didn't matter what I thought. Their opinions and feelings mattered. I went back to my office and quietly closed the door. I needed to read through every damn line of the article. It was essentially my performance review. As the boss, I never got put in check when I stepped out of line. Hattie would mention something to me, but she knew there was no consequence she could enforce. I was her boss.

Taking a deep breath, I began to read those damning words, the anger and shame bubbling up inside me. It was excruciating to relive those moments, to see how my actions had been portrayed for the world to see. I knew what I had to do.

I walked out of my office, hoping to catch anyone before they left for the day. I knew if I didn't say something now, there were a few people that probably wouldn't bother to come back in the morning.

I cleared my throat loudly. "I assume you've all read the article that's caused all this havoc," I started, my tone heavy with regret and humility. People nodded, their eyes avoiding mine.

"I want to apologize," I continued, my voice unwavering. "I'm deeply sorry for how I've treated you, for the way I've acted in the past. The article may have exaggerated some things, but there's truth in it too, and that's on me."

My staff exchanged glances, their expressions a mix of surprise and uncertainty. It was a vulnerable moment for me, one that I had never imagined having to face. But I had to acknowledge my mistakes and make amends if I had any hope of rebuilding trust and moving forward. My launch was probably fucked, but I still had the tech. I could still put it out there and I would need my people ready to rally when the thing took off like I was confident it would. Assuming the public was willing to give something the evil Jensen Loxley produced a chance.

"I've let my own ambition and drive cloud my judgment," I admitted, my voice softer now. "I've pushed too hard, and I've been demanding in ways that were unfair to all of you. I want you to know that I'm committed to making things right, to being a better leader and teammate. Your hard work and dedication deserve better."

As I finished speaking, my words hung in the air, and I waited for their response, hoping that they would see the sincerity in my apology and give me a chance to make amends.

As I stood there, feeling a deep sense of shame, I had to confront the fact that I had failed as a leader at times. I had lost my cool with my staff, and during moments of high pressure, I had let my emotions get the best of me. It was a side of myself I didn't like. I didn't want to be that guy.

“I want you guys to know, I’m going to do better. I’m going to try and put myself in check when I feel myself getting frustrated. I’m not perfect. I’m going to slip, but I promise all of you I am going to make the effort to change my ways. I hope you all give me another chance to show you I’m not a bad guy. I’m a guy that makes some bad choices and has bad days. I vow to do better.”

One of the developers piped up. “This is tech, boss,” he said. “Every job I’ve ever had has moments where the pressure is breathing down your neck. Anyone is bound to crack every now and then.”

His words were followed by nods of agreement from others in the room. “You make up for it with quarterly bonuses,” a woman chimed in with a sympathetic smile.

“And the best benefits in the business,” another added. “You let me take a year off when my baby was born without losing any income, and you still gave me raises.”

“You covered my Christmas shopping last year when you found out my mother was sick, and the medical bills ate into our budget,” someone else shared.

Listening to their words, I was overwhelmed with a mix of emotions—relief, gratitude, and a renewed sense of purpose. These were the moments that truly mattered, the moments that reminded me why I had started this journey in the first place. My staff wasn’t just a team. They were a family, and I had a responsibility to be the leader they deserved.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I realized the depth of their forgiveness and support. It was a turning point, a chance to make amends and be a better leader. With a renewed sense of determination, I would do everything in my power to live up to their faith in me and to create an environment where they could thrive and succeed.

I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude toward my team. “Thank you,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “Thank you all for reminding me of what’s truly important.”

I took a deep breath and looked around the room, meeting the eyes of each of my team members. “You’re right,” I said, my voice gaining strength. “This is tech, and it’s tough. But that’s no excuse for the way I’ve been behaving. I want to be a better boss, a better leader, and a better person. And I promise to make the effort, every single day. Hattie is going to help me, right?”

She smiled, wiping tears as she nodded. “I can’t wait to tell you you’re being an asshole.”

Everyone laughed. The mood was lifting.

“Guys, I cannot possibly predict what’s going to happen in the next week or the next month, but I’m asking all of you to hang in there. Yes, the company has taken a hit. We’ve lost some investors, but I can still keep things afloat. I have every intention of launching Lox. You all worked hard on this tech and I want you all to reap the rewards when it takes off. It will take off. I know it. But I also need to prepare all of you for some rough waters ahead. This is just getting started. If you guys want to jump ship, I can’t stop you. But if you stick with me, you will be rewarded.”

I paused for a moment, allowing my words to sink in. I could see that my team was slowly beginning to regain their confidence in me. It was a start, but I knew that it wasn’t going to be easy. I had a lot of work to do if I wanted to be the kind of leader they deserved, the kind of leader they needed.

“Thank you all! Go home. Have a drink and let’s forget about today. I hope I’ll see you all back here tomorrow.”

As I walked back into my office, a weight lifted off my shoulders. I had a renewed sense of purpose, a drive to succeed, not just for myself, but for my team. I was determined to make amends, to be better, to do better.

Hattie followed behind me. “That was good,” she said. “Very motivational.”

“Do you think it worked?” I asked. “Do you think I’m going to lose some of them?”

“Honestly, you probably will, but that’s on them. If they can’t stick by you through some of the tricky stuff, you don’t need them. You weren’t a horrible boss before. That bitch exploited a few little instances. Like she’s never said a cross word.”

“Hattie, please don’t call her a bitch,” I said quietly.

“Jensen, she hurt you,” she snapped. “Calling her a bitch is about the nicest thing I can say right now.”

“I know you’re just looking out for me. I appreciate it.”

“You know I’ve got your back.” She looked at me and sighed. “I’m going home. You should go home, too. I hate to say it, but I think tomorrow is going to be even worse. Don’t get too drunk.”

I scoffed. “At this point, I don’t know if there is *too drunk*. There isn’t enough whiskey in the world to numb me and make me forget this day.”

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “I know, but you’re tough. It’s better you learned who she is now than down the road. Imagine if you would have married her. She would have destroyed you and taken half of everything.”





## MERIDA

I sat in the plush leather seat at the ultra-nice steak restaurant, surrounded by the top writers at *Full Disclosure*. It was a moment I had longed for, a celebration of my supposed success in the world of journalism. But now that it had arrived, it felt empty and devoid of meaning. I shouldn't have come, but I supposed there was still that girl that wanted her father's attention. I had heard of the celebration dinners, but I had never been invited. I tried to be one of the cool kids for a long time. It was nice to finally be one of the people at the table—literally.

The restaurant was a culinary haven, and everyone around me raved about the amazing food. I had been here with my father before, but it was a father-daughter thing, not an editor and his top writer thing. Food flowed from the kitchen to our table. The steaks were perfectly cooked, the sides were gourmet delights, and the wine flowed generously. But to me, it was as if the flavors had vanished, leaving behind only a bitter taste of guilt.

My father beamed with pride as he toasted my latest article. He spoke of my talent as if it were a commodity that he had acquired and was now showing off to his colleagues. I smiled and thanked him, but my mind was elsewhere. I couldn't shake the feeling that I didn't belong here, that I had somehow cheated my way to this table. My father's praise did nothing to dispel this feeling. If anything, it only made it worse.

I forced a smile and clinked my glass with those around me, but inside, I was wrestling with my conscience. The article I had written, the one that had brought me this moment of glory, was based on deceit and betrayal.

As I glanced around the table at my colleagues and mentors, I couldn't help but feel like an imposter. They saw me as a rising star in the world of journalism, but I knew the truth. My success had come at a cost, and I was carrying the weight of my choices.

As the night wore on, the conversation turned to gossip and office politics. I tried to participate, but everything felt so shallow and meaningless. These people were supposed to be the best of the best, but all they cared about was who was sleeping with whom and who was in line for the next promotion. I felt like I was drowning in a sea of superficiality.

The laughter and chatter of the dinner conversation swirled around me, but I was lost in my own thoughts. I wondered if this was the price of ambition, if climbing the ladder of success meant sacrificing one's integrity. I realized I wasn't missing much when it came to being in the cool kids' circle.

As the evening wore on, I knew I had a decision to make—to continue down this path of deception or find a way to make amends for the choices I had made.

I was nursing my glass of wine, with Dalton sitting beside me. His enthusiasm was usually infectious and something I admired, but it grated on my nerves tonight more than usual. He was talking about how my career was on the cusp of a massive transformation, and all I could think about was the whirlwind of emotions that had consumed me since that article had been published.

“Merida.” Dalton leaned in closer, his voice honeyed with charm. “You have no idea just how big this is going to be for you. This is your moment, your ticket to the big leagues.”

I tried to smile, to appreciate his support, but it was hard when all I felt was a sense of dread. “I don't know about that,” I murmured.

“I do,” he said, smiling. “I’m having a party at my place. I want you to come over for drinks.”

Dalton’s parties were the worst kept secret at the office. Only the really cool kids got an invite to his parties. I was jealous of the others that got invited. I always felt left out. I had aspired to be one of the regulars at his parties and now that I had the invitation I’d been coveting, my stomach revolted.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t think I’m in the mood to party.”

“Merida,” he said with his voice low as he leaned in. “I’d like you to be there. You’ve never been to my place. I think you would like it.”

His eyes lingered just a little too long on mine as he spoke. As if that wasn’t bad enough, I didn’t miss the leering look at my chest. I wasn’t in the mood for socializing, especially with my name plastered all over the media for the wrong reasons.

He was hitting on me. That confused the hell out of me. “Dalton, I don’t think that would be a good idea.” I said firmly, trying to stifle the irritation in my voice.

“Why not?” he asked, his hand inching ever closer to my thigh.

I leaned back, out of his reach. “I’m really not interested.”

“Come on, Merida,” he said, his tone turning insistent. “It’ll be fun. You deserve to celebrate. Let’s go back to my place and we can have our own party. I’ll tell everyone I changed my mind.”

I knew where this was going, and I didn’t want any of it. I had always thought Dalton was cute, but I had never been interested in him that way. And now, with everything that was going on, I definitely didn’t need any more attention.

It was disappointing. I looked up to Dalton. I thought I wanted to be like him, but now, after what he had done, I didn’t even want to be near him. He kept finding ways to touch me. I was surprised and a little disappointed my father didn’t intervene. I would have thought he would be disgusted to have an older man pawing at me.

Unfortunately, Dalton seemed unbothered by my discomfort. The server approached, bringing a fresh bottle of wine. Dalton, in his usual theatrical manner, told her about my newfound fame. “This is the woman who spent a month with Jensen Loxley,” he bragged. “She’s the one that finally broke through the dude’s veil of secrecy.”

I could feel the eyes of the people around us on me, and it made me uncomfortable. I wasn’t ready for this kind of attention, and I certainly didn’t want to be the center of anyone’s gossip.

The server looked at me like she thought Dalton was lying. I knew exactly what she was thinking. She didn’t believe the gorgeous billionaire would look twice at someone like me. It made me want to crawl under the table and hide.

As the evening wore on, Dalton’s attempts at charm became increasingly unbearable. I knew he meant well by constantly talking me up, but I needed some space to clear my head and make sense of the mess I had unwittingly created. I made an early getaway, much to everyone’s disappointment, slipping out of the party like a phantom.

The night air was cool and refreshing, a welcome relief from the suffocating atmosphere of the party and the overwhelming smell of rich food and wine. I needed time to think, to figure out how to navigate the storm that was brewing in the media. My life was changing, that much was certain, but whether it was for better or worse remained to be seen.

On one hand, I finally had the career I had been fighting for. On the other, I lost the only man I ever loved.

I had spent hours wandering the city, seeking solace and answers to the chaos my life had become. I mulled over my options. What could I do to make things better? I had to apologize again. I hoped that with a little time to cool down, Jensen would give me a chance to explain what happened.

The first place I went was Jensen’s office, desperate to find some connection, some way to make sense of the whirlwind that had consumed me. But the office was locked up for the

night. I was a little surprised they weren't burning the midnight oil to fix the mess I made.

Next, I made my way to Jensen's penthouse, hoping against hope that I might find him there. The doorman, however, had other plans. He refused to let me up, a stark reminder that I was no longer welcome in Jensen's world.

As the rain began to fall, I felt utterly defeated. My emotions, like the raindrops, poured out of me, and I couldn't hold back the tears any longer. Heartbroken and drenched, I found myself standing at my mother's doorstep.

The door opened, and there was my mother, a comforting presence in the midst of my storm. Without a word, she extended her arms, and I rushed into her embrace, sobbing uncontrollably. She held me close, shielding me from the cold and the world outside.

"I screwed up," I sobbed.

My mom hugged me and held me while I cried. My heart felt heavy with regret and shame. I couldn't believe I had let things get this far. How could I have been so stupid?

"It's going to be okay," my mom whispered, rubbing my back. "We'll figure this out. You'll make things right."

I nodded, unable to form words. My mind was still racing, trying to come up with a plan. I knew I had to make things right with Jensen and the media. But how?

"Let me make up the bed for you."

"No, I have to go home." I hiccupped.

"No, you don't. I need to move my stuff. You're sleeping here. You're in no condition to be out in the rain. A good sleep always provides some clarity. Get yourself a drink and I'll be right back."

I followed my mother to her guest room, feeling like a child in need of her mother's care. She fluffed up the pillows and pulled back the covers, making the bed look inviting and cozy. I crawled under the covers, grateful for the warmth and comfort of the bed. My mother brought me a glass of water

and tucked me in before leaving the room. I closed my eyes and let out a deep sigh, feeling the exhaustion from the night's events.

As I lay in bed, my thoughts drifted back to Jensen. I couldn't imagine what he must think of me now. I had completely destroyed his trust in me, and it would take a lot to earn it back. But I was determined to make things right. I couldn't just let this go.

I sat up in bed, feeling a sudden surge of energy. I needed to talk to Jensen, to explain everything and apologize. I grabbed my phone and dialed his number, my heart racing as I waited for him to answer.

"Hello?" His voice was guarded and tense.

"Jensen, it's me," I said, my voice shaking. "I need to talk to you."

"No, you don't. You've said plenty. Goodbye, Merida. You'll be hearing from my lawyers."

He ended the call. I tried to call back, but it went straight to voicemail.

I tossed my phone on the nightstand and buried my face in my hands, the weight of my mistakes crushing me. I couldn't let things end like this. I had to find a way to make things right with Jensen.



I was up in my penthouse with Christian, trying to find solace in the amber depths of expensive whiskey. The world outside was chaotic, and I needed a break from it all. I stared into the glass, replaying the events of the day. I had that feeling I always got after I'd flown across the world. It was a weird buzzing sensation in my legs and head.

"What are you going to do?" Christian asked.

"I was considering buying an island and disappearing," I said dryly.

He laughed. "You'd only last a week. You're a tech guy. You would not be able to live off the grid."

"I think I could learn to appreciate it."

"You're not going to run and hide," he said. "So what, some chick said some mean stuff about you? Fuck her. You're Jensen Loxley. The world hates you because they aren't you. When you look at the details of her hit piece, there's very little she could say bad about you. So what, you yelled at employees who weren't doing their job?"

Christian was right. I couldn't just run away from my problems. But the constant scrutiny from the media, the endless rumors and speculation, it was all becoming too much to handle. It was like every move I made was being watched and dissected, and I was getting tired of it.

"I know, I know," I muttered, taking a sip of the whiskey. "It's just exhausting, you know?"



Christian nodded, his eyes empathetic. “I get it. But you can’t let these people get to you. You’re stronger than that.”

“It isn’t just the gossip,” I said. “People have been waiting for the moment I was jerked off the pedestal they put me on. They love it. Now that I have this stupid scandal attached to my name, investors and advertisers are jumping ship.”

“You don’t need them,” he said. “Lox is good. When it launches, you’re going to rake in millions, maybe billions. It’s the investors’ loss. They are the ones that are shooting themselves in the foot. If they’re that skittish, you don’t need them.”

I took another sip of the whiskey, letting the warm burn of the alcohol soothe my nerves. Christian always knew how to make me feel better, but this time, it wasn’t enough. The pressure was too much, and I needed an escape.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I said, placing the glass down on the table. “I need to get away from all of this.”

Christian raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“I need to take a break,” I said. “A real break. From everything.”

“A break?” he repeated, his expression skeptical. “What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “Just leave. Maybe travel for a bit. Get away from the constant attention, the expectations. I need to clear my head.”

Christian leaned back in his seat, considering my words. “Where would you go?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Somewhere far away. Maybe Europe. Or Asia. Anywhere that isn’t here.”

Christian nodded slowly. “Okay. I get it. But you can’t just disappear. You have obligations. You’ve got a whole company counting on you to dig your way out of this.”

“I know,” I said. “But I need to do this. I can’t keep going like this. I need to take care of myself before I can take care of

anyone else.”

“I understand,” Christian said. “But before you make any decisions, think about it. Make sure this is what you really want. And if it is, that’s cool. Are you trying to run from the negative attention or her?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Both maybe.”

The intercom buzzed. Christian looked at me. “Hattie?”

“She would just come up,” I said. “I swear, if it’s a reporter, I’m going to lose my shit. How dare they come to my fucking house?”

The concierge’s voice crackled through the intercom, informing me that there was a dark, curly-haired young woman here to see me.

“No,” I said firmly. “I don’t want her in the building.”

“Understood, sir.” His tone made it clear that under no circumstances was she permitted upstairs. The connection was abruptly severed.

Christian looked at me. “Merida?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding.

“That’s bold coming over here to see you,” he said.

“I don’t care.”

“Have you talked to her?” he asked.

“I’ve heard enough from her. She says she didn’t mean it and it wasn’t supposed to get published. Am I supposed to believe she accidentally wrote the article and accidentally sent it in? She was sleep writing when the words hit the page? Bullshit.”

Christian nodded in agreement. “Yeah, that’s a load of crap. But maybe you should hear her out. Give her a chance to explain herself.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to hear any more lies. I can’t trust her anymore.”

“You don’t have to trust her, but it would be nice if you could try and find out why she did it,” he said. “Don’t you want to know if she did it maliciously? Did you wrong her or someone in her family?”

“Why should I care?” I shrugged. “It’s done.” I poured myself another glass of whiskey.

“I think you should at least talk to her,” he said. “At least tell her to fuck off in person or something. It would give you some kind of closure.”

“So, she can gather more information for her next sensational piece? I have already been burned once, and I’m not eager to be fodder for the media again. This was humiliating enough. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a sex tape out there just waiting to drop.”

He laughed. “Shit, I bet that would make a few million. All the ladies want to see the great Jensen Loxley naked and panting. I sure as hell don’t, but I know a few ladies would kill to see it.”

“Gross.”

“Seriously, I know you. You’re pretty good at reading a person’s character. You can sniff out gold-diggers better than anyone I know. Are you sure you have the full story here? This girl doesn’t strike me as the type who would intentionally run an article to blow up your life. Showing up in the pouring rain at this hour to talk? Doesn’t seem like the move of someone with malicious intent.”

I ran a hand through my hair, the frustration still lingering. “What’s done is done,” I replied, resigned. “I let someone in, and she burned me badly. Now, I have to focus on my launch and repairing the lingering damage her article caused. Hattie has set up some last-minute interviews for me to try to address the fallout.”

Christian frowned, concern etched on his face. “Is that really a good idea? Maybe it would be smarter to just let it all blow over.”

I shot him a look, my frustration with the situation simmering beneath the surface. “How about we trade places, and you tell me you still want to see if it will all just blow over?”

He sighed, acknowledging my point. “Alright, alright. I’m a friend here. I’m not the enemy. I know all your dirty little secrets and I have never been tempted to sell them to the media.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know you haven’t. You and Hattie are the only two people I can trust. Fuck everyone else.”

“You can trust me. The last thing you need is this shit to deal with. I’m really sorry. I know you liked this lady. You seemed really happy.”

“I was a fool.”

“You were a fool in love. She disarmed you. You thought you were getting something different. You couldn’t have known what she would do.”

“I should have vetted her,” I said. “She told me she was a journalist that wrote a woman’s column or something like that. She lied to me, and I ate it up without bothering to ask questions. I’m a fucking idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot,” Christian said. “You’re just a lonely man that found someone that seemed genuine. You wanted to believe that true love exists.”

I scoffed angrily. “I don’t care. It’s done. Carl is hiring a team of pollsters and shit that are supposed to take the pulse of the world. If it comes back with more negative than positive, we’re delaying the release of Lox.”

“You can’t let her halt something that you’ve been working on for years.”

“I don’t really have a choice,” I said. “This isn’t only my decision. I have to satisfy the investors that are still on board. I can’t have a failed launch. This has to be done right. If they think this black cloud is going to impact sales, it gets pulled back.”

“Man, I’m really sorry,” he said with a shake of his head. “That really sucks. When will you know if you’ve got the green light?”

“By the end of the week.”

“That’s not a lot of time to cancel the launch party,” he warned.

“I know, but Hattie says it’s the right thing to do.”

I took a deep breath and looked at Christian. He was right. It was time to move on. I couldn’t let my personal life affect my work. Lox was my dream, and I couldn’t let anyone stop me from making it a reality.

“You know,” I said with an amused smile. “I stayed single all this time because I didn’t want to be distracted. I get an inch from the finish line, and I allowed myself to get distracted.”

As our conversation continued, Christian’s voice took a more serious turn. “By the way, are you still on the hook to pay Merida that cool half million?”

I nodded solemnly. “There’s a contract, but I’ve got lawyers on it.”

“Good,” he said. “Don’t you dare pay her a penny for doing this shit.”

We finished another glass of whiskey before Christian got up to leave. I walked him to the door and then turned to look at all that my wealth bought for me. I wasn’t in danger of losing what I already had in terms of physical possessions, but I lost the respect of my peers and my customers. That was worse than losing the penthouse.

It was almost midnight and I needed to try and sleep. Tomorrow was going to be another day from hell. I needed to have my wits about me while I dealt with the reporters that were giving me a chance to tell my side of the story.

Hattie and Carl and the team of experts that handled these crisis situations would tell me everything I was supposed to say. They would tell me to smile and turn on the charm. I

couldn't change what was out there, but I could try and blind people with my smile and make them forget about it. I was going to have to do some *mea culpas* and promise to be better, which I already did, but now I had to do it in front of the world.

After my shower, I looked in the mirror and saw nothing but a tired man who was a little hungover. I was in desperate need of a shave and a haircut. I was ready to sleep for a month. I turned off the lights and walked to the bed to try and get some much-needed rest when my phone buzzed. It was a text from Merida.

“I'm sorry.”

I sat there looking at the screen. I didn't have to respond. I didn't have to do anything else at all. She had made her choice.

The phone rang in my hand. It was her.



## MERIDA

I woke up in my mother's guest room, feeling blurry-eyed and utterly exhausted. My head throbbed from the relentless tears I had shed the night before. Pushing myself to sit up, I took a deep breath and rubbed my temples, trying to regain some semblance of composure. I still felt the weight of yesterday's disaster on my chest.

I wasn't sure I would ever feel normal again. Where did I go from here? What did I do? Moving to Siberia seemed like a good option. I didn't want to accidentally run into Hattie or Jensen. Not that we would ever be in the same social circle, but just in case.

Leaving the bedroom, I found my mother in the living room, a sense of warmth and familiarity washing over me at the sight of her. She looked up, and her eyes softened with understanding and concern. Offering me a warm smile, she gestured toward the stove.

"There's a hot kettle on the stove if you'd like to fix yourself some tea," she said gently. "And I've just baked some fresh scones. They're on the counter."

I nodded, appreciating her thoughtfulness. Comfort food was exactly what I needed right now. I headed to the kitchen and poured myself a cup of steaming tea, its aroma offering a sense of solace. The scones, warm and inviting, beckoned to me from the counter. I couldn't resist, and I helped myself to a couple, carrying them back to the living room.



Settling into a plush armchair beside my mother, I sipped the tea and nibbled on the scones, the simple act of eating bringing a small measure of comfort. The rain pattered against the windows, a soft and melancholic backdrop to our shared silence. There was a warm fire going in the gas fireplace. It would have been a perfect morning if it wasn't coming on the heels of utter disaster.

She gazed at me with a gentle concern, her eyes filled with empathy. She asked the question I had been wrestling with all night.

“Are you ready to talk about it?” she asked.

“I don't know what to say,” I replied. “I messed up.”

“What happened?”

“Dalton took the piece to Dad and told him he wrote it.”

Her mouth dropped open. “He did not!”

“He did. He wanted to see what Dad would say. Dad loved it and wanted to run with it. Dalton told him I wrote it. It's the first time Dad has ever been truly proud of me. I hate that I liked the fact he was proud of me. I hate that I went to dinner with all of them to celebrate. I feel gross.”

“Do I have to ask how Jensen feels about it?”

I gave her a look that spoke a thousand words. “I'm sure you can guess.”

She nodded. “I think I can.”

I started to cry again. “The hurt on his face. I hurt him so bad, Mom. He wasn't even all that mad. I know he was mad, but it was the betrayal that really got him. He was just destroyed. I tried to apologize, but he didn't want to hear it. He doesn't want to hear my explanations. He just wants me to leave him alone.”

My mother reached across the end table between us and took my hand in hers. “Sweetheart, you made a mistake. But you're human. We all make mistakes. But what's important is that you take responsibility for your actions and try to make things right.”

“I don’t know how to make it right. Jensen won’t talk to me. Dalton is acting like nothing happened. And Dad thinks I’m a genius. I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

“You’re still my daughter,” my mother said. “And I love you no matter what. But you need to figure out who you are and what you want. And then you need to make things right with Jensen.”

“I don’t think he’ll ever forgive me,” I said, wiping away tears.

“You won’t know until you try,” my mother said with a gentle smile. “But in the meantime, try to focus on yourself. Figure out who you are, what you want in life, and where you want to go from here.”

“I guess that’s the problem. I don’t know who I am or what I want. I’ve spent the last ten years trying to show Dad I’m a good journalist, just like him. I do love to write, but what I’ve been doing isn’t really writing. I could do that with a blog or something. I don’t even know if this is what I want to spend the rest of my life doing. I think I’ve just been doing what you guys thought I should do. You both used to tell me journalism was in my blood. I’m not so sure about that now.”

My mother squeezed my hand. “It’s okay to question things, sweetheart. That’s how we grow and learn. Maybe it’s time for you to explore other passions and interests.”

I sighed, looking down at my lap. “I just don’t know where to start.”

“How about starting with something that makes you happy?” my mother suggested. “What’s something you enjoy doing, just for yourself?”

I thought for a moment before answering. “I don’t know. I feel like an empty vessel. I feel hollow. When I was with Jensen, my life felt so full. There was so much excitement. Every day there was something new to see and do.”

“I’m sure you mean every day was exciting because you were with Jensen. Being with someone you love can make doing the dishes fun and exciting.”

“It’s crazy,” I said with a watery smile. “I only knew him for a few weeks, but I fell in love with him. I fell fast and hard. Now, I’m trying to figure out how I just pick up and go on without him.”

“Does he know how you feel?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t think he would believe me if I tried to tell him. I called him last night. He hung up on me and blocked my calls. He doesn’t want anything to do with me. Jensen isn’t the kind of man that trusts easily. He’s such a mystery because he’s a private person. He doesn’t like to put himself out there. He’s not the man that article painted him to be. The man I wrote about was the man he presents to the world for the most part. I didn’t get to really explain who he was.”

“But is it your place to explain who he is?” Her question was soft, but I heard the disapproval in her voice. “He doesn’t have to answer to anyone except whatever higher power he believes in. If he wants to be a world-class asshole, that’s his choice. We all do things that irritate others. Why should he have his faults blasted to the world to judge him for?”

I shrugged, feeling a little defensive. “I wasn’t trying to judge him. I wanted to show the world who he really was. I thought it would help people understand him better.”

“Did you ever consider that he might not want to be understood? That he might be perfectly happy with who he is and doesn’t want anyone meddling in his life?”

I opened my mouth to respond but found that I didn’t have an answer. She was right. I had been so caught up in my own ambition and desire to make a name for myself that I had forgotten that Jensen was a person with feelings and desires of his own. I had taken his trust and betrayed it for the sake of my own career.

As I sat there, feeling guilty and ashamed, Mom patted my hand. “Listen, I’m not trying to make you feel bad. I just want you to think about Jensen’s perspective. He’s allowed to have boundaries and make choices about who he lets into his life.

Maybe he's just not ready for a relationship right now, or maybe he's dealing with things that you don't know about."

She was right. I had been so focused on my own feelings and needs that I hadn't stopped to consider Jensen's. "Just for the record, I didn't want the piece published."

She laughed and took a bite of her scone. "I know. But now that you've had a good night's sleep and I've given you a harsh dose of reality, do you have any clarity about what you need to do?"

I sighed, knowing I needed to act fast. "Yes," I replied with a heavy heart. "I think I know what I have to do."

Her eyes were full of understanding as she smiled. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to run a second article," I confessed, my voice quivering with both determination and fear. "And if my father won't publish it? Well, I'll figure that piece out. I have a coworker who owes me a favor after he stabbed me in the back."

My mother's brow furrowed in concern. "You're talking about Dalton?"

I nodded, acknowledging the complicated situation. "Yes, Dalton. He still thinks he did me a favor, but it's time I tell him the truth. I've fallen in love with my subject, and I have to make this right."

She offered me a reassuring smile. "Did Dalton say why he did what he did?"

"He said he did it for me, but last night, I think there was more to it. I've idolized that guy for a long time. He was hitting on me. Wanted me to go back to his place. I think all this time I operated under the impression he was just trying to help me out, but that's not the case at all. He's a snake."

"Your father would not be happy to know that about his star writer," she said in a tight voice.

"He was right there. I don't know how he could have missed it."

“Shame on him. I should have a word with him. His daughter isn’t a toy to be passed around the office or offered as a prize to his top writer.”

I smiled. “Thank you. I think I’m done with that place. It’s not for me. I can’t sell my soul to get a little fame. It isn’t worth it to me. I want more for myself. I don’t want to climb to the top by stepping on others.”

“Good for you! I’m so proud of you. I know my pride isn’t as worthy as your father’s, but I’ve always been proud of the woman you are, not the writer you can be.”

Tears streamed down my face. “Mom, your opinion of me means everything. I’ve always known I had your love and respect. You’ve always made it very clear you were proud of me. I guess I’ve been chasing it from Dad because he just doesn’t want to give it. I feel like I owe it to you guys to be better. To be successful.”

She took my hand in hers and squeezed it gently. “You don’t owe us anything, dear. Just be true to yourself and follow your heart. That’s all we can ask for.”

I nodded, feeling a sense of relief. “Thank you, Mom. You have no idea how much your support means to me.”

“Anytime, sweetheart.”

“I should go,” I said. “I need to get to work. Thank you so much for giving me a kick in the pants and loving me through it.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”



The next day, I sat in my office, the phone call with my lawyer fresh in my mind. He had been my first call yesterday. I sought his counsel on the potential of suing for defamation. As much as I wanted to protect my reputation, I had never anticipated that the personal conversations I had shared with Merida would be weaponized against me in an opinion piece filled with libel. It was more about personal revenge than the idea I would actually win anything.

My jaw clenched as I reviewed the notes from our conversation. Nothing she had said in that article was a lie. She had painted a vivid, albeit painful, picture of our interactions, one that was difficult to deny. The lawyer's voice had been measured as he explained the legal implications.

"In this case, you don't really have a case at all," he said carefully, like he was afraid I might blow up at him.

While it wasn't what I wanted to hear, it did give me a mixture of relief and resignation. Truthfully, I hadn't wanted to go down the path of a lawsuit. It was just one more thing to add to the growing list of complications stemming from Merida's article. I was angry and hurt and wanted to lash out at her. I had made the call in the heat of the moment. I was kind of glad it wasn't going to go anywhere. I was pissed at her, but I didn't want to destroy her. I supposed that was the difference between me and her.

I needed to focus on going through the motions of dealing with the fallout in an attempt to repair the damage she had

caused to my life and my reputation. I almost believed her when she said she didn't mean to publish the article. But it didn't change the fact she wrote it in the first place. That was what really stung. To see what she really thought of me was hurtful. I thought I treated her with kindness and respect. Clearly, I was wrong.

I took a deep breath and headed back into the office from my brief trip down to the lobby to get fresh coffee. I braced myself for what awaited me. Hattie was already there, and the rest of the development team had assembled in the conference room. Their faces were etched with stress and determination. The place had that familiar, frantic, chaotic energy that had become the norm in the past couple of days.

I offered a grateful smile to my dedicated team, who had weathered the storm alongside me. "Thank you, everyone, for still being here and working your butts off," I said, my voice filled with genuine appreciation. "I promise, after the launch, I'll make sure to pay it back to each and every one of you."

I hoped they believed me when I said I would make sure they were all going to be generously rewarded. I did give good bonuses.

Their weary but determined expressions relaxed into small smiles, and it was in that moment that I felt a renewed sense of purpose. We had a monumental launch ahead of us, and with this team by my side, we could weather any storm that came our way.

"We're here for you," one of them said.

"And the bonus," another one joked.

"Trust me, if this thing takes off like it should, you're going to be buying new cars. But please don't quit on me. Once we roll out Lox, we're going to keep moving forward. We've got a lot more to do. I'll check in with you all later. Just keep doing what you're doing."

I retreated to my office, seeking a moment of solitude before the live interview I had scheduled for later that evening. Hattie had arranged it after filtering through the many, many



requests Carl sent her way. She explained we had the pick of anyone I wanted to talk to because anyone who was someone in this town wanted to give me a time slot. I was going to be ratings gold.

Carl was negotiating questions and making it clear what was off limits. Even when deals were made, a pushy interviewer always tried to get one of the questions that were off limits into the interview. I was used to it.

Hattie, Carl, and the whole damn PR crisis team insisted I had to go public and get my face out there. A smiling face. I needed to discredit the article by laughing it off and being approachable. I felt a little bad that I was going to be discrediting Merida, but when it came down to it, it was me or her. Even knowing the interview was a must, I couldn't help but dread it.

As I sat at my desk, I went through my notes and prepared myself for the questions that were bound to come. The late-night show's host was known for their probing and often relentless interviews, and they wouldn't hold back.

Hattie popped her head into my office, a reassuring smile on her face. "Jensen, you've got this," she said with a smile. "Just be yourself and tell your side of the story. People will understand."

I nodded, trying to summon a sense of confidence. But deep down, I couldn't shake the feeling of trepidation. This interview would be my chance to address the public, to set the record straight, but it also meant opening myself up to further scrutiny and judgment. I loathed talking about my personal life. It felt unnatural, and it was seriously uncomfortable.

Later in the evening, a car arrived at my doorstep, ready to whisk me away to the late-night show. Hattie joined me, taking a seat beside me in the back as we embarked on the short journey. The city lights blurred by as we discussed the dos and don'ts for my upcoming interview.

Hattie, always the pragmatist, leaned in and lowered her voice. "Remember, Jensen, you shouldn't say anything about Faux's. Merida never dropped the company's name in the

article, so you shouldn't either. Let's not give them any unnecessary attention. We'll deal with them privately."

I nodded in agreement. "Trust me, I'm not about to advertise the fact I paid a woman to pretend to be my girlfriend. I think I've suffered enough humiliation at this point."

The interview would likely not delve that deep, so there was no need to needlessly drag Faux's into the spotlight. Just like Della promised me privacy, I had agreed to the same. That meant I couldn't go running my mouth about her place. She could turn around and sue me. I didn't want to give her any way to come after me.

"Let's just get this over with," I muttered to Hattie as I stepped out of the car. She gave me a reassuring pat on the back, offering a final pep talk before we entered the studio.

Once inside, the bustling atmosphere of the show's production team engulfed us. The backstage area was a whirlwind of activity, with crew members scurrying about, adjusting lighting and sound equipment. I couldn't help but feel like a lamb headed to the slaughter.

Hattie stayed by my side, her presence a reassuring anchor amidst the chaos. She continued to offer words of encouragement and advice, helping me stay focused on the task at hand.

"Remember, Jensen don't offer any more than what we discussed," she reminded me. "Just be honest and authentic. People can see through insincerity. You don't have to give them any additional information, but you need to try and pretend you like them."

I nodded, taking in her words of wisdom. "You know I would rather eat glass."

She smiled. "I do, and trust me, I would rather serve you a plate of glass, but here we are."

I understood the necessity of the stupid interview. This was my chance to address the rumors and misconceptions that had spiraled out of control. We were hoping I would only need to

do the one interview. If we could get the message across, I didn't have to go on a media blitz. That was all the incentive I needed to do a good job the first time.

As the minutes ticked away, I mentally prepared for the hard questions. The public's perception of me was at stake, as was the success of my impending product launch.

I sat in the chair while an overzealous makeup woman attacked me with a powder puff. "Okay, I think I'm good," I said after sitting still for a good fifteen seconds.

"You don't want to look washed out," she said.

"I'm fine. Thank you."

She shot me a dirty look and ripped the tissue from my collar. "Suit yourself."

Hattie stepped in front of me. "It's not like anyone would see the makeup," she whispered. "We don't want you to look like a ghost."

"I'll take my chances," I said.

"You need to get your head straight," she warned. "You can't be cranky. The host will pick up on that and give you shit. He's going to needle you just to get a reaction. Don't give him any reason to be a dick."

I took a deep breath and tried to calm my nerves. Hattie was right. I needed to keep my cool no matter what. This interview was important, and I couldn't afford to mess it up. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror, making sure my hair was neatly combed and my suit was straight. I looked presentable enough, but my nerves were still getting the best of me. I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, trying to steady myself.

"You look good," Hattie assured me. "I like that blue tie on you."

I looked down and had an alarming thought. "I need a different tie!"

"What? It's perfect. Blue makes you look trustworthy. That's what Carl said."

“Not this one. Get me a new tie.”

“Jensen, you’re going on any minute,” she scolded. “I can’t just run out and buy you a new tie.”

I spotted a man with his hands in his pockets talking to someone else. “His.” I pointed. “Offer him a grand for his tie.”

She looked over my shoulder. “That’s the band leader.”

“Hattie, Merida bought this tie for me while we were in Dubai. Get me that fucking tie.”

She pinched her lips and reached for her purse. “I’ve only got five hundred.”

I pulled out my wallet and gave her all the cash I had.

“Give me a minute,” she said and walked away with determination.

She came back just as I was yanking off the old tie. She quickly helped me with the silver and blue one. I was glad she didn’t make a fuss about my need to change ties. No way was I going on TV while wearing something she was connected to. I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

Finally, the moment arrived. A producer approached us and signaled that it was time for me to take the stage. I squared my shoulders and followed him, Hattie close behind.

As I stepped onto the brightly lit set, the live audience’s applause and the host’s welcoming smile greeted me. It was showtime. I took a deep breath, reminding myself that this was my chance to reclaim the narrative, to tell my side of the story, and to hopefully begin the process of rebuilding my life and reputation.



## MERIDA

I returned to the *Full Disclosure* office just as the workday was winding down. The energy was palpable, a combination of anticipation for the evening and the usual buzz of the newsroom. A few of the writers had picked up the ball and run with it on the Jensen story. The fashion writer dissected his suits, and the tech guy was diving deep into Lox. They were all riding high on the success of my article.

Dalton was there, his desk cluttered with papers, and so were a handful of other staff members. I couldn't let this wait any longer, so I marched right up to my father, who was engrossed in conversation with one of the editors.

"Dad," I said firmly with my chin raised and my back ramrod straight. "I have another piece to run about Jensen."

My father's eyes lit up with a mischievous glint. "Really? Already?"

He eagerly took the pages I offered him. He started to read, and I watched as his expression shifted from excitement to confusion. Within moments, his eyes narrowed, and he looked up at me, incredulous.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded, his voice laced with irritation.

I took a deep breath, preparing myself for his reaction. "It's a follow-up piece on Jensen Loxley," I explained. "I need to provide a more balanced perspective. The first article was one-sided, and I owe it to our readers to present both sides of the story."

My father's face contorted with frustration. "Merida, do you have any idea what you're doing? You've already caused a firestorm with that first article. Running another one now will destroy your credibility and that of the publication."

I knew he was worried, but I couldn't back down. "Dad, I need to do this. It's the right thing to do. I've gotten to know Jensen better, and there's more to his story than what was portrayed in the initial piece. I won't let *Full Disclosure* be responsible for perpetuating a false narrative. That piece was written early on in my relationship with Jensen. It doesn't tell the full story."

He sighed, his shoulders sagging. "Merida, I understand your desire for balance, but this could have serious consequences. You're taking a huge risk, not just for yourself, but for the reputation of this whole organization."

I held his gaze, unwavering. "I'm willing to take that risk," I said firmly. "I became a journalist to tell the truth and shed light on important stories. Running this piece is the right thing to do."

He walked into his office like he was just going to walk away from me. I was on his heels. I made up my mind I wouldn't take no for an answer. It wasn't like I had anything more to lose.

"No," he said and tried to push the papers back at me. "I won't do it."

I squared my shoulders and looked my father in the eye, determined to stand my ground. "It's the truth, Dad. The full truth. And isn't that what *Full Disclosure* is all about? Transparency and honesty? Isn't that what you've built your reputation on?"

His expression remained skeptical, but there was a hint of resignation in his eyes. "Merida, you have to understand the consequences of running a piece like this. You've already rocked the boat with the first one. I've got Loxley's lawyers up my ass. They're threatening to sue for defamation and all kinds of shit. This could make things even messier."

I took a deep breath, steadying my resolve. “I didn’t give permission for the first story to be run. Dalton ran with it when he shouldn’t have. The piece is biased. That’s my name that’s going to be discredited and ruined. I should have a say in this.”

As if on cue, Dalton poked his head into the room, clearly overhearing his name. Before he could interject, I cut him off sharply. “Shut up and sit down, Dalton. I have the floor, and you’re going to listen.”

My father raised an eyebrow, seemingly intrigued by my determination. Running another story about Jensen Loxley was a risky move, and he was well aware of the potential consequences.

But I wasn’t about to back down. This was my chance to make amends, to rectify the mistakes of the past, and to show that *Full Disclosure* could indeed live up to its name.

“This piece will provide a more balanced perspective on Jensen’s story,” I said. “It will show that there’s more to him than what was portrayed in the initial article. It’s the right thing to do, Dad. It might actually get his lawyers off your back.”

He let out a sigh, acknowledging my determination. “Merida, I hope you know what you’re getting into. This won’t be an easy path. You’ll face a lot of backlash. You’re going to trash your reputation.”

I met his gaze with resolve. “I’m willing to take that risk, Dad. I became a journalist to tell the truth, even when it’s difficult.”

He still wasn’t convinced. I could see him wrestling with ratings and clicks and being my father. Over my twenty-nine years, I knew there was a better chance of his paper winning than me. But I had to believe he would see how important this was to me.

“Merida,” he started.

“Don’t,” I said. I took a deep breath and began to explain, my voice trembling slightly with emotion. “The last month has been a whirlwind, to say the least. It started as an effort to



make you notice me, to finally be taken seriously in this field. I wanted a story that would put my name on the map, something that would show I could handle the big stories.”

He stared at me with his brow furrowed.

“However, being ‘noticed’ was not even close to worth what it cost me.” I paused, letting the weight of my words sink in. “I’m in love, Dad. Madly in love.”

There was a stunned silence in the room. Dalton, who had been sitting there quietly, suddenly perked up, his eyes widening in disbelief. “Wait, come again?”

I glanced at Dalton, then back at my father. “I said I’m in love with Jensen Loxley.”

My father’s jaw dropped, and he exchanged a bewildered glance with Dalton. They both seemed utterly taken aback by my confession.

“You’re in love with the subject of the article?” my father finally managed to sputter.

I nodded, tears welling up in my eyes. “Yes, Dad. It started as a journalistic pursuit, but it became so much more. I’ve fallen in love with him, and I can’t just stand by and let his life be torn apart. I sent Dalton that article for him to look over after you fired me. I guess I thought I could get the recognition I needed from someone I thought was a mentor. I texted Dalton and told him not to run that story. He chose to ignore my wishes. He took something that wasn’t his. I think I might have a cause of action. You better believe I will pursue it if you don’t let me run this piece.”

Dalton leaned forward, his curiosity getting the best of him. “Merida, you need to understand the magnitude of what you’re saying. This changes everything.”

I knew he was right. My admission had the potential to alter the course of my career and personal life in unimaginable ways. But I couldn’t deny my feelings, and I couldn’t ignore the sense of responsibility that now weighed heavily on my shoulders.

“I know,” I replied, my voice filled with determination. “I’m ready to face the consequences, whatever they may be. I have to provide a more balanced perspective. This is my chance to make amends and tell the truth, even when it’s difficult. I have to do this for Jensen. He may never speak to me again, but I can do this for him. I can try to repair what I’ve broken. He did nothing to deserve me betraying his trust like that. He has only shown me kindness.”

“If that’s the case, why did you write it?” Dalton scoffed. “He gave you shit about your shoes. That doesn’t sound like a kind man.”

I ignored Dalton. He knew he’d done something wrong, and when I told the world he ran the story against my wishes, his reputation would be tarnished as well.

I kept my gaze focused on my father. “The story changed, Dad, within weeks of meeting Jensen. It stopped being just about AI and whether it was good or bad. It became about us, about him and me, about all the moments we shared that weren’t related to business.” I paused, my eyes glistening with tears. “I love him, Dad.”

My father’s expression remained skeptical, his brows furrowed deeply. “You love him?” He repeated my words as if they were foreign to him.

I nodded. “Yes, Dad. I never expected it, but it happened. And now, I’m in too deep. I can’t just walk away and watch his life be torn apart.”

“You’re asking me to put your personal feelings above your career and our publication’s reputation,” he said.

“Dad, I understand the risks,” I said firmly. “Please, help me make it right.”

My father and Dalton exchanged glances, clearly taken aback by my unwavering resolve. I could feel the tension in the room, and I knew this was a pivotal moment in my career and my relationship with both of them.

“Dalton, could you give us a moment, please?” my father finally requested, his voice strained.

Dalton stood up with a mocking grin, slow clapping as if this were some kind of twisted performance. “Well done, Merida,” he said sarcastically, his eyes cold. “You’ve certainly made your point.”

I ignored Dalton’s sarcasm and maintained my stern gaze on my father. This was my moment to assert my independence and prove my worth, and I wasn’t about to back down.

“Look, Dad,” I said firmly, digging deep to find the strength to stand up to him. “I’ve spent years feeling like I’m held down under your thumb because you refuse to see me as anything other than your little girl. You think I’m dabbling in journalism. That time is over. I’ve proven that I can find a good story and write a compelling piece. My name already carries weight, and if you don’t publish this, I’ll take it directly to our competition. They’ll run it first thing tomorrow morning, if not tonight. It’s your choice.”

My father’s expression shifted between frustration and resignation. He knew I was serious, and he understood the implications of my threat. I had arrived at a crossroads in my career, and I was determined to no longer write fluff to fit the mold he had in mind for me. As far as I was concerned, I had written my last article for *Full Disclosure*. It was no longer what I wanted to do. I wasn’t going to quit writing, but I wanted to use my talent for something good.

Dalton was standing outside my father’s office when I walked out. “You’re such a dick,” I hissed. “I can’t believe I ever looked up to you. You are the reason all of this is happening. Fuck you. Don’t ever call me again. We are not friends. We are not coworkers. You are my enemy. Period.”



The interview had been grueling from the start, and I could feel my patience wearing thin. The questions about the recent article on *Full Disclosure* were relentless, and every answer I gave seemed to dig me deeper into a hole of speculation and doubt. I had prepared for this interview, rehearsed my responses, and coached myself to stay calm under the intense scrutiny, but nothing could truly prepare me for the storm that was brewing.

Halfway through the interview, the host abruptly interrupted, a look of astonishment on his face. He turned to his producer, who had just handed him a note, and then back to the camera.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a breaking development,” the host announced, his voice tinged with excitement. “It appears that another article has just gone live, and it’s related to the very subject we’ve been discussing.”

*Are you fucking kidding?*

My stomach clenched as I exchanged a worried glance with Hattie, who was watching the proceedings from backstage. She put up a finger, telling me to hold on while she held her phone in the other hand.

The host smiled and I just knew I was about to get my ass handed to me. “This article is quite a revelation, and I believe we should all read it together,” he said.

I could hardly believe what was happening. My eyes went to Hattie again. She wasn’t looking at me. Her eyes were glued

to the phone. I felt like I was tossed into the ocean without a life preserver. I was being fed to the sharks on live TV. I couldn't ask for a timeout. My reputation was already taking a hell of a beating. The host's team quickly pulled up the article on the large screen behind him, and the words came into view, making my heart race: "Confessions of a Journalist: My Unexpected Journey with Jensen Loxley."

As the host began reading aloud, I felt a mix of anticipation and dread. The host was giddy. I couldn't read the article because my eyes wouldn't focus. I was looking for an escape at that point. The idea of an isolated island sounded really, really good just then.

"This article is a confession written by the journalist herself, Merida Moore!" the host announced.

I listened to the host introduce the article. "She started with the intention of crafting a sensational story," the host read, his voice echoing through the studio. "Something that would give her a big break in the world of journalism."

I swallowed hard, my mind racing as I listened to Merida's words. She was exposing the initial motive behind the article. She started out with the intention to depict me in a less than flattering light. It was a confession of her ambition and desire for success at any cost, even if it meant throwing me under the bus.

"But something unexpected happened along the way," the host continued, his tone growing more somber. "Merida Moore fell for her subject. She fell for Jensen Loxley in a way she never anticipated."

My heart skipped a beat. Merida was baring her soul in front of the world, admitting to her feelings for me. It was a shocking revelation, one that I had never expected to hear from her. I would have preferred to have had the conversation in private, but I couldn't really blame her for going this route. I didn't give her a chance to talk.

"The original piece she wrote came from a place before she truly knew him," the host read, his voice tinged with empathy. "Her focus was on writing a compelling story, a

story that would make headlines. It wasn't about representing Jensen Loxley accurately."

The host's expression shifted from surprise to understanding. He was beginning to grasp the complexity of the situation, as were the members of the audience. I was absolutely mortified to have all of this coming out while I had four cameras trained on my face. They were hoping to catch my reaction. I kept my poker face on, refusing to give them the image they needed for a meme.

"Now, she's determined to set the record straight," the host concluded, his voice filled with gravity. "Merida Moore has taken it upon herself to paint a more accurate picture of Jensen Loxley, the man behind the headlines."

The studio fell into silence, Merida's words sinking in. I could hardly believe what was happening. Merida had confessed her true intentions and her unexpected feelings for me.

The host turned to me, his expression thoughtful. "Mr. Loxley, I have to ask, how do you feel about this confession from Merida Moore?"

I took a deep breath, trying to find the right words. "It's a surprising turn of events," I admitted, my voice steady. "I appreciate her honesty, and I hope that her new perspective will shed light on who I truly am."

"Are you going to give the woman another chance?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"Do you love this woman?"

I found myself in a unique position. The world was now aware of her change of heart, but I was still not all that willing to talk about my relationship with Merida to twenty million strangers. It was going to piss off Hattie and all the people working hard to make me look good, but I wasn't going to bend to anyone.

"I'm sorry, but I have to draw a line between my personal and professional life," I said with a smile. "I know I'm not the only public figure to want to keep elements of their private life

private. This is a sensitive situation. I'd like to handle it privately."

I quickly glanced over to judge Hattie's reaction. She gave me a thumbs-up and a big smile.

The interview had shifted from an interrogation to a conversation about redemption and forgiveness. The host turned to me once more. "Jensen, how do you feel about Merida's words, her confession?"

I took a moment to collect my thoughts. "I appreciate her honesty," I began, my voice steady. "Merida's journey with me has been unconventional, to say the least. And while her initial intentions may have been misguided, I believe that people can change."

I looked directly into the camera, addressing not only the host and the studio audience but also Merida herself, wherever she was. "Merida, if you're watching, I want you to know that forgiveness is possible. We've both made mistakes, and we've both learned from them. What's important now is moving forward with integrity and a commitment to truth."

The host nodded, seemingly satisfied with my response. The atmosphere in the studio had shifted once again, from one of scrutiny to one of reflection and hope. I could see it in the faces of the audience members and in the eyes of the people behind the cameras. An eruption of applause from the audience took me by surprise.

"I think that is a very generous, kind response," the host said, smiling. The guy looked like a kid on Christmas morning. He knew he just had the interview of a lifetime. The clip from the interview was going to go viral.

The host gave me a final nod, and the camera lights dimmed. Merida's words hung in the air, a reminder that sometimes, the path to redemption was paved with honesty and a willingness to face one's own shortcomings.

I couldn't bear to stay on that stage a moment longer. As soon as I was off stage, I knew what I needed to do. Hattie's voice snapped me out of my daze. She was right behind me,



already in action mode, arranging for a car to whisk me away from the studio.

As I climbed into the waiting car, I instructed the driver to take me back to my penthouse. The city streets passed by in a blur, the familiar sights and sounds of New York offering a strange comfort in the midst of chaos.

Hattie sat beside me with a huge smile on her face. “That was unexpected.”

“No shit,” I muttered. “You should have got me off that stage.”

“Do you know how good you looked?” she asked with a huge smile. “You just changed the narrative. You handled that very well. They love you.”

I rolled my eyes at Hattie’s comment. I knew what she was doing, trying to cheer me up and build my confidence. But the truth was, I didn’t care what “they” thought. There was only one person I cared about.

I asked about someone else instead. “What has Carl said?”

“He said he would let me know tomorrow. He’s doing what he does.”

“Good,” I said, nodding. “I hope it’s over. I never want to do that again. I’m done parading myself across stages.”

Hattie gave me a knowing look. “I understand. But you have to admit, you did look good up there. And the audience loved you. You were vulnerable, honest, and real. That’s what people want to see.”

I sighed. “I know. But all of this attention, it’s not me. It’s not who I am.”

Hattie nodded. “I get it. But you have to embrace it, at least for now. This is your moment. And who knows? Maybe this will lead to something bigger and better.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want anything bigger or better. I just want to figure this shit out with Merida.”

“Drop me off at my building and go handle your business.”

“I’m not sure she’s going to want to talk to me,” I said. “I was a dick.”

“She’s no saint in this either.” Hattie grimaced. “But I was horrible to her. I’m going to go home and find the biggest fruit basket to send to her. Fruit, muffins, chocolate, whatever. I jumped to conclusions.”

“The evidence was pretty damning,” I said. “She *did* write the article.”

Hattie sighed. “I know. But we shouldn’t have assumed the worst without giving her a chance to explain. Look, you need to apologize to her and make things right. And who knows? Maybe she’ll forgive you.”

I nodded, knowing deep down that it would take more than a simple apology to fix things between me and Merida. But I had to try. “I know.”

“I guess the bigger question is, can you forgive her?”

As the car pulled up in front of Hattie’s building, I thought about her question. Could I forgive Merida? The answer wasn’t simple. On one hand, she had betrayed me and exploited my vulnerability for her own gain. On the other hand, I had been a dick to her and had treated her unfairly. Most importantly, I cared about her. I loved her.

“I don’t know,” I said to Hattie. “I want to, but I’m not sure if I can.”

Hattie put a hand on my shoulder. “Just take it one step at a time. Apologize first and see where it goes from there. You guys have something special.”

“I hope so,” I said, feeling a knot form in my stomach. “Thanks for everything, Hattie.”

“Anytime,” she said, giving me a quick hug before getting out of the car. “Good luck with Merida. I am going to have a big-ass drink and take a long hot bath. My work is done.”

“You deserve it,” I said with a laugh. “You worked your ass off on this. Let’s hope this is the end of it. I really don’t want to hold back the launch.”

“Me either,” she groaned. “Do you know how much time, money, and energy went into planning that launch party?”

“I don’t but I know you busted your ass on that too.”

“Good luck,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”



## MERIDA

**I**n the silence of my house, I sat alone with my thoughts, my phone turned off and the world outside blissfully disconnected. I needed this solitude, this respite from the storm that had engulfed my life. My contact information was still up on the *Full Disclosure* site. Reporters from all around the world had been calling, texting, and emailing to get a comment from me.

If this was fame, I wanted nothing to do with it. Merida Moore, the writer who had once sought fame and recognition, was now a recluse in her own sanctuary. The weight of my confession in that second article pressed heavily on my shoulders, and I couldn't help but second-guess my actions. It might have been too much. I knew how private Jensen was and I doubted he would really appreciate me baring my soul for all the world to see. But it was the only way I could make him understand. I hoped my apology and the truth were enough to fix the damage I caused.

I wondered how the world would react to my admission, to my willingness to admit that I had hurt the man I had fallen in love with. Would they see me as a fraud, a manipulator who had crafted a narrative for personal gain? It didn't matter. I had to do what was right, no matter the consequences. I would hang my head in shame. I could work as a ghostwriter and never leave my house again.

I had been blinded by ambition and the desire for success. My relationship with Jensen Loxley had changed me. It forced me to confront my own flaws and reassess my priorities. I

knew for certain I didn't need the fame I craved for most of my professional career. I had fallen in love with a man who deserved better than being the subject of a silly article.

Would my career as a journalist survive this revelation? Would I be able to rebuild my reputation, or was it forever tarnished by my past actions? I couldn't even be certain I wanted my career. Mom told me to find something else that I loved.

Even if I ruined my career, I had done the right thing. I had chosen honesty and integrity over ambition and fame. It was a small step toward redemption. I hoped Jensen would have a little better opinion of me. I didn't expect him to thank me for the second article, but I didn't want him to hate me.

Wrapped in a cocoon of self-pity, I sat on the sofa, a heavy blanket wrapped tightly around my shoulders. The weight of my recent actions bore down on me, and I couldn't help but wallow in the depths of my own remorse.

Amidst the suffocating silence, an unexpected knock on my door pierced through my thoughts. Irritation welled up within me. I just wanted to be alone with my guilt, to hide from the world and lick my wounds in private. I shouted for them to go away, hoping that would be enough to deter the uninvited guest. I assumed it was a nosey journalist. I wasn't about to let them get a picture of me in my current state.

But they were persistent. The knocking came again, louder this time, more insistent, as if the person on the other side of the door refused to be ignored. I threw the blanket off my shoulders and, with a mixture of frustration and curiosity, stomped toward the door.

"What?" I snapped, my voice edged with irritation, as I swung the door open without bothering to check who stood on the other side. I was ready to unleash my anger, to lash out at anyone who dared to intrude on my self-imposed isolation.

But as the door swung open, my words died on my lips, replaced by a startled gasp. There, on the threshold, stood Jensen, his usually composed expression marred by a complex

mixture of emotions—hurt, anger, confusion, and something else I couldn't quite place.

His presence caught me off guard, and for a moment, I stood frozen, unable to comprehend why he was here. Had he come to yell at me in person, to confront me about my actions and the damage I caused?

I could see the turmoil in his eyes, the weight of the world bearing down on his shoulders just as heavily as it did on mine. I felt so bad. My heart broke for him. I had seen the articles in various gossip rags. They were picking on him.

Jensen cleared his throat, breaking the awkward silence that hung between us. "Merida," he began, his voice wavering slightly.

"Jensen."

"We need to talk," he said.

"Come in," I said and took a hesitant step back, allowing him to enter my sanctuary. As the door closed behind him, I couldn't help but wonder if this was the beginning of a painful reckoning. I steeled myself, preparing for the anger I knew was coming my way. I was ready to accept whatever tirade he had prepared for me. I deserved it after all the pain I had caused him.

It was hard to look at him. He looked incredible in his new suit. His hair was neatly styled, and he was clean shaven. I longed for his touch. I missed him like crazy and was still trying to come to terms with the fact I would never have him again.

"Yell at me," I said. "Scream at me. I can take it."

"I read your article," he said. "The second article. Well, someone read it to me on live TV, which was interesting."

I nodded, waiting for the wrath to come. "I know you're angry. You have every right to be. I want you to rage at me. It will only make me feel better."

"I'm not here to rage at you."

His expression softened as he took my trembling hands in his own. My heart pounded fiercely, and I braced myself for the scolding I thought I deserved. His hands felt warm and offered comfort even when I didn't deserve it.

"I love you, too," he confessed, and my world seemed to stop in its tracks. I couldn't believe my ears. Did he just say what I thought he did?

My eyes welled up with tears, emotions swirling within me like a tempest. I had braced myself for his anger and condemnation, but this unexpected twist had me utterly floored. The weight of my guilt began to lift.

"What?" I asked on a breath.

In the dimly lit room, Jensen's words hung heavy in the air. His confession of love, delivered with such sincerity and vulnerability, felt like a balm to my wounded soul.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you," I blurted out the words. They fell out of my mouth with no hesitation.

We locked eyes, and I saw the love and desire in Jensen's gaze. When we were together before the article, I thought I saw it there, but after the article came out, I wasn't sure if I was seeing it for real.

"These weeks with you," he began with his voice soft and full of emotion. "They've been some of the best weeks of my life. I know we've had our ups and downs, but being with you makes me feel alive. I can't imagine my life without you in it."

My heart swelled with love and gratitude. The guilt I had been carrying around like a heavy burden slowly dissipated, and I was left with a sense of lightness and hope.

His eyes, those captivating windows into his soul, never left mine. "You've filled an empty part of me, Merida, a deep, dark hole that's been there ever since I lost my dad. I knew from the moment I met you that you were different. You made me feel something that I had never felt before. You showed me what it's like to truly love someone and be loved in return."



My heart fluttered at his words, and a tear rolled down my cheek. I reached up to wipe it away, but Jensen beat me to it. His thumb brushed gently over my cheek, wiping away the teardrop.

“I do love you,” I said. “I didn’t mean to fall in love with you, but it happened when I least expected it. I actually liked those rules you gave me. It told me a little more about you. You set a high standard, but no higher than you expect from yourself.”

Jensen chuckled, a low and throaty sound that made my insides tingle. “I’m glad you liked them. I’m used to stating things up front because it just seems to work better that way. People don’t get confused and there aren’t any failed expectations.”

“But you know, a relationship might have some disappointments.”

“You could never disappoint me, Merida. If anything, I was disappointed in myself for realizing all my shortcomings. I hate that I hurt your feelings about the shoes. When we started this venture, I thought the best thing to do was to keep it professional. I thought it would be easier. I never expected to fall in love. I didn’t think anyone could love me for me.”

My breath caught in my throat as his words washed over me. I had known about the pain he carried, the grief he hid beneath his stoic exterior, but hearing him acknowledge it so openly tugged at my heartstrings. I knew he had no reason to trust me after what I did, but I appreciated the fact that he did.

“You make me feel like I’m more than just the tech guy everyone wants a piece of,” he continued, his voice tinged with emotion. “You make me feel like a man who is lucky enough to love and be loved by you. With you, I was able to be myself.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as I listened to him lay bare his feelings. His eyes bored into mine, his gaze unwavering, as he made his plea. “I can’t let this go, Merida. I won’t. You’re mine. Please, tell me you’re mine.”

His vulnerability washed over me like a tidal wave, and all my doubts and insecurities seemed to evaporate in the warmth of his love. "I'm yours. Always." My voice trembled with emotion.

A gentle smile tugged at the corners of his lips as he pulled me closer into his embrace. He leaned in, his lips brushing against mine in a soft, gentle kiss. It felt like coming home after a long journey, like I had finally found the missing piece of me that I had been searching for all along.

We pulled away, our foreheads pressed together as we caught our breath.

"I want you," he whispered. "I will always want you."



JENSEN

I thought I would be terrified to pour my heart out. Even though her article said she loved me, part of me still doubted her affection for me. I thought she might shut me down and say it was just for the media.

“I want you, Jensen.”

Her words spread warmth through my body. “Can I stay?” I asked quietly.

“I would love that. Let me lock the door.”

She let go of my hand and walked to the door, turning the locks before she turned to face me. I didn’t miss the bottle of wine on the coffee table and the candles glowing around the room.

“It almost looks like you were planning a seduction,” I said.

“That was not my intention,” she said, laughing. “But now that you’re here...”

“What were you doing?” I asked as I realized the place was eerily quiet.

“Sulking. Pouting. Wallowing in misery.”

I stepped to her, my hand cupping her cheek. “No more wallowing. We’re celebrating.”

She grinned. “Do you want a glass of cheap wine? Turns out I’m unemployed. I have to cut back on expenses.”

“Did you quit?”

“I was already fired, remember?”

I nodded, and while I didn't want to bring up the ugliness, I had a few questions. “What about the first article?”

She sighed. “I was telling the truth. Dalton, someone I worked with and actually respected, completely screwed me over. I sent him the first draft of the article I wrote right after my dad fired me. Dalton said he would look it over and see what he thought. It wasn't meant to be published. I wanted to see if I could write real journalism. If Dalton thought my piece was garbage, I was ready to move on and find a new career. After I realized how much I loved you, I told Dalton to scrap it. Against my wishes, he took it to my dad and said it was his article. My dad liked it, and Dalton told him it was mine. The rest you already know. I had no idea it was happening, but that doesn't excuse what I did. Ignorance is not an excuse.”

“You are not ignorant,” I said. “You are smart. Beautiful. Tenacious. Did I say gorgeous? You are the kind of woman I want at my side. I need someone who isn't afraid to speak her mind and who understands my world.”

“I will always try,” she whispered.

“I know and that's why we're going to work out just fine.”

I leaned down and kissed her. As our lips met, I felt a rush of energy coursing through my veins. It was as if all the uncertainty and doubt I'd been harboring for the past few days vanished, and in its place was an intense and fiery passion. Our lips moved in perfect harmony, our tongues exploring each other's mouths. I felt her hands on my back, pulling me closer. I responded by wrapping my arms around her waist and lifting her up. She let out a soft moan, and I knew that she was just as hungry for me as I was for her.

We broke the kiss, gasping for breath. I set her down gently and looked into her eyes, which were now filled with desire.

“My room,” she said and took my hand.

As soon as we entered the room, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her again. This time, our kiss was even more intense than before. Our bodies pressed against each other, and I could feel her warmth against my skin.

I slowly began to undress her, taking off her shirt and her bra. Her breasts were perfect. I couldn't resist the urge to touch them. I took one of her nipples in my mouth and sucked it gently, which earned me a soft moan. She put her arms around my neck, letting me suck her nipple as long as I wanted.

I pulled away and gently laid her on the bed. I slowly pulled her pants and her panties down. She lifted her butt to make it easier for me. I lowered my head and started licking her clit, and she let forth a soft cry of pleasure.

She tasted delicious. I couldn't get enough of her. I licked and sucked, listening to her beautiful moans. She grabbed my hair, obviously wanting more.

I gave her what she wanted. I flicked my tongue across her clit, stopping every now and then to suck on it gently. She was making those soft little moans I loved to hear. I knew she was close.

I slid two fingers inside her. She cried out in pleasure and began bucking against my hand. I flicked my tongue faster, alternating between licking and sucking. She was moaning louder now.

Her hand grabbed my hair tighter. She bucked wildly against my face, and I knew that she was on the verge of coming. I flicked my tongue as fast as I could. She came hard, moaning loudly as she did so. I didn't stop until she pushed me away softly.

I got up and looked at her. She was panting, and her face showed the glow of pleasure as I quickly shed my own clothes.

“I want to taste you now.”

I nodded and did as she asked. I got closer to her, my dick standing rock hard and proud. She looked at it for a moment,

admiring it, then put her lips on the tip of it. I moaned as she wrapped her lips around it. She sucked it gently, and delicious warmth spread through my body.

She started bobbing her head slowly, taking me almost all the way out and then taking me all the way in again. Her head moved faster and faster until I felt that familiar warmth build up.

It wasn't enough, though. I wanted to feel her warmth against me. I undressed completely and joined her on the bed, kissing her and letting my cock slide into her wet sheath.

I slid my cock in deeper. She pulled me even closer. She bit her lower lip and let out a soft moan, which made me thrust deep into her again.

She moaned loudly, obviously liking it. I started moving, letting my cock slide in and out of her wetness. The feeling was unbelievable.

She closed her eyes and let out a soft cry of pleasure. I started moving faster, allowing my cock to slide in and out of her faster and faster. I felt her pussy tighten around me, and I knew she was close to coming again.

She let out a soft scream. I knew her sounds of pleasure very well. She was hot for me. Her body was mine. I knew every little nuance. I knew where she liked to be touched and how much pressure she needed to achieve the best orgasm.

I looked at her face and saw that her eyes were closed with a soft smile on her lips.

“Look at me,” I whispered.

Her eyes opened, locking on mine. I saw the love. I saw the trust. I saw the desire. I saw the real her, reaching out to me to join her in a moment of intimacy we would never forget.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you, Merida Moore.”

I kissed her deeply and started moving inside her. Her body moved with me. She met each one of my thrusts. Tension

built up in her. She was close. Her muscles tensed as she got nearer to her orgasm.

“I’m going to come,” she whispered.

“So am I,” I replied, thrusting harder.

“Now!” she yelled out as her body seized up.

Her orgasm was powerful. Her pussy contracted around my cock as she came. I kept thrusting, driving her orgasm to its fullest.

I was close. I had been holding it back for her, waiting for her to get her pleasure before I did.

Our bodies became one. I felt like our souls were united. Every breath, every touch brought us closer together.

The moment was so intimate. I’d never felt such an overwhelming love for anyone. I knew that life was perfect at this moment. I knew she was the one for me.

My orgasm hit hard, blinding me for several seconds as white stars burst in front of me. She pulled me down to her, holding me close.

We didn’t move for a long time. We just lay together, holding each other, feeling our hearts beat against each other, feeling each other’s breath on our faces.

“I love you, Merida,” I said.

“I love you, Jensen.”

We sat in the soft glow of the room, our fingers intertwined as the weight of our emotions hung in the air.

“What happens now?” I asked. “Will you go back to your father’s paper?”

She looked at me with those deep, expressive eyes, and a small, determined smile curved her lips. “I quit for good,” she said, her words carrying a sense of finality. “I’m going to start my own news outlet.”

The revelation caught me off guard, and I struggled to process it. Merida, who had been through so much in the last



couple of days, was now taking a bold step into the unknown, embracing a future filled with uncertainty and possibility. It was a testament to her strength and resilience.

“You’re starting your own news outlet?” I repeated, my voice tinged with admiration. “That’s incredible, Merida.”

She nodded, her eyes shimmering. “I don’t know exactly what it will look like yet,” she admitted. “I don’t even know how I would do it, but I need to embark on my own journalism journey. I need to tell stories that matter, stories that make a difference. I don’t mind telling people what the best scents for whatever holiday are, but I don’t want that to be my only contribution.”

Her words resonated with me deeply. Merida was not just a woman of words but a woman of action, someone who was willing to follow her passion and her principles even when it meant stepping into uncharted territory. It was one of the many things I loved about her.

“I’m proud of you,” I told her sincerely, reaching out to brush a strand of hair away from her face. “Starting something new, something that aligns with your values and your vision—it’s incredibly brave.”

A mixture of emotions played across her features, and she leaned closer, her eyes locking onto mine. “Thank you, Jensen,” she whispered. “Your support means the world to me. I guess you inspired me.”

“How so?”

“You did what you loved, and you turned it into an empire. I don’t want an empire, but I’ve seen you work. I’ve seen how animated you get when you talk about your tech. I want to feel that same passion for my work.”

I couldn’t help but smile, my heart swelling with affection for this remarkable woman who had come into my life and turned it upside down.

As we sat there, bathed in the gentle glow of the room, I realized that this was a new beginning for both of us.

“So, what’s next for us?” I asked, my voice low and filled with anticipation.

She looked at me, her eyes filled with a mixture of tenderness and longing. “For us, Jensen, I hope it’s a future filled with love, trust, and endless possibilities. I hope it’s a journey we’ll embark on together.”

# EPILOGUE

## MERIDA

### Six Months Later

**A**s I sat in my new studio, surrounded by the familiar sights and sounds of my podcast setup, a sense of accomplishment filled me. It had been a whirlwind journey, but here I was, recording the twentieth episode of “Merida’s Musings.”

My show was a little bit of everything—hard-hitting news stories, discussions on world events, and whatever else caught my interest. After all, it was my show, and I reveled in the freedom to explore any topic that piqued my curiosity.

The podcast had been Jensen’s idea. It was a way for me to still be involved with the news without worrying about getting an article approved or having an editor take a red pen to the whole thing. I was still doing some writing, but it was for me. One day, I thought about writing a book, but not now. I was enjoying my new life with Jensen. We were happy and I didn’t see any reason to change anything.

I adjusted the microphone and took a sip of water, glancing at the notes for today’s episode. My loyal and ever-growing listeners had been tuning in regularly, and I had even set up subscription tiers on platforms like Patreon. It was safe to say that I was making better money than I ever had in my life. I had recently bought my first car, a modest but reliable vehicle, and it felt like a symbol of my newfound independence.

Yes, I lived with a billionaire, but it still mattered that I could make my own money. I needed that independence. I knew Jensen liked it as well. We supported each other.

Today's episode was centered around the theme of resilience, a topic that resonated deeply with me. I began the episode by sharing a personal story about facing adversity and the lessons I had learned along the way. It was important to me that my listeners could connect with the material on a personal level, and I always aimed to strike that balance between informative and relatable.

As I delved into the various aspects of resilience, I received live comments and questions from my audience. It was one of the things I loved most about the podcast—the ability to engage directly with my listeners, to hear their stories and provide insights, and to build a sense of community.

During a short break, I checked my Patreon page and was pleasantly surprised to see new subscribers signing up for exclusive content. It was gratifying to know that people valued my work enough to support it financially. It allowed me to keep my podcast independent and free from external influences. I did not have to bend to anyone's will. If people didn't want to listen, they just had to turn it off.

After the break, I transitioned to a segment where I answered listeners' questions on a range of topics. It was always fascinating to see the diversity of inquiries that came in, from relationship advice to world affairs. It was pretty cool that people actually wanted to hear my opinion.

I concluded the episode by expressing my gratitude for my listeners and the incredible journey we had embarked upon together.

I pressed the stop button on the recording software and leaned back in my chair, taking a moment to savor the sense of fulfillment that washed over me.

My assistant approached me with a curious look on her face, and I raised an eyebrow, wondering what had caught her

attention. “Merida, there’s a car waiting for you outside,” she said, her voice tinged with intrigue.

I furrowed my brow, not quite sure what to make of it. “Jensen?”

Her lips curved into a smile. “It’s from Mr. Loxley.”

After the Lox launch, we had both been swept up in a whirlwind of events, but now things had settled down, and he had been making an effort to spend more time with me. I couldn’t deny that I had never been happier.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll be right there.”

Jensen was a romantic. He usually let me know when he was going to stop by, but I liked the element of surprise. I made my way outside to find the waiting car. The driver held the door open for me. As I settled into the comfortable leather seats, I couldn’t help but wonder what awaited me.

The car began to move, and I watched the city pass by through the tinted windows. Thoughts raced through my mind. Had Jensen planned a surprise for us? I was expecting a romantic dinner at one of the restaurants he loved. The man had good taste.

The car carried me to his private airport hangar. I laughed, shaking my head. Sometimes, being with a billionaire was a little overwhelming. Whenever he got an urge to go to the beach in San Diego or to the Bahamas, he made a call and off we went. I should have been used to his surprise getaways, but they would never get old.

As I boarded the jet, I was greeted by Hattie. “What’s going on, Hattie?” I asked, a playful smile tugging at my lips.

Hattie chuckled. “All in good time, Merida. But first, we need to find the perfect outfit for you.”

She stretched out an arm, gesturing to the many, many dresses she had draped over seats and hanging from hooks.

“I’m getting dressed?” I asked.

“Yes. We have a few hours, but you know me. It takes me that long to put together a single outfit.”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise,” she said, smiling.

During the flight, I tried on several dresses, each more stunning than the last. Hattie helped me style each one, her expertise evident in every choice. It felt like we were preparing for something truly special, and I couldn’t help but wonder where Jensen was taking me.

Hattie remained tight-lipped, refusing to divulge any hints about our destination. Her playful secrecy only added to the sense of anticipation that was building inside me. It wasn’t like I could read the clouds to know where we were going. I assumed we were over the Atlantic, but that didn’t exactly give me any real information.

Before I knew it, we were landing. Hattie blindfolded me before we disembarked from the jet. I couldn’t see a thing as I got into another car, the excitement and mystery of it all sending my heart into a joyful frenzy.

As Hattie led me through various locations—lobby, elevator, and more—I could feel the anticipation building. Every step was a tantalizing clue, a piece of a puzzle I couldn’t wait to solve.

Finally, the blindfold was removed, and I stood in awe of the breathtaking scene before me. Jensen was waiting at the end of an aisle lined with flickering candles, the romantic ambiance taking my breath away.

We were back in Paris, at the same restaurant where we had dined before, with the Eiffel Tower as our stunning backdrop, glistening against the night sky.

I gasped, unable to believe my eyes. It felt like something out of a dream—a dream I never wanted to wake up from. The sight of Jensen, the beautiful setting, and the surprise he had orchestrated left me utterly speechless.

“Is this real?” I whispered, my heart brimming with emotion. Tears blurred my vision.

Jensen smiled, his eyes filled with warmth and affection. “As real as it gets, Merida.”

As I walked toward him, I was overwhelmed by the love and gratitude that filled my heart. These past months had been amazing. I didn't think I could be any happier, but then he went and did something like this.

"What are you doing?" I smiled. "You are always so full of surprises."

"I hope I can continue to surprise you for many, many years to come. Here's one more."

He gracefully sank down onto one knee. Time seemed to stand still as my heart pounded in my chest. In that magical moment, with the flickering candles casting a warm glow around us and the Eiffel Tower standing tall in the background, Jensen looked up at me with eyes filled with love and tenderness.

"Merida Moore," he began, his voice filled with emotion. "From the moment I met you, my life changed in ways I couldn't have imagined. You've filled my world with love, laughter, and joy. You've shown me what it means to truly live, to love unconditionally, and to be loved in return."

My heart swelled as he continued, his words washing over me like a soothing melody. My heart felt like it was going to explode in my chest. "I can't imagine spending another moment of my life without you by my side. Merida, will you do me the incredible honor of becoming my wife?"

Tears welled up in my eyes as I gazed down at the man who had captured my heart, who had shown me a love I never thought possible. All the doubts and uncertainties of the past seemed to fade into insignificance.

With a voice trembling with emotion, I whispered, "Yes, Jensen. Yes, a thousand times yes!"

A radiant smile lit up his face as he slipped a stunning ring onto my finger. It sparkled in the soft candlelight. I could have cared less if he tied a string around my finger. I was just so happy to be the one he chose to spend the rest of his life with.

As we stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, I couldn't help but feel that our love story was just beginning.



He kissed me and pulled back. “Are you hungry?”

I laughed, wiping my tears. “I am. Where did Hattie go?”

“She’s probably at a bar or in her room.”

“I can’t believe you did all of this. I thought you said you were in Germany.”

“I was, but this was always my plan,” he said. “I’ve wanted to ask you to marry me for a long time, but it had to be perfect. I thought this was the right place. It’s where it all really started, don’t you think?”

I touched the bridge of my nose. “Technically, I think it started with you nearly killing me.”

He laughed and poured us each a glass of champagne. “I have never benefited from my clumsiness before. I think fate finally gave me a break. I got the woman of my dreams.”

“And I got the man of my dreams,” I replied.

We clinked our glasses together, savoring the bubbles dancing on our tongues. I couldn’t help but think about what our future held. What kind of adventures we would go on, what challenges we would face, and what kind of love we would continue to build.

Jensen’s hand found mine, and he squeezed it gently. “I can’t wait to start our life together. To wake up every day with you by my side.”

My heart swelled at his words. “I can’t wait either. I know it won’t always be easy, but I’m ready for anything as long as I have you.”

He leaned in and kissed me again, his lips soft and warm against mine. Our hands intertwined, fingers laced together, as we lost ourselves in the moment.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps interrupted our blissful moment. We turned to see Hattie walking toward us. “I’m sorry to crash the party. I just had to be the first one to tell you guys congratulations. You can thank me later.”

“Thank you, Hattie.” I got to my feet and hugged her. “I always wanted a sister.”

“Me too,” she said, smiling. “I’m glad it’s you. I’ll leave you guys to it. I’m catching a flight to London. I’m meeting a couple of friends and we’re shopping for a week. I’ll see you guys back home.”

I couldn’t believe I was getting a sister and the perfect husband. My mom told me to follow my heart and it led right to him.

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Did you love Merida and Jensen? Want more? I’ve got a Deleted Scene that didn’t make the book just for YOU.

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**If you loved this book don’t miss out!**

Check out book 1 in A Faux Love Novel, [Fake It Real Good!](#)



**MY YOUNGER BROTHER HATES ME... he's getting married.**

And of course, my mother is going to have a field day with me still being a bachelor.

But love is for the birds. I don't have time for that madness.

So, a fake date from an agency will work in a pinch.

Hope this poor damsel in distress is up for having to meet my wretched family.

If she survives, I'll have to give her a bonus. Or hire her for my lonelier nights.

Much to my surprise, she's not at all what I thought she would be.

Curvy, bold, hilarious – everything I want in my life.

This isn't good.

Why in the world would a woman like her sell her time to a man like me?

Surely there's more to her story than meets the eyes.

Not my problem. I just need one thing from the delicious beauty.

**Fake it real good, baby. Fake it good.**

**I gotta have this!**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Weston Parker*  
EVERY *good girl* DESERVES A *bad boy*

Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, two dogs, three cats, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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## **Fake It For Glory**

A Faux Love Novel Book 11

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