



MAFIA CAPTOR

SHANNA HANDEL

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A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

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Mafia Captor: A Dark Mafia Romance

Shanna Handel

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Ashely

Boston, The Boss, Bachman. Tall, dark-hearted, and melt your panties gorgeous.

New England royalty. Billionaire stud. Mafia man.

I'm terrified of him. He's covered in ink. The man has a tattoo.
On his face.

I feel naughty when I wear black nail polish.

He's my total opposite. Someone I would never, ever go for in the real world.

But this is his world, isn't it? And he wants me. So much so, he's captured me.

He teases me, tortures me. His punishments leave my skin burning and my core throbbing.

I thought I was a good girl, but he's made me do very naughty things.

But there's pleasure in the shame. It's almost as if I don't want to escape.

I know this madness needs to end. There's no way I'm the girl for him.

I have to get away or this man is going to destroy me.

Boss

She's the good girl, the one who cooks you dinner, the one you take home to Ma.

But I know inside that girl there's a freak flag.

And I'm gonna be the one to let it fly.

She's nothing like the other women I've been with.

I'm obsessed. Jealous. Possessive.

I want to own her. I want to make her beg.

And then I need to turn her loose.

Her hold on me is too strong, I'm addicted to her sweet innocence.

Now... I'm picturing her carrying my babies.

CHAPTER ONE

Boss

ALL WOMEN ARE precious and beautiful in their own way. There's one uniquely special type of woman that turns my world on end. And ever since the moment I laid eyes on Ashe, I've suspected she was one of these. A strong, independent woman who turns into a soft, needy kitten when you take charge. Take things a step further and—with one little spank—the kitten turns into a leopard ready to pounce, scratching you with her claws, demanding every ounce of pleasure you'll offer her.

I know Ashe is one of these women. Let's test my theory.

I dip my tongue against hers, tangling her deeper in our kiss. I leave my left hand imprisoning her thick curves. I move my kiss to her neck, nibbling and biting. She offers a soft exhale of contentment. I pull my right hand away, lifting it, leaving it hovering over her soft curves just long enough for her to take pause, to wonder where my hand has gone. I bring it back down, timing the stinging spank with a sharp nip of her earlobe.

She's either going to slap me or sleep with me.

Coming from her, I'd enjoy either one.

A FEW DAYS EARLIER...

I see her standing alone at the wedding reception. Wearing a simple black dress, an outfit more appropriate for a funeral than a wedding. Or for a woman twice her age. Still, the frumpy dress can't hide her insane figure. She has the hourglass shape of a black widow spider.

There's a frown on her pretty face.

I've heard Nikolaos talk about her before.

He never mentioned how beautiful she is.

She's uptight. I can see that by the way she stands, one arm around her waist hugging herself, the other bringing her fingers to her lips, like she's trying not to bite her perfectly manicured deep plum fingernails. I get the sense she's one of those women who's wound like a spring...

Coiled so damn tight she might break.

But if you're the right man, the one who can loosen the tension...

You're in for the ride of your life.

Fuck.

I take a deep sip of whiskey. Why am I crushing on this girl? The last thing I need is to get involved with a woman. Especially one that looks as high maintenance as this one does. Right now she's literally straightening a stack of already perfectly arranged cocktail napkins, her pearly white teeth sinking into her full pink bottom lip as she focuses.

She's the polar opposite of the women I go for. I go for tall and exotic—this girl is five foot and change, in heels—and as girl-next-door as a slice of apple pie. I like dark and mysterious, the ones you never know what they're thinking. Ashley wears her heart on her sleeve. I barely know the girl and I can see she's tormented by something tonight. I go for gaunt faces, tattoos wrapping around pinched biceps, spandex crop tops and leather leggings. This girl looks like she's headed to church, though there's nothing pure about those soft curves of hers. I crave women who are distant, detached, up for a fling and nothing more.

This curvy blonde gives me the kind of vibes that usually make me want to run. A serious perfectionist who probably went to college in search of her M.R.S. degree, dreaming of minivans and soccer matches. She's the kind of woman you want making your dinner and raising your babies. The one you bring home to your mother.

So why the hell is my whiskey gone in my attempt to hide my stare behind sips from my heavy glass?

As if reading my thoughts, my phone rings. It's Ma. Again. She thinks she's the Queen of Boston, my family being one of the oldest names in Massachusetts. She assumes she's royalty to me as well, and I should drop everything to answer her call.

Even when she knows I'm at a wedding. Maybe especially because she knows I'm at a wedding. She's going to want to know every detail of the event, including how many single girls are in attendance. Ma wants to be the most important thing in my life. And since my father died last year, she's got no one to distract her. Thinking of how sad she is without my dad induces enough guilt to flow to make me pick up the phone.

I already know the conversation we're going to have before I even say hello. I hold back a frustrated sigh. "Ma. What's up?"

I can hear her ring click against her wineglass. "Boston? Is that you?"

My mom still doesn't understand cell phones. "You dialed my number, Ma. It's me. It's always going to be me when you call my number."

"Oh, true. How are you doing? What are you up to?" I can see her sitting on her red velvet settee in the corner of the formal living room, feet curled underneath her, wineglass in her hand, Hardy, her butler, lingering behind her, waiting to refill her glass.

"I told you. I'm at a wedding. And I can't talk. You okay?"

"The wedding. Right. It must have slipped my mind." She pauses to sip at her wine. "Yes, yes. I'm fine. I just wanted to

remind you about that little family thing we have this weekend.”

By little, my mom’s referring to the biggest event in our family’s life: the Annual Sullivan Valentine’s Throw Down. A massive party my mother hosts at our family mansion in Massachusetts. She invites everyone who’s made a name for themselves in the city of Boston. The city she named me after.

Everyone else in my life calls me Boss.

“It’s annual. I’ve got it on my calendar,” I say. “Same as every other year.”

I count down, knowing exactly what question she’ll ask next. *Five... four... three... two... one...*

“Boston, do you think you’ll be bringing anyone with you? Maybe a special date? It is Valentine’s Day, after all.” She pauses only long enough to suck down some more wine. “I mean, you are at a wedding, right this minute. There must be dozens of beautiful, single women there.”

And there it is.

My mom’s always been desperate for me to meet “the one,” but since my dad passed away, she’s been contemplating her own death. She’s only in her late fifties, works out four times a week, and eats well, her only vice being red wine—for the antioxidants, she says.

She’s not going down anytime soon.

My dad, on the other hand, smoked like a chimney and drank hard liquor like Prohibition was about to make a comeback. As irrational as her thinking is, she’s gone into overdrive, wanting me to marry and come home to take over the family estate as the eldest of her five sons.

And finally give her the daughter-in-law she’s been yearning for.

“I don’t know, Ma.” I eye Ashely. She’s moved over to the champagne tower, standing beside Tess. Tess has her “boss woman” look on her face, one hand on her hip, the other one using her champagne glass to punctuate her words. Tess’s

voice rises as she speaks, clearly passionate about whatever she's saying. I catch something about a job, Ashely working in the Village.

Ma gives an exasperated sigh. "It would just be nice. You haven't brought anyone since"—my mom's voice dips down, dripping with disdain—"her, and that was five years ago. Don't you think it's time to move on?"

Leave it to Ma to bring up the she-devil of whom we do not speak, to pressure me to bring a date. "I have moved on. I'm just busy with work."

"I know. I know. The Bachmans are your new family now. The Sullivans forgotten." My mom's still bitter about me changing my last name after being initiated into the Bachman Brotherhood, an elusive mafia family based out of the city. "I've seen the women in New York. Surely there's one single girl who's caught your eye."

My said eye travels back to Ashely. She's hugging Tess. She must have taken the job. Which means I'll be seeing her Monday morning when I head in to work. "Maybe. This might be the year you get your wish."

Her voice floods with hope. "Really? Hmm..." She pauses. "Tell you what. You bring the girl and I'll finally give you what you've been begging me for over the past year."

I know exactly what she's talking about. I feel a tug in my chest. I want it so damn bad I can feel it in my hand. Is that all I have to do? Show up with a date and she'll finally make it mine?

I clear my throat, steady my voice. "You always did drive a hard bargain."

"No, I just know how to get what I want. So do you." She laughs. "You get that from me."

"I thought that came from my Taurus stubborn streak," I say, knowing full well my bullheadedness comes from her. "You told me that when you made me do that ridiculous moon chart."

“Natal chart. It was a natal chart.” My mother is way into astrology and personality traits. “And yes, my Boston Bull, you are both. Which means double trouble when you’re trying to get your way.”

“Okay, Ma. You calling me your Boston Bull is my cue to hang up and go find my male friends. I need a shot of whiskey and a dose of testosterone.”

“Well, think about what I said, please. You get something you want, and I get something I need. To see you at least try to have one healthy, intimate relationship. That woman, she who must not be named, God, she did a number on you—”

“Got to go.” Bringing up the she-devil a second time in one call is grounds for dismissal. “Bye, Ma. Love you. See you soon.”

I hang up before she can start in on her, the woman she claims wrecked me for all other women. She’s wrong. I’ve only had one relationship that lasted longer than six months. That was five years ago. Everyone assumes I was crushed and haven’t moved on. I keep telling them the truth. I’m a cold-hearted bastard who gets bored with women after a few days. I prefer to keep them around short-term, then move on. The day I know it’s time to have the “see other people” chat is when she leaves a toothbrush in my bathroom.

That’s my cue to kick said girl to the curb.

My family doesn’t know that I did the dumping in my last relationship. Or why I let her go. No one but she and I know what really happened between us. And I’d like to keep it that way.

Booker, the youngest of my four brothers, sends me a text. I’d ignore it, being at a wedding and all, but he’s house-sitting my dogs for me while I’m here for the gala. I glance down at my screen, trying to be discreet. No one likes the guest who’s on their phone.

big bro

hook a little brother up

let me drive the Rover tonight

I SHOOT BACK A TEXT. Off-roading with his friends would probably involve beer. That would be a hard no.

WHERE ARE you headed bud

HIS TEXT COMES BACK LIGHTNING FAST.

THE GYM

the girls love the Rover

FUNNY how when he wants something he can get back to me right away, but it took him three days to let me know he could house-sit this weekend.

Should I let him?

I run a hand through my hair, debating. He's a good kid. Responsible. I've made sure of it. He's crazy smart and recently switched to online school, ready to knock out his senior year even though he's only 16. I should cut the kid some slack. He needs to get out.

YOU FEED BASTIAN?

Lopsy got her meds?

Threw the ball for Sasha?

HE REPLIES WITH:

TWICE PLUS TREATS

yes but she wasn't happy about it

like a zillion times

say yes

THAT KID. He makes me laugh.

Fine

Wear your seat belt

And don't trash my Rover

TWO LETTERS COME BACK.

TY

AS WITH HALF of my kid brother's texts, I have to look up the meaning of them. Ty? Short for thank you. I don't understand kids these days. How long does it take to type out two words?

Back to the problem at hand. If I ask Ashely to come with me, my mother finally gives me what I've been begging her for since my dad died. Ask Ashely to come with me and I'll face ribbing from four brothers and pestering from my mother. And I'll be risking having her hang around long enough to leave a toothbrush, forcing me to have that skin-crawling discussion yet again.

My gut twists at the idea of inviting another woman into my life. The whiskey lining the bottom of my stomach suddenly grows sour. Nope. Not worth it. I'll send Ma the RSVP in the morning. Yes for one. This Boston Bull will be charging in solo. Just as headstrong and just as much a pain in the ass as I've been for my entire life.

I fucking hate Valentine's Day. It scares me to death. If you're seeing a woman, you've got to pull out all the stops. If you're not, everyone shoots you looks of sympathy all day. Asking a

woman out for a first date on V-Day? Yeah, that's gonna lead to ideas of leaving toothbrushes.

So, yeah. The tightly wound girl in the sexy little black dress needs to move to the back of my mind. Ma will have to be disappointed.

As Ma said, I know how to get what I want. She'll give in eventually. Not worth risking a date over.

I'm staying single.

CHAPTER TWO

Ashely

LATER TODAY I'll be throwing a wedding for my boss Nikolaos Bachman—a man I thought I might be in love with, so yeah, I'm a little down. I'm allowing myself to have one of those “lay on the bed and scroll through my phone” afternoons, choosing to ignore the cleaning I could be doing.

The Bachmans are a powerful mafia family living in a hidden village in New York. I mean, like everybody knows about them, but still. There are protocols in place to keep them elusive. One of their hard and fast rules?

No personal social media accounts.

So when I find one of Reece's secret accounts under her maiden name, of course I settle in for a deep dive, two-hour binge of all her photos. She's married to Bryant, my ex-boss and long-term crush. I was his personal assistant before he met her, his right-hand woman, helping him run all aspects of his successful tech company.

I'm not just doing some light stalking for the sake of it. I want to know what I'm missing out on. I want to see their love, feel it, live vicariously through their photos if just for a moment, to give me some hope that one day, I too might find love.

Bryant and Reece standing on the sundeck of the family yacht, the Aphrodite, gliding through the Adriatic Sea. There's a gorgeous rose-colored sunset behind them, spanning the

background of the photo, but my eye goes to the way he's wrapped his hands around her waist. Like she belongs to him, like he wants to hold her like that forever, her back pressed against his chest, her hands resting on his.

Another photo, the two of them kissing in front of the arched doorway of one of the family's castles, again, his hands wrapped around her waist, her arms casually tossed around his neck. And the last one she posted...

The two of them headed to the family's private island in Greece, the Parish. He's scooped her up in his arms, carrying her like she weighs nothing. The smile on his face makes my stomach churn with jealousy.

I think I can count on one hand the number of times I saw him smile before Reece.

It's clear from the photos—they were meant to be together. I wish them all the best. I just also wish I could make someone smile like that.

I allow myself one pitiful sigh. Time to swipe the screen and get back to the last-minute emails I need to sort through. Before I can leave the app, an ad pops up. It's a pink heart with white swirling font inside.

Dare to Date: A dating website for young professionals.

Hmm...

I have to admit, I'm more than a little intrigued. I'm downright tempted. Those happy couple pics I just scrolled through have my ovaries throbbing. I'm not getting any younger. Maybe it's time to take matters into my own hands and stop waiting for the man behind me in the grocery line to magically fall in love with me.

I've never, ever, tried online dating before. I rarely try new things, or date, so of course I haven't dipped my toes into meeting strangers through a website. When was the last time I went out with a man? A memory of a blind date with an undergraduate wearing filmy glasses and having a habit of nervously glancing down at my cleavage every thirty seconds flashes through my mind. How long ago was that?

A year?

The little pink heart dances across my screen, begging me to reach out a fingertip and tap it.

Maybe it's time.

After all, I've got to do something to end this habit of falling in love with my bosses.

Did I let the lines of coworker and boss blur a little bit over those years? Sure. Can you blame me? Bryant Bachman was rich, gorgeous, and decisive. Was he always the professional, never showing any interest in me in that way? Sure.

I still found myself crushing on him.

Stupid, right? Not as silly as what I did next. No longer able to bear the pain of watching Bryant shower attention and devotion on his new love, I did the mature thing. I quit. But I didn't leave the Bachman family.

Bryant passed me off to another single brother looking for a personal assistant, Nikolaos "The Beast" Bachman. An even hotter man who—get this—has his own castle for a home. So yeah, I pulled the idiot card once more and fell for him too. You're familiar with the story by now. He fell in love—spoiler alert, not with me—but with Charlie, the sweetest woman in the world, someone so kind and generous I don't even have it in me to be jealous of her. I'm thrilled for her. But now I'm in the same predicament I was in before, brokenhearted and discarded.

Oh, and I was asked to plan Nikolaos and Charlie's wedding. Cake knife in the heart, right? I can handle it, though. At least I think I can... I just have to make it through this reception and then I can break the news to the happy couple.

I'm quitting.

I'll still put my all into this day—I always keep my commitments—but afterward? I'm going to allow myself to fall into bed and cry myself to sleep. Oh, who am I kidding? I'm not one to cry. I'll probably end up cleaning. The grout in my bathroom tile could use a going over.

Is this really what my life has come to? Planning other people's weddings and cleaning for fun? Now a little cupid cavorts across the screen, offering me ten percent off my new online dating profile. My shiny plum fingernail hovers over the heart. What's the worst that could happen if I click it?

A look at the time tells me I have ten minutes before I need to go. Hover, hover... and... click.

I glance up at my reflection in the mirror. I see a cute girl, pretty, even, but her eyes are sad. What's that Einstein quote my psychology professor always used? The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Time to change it up.

"What the heck? Why not take a chance?" I pay for the one-month trial, already knowing this will be an epic failure, and start skimming the questions. I flip through filling out a quick profile, checking off my loves and hates. I snap a quick pic—already looking cute for the reception—and upload it for my profile pic. Done. With three minutes to spare.

I turn off the phone, slide it across the top of my makeup table, and forget about the website.

It's time to get to work.

"Okay, Ashely, you've got this." I stare at my reflection, smoothing down my simple black dress. I've chosen this color because I'm an employee today, not a guest. And yes, black is my little nod to the depression I'm feeling. Always the wedding planner, never the bride. I had my hair freshly highlighted and toned to my signature ashy shade. I've gone with minimal makeup today, not wanting anyone to think I'm overstepping my bounds. I did splurge on a gel manicure last time I was in the city, though, opting for a deep purple shade to complement my dress.

Charlie, the blushing bride, is obsessed with all things flowers. I've transformed the ballroom into a living, breathing garden. One-hundred-thousand real flowers decorate the room, not one single fake silk plant in sight. When I do something—even planning someone else's wedding to the man I've been lusting

after—I put my all into it. When I step into the ballroom, I can't stop the beaming grin that spreads over my face.

It's perfect. Absolutely perfect. A netting of flowers hangs overhead, crisscrossed by twinkling white lights. There's a stage set up with a band, ready to play at my cue. Walls of flowers, chocolates floating amongst their leaves and petals, Charlie's own design, frame the three-tiered white wedding cake. And hundreds of potted, blooming trees to bring the feel of a garden to life.

I'm not one to brag, but I freaking nailed it.

Tess, the head of the family's wife and a red-headed firecracker, grabs my arm. "Ashely." Her eyes roll overhead, taking in my flower blanket. "Girl. You have outdone yourself. I think this might be the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen."

"Thanks. I wanted it to be Charlie's dream world." Tess's opinion means the world to me. She was the first woman to break into leadership in the Bachman family and I think she's just brilliant. And sexy. And my God... her clothes. The crimes I would commit just to get to spend a day in her closet.

Today she's not wearing her classic cream, not wanting to compete with the bride in her white dress. She's opted for a deep emerald, scalloped-hem lace dress—Vera Wang?—which looks lovely with her complexion and hair color, a matching satin sash tied around her tiny waist.

Tess takes a long, hard look at me. "Something's off about you today." Her nose crinkles as she takes in my dress.

"Black. Because I'm technically working today," I explain.

"No, no. Your work is done. The event is flawless. You're our guest for tonight! Please. This place is perfect. Now you get to enjoy." She grabs two flutes of champagne from a tray as a waiter passes by. I had them add frozen pomegranate seeds to the bottoms of the glasses for a touch of color. She hands me one. "Take this. It'll help you relax."

I don't feel much like celebrating, knowing this will be my last event with the family. I try to put a smile on my face. "Thank you."

She holds up her glass. “To the Bachman Family. And to those like you, whose loyal service makes things happen.”

I clink my glass lightly against hers in a “cheers.” The word *loyal* turns my stomach. I twist the stem of the glass in my fingers. “Actually, there’s something I need to tell you guys.”

She freezes in place, her glass not quite to her lips. She gives me another long, hard look. Of course, this is the moment they announce the happy couple. I can’t help the way my gaze lingers on Nikolaos, so handsome in his suit.

With a sigh, she lowers her glass. “It happened again. Am I right?”

“What happened again?” I ask, glancing over at her then tearing my gaze away. She knows. How does she know?

She gives me an accusatory look, both perfectly arched brows sky high. “Bryant?”

My old boss. I thought my change of employment had been discreet. I hold back an embarrassed moan. My eyes dart around the room. “What? You mean everyone in the family knew?”

She looks like she’s holding back an eye roll. “Please. Everyone in the family always knows everything. When you left Bryant to work for Nikolaos, we knew why. And now, you’re telling me you have something to tell me, and I can only guess that you’ve fallen for your boss. Again. And you’re trying to leave the family. Again.”

“It’s not that I want to leave the family...” What I really, really want? To be one of them. To belong to this amazing, chaotic, powerful group of people. I want to be a Beauty, which is what they call the wives of the Bachman men. “I just need a change.”

“I’ll give you a change. But you’re not leaving the family.” Her eyes flash with a steely determination bordering on anger. “I won’t allow it. We need strong women like you.”

There’s power behind those words. She’s a tigress and she gets what she wants. I don’t know what to say. “I just don’t know...”

She leans in, locking gazes with me. “Ashely, do you trust me?”

The question hangs between us like a signpost, pointing to two possible directions my life might now take. Let’s see where this goes. I offer the truth. “Yes. One hundred percent.”

A naughty smile turns up the corners of her red lips. “Don’t be mad. Promise?”

“What is it, Tess?”

She rolls her eyes, giving a giggle. “Nothing bad... I may have overstepped, though.”

My stomach flips. What has she done? “Just tell me. Please.”

Tess takes a deep breath. “I knew you were going to try to quit, to leave the family. We just can’t afford to lose you. You’re too valuable. Soooo... the past five hours while you’ve been working the event, I may have had a team packing up your place at Nik’s and moving everything—including your cat—with the absolute greatest care, to a lovely apartment uptown. You’re coming to work for me. It’s settled. I’ll let Nik know, I’ll take care of everything. The apartment is over Gotchas. The music is a little loud sometimes, I mean, it is a nightclub, but a white noise machine will fix you right up. Be at Bachman Enterprises building in the Village at eight a.m. Monday morning. Don’t be late.” She tips her glass back, emptying it in one swallow. “And that’s final.” She grins.

What?

Not only do I have a new job—starting Monday morning—but a new apartment as well? At first, my stomach tightens, nerves over the changes to come rippling through my belly. But then, it hits me. Tess has literally solved all of my problems in five hours. I can move on. I don’t have to go through the horrible process of applying and interviewing for jobs. I can keep working for a family that I love and trust. And I don’t even have to pack a single box.

She gives me a nervous look, teeth sinking into her bottom lip as she awaits my reply. “Please,” she begs. “Say something.”

I'm speechless. I go to open my mouth, but no words come out.

Tears sparkle in her eyes. "Oh no. I've done the wrong thing, haven't I? Damn it. Rockland told me I was overstepping, but I thought I was doing the right—"

"No." I cut off her words, grabbing her in a tight hug. "Thank you, Tess. It's just... I thought no one was really looking out for me, you know? But you were. It means so much to me that you would do this all for me."

"Look, I don't want to overstep again, but God, I'm going to, aren't I?" She crinkles her nose. "My middle name should be 'overstep.' Anyway, I think the truth is, you're not falling in love with your bosses."

"Huh?"

"You're falling in love with men you know are unavailable to you. So you can stop yourself. From falling in love."

"What do you mean?" A creeping feeling crawls across the back of my neck—the one you get when you know the person speaking is telling the truth, but you've never stopped to consider the thought.

"Listen." She grabs my hands in hers, giving me a soft look of comfort. "I know you. Like, really, really well. And I know love. I mean, I'm the family's most successful matchmaker to date—"

"And the only," I interject.

"Sure. Beside the point. Anyway, I really think you've chosen to admire your bosses, tell yourself you're falling for them. They're gorgeous. Wealthy. In a position of power over you. And someone you would never, ever date. You know all those rules you have for yourself?"

I can't breathe. Everything she's saying... She's... right. Speechless, I nod.

"Pretty damn sure one of those hard and fast rules of yours is no dating the boss. You're too much of a professional for that."

“Crap,” I say, all her words sinking in deep. “You’re right.”

She gives my hands a squeeze. “I know. I usually am.”

All the pain I’ve put myself through... it was all fake? For nothing? I was just fooling myself? My hands tremble in hers.

“But—w—why would I do that to myself?”

“Easy.” She gives a delicate shrug of her slender, milky-white shoulders. “You had a messed-up childhood. Abandoned by your dad? A mom who couldn’t care for you? You safeguard yourself, you protect yourself, so you don’t have to go through that pain again. You love men, you admire men, you want a man, but you don’t want to risk it. You wrap yourself in a bubble of rules. You’d rather be alone than be hurt again.”

“Holy cow, Tess.” The eerie feeling of hearing a hard truth about myself begins to ebb away. It’s replaced with a feeling as clean and fresh as an early spring day. “I think you just saved me years and years of therapy.”

“Thank you.” She drops my hands, falling into a curtsey and flashing a grin.

Wow. I’m like a hundred pounds lighter, the feelings of shame and failure from falling in unrequited love rising from my shoulders. I was just protecting myself. Of course I was.

“I feel free... happy.”

She leans back, studying my face. “Really? You’re happy?”

“Really, really.” I nod, the relief of having the next chapter of my life sorted out filling me. She’s an angel.

“I’m so glad you’re not mad. I think this is the best decision for you right now.” She kisses my cheek. “And selfishly, for me too.”

I clear the emotion from my throat. “I guess I need to go check out my new place.”

“You let me know if there’s anything I can do to make it more perfect. And I’ll see you for work Monday morning.”

I thank her again and we say our goodbyes.

I think of the only steady male other than my brother that I've allowed in my life, my Persian cat, Giorgio Armani. He's probably cranky from the move and looking for me.

Scanning the room, I see that everything is going as it should be: perfectly. Time for me to slip out. My heels click across the marble floor as I make my way through the throngs of well-dressed, beautiful people. I keep my eyes straight ahead, focused on the exit door.

Tess has a massive team to do her bidding. I know all my things will be moved and unpacked by now. I've always wanted a place uptown. I can't wait to see what the apartment looks like.

My shoulder bumps someone, jarring me and throwing me off my beeline-track. "Oh, sorry!" I apologize, not knowing whose fault the faux pas was.

I look up into the brightest set of blue eyes I've ever seen. Golden blond hair, clean shaven, sculpted jawline. Athletic build. Big, strong hands rest on my shoulders, steadying me with their weight. A smooth, velvety voice drags my attention to a pair of perfect lips. "Sorry about that."

Let's see... My eyes go right where any sane single woman's would go. Left hand. No ring. Stunning *and* single.

I can't stop the smile from spreading over my face. I'm free. I can talk to available men. I'm ready. "No, it was my fault. I wasn't watching where I was going."

His own sexy grin comes easily as he offers a second apology. "Sorry, anyway."

"We'll split the blame 50/50." He's cute. What am I saying—he's beyond cute. He's gorgeous. I extend a hand. "Hi, I'm Ashely."

"Danny. Danny Bachman." His hand encircles mine.

Hot, polite, single, and a Bachman brother? I want to know more. "So, how do you know the happy couple—"

My words are cut off by a deep and rumbling voice saying, "Scuse me," as a man in a black blazer steps right in front of

me, keeping his back to me as he faces Danny. The only thing I can see is the back of a mannerless man's head. His thick, dark, wavy hair stands between Danny and me, effectively cutting off our conversation.

The man starts talking to Danny, either totally oblivious to me or hoping I'll excuse myself. He obviously thinks he's more important and whatever he wants to say to Danny Bachman can't wait.

Over the shoulder of Mr. Rude, Danny sends me an apologetic glance, turning his full attention to the intruder. Heat washes over my face to be dismissed so quickly.

Okay, I'm ready to take on a man, but the men aren't ready for me. I turn on my heel, now one hundred percent ready to be at my new home, crawling into my bed with a green tea face mask and a cup of chamomile tea.

I need a cookie and a cuddle from Giorgio, who offers me unconditional love and affection... when he feels like it. Which is mostly at night when I'm curled up on my sofa or anytime I order a spicy tuna roll to share with him. Giorgio's *Dare to Date* profile would say *this full-figured cuddler loves staying in, couture fashion, sushi, and reality television.*

After what feels like an hour but's only been a minute, I reach the lobby. I let out a relieved sigh. Only a car ride from home sweet new-to-me home. An attendant holds the door open for me.

"Thank you." I step out into the night, a cool breeze calming the heat of humiliation that left my face flushed. I scan the street. My car has not yet arrived. The sound of tiny trumpets rises from my purse, a notification sound unfamiliar to me. I pause on the concrete stoop, slipping my phone from my bag as another gust of wind whips my hair around my face.

A man with a neatly trimmed gray beard stands in front of a sleek black sedan, buttoning his suit jacket. "Ms. Ashely," he calls out to me.

I put my phone back in my purse. "Yes?"

“I’m Mr. Robert. Mrs. Tess requested my services. I’ll be your driver.”

Umm... driver?

“Oh—ah, that’s fine. I can take a cab,” I say, stepping toward the car. “It’s fine.”

He gives a chuckle. “Have you met Mrs. Tess? We do things her way and she insisted that with your loyalty to the family, you deserve a driver.” He opens the car door for me.

I step into the car, sinking into the plush seat. The car smells of leather and luxury.

I push a strand of hair away from my eyes and grab my phone to see what the notification was. I glance down at the screen. Tiny pink digital hearts explode across it. My tummy flips.

I’ve got a match...

CHAPTER
THREE

Ashely

I'M HAVING a hard time believing this is my life as Mr. Robert pulls up to my new place. A new job, a new place, a new driver, a new Ashely. I thank him as he opens the car door for me, a true gentleman.

I have to walk through the main door of the club to get to my apartment. The bouncer lets me in, directing me to a door on the right. I walk through the throng of bodies, the thrum of the loud music vibrating through me as I find my way.

There's a security guard at the door, an earpiece tucked in his ear. "Miss Ashely?"

"Yes?"

"Welcome home." He opens the door with a smile. "Someone will be here twenty-four seven to serve you. When the club is closed, we'll still be here to let you in."

"Thank you." There's a set of steps in front of me. I give a little start as the door closes behind me. I'm surprised at how much noise is blocked out. There's a second door at the top of the stairs, a keypad to open it.

Did Tess mention a code?

My phone dings, a four-digit number appearing on my screen. Hmm... it must be for the door. I punch the number in, and sure enough the door opens.

I step inside. Am I in a movie? It's gorgeous.

The place has an industrial feel to it, black pipes running along the length of the ceiling high above my head. The bedroom is massive, and a spa-like bathroom awaits my pre-work morning shower. It's quiet, the thumping music a distant hum.

Forget the chamomile tea. I treat myself to a generous pour of chilled Prosecco. This apartment calls for a toast.

I hold my wineglass up to Giorgio Armani. "Here's to our new place, G! We made it to Manhattan."

He offers a bored yawn, stretching out across our sunflower-yellow leather sofa.

"I thought you'd be more excited after binge-watching *Sex in the City* last time we were in between jobs." He eyes me while delicately licking a paw.

I sink into the sofa beside him, stroking his soft white fur. He nestles against me, offering a rumbling purr as we take in our new abode. The movers positioned the sofa against the exposed brick wall, facing the window that offers a view of the city.

Everything's been arranged just as I would have done it myself. My clothes have even been unpacked, organized just as I had them at my other place.

"Home sweet home." I give my kitty a pat and flip on the television for him. I'm relieved to find all my services are already up and running. G gets cranky when he can't catch up on his housewives drama.

My phone rests on the cushion beside me. Taunting me. Begging me to finally see what those exploding hearts are all about. After I saw that I had a match, I didn't have the guts to check out my potential date.

The open wine bottle sits on my spotless glass coffee table, icy in a marble chiller. I pour myself a second drink. When I'm halfway through the glass, I'm feeling loose enough to open the message and view my match.

I click on the app. A little pink cupid with gold sparkly wings pops up, a banner trailing behind him, telling me that someone has “shot an arrow at me.” A little red arrow appears on the screen, saying, *Click Me* in big gold letters.

Holy... cow... I must be getting catfished because the picture of the man looking back at me is so darn handsome, I doubt he’s real. I swear my panties are starting to melt.

ASHELY,

Pleasure to “meet” you. I enjoyed your profile and found we had many similarities. I have a proposal for you. I’m due at a family function next weekend and I’m in desperate need of a date. My mother’s day would be made if I arrived with you on my arm, and I have to say, it would make my day as well. Have a look at my profile and see if you think we might be compatible.

UM... mmmkay...

A gentleman, loves his mama, and looks like he just climbed down from Mount Olympus? What’s the catch?

I flip through his photos. Standing among other gorgeous men he resembles, fishing off docks, sailing on boats, his tanned skin exposed as he gives a shirtless smile. I recognize some of the faces.

Where do I know these people from? A little tickle dances at the back of my mind, a vague memory of an article I read last year about the father of a prestigious Boston family passing away. The answer comes to me, bringing with it that relief like a sneeze finally coming out.

He’s a *Sullivan*. The family is like royalty in New England. Their lives are often covered by gossip magazines. They’re all rich. Powerful. And gorgeous.

I’m intimidated, my belly flopping as I scan the beautiful photos. Do I have what it takes to make small talk at an event filled with important people?

Wait—I've been rubbing shoulders with the Bachmans for years. I know how to handle myself around the mafia. I think I can handle some normal, old-money people.

The real question is, do I have what it takes to go on a date with a man this drop-dead gorgeous? I picture myself sitting across from him, wanting to make conversation but instead just staring at him with my jaw dropped open as I sit in a puddle of my own arousal.

Forgive me, Jesus. It's been a minute...

Slugging down more wine, I reread the message. Then I do what any good girl would do. Google the heck out of him. Turns out the Sullivans throw an annual charity ball that just happens to be this weekend. I freaking love charity events. I think the wealthy should share what they have with others, and who doesn't love a glamorous party? Not to mention a chance to dive into my favorite secondhand app and buy myself a lightly loved Chanel gown.

He wants me... to be his date... to Boston's most powerful family's biggest event of the year.

Me. Little old Ashely. I stare at his picture. I've been called cute, even pretty a couple of times in my life. But I'm short, curvy, the girl next door. Yeah, okay, I've got a face that doesn't crack a mirror—especially with the help of a little makeup—but this man could be a model in one of those black-and-white cologne commercials. I can see his abs rippling, thigh muscles flexing as he runs down the beach.

I think of Reece and Bryant, Nik and Charlie. I remember Danny's smile from earlier, then Mr. Rude stepping in, his back to me like I'm nothing. Even with the newfound truth bomb Tess dropped on me, my confidence is still just about shot. I can't do this. I can't go on a date with a gorgeous stranger who messaged me on a dating app.

I need more time to lean into the idea that I'm ready to really meet someone.

I'm going to politely decline the invitation.

My fingers shake as I type my reply.

I'm sorry but I don't think I'm ready to date. Not sure why I filled out that profile. I'm going to delete it. I apologize for the inconvenience.

Very best, Ashely

ALMOST INSTANTLY, another arrow pops up.

Hmm... what's this? He's already messaged me back? Or turned me in to the cupid police for being a complete and total fraud.

Do I click on it? Curiosity travels up my spine, warm and tingly, little fingers of hope daring to enter my heart. Maybe he messaged me. Perhaps he'll talk me into going out with him after all. My finger hovers over the arrow.

I thrive in organized chaos. Leaving a message unopened makes a little bit of bile rise in my throat.

I need to know what he's written.

DEAR VERY BEST ASHELY.

I won't take no for an answer. I've sent over a background check as well as three references and the promise of my firstborn. Please send me your address. I'll be picking you up at six on Saturday. That'll give us plenty of time to get to the estate in Boston via private plane. I look forward to getting to know you on the drive. Dress is formal.

I TURN TO GIORGIO. "What do you think? Should I take a risk and go out with Mr. Gorgeous?"

G blinks lazily then drops his head back down. He's good for a cuddle but this cat is useless at conversation. Looks like I'm on my own to make this decision.

I think of my bad luck. The two unavailable bosses I fell for. Heck—I couldn't even get past introductions with that Danny

Bachman tonight. What makes me think I'll be able to have a successful blind date?

Tess's words come to my mind. My protective bubble. My rules. One of which is no online dating. Rules that have all led me to be home alone with my cat tonight. Again.

I think of the sweet messages my mystery man sent. At least he's a Sullivan and not a Bachman. Still—it's risky.

What on earth do I do?

CHAPTER FOUR

Boss

IT'S good to be back at the Sullivan Estate in Boston. I don't get the chance to visit often. It's always nice to arrive. But 24 hours later? I'm ready to leave. My mom has one agenda—get me married off. For a self-proclaimed forever bachelor, it's exhausting.

Plus, I can't be away from my dogs that long.

I lean down to kiss my mother's cheek. The familiar scent of her perfume hits me. It's been the same since I was a kid. "You look gorgeous, as always."

"Aw, stop it, Boston! I'm old," she laughs.

"No, you look young and vibrant. Inner and outer classic beauty."

Glowing at my praise, she shoos me away. "Stop it. You're complimenting the wrong woman. You need to be showing some of these beautiful single girls some attention. Not me." Her gaze scans the room, hungry for a grandbaby-maker. "Look at all these gorgeous girls! And all from families we know and trust. Fellow Bostonians."

"Ma, you love Boston too much."

"Enough to name my firstborn son after it." She raises her glass. "To you and to my favorite city."

“To the two Bostons in your life.” I clink glasses with her, my whiskey swirling against the crystal. “Please tell me I’m your favorite of the two.”

She squints off into the distance, thinking. “It’s a tight race. You’re a close second.”

“Seriously?” I laugh. “You love the city more than your son?”

“Ah, you’re young. Boston’s always been there for me. I’ve had some wild nights downtown. Nights I’ll never forget.” Ma takes a swig of her wine while eyeing a pretty girl walking by. I’m sure she’s sizing up the poor girl’s hips for ease of birthing. “Grandkids could sway me. Could move you up the ladder to the top. Maybe even give you that thing you’ve been harassing me for.”

Prickles heat the back of my neck. My palms sweat, wanting to run to the library and steal it from my father’s shelves. “You could still give it to me. The night is young.”

She shoots back, “You could have had it in your possession right now, had you brought a date, you know.”

I have to hold in a sigh of exasperation. “I know, Ma. Your grandma clock is ticking. Sorry, all my usual escorts were booked tonight.”

“Stop it, Boston. You could have any girl in this city that you want.”

I think of sweet, innocent Ashely. The girl’d be scared to death of me. “Sure, Ma.”

“Sailor’s bringing a date tonight. He met her online.” Ma stares up at me, her look accusatory. “See how easy it is to meet someone these days?”

“Yeah.” I picture the girls my brother had to choose from on the dating app. Hundreds of plastic-looking faces with duck lips, quirky quotes filling out their profile to make them feel unique. I already know what she’ll look like. Five six give or take, thin but not toned, brown hair highlighted to make it look like she’s outdoorsy, clinging to my brother’s arm, staring up at him adoringly, trying to hide the dollar signs in her eyes. “She’s sure to be a gem.”

“Honey, I know I push you to date, but really I’m just worried about you.” Her voice goes soft. “I don’t want you to be lonely.”

Am I? Lonely? I don’t think so. I love my estate. I love my work. My dogs keep me warm. “I’m not. I’ve got my brothers. And my brotherhood.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, the beautiful Bachmans. I know. I’m happy you’ve found a second family to support you but my mouth to God’s ear. If you even think about ditching the Sullivans for Christmas, I’ll throw you off the Harvard Bridge.”

“Ma...”

“Sorry.” She leans her head against my shoulder. “I just love you, honey. I want you to be happy.”

I want to tell her that I am happy. But I don’t take to lying. “I’m not unhappy.” Her momentary softness makes me want to open up to her. “There is this one girl...”

She leaps away from my side like she’s been struck by a bolt of lightning.

“It’s not that serious—I haven’t even talked to her yet,” I say.

Then I realize, it’s not *my* words that have her attention. She’s not even listening.

“Oh. My. God. There he is. With the date! Oh my God, look at her. She’s gorgeous. A little on the short side, but stunning. Do you think she’s a natural blonde?” She leaves me, crossing the room, calling for my brother. “Say Say!”

I go find more whiskey. Ma still calls him by the name he used when he couldn’t pronounce his own, Say Say. Yeah, I know. Ma’s terrible at names. I swear she ran out of good ones after mine—naming me for the city she loves and thinks she owns. Everyone but her calls me Boss, and after helping raise four brothers, I think the moniker fits me.

After me, she blessed the rest of my brothers with handles related to their conception. Sailor was created on my parents’ ten-year anniversary cruise. God rest my father’s soul, but

that's an entirely unattractive name. I did Sailor a solid when he was about six, dropping the first half of his name and going with Lor. I didn't want him getting his ass kicked on the playground. So you could kinda say the kid owes me one.

Anyway, of us five brothers, he's the good one. Our golden boy. Dark hair like mine, but baby blue eyes, muscles sculpted during weekly gym sessions.

I visit the bar, ordering another drink. While I wait, I take a glance at my brother. He's wearing a perfectly fitted gray suit, a cute little sky-blue pocket square in his jacket pocket. It matches his bow tie. I crane my neck to get a look at his date.

My stomach drops to the soles of my uncomfortable shoes.

Guess who's clinging to my baby brother's arm...

Ashely. *My* Ashely. And god damn, does she look amazing.

She's wearing a pink gown. Her breasts are perfectly encased in satiny fabric, smooth and round and welcoming. I want to bury my face in them, kissing the sweet nipples I know are hiding under that material. The rosy shade of the dress is a perfect match for the excited blush rising in her cheeks. Her hair is down, soft waves brushing her shoulders. She's worn heels tonight, trying to appear to be a normal height and not the tiny little thing she is.

Sailor and Ashely look great together, him in blue, her in pink, like they're already practicing for their gender reveal party. I take in my all-black ensemble, no jacket, shirtsleeves rolled up to my elbows, colorful tattoos covering my forearms.

Not a match.

Honestly? He's perfect for her. I can see them now, driving their Suburban to potlucks in the 'burbs. Two point five kids dressed in white polo shirts with their hair parted and gelled. Mom chasing after them telling them not to get their shoes dirty. Mom and Dad sharing a smile while looking on adoringly at the perfect little creatures they've created.

A bit of bile rises in my throat.

I can't let it happen.

I know there's a naughty freak flag inside that girl. I'm gonna be the one to make it fly.

Not my little brother.

She's laughing at something he said, touching his arm playfully with those pretty pink fingertips she's had repolished to match her dress.

Fuck.

Heat rises in my chest, my fingers tightening into a fist, clenched at my side.

I've already cut off her conversation with one man, literally blocking Danny Bachman from her view with my body. That fuckin' guy. I saw the way she smiled at him at that wedding. Made my blood boil. Uh-uh. Not my girl. She's not going to talk to anyone unless it's me.

I stand back, leaning against the wall as I sip my whiskey. I've got to think. Ending a convo between her and a stranger was easy. Ending a date between her and my brother? Could get a bit dicey.

I'm not a jealous man. I just know what belongs to me. And I don't share well.

I could just tackle him and throw him to the ground like I did when we were younger. But now, he's filled out by spending hours in the gym. My only form of exercise right now is throwing a ball to my dog. Plus, after I kicked his ass, Ma would kick mine for ruining her event.

Scratch the wrestling match.

I rack my brain, stumbling through possibilities. I've already ragged him enough about the name thing. I need something fresh.

Blackmail? Ha. There's no dirt on the kid. He's squeaky clean. The worst thing he's done this year is getting pulled over on his way to check on Ma when she went radio silent for a week. Turns out she had slipped into a depression when the Red Sox didn't win the World Series. And as soon as he flashed his license with the name Sullivan on it, the cop let him go.

I could beg him. It is a charity ball, after all. Who's a sadder cause than me? The brother who got dumped and never got over it. At least, that's what they all think. I could play up that angle.

Or I could steal.

Only, it's not thieving when the treasure already belongs to you. I did see her first. I should have reeled her in at that damn wedding.

I'll wait till she's alone, then I'll corner her. Show her what she's missing in my brother. Show her how bad boys make good girls get naughty. Drag her off to the dark places in this house and let her see how fun dirty can be. Now, I just have to lie in wait.

And try not to kill my brother in the meantime.

I stare daggers at him as he wraps an arm around her shoulders. He's infatuated with her. Oblivious to me. A waitress hands Ashely a glass of the signature cocktail of the event. Ma's latest obsession, a pink flamingo cocktail. Vodka, grenadine, lime, and pineapple. They hold their glasses up to one another to clink.

I'm going to vomit.

This plan of mine needs a little help. I walk by the happy couple with my usual grace but somehow as I'm passing Ashely, my face turned away from her, my elbow happens to jut out in her direction. My arm makes contact with hers. Electric tingles brush up my arm, just from my naked forearm making contact with her warm, bare skin. I bump her just enough to send a wave of flamingo juice splashing over her gown.

"Oh!" her sweet voice calls as I pass by. "My gosh."

Dick move, I know. But save for making a scene, I have few options.

I slink into the crowd, gone before they can even look over to see who's ruined her pretty party dress. I pass guests. Give a pat on a shoulder, shake a hand, and make my way to the front of the room as quickly as possible.

She'll need to find the restroom to clean up. The nearest one is off the ballroom, down this hall. I pass under the arched doorway and hang a right. The Persian runner muffles my footsteps as I make my way. At the end of this hall there's a door for the restroom and a wall of Sullivan family photos and portraits going back to the early 1700s. Give a tug on the upper right corner of the black frame holding Great Uncle Leon's photo and a secret door is revealed, leading to a hidden room. A special nook that I've kept to myself, unbeknownst to my family.

The eldest of this many brothers deserves a privilege or two, don't you think?

This room is mine. My next conquest? The thing I've been begging Ma for? The title to my dad's silver 1964 Aston Martin DB5.

Damn, I love that car.

Ashely, she'd look good in that car. I can picture her sitting beside me as we cruise down Market Street, her wearing a black minidress, the hem rising higher and higher as I slip my fingers between her soft thighs. God, I've got to focus or I'm going to come before I even lay hands on the girl.

I'm halfway down the hall. Here she comes. I can feel her behind me, sense her presence before I even hear her speak. She gives a sigh, whispering under her breath about the dress being ruined for resale. I can buy her a thousand dresses. If she was my girl, she'd never shop secondhand again.

Madness.

What are you doing, Boss? You idiot. Didn't you decide to stay single? You could have asked her out at the wedding, but you knew it was best to let her go.

So why am I pouring drinks on the poor girl, stalking her, stealing her from my brother?

Because ever since the first moment I laid eyes on her, I haven't been able to stop thinking about her.

I'm obsessed.

Hiding my face, I stand with my back to her, hands clasped behind me as I pretend to study the pictures in the black frames that I already have memorized. Growing up, when my dad needed my youngest brother, Booker (conceived in my father's library), out of his hair, I used to entertain him playing our own version of Guess Who on this wall, using family photos for the cards. Ashely murmurs something reassuring to herself about a magic stain stick she has at home. I can't help but think of my own magic stick—one I'd love to stain her innocent little body with—and then I hear the bathroom door open.

She's quick. Precise. She'll have her dress fixed up in no time. I've only got a few minutes.

"Here we go, Uncle Leon. Don't let me down." I wrap my fingers around the corner of the frame. One good tug and the door will slip open, running quietly on its tracks as the wall moves to the right. My timing has to be perfect. The moment that bathroom door opens, I'll pull the trigger. I wait, hoping no one else meanders down this hallway—

A too-familiar voice interrupts me. "Aye-oh, Boss Man! How's it hanging?"

Fuck.

The air leaves my lungs as my plan crumbles before my eyes. My hand drops to my side. I turn on my heel, greeting my brother. "Lor. What's the word?"

He shoots me a curious look. "Why are you manhandling Great Uncle Leon? What's he ever done to you?"

"He gave me this damn Adam's apple. Sticks out too far. I always cut it when I'm shaving."

"You've got a screw loose, man." He glances over at the bathroom door. "Have you seen my date? I think she went this way. Some asshole spilled her drink on her dress."

"Fucker. Are there no gentlemen left out there?"

"Certainly not in this family. Other than me, that is," he says.

“I saw a lady rushing off to the bathroom. Must be yours. She’s in there.” I give the door a nod. Then it comes to me, a vision of Ashely stepping out of that restroom, linking her arm into my brother’s, and walking off into the night. My stomach twists in icy knots. I love my little brother. I’d do anything for him. This, however, I can’t do. I stare into his trusting blue eyes. “But while I have you, let me run something by you.”

“Okay.” His arms cross over his chest as he sizes me up. After the shenanigans I pulled on him when we were younger, he’s leery of my deals. “Shoot.”

A bolt of raw adrenaline shoots through my veins. I push past my guilt, focus on my brother’s heart, and squeeze the trigger. Die, you bastard. “Give me the girl.”

“What?” His brow folds. “What are you talking about?”

“Your girl. I want her.”

He lowers his voice, looking toward the door. “Ashely? I’ve only just met her.”

“Then you’re not attached,” I say. “Give me the girl.”

“We got to know one another on the plane ride. She’s really sweet. Why do you want her?” His brow knits. “You don’t even know her.”

“Neither do you,” I say.

“She’s cute though. I really liked her profile. As I said, she’s sweet.” His jaw clicks, and his eyes dart to the left. It’s just a split second but the break in eye contact is enough for me to know he’s considering a deal.

I put my finger back on the trigger. “What do you want?”

“I don’t know.” He rubs the back of his neck, gaze falling to the floor. He’s thinking about it, but he’s feeling guilty. I told you—he’s the good guy. “That seems pretty cold, to just walk away from her.”

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I’ll warm her up.”

He gives a laugh, shaking his head in that Boss-is-so-deplorable kinda way I’m used to. “I don’t know, man. This is

weird.”

“Let’s see.” I glance up at the ceiling, taking my time. My heart beats faster. Time’s running out. I need him out of here before she comes back out. I know the one thing he won’t turn down. I go in for the kill. “The Lambo.”

He loves that car. It was the one he was “borrowing” the one time he ever got pulled over.

“You’re shitting me.” His eyes widen, searching my face to see if I’m serious. “A 769-HP Lamborghini Aventador LP780-4 Ultimae in exchange for my date?”

“Yes.” I lower my voice, my eyes glued to the door. She’s going to be walking out of there any moment. “The keys are in the drawer by the garage. Help yourself.”

“Sounds good.” He wants to jump on the deal. I know he does. His damn eyes look like a kid’s at Christmas. But he’s calculating. He pauses, strokes his jawline, milking this for all it’s worth. “But I feel bad—”

“It is a really, really nice car. Maybe I should keep it.”

He laughs, throwing his hands in the air, and steps back in surrender. “Okay! Okay! I know better than to let a deal like that sit on the counter too long.”

I need him gone. Five minutes ago, gone. “Take the car and get the hell out of here.”

“Take care of her, brother.” He’s practically skipping down the hall. He calls over his shoulder, “You’re going to tell me what this is all about later, right?”

“Nope.”

His laughter echoes down the hall as he disappears around the corner.

And I’m back to the hunt.

I glance up at Uncle Leon. “Let’s try this again, shall we? And I meant what I said about the Adam’s apple. It’s a serious pain in my ass.”

Leon gives me a stare of disapproval from behind his wire-rimmed glasses. I ignore him. My heart goes to double time as I prepare my second attempt at abduction. My fingers grip the frame.

I tug on the frame. Nothing happens. I tug again. The damn thing is stuck. I drop my hand just as Ashely steps out of the restroom. Her gaze is down, a hand towel blotting at her dress. Miraculously, she's gotten the dark red stain out.

Slowly, she realizes she's not alone. Sensing my presence, her gaze rises, her eyes locking on mine.

Blood rushes to my cock. I shift my weight, running a hand through my hair. "Hello, Ashely."

She takes me in, from my black clothing to the ink that covers my body, her gaze resting on the tattoo on my face.

"Who," she says, fear making her voice tremble, "are you?"

Your worst nightmare? *Not* the man of your dreams? Your stalker?

The rising blood throbs through my cock, unquenched desire tightening my belly. Wanting to taste her, the tip of my tongue strokes my lip.

"I'm Boss," I say. "And now, we're going to fuck."

CHAPTER
FIVE

Ashely

THIS GORGEOUS, terrifying stranger with some kind of sexy accent caught between Boston and New York just told me we're going to... *what?!*

I pick my jaw off the floor, closing my mouth. Is he serious? The man in front of me is dark, dangerous, donned in black and covered in ink. I take him in. His shirt is unbuttoned enough for me to see part of the black angel wings spanning his tanned chest. He has a tattoo. *On his face*. An angel wing alongside his right eye.

Terrifying.

But I stand my ground. He will not be getting off lightly, talking to me like that. I don't care if he's got a thousand tattoos on that ridiculously handsome face of his. "Excuse me? Who do you think you're talking to?"

"You." His dark eyes glitter. "I just traded my brother my Lamborghini for you."

There are no words. I've met cocky men before, but this guy takes the darn wedding cake. Although, I have to give credit where it's due. He's an impeccable dresser—his clothes fit him like a second skin, his body a vision in Mr. Armani's work, but my goodness, the mouth on him. And the nerve. To assume he's going to get anywhere with me. And did he say he traded a car... for a date with me?

“Where’s...” I glance around, my online date nowhere to be found. Shoot. What was his name? This dark stranger’s presence has zapped me of all memory of my date. How could I forget his name? “Mr. Sullivan?”

“Sadly, Mr. Sullivan is deceased. But if you’re looking for my brother, Sailor—”

Sailor! That’s it. How could I forget a name like that? “My date was your brother?”

“One of them. The one that’s ditched this boring party. I’d say by now he’s tearing down the highway doing about a hundred and five, breaking in his new car.” Boss gives a shrug. “He didn’t put up much of a fight when I made the offer.”

My intrigue momentarily takes over my disgust. “You gave a car up, for one date with me?”

“Mmm.” He gazes up at the ceiling, clasping his hands behind his back as he rocks on his heels, thinking. “Not for a date.”

“What did you trade the car for then?” I ask.

“Isn’t it obvious?” His dark eyes pull me in, his gaze so intense it makes my belly flip and flop. They drop down, caressing my breasts. “For. You.”

My stomach drops to the soles of my pinching heels. My heart thumps in my ears. My knees go weak as I take a step back, trying to put a safe distance between me and this stranger. I only succeed in bumping my back against the closed door.

I shake my head, my damp palms pressing into the cool wood. “You can’t do that.”

He drags his arm upward, flattening his palm against the door above my head, trapping me with his body. I’m used to men being taller than me. I mean, come on—I’m five five in stilettos—but there’s something more to his height, like his commanding presence makes him a giant in my eyes. I’m tortured by his intoxicating scent. A villain shouldn’t smell this good.

He stares down at me, those coal-black eyes stirring embers in my core. His voice is velvety smooth, raising the internal heat

I'm feeling. "It's Valentine's Day. Don't girls like you go for grand, romantic gestures?"

"Romantic gestures?" Is this man for real? He really does take that cake. Cocksure and arrogantly confident. "You can't be serious."

"It's not?" His brow knits. He honestly looks confused. Like he can't understand why I wouldn't approve of being a trade-in for his car.

"No. A romantic gesture is flowers. Or chocolates. Surprising your girlfriend at work with her favorite coffee. Not stealing your brother's date by offering him a car. Then telling said date that you"—I poke a Pretty Petal Pink fingernail into the center of his chest—"basically own her."

"But I do. That's a two-hundred-thousand-dollar car."

He's teasing me. He can't really think that I'd do him because of some deal he made with his brother. A slow, lazy grin spreads across his too-handsome-for-his-own-good face, confirming my suspicions. He's having a laugh at my expense. Trying to get a rise out of me. His smile comes so slow and sensual I find my clothes getting damp where they shouldn't.

"You've got some nerve. You know that?" I press my thighs together, shifting my weight to my other foot. God, these shoes are pinching. Wish I'd worn flats. I could run a lot faster—if it comes to that. I should be running right now. Why aren't I? Instead, I'm standing here like one of the stone statues in the front garden I walked past on the arm of—what's his name again?—staring up into the black pools of a man who is possibly the rudest, most misguided, best smelling, sexiest man I've ever met.

"I've been told as much." He leans down, his lips so close to my cheek they brush against my skin as he speaks. "The question is, do you?"

"Have nerve?"

"Do you? Have enough nerve in you to fuck a stranger?" His eyes drag down to my lips, lower to my breasts, then rise back to meet my gaze. "You're clearly considering it."

“How do you know that?”

His voice lowers and with it, my inhibitions. “Your nipples are impossibly tight, showing off under that thin material of your dress. They want to come out and play.”

Now that he mentions it, there’s a tingling across my chest, a heaviness in my breasts, a reaction to his close proximity. I inhale a shaky breath, parting my lips to deny, deny, deny. The words don’t come.

“Your breaths come quicker each time I speak.” He lifts his hand, bringing it close to my face. This stranger has the audacity to drag the rough pad of his thumb across my chin. Tingles of fire dance across my skin, leaving a starburst of heat in the wake of his touch.

Am I? Breathing heavier? No idea. My mind feels like a cloud, his words wrapping cotton around my brain. My tongue is thick in my mouth. Can’t think. Can’t speak.

His hand is on my waist. Heat and pressure intensify as he drags me closer. My breasts graze his chest, causing a sharp intake of breath that doesn’t go unnoticed by him. The sexy flip-your-tummy smile crosses his face.

“And there’s a lovely pink in your cheeks. Matches the drink I spilled on your dress.” His finger glides across my cheekbone. “If you’re not considering it, why are you blushing?”

He’s the one who spilled my drink? He did it on purpose, knowing he’d corner me back here? The man is obsessed with me. I’m equal parts fearful and flattered. This big, bad, powerful mafia man wants little ol’ me.

But... why?

Digging deep, I find my nerve. I focus my breath like I’m in hot yoga class, steadying my voice. I’ve only got one word to get out, but I want to sound confident when I say it. “Why?”

His brow creases, his strong shoulders rising in a shrug. “Why, what?”

“Why... me?” I force myself to meet his gaze. Something changes in his eyes, a softening? Perhaps a flash of guilt? A

momentary realization he's absolutely mental? The look is gone before I can decipher the emotion behind it.

"Do you want the truth?" he asks.

Do I? Can I handle it? What if he says he has a thing for chubby girls? Ugly girls? I know I'm not either of those things, not really, but my confidence has taken a hit over the past two years. I don't have luck in love, but I'm successful otherwise. I work hard. I'm strong. I can handle the truth. Whatever it is. Whatever feeling is buried in his dark little heart.

I steel my nerves. "Yes."

His gaze roves from my eyes to my lips, to my breasts, back to my eyes. He shakes his head. "Dunno."

I don't know what answer I was expecting, but that wasn't it. Now I'm getting frustrated. I don't have to focus on steadying my voice now. Instead, I'm tempering it. The man is infuriating.

"Let me get this straight." My hand goes to my hip. "You don't know me whatsoever, but you take it upon yourself to spill my drink, cancel my date, corner me in a dark hallway, then make a very, very lewd—" My mind goes blank for a moment. What do you call it when a man tells you he's going to...*eff* you? "—proposition, and then you tell me you don't even know why you did all those things?"

The heat from his eyes rakes over me like he's dragging prongs over coals. "The truth is, I've heard your old boss talk about you. A lot. Then, at his wedding, I saw you. You were standing there in a black dress, biting your lip, worrying over something. And I. Don't. Know. I just..." His gaze bores into mine. "Wanted you."

A warm liquid feeling rushes through me, loosening the tension in my body. I take a deep breath and with my inhale, I absorb the meaning of his words.

He just wanted me.

Someone... wants me.

The good feeling that flattery brings only lasts a moment. I'm in danger. I'm pinned to the wall by a man who thinks he bought me.

"I wanted you and I haven't stopped thinking about you." He moves in, his lips so close to mine, I can feel the heat coming off his skin. "And I always get what I want."

Should I slap him or give him what he wants?

"Well," I say, remembering the rules I've set for myself. "I don't kiss on the first date. I mean... not that this is a date, per se, this is more of a very rude bypassing of my original date —"

"Fuck your rules."

And his mouth is on mine.

My heart thrums in my chest as my eyes close. The heat of his hand warms my lower back as he pulls me into him, his other hand slipping up the back of my neck, causing an explosion of tingles to flicker down my spine. His motions are controlled, experienced; this man knows how to kiss a woman. My knees go melty, and I have to slip my arms around his neck to brace myself, using him as an anchor to keep from floating above the clouds.

What the heck am I doing! I try to pull away, to break the embrace, to do the right thing. Which is not letting this dangerous stranger swipe his tongue against mine. I'm a good girl, I don't let strange men kiss me. I struggle to pull away and he holds me tighter, his hand now dipping below my waist, cupping my ass in his palm, squeezing it. I should be slapping him, but it feels so good, and I have this thing where if any guy touches my butt I just go into overdrive and now I'm pressing against him, and the kiss grows deeper. Possessive, aggressive, controlling. And my God, is this man in control of my body right now. I'm practically melting against him. Melting everywhere. I'm going to be a puddle of Ashely if I don't stop this kiss, but now he's squeezing my ass again, fingertips digging into my flesh, and it's been so long since a man has touched me and no man has ever touched me

like this, with so much power and confidence. But... but....
but...

I flatten my hands against his chest, pushing him away.
“Stop.”

He turns, grabbing a corner of a picture frame. He tugs at it, pulling hard. The frame drops to the floor, glass shattering at our feet.

He looks down at the frame. “Shit. Sorry, Leon.”

I’m lost, heady from the kiss, confused by this crazy chain of events, and yes, slightly mesmerized by this bad boy who’s taken a sudden and intense interest in me. I ask the first question that pops into my mind. “Who is Leon?” And why do I care? I should take this opportunity to run, but I’m too curious about what he’s up to. And let’s be honest—I’ve never been kissed like that before. It’s a near impossible thing to walk away from.

The wall starts to move. The wall... is.... *moving*. The array of family members slide to the right, exposing what looks like a secret room.

I peer over his shoulder, dying for a better look. “What is *that?*”

“It’s where the good girls go to be bad.” My stomach drops and tingles spark between my thighs at the devilish wink he flashes me. He grabs my hand, tugging me away from the glass, around the mess, and into the darkness.

CHAPTER
SIX

Boss

SHE TASTES like what lying on a white sand beach feels like. When I grabbed her ass a flash of heat bolted through her, her tongue hungry against mine. I knew there was a little freak in there. She just needs the right man to entice it to come out and play.

“Don’t be shy, baby. I know what you like.”

“How can you know what I like?” she asks, her attention on the room we’re entering. Her wide eyes scan my space. “You’ve only just met me.”

She gives a little jump as the gears kick in, rolling the wall back into place.

Now we’re alone. No one knows of this place. No one knows we’re here.

The reality of her situation settles in. Fear etches her brow. She takes a trembling step away from me. “I should be going.”

“Too late, Ashe. You’re all mine.”

“Ashe?” She shakes her head. “No one calls me that.”

“I like it. It’s sexy,” I say. “It suits you.”

“Sexy.” Her eyes narrow. “No one calls me that either.”

“It’s because you put up a wall. But I’m telling you, you’re fucking sexy.” I pull her against me. I need another taste. She

shivers as I kiss her neck. “Let me show you how sexy you can be.”

She tenses, fighting with herself, knowing this is wrong. But I make it feel so right. I know how to make her purr. My fingertips travel down her back, arrive at the promised land, and grip handfuls of her luscious ass. I give a hard squeeze, enough pressure to send her flying onto the balls of her feet as she gasps into our kiss. Sweet, sweet Ashely has that freak in her. I know it.

All women are precious and beautiful in their own way, but there’s one uniquely special type of woman that turns my world on end. And ever since the moment I laid eyes on Ashe, I’ve suspected she was one of them. A strong, independent woman who turns into a soft, needy little kitten when you take charge. Take things a step further and, with one little spank, the kitten turns into a leopard ready to pounce and steal every ounce of pleasure you’ll offer her.

I know Ashe is one of these women. Let’s test my theory.

I dip my tongue against hers, tangling her deeper in our kiss. I leave my left hand imprisoning her generous curves and move my kiss to her neck, nibbling and biting. She offers a soft exhale of contentment. I pull my right hand away, lifting it, leaving it hovering over her soft curves just long enough for her to take pause, to wonder where my hand has gone. I bring it back down, timing the stinging spank with a sharp nip of her earlobe.

She’s either going to slap me or fuck me. Coming from her, I’d enjoy either one.

I hate to sound cocky... but I’m almost always right.

“Oh!” She pulls back, a look equal parts shock and gonna-tear-my-clothes-off locked on her face.

Three... two... one...

She doesn’t slap me. Instead, her hands cup either side of my face, pulling me into her for a hungry kiss. Her tongue slides against mine. My cock grows uncomfortably hard in my pants. She’s a little tigress. One spank and she’s ready to go.

I fucking love being right all the damn time.

I grab her ass, dragging her up. Her legs spread in the roomy skirt of her gown, wrapping around my waist. Her hands are in my hair, her kiss growing more eager. Fly that freak flag, baby. Let it fly.

I like my secret room empty, save for whatever it is I'm in the mood for. Tonight, it's a long, black leather Chesterfield couch. The back is low, a thick roll of padded leather. There's a thick gray fur on the floor beneath it, a table beside it, covered in tall white pillar candles, their soft vanilla scent filling the room as wax drips down their sides. I've chosen a smooth jazz mix for tonight, a sensual, seductive playlist of fifteen of my favorite songs for when it's a black leather kind of night.

I could have gone kinky or crazy with the room, but she's a classy gal. The kind of girl that wants to be taken to the edge but won't jump off with you until she trusts you. I respect that.

Still going to fuck the hell out of her.

I carry her over to my sofa, laying her down on her back and breaking our kiss to see what she looks like lying there. The candlelight brightens the sparkle of excitement that dances in her pretty eyes.

"I can't believe I'm doing this..." Her anxiety eases as she gazes around the room. "It's gorgeous. I love all the candles."

"Look over there." I nod toward the one thing she's not yet noticed. I had a huge mirror moved to the room for tonight. It's six feet wide, seven feet tall, and leans up against the wall across from the sofa. The candles reflect back, doubling the soft, glowing light in the room.

The ornate silver frame of the mirror resembles a picture frame, surrounding the sexy young couple reflected back like a painting frozen in a moment of time. The two of us are a study in contrast, me in black kneeling beside her, her in the pink gown, her curvy body stretched out over the leather sofa, gazing at my face. It's my favorite moment—when tension

hovers in the air between two people who know they're about to fuck.

We stare at one another in the mirror, watching as I move my hand over her belly, up to her breasts, cupping and fondling her soft curves. An arm stretches lazily over her head, resting on the arm of the couch behind her. She gives a sigh as I finger her nipple through her dress. Her eyes stay on the mirror, fixated on me. I turn away from the reflection, taking in her breasts as I push the silky fabric down, revealing her bra-less beauty. Her breasts are full, her nipples gorgeous. I dip down, taking a pretty pink bud in my mouth. She sighs with satisfaction as I suck on it.

I could stay here all night tasting her breasts, but I only have this one night with her and there is much more I want to do. I kiss my way up her neck, nipping at her skin.

I whisper words hot against her ear. "I want to taste your pussy. Lick it with my tongue until you come. Would you like that?" I go back to biting and kissing her neck, waiting for her answer.

"Oh my gosh... I—I don't even know you! I never kiss on the first date... oh God, that feels good..." Her hands run through my hair as she continues to run through her rules. I keep kissing. "And I certainly don't go to third base on a first date, not that this is even a date..." I slip my fingers below her waist, sliding them over her silk-covered pussy. "Oh wow. That feels... Okay, I guess you could have a little taste, but there will not be any sex. I am a hundred percent not going to break that rule—"

Her words choke off as I push her dress up around her waist. I moan as I see her pussy, encased in a tiny pink thong, strings digging into the tops of her hips. I explore her pussy, running a finger over her panties. She gives a little moan, moving her hips. My invitation to taste her.

But I want to hear her beg.

"Tell me how much you want it." I tease her pussy, pushing my finger against her panties, fingering her clit. "Make me put my mouth on you."

“That’s filthy. I don’t talk like that,” she says with the barest hint of a smile on her face.

“Tell your rulebook to fuck off. Just for one night. Do what you want to do, not what you think you should do.” My fingers creep along the bands of her panties, ready to tug them down over her hips. “Ask me to taste you.”

Her shy gaze finds mine. Her mouth opens but the words don’t come. I inch down the thin waistband. Waiting. Finally, her words come, tiny and timid. “Please, put your mouth on me.”

“Such a good girl.” I don’t want to push her too far. I slowly lower her panties, dragging them down her shapely legs to her ankles. I leave them, focusing on her strappy sandals. I undo the buckle of one, slipping the shoe from her foot. Her toes are painted a pretty pink to match her dress. I hold her soft foot in my hand, bending down to suck on her toes.

“Wait! What are you doing?” She shoots up, bending at the waist to sit up and stop me.

I move closer to her big toe. “Sucking on these pretty little toes of yours.”

“Um... no, you’re not.”

“Just wait and see how it feels. You’ll feel it all the way up in your pussy. Trust me. Now be a good girl and lie back down.”

She lies back, hiding her face in her hands. I take her toe in my mouth, sucking till she forgets her shame. I rub her ankle and foot as I kiss her toe.

She gives a kitten-like mew. I remove her other shoe. Slip her panties from her ankles. She’s too distracted to notice me slide them into my pocket. A keepsake to remember this night.

I kiss my way up the inside of her leg, drawing closer to the promised land. I grab her soft thighs, spreading them. The sweet scent of her pussy reaches me, my cock throbbing at the sight of her bareness. Her clit waits for my mouth. I glance up at her, getting off on the look of timidness on her face.

I dive down, feasting on her pink folds, teasingly circling her clit, then swipe my tongue directly over her swelling bud. She

cries out, grabbing at the ends of my hair as I murmur against her pussy while I kiss and lick. Her thighs press into my cheeks. She's already so close...

I was going to let her come. I decide not to.

I rip my face away from her pussy, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. Her eyelids drag open, blinking as she comes to. "Huh? What are you doing?"

I put my hands on her thighs, locking eyes with her. "This has been sweet. Really nice. But maybe it's been too nice. Too sweet."

"What do you mean? It's been lovely." Begging creeps into her tone. "I've loved it. Keep going?"

"I'm going to keep going. But not like this."

"How then?"

"I want you on your knees. I want to fuck you from behind. Spanking your ass while I fill you with my cock."

Her eyes widen, her mouth opening, but no words come. "Um... err..."

I don't need an answer. I grab her hips, dragging her down the sofa and flipping her over, her knees burying into the carpet, her belly pushing up against the sofa cushion.

"Oh!" Her arms flail, looking for something to grab onto. There's nothing. She settles on pushing her palms against the cushion. She turns over her shoulder, peeking at me. "Are we really doing this?"

"Doing what?" I'm already unbuckling my belt. She watches as I free my cock. I can't tell from the expression on her face if the size scares her or excites her. Maybe both. "Fucking? Yes."

She goes to say something, but I strike first. Assuming she's clean and on birth control—she's too type A to take a chance with that stuff—I part her ass cheeks and push the head of my cock against her wet pussy.

I grab her hips, gripping them as I throw my hips forward, thrusting inside of her. Her face turns forward as she leans

over, a gasp leaving her lungs as I plunge my cock all the way inside her tight pussy.

Fuck.

I almost come. “You’re so tight and wet. Your pussy... my God, girl. Your pussy—it’s some kind of magical.”

She grips at the couch, panting as I enter her. “Uhn... You’re so big—”

I pull back, fucking her again. She moans, reaching one hand back to grab at me. She clings to my shirt as I fuck her. The sounds she’s making grow louder, more desperate, as I fuck her. Her pussy tightens around my cock. My balls rise up into my stomach. The center of my body coils with tension. I need that release. We’re a match made for fucking one another. Our bodies respond like we were made to be together at this moment. I’m so fucking turned on by her. She feels so fucking good.

“I need to fill your perfect pussy with my hot cum.”

“Wow—” she pants, letting go of my shirt, her hips pushing back to meet me. “Just... wow. What a filthy mouth you have.”

“The better to eat you with, my dear.” She’s getting so close. I want to push her to the edge. I spank what I can reach of her thick curves. “And I have big hands. The better to spank your ass with.”

She moans, her upper half collapsing against the couch, her arms folding under her face. “Do it again.”

“Hell. Yes.” I slap her ass, sending her spiraling. Her pussy locks down on me, and she moans through the harder spanks I deliver, again and again. She’s breaking through that shell, showing me glimpses of the wild girl she’s hiding deep inside. Her ass pushes against me, getting all she can of my cock.

“My God. I’m going to come.” My balls are so tight it’s growing painful. I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her against me. Breathing in the light, flowery scent of her hair, where I’ve buried my face.

She's desperate for her own climax, whimpering as she reaches back to touch my face. "Me too. Me too."

Stars flit over the backs of my closed eyelids. My breath jolts to the back of my throat. My heart pounds in my ears, perspiration rising at my hairline. She's grabbing at me, fingertips digging into my flesh. I mouth her finger, sucking hard as she comes. She cries out, calling, "Yes, oh, yes."

Hearing her sultry voice is my undoing. The climax hits, hard. My world goes unsteady as the release rushes through me. I come. Hard. I fill her with my cum, marking her as mine.

"Yes!" Her voice is so pretty as she comes, her fingers raking at my skin.

I collapse against her, catching my breath. My entire body relaxes. Euphoria runs through my bloodstream.

As I pull my cock from her, cum slides over my skin, down her inner thigh. Staring at the glistening smear, a strange feeling overcomes me.

It feels like I've left more with her than a cockful—is that even a word—of sperm.

It feels like I've left a piece of me inside her.

How can that be? This woman... I'd heard stories about her. Saw her that night at the wedding.

Then traded my brother a car for her.

What. The. Fuck have I gotten myself into?

I untangle myself from her. I offer her a shower and a room in one of my mother's guest suites. I pre-order her breakfast and coffee, and a private plane to take her back to the city in the morning. I ensure staff will see to her every need.

I leave her, without a kiss.

Her shy smile is the last thing I see before she closes the door.

The. End.

It has to be.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Ashely

GETTING BACK TO NEW YORK, to my new apartment and my cat, is a total and utter relief. What was I thinking? Having sex with some dangerous stranger in a hidden room? It was crazy... Irresponsible... Epicly, morally wrong... He didn't even ask if I was on birth control. Of course, I am. I have a nonexistent sex life, but I don't leave things like planning a human to chance.

The stupidest thing I've ever done.

One convo with Tess and I break just about every single one of my rules.

And have the very best night of my life.

A naughty smile crosses my face, remembering him calling my—you know what—magical. I sigh, falling into the butter-soft leather of my couch and curling up beside my cat. I'm in a robe, a towel around my freshly washed hair. I scrubbed in the shower but still feel deliciously dirty, remembering the sensation of his strong, rough hands as they explored my body.

Will I ever see him again?

Probably not.

I was relieved he didn't kiss me goodbye.

We both knew this was a one-night thing.

I order the greatest Chinese food in the world to be delivered, then turn on the TV. “G, what do we need to catch up on first? *Ninja Beast Mode Challenger* or *Blind Date Lovers*?”

He lazily blinks one eyelid. “*Ninja Beast Mode*. You got it.”

My phone dings.

It can’t be... can it?

I look down to find an apology message from Sailor.

SO SORRY ABOUT the other night

Something came up and Boston was good enough to host you in my absence

Sorry

HE’S NOT GETTING off that easy.

NO WORRIES—ENJOY the car!

I HIT SEND, then block his number.

I’m done with Sullivans. I’m done with Bachmans. I’m done with dating.

The adventure was sexy, dangerous. Exactly what I needed but didn’t know I needed. Now I’m happy to go back to my daily routine, leaving last night behind. A crazy memory I’ll keep with me forever.

After devouring delicious food and watching a mind-numbing amount of television, I clean up and cut the screen. I cuddle back down with my cat.

Drowsily, I stroke Giorgio’s soft fur. “You’re the only man for me.”

I’m so tired from the whirlwind adventure, I’m going to fall asleep right here. I set an alarm on my phone, not wanting to

be late for work. Getting up, getting dressed, grabbing my morning coffee, and heading into Tess's predictable office tomorrow morning is exactly what I need.

The sun wakes me Monday morning, filtering through the blinds. My eyes blink open as I stretch, smiling about how rested I feel, how good the warm sun feels on my—wait. The sun? I always, always wake up before sunrise on a workday. What's going on? I grab my phone to check the time.

It's dead. It must have died in the night. My alarm didn't go off.

"Oh my gosh. What time is it?" I run to the kitchen to check the clock on the oven.

I have fifteen minutes to be dressed and to the Village.

I'm never going to make it. I'm going to be late. I've never, ever been late for a day of work in my life. It's only my second week of work. Will this affect Tess's impression of me?

My stomach flips and flops as I rush over to plug my phone into the charger. It comes to life, dinging with messages that I don't have time to read. I see the alert at the top of my screen, letting me know my driver is waiting for me at the curb.

Thank God I showered last night. The clean bra and panties I slept in will have to do. I rush through the apartment, pulling an easy to put on red cotton dress over my head. My hair dried overnight in the towel. It's a tangled mess. There's no time to straighten it. I go with a high, slightly un-messy bun. A pair of dangly earrings and slip-on red sandals and I'm ready to go. I toss my glam bag in my purse as I run out the door. I'll do my makeup in the car. One of the many perks of having your own driver. I go to lock my door. "Shoot! Forgot Mr. Robert's protein bar." I rush back into the house, grab one of the bars from the cupboard—chocolate chip, he's not tried that one yet—and finally, I'm closing the door and locking it.

Mr. Robert waits for me by the door of the car, offering me a smile just as he does every morning. Apparently, he was supposed to retire this year, but refused. When Tess brought it up, he told her, "I'm working till I can't work no more."

I greet him with a kiss on the cheek. “Good morning Mr. Robert!”

“Miss Ashely.” He checks his watch. “You’re late today. You’re never late.”

“Missed my alarm.” I dive into my purse, pulling out the bar. “Chocolate chip. Twenty grams of your daily protein.” It’s also packed with vitamins. If I can’t get him to eat a salad, this is the best I can do.

“Aww, you spoil me, lady. I’ll be sure to have it with my coffee on my break.”

I settle into the plush back seat of the car. My first day of work he noticed me applying lip gloss on our drive. The next morning I found he’d attached a mirror to the back of the passenger seat headrest for me to do my makeup. I pull out my quilted cloth bag and get to work. Can’t do anything about the hair so I go heavy on the eyeshadow, mascara, and lipstick.

Red dress, red sandals, cherry red lips. I’m feeling as confident as I can considering I’m walking into work late for the first time ever. Today only starts my second week of working for Tess. I hope she understands.

We pull up to the brown and black gates that hide the Village from the rest of the city. I feel proud to be invited as a guest into this pristine world, hidden behind the stately brownstone buildings that line the street. The grassy common area greets us. Couples sit at café tables sipping their morning coffees. Neat rows of well-maintained townhomes house the families that have the privilege of living here.

We pass by the homes, their doors painted and porches decorated to reflect the personalities of the owners. There’s a little schoolhouse, modeled after something you’d see on *Little House on the Prairie*. I feel a tingle of excitement as we pass the three-story brick building that houses the family’s rooftop bar—their favored space for outdoor events and my next big project. Tess and I are planning a total overhaul of the place and I can’t wait to get to work.

The tall steel and glass building comes into view. I thank Mr. Robert as I step out into the warm morning sun. Even though I'm late, I can't pass up the opportunity to pause, staring up at the beautiful architecture. The shining silver words on the sign bring pride to my heart. Bachman Enterprises. Very few non-family members ever make it into the Village, much less the family's headquarters.

I thank the doorman as I step into the breezeway. The scent of perfectly roasted coffee beans hits me as I pass the coffee bar. Every single morning I order a cappuccino from Sophie, the friendly young woman with the purple glasses who works behind the counter. It's one of the many little highlights of my day. The sound of the whirring machine tries to lure me in but I just don't have time.

I hold back a sigh as I pass the counter, caffeine-free.

A voice calls out to stop me. "Miss Ashely? Miss Ashely?"

"Yes?" I turn to find Sophie, wiping her hands on the front of her green apron.

"Hold on." She goes to the order pickup end of the counter, lifting a white paper cup. "Your coffee."

"Oh! You made me one?"

"Medium vanilla cappuccino, sprinkle of cinnamon." She gives a shrug. "You ordered one the same time every day last week. I figured you were just running a little late today and I may as well have it ready for you."

"Thank you!" I take the cup from her hand. She's written my name on the sleeve in black marker. *Ashe*. Makes me think of *him*. "Really, thank you so much."

I can't stop smiling as I walk away. From the memory of him or her kind gesture? I'm not sure. Maybe both. I take a long sip, reveling in the warm vanilla and cinnamon.

I can't wait to get to Tess's office. Today, we're discussing eco-friendly flooring that can hold up to the elements for the bar. I found a porcelain clay that might work. I'm excited to show her.

I take the stairs even though I'm rushing. I'm wearing flats and can use the exercise. A well-dressed man passes me with a nod, heading downstairs. His cologne pricks at my nose—woody and similar to the one Boston was wearing. Thoughts of that evening hit me, hard, right between the tops of my thighs.

I erase his memory from my mind. Goodbye, Boston. You were my first, and only, one-night stand.

I reach Tess's office, but her door is closed, a man with massive shoulders and a shaved head blocking the entrance. His hands are folded neatly in front of his blue suit jacket.

Curious.

"Hello, can I help you?" I ask.

"Ashley, come with me." Without waiting for my response, he turns on his heel, leading me down the hallway.

"Oookay. But where's Tess?" My heart thumps against my ribs. How late am I? Am I being fired? He's a good two feet taller than me and I have to hoof it to keep up with him. I toss my coffee cup in a trash can as we pass by. I don't think my racing heart can use any more caffeine right now.

He doesn't answer me. He's taking me down a hall I've never been down. One that wasn't included in my welcome tour the first day of work. It's darker back here, away from the big sunny windows overlooking the city, the leafy green office plants. Where are we going? I can't take the suspense.

"Um. Sir?"

His pace doesn't slow a bit. He gives a grunt in response.

"Can you tell me where we're going?"

He stops in front of an ominous-looking black door. "We're here." His hand goes to the handle, swinging the door open with a determined push.

I step into the room.

It's an office with dark wood walls, navy carpet, and a massive desk in the center of the room.

And behind that desk... sits...

Boston Bachman.

My heart goes into my throat. He can't be here. He's in Boston. I've never even seen him at Bachman Enterprises before. I blink twice, expecting him to be gone when I open my eyes.

Still there.

Still gorgeous.

He's wearing black, as always. Looking panty-melting fine, as always. The tattoo on his face moves as he narrows his brow. He clenches his locked jaw. A slow, predator-like grin spreads over his perfectly shaped lips. His dark eyes burn with a look that makes my knees go weak. He stares at me like I'm back in his secret room, in his arms, his mouth hot against my neck with his burning kisses.

"What," I say with a shaky breath, "are you doing here?"

"That's not a polite way to greet your new boss." He stands from his seat, tossing a gaze to the watch at his wrist. "Especially considering you're late."

The door closes behind me with a thump, making me startle. Did he say *boss*? "My what?"

"Your boss." He leans his ass on the front edge of the desk, crossing his svelte arms over his chest. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Meet me?" The man's had me. All over. Prickly heat dances over my shoulders blades. My red cotton dress now seems too thin, too short, too red.

"You know, you look kinda familiar. Do I know you from anywhere?" He stands, walking toward me, making the heat turn to flames with his closeness. "Have I met you before?"

He circles me, eyes roving over every inch of my body. I hate the power he has over my body. It responds to him, nipples growing tight, pussy throbbing in time with my pounding heart. My knees are like jelly, my painted red lips parting, wanting his tongue between them.

I need to take control of the situation before things get out of hand and I'm panting, begging him to take me. Me and him? That canNOT happen again.

This thing he's doing to me, circling me like I'm a piece of meat, teasing me, tempting me, I have to end it. I'm at work, for goodness' sake. And Tess is my boss. Not Boston.

I do the thing that comes naturally to me. Throw my hand on my hip and straighten my spine to try to look taller and bigger. It's a stance I learned when trying to wrangle my little brother growing up. I call it my big sister stance. The commanding tone comes easily as well.

"You don't work here. You don't have an office here." I glance around, noticing there's nothing in this room but a desk. "You made all this up."

"It was fun. I know you're all proper, so I thought you'd like me to have an office when I introduced myself to you."

There's a little yap from behind the desk.

"Who's that?" I ask.

An angry little terrier comes trotting into view, a puzzled look on his cross face.

"That's Grumps. My assistant."

The dog gives me a hard stare, fitting of his name.

Now, I'm annoyed at both of them.

"Let me see if I've got this right. You had them bring in a desk, you brought your dog as your sidekick to play assistant, all to tease me? To get a rise out of me by pretending you're my new boss? Look, I don't know what game you and Grumps are trying to play, but yes, I am late and you, sir, are only making me later." I turn on my heel to leave.

A wall of black-covered muscle blocks my exit. "Not so fast."

"Excuse me. Please step aside." I stare up at him.

"I'm not playing games. You work for me now," he says. "I traded Tess for you."

What. The. Fudge.

Okay, now I'm angry. I don't care how handsome he is, how much he makes my panties melt, or how dangerous he seems. "Let me get this straight. First, you trade me for a car. Now you've traded me again? For what, exactly?"

"Something she needed. Something she couldn't say no to."

"Stop speaking in riddles. What did you trade? And why? What the heck do you want with me?" I want to push him out of my way, get out of the office, far away from him, and go stick my head in a freezer. And maybe my pussy as well. "Why are you doing this?"

That devilish look crosses his face. The one that makes me long for his cock inside me. He runs his tongue over his bottom lip. "Because I can."

"Well, you can't. Please move because I'm going to find my real boss. Tess."

I go to step past him. Surprisingly, he lets me. He calls out, stopping me with his words.

"She's not here."

I flip back around. "Where is she?"

He smirks. "The one thing she wanted badly enough to let you, her very favorite employee, go? I had tickets to the Westminster Dog Show. They're completely sold out. She's been bribing everyone she knows but couldn't get a hold of tickets. I gave her mine. For you."

I'm too surprised by him saying he had tickets to the Westminster Dog Show to be bothered about the fact that Tess was willing to trade me. "You go to the dog show?"

"Yeah. I fucking love dogs. They're so much better than people." He scoops up the terrier in his arms. The dog gives a bored yawn.

Hmm... I've had the same thought about Giorgio. I take a good, long look at him. Maybe I wrote him off too quickly.

I look down at his feet. Even his fashion choices puzzle me.
“Are you wearing... Doc Martens?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Nothing. Just—you don’t make any sense.”

His dark brow folds inward. “What do you mean?”

What do I say? You love your family but you’re ruthless at work, I’ve heard. You’re hard and cold but go to dog shows. You have good and terrible taste in fashion but look amazing in everything you put together.

I shrug. “I don’t know. But I do know one thing. I need you to stop trading me around like I’m a worthless object.”

“Worthless?” he says. “I trade for you because you’re the best. And I want the best.”

There he goes again, with his *wanting me* line, the line that got my panties off in the first place. I’ve got to get us out of the danger zone, cool down the sexual tension that’s burning between us. “Fine. Let’s get to work.” I march over to his desk, setting my purse down on its bare top. “What do you want me to do.”

His hands go to the buckle of his belt. There’s not a tinge of shame in his filthy words as he says, “Suck my cock?”

Dirty boy. I will the blush to stay away from my cheeks. “Nope. Not going to happen. Let me make something clear. I am your employee. I work for you. I’m good with whatever job you give me, within reason, but I will not be your personal sex worker. In fact, I will not be touching you.”

“Can I touch you?” He gazes at my breasts.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Absolutely not.”

“Fine.” He heaves a heavy sigh, his hands dropping from his waist. “We’ll get to work.”

“Great. What are we doing?”

“Working.” He grabs his car keys from a hook on the wall.
“Come on.”

“Where are we going?” I grab my purse from the desk. His next words stop my heart.

He gives me that devil’s grin. “We’re going to kill a man.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Boss

“BOSTON. Killing a man? What are you talking about?” Her pretty blue eyes widen, her lips forming a little “O” of surprise. She’s painted them today to match her red dress. It’s fucking sexy. There’s a shine of fear in her eyes.

Grumps gives a bark from my arms, ready for action.

Probably not a good time to confess that I’m the debt collector for the family. It’s a job I’m good at, one I did for my dad back in Boston. You need someone who can separate their emotions from the task at hand. I can turn off feelings as easily as people flip their damn light switches off at home. My powers are so strong, people think I’m heartless. I get called an asshole half the time.

Maybe I am an ass, or maybe it’s just the way I’m wired.

What they don’t know is that I tear up at diaper commercials. Those chubby little babies. Their smiles kill me.

They’re just too damn cute.

I do have money I need to collect. Pretty close to where we’re headed, actually. Could kill two birds with one stone but not with her in the car.

Still, I like teasing her. “Come on, haven’t you ever wanted to hold a gun?”

“Um... No. Holding a gun is not on this girl’s bucket list.” She shakes her head in disbelief. I hold back a laugh.

She peers at me, suspicious. “You’re just trying to get a reaction from me.”

I love getting a rise out of her. I get off on it. But I know when to quit.

“We’re not going to kill a man,” I say. “Just make him think we’re going to kill him.”

“And why would we do that?”

“He owes us money,” I say. “Doesn’t he, Grumps?”

“For what? You guys have more money than God.” She shakes her head. “No. You know what? I don’t want to know. But I’m coming with you anyway to make sure you don’t do anything crazy.”

Purse slung over her shoulder, she marches past me, determined to put in a good day’s work.

I watch her ass cheeks jiggle under the thin fabric of her dress as she goes by.

Not fucking her is going to be the hardest job I’ve ever had.

I get her settled in the Land Rover, by far my favorite car for where we’re going. Rugged enough to take off road but comfortable for my beautiful passenger. She’s so tiny, she has to hold onto the bar and step on the running board to get herself up into the car.

“Need a boost?” I tease.

She swings herself into the car, landing with her purse in her lap. She gives me a smile of victory. “I’ve got it.”

She’s got determination and grit. I wouldn’t really take her on a run—I’d never put her in danger like that. I was just playing around. I’ll tell her the truth when we get closer, but right now I love that she was down to go along for the ride, making sure I don’t rough someone up for money.

Grumps curls up on the back seat.

We're going to check out an event space. Not my idea of a hard day's work. Tess made me promise I'd take Ashe in exchange for her employment. My typical workday usually involves more physical force and blood, but hey, a promise is a promise.

Something about a Beauties' glamping retreat they were already planning. I have no idea.

I'll probably just wait in the car while she checks it out. My musically inclined brother, John—yes, he was conceived exactly where you think he was—has me learning to play the piano. He downloaded an app on my phone. The keys scroll across the screen and you press them with your fingers. I'm trying to nail down *Prelude in C Major*.

We leave the Village and drive through the city, an easy silence between us. As the buildings grow further apart, I feel tension entering her body.

She stares out the window. "Where are we going to get this money, exactly?"

"We're close."

It's all trees and hills now. We're actually pretty close to my place. I live out in the country. I need space to breathe.

Tess said the place I'm looking for is in the sticks and she's not exaggerating. There's only one other car on the road. A white SUV that's been behind us since we turned off the main highway. I start looking for the landmark Tess mentioned, the one that marks the long drive to the glamping site.

Whatever the fuck glamping is.

All I see are tall evergreens. "Could you let me know if you see a giant purple cactus statue topped with a pink cowgirl hat?"

Her pretty face flips from her window. "A what?!"

"Cactus. Giant cactus. Tess said we'd see one." I don't even see the entrance to a drive anywhere. I slow down.

"Wait a minute. You were kidding me about the money, weren't you? We're going to the glamping site, aren't we!"

“You got me. What is glamping anyway? Girl-camping?”

“Something like that.” She pulls out her phone, tapping away at her screen. “Okay, we’re only like a quarter of a mile out. It should be around here somewhere. We’re also looking for a sign. *Cowgirl Camping.*”

I slow down. The white SUV behind us speeds up. “What the hell...”

“What is it?” She looks over her shoulder.

“There’s some idiot driving like a maniac.” I study the rearview mirror. New Yorkers know how to drive, but until you’ve been on I-93 South from the tunnel to the split, you got nothin’ on Bostonians.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. My gut kicks in. Something ain’t right here.

“This fuckin’ guy.” I turn to Ashe. “You got your seat belt on, babygirl?”

“What! Why?” Her neck snaps around as she looks behind us, staring at the car.

“Sit back and relax.”

She settles back in her seat, her fingers digging into the leather. “What’s going on? Oh my gosh...”

“Hold on tight, baby. Grumps, get down.” The dog obeys, hopping down onto the floorboard where he’ll be safer.

I grip the wheel. The SUV charges forward. But I anticipate his move. I hit the gas, sliding over till I’m riding the yellow lines.

My foot smashes the clutch, shifting up a gear, then I floor it. I gain speed to get ahead but the SUV hits it too. He’s right on my tail.

She snaps out questions like bullets. “Why’s he following us? Who is that? What’s going on?”

“Baby, I need you to take a deep breath. Don’t panic. We’re gonna bang a U-ey in five.” I gain some ground.

“Bang a what?” she squeaks.

“We’re gonna make a hard U-turn.”

“Okay. Good plan.”

“Grumps? You good back there?” He gives me an all-ready bark from his position on the floorboard.

She turns forward to face the windshield. Sucking in a breath, setting her jaw, steeling her nerves. “You got this. Whatever it is. I trust you.”

This girl’s got balls. She’s ride or die material. I’m here for it.

“Ready? Hold on.”

“Ready.” She grips the edges of her seat.

I’ve got just enough of a lead to pull it off. Tires screeching, I bang out a hard U-ey, flipping the script. She’s strong and stoic, hanging in there as I hit the gas, sending us in the other direction.

The Land Rover’s not the fastest, but it’s a tank. I stare daggers at the SUV as I pass it. A younger guy with dark hair and a death wish behind the wheel. No one I recognize. When the SUV catches on, it flips around to tail us again.

I’ve got to make a new plan. I don’t know that I can out-race this fuckin’ guy. I got a feeling the guy that owes us money must be thinking he can get to me before I get to him.

Not gonna happen.

If it was just me in this car, the glovebox would be flying open, and I’d be poppin’ shots out my window. Ashely’s brave and strong, but I feel crazy protective over her. I don’t want her in more danger.

She turns over her shoulder, checking how far behind us the other car is. “Looks like you’ve got a lead. What do we do now?”

“We?” I shift gears, plowing down the road.

“I can do something to help.” She flips around, opening the glovebox.

Fuck. My piece, locked and loaded, is sitting right here.

“Is that a gun?” She slams the glovebox closed. “Never mind. Don’t even want to know why you have that. Okay, there has to be something here.”

I’m focused on the road. He’s gaining ground. She pops open the armrest between us, her little hands flying as she digs around. “Okay, okay. Huh... Yes. This will work.”

I can’t tear my eyes from the rearview mirror. “What are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” I hear the motor of the window rolling down.

I catch a look at her. She’s hanging out the window, something in her hands. She gives a grunt of exertion as she tosses it out the window. I watch in the rearview as an opened bottle of blue power drink explodes over the dude’s windshield.

It’s not a gunshot, but it’s enough to make him swerve.

“Good job, girl! What else you got in there?”

She’s throwing one thing after the other out the window. Socks. Hats. Candy wrappers. Booker was the last one to drive the Rover. Those youngest kids being the babies of the family, they’re messy AF. Always having their mama picking up after them their whole lives.

This is the first time in Booker’s life that I’m not going to be riding his ass about the mess he left behind.

She tosses a Men’s Fitness magazine out the window. It flies through the air, splaying out over the driver’s side of the windshield. It’s enough to block the driver’s view, causing him to swerve just as we reach the intersection that leads home.

I turn left, taking off toward my estate.

“Did we lose him?” Her cheeks are flushed from exertion.

“For now.” The SUV is nowhere in sight. The turn to the house comes into view. I feel relief piping through my bloodstream as the adrenaline ebbs. No one’s going to mess with us now. My security detail is ex-military, and everyone knows to stay the hell off my property.

“There’s only one way to keep you safe,” I say.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“You’re coming home with me,” I say.

Grumps chooses this time to hop into the front of the car, traveling over the console and circling her lap.

She helps him get settled. “Come here, boy. Weren’t you brave?”

“See? Grumps even agrees. You’re coming with us.”

“No,” she says, giving me *the look*, the delusional one where she thinks she’s in charge. “I’m not.”

Her adamantness—is that a word?—that she has any power is even more adorable when her hair’s all messed up from her efforts to save us.

“Yes,” I say, turning onto the side road that will take us to my estate, “you are.”

I smash the button, locking the doors.

“Did you just lock me in?” She jiggles the handle of her door, her messy bun bobbing. “Did you rig this car so your passengers can’t get out?”

“Yup. And now, I’m kidnapping you.”

CHAPTER
NINE

Ashely

MY HANDS WON'T STOP SHAKING. I busy them, petting the dog's soft fur. I've never been through something so terrifying. I'm still on a high from helping us get out of that last situation, but now I'm being held captive by someone who looks at me like he's a starving man in a desert and I'm his next snack. He thinks just because his name is Boss Bachman, he can tell me what to do.

But I guess right now, he can.

I can't believe what I've just been through. It seems surreal that I'm in danger. The drama in my life usually comes through my television screen, watching other people fight battles in their own lives. Giorgio by my side and a glass of wine in my hand.

I saw a gun today. A real one.

Boston's smooth voice interrupts my barrage of thoughts. "You're going to love my place."

"How do you know I'm going to love it?" The landscape is beautiful, the land rolling into hills, lush with evergreens.

"You're a classic beauty. You like things that are timeless. Beautifully made and built to last. We have that in common."

I mull over his words. It might be my favorite compliment I've ever been paid. He's got a charming side, my kidnapper/boss

with the angel wing face tattoo.

“That’s a very nice thing to say,” I say. “Thank you.”

I glance over at his ink, curious. “May I ask about the meaning of the wing on your face?” Normally, I’d file asking this question under improper etiquette, but hey, he abducted me so some rules are off.

His hands grip the wheel like a bolt of physical pain shoots through him.

The gesture instantly has me regretting my decision. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want.”

“S’okay. It’s for my dad. He always said I was his right-hand man, and now he’s in heaven. Looking down on me, I hope.”

Wow—I never would have thought...

I’m drawn from my thoughts as the tires turn from pavement, crunching over rock.

He flashes me a grin. “Welcome to my estate.”

Of course, he times his words perfectly with us pulling up to an ornate wrought iron gate. The swirling black metal panels sense our presence, slowly opening. Hidden speakers play the soft sound of *Carol of the Bells*. Grumps gives the gate a little growl.

This guy is full of surprises. I slant him some side-eye. “Your gate plays music?”

He shrugs. “It’s a great song. It’s bigger than Christmas. I like it.”

The grounds are everything one would expect when being dropped into a French chateau that’s hiding in the middle of the state of New York. Rolling grassy hills dip into low stone walls. The long drives are paved with tan and white pebbles. The stately three-story residence has a cream-colored exterior, towers, and a sloping gray roof. It’s a house out of dreams and storybooks. A manor worthy of elegant weddings, sophisticated garden parties, a happy family with children and dogs, extended family joining for gatherings.

It's heaven.

"How did you find this place?" I crane my neck to get a look at some of the gardens as we drive toward the front entrance.

"I'm not a Village guy. I needed land. I asked Tess to find me a couple places to choose from. The moment I saw this place, I knew it was mine."

"Why do you need the land? I mean, don't get me wrong. It's gorgeous. I'd love to have it even if I didn't need it, but..." My goodness... is that a babbling brook running the length of the property? Have I fallen asleep and woken up in a Jane Austen novel? "Is there a specific reason?"

"I have dogs. A lot of dogs."

"Makes sense. I can't recall ever seeing dogs inside the Village."

"Nope. Charlie had a fish. Jack Sparrow. I sent her flowers when he died. Other than that, there's a couple of indoor cats but that's the extent of the pets. I need space to breathe, room to roam. And I can't live without my dogs."

Again—who is this man? He's full of surprises. Just when I think I have him pegged, he flips the script on me. Sending flowers when a friend's fish dies? Who does that?

Huh... *I* do.

Could it be possible that he and I actually do have some things in common? We do have the same idea of a dream home, that's for sure. My face is practically glued to the window glass, not wanting to miss a single thing.

He pulls the Land Rover—a very fun car in a car chase, by the way—up to the curved front steps, putting it in Park.

He opens my door for me. I step out onto the pebbled drive. "I have to say, you have impeccable taste in homes."

"And you, in bosses." He flashes a wicked grin.

The comment is meant to get a rise out of me. Not only did I not choose him as a boss, but him stealing me from Tess has now led to my imprisonment. Had he left me alone, Tess and I

would be matching white and gold wallpaper to flooring right now.

I ignore him, heading toward the large wooden doors. Grumps trails behind.

I can barely keep from running, I'm so excited to get the tour. Wait. There will be a tour, won't there? Is it rude to ask? Or will he just lock me away in one of those towers? My little heart couldn't take it if I got this close to such a gorgeous house and didn't get to explore.

Lucky for me he's as eager to show his house off as I am to see it. He's redone the kitchen, turning it into a sleek, modern commercial-grade space perfect for catering events. The rear wall of the kitchen is made of glass doors. Today, with the gorgeous weather, they've been left open to let in a cool breeze, filling the room with the scent of fresh flowers.

He must have gardens.

Of course he does. The man's got a face tattoo dedicated to his beloved father, a gun in his glovebox, sends flowers over dead fish, and—I peek out the back door to confirm—yup. There's a stone wall out there like something out of *The Secret Garden*, and I just know there's rows of blooming rose bushes behind it.

He's got gardens.

He's like no one I've ever met. He fits in none of my neatly checked boxes of what I'm looking for in a man and yet...

There's a library but instead of the dark, dusty space you'd picture, sunlight floods through tall windows, highlighting the books sitting on lacquered white shelves against walls painted pale yellow. Instead of the whole wingback chair by the fireplace vibe, he's got the most adorable round chairs. They're covered in a soft, gray fabric and wide enough for two to snuggle into or for one to curl their feet up under them as they read.

He's got a cozy living room, dark gray walls with white sofas. No television. No cat. I'm guessing he doesn't watch a lot of reality television. Grumps leaves us at this point in the tour,

curling up in one of the many soft dog beds I've seen laying around. There's a beautiful, shiny black grand piano in the corner of the room. It sits in front of a window that overlooks the garden.

I smooth a hand over its glossy top. "Does anyone play?"

"My brother John. He lives in a studio apartment in the city, no way to have one. I promised him the day I closed, I'd have one here for him."

I love how much he looks out for his family. Kinda makes me bring my guard down a bit. "That's extremely generous of you. I've always wanted to learn to play."

"He's real good. He loves to teach. Maybe he can show you a few things."

"I'd like that." It's a nice idea, but I doubt I'll be here long enough to take piano lessons.

He leads me up a curving staircase to the second floor. Cream-colored walls and large windows create a light and airy ambiance in the main spaces. He has an extensive collection of brightly colored modern art pieces hung in his hallways.

My eyes wander over the walls. "You like art, I see."

"I like bright colors."

I eye what seems to be his daily uniform, an ensemble that's head-to-toe black. "Yeah. I can see that."

He stops at a door, grabbing the crystal glass doorknob. "This"— he opens the door— "is your room."

He doesn't move for me to walk past, instead taking up space at the doorway so I have to brush up against his chest to step inside. His scent, his warmth, sends a little thrill through me.

Taking in my new prison, I try to control my excitement.

Because it's the tower room, the far wall is rounded, a semi-circle of oblong windows. Heavy white curtains hang from high, gold rods. It's classic but modern and fresh. The walls are eggshell, the linens white. The bedframe is made of thin gold bars, crisscrossing into patterns at the headboard and

footboard. There's a stone fireplace, currently hosting a large vase filled with branches of cherry blossoms.

I'm staying. In. A. Turret. My heart almost explodes.

"It's lovely." I say.

This place would be my dream home if I'd ever dared to dream this fabulous. But for how long? When will I be out of danger? And more importantly...

How will I live without Mr. Armani and my stuff?

"What about my belongings?" I ask.

"We can have your things sent. Anything you don't have? We'll get. Buy whatever you want. Get yourself a whole new wardrobe. You're living in a French chateau now, you should look the part."

His words make a little shiver of pleasure trip down my spine. I might have to take him up on his offer.

"And my cat?" I ask.

His face twists in distaste. "I'm a dog person."

"Well, I'm both." No cat? That's a deal-breaker. I'll take my chances on the streets. I straighten my spine. "My cat is nonnegotiable. He's very special to me."

"Look, you're safe here, but I have a ton of dogs. And some of them have a killer hunting instinct. They're well-trained animals but they could chase your cat—what's his name?"

"Giorgio Armani."

Is he... laughing at my cat's amazing name?

He runs a hand over his stubbled jaw, his dark eyes sparkling with humor. "You're safe here, but your little fashion designer isn't. I have a newer employee, Talia. She's a part-time vet tech here who helps out with my dogs. She's obsessed with animals. I bet she'd love to care for him for you. She can bring you updates, pics, every morning."

I take a minute to think over his proposal. "Okay. I can work with that. I'll miss him but I want what's best for G."

“Same,” he says. “I mean, I won’t miss him. I hate cats. But I’ll make sure he’s well cared for, for your sake.”

“How can you hate cats? They’re perfect.”

“They’re assholes. They only come around when they want something.”

“Not true. You have to earn their respect, but we can agree to disagree,” I huff. “Anyway, I appreciate that you’re keeping me safe. I’ll stay here until you feel like it’s okay for me to go back to my apartment. And I’ll be going back to my real life, working for Tess.”

“Fine. That’s fair.”

I’m surprised by how quickly he gives me up.

I quickly add, “But while I’m here, I’m all yours.”

“All mine?” He shoots me a lewd grin and a seductive waggle of his brow.

Naughty boy. Sex with me never seems to be far from his mind.

“Not like that, Boston. I need to work. I can’t not work.”

He gives it a long minute, thinking. “You know, I’ve been looking for a house manager.”

Whaaat?

Oh my gosh. I used to read regency romance, just for the descriptions of the houses and gardens. Now I’m living in one of those homes I thought I’d only ever see in my imagination.

And...

I get to run it... the way I want? I take a peek at Boston. He’s checking his phone, obviously ready to get back to work. Seems like he’s going to be pretty hands off.

He looks up from the screen. “The staff do their best, but I go through them pretty quick. It’s kinda chaos with the turnover.”

I look around. “Where are they all going? Are you trading them for stuff? I know you have a habit of trading people.”

“You’re the only one worth trading for.” He gives me a lewd wink.

He doesn’t mean it. He’s staring at me like he does.

I feel... flustered.

I look away. “Yeah, right. What really happens?”

He shrugs, completely unbothered by the fact that his staff turns over like people change their underwear. “They just don’t last very long.”

“They quit?” I’ve managed quite a few small teams. I’ve yet to have an employee leave.

He shrugs. “Yeah. They kinda hate me. Something about me being an asshole to work for?” He shrugs again. “Not sure.”

“If someone quit on me, I’d be doing my best to figure out what I did wrong.”

“That’s just it,” he says, already bored by this conversation. “I don’t care enough. I want to focus on my work, not organizing the people who order the light bulbs.”

“Consider house management taken off your hands. I love that stuff. You had me at *organize*.” I hold out my hand to shake on the deal.

He takes my hand to his mouth, kissing it all sensual-like. “And when do I have *you* again.” He says it as a statement. A fact about something that is inevitable, that will happen.

Not a question.

We need to nip this in the bud. We will not be rekindling whatever happened in the secret room. I lock eyes with him. “That will be happening, never.”

“We’ll see.”

“Cocky much, mister?”

He laughs. A genuine laugh that reaches his eyes. They actually sparkle.

I have dream housing, a new job, my cat is cared for, and my stuff is on the way. He might be rude to the staff but he’s

pleasant to me. I can handle my temporary imprisonment. I just need to keep my panties on and start my spreadsheets and I'll be just fine.

There's one thing I need in order to get through this, though. He has to do what I say. Or I'm going to find a way to escape.

I need to make my demand. "Staying here, working for you, living without my cat? I agree. Under one nonnegotiable condition."

"What is it?"

I take a deep breath. "I need you to make a second kidnapping."

CHAPTER
TEN

Boss

BECKETT THROWS his bag into the back seat of my car. He's got an all-American athletic look and the height to back it up. Brown eyes, brown hair, a bit of scruff on his jaw, he radiates an easy energy. Then his gaze meets mine.

There's something dark behind his eyes but it's gone as quick as it came, replaced by a languid smile. A guy you can have a drink with, you'd just better not spill it on him.

He moves around the car, slow, calculated, muscles tensing beneath his shirt. He glances around as he goes, doing a casual surveil of his surroundings. I can tell by the way he carries himself; he's not a guy to fuck with.

Instantly, I like him.

I don't like a lot of people.

He climbs into the passenger seat, giving a low whistle. "I'd say it's nice to meet you, but I'm more interested in your car."

"You know cars?" I offer him my hand. "Boston. You can call me Boss."

He's got a nice grip. "Beckett, but everyone calls me Beck. Everyone but A that is. She's proper."

"Yeah, everyone but my mom and Ashe calls me Boss."

He smooths a hand over my leather dash. "I love cars. I breathe cars. Cars are my life."

I really like this kid. “You’re going to love my place. We have a bay of them.”

“What do you mean? A bay of, like, vans and work trucks? Or other cars? Ones like this?”

“This.”

His eyes widen. “Are we talking, like, Mercedes, Audis, Porsches?”

“All of them. And more. The only one I’m missing is my dad’s Aston Martin.”

I feel his stare turn to me in slow motion. “You’re shitting me. Right?”

That brings a chuckle to the back of my throat. “Nah, man. I wouldn’t joke about something as serious as The Martin.”

“Damn straight. Those things demand respect.” He lets out another low whistle. “I gotta see that car.”

“I just met you. You gotta at least buy me a drink first. Wanna grab a beer?”

“Hell yeah.” He pauses. “Wait. Is A waiting for us?”

“Ashe? Nah. She just started a new job today. She’ll be tied up.” I turn off the road, heading to my favorite hole-in-the-wall bar, a little place built into a cave in the side of the mountain. “How did your boss handle my phone call?”

“There were a lot of questions. A lot. Like, who calls in the middle of a workday saying you’ve got to borrow one of their employees for the unforeseeable future? Boss was pissed. But then when you dropped the B name, he started in with the *yes, sir. No problem, sir.* He got off the phone and told me to get my ass back to my apartment, pack, and be back in fifteen minutes, or he was going to kick my ass. It cracked me up. He’s such a hardass. It was funny to see him bowing down to someone else.”

“The Bachman name does that to people,” I say.

“Bachmans... yeah. Ashely’s been pretty tightlipped since she’s been working for you guys, but being this close to the

city, I've heard some things about the family." A tinge of awe creeps into his tone. "There's a lot of power behind that name."

"Sure is." I pull into the gravel lot. "Sure is."

"Wow. Earlier today I was under a 1998 Honda minivan, changing the oil, and now I'm having a drink with Boston 'The Boss Man' Bachman. How do you know A anyway? She working for you now?"

"Yeah. Something like that. She's staying at my place for a bit. Getting my house in order. She wanted to invite you along for the ride." Idle hands make for the devil's work, and I know Ashe is worried about him interacting too much with us and our line of work. I need to keep the kid busy. "I might have a job for you too."

"Okay. What're you thinking?" he asks.

"We could use a good mechanic. There's a vibration in my Ferrari engine I've been wanting to have someone take a look at."

"I'm your man." He holds up his hand, slapping me a high five. "It's a deal. Let's celebrate with that drink."

He loves the place, lodging another point for him in my books. The smooth rock walls, the dirt floor, dim lights recessed into the curved stone overhead. The bar top is a polished wood piece. The bartender keeps it spotless, none of that stick to your arms shit when you lean on it. Slow, soft blues music floats through the room.

We sit on stools at the bar, taste a few pale ales, settling on the same one.

I turn my attention to him. I'm guessing Ashe doesn't want me drawing him into our world any more than we have to on this trip. I'll respect her wishes, but damn, I like the kid. He tells me more about Ashe, A, he calls her because he couldn't spell Ashely as a kid. He talks about his sister the way I talk about Ma.

He really loves her.

He's funny too. He has a great way of telling stories. By the time we finish our beers, I like him even more than I already did.

When we pull up to the gates of my estate, he gives another one of his whistles. "Damn. What a place."

He wants to go straight to the bay of garages. I turn the car to take him there, but there's a little blonde bombshell standing in our way. Hands on her hips like she does when she's mad. Does she think it makes her look bigger or something?

She's still tiny. Her determination just makes her cuter.

"Uh-oh," Beck says. "Told you she'd be waiting on me. Shit. You got any mints?"

"Let me handle this." I pull up beside her, rolling the window down. "Sup?"

She comes over, hands resting on the doorframe. "What's up? You left two hours ago. His work is only forty-five minutes from here and I know he'd already gone home to get his stuff before you got there." She leans into the window, inches from my face. "Is that... beer I smell?"

Let me teach the kid a trick. Answer a question you don't want to answer with a distraction. "Sweetheart, you gonna say hi to your baby brother or what? He's been dying to see you. Talked about you nonstop."

She forgets her anger for a moment, the sun shining from her face as she beams at her brother. "Hey, Beckett! Thanks so much for coming on short notice."

"No problem, sis."

"I figured if I had to be locked up in a gorgeous estate till we figure out what's going on with that stupid SUV..." Beck tenses at her mention of the car. I filled him in over our beers. She laughs, "I may as well have you imprisoned with me for company."

"Not true," I whisper, just loud enough for her to hear me. "She wants you here as a block. To keep her from being tempted by her sexy boss."

Beck lifts his hands in surrender. “Not touching that with a ten-foot pole.”

Smart man.

Ashe ignores my comment, but can't stop the pink from coming to her cheeks. “Get out and give me a hug.”

“Coming.” He climbs out of the car.

I watch through the windshield as the siblings hug. She goes up on tiptoe to whisper something in his ear, then looks at me. Warning her brother off spending time with me, for sure. She made it very clear when she made her kidnapping request that Beckett was not to be dragged into Bachman family business.

I assured her they won't be here long enough for her baby bro to get corrupted. I've got ears and eyes everywhere and we'll soon know who the driver of the white SUV is. Let me correct myself—who the driver *was*. Because when I get done with him, he'll be compact size, his body crunched inside his car by the crusher at the landfill.

I watch her wrap her arm around her brother's back, leading him toward the garden. I'm assuming she'll take him for a tour. She fell in love with the house, the property, the staff, in a matter of hours. Pride was wide and deep inside me while I was showing her around.

She more than approved of all the renovation choices I made.

It felt good.

It felt like the only piece of art I'm missing in this house is a curvy little blonde.

We'll get matters cleared up soon, and they'll both be on their way. The thought lodges a stone in my throat. She's been here all of what? A couple hours? And I can't imagine the place without her.

God, am I soft, I'm a damn marshmallow thanks to her.

I let them go, let her get Beck settled. Just before he enters the gate in the garden wall, he turns, giving me a farewell wave over his shoulder. The kid is probably starving for bro time. I'll see what I can do to cut his apron strings loose. At least let

him in on one of our pickup basketball games before he leaves. We often draw blood.

Boy, would that piss Ashe off.

I can see her now, her hands on those full hips. The thought makes me hard. I've never been this damn horny in my life. I've got to get my head back in the game.

Time to go see what the boys have found out about our friend in the SUV.

Wait...

Fuck.

The cat.

Before I dive into work, I've got to talk to Talia. Tell her about her new roommate. Then get the damn furball to her place. I guess plotting murders will have to hit the back burner. Giorgio needs housing. Exactly why I didn't want to get tangled up with a woman. You have to take care of their cats.

I don't have time for this kind of thing.

Instead of polishing my Glock G19, I find myself tracking Talia down, giving her specific instructions, emphasizing how important it is that the cat is well cared for. I'm looking up numbers for professionals that can help move the cat from her place to Talia's without traumatizing the furball.

Finally, after hours that felt like days, I'm ready to do some real work.

I whistle for Champ, my German shepherd. He's a retired police dog and the most well-trained animal I have. He goes with me on every run. Sometimes, seeing him in the bed of my truck is all it takes to get the money I'm collecting. I don't hurt people unless I'm forced to.

He jumps in the bed, and I slam the tailgate shut. He's the only one of my dogs I allow to ride back here. He likes the freedom, and he looks damn intimidating when we pull up.

My gun goes in the glovebox. We make our rounds, get our cash. No one gets hurt.

Cause for a celebration.

I'm starving. I open the passenger door for Champ after letting him down from the bed. "Hop in, bud. Time to get some grub."

His tail wags. He knows exactly where we're going.

I pull into the drive-thru of our favorite burger place, twenty miles from my house and worth every minute of the drive. A double for me, a single for Champ. And a bacon burger to take back to Beckett.

After a run, I'm used to kicking it alone or with the dogs. If I'm lucky and Booker's in town, we'll shoot hoops. Today, I find myself looking for Ashe. I locate her on her hands and knees in the guest shower, showing my cleaning team how to clean grout with a toothbrush. You'd think they'd resent her showing up and changing their routine, but they're loving her, laughing with her, trying her technique.

It's like she's been here forever.

She sees me standing there.

"Hey, Boston! You looking for me?" She wipes her hands on the coveralls she found, standing up. She goes to the sink to wash her hands.

"Yeah... ah..." I try to think of something. I was looking for her but not for any particular reason. "There's something I needed to show you."

"Okay." She says goodbye to the team, following me from the room. "Where are you coming back from?"

"Had to make a run." I leave the sentence hanging in the air, waiting to see how much she knows.

She sizes me up with her pretty blue eyes. "Debt collector for the family since your initiation. Same kind of work you did for your father before becoming a Bachman. You do your job well, using violence only when necessary. Rockland has a deep respect for your technique. Five years ago you asked to be moved to a desk job, but then changed your mind and kept

with the debt collecting. To date, you've recovered over three million dollars for the family."

"Shit. You really know your Bachmans."

"It's funny how much information you can pick up over the years." She gives a little grin. "Also? I tried to call Tess when I first got here to see what the heck was going on. Tess wasn't available, but her assistant spilled the beans to me. I think she liked me, for the one whole week I got to work there."

I ignore the accusation about making her leave her job.

"Why did you ask for a desk job and then change your mind?" she asks.

"I thought I might settle down. Turns out, I didn't." I leave it at that.

She doesn't push for more information.

Strange, but over the next few days our new trio falls into an easy rhythm.

Three days after the SUV tailed us, I find out who the owner is. Why they were chasing us down. And it's a fucking shock. The driver had nothing to do with the man that owed us money. And I can't tell Ashe. Not yet.

I continue to take care of my business, get the money that's owed us, spilling as little blood as possible.

After that, work slows down for me. Rockland, the head of the family, knows I have business back at home, that I'm keeping Ashely close till I get this crazy situation figured out.

She's safer here, with me, so I'll be keeping my houseguests till I have resolution.

The days turn into weeks.

I get more information every day. It comes in bits and pieces but it's not enough to let her go. After day five, she stopped asking me for an update, anyway.

She doesn't seem to want to leave.

Beck is a welcome addition to the team of guys. We're all obsessed with cars, but no one knows how to keep the damn things running. The kid's just so likeable, that open, honest face of his has men I've barely spoken to pouring out their life stories to him over my famous walnut brownies in the back of the garage.

Ashe dives headfirst into managing the house, creating a mountain of spreadsheets on that first day. She's got schedules for staff hours, breaks, she even typed up a vacation request form. Are you supposed to give them time off? I didn't know. I don't take time off.

She's insisting on time off, breaks, and weekly camaraderie-building staff meals.

She's a force to be reckoned with. And—the only person on this earth that I find I can't say no to. I've found myself leaving freaking catalogues out for her, wanting her to order whatever her solid-gold heart desires. She's just so damn... good.

Every staff member has fallen in love with her.

Even my dogs like her. My terrier, Grumps, has moved into her office. She even bought him a black-and-white checkered dog bed that sits by her feet. The traitor curls up in a ball, snoring away while she works.

The weeks feel like months with the amount of time we're around one another. It's getting hard to imagine my place without her. Even though my bed remains cold and empty. By some kind of miracle and a lot of long, hot morning showers, I've resisted touching her.

Almost every night for twenty days now, we've dined together, the three of us. If it's nice, we sit in the garden, my favorite place on the estate. We sip wine as we eat. Their light sibling bickering makes me laugh. I find my grins coming easily, more frequently.

Tonight, we're having fish and salad as the sun sets over the garden wall. A staff member comes my way, interrupting our peaceful evening. He hovers by Ashely's side, even though he

is speaking directly to me. Looks like there's been a power shift in this house. Everyone thinks she's in charge.

I place my fork and knife across the plate, dabbing my lips with the napkin.

"Sir," he says. "Your mother is here."

"Ma?" I'm not expecting her for a few weeks. What's she doing here? Of all the times to spring a visit on me. Jesus. Not only is she going to recognize Ashe, but finding Ashe and her baby brother living with me? She liked Ashe when she met her at the Valentine's Gala. My mom's going to jump to some wicked hopeful grandma-like conclusions.

She cannot see these two at my house.

I stand from the table. "You two. Out of sight. Understood?"

"Are you sure?" Ashley gives me an overly innocent smile. "I'd love to see your mother again! Haven't seen her since someone so rudely cut my time short at her Gala."

"Shit." I put my napkin down, pushing myself up from the table. I look at the siblings. "Don't show your faces. Promise me."

"You don't want me to spend time with your mom? I'm offended," Ashely teases.

The Beckster flashes a mischievous smile. I have a feeling he knows Ma met Ashely as my brother's blind date.

"Absolutely not," I say. "Ma still thinks Ashe ghosted Sailor. I do not feel like getting my ass kicked if she finds out the real reason their date ended short."

Ashely hides a giggle in her napkin.

Upon threat of death, I leave the siblings to go find Ma. She's waiting for me in the dining room, her heel tapping the polished wood floor. She greets me with a kiss then dives right into her beef with me.

"Boston, where the heck were you on Valentine's Day?" she demands. "I had a lovely, lovely girl for you to meet. Sarah Plainer. Remember her? From kindergarten?"

“The one who ate glue and cut her own bangs at the art table?”
I ask.

“Boston. You remember the funniest things. Anyway, she’s not eating glue now, though she is one of those vegans.” My mom’s nose wrinkles. “You know I love my filet mignon.”

“That’s great, Ma. But I told you. I’m not interested.”

“I know. You’ve had your heart broken. But that was five years ago. You’ve got to get back out there—”

“Ma.” I cut her off. It’s time to finally come clean. Something about having Ashe around makes me want to put this to bed, to tell her the truth.

For once, I get the chance to tell my mom something she didn’t already know.

“I broke up with her.”

Her eyes go wide as saucers. “You did?”

“Yes.”

“But why?” She studies my face. “I thought the two of you were getting on so well. That girl seemed smitten with you.” She stares hard at me, demanding the rest of the story.

“She was. Too smitten. I didn’t want to be involved with anyone. My work life is too demanding. She was sucking up all of my time.” I shrug, wanting to end there but knowing Ma won’t let it go unless I tell her the rest of the story. “There’s more.”

Ma gives a gasp. “What? What is it? Did she get pregnant?”

“God, no, Ma! I’d never risk that. I’m careful. Jesus.”

“Well then, just spit it out.”

“She didn’t like the brothers hanging around. I tried to appease her. Told Booker he couldn’t come around as much. Stopped going to concerts with John. Quit the pickup basketball team I was on with River. I was miserable. But it wasn’t enough. Finally, she gave me an ultimatum.” I can still picture the pink note she left on my bathroom counter... right next to her toothbrush, the one she moved in after our third date. The note

said three words, and now, I finally share them with Ma. “She left me a note that said *them or me*.”

Ma’s face goes from pale to red. “That little she-devil! Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“The bros already hated her enough. I didn’t want to give them more ammo. And I was ashamed that I let it get that far in the first place. I should have told her we were a package deal from day one.”

“God, I’m glad you kicked her to the curb, Boston. Thank you.” She pulls me in for a side squeeze.

I plant a kiss on the top of her head. “An easy choice. An hour later I had all her stuff moved out. That was the last time I saw her.”

“Thank God.”

“It was five years ago. Now that you know the truth, can you let it go?”

Pursing her lips, she takes a minute to think. Finally, her features brighten. A little quicker than I would have thought.

“Okay,” she says. “Well, that’s good, actually. So, she wasn’t the right girl for you. You were right to end it. Moving on.”

“There is no right girl for me,” I lie.

Ashe’s face floats in my mind’s eye. A voice in my head calls me out, telling me I’ve found the one girl in the world for me. She’s being held captive under my own fucking roof.

“I’m sure Sailor will be able to find another chick online. Or a dude for you, for that matter,” I say.

Ma shakes her head. “For me? We’re talking about you.”

Let’s keep the focus off me and my nonexistent love life.

“Why don’t you date?” I ask.

“Don’t even say that word to me. Please. When your father died, my dating life died with him.” Her voice dips. “You know that.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders, pulling her in for a hug. “I know. Let’s talk about something else.”

Ma recovers quickly, turning the conversation back to my brother.

“How about Sailor’s blind date? She disappeared too. Came down with the stomach flu. I told Sailor it was not my caterers. She wasn’t even there long enough to eat anything.” I have to hold back a laugh as she continues her rant. “Can you believe that girl never even *called* Say Say back? I’m mean, she’s pretty. I’ll give her that. But she’s short. When you’re that vertically challenged, you can’t be so choosy.”

“Ma!”

“What?” She shrugs, her already small filter growing nonexistent as she ages. “I only speak the truth. I need grandbabies that can reach my kitchen cupboards when they come visit me.”

“Stop.”

“Alright, but have you ever heard of something so rude?” She gives me a stern look, demanding an answer. “Sailor is a catch. Every single one of my boys is. She’d be so lucky—”

Redirect. “Let’s go get a glass of wine.” I steer her through the kitchen toward the rear of the house.

Her heels click against the floors as we go. “Oooh... do you have any of that 170th edition champagne in your cellars? The one you served with the chocolate-covered strawberries. I loved that the last time I stayed here.”

“I’ll have the staff whip us up a little dessert.”

Ten minutes later, Ma and I are sitting at a café table on the brick patio behind my commercial kitchen, sipping on flutes of chilled champagne. Ma nibbles happily on a white chocolate-covered berry. We’re shooting the breeze, keeping the convo light. She’s telling me, again, about how I need to install a water feature out here.

I’m starting to relax, to enjoy myself when another staff member comes up, placing a third champagne glass in front of

an open seat.

“Who’s that for?” I say.

The staff member goes to answer me, thinks better of it, and quickly nods, giving a “Have a good evening, sir,” then scurrying away.

“This fuckin’ guy. Can’t answer a simple question?” I don’t know his name. They never stay long enough for me to learn their names. “I swear, this staff...”

If Ashe was here, she’d probably tell me this is why my people keep quitting.

“That was strange,” Ma says, staring after the guy as he scurries away.

I refill her glass as she takes another strawberry.

Ma takes a long sip. “You really need someone to manage these people better.”

The click-clack of a pair of heels echoes from the Spanish tile kitchen floors, grabbing my attention. I glance up to the open glass doors that run across the back wall of the kitchen. My heart jumps in my throat.

The very last face I’d think I’d see right now.

What’s *she* doing here?



Ashely

OH, the look on Boston’s face! Priceless. Equal parts admiration and anger at my stubbornness. Too bad.

If I’m going to be his prisoner, it’ll be on my terms. I’m not going to be his dirty little secret. Or allow our relationship to be misconstrued by anyone.

Having a female staying with you can stir up all kinds of rumors. Boston is a gorgeous man. I’ve seen the way women

—all women—admire him. I'm sure the city is his playing field. There's no doubt in my mind he's had plenty of girls come back here to spend the night with him.

I do not want to be lumped in with the long line of long-legged flings rotating through his bed.

Which I realize is a little hypocritical of me, considering he was my one and only one-night stand.

Nevertheless...

We are in a temporary business partnership. And I don't see anything wrong with his family knowing that truth.

I extend a hand, my nails painted a shimmering purple by his staff this morning to compliment my new lavender Kate Spade dress, also bought by him. "I thought you'd want to meet Mr. Bachman's new house manager. Ashely. It's a pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Sullivan."

His mother rises from her chair, her impeccable manners keeping the shock from her face. "It's lovely to see you. We missed you at the Gala. I'm sorry we had such a short amount of time together."

"Yes," Ashe says, looking at me. "Let me explain."

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Boston

WHAT DOES she think she's doing? I stare daggers at her. She ignores me.

"Please." Ashely gestures to Ma's chair. "Let's have a seat." They slip into their chairs and Ashely dives right in. "I'm so glad to get this opportunity to talk to you in person. I wanted to personally apologize for my early disappearance at your wonderful party."

"We were sorry to hear you fell ill," Ma counters.

"Oh, I wasn't sick at all. Is that what Sailor told you?"

"Ashe—" I try to catch Ashe's eye, to give her a warning look, to end whatever game she's playing.

Ma says, "My mistake. May I ask what happened?"

Ashe pointedly avoids me, continuing with her plan. "It's such a cute story, and it's how I ended up here, actually. Sailor and I met on a dating app. I think he told you that. Anyway, I was so enjoying your amazing event. I've always wanted to attend one of your famous Galas."

Ma smiles, softening up from the compliments. "It was our pleasure to have you."

"Thank you. Anyway, I was mingling amongst your guests when" —Ashely's face falls like she's going to cry, her voice trembling— "some really, really rude man bumped into me,

spilling my drink. He ruined my dress and didn't even apologize. I was so upset. I mean, what kind of monster does something like that?"

I capture a laugh before it can leave me. I end up choking on it. I take a sip of my drink to recover.

"Mr. Bachman. Are you okay?" Ashe looks at me, her eyes wide with fake concern.

"I'm good. Please, continue your story."

"You're funny. You already know it, silly," she says to me. "You were there."

My stomach drops. I have no idea where this is going or what she's going to say. I take a long-ass sip of champagne. "Silly me."

Ma says, "Who was it? I'll kill him. I can't believe one of my guests did that."

"It was probably a guest of one of your guests. I'm sure anyone who knows you would have more class." Ashe shoots me a meaningful look. "Anyway, I rushed off to the restroom, near tears. And who should I bump into? Your other son. The one who happened to have a fabulous estate with no one to run it. We got to talking." The look she throws me demands I play my part.

"Yeah. Man, Ashe knows so much about houses and spreadsheets and stuff and as you've both told me—too many times—I needed help."

"He really did. I was happy to provide it. I just knew this was where I was meant to be. It took a few weeks for us to finally agree to terms and get me moved out here, but with this job in the works, I told Sailor we should remain friends. It's just too far from the city and wouldn't really be a good way to start a relationship, long distance. Don't you agree, Mrs. Sullivan?"

Nice job, Ashe. The girl could get an Oscar for her performance.

Ma replies, "I always say, you need a good partner right by your side to get through this madness we call life." She looks

up at the sky, leaving us for a moment. An uncomfortable silence falls over our trio. Coming back to us, she dabs at the corners of her eyes with her napkin. “God, I miss my husband.”

A lump wells in my throat. “Ma, don’t cry.”

Ashely sees the clouds coming and breaks them up with a ray of her sunshine. “We’d all be so lucky to find a love like that in our lifetime. Tell me—what did you love most about him?” Ashely leans in, hanging on my mom’s words as Ma pours her heart out about my father.

With Ma recovered, Ashe gives a contented sigh, looking around my backyard. The sun’s gone now, our light the soft glow from the twinkling globes hanging over our heads. “This place is so beautiful.”

Ma nods in agreement. “It just needs one thing—”

“It needs a water feature,” Ashely says.

“Oh. My. God.” My mother turns to me, her face moving as slow as honey dripping down the side of a jar. She locks eyes with me, like she’s seen a ghost. “That’s exactly what I’ve been telling Boston for years.”

“Have you? He should have mentioned it to me. It’s a fantastic idea. It’s so peaceful out here. A little flowing creek with flowers planted along the side of it or one of those low walls with a constant waterfall streaming over stones.”

Mom gives an emphatic nod. “Exactly, like a mini moat defining the space.”

“Ooh, mini moat. I love that.” She holds her glass up to meet my mom’s. They clink in cheers. “I have a landscape architect in the city I trust. I’d like to contact her in the morning. Leave your email with me and I’ll send over the drawings when I get them back.”

“Email?” Ma looks positively fearful.

I wait for Ashely to gawk at Ma, wondering how she’s gotten through this decade without the internet.

Instead, Ashely says, “You know what? There’s nothing like holding the actual drawings in your hands, is there? Since Boston seems disinterested in our little project, would it be okay if I just have the final plans sent over to you for approval before we start work?”

Ma beams. “I’d love that.”

Miss House Manager turns to me. “Boston, are you okay with that?”

This girl is unreal. She’s not even supposed to be out here. Now she and Ma are planning a moat. “Sure. Whatever you ladies think is best.”

“Alright. We have a plan.” The women clink glasses again and move on to more improvements they want to make. I let them, enjoying my drink and the night breeze.

Lopsy, my old basset, comes loping over. She plops down beside me, making the moment perfect. I scratch behind her ear, resting. Having Ashe here with us takes some of the pressure off me to make conversation with Ma. It’s a nice change.

There’s only so much speculative marriage and baby talk I can take.

But this? This is nice.

We have one more glass of champagne, then decide it’s time to retire to our rooms. Ashely bids us goodnight, going ahead of us, I presume to give us some space to say goodnight. As the kitchen door closes behind Ashely, Ma grabs me by the arm. “Boston, wait.”

“What’s up?” I wait. Lopsy pauses her trot, relaxing by my side while we watch Ma wrestle her massive purse.

Lopsy looks up at me with her big, sad eyes. She thinks Ma is extra. I can’t blame her. The dog’s got a good read on people.

Ma digs deep, her purse rattling as she peers into its dark cavern. “Hang on. It’s in here somewhere.”

She’s piqued my interest. Has she finally brought me the title to my father’s car? A flicker of hope lights in my chest.

“Ah! Here it is!” She holds a little white box in the air, victorious in her quest. She hands me the box, a look of high anticipation on her face. “Open it already!”

I snap open the lid. My stomach drops to my feet.

Grandma Sullivan’s wedding ring stares back at me. Weighing in at three carats, the rare blue diamond has started many tall tales in our family. Some claimed it once belonged to Blackbeard, the pirate. Others were convinced it was found by divers in the wreckage of the Titanic. One family member vowed that a leprechaun had stowed away with it on a New England-bound ship when the Sullivans first settled in Boston.

But one story stays consistent. This diamond is meant for the oldest son in the family when he proposes to his bride.

Which would be me.

“Why on earth do you have this with you?” I say.

She looks at me like it’s a stupid question. “I always carry it with me. Ever since she-who-shall-not-be-named started coming around.”

No fucking way. “You’ve been carrying this ring with you for five years?”

“Yup.” She gives a proud nod.

Lopsy looks at me. *See, I told you she was extra.* I give the dog a nod of agreement.

“You know I don’t even date,” I say. “What do I need with this?”

Her face is flushed with excitement. Or maybe from the additional pour of champagne she snuck when she thought I was paying attention to the dog.

She says, “I saw how you looked at her tonight.”

“Ashe? She told you. She’s working for me.” A prickly, strange feeling crawls up the back of my neck. Like someone’s walking over my damn grave. What’s she talking about? There’s nothing between me and Ashe.

Sure, there’s sexual tension, but nothing real, or lasting.

Right?

“Boston Sullivan Bachman.” Her hands go to her hips. So, it’s not just Ashe who does that? All women fall into this stance when they mean business. “You know us mothers have eyes in the back of our heads. I know about your secret little room, and I know you traded your Lambo to Sailor for one night with that girl.”

“What?” My stomach turns, thinking of Ma spying on me. “How do you know all that?”

“A mother’s instinct. And security cameras.”

“Damn, thought I’d turned those off,” I say.

“It was pretty apparent what happened when I watched the video from that night. Sailor was peeling out of the driveway in the Lambo and not five minutes later, you and Ashe were seen on the hall camera, disappearing into your room. When you came out, you were both straightening your clothes—”

“Ma. Enough.”

“You’re in love. You know it. I know it. And soon, Miss Ashely’s going to know it.” She nods toward the ring. “And if you’re thinking of asking for my blessing, you have it. Even if she is a little on the short side, she’s a lovely girl. Hopefully the Sullivans’ height genes will come through.”

“Only you would give me an engagement ring and worry about the height of my children the second time you’ve met a woman.” I close the lid, slipping the ring in my pocket. Just to get her off my case. I’m going to put it in the top drawer of my dresser and forget about it.

Her eyes narrow on me. “And don’t just put that ring in your top drawer and forget about it. I know what I see when I see it. Don’t let this girl pass you by. She’s a Virgo, for heaven’s sake. Logical, practical, a perfectionist. That’s why she makes such a good manager. Virgo’s the most complementary match for a bull-headed Taurus like you.”

She leaves me to ponder her words, the ring heavy in my pocket.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Ashely

“SERIOUSLY, ASHELY,” Tess sighs into the phone. “I’m sooo sorry it’s taken me this long to call and explain. You’ve been captured there how long now?”

“Umm...” I think back to when I first arrived. “Maybe two months now?”

“Oh, God! Has it really been that long? How terrible of me. I should have called right away but, yes, of course I wanted the tickets to the dog show—there’s this new breed, a butterfly Pomeranian I just had to lay my eyes on—but you know I would never in a million years trade you for tickets!”

“What happened then, Tess? I went into work that Monday and there was a giant blocking your office door—”

“Who? Pete?”

“Giant man. Bald head. Navy suit?” I ask.

“Mmm hmm,” she says. “Yeah, that’s Pete. He’s huge but he’s a big softy.”

“Well, he was waiting for me, physically stopping me from going in. Then he took me down this long, creepy hallway—”

“Oh, the Annex. Icky. Yeah, no one likes that part of the building. We haven’t renovated it yet.”

I continue my story. “And then there Boston was, sitting behind a desk, telling me he was my new boss.”

“He was. I mean, he is. I didn’t know you were going to do something to get yourself kidnapped and have to live with the guy. But I would have thought that would have just sped up the process.” She waits for me to reply.

But I have no idea what she’s talking about. “What process?”

“I’m a matchmaker, babe. That is the one and only reason I let him have you, even when a Pomeranian was involved. I had a feeling in my gut that the two of you should be together. And my gut? It’s never wrong.”

The information she’s sharing with me fully sinks in. “You gave me up because you thought he and I were going to get together? That’s crazy.”

“No, what’s crazy is that you aren’t on the other end of this phone thanking me right now.”

I’m only following about half of this conversation. “Thanking you for what?”

She gasps. “Don’t tell me you’re not having the best sex of your life?”

I whisper back into the phone. “We’re not having... you-know-what.”

She takes a breath. “That’s... unusual.”

“What? Why? Why would that be unusual? What do you mean?” I say.

“Well, it’s been weeks. I mean, you’re living there, running his house, eating dinner with him every night. You two are obviously attracted to one another. I was pretty sure I walked you through your baggage at Charlie’s wedding, so you had no holdbacks. Sex normally would have happened by now. But even without the sex, the big thing should have happened...”

Gosh, do I even want to know what the “big thing” is? I take a breath, steeling my nerves and preparing to dive off the edge of the pool, feeling like a parrot, just repeating her words as questions. “What would have happened by now? What’s the big thing?”

“You know,” she says. “The ‘L’ word.”

“‘L’ word? Lice?” That’s stupid. Makes no sense. But it’s the only word that pops into my head.

Dead silence on the other end of the line.

Finally, she says, “What did you just say? Mice? Did you see a mouse or something?”

Lopsy’s lying on the kitchen floor. She rolls her big droopy eyes up at me, wondering why I didn’t choose her name for my “L” word.

“Yes,” I say, finding a bit of beef jerky from the pantry shelf. I give it to the old hound, hoping she’ll keep this convo just between us. “I saw a mouse. Boston really should get some cats.”

“He’s more of a dog person,” she says.

“I got that impression.” I give Lopsy an apology pat. “What’s the ‘L’ word?”

She speaks with reverence. “Only the most important word in the world. Love.”

“Oh, gosh.” The ‘L’ word makes my tummy flip, my heart launch into my throat.

Why is my body responding like this when we couldn’t be further from love?

Her voice drops to a whisper. “I mean, have you guys even kissed or anything since you’ve been there?”

“No. I laid down the law when I first got here. I told him to keep his hands to himself, that this was just a temporary thing.”

“Hmm...” She sounds genuinely puzzled. “That’s just strange. I’ve never had this happen before.”

Now I’m wondering why he’s *not* touching me. Is there something wrong with me? Why hasn’t he kissed me?

I’m so confused. I have to get off this phone.

“Tess. This mouse. He’s out of control. I’m so sorry, I’ve got to go get someone. I’m supposed to be managing this house

and if anyone else lays eyes on this mouse other than me, I'll be mortified."

"Go girl," she says. "Go do what you need to do."

"Okay. Can't wait to see you this weekend at the big reveal of our rooftop bar reno."

"Awesome. See you there. Just keep me posted, okay? Let me know if there's any progress tonight."

"Of course, I will," I say, my stomach turning. "Oh gosh, there goes the mouse..."

I get off the phone, thinking about how there's not going to be anything to update her about. Is there? Because apparently, I'm defective.

So undesirable that the unthinkable has happened.

One of Tess's matches did not fall in love.

The woman has a perfect track record.

I can't help but feel like it's all my fault.

I've been happy here. I think of the easy, friendly comradery Boston and I have fallen into over the past few weeks. I've been so busy with my new job, I haven't dwelled too much on what happened between us in the past. I thought I'd put it behind me. But Tess's conversation has stirred up all kinds of emotions in me.

Just like the last one I had with her did. At the wedding, she told me a truth about myself, that I didn't really love my bosses, but I tricked myself into thinking I did because they were unavailable, thus guarding my heart from falling for someone like my father or mother. She left me hopeful, so much so, I even signed up for that silly online dating app.

Now, this most recent conversation has left me filled with a confusing medley of feelings of doubt and desire.

Feelings I'm not totally sure I can push away.

I feel all weird inside. Her words set me on edge. I toss Lopsy another piece of beef jerky, helping myself to a cookie. Double chocolate. It's delicious. Earlier I heard a staff member saying

Boston baked them, but I'm sure they were kidding. Must have been an inside joke I didn't understand.

Lopsy and I sit on the kitchen floor, stress eating together to try to get a hold of our emotions. I have a second cookie. Gosh, these are good. I didn't know how badly I needed chocolate.

Am I PMS-ing? Nah. I brush the crumbs from my clothing. Refill Lopsy's water bowl with fresh water. Have a drink of water myself. Grab a cloth and start to wipe down an already spotless counter.

Okay, I'm stalling.

I was excited about the event to show the Bachmans their newly renovated rooftop bar. I've not been back to the city since I arrived at the estate. Boston went to all kinds of lengths to get his security to meet his satisfaction for us to go. But now... I'm not so sure about leaving my bubble. The cookies feel heavy in my stomach, just thinking about how Tess is going to corner me a few days from now, demanding details that I don't have to give her.

Nothing has happened.

Why has nothing happened?

That's it. I can't take this anymore. I march myself right out of the kitchen, searching for Boston. By the time I find him, I'm fired up. He's sitting in the library. Reading? Never saw him read before.

Wearing a black shirt tucked into khakis for a change, sleeves rolled to his elbows, he reaches up, rubbing at his temple, just above his tattoo. He looks so darn handsome, slouched back in the gray side chair, one leg crossed over his thigh, so comfortable in his own skin. He runs his fingers through his hair. He has no idea I'm standing here, watching him. It's turning me on, to spy on him.

I peek at the cover to read the title of his book.

Manage Your Team Without Being an A\$\$HOLE

I hide a giggle behind my hand. So now self-improvement is among his many hobbies? Bettering himself, buying art, house renovations, collectible cars, dogs, gardening, and possibly... baking.

There's no way he really made those cookies, is there?

I'd marry him right now.

He flips the page, his brow furrowing like he's reading in another language.

"This fuckin' guy. What kind of advice is this?" he mutters to himself.

I could stand here staring at him longer, but a creepy little spider of guilt is tickling my tummy. I'm not one for spying.

"Ahem." I clear my throat to get his attention.

He looks up from his book. As soon as he sees me, the cross look on his face disappears. He closes the book, setting it down beside him.

"What's up?"

My heart thumps in my ears at what I'm about to ask.

I need to know where I stand.

Just spit it out, Ashely. I take a deep breath. "Will you be my date at the rooftop bar event tomorrow night?"

"Yeah."

"Good." Relief rushes through me.

See? I'm not disgusting.

"We were already going in the same car, weren't we?" he says.

Oh. Soo... not a date. Just carpool buddies.

"We are. K. Bye." I spin on my heel, ready to run, my heart thumping in my chest. "See ya."

His deep voice echoes through the room, stopping me. "Wait."

"What?" I glance over my shoulder at him, so ready to leave this room and go be embarrassed by myself.

Maybe Lopsy is up for some more stress eating.

His dark brows lift, demanding the truth. "Is that it?"

"Yup."

"You sure?"

"Uh. Huh." I flip back to the door to leave.

"K."

I can't leave this room, still in limbo, still wondering where I stand with him.

Because if I'm being honest with myself... really honest?

I want to know if he still wants me.

'Cause I'm starting to think I want him.

I turn back to face him. "Wait."

"Yeah?" he says.

"I meant, will you be my *date*, date?"

He just stares at me. Like I'm speaking a foreign language.

Great.

Finally, he says, "Why?"

Bile rises in my throat. He doesn't want me, does he? My embarrassment at his rejection morphs to anger.

It's not a pretty trait of mine, and it's only happened a few times in my life, but because I'm crushed, humiliated, a furious heat radiates through my limbs.

"You know," I snap, "for a self-proclaimed asshole, you don't have to be a asshole to me."

"Huh?" He stands, crossing his arms over his chest. "What the hell are you talking about?"

I throw my hands on my hips. "You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"You told me not to touch you. Now you're mad because I respected your wishes?" He shakes his head. "You make no sense."

Oh my goodness, may the good Lord protect him.

You never, ever tell a woman she's not making sense.

Especially when she's not.

“Who do you think you are, to talk to me like this? Just because you're my boss doesn't give you the right to put me down. Or are you trying to get me to quit, just like all the other employees who've left you? Good luck with your book. I don't think you can find out how to be a decent human from reading.”

“That's cold. That's real cold.” His eyes narrow. “Girl, I wanted to see your freaky side, but this isn't what I had in mind.”

Heck. No. He did not just say that. “So now you want to pick and choose which side of me you want to see? Sorry, but I'm not a coin you can flip and choose heads or tails. I'm the whole package.”

He just stares at me. Totally, utterly confused. Which just makes me madder.

“Say something! You dragged me here. Made me your prisoner. Then just totally friend-zoned me? Like I'm some ugly little mouse running around your kitchen?” Sorry, mice, I know you're cute. “And you re-homed my cat. Because you're not man enough to have an animal around whose affection you have to earn? Unlike dogs who'll wag their tail at anything they see. Is that how you feel about me?”

Now he's the one who's furious. Heat flashes in his eyes. When he speaks, his voice is low and rumbling like the distant warnings of thunder before a storm.

He takes a step toward me. “Stop right there. You're crossing a line. You can call me all the names you want. Do not insult my dogs.”

“You insulted my cat.” I take a step back.

Wait... did he ever insult Mr. Armani?

He is moving toward me, closing in. His anger is radiating off him. “Check your facts, girl. I found housing for your cat.

With a vet tech. You get handwritten updates. Every single morning. From said vet tech. And do you know how that cat got from your apartment to Talia's?"

"No. How?" I inch backward.

"I found a pet communicator in the city. Took me three hours to convince her to come last minute to help us out. Stood there, wanting to poke my eyes out with a hot poker, watching, for forty-five freaking minutes while she petted your cat, whispering to him. I had to watch that shit. Then I had to drive her kooky ass all the way to Talia's while she sat in the seat beside me, having some kind of one-sided convo with your damn cat, him making mean eyes at me the entire drive."

"You hired a... pet psychic? For my cat?" Okay, this man is a keeper.

"That's what she called herself, but I refuse to. It's ludicrous."

I've always wanted to hire a pet psychic, but my sensibleness wouldn't allow for it. Even though we're in the middle of a battle, I have to ask. "What did she say about G?"

"Did you even hear what I said? I did all that for you and you're gonna stand here and tell me I insulted your cat."

"Fine, so you didn't insult the cat, but you insulted me."

He stares at me, his eyes coals of fury. "What do you mean?"

"You don't want me."

"I don't want you? Every fucking day, I have to stop myself from grabbing you and fucking you." He runs his hands through his hair, staring up at the ceiling. "God. You are infuriating right now."

Gosh, he's even hotter when he's mad. And he's been wanting me? Every day? The thought makes me melt. Everywhere. Tess said we should be having sex. And she's never been wrong. Yet. You know what? If he wants me that much—

"If you want it so effing bad," I say, "take it."

I can't believe those words just came out of my mouth. What is he going to say? I try to look controlled, though I feel

anything but. My knees go to jelly as he moves toward me.

“Alright, girl.” His eyes drop, locking on mine. The look he gives me sends hot and cold chills through my body. He looks like he’s going to tear me to pieces. “But we’re gonna do things my way.”

What have I just done?

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

A shely

MISSSSSSTAKE.

He's gunning for me, fire in his eyes. I turn to run, squealing as I try to escape the library. I don't stand a chance; strong hands wrap around my waist before I even make it to the door.

He grabs me, carrying me over to the gray chair where he'd just been reading. The soft, padded back of the chair presses into my lower stomach as he bends my upper body over it after setting me on my feet. My hands fly out, pressing into the velvety cushion of the seat.

I cry out, "What are you doing?"

But I already know. He's going to spank me. And I have a feeling it's going to hurt. He's angry and he wants to punish me. After what I said to him, I know he's going to enjoy every minute.

Still, it's hard to stomach the idea of letting him do this to me. I could leave. Tell him no. But something in me keeps me clinging to this chair. The power he has over me...its all-encompassing.

His hand grabs the elastic waist of my PJ pants. He's going to tug them down. Butterflies whisper in my belly as I remember I didn't put on panties after my shower, wanting to be extra comfy. No bra, either.

He tugs my pajama pants down. The room is a bit on the cool side, and as the air chills my bare skin, I give a little shiver and clench my ass. Waiting for the first spank to land is nerve-racking.

A moan escapes him; he's paused to admire me. "Such a gorgeous ass. It's going to be even prettier when it's all red from your spanking."

Ahh... *red?*

I've made him so mad. My belly flips with nerves. How hard is he going to spank me?

I manage to squeak out, "Is this going to hurt?"

"Hell, yes, it is." He drags his hand over my vulnerable ass. "And after your spanking?"

My breath sucks in. "What?"

"I'm going to take my belt to this perfect ass."

"Oh, gosh." I can't imagine him spanking me, then whipping me with his belt. I've never, ever been spanked before. The spanking he gave me in that room at his mother's house was the first time anyone spanked me. That night, it was just a tease of what's to come tonight. I think of how my body responded to him. My pussy getting wet, my core throbbing as his hands touched my ass.

Now, just hearing his threats, arousal pools. With no panties to dampen, the slickness creeps toward my thighs. He hasn't even spanked me yet.

But it's coming. I know it is. I'm equal parts turned on and terrified. He pushes my shirt further up my back. I sense his hand pulling away from me. I wait, my eyes squeezing shut tight. When his hand comes down, the pain is shocking. The spank explodes like fireworks across my ass.

"Yeowch!" I shift my weight to my other foot. "Oh my gosh."

"You love cats so much you're turning into one. Was that a meow?" Before I can answer, he starts spanking the bottom curve of my ass. Short, fast little spanks, but gosh, do they sting. His speed increases, peppering every inch of my

backside. “You’re such a naughty girl. Coming in here, spouting off like you’re ten feet tall. But you’re not, are you? You’re just a tiny little thing, bent over my chair, getting your ass spanked.”

My skin is starting to burn. I roll my hips, trying to get away from him.

He digs his fingers into my waist, holding me in place. “You’re not going anywhere till I’m done punishing this ass.”

He brings his palm flat against the center of my ass cheeks. The sound echoes through the room.

The heat, the pain, his words... they all collide, making my pussy wet and clenching, my knees weak like jelly. “Uhn...”

This is madness, to let him do this to me. To like it so much, to hate it so much, to be so darn wet.

The buckle of his belt clicks open.

Nooo...

“I’m not ready... I can’t... Let me out of here...” I push my hands into the cushion, trying to lift my upper body.

His strong arm locks me to the chair. “Whoa, little cowgirl. You haven’t tasted leather yet.”

The belt...

My heart races in my chest, my stomach dropping into the chair I’m bent over. “I don’t know about the belt.”

He growls his next words. “I do.” I hear the leather slice through the loops of his pants.

I cringe. A wave of humiliation tears through me as my bare ass cheeks full-on clench in front of him. He drags the leather over my ass. It’s cool and feels good against my skin that he heated with his punishing hand.

It doesn’t feel good for long...

The leather lifts. It comes crashing back, striking a line of fire over my ass from hip to hip. I suck air in, between my teeth,

trying not to cry out. The leather whips me again, lower this time, two stripes of pain now radiating over my skin.

It's too much. I moan, tears popping up in my eyes. To my surprise, I hear the belt hit the floor.

"I can't wait anymore." He runs his fingertips over the punishing lines. "Seeing my handprints on your ass, my belt marks... I have to fuck you. Now."

My pussy throbs at his promise. I press my hipbones into the back of the chair, so ready to have him fill me, to ease away this empty ache inside me.

I moan as his finger slides down the crack of my ass, teasing me. Finally, he circles his fingertip around the entrance to my pussy, collecting the slickness that pools there. He pushes a finger into me, giving some relief. It's not enough. I need the real thing.

I'm not above begging for it. "Please. I need you. I need you inside me."

"What part of me do you want?" He adds a second finger to the first, stretching me. "Say it."

I hold back a groan. "Are you really going to make me say it?"

"Yes." He thrusts.

"Please," I whimper. "Put your c—cock inside me."

"Good girl," he purrs.

His finger leaves me. I hear him freeing his cock from his clothing. He grabs my hips. I part my legs, wanting him, needing him.

Finally, I feel him push the head of his cock against my pussy. I'm wet, but tight, my pussy stretching, burning as he thrusts inside me. He gives my still-sore ass a smack. He fucks me, hard, his cock plunging inside me.

My mouth falls open, my eyes closing. But I want to see him, to touch his face. I want his mouth on mine. I reach back, grabbing for him. "Kiss me. I need you."

"Huh?" His pace doesn't even slow.

I'm desperate now. I need to kiss him. "Please, turn me over."

He grabs my hips, pulling out of me. I ache for him, wanting more. He lays me down on my back on the soft cushion of the oversized chair. I reach up for him, needing to put my arms around him. It's been so long since we were first together. Now I don't just want the dirty sex that he introduced me to and made me crave.

I want to see his face when he's inside me. I want to know what's going on in those dark eyes of his. I want to see what he feels.

A smile comes to my lips. I wrap my arms around his neck. "Please. Get back inside me."

"Won't make you ask twice." He buries one knee into the cushion to the right of my thigh, then grabs my left leg behind the knee, lifting it and pressing down so the front of my thigh is against my stomach. He leans down, locks gazes with me, and enters me. In this new position he's deeper than before. I touch his face, his cheek, his tattoo. I stare at him as the most intense look of pleasure eases over his face, and I know I'm the woman who put it there.

His pace builds as he curls his body around mine. The friction from the sexual tension that's been building and building and building between us combusts into a bonfire. I'm clawing at the back of his neck, a cry lodged in my throat. The feeling of him in me is so intense, my mind feels faint, black circles closing in around my vision.

My breaths come faster, dots of sweat glistening along my hairline. My heart races. An all-consuming cloud of euphoria takes over my body. I'm leaving every inhibition, thought, tension behind as I tumble into the release. He brings his knee down, pulling me up, holding me tight against him as he enters his own climax. My arms wrap around him. I reach that no-turning-back point. My insides feel like they are bursting into twinkling stars.

Finally, he's kissing me. Our tongues tangle as I melt into him. I run my hands through his hair. It feels so good to be back in his arms, satiated from our coupling.

I'm on cloud nine. This place, being with him, just feels like my life now. I feel like I'm home.

I don't want to leave.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Boston

I CARRY her upstairs and into the shower. Her skin is beautiful, gleaming as I run my soapy hands over every smooth inch, enjoying every caress. Rinsing off, I dry us with two big, soft towels. It's so relaxing to climb into our pajamas and lie in my bed. I thought it would be strange to have a woman in my bed again. It's been a minute. Instead, it feels like second nature to pull her against me, spooning her as she drifts off to sleep.

I love the feel of her soft weight against me. Even though I'm holding her, my mind wraps around her as well. Seems like all I think about is her.

The next day when I wake, she's lying in bed on her side, moaning. My first thought is that I fucked her too hard last night. But she didn't make a peep of complaint.

Panic hits my chest. "Are you okay? Are you getting sick?"

"No. It's my period. No wonder I wolfed down so many cookies yesterday." She's burying her face in the pillows.

Any other woman on this earth mumbling those words at me? I'd be running—not walking—out of this room. But when Ashe says them? I sink down on the bed beside her, rubbing her back. "What can I do for you?"

"Really?" She peeks up at me from the face cave she made in the pillow. "You don't have to do anything for me. I can take some ibuprofen and get back to work."

“I think you’ve earned a day off. Tell me what you want, and I’ll get it.”

It takes some coaxing but finally I figure out what she needs. An hour later, she’s curled up in my bed, covered in a thick pile of blankets. Every ounce of chocolate I could find is on the nightstand, along with some healthy fruit I added to the mix. She wants wine but it’s too early, so I made her a mimosa with freshly squeezed orange juice. I flip on the television I’ve never used and spend five minutes with the remote, finding her the trashiest reality show I can. *Driving your Exes’ Cars Off of Cliffs*. Yes, it’s as mindless as it sounds. Exactly what she needs.

I toss the remote to her then lean down, kissing the top of her head. “I like all your freaky sides. Even the demonic PMS one.”

She holds a finger up at me. “You’re fine to say that today, but I’m just letting you know, if you had mentioned PMS a few days ago, you might not be standing here. You never tell a woman she’s PMS-ing. Especially when she’s PMS-ing.”

“Noted. So it’s chocolate, baked goods, wine, reality TV, and comfy blankets?”

“Even better?” She holds up her cookie. “Chocolate baked goods.”

“I can handle that,” I say. “I can handle all of you.”

That makes her smile.

We weather the storm. She’s tough and after twenty-four hours of a little spoiling, she’s back in action, flying around her office making last-minute adjustments for an event that I’m sure she’s already perfected. No sex. No kisses. I don’t get any attention from her.

For two fucking days, I only catch glimpses of her as she rushes around the place, doing her Ashe-event-planning thing. I’ll be glad when this thing is over, and things go back to normal.

At least I’ll get to spend time with her on our *date* date.

I've got my suit and tie on in fifteen minutes. It takes her five hours to get ready. But when I see the finished product, I must admit it was worth the wait. She'll always be worth the wait.

She steps onto the marble front entry steps, dressed in gold, her hair swept up in an elegant knot. The shimmering fabric of her dress glides loosely over her body as she moves, but hugs her curves in all the right places. The skirt opens in an upside-down V in the front, showing off her tanned legs as she struts down the stairs toward me, a sexy kitten smile on her painted red lips. She knows how much I love her red lips. She's given herself some height tonight, going for sandals that have thick, tall heels, and straps that wind their way up her pretty legs. I can't wait to untie their ribbons with my teeth.

I can't take my eyes off her.

"You look stunning."

A pretty flush blooms on her cheeks. "Really? It's not too much?"

"It's just right." I take her in my arms, running my hands over the smooth fabric of her dress. I go to kiss her lips, but she giggles, turning to offer her cheek.

"You'll be wearing lipstick if you're not careful," she says.

I kiss her cheek. "I'm messing up those sexy lips when I get you home. And untying those sandals with my teeth."

"Mmm... I can't wait."

I feel like all eyes are on her as we walk into the newly redone rooftop bar in the Village. As they should be. She's the most beautiful woman in the world and tonight, she's simply exquisite. There are a couple single brothers at the bar. It doesn't escape me that their glances rest on her longer than they should.

I understand it, but I don't like it.

She's oblivious to the stares, all her attention on me. She's eager to show me her hard work. I follow her as she points out the enhanced lighting, the new flooring. I try to pay attention, but there it is again. A young server holding a tray of canapes

literally turns his head to watch her walk by. A lump forms in my throat, my blood burning hot and bright with jealousy.

I want to throat punch the kid. My hands clench to fists at my sides. I can't blame him. Can't blame anyone. She's fucking gorgeous and right now, she's a free agent. Nothing's settled between us. No proclamations have been made. The girl could walk out of here tonight with any single man she wanted.

Of course, the dude she'd be leaving with would have two broken kneecaps, but she's free to make that choice. That's a problem. I need to take that choice away. I need her to want to pick me.

Every time.

"Boston. Are you even listening?" she says. "We ordered this bar top from Brazil. See the gold vein running down the rock? It matches the gold in the pendant lighting."

I lean forward, studying the granite. "Yeah. I see it. Nice."

Her brow wrinkles. "What did you think of the textured wallpaper in the hall?"

"I..." I try to think back to the tour. I have no idea what she's talking about. Her face falls. I'm starting to hurt her feelings. I can't have that.

She stares at me, waiting. "Well?"

There's only one way to fix this enormous problem. I dip into my pants pocket, feeling the small velvet box. I've found myself carrying it with me wherever I go. I don't know why, and I don't give it much thought. Every morning it kinda finds its way from my dresser drawer into my pants.

"Here," I say, handing her the box. "Put this on."

She gives me a curious look. "Thank you?"

I wait, my inhale sticking in my chest. I feel like I can't breathe as I watch her flip open the lid.

She looks in the box. She looks up at me. She looks back down in the box. She looks back up at me.

"What," she says, "is this?"

“It’s a ring.”

“I can see that, but why am I holding it?”

“It’s my Grandma Sullivan’s wedding ring. A blue diamond. It’s super rare.” I lift the ring from the box. Last week I had the diamond reset into a new band made of black gold, one that embodies the beauty of Ashe. It’s a vintage style, an intricate design of twisting loops that form the band. The deep blue against the beautiful black gold is the perfect combination for her.

“It’s gorgeous.” She inspects the ring as I hold it between my fingers. “And this band—it’s so unique. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“I picked it out myself.” God. I sound like a damn kid trying to impress his girlfriend.

I hand her the ring. She takes it carefully, holds it up, pinched between her forefinger and thumb. Her eyes fill with what looks like awe as she turns it, letting the sunlight hit the gemstone.

My heart does a weird pulsing thing. I feel anxious. I’m never anxious. I can’t take her staring at it any longer.

“Well.” I don’t mean to sound tense, but I am. “What do you think?”

She hands it back to me. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I’ve never, ever seen a ring like that. And the black gold? It’s outrageous. Just gorgeous. I mean, I couldn’t pull it off, but it would look so good on someone like you. You did really well. But who’s it for?”

What? Isn’t it obvious? Who else would I have designed a ring for? A creeping feeling of doubt edges up my spine. She doesn’t like it.

Do I pull back? Laugh it off? Pretend I had it reset as a gift for a distant relative? No. I do something totally, completely, idiotic.

“You.” I hand the ring back to her.

She doesn't accept it. She just stares at me. Her pouty lips are doing that little "O" thing that makes my cock throb.

It doesn't throb now, though. I'm too damn nervous. God, this girl. When she's not making me think about fucking her, she's making me too nervous to think about fucking her.

Maddening.

"Don't you get it?" I grab her left hand, holding it up in the air. She watches, wide-eyed, as I slip the ring on the fourth finger of her hand.

She shakes her head. "I don't understand?"

"I don't want anyone looking at you. I don't want anyone talking to you. I don't—" Heat boils through my veins. "I *won't* let anyone touch you. Ever."

She stares at the ring. She stares up at me. She holds her hand so the ring is facing me. "Boston... is this your idea of a... a *proposal?*"

The ring looks so good on her. Like it was made for her. Which it was. By me. I give it a second look. The black gold doesn't do her sun-kissed skin justice. She should be wearing gold.

I can take care of that later. At least the ring is on her finger, where it belongs.

I take her hand, bringing it to my lips. I kiss her fingers. "Ashe. Marry me."

"Oh my... this doesn't feel... right. I mean, I don't even know you. Not really. You're really asking me to marry you?" She blinks, shaking her head, like she's trying to wake from a dream.

"No. I'm telling you to." I stare into her eyes. Grab her face in my hands. I bring my lips to hers, and I kiss her. At first, she resists me, overwhelmed by everything that just happened. I pull her closer, kiss her deeper. She gives in, slipping her arms around my neck, running her hand through my hair. Her body presses against me, longing for me, like I'm yearning for her.

God, I've missed this so much the past couple days. Watching her walk around my house, looking like she belongs but knowing she's got one foot out the door... not being able to touch her. It's been maddening.

I run my hands over her back. I cup her ass, hungry to make up for lost time. I enjoy the fullness I've missed so much, holding her curves in my hands. I push up against her, needing her pressure against my cock.

"What are you doing?" She grabs my hands, pushing them away from her body. She tosses a furtive glance over her shoulder. "We're in public."

I go back in to kiss her, but she puts a hand to my chest, stopping me. "You don't even have my answer yet."

"I didn't ask." I lift her hand, showing her the ring. "I put a ring on it."

She takes a step back. "You know I have rules. And one of them is that a proposal takes a knee. The other would be I actually have to know the guy for more than a few days to say yes." There they go, her hands sliding up to her gold-covered hips. She pulls the stance out on me, giving me that look she has that means she is not budging.

"Fine." I drop down on my right knee. I grab her hands from her hips and hold them in mine. I stare up at her. "Ashe. I can't live without you. Marry me."

She just stares.

Uh-oh.

This isn't good.

This is really, truly, not fucking good.

I run a hand over the back of my heated neck, watching her as she slips the ring from her finger. My heart rests in my throat.

She hands me the ring. It's as cold as ice against my skin. I cringe as she tries to offer her apologies.

"Boston, I'm sorry. I just... I mean... I love being here with you. I love spending time with you. I want to keep getting to

know you, but to marry someone? I have to be in love to marry someone.”

Love...

The word hangs in the air between us. Spinning. Slipping. Falling away. She’s pure goodness and light. Is she even capable of loving someone like me?

My throat goes tight. I swallow down the torrid wave of emotion that threatens to consume me. What was I thinking?

I slip the ring back in my pocket. I glance around. Thank God no one noticed us here in this dark corner to witness my humiliating display.

“If you won’t say yes yet...” I stand, grabbing her in my arms and lifting her off the ground. “I’ll have to kill every unmarried man here.”

Her nose wrinkles with confusion. “What?”

“Nothing,” I say.

If she won’t marry me, at least I can kiss her.

Fuck the lipstick. I don’t mind if I end up wearing it. I’ve missed her, I’ve missed this kind of us, so much. I need her lips against mine.

I’m not giving up. Not yet.

One day she will wear my ring—and everyone will know how *mine* she is.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Ashely

I NEED to find my brother, to make sure he's safe. To ensure Boston hasn't eaten him alive yet. Who knows what that man is capable of. I do... I've seen him in action. The man has eaten me alive.

The sun fills my eyes as I step out onto the pebbled path. I hold my hand up to get some shade. A stream of sun hits my sparkling bracelet, making me think of that gorgeous blue diamond. It was stunning. I would probably prefer yellow gold for the setting, but nevertheless, the ring was gorgeous, the kind of ring I'd let myself dream about as I sat behind my desk at Bryant's company on my lunch break, perusing wedding websites as I nibbled at lettuce leaves, having a salad to lose those extra pounds. Not that I had a wedding dress to fit into.

And just like that, I turned him down, I gave up wearing a piece of Sullivan history.

It's just all too crazy. I love how he's taken me outside my comfort zone, but it just wouldn't be me to do something so foolish as to say yes to an almost-stranger asking for my hand in marriage. No matter how gorgeous he is or how he makes my panties melt.

Or how darn cute he is with those dogs of his.

Or how well he takes care of my every need. My nails are manicured, by order of him, my skin exfoliated and

moisturized by the gentle hands of his spa team, a glowing tan seeping into my skin from my many hours of free time spent roaming around the gardens.

Even my shoes, calfskin ballet flats that feel like cushions of air as I walk down the path, were paid for by him.

I'm a kept woman. Boston said the white SUV drama is taken care of. I'm safe. But I'm going nowhere. This estate is my slice of heaven on earth and I'm hoping to be buried here after I live a full life.

Now, where are they?

Needing shade, I dip behind one of his exquisite topiaries, a tall, dark green, lushy tree trimmed to look like the head and torso of a tiger in mid-pounce. A work of living art meant to capture the very moment before the predator devours his prey. So very Boston.

I hear grunting coming from the grassy field in the center of the garden. There's a loud shout and another grunt. Images of Boston as the tiger come to my mind, his sharp white teeth tearing my baby brother's limbs from his body. My heart leaps to my throat and I break into a run. Well, a run for me, a jog for others. I'm scanning the breaks between the bushes for a glimpse of Beckett as I make my way around the curving paths.

Why did I leave them alone?

"Beckett? Where are you?"

"Over here—oh God, that hurts!" He gives a deep groan. "We're in the garden."

I'm relieved to hear his voice, but why is he in pain? My search for them has the gauge on my moisture needle moving from glistening to sweating. I slow to a walk, not wanting to care about what my man thinks of how I smell... but of course my nose strays to my underarm for a whiff.

Sweet Lavender deodorant imported from France just for me. Still as fresh as this morning when I first glided it onto my skin. I make a mental note to find out where he got it and order it for all the Beauties.

Now that I'm sure I don't stink, on to more important things, like saving my baby brother.

"Beckett, I'm coming!" A fluff of my freshly washed and curled hair, a straightening of the hem of my mint-green wrap dress and I take the final step to the end of the path, ready to take on whatever is lurking on the other side of those bushes.

Boston is a bad boy. But he's a great man. I brace myself, not letting my imagination get away from me, knowing in my mind, Beckett's probably just fine—

What... the...

I blink. Hard. Twice.

It's a human stack of two half-naked men, sweat glistening from their overexerted muscles. My almost-fiancé has his hands pressed into the grass, balancing his body weight on the balls of his feet. Beckett is on his back, hands wrapped around Boston's ankles, the balls of his feet pressed into the backs of Boston's shoulders.

Beckett calls out, "Three. Two. One. Go!"

They both grunt, dipping down toward the ground in a two-man synchronized pushup. I watch as they continue to repeat the process, counting out loud as they go. Each number they call out is more strangled with their effort than the last.

Finally, they reach their goal. Boston collapses to the ground, Beckett tumbling off his back. My brother rolls across the grass, clutching his belly with laughter.

Boston flips onto his back and holds up his hand. He slaps Beckett a high five.

Beckett's smile is pure joy as his hand wraps around Boston's.

Boston grins back, saying something I can't quite hear. Whatever it is, it makes Beckett laugh. A full-on belly laugh.

I can't tear my eyes away from the simple gesture. Is that... a... *tear* easing into the corner of my eye? My heart makes a lump in my throat. My fingers are suddenly at my hair, wanting to straighten... something, anything. I feel very

ruffled, out of place here in this... bromance moment, yet I don't want to leave.

Seeing him with my brother... It shows me there are family men out there to be had. Ones who would never abandon the ones they love. It almost makes me regret turning down that proposal.

Almost...

I want to keep watching them.

Having recovered his breath, Beckett laughs. "Fuck yeah! We hit twenty that time." His eyes catch mine, going wide like he's ten again. "Oops. Sorry, sis."

Trying to be the "cool big sis" I brush off his apologies with a waggle of my coppery-pink fingernails. "No worries. I'll just sit here and watch you guys for a minute. Pick up some workout tips while I get some sun."

Hearing my voice, Boston rolls toward me, lazily resting his chin in the cup of his palm. He gives a low whistle as his gaze roves over my curves, lapping up the view of my breasts wrapped in the thin mint green fabric, the neckline dipping just low enough to offer him a peek of the curve of the tops of my breasts, perfectly displayed thanks to my Italian lingerie, a black bra ordered from a catalogue left on my nightstand the other day.

The cups are made of see-through lace material, the band of the bra a silky black, forming a triangle between my perfectly perky breasts. Of course, I ordered the panties to match. The sheer lace triangle in the front displays the Brazilian wax I had done last night.

Boston would have wanted me to treat myself.

I ease onto the stone bench, lifting my leg, crossing it over my other, my dress sliding up my thighs. I let it. Pressing my hands into the bench behind me, I ease my shoulders back, pushing my breasts upward. Hey—he paid for the bra, he might as well enjoy the full benefit of his purchase.

He runs the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip. His eyes are hungry. Greedy. Seems like he's loving the total package I've

put together with his tastes in mind.

Running a hand down the plane of his smooth chest, he takes me in. His hand goes suspiciously close to his groin, dipping below his waist. A subtle caress of his palm over the crotch of his sweats has me shifting my weight in my seat, pressing my thighs together.

The fact that I'm turning him on so much, just the sight of me in this dress, sitting on this bench, turns *me* on.

He gives me a look that further melts my already dripping Italian lace panties. "Damn, girl. You look good enough to bench press. Get over here and let me do my thing."

Heat rushes to my face but I will the blush to cool. Lifting a brow, I say, "Looks like you've been doing just fine for yourself with the barbell. I'm just here to watch. Though I did enjoy the creative push-up routine you guys came up with."

"Body weight exercises," Beckett says, gripping the handle of a kettlebell. "Good for building up cardio endurance."

"I'm sure I'll pick up some tips while I take in the sun." As if on cue, one of his staff members steps off the path, tray in hand.

He leans down with a smooth smile, offering me a glass. "Ice water with mint and lemon, madam?"

"Yes, please." I take a sip of the icy, tangy water. Refreshing. "Thank you."

Boston calls out, "Move, Mauricio. You're blocking her view. I'm the only one she needs to be smiling at."

"Thank you," I say again, dismissing Mauricio with a smile before he can get into any trouble. He's wary of Boston at best.

I sip my drink, the sun warming my skin as I watch the men—okay, I'm only watching one man—swing their heavy metal balls back and forth in the air. They make a show of it, flexing for me, making me laugh. Soon though, their laughter turns to one another, and I'm forgotten, the bromance winning out. I'd

almost feel like a third wheel if my heart wasn't about to burst with happiness.

For years, I've wanted this for my brother. An easy comradery with a male companion, a family member, one he could go out and do guy things with. I've tried to be everything for Beckett, a mother, a father, a sister, and a brother, but as anyone in my position would have, I've fallen short.

Watching Boston pick up the pieces I dropped, it's a gift he's given me. One I don't take lightly. He just better know better than to involve Beckett in any of his mafia business.

My little brother has always been a good boy and that's the way it'll stay.

Watching Beckett in this new place in his life makes my mind trip back in time, to when things weren't so good. My father left when we were little. He sent a check every month, thank God, but other than that and his blue eyes, I had no connection to him. My mother was bipolar, but before anyone really seemed to know what it was. She refuses medication and now lives in an assisted living place.

I used to visit her every month, taking Beckett whenever I could convince him to come. A year later, the staff asked us to stop coming. Apparently, Mom said she felt better without seeing us. That stung. But if I'm being totally honest? It was also a relief.

When we were young, there'd be days on end when she'd be in bed, moaning and crying, followed by days of painting the house blue, a haphazard job that I tried to clean up as best I could when she moved on to her next project. I shielded Beckett as much as I could. I learned how to be a mother watching those afterschool sit-coms about loving families who get themselves into quirky messes, then get themselves back out again, fixing their problems with their love for one another.

I loved Beckett, deeply and fully, from the moment the nurse put him in my arms and let me hold him for the first time. Love, that wasn't something I needed a television show to teach me.

When I was eight, I read a book about a little girl who lived in an orphanage. I was terrified the same thing would happen to us, that we would be separated. So, I kept our strange little lives a secret and we managed. Beckett was good. He made my job as easy as it could be for someone so young. I could see the concern in his eyes. He took that worry and turned it into determination to make me smile, to get a laugh out of me.

Honestly, I think our dynamic has shaped his personality, made my brother feel like he has to be the funny guy in the room. I kept us going. He kept me steady. If he hadn't kept things light? The weight of our world would have crushed us.

That's why it makes me so happy to see Boston make him laugh.

I'm the one who walked him to school, holding his hand all the way to his classroom. When I got my license, I drove him. Every day. Parked on the street watching him till he disappeared behind the front door. Even if it meant I was late to class. A little help from my memory and YouTube and we got through homework. He's smart, a hard worker, and he got great grades. He was supposed to go to college. I was the one who put stamps on each of his applications.

He didn't get in. Not to a single one.

I blame myself.

I had moved out by then. I had to. Mom was pretty stable during that time, even holding down a part-time job at the Dollar Store. I got a scholarship to college out of state that I couldn't afford to pass up. But reaching my college dreams made him miss out on his. I could have helped him get registered at a community college, something. Instead, he opted to move to New York with me, move to a small town in the Catskills, and work as an auto mechanic.

He always loved working on cars.

He's gotten bigger since he got here to Boston's estate, his shoulders broad and round from the weights he's been lifting. The babyish look has melted away from his cheeks, leaving

only angles and planes behind. He doesn't look like a kid anymore.

Still, he'll always be my baby brother and—wait. Is that... wait...

What the heck is that I just saw on Beckett's flawless skin.

I peer for a closer look as Beckett twists his torso, kettlebell in hand.

There it is again, a flash of black ink swirling just above his right hipbone. My mind was not deceiving me. My brother, my baby brother, my Beckett, has a tattoo, on his body.

I'm going to kill Boston.

I'm going to kill Beckett.

I'm going to kill them both.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Ashely

I STAND FROM MY BENCH, my hands going to my hips as I assemble myself into a respect-demanding, classic big-sister pose. “Beckett. Michael. Is that a *tattoo* on your body?”

Boston laughs, calling out, “He’s not as innocent as you think.”

“What,” I say, “do you mean by that?”

“The kid’s no kid.” Boston looks at me. “He’s twenty-one, for Christ’s sake. He can get ink if he wants. And before you start, no, I had nothing to do with it.”

Beckett may be Boston’s new workout buddy, his new car mechanic, but he’s my blood. My emotions run sky-high. “I know how old he is. You think I don’t know how old he is? Who do you think’s been making his birthday cake every year since I could reach the kitchen countertops?”

Silence falls over the garden. I meant to keep my tone light but pain seeps through my voice. Boston’s features change, the laughter dropping from his face. He didn’t mean to upset me. I can’t hide a damn thing from him, can I.

Beckett looks from me to Boston, back to me. “Ah, guys, that’s my cue to take off.” He grabs his shirt from the weight bench. “Sis. We’ll talk about the tat later. Love you.” He gives us both a wave, taking off in the opposite direction from where I stand.

With Beckett out of earshot, Boston crosses the garden. He holds the end of his black tee, throwing it over his shoulder, and his natural swagger falls into his hips as he moves toward me. His eyes burrow into mine. “He mentioned you took care of him growing up—I didn’t realize to what extent.”

“Yeah.” I push back the barrage of flashbacks, me pushing a chair over to a cupboard, searching desperately for Band-Aids to patch up my brother’s bleeding, scraped-up knees. Trying to remember math problems I did five years before, poring over his homework with him, reading the backs of cereal boxes, convincing myself that there were enough vitamins and minerals in Captain Crunch to provide him a healthy dinner. Hey, milk has calcium, right?

“It was... pretty bad,” I say.

“It must have been—” Seeing something in my face, his voice trails off.

Boston drops his tee. Grabs my hand, pulling me up from the bench. He wraps me in his arms, burying his face in my hair. “You’re fucking strong. You know that?”

Am I?

I don’t feel strong right now.

His lips are warm against the skin of my neck as he works a line of sexy kisses up toward my ear. His hands brush up my arms, going toward my shoulders. His light touches leave delicious tingles dancing over my skin. The pads of his thumbs press into my collarbones, fingers wrapping around me.

His fire-sparking kisses leave my skin. A soft exhale of disappointment escapes me. I want his lips back on me.

He locks eyes with mine. “And your brother is strong too. You should know that. He doesn’t need you to take care of him anymore. You’ve got to let him go, let him become the man he wants to be.”

“You just help him sculpt his abs, and I’ll worry about the rest.”

“That’s what I’m saying. He doesn’t need you to be his parent. He needs to you to be his friend.”

A prickly heat rises in me, just thinking of relinquishing control over my little brother. “Wise words, but that’s a difficult transition and—”

“Trust me,” he says. “I’ve helped raise a few of my own.”

And now his lips are on mine and the conversation is over. My arms slip around his neck, into his hair, and my head goes all cloudy as I lift up on the balls of my feet, the soft soles of my shoes pressing into the pebbled walkway. The soft, silky feel of his hair momentarily distracts me from his hands at my waist, his fingers beginning to tug at the one, simple knot that has this dress hugging my body.

The fear of his staff getting a good look at the Italian lace meant for his eyes only shoots through me. I break away from our kiss, my hand reaching down to stop his. My eyes dart side to side, on the lookout for spying eyes.

I hiss out, “Not here. What are you doing? Anyone could walk by.”

“My team knows better than that. When I’m alone with my woman they know to give me total privacy.”

A jealous prickle dances at the back of my neck. “And exactly how many women have you had in this garden?”

“None.” He’s moving behind me, his stirring cock brushing up against my ass, his hands grazing my breasts, drawing my nipples toward his wandering fingers. “The garden’s my favorite part of the estate. It’s a privilege only worthy of my bride-to-be.”

“Bride? I thought we cleared that up.” I try to steer the conversation away from marriage. “If you don’t mind me asking, why have you been single for so long?”

His body tenses against mine. Sore subject? He waits a beat, as if he’s debating how much to share. “The last person I dated... it was a mistake.”

I'm so curious. To go so long without being in a committed relationship, then suddenly propose to a person you basically had just met? What changed?

"But five years." Peeking up at his expression, I speak gently, like one would to a cornered, wounded animal. I don't want to spook him, but I want more information. "That's a long time."

"I made some mistakes while I was with her. I don't want to repeat them." He shakes his head, meeting my eyes. "So, I stayed single."

There's a heaviness in his gaze, a lace of shame in his tone. He makes me think this is about more than not repeating mistakes, but rather, not forgiving himself for them. Did he do something unforgiveable? I want to know but I also know when to stop pushing.

And my body is begging me to change the subject once more.

I lighten my tone. "Well, I do feel privileged to be the first one to get to enjoy your garden this way."

"God, you're beautiful." He pinches my breasts, slips the hair from the back of my neck, his warm kisses returning to my skin. I lose my will to fend him off, my hand dropping away from the knot in my dress. I trust him. Anyway, if someone wants to see, let them look. A little laugh hides inside me at the brazen thought.

His hands smooth over my now-toned—thanks to our twice-weekly couples workout sessions—biceps.

He's bringing out a new Ashely. A sexier, healthier, braver Ashely. *Ash*e, even. He's tricked my brain into starting to think of myself the way he sees me... *Ashe*, the sexy goddess of a woman who fucks her man outdoors, in a garden, wearing the imported lingerie he paid for.

He's not seen this set yet...

His nimble fingers delicately untie the string holding my modesty intact. A butterfly flutter of a breath tickles through me as the material slips open. He's pulling it down, kissing every inch of my shoulder as he exposes it to the warm sun.

“Damn, girl. You look good in everything, don’t you?” He nips at my skin, pushing the fabric out of his way. My dress slides down my back and flutters to the ground. I sense him taking a step back. I feel his eyes on me. “But you look best in nothing at all.”

His fingers reach for the clasp of my bra.

I spin around to face him. “Not so fast. I want you to get the full view first. You did pay for this lingerie, after all.”

The shyness eases from my body. I’m emboldened by his devouring stare. He wants me. He loves the way I look.

The way he looks at me, the rash proposal that made no sense to me at the time. All the things he does for me. The way he accepts me just how I am, knows what I need. Doesn’t try to control me but in the bedroom is in total control in the most delicious way.

No one seems to *know* me, know me, like he does.

I’m starting to think... he just might... love me...

“You look so. Damn. Good.” He teases me, reaching out and dragging a finger over my budding nipple as it strains against the bra’s see-through fabric, his other hand gripping my panties. I shiver a little, letting him look. His teeth sink into his bottom lip. A rumble of a growl rises from him. “They’re cock-busting. Now can I tear them off? Pretty please?”

I jut a hip out, lowering a brow. It’s like I’m out of my body, being this other person, but she’s me too. I grab his hand, guiding it to the silky triangle over my waxed pussy. “I don’t think you’ve fully appreciated them yet. Why don’t you feel the fabric. See how soft it is.”

“My God, girl. Are you trying to *kill* me?” He closes his eyes, moaning as he strokes his fingers over the gusset of my panties.

The thrill of power excites me. For once, *I’m* in control. A sly smile crossing my lips. “Keep stroking.”

Flames of heat lick at my earlobe, his deep, raspy voice at my ear. “You getting bossy with me, babygirl?”

“Maybe.” I inch my hip to the left, the perfect position for his nimble fingers. Another stroke and I’m going to incinerate.

“Every single warm-blooded body on this property is to obey your command.” His hands slip up the back of my neck, gathering my curls and crushing them as he wraps my locks around his fingers. He gives a tug—hard enough to spark pain, gentle enough to fill my pussy with a warm, liquid-y craving. “But me, babygirl? I’m the only one who commands you. And you will never, ever, be in control with me.”

My sex throbs, desire thickening my tone. “You make me feel out of control.”

“And you love it.” His mouth finds mine, hot and slick and wanting. His tongue swipes against mine with the perfect amount of pressure. He strokes me harder, faster over my sexy, silky panties. The tiniest little thunderbolt of an orgasm ricochets through me, making me give a shiver of delight, my shoulders shaking.

“Good girl. There’s my baby. You’re so pretty when you come.” He slips his fingers past the elastic band of my panties, pushing two thick fingers inside of me. Wobbling slightly, my hands grab at his shoulders, to steady me, to keep my feet planted on the ground. I widen my stance, letting him in further. His fingers curve, stroke, hitting some kind of spot inside me that sends me bolting up on my tiptoes.

He pets me, cooing in my ear as he draws another, longer orgasm from me. Fingertips digging into his muscles, I exhale, rocking back on my heels. “Oh my God.”

“I want to be inside you.” He slips his fingers from me, tugging my panties down. “I need to be inside you. Now.”

I hold onto him, stepping out of the panties. He stands slowly, dragging his fingers up the backs of my legs and over my ass as he rises. I reach around to unclasp my bra, letting it slide down my arms. It drops to the ground beside the panties.

Bared to him, glowing in the warm sun streaming over my skin, I boldly let him have a full, long view of my nakedness. I feel like a goddess, Eve in her garden, tempting her man with

her beauty. He wants me so bad—it's written all over his angst-covered face. His brow is knit like my beauty is too much to bear, his jaw locked like I'm causing him physical pain, a man under a siren's spell.

He wants me. Desperately. And he's all mine...

He is so completely focused on me, his sultry tone of lust reserved only for me. Ashe. I'm not the neglected little girl who grew into an unwanted woman. Instead, I now feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

Because of him.

Boston. The boss of my heart. My body. My soul.

Oh... my... fudge...

I'm falling in love... aren't I?

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Boston

I'M IN FUCKING LOVE.

Aren't I?

Fuuuuuuuuck.

I guess that explains the idiotic move I made, whipping that ring out of my pocket, demanding she marry me.

I shove the unsettling thought from my mind. It's just my other head playing tricks on me, right? I mean, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen is standing in my garden, buck naked. Of course, I'm going to catch some feels.

There are more pressing matters at hand than the fact that this girl is about to break down my entire world as I currently know it. Like those peachy-pink nipples that are begging me to taste them. Warmed by the sun, I slip a nipple into my mouth, cupping the soft curve of her breast as I suck.

She exhales softly, leaning into me.

I can't wait another second. "I need to be inside you. I need to feel your sweet pussy wrapped around my cock."

A word that used to make her blush now has a seductive grin slipping across her full lips. It's easy to free my cock from my sweats. Running my hands over her ass, I squeeze her soft curves. She gives a pretty little shriek as I scoop her up from

underneath her thighs, lifting her from the ground. Her shoes fall to the grass, her legs wrapping around my waist.

I hold her with one hand, using the other to grab the base of my rock-hard cock, finding her slick, honeyed entrance. “You’re so wet for me. Aren’t you, babygirl? You love my magic fingers on your pussy. Don’t you?”

“What can I say?” She nuzzles against my neck, her breath caressing my skin. “You’re good with your hands.”

“You can say, ‘fuck me, please, big daddy. Fuck your little girl so hard she comes all over your cock’.”

“Not gonna call you daddy, baby.” She gives a laugh, her voice raspy with desire as I shove my cock inside of her. I’m big and she’s small and tight and when I give a second hard thrust, it fills her too full, turning her laughter into a gasp in the back of her throat.

“That’s fine. Just as long as you know who you belong to.” I slip a finger down the crack of her ass, playing with her tight little rosebud.

She pushes my hand away. “There’s no way I’m calling you daddy, and there’s no way you’re going *there*.”

“By *there* do you mean your pretty little asshole? Because one day, baby, I’m going to have my cock inside it. When I say you belong to me, I mean every inch of this beautiful body.”

“We’ll see,” she chokes out, but her words turn to a deep moan as I grip underneath her thighs, pushing her back, then bringing her toward me. I thrust my hips at the same time, fucking her hard. Her fingernails scratch the back of my neck as she tightens her grip like I’m the only thing holding her on this earth right now. Her eyes close, her head lolling back, and just when I thought she couldn’t be any more damn gorgeous, she lets out a cry of my name. “Boston!”

Fuck. I’m gonna come. How in the hell am I supposed to last when this girl turns me on so damn much? Jesus, I’m like a damn teenager with her. Just looking at her makes me hard. Every time I stick my cock in her perfect pussy I want to fucking explode.

She senses my urgency. “Go ahead,” she says. “I’m close too.”

Like I need another thing to love about her—our bodies are so in sync we can get one another off in a matter of minutes.

I hold her tighter, keeping a fast-paced rhythm as I rock my hips, bringing us both to that magical place we so desperately need. “Go ahead, baby. Come for me. Come for your man.”

She grips my hair with her hands, giving a pretty little whine. Her pussy locks tight around my cock and that’s all she fucking wrote. The orgasm shoots up from my tightening balls, vibrating through my shaft. One more thrust and my whole body goes through the tremor of an earthquake. I’m filling her pussy with my hot cum, making her even more mine. I shudder through the aftershocks as she shivers through the final stages of her own climax.

I kiss her mouth. She’s like warm putty in my arms as she lazily slips the tip of her tongue past my lips. She’s so naughty but so good.

She’s perfect.

Never thought that about another human. Ever. I kiss her deeper. I mean, I’ve had dogs that were close to perfect, loyal, obedient, fun. Not that I’m comparing her to a dog or anything, I’m just saying a good dog is pretty close to a perfect being, but this girl... this girl’s an angel.

I’ve always had a thing for angels. After my first kill, I got the wings tattooed across my chest. I think it’s my way of dealing with deaths, especially ones I’m responsible for. A hope for something better after this life. For everyone. My loved ones as well as my enemies.

The wing on my face is for my father. I hope he’s looking down on me. He’d love this girl.

But Ashe... she’s like an angel on earth, a bright spot in a dark world.

I break away from the kiss. “You’re a fucking angel. You know that?”

“Hmm?” Her eyes flutter open, her face stunning and satiated, too far gone to hear me. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” I say. “Just that I think you’re pretty damn perfect.”

“You’re pretty alright yourself.” She kisses my cheek. Her soft touch makes damn butterflies in my stomach. I’ve just had the girl and I already want more.

Everyone thought I’d quit dating since the last woman in my life because I got my heart broken. Now they know the truth. I realized I was investing too much in her and it was taking away from my work. My work is my life, it’s a part of me, and that’s never gonna change for anyone.

But with Ashe... she’s a smart cookie and loves to work as much as I do. With her by my side, I don’t feel like I’m torn away from my priorities, I feel like she’s giving me power to be even more focused on the prize.

She pushes me to be a better man, to work harder, to be... good. Well...

As good as I’m ever gonna be.

The ring was one thing. That was so every damn man with a set of eyes would know she’s taken.

But falling in love with my almost-fiancée... That wasn’t in the plans. Was it? This girl’s gonna make an amazing wife.

She pulls away, her nose crinkling. Adorable. “Whatcha thinking about?” she asks.

I’ve been lost in my thoughts. What do I say? *I’m falling in love with you? You make me want to be a better man?* Mush. Soft, marshmallow mush.

“Dinner,” I say. “You’re wicked sexy and you made me work up an appetite. Let’s go. I’m starving.”

She laughs, slipping down to the ground, her bare feet enveloped in the soft grass. “Then we’d better get going. You are one man I do not want to see get hangry.”

“It’s not a pretty sight.” I give her ass a smack as I bend down to pick up her clothes. “Let’s go clean up. Tasha’s making steak. And I requested a spinach salad for you.”

“Thank you. But you should have some too.” She tickles my ribs. “You gotta have some veggies with all that meat you consume.”

See what I mean? Sweet *and* concerned with my health. Total wifey material.

“I’m suspicious of green things.”

We fix up our clothes and she stands on tiptoe to plant another soft kiss on my cheek. She slips her hand in mine. “Thank you for thinking of me. With the salad.”

Thinking about you is all I seem to do. “Yeah. No problem.”

“If we’re having steak, should we invite your brothers over? I know Sailor’s in Boston, but John could come in from the city. Booker is in the guest house and River’s place isn’t too far. Beckett would love the company.”

Her question surprises me. “You want to invite them? All of them?”

“Of course!”

Her sweet smile gives me a flashback to five years ago. Booker, begging for my time. Wanting me to take him to drive go-carts like I promised. She-who-must-not-be-named—we’ll call her Ms. Voldemort since at that time period Booker was in a Harry Potter phase, thinking he was getting a letter and headed off to wizard school at any minute—made it very clear; I would be dining with her in the city, and no tagalongs were invited.

I’m still pissed at myself over that one.

Ms. Voldemort wanted me all to herself, was jealous of my time. Didn’t like how close I was with my family. I love that Ashe’s including my brothers in our lives.

We reach the door. I need a minute to sort myself out. Get myself back to the stubborn hard-ass that I am. If I don’t take some time to kick my own ass back over to the dark side,

Ashe's gonna turn me into a damn pillow. People are gonna be sleeping on me.

Can't leave her without a kiss, though. I lean down, planting a smacker on the top of her head. "I'll see you at dinner."

"Okay." She tenses at my side, a question forming in her mind. "Hey, first, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

Her brow knits. "What mistake did you make? With the last girl?"

Her eyes say it all.

She wants to know—will I make the same mistake with her?

Never.

Even if I slipped up, which I wouldn't—

She wouldn't let me.

Family means everything to her, just as it does to me.

"She asked me to push my family away," I say. "To make space for her. And for a while, I listened."

Relief comes over her. "Oh. Well, I think there's enough room for everyone." She smiles up at me. "Don't you?"

"Hell yes, I do."

"K." She gazes up at me with those enchanting eyes. "I'll gather the guys. See you then."

I have to give that ass one more smack as she walks away. She laughs, shooing my hand away. I watch her curves jiggle under the thin material of her dress as she goes. My favorite pastime these days.

I take a long shower, letting the heat from the water ease the tension from my muscles. I run my slick, soap-covered hands over my body. The memory of her standing there—bared to me—the sunlight glinting off her blonde hair. Her body, a work of art, but it was the spark in her eyes, that sensual little smile on her face that struck me in my core, need hitting me like a wrecking ball in the gut.

The only thing that would make the memory better would be if she had my ring on her hand.

She's got to be the one.

My hand glides over my abs, dipping below my waist. Rub up and down my hardening shaft with sudsy strokes. I play with my balls, cupping them then tugging at the skin. I grip my cock, the thought of my mouth around her sun-kissed skin taking me over the edge. I come, hard. Rinse off. Take a deep breath and run my hand through my freshly washed hair.

I stroll through my closet, choosing a shirt for tonight. My fingers slip over the sleeve of a light blue linen shirt, one Ashely would love. She mentioned she likes me in blue. The color matches her eyes.

Fuck. Me. Did that thought actually just cross my mind? Wear a shirt to match my girl's—eyes?

I'm going to make myself gag with this mushy shit.

I grab a button-down, tugging it from the hanger. I'm wearing my usual. Black. I go with gray pants and sleek leather lace-up boots. After rolling my sleeves to my elbows, I slip my navy and silver Tag Heuer watch on my wrist.

I guess there's a bit of blue for her after all.

I let myself enjoy my home as I make my way through the downstairs hall to dinner. John's playing piano, the soft melody floating through the house. He'll probably play right through dinner.

The abstract art I've bought pops out in splashes of bright colors against white walls. The dining room has high ceilings, white wainscoting reaching two thirds of the way up the wall to meet the dark navy paint above it. The solid hardwood floors gleam; I have them refinished annually because I love real wood and I love my dogs but the two don't go together without maintenance.

Sasha, my mini-Australian shepherd, and the only female other than Ma to have my heart before Ashe, comes trotting down the hall to my side. She shoots me a happy look.

I give her soft fur a stroke. “You smell steak, don’t you, baby?”

Sasha and I make our way to the dining room, joining the guys. They made it here in record time. They know I buy the best cuts of steak from the cattle ranch down the road. We’re standing around the dining room, shooting the breeze, waiting for Ashe and John.

My dogs are well trained but that doesn’t mean I don’t allow them tastes of my dinner under the table. I may be cold-blooded, but I’ve got a soft spot for pups.

And one little blonde.

As if on cue with my thoughts, Ashe appears in the doorway of the dining room. My breath catches in my throat. She’s stunning. There’s no other word for it. Seeing her makes me take pause, my eyes locked on her.

Booker leans over, whispering to me, “Close your mouth, bro.”

“Shut it.” I nudge him with my elbow.

She wears a cream-colored dress that offsets her tanned skin. Her hair falls in shining waves. The best part? She’s scanning the room, looking for one thing and one thing only.

Me.

God, that feels fucking good.

She spots me. A smile brightens her face as she crosses the room to meet me. I press a kiss to her cheek, inhaling the scent of her lavender perfume. I ordered her the whole set, I love the smell so much.

“You look amazing.”

“Thank you. You look handsome as always.” She gives me that womanly once over. The one they do when they’re about to make a “suggestion.” The suggestion being something they’re gonna want you to do something about. “But don’t you own anything that’s not black? Blue, maybe?”

“To match your eyes?” I ask.

Booker snickers at my side.

“No. But. Well. I didn’t think of that, but it would be kinda cute.” And she smiles up at me with that crinkly little sweet smile of hers and if I wasn’t such a cold-hearted bastard, I might have melted a little. “So, do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Own anything other than black?” she says.

“Nope,” River interjects. “He wore all-black workout gear when we played basketball on the same team. It was humiliating.”

“Enough about my clothing choices.” I’m seeing an entire new wardrobe in my near future. “Let’s eat.”

“Sounds good. I’m hungry.” Ashely whispers to me, “All that fresh air gave me an appetite.”

I run a discreet hand over her ass, thinking of the garden. “Yeah. Me too.”

I pull a chair out for her, the sudden gentleman that I am. It seems like a gesture a girl like Ashe would appreciate. Sure enough, she flashes me a pretty smile. “Thanks so much. I love that.”

“No problem.”

I sink into the open chair beside her, sliding an arm around the back of her shoulders. Sasha sits beside me, warily eyeing Ashely.

“Oh! Is your shepherd joining us? I haven’t met this one yet. She’s gorgeous. What’s her name?”

“Sasha.” I don’t tell Ashe that Sasha’s been avoiding her since the day she arrived. “She’s here for the steak.”

Ashe leans over my lap, whispering to Sasha. “Hey, pretty girl. You like steak? Me too.”

Despite Sasha’s initial jealousy, Ashe’s soft words make her fluffy tail swish across the flooring.

Hmm... that’s interesting.

Sasha's tail doesn't wag for many people. She has a discerning eye for humans.

Ashley tells her more sweet nothings. "You sure are a pretty girl, aren't you? And so patient." Sasha's tail wags again.

I watch in shock and awe as Sasha stands from her loyal spot beside me, where she's dined every evening I've hosted company in this dining room, ever since I brought her home. Without a second glance at me, she trots over to the open space beside Ashely. Nuzzling against her new friend's thigh, Sasha finds a new spot to sit.

"You kidding me, Sash?"

Ashely's eyes light with delight. "Oh! I think I've found a new friend." She gives Sasha a delicate pet, scratching behind her ears. Ashe turns to me, smiling. "Is she like this with everyone?"

"Yes," I say, lying through my teeth. I can't tell her the truth... Sasha doesn't like women other than Ashe.

Neither do I.

My damn dog is every bit as in love with her as I am.

I was intrigued by Ashe when others spoke of her. Obsessed with the girl the moment I saw her.

Now? She passed the Sasha test?

Hell...

She's got to be the one.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Ashely

I LOOK AROUND THE ROOM, a feeling of happiness welling inside me. The soft glow of the candles lighting the room flickers over everyone's faces. What sounds like a modern twist on classical music plays softly in the background. John's chosen the music tonight. Boston asking him for a music recommendation for the meal was the only way we could get John away from the piano to join us.

The steak is cooked to perfection, juicy and tender. I take a sip of my wine. Rich and woodsy, warming me as it goes down.

Beckett's all smiles tonight. He looks so at ease here, I feel a mother-like sense of relief. He chats with one of Boston's younger brothers, River, who's close to his age. I catch a bit about deadlifting to which I see Booker proudly flash the older guys a growing bicep. Beckett gives the young man a high five of congratulations. I've convinced Booker to stay another week. If I had my way, he'd just move into the guest house permanently while he finishes school since he's online anyway.

This is everything I ever wanted. Not just the delicious meal and gorgeous surroundings—though the art of a well-planned menu and elegantly decorated home aren't lost on me—but what's making my heart warm and my throat tighten with emotion is a room filled with laughter, good food, family, and my man by my side.

My man...

It's a new expression I'll have to get used to. I can see me now, navigating the social circles in the city. *Oh yes, Boston and I would love to attend your gala. Drinks Saturday night? Let me ask my man if we're free.* Okay, so I probably won't say that, but it's so nice to be a part of a "we."

I never needed a man to take care of me. I also never knew how good it feels to have one.

Should I have said yes?

Running my fingers through Sasha's fur, I sneak a glance at him. He's leaned back in his seat, an easy smile on his face. The protective arm that seems to always be wrapped around me rests on the back of my chair. To an outsider looking in, we'd look like a legit couple. Two opposites that attracted to make the perfect couple. North and south magnets that overthrew the laws of physics to come together.

No one would guess our relationship started with a kidnapping.

Seems like a lifetime ago.

Now we've settled into a healthy rhythm. Wake, breakfast together, work, sneak off for sex, work some more, grab dinner together or with our separate friends, then fall into bed for more sex.

His voice draws me from my thoughts. "That dog's in love with you."

"Aww." I stroke her silky coat, flattered by her attention. "She's just excited to see a new face at dinner."

"No. She loves you." He leans in, his words tickling my ear. "So do I."

Did he just say.... I sit, stunned, gazing into his eyes.

He doesn't look away.

He stares at me like he's searching my soul. I want to say wait... you *love me*, love me? Like... *in love* with me? Or love me like I love shopping and event planning, love me? Is this

just his way of finally getting that ring on my finger? To satisfy his possessive streak?

I stare right back. I search his soul and as I do the questions melt from my heart. I know the truth. He didn't even want a woman in his life till I came along. He was happily married to his work, his family. Whatever it is he sees in me, he wants me.

Just as I want him.

I love this man. And he loves me. And I've wanted love for so long.

I'm not going to hide from it.

I stare right back. "I love you too."

That slow, sexy smile, the one that turns my tummy inside out, spreads over his face. "That's what I thought."

His hand goes to the pocket of his shirt. I watch, holding my breath, waiting to see what he does. Whatever was in his pocket is now hidden in his hand. He pushes back his chair. He's going down on one knee.

My hands flutter over my gaping mouth.

He stares up at me, holding that ring up once more. But now the twinkling blue diamond is set in pure yellow gold. A simple band that gives all the attention to the stunning, rare gem. It's so... me.

"Ashely, I love you. And I'll do everything I can to take care of you for the rest of your life. Will you marry me?"

He will—he will do as he says. He'll stay by my side, my brother's side, and if we have kids, he'll stick by them too.

I can't deny it anymore. I love this man. Even though it happened faster than I would have planned for. Even though it might be crazy to say yes...

I can't help it.

I love the guy.

"Yes, Boston. I will marry you."

He leans up, sweeping me up in a deep kiss.

The kiss grows beyond anything I would normally allow in a public setting but how can I pull away? Not only do I not want to end this moment, but this kiss is also sealing the deal; we're not only getting married, but we also now have the love behind it that every marriage should.

I have it all.

A cheer from our family erupts, pulling me from the kiss. We take our seats, me blushing, him beaming as we accept our congratulations. Boston offers a champagne toast to celebrate.

There's a soft nuzzle at my thigh. I set my champagne flute down, checking on my furry friend. Sasha is looking up, like, hey, what about me? "I didn't forget about you. I love you too." She gives me a long blink, her tail tapping the floor. I laugh, taking her pretty face in my hands. I bend down, kissing the soft spot on her snout.

I settle back in my seat, one hand on Sasha's head. Boston's arm wraps tighter around my shoulders. I sit as happy as I've ever been, basking in the warmth of our admission to one another, still flushed from the kiss. I can't tear my gaze away from the ring on my finger. It looks like it's always belonged there.

We finish our meal. Toast our guests with flutes of Krug Grande 170th edition champagne. Nibble at white chocolate-covered fresh fruit. Give hugs and kisses and say our goodnights.

I stand and take his hand, eager to go upstairs and whisper more "I love you's" to him while tangling up our Boll & Branch eucalyptus bedsheets.

Beckett comes to say goodnight. He bends down to give me a kiss on my cheek. Has he always been this tall?

"Night, sis. Thanks for the great evening." His lips brush my skin. He smells like a grown-up man. Has he started wearing cologne? "And congrats."

"Thank you. I'm so glad you're here with me." I grab his hands in mine, stepping back to get a good look at him. He

looks so handsome in his borrowed suit. Boston's right. He's no longer a kid. He's a full-grown man. When did that happen? I guess I was wearing my big sister goggles, blind to his transformation.

I squeeze his hands in mine. "You look great. That working out is paying off. Are you guys lifting tomorrow?"

"It's a rest day. Gotta give the body time to lower those cortisol levels and raise the glycogen. Besides," his gaze shifts to meet Boston's, "Boss and I have other plans tomorrow."

"That's great." Just when I couldn't be happier, my heart warms even more. I love that they are spending time together. I picture them doing something normal. Golfing, maybe? I almost giggle, trying to picture Boston in a pink polo and white golf pants, tattoos all over the place. Cute. I might suggest it. Boston's standing beside me, and I look over at him. "What are you guys getting into?"

He gives a shrug. His eyes drop away from mine. He smooths a hand over his stubbled jaw. "Just stuff."

An icy trickle trips up my spine. "Like, work stuff?"

His hand moves from his jaw to the back of his neck. I try to catch his eye but he's suddenly entranced by something on the ceiling, his attention looking upward in avoidance.

I could ask him what they're doing, but Beckett will be easier to crack. I can't stop my hands from planting on my hips. "Beckett. What stuff?"

He looks at the floor, slipping his hands into the pockets of his pants. He nudges the hardwood with the toe of his shoe. "Ah, you know. Just guy stuff."

That riles me up. Sasha prances over, standing by my side. Two women facing off with boys. My arms cross over my chest, a hip jutting out.

"'Guy stuff,' as in, because I have two x chromosomes, I don't have the right to know what my younger brother is up to?" I say.

Boston slips an arm around my shoulders. A gesture of love? Or an attempt to calm a hysterical woman? “It’s nothing to worry about, babe,” he says, planting a kiss on the top of my head.

The kiss of death... for him. He’s trying to placate me. Oh. Heck. No.

“I’ll decide if I want to worry or not.” I kiss my brother’s cheek. “Night, Beckett. Sleep well.” I pass the boys, tossing my hair over my shoulder. “Boston, we need to talk.”

Looks like this perfect couple is about to have their very first real fight. And it’s going to be a knock-down, drag-out. Boston needs to know—

You don’t fudge around with the big sister.

I march all the way up to my bedroom, waiting till we’re both inside with the door closed before I speak.

He crosses the room to where I stand, slipping his hands around my waist and goes in for a kiss. I stop him, putting a hand firmly to his chest.

I stare into his eyes. They’ve got sex written all over them. Focus, Ashely.

I press my hand further into him. “This is serious. No funny business. We need to talk.”

“Let’s talk, baby.” But his eyes are on my lips and he’s dragging his tongue over his like he wants to kiss me.

“Boston.”

“Okay, okay. Here. You go sit on the bed. I’ll sit in the chair. If there’s a few feet between us, maybe I can keep my hands off you. Maybe.”

I go to the bed. He goes to the armchair by the fireplace. His eyes are now on my breasts.

“Am I going to have to put a garbage bag around my body or are you going to focus?”

“I’m sorry. You’re just so damn sexy.” He leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “Alright. You’ve got me.

Shoot.”

“I don’t want Beckett involved in your work stuff. He can help with the cars. Do some landscaping. Whatever. No mafia stuff.”

He looks down at his Doc Martens boots.

He’s not saying anything.

“Boston.” My voice grows desperate. “I don’t want him getting into that stuff. He’s a good boy. I want him to stay that way.”

“He’s a good man,” Boston corrects me.

“Okay, man.”

“I’m a good man too. But I do bad things. Everything I do has a reason behind it. I have my own moral compass that I follow. I think as long as you’re doing that, you’re okay, no matter what you’re getting into.”

“Getting into. That’s the problem. Exactly what are you getting him into?”

“Nothing.” He pauses. “Yet.”

My blood boils. “Yet?”

“Look, he’s around the brothers. He likes us. What can I say? We’re a good group. He knew about the Bachmans way before he came here. He’s a young guy, with energy and passion. He’s wicked smart. You wanna hear the truth? He fits right in.”

My temperature rises even more. “*I* decide where he fits in. I’m his big sister. *I* look out for him.”

“Sweetheart. He doesn’t need you anymore. He can look out for himself.” He stares at me. “He’s got a job. An apartment. A life that’s totally separate from you. No offense, but what does he need you for as far as making life decisions goes?”

“He didn’t even go to college after I left. He needed my help, and I wasn’t there and now he doesn’t have a degree. I have to keep a close eye on him to help him with his future, to make sure he doesn’t miss any other opportunities.”

“He didn’t go to college because he didn’t want to go, Ashe.” His tone softens. “He never even mailed the applications.”

“What did you just say?”

The heat turns to ice. A cold chill creeps down my spine. I think of the nights at the kitchen table, poring over the papers, painstakingly completing each application. This can’t be. It just can’t.

I search his face for the truth. “What do you mean by that?”

“He told me. He only filled them out to make you happy. He knew he wasn’t going. He already had work at the shop by then. He loves his cars. And he’s damn good at what he does. The engine on the Ferrari was vibrating more than usual and the kid had the engine mounts replaced in 15 minutes.” Boston gives a shrug. “You can’t choose someone’s passion for them.”

“But...” My mouth closes.

A thousand retorts come to mind but they’re all stupid.

Boston’s right. Beckett loves his cars. They make him happy. Who am I to stand in his way? I’m still the big sister. No need to tell him he’s right.

“Lying about the college applications? That’s just cruel. He’ll definitely be hearing about this.”

“Leave the kid alone. That was years ago. Who cares?”

“Ugh. You don’t get it.”

“I do too,” he says. “I’ve got four times the little bros you have. I understand when you have to let go. Which was eighth grade at the latest.”

“Eighth grade? Whatever. Your brothers had a mother who wasn’t bipolar.”

He walks over to the bed, sitting beside me. He slips a protective arm around my shoulders. His voice is warm, soft, caring. “He just needs you to be there for him. Someone to talk to. To bounce shit off of. You buy him some pizza every once in a while. Let him borrow your best car for a date. That’s it.”

I give a little sniff, looking down at my sandals. “I only have one car. I drive a Honda. No one ever wants to borrow a Honda.” I don’t know what else to say.

“We’ll change that, baby. I was thinking how cute you’d look in a green Audi E Tron. Everyone and their mother will want to borrow it.” He runs his fingertip over my thigh in circles. “In fact, I may have already had Beckett put the order in.”

Did I hear him correctly? “You bought me a car? Like, a whole car?”

“Half a car wouldn’t drive too well.”

“You didn’t need to do that.” I know nothing about cars but the idea of owning something that isn’t one hundred percent purchased by its reliability rating kind of perks me up. He’s so generous with me—it’s kind of ridiculous. “And just because you think I’d look good in it? Gosh, that’s so sweet.”

He kisses my cheek. “Just try to relax. Okay? I take good care of you, don’t I?”

I smile, laughing. “Yes. You do.”

“And I’ll take care of The Beckster too. You just have to trust me.”

“Okay.”

“And please, don’t break his balls about the application thing. Let it go.”

My heart still feels heavy about the unsent college applications. I just wish Beckett felt like he could have told me. “I’ll try to let it go.”

He stands, grabbing my hands and pulling me up from the bed to my feet. He wraps his arms around me. It feels so good, warm, protecting. I melt against him, letting the tension leave my body.

“This feels good.” I give a soft sigh.

“I can help you learn to let go.” He’s kissing my neck, his fingers lowering the zipper of my dress. He peels the fabric over my shoulders, letting the dress fall to the floor.

On today's outrageously priced lingerie menu? A matching gold bra and panty set. The shimmering fabric gave me Princess Leia vibes when I was flipping through the pages of the catalog Boston left me. When the set arrived, I loved it even more in person. I'm not sure what it's made of, but it feels like silk against my skin. The color makes my sun-kissed skin look perfectly tanned.

His eyes widen. "Holy shit."

"Thanks?" I laugh.

He takes a step back, fully admiring me in the ensemble. "Holy, *holy*, shit. You look incredible. Come here." He wraps his arms around my waist, lifting me from the floor.

He carries me over to the bed, setting me down. The mattress dips and I lean into him as he sits beside me. "You know how I was saying I can help you learn to let go?"

"Yes?" He flips me over his lap, taking me by surprise. I grab at the covers to steady myself. "Whoa!"

"Let me show you how." He grabs my waist, centering me over his lap. My legs are splayed out behind him, hanging off the edge of the bed. I sit up, pressing my elbows into the mattress.

"Mmm... Oookay..." I can't believe I'm laying here, over his lap like this. I shouldn't let him do this, but now his hand is smoothing over my ass, slipping over my silky panties.

His hand lifts, then comes down, smacking my ass with a spank. I startle, surprised by the sting. And by how much the one spank makes my pussy throb.

"Focus on the pain. On how the pain makes your pussy ache for me. Let go of all other thoughts."

I hold back a moan as he rubs the spot he's just spanked. My skin warms and tingles. I ease my legs up onto the bed, flattening my arms and laying my breasts over the edge of his thigh.

"There's a good girl. Take a deep breath and relax."

I close my eyes, sliding my hands under my face. I listen to his words, wait for the spank I know is coming. He spanks the bottom curve of my ass, making my flesh jiggle. My hips wiggle as the pain sets in. Before I can recover, his hand comes down a couple more times in rapid succession, peppering my ass with his big hand.

The sting warms my flesh, making me roll my hips against his thighs. I can feel his cock growing hard beneath my belly. My pussy grows wet from the feeling of his hardness, knowing how much he's turning me on, feeling how my body turns him on. I wiggle again, teasing him.

"Naughty girl. Tormenting the one in power?" His spanks land hard and sharp, one on my right cheek, then one on the left. "That's gonna cost you."

He grabs the waistband of my panties, tugging them down around my mid-thighs.

A shiver runs through me, my bare skin exposed to him. His hand is warm against me as he smooths over my curves. "God, you've got an amazing ass."

"Thank you." I wriggle my hips, stirring his cock even more.

He gives a moan, spanking me again. "You're the one who's supposed to be working on focusing your thoughts but the only thing I can think about is this gorgeous ass, and that pretty pussy that's all wet for me. I want to taste you, babygirl."

"You should," I say. My pussy clenches, knowing the pleasure that's coming my way. "You can spank me all day long, but I still know I'm right," I sniff.

"Right or wrong, you have to let him be."

"Fine. I'll try."

"And I'll keep encouraging you."

His hands rove over my curves. He lays me on the bed. I stretch my arms, closing my eyes and letting him kiss me full on the mouth. He can kiss me all he wants.

I'm still going to get my way.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Boston

I BREAK off the kiss to read her face and see where I stand with her. She smiles up at me, but her grin doesn't quite reach her eyes. She's still thinking about our fight.

I can read her like a damn book.

I distract her, tearing the gold panties from around her legs and tossing them to the floor. I grab her soft thighs and spread her legs. I dip my tongue between her sweet, honeyed folds.

She moans, running her hands through my hair. "God, that feels amazing."

I eat her till she's shaking, her thighs locked against my cheeks.

But I know...

This is a momentary truce, courtesy of my tongue against her greedy clit. When she comes to, there'll still be trouble in our paradise. I'm not willing to lose my new car mechanic. And there's no way she's backing down.

Also, she doesn't know the half of it. And I don't know how to tell her. The truth is going to turn her world upside down.

I lap up the last drop of her sweet nectar.

Let the war begin.

Sunlight wakes me. I open my eyes to find her already gone from my bed. She's usually snuggled up to my side, sleeping like a kitten.

Told you she was still salty.

I'm not going to fight with her over The Beckster. There's no point. The kid's a grown man and he'll make his own choices. And right now, the choice he's making is really going to piss her off. If she thinks she's mad now, wait till she finds out what Becks has planned for his future.

The nutty aroma of my favorite coffee lures me over to the circular white marble table in the center of my room, where a carafe of it waits for me alongside a plate of golden brown, buttered toast. Crunching on a piece of toast, I pour a mug of the strong black coffee and sip deeply. I take a long shower, rubbing out the cum that built up from eating her pussy last night. God, her pussy tastes so good. Feels like heaven. Smells like pure woman sensuality.

Is that even a phrase? I scrub my hair, watching the suds spin toward the drain.

I chose the blue linen shirt to wear. Maybe that'll soften her up. She's not going to get her way on the Beckett front, but I'll change up my wardrobe for her.

Stepping out into the morning sun, refilled coffee mug in hand, I gaze around the estate. The grass has recently been mowed, leaving neat rows and a sweet scent lingering in the air. The maintenance of the pebbled paths shows meticulous care, sharply edged, their boundaries refilled with new rock that's been evenly smoothed. My animal topiaries have been trimmed, my life-like leafy tiger ready to pounce.

I love this place. I always have. I never even realized there was something missing. A king has to have his queen. As much as I love my dog, Sasha's not wifey material.

Plus, she sheds like crazy.

Becks walks out of the house, headed toward me, slipping his hands in his pockets. He looks so light, easygoing. I know he's

anything but. Inside that kid is a determination that burns bright.

I know what he wants to talk to me about. I finish my coffee, needing the extra hit of caffeine. Ashe is going to fucking kill me over this.

“Hey,” he says. “You got a minute?”

“What’s up? You got a confession to make?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“Fuck,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, bro. I was hoping to get to you before they did.”

“How much?” I ask.

“By now?” He looks up at the sky, calculating. “It’s up to about a hundred k.”

That amount is nothing to me but trying to pay it back must feel like climbing Everest to him on a mechanic’s salary. I can just give the kid the money, but as I’ve gotten to know him, I know he’s going to feel like shit about himself till he pays me back. This kid’s going to be in debt forever if he keeps working at the shop.

He could work for me, but Ashe would kill me.

I’m torn.

“You did the right thing telling me.” I slap him on the back. “I’ll take care of it.”

“I can’t let you do it,” he says. “It’s my debt.”

“You don’t have a choice, man.”

He holds my eye. “I will pay you back.”

“I know you will,” I say.

“I never meant for this to come back on you or A. I was young—I had no idea what kind of guys I was dealing with.”

“They took advantage.” Sharks, circling the waters, looking for kids with no support systems in place, ones in trouble. “I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry about it.”

He holds out his hand. “I can’t thank you enough.”

I shake it. “It’s been weighing you down a long time. I’m happy to help.”

I watch him walk away, his shoulders noticeably lighter. It’s gonna kill me to have him go back to his old job. I know he belongs here. He wants to be here, working for the Bachman family.

Ashe?

I believe the last thing she said on the subject was, “Over my dead body. You don’t fudge around with the big sis.”

I have to sway her. Keeping Beckett is what’s best for everyone. I need to gain control of the situation. A perfect idea comes to me.

I feel like doing a bit of baking. I go down to my kitchen, clearing my staff out so I can whisk in peace. They scatter as I tie my apron around my waist.

Ashe’s going to lose her shit when she finds out what I have in store for her.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Ashely

I SLIP my little blue Honda into the bay where we keep the cars. I cut the engine, giving the dash a pat. “Thanks, babe. I appreciate the ride.” I don’t want her to feel unwanted when the Audi arrives.

It’s nice to have a little freedom, to drive my own car, even though I’m sure Boston had me tailed by security the whole time. I met his mom in the city for wedding invite shopping. Today, we found a little shop near the Village. Hand-painted keepsake boxes with a tiny note inside, the details for the celebration written in calligraphy, in black ink. The owner almost burst from joy when we ordered three hundred.

Ma and I, we’re getting pretty tight. It’s the two of us women, and Sasha, the only girls up in a family of men. I love Ma to death, and her input on the reception has been invaluable. I can tell it brings her joy to plan with me. She keeps saying I’m the daughter she never had. I get choked up when she says that. She knows my mom can’t join us.

I thought about sending my mom an invitation, just to let her know her only daughter is getting married, but then I remember what the staff of her home said, about how she felt better off without us, and I dropped the thought like a hot pan I’d grabbed from the oven.

There’s more planning to do, but all I want is to cozy up with a good book. I get snuggled down in one of the oversized gray

chairs in the library, a cup of cocoa by my side. Alice begins to spiral down the rabbit hole just as I hear my name being called.

“Mrs. Bachman?”

I lift my eyes from the page of my book to find a timid staff member the size of a thimble, her hair plaited in two long, black braids. There’s a touch of fear shining in her green eyes. Talia. Our youngest staff member who helps care for the dogs, as well as being my cat’s caretaker.

They treat me like a queen at court. I want the staff to respect me, but also know I care for them. I want to be a kind queen.

“Hi, sweetheart,” I say, trying to ease her nerves. “Thank you so much for the daily updates on G. Are you guys getting on okay?”

“We’re great!” Her smile says everything. My little furball gentleman has won her over. “I’m in love. Are you still enjoying the morning update notes about him I leave on your desk?”

“Yes. Thank you for keeping him up on his shows.” It’s obvious I’m never moving out of this estate. I could have taken him back by now, figured something out, but I don’t have the heart to take him away from her. She lives alone and she’s grown very attached.

“It’s my pleasure, Mrs. Bachman.”

“You should know, my name is not Mrs. Bachman.” A little heat flashes over my face, remembering my argument with Boston. If he keeps disagreeing with me about my brother, there might be a delay in my new last name. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Her cheeks bloom pink. “Ah... but... um...”

“It’s okay, Talia. What is it?”

“It’s just that Mr. Bachman was adamant.” Her brows rise, her facial features animated as she speaks. “Like, really serious

about it. He insisted the entire staff address you as Mrs. Bachman. Always.”

“The whole staff?” I hold back a giggle.

She nods, a little smile of her own popping up. “He had a group meeting about it.”

“A group meeting? That cracks me up.”

Boston has a possessive streak in him. It’s flattering, knowing how important it is to him that everyone in the world knows that I belong to him. Pretty sure that’s the main reason he proposed. I picture my big, scary, tattooed man demanding they all address me as the missus.

“I’m glad you’re not mad about it. I thought it was kind of cute, personally.” Feeling more comfortable in my presence, she moves closer. “I hate to interrupt you, but I’ve been sent to get you.”

“You’re not interrupting anything. I was just taking a break from wedding planning to read for a bit.” I close my book. “What’s up?”

“Mr. Bachman made you a spa appointment. He has a team waiting for you in your room. I’m here to take you.”

“What a nice treat. Thank you.” I set my book on the side table and stand with a stretch. I glance down at my toes. Still perfectly polished. Not a chip in sight. My hair was recently highlighted and trimmed. I wonder what treatment he’s ordered up for me.

My room has been transformed. There’s what looks like a massage table, covered in a white sheet. A makeshift table has been set up with all kinds of little white pots of potions. The room smells of honey and lemons.

Two female attendants stand, hands at their sides, smiles on their faces, waiting for me. Their white medical-style coats are spotless. The shorter of the two stretches out an arm, gesturing toward the massage table.

“Please. Come lie down. Mr. Bachman’s ordered a full body waxing for you today. We’ll start with a massage to relax

you.”

Of course he did. We’ve been having sex like bunnies. It’s nice to feel my smooth skin against his. “That’s going to sting. I’m glad there’s a massage first.”

“Boss’s orders.” She folds the top sheet back, creating a little pocket for me to slide into. “We’ll step out so you can undress.”

“Thank you so much.”

They leave me with a soft close of the door. I strip down, carefully folding my clothing over the back of a chair. I slip in between the sheets, the clean cotton feeling cool and crisp on my naked skin. The attendants return, one working the left side of my body, the other, the right. Their experienced hands rub slick, warm oil into every inch of my skin. I have to hold in a moan as one of them slips their fingers through mine, massaging my hand, turning it in light circles to relieve the tension from work.

They have me rinse my skin. I’m so relaxed, I have to focus while I’m in the shower so I don’t fall asleep. They pat me dry and have me lie back down, moving sheets and towels around expertly to maintain my privacy. The application of the hot wax feels wonderful but the aftermath of the ripping off of the long strips of muslin, well, it’s not pleasant, especially my most sensitive lady bits. Afterward, though, my skin feels like velvet and smells like clean vanilla. Boston’s going to love it.

What to wear? I have no idea what Boston has in store for me. I open the door of my lingerie cabinet, fingering the pretty, lacy things. You know what? Why waste the spa attendants’ hard work? I close the door, deciding to go without undergarments.

I choose a simple, pale blue dress, slipping it on over my head. The cotton feels fresh and clean against my freshly cared for skin. As I’m stepping into a pair of sunflower-yellow leather sandals, there’s a knock on my door.

“Come in!” I buckle the strap and turn to see who’s here.

Talia's small face peeks through a crack in the opened door. "Hi there. All done?"

"Yes." I walk over to meet her. "It was wonderful. Thanks for your help in setting that up."

"Oh my gosh! No problem. It was my pleasure." She takes in my outfit. "You look beautiful."

"I hope Boston thinks so." I follow her out of the room, pulling the door closed behind me as we leave.

She leads me down the hall off the back wing, to an addition I've noticed from the outside of the house when pulling up to the estate, but one I've never been in.

My heart stops. At the end of the hall is a family picture wall, just like the wall at his mother's house. We're the only ones here.

"He said to tell Uncle Leon hello?" She gives me a quizzical look. "And that you would know what that means..."

I glance up. Uncle Leon gives me a look of disapproval. "Yes. I've got it from here. Please. Go home. You've had a long day. Thanks for everything. Give G a squeeze for me." I hold out my hand for a shake, thinking a hug may overwhelm her.

She gives my hand a squeeze. "Thanks. I'm excited to get back to him. It's sushi and the series premier of *Real Housewives of Rodeo Drive* tonight."

I feel a little pang for my precious kitty but I'm happy knowing he's in good hands. It all worked out for the best. There's too many doggos here. They would stress the furry prince out. And he would not like how close Sasha and I have become. "Give him a snuggle from me and send me pictures."

"Will do." She waggles her fingers in a wave goodbye and heads down the hall.

I wait till I'm sure she's out of sight to tug on the corner of Uncle Leon's frame. I watch in awe even though I've seen it happen before as the wall begins to move. I slip inside the room, tapping the button on the floor to close the door, like I saw Boston do the first night I met him.

It's the same room. Just a different house.

The room is completely empty of furniture, save for a large, round oak table that sits in the center of the room. On the table is a silver cake stand with a domed lid. Boston stands behind the table, looking gorgeous in a light blue button-down that matches my dress.

"I had no idea this was here."

"I had it built years ago. Never felt like using it before you. You'll be the first."

Relief washes over me. I didn't realize how tense I was, standing here wondering if he'd had other women here. Now the room feels special. All ours.

"I like the shirt. Thanks for changing it up." I walk over to greet him with a kiss. "You look so handsome."

He holds a hand up, gesturing for me to stop. "Hold it right there."

"Oooh...kay." I stop midstep, putting my foot down. I'm about two arm's lengths from the table.

He lifts the silver cake plate topper, revealing a beautiful chocolate cake, thick, shiny frosting covering every inch of it.

My mouth waters as the scent of chocolate reaches me. Delicious. But why? I enjoyed the massage, but the pain from the full body wax I could have done without.

"Dessert," he says. His grin has a positively wicked edge to it. "Devil's food with double fudge icing. Baked it myself."

He does bake! I've been wondering for months. And he's good at it. The cake looks amazing.

Was it really necessary to remove every body hair from its root to eat dessert with him?

"Why the empty room? Why the cake? What are you up to?"

"The other day, you told me not to fudge around with the big sister, but you don't tell me what to do, baby. I can do anything I want to you. Whenever I want." He dips a finger in

the icing, holding eye contact as he licks it off. “Just because I can.”

There’s a hint of a threat in his tone. The vibe he’s sending makes the little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end which leads to chill bumps rising on my arms. I’m excited to see what he has in store, but nervous as well. My nipples harden, pressing against my dress. Maybe I should have worn a bra.

I cross my arms over my torso, giving myself a reassuring hug. “Well, I don’t know about that. Pretty sure you’ve heard of a little thing called consent?”

“Consent?” He raises a brow. “You do remember how you came to this estate in the first place, don’t you?”

He’s got me there.

“First things first.” His dark brow narrows at me. “Lose the dress.”

I imagine standing in the center of this bare room naked. I feel a sudden chill in the air. “I can’t. I’m not wearing anything underneath.”

His attention falls to my breasts. “Even better.”

A heavy ache zings through my chest, desire twisted up with nerves.

“Umm... Okay.” I step out of my sandals. Trying to channel my inner-sexpot-Ashe, I lift the hem of my dress. As I raise it, the cool air slips over my skin, chilling me. He gives a moan as the dress lifts high enough to show off my freshly waxed pussy. My nervousness settles. I start to enjoy this. I move slower, offering him a teasing grin as I bring the fabric up over my belly. I give a sexy little shimmy as I lift it up, freeing my breasts as I tug it up and over my head.

I toss the dress to the floor. I want to tap into that Zen place I was in when I was standing in the garden naked, but this time is different. There’s something a little ominous about this space, this empty room. And I still haven’t figured out what the meaning of this cake is.

I wait for him to come to me, to touch me. He doesn't move, holding down his place behind the table. His eyes are greedy, though, taking me in.

The tone of this room is much darker than the garden, and it's not due to the missing sunshine. It's him. He's got a darkness in his gaze, a hardness in his stance that makes me shiver. I feel small, cold, not quite scared or excited, but some strange feeling in between the two. It's like butterflies in my tummy but with the notion that they might turn into bees.

What is he going to do to me?

He slides his hands around the edges of the cake stand, lifting it. He walks around the table, stopping about one foot from me. He smiles that filthy, dirty, sexy smile and sets the cake stand down.

On the floor.

Right in front of me.

Strange.

I stare down at the beautiful cake. I want to demand answers. Why am I naked? Why is the cake on the floor?

But it's clear. I'm not the one calling the shots tonight.

He is. And he's loving it.

I stand there, naked, trying not to tremble while I wait to see what this is all about, what he's planning to do with me. He circles me, heavy footsteps echoing against the wooden floorboards. The sound of each step makes my heart beat harder. He stops, standing behind me. I can feel his eyes on me, admiring my nakedness... or... reveling in my current lack of power. I'm not quite sure which. Maybe both.

I wait for him to reach out, to touch me. He doesn't. The footsteps restart as he circles back around. He leaves me standing there, totally unsure of what's going on. He goes back to his spot behind the table. He places his hands on its smooth top, pressing his palms against the wood.

"Now. It's time for you to be a good girl and do exactly as I say."

I muster up the courage to push back. “And if I don’t?”

“That’d be a shame. You’d miss out on dessert.” He runs his tongue over his bottom lip. “It’s going to be mind-blowing.”

What else can I do? “Okay.” I hold back a shiver. “What do you want me to do?”

“Stand over the cake with one foot on either side of the cake plate.”

“Um... I’m naked.”

“Do it.” His dark eyes flash. “Now.”

I inch toward the cake. It feels strange and shameful to spread my legs wide enough to put one foot on either side of the cake stand. Cool air rushes up the insides of my thighs, chilling my heated skin as it caresses my exposed pussy. The cold air tickles my sex. It’s humiliating, standing here bare in this awkward position, a cake between my feet. What next?

“Good girl. Now bend your knees.”

I bend my knees. Just a touch.

“More.”

I bend my knees a bit more, my muscles tensing as I hold my weight over the cake. Something about the cold air, my nakedness, and his commanding presence stirs desire in my belly. The shame somehow turns sensual, my lack of power making my nipples grow hard, arousal wetting my pussy. Am I going to drip right on top of his cake?

He’d probably love that.

My knees are starting to turn to jelly. “Now what?”

“Now you squat down. And sit on my cake. I want double fudge icing all over your pussy so I can eat it off.”

My stomach drops. I take a choppy inhale, my breath caught in a gasp. “You can’t be serious.”

“And make sure you get your asshole too, because I’ll be eating that as well.”

He's got to be joking. Or testing me. The room's suddenly a hundred degrees, heat flushing my chest. My hand flutters to my throat.

"Wha—what... no... no, you're not."

"Yes. I. Am. Now, bend those knees, babygirl."

Am I going to do what he says? Can I do what he asks? Am I even capable?

I bend my knees, squatting down, spreading my legs, till I'm hovering just over the cake.

"You know what," he says. "I think you'd get more coating kneeling. Get on your knees."

I'm fighting to keep my balance as it is. To get on my knees... it's going to get more awkward, more embarrassing.

I take a moment to plan it out, to figure out how to pull this off without falling on my face. I inch forward so I'm at the front of the plate. I lean forward, pressing my hands into the floor. One knee at a time, I press them to the floor. I push myself back up, now kneeling in front of the cake. If I was taller... but I'm not. The only way to coat myself in this icing is to scoot back, bit by bit, sliding my parts over the top of the cake.

He's losing patience. "You know what to do. Let's see it."

I can't believe I'm going to do this. I take a deep breath to still my nerves. I start to move. Inching backward.

My ass hits the cake first. The icing is cold and wet and feels squishy as I move my body over the cake, the icing spreading over my ass, my pussy.

"Good, good girl. You're making me so hard it hurts, watching you do what I tell you. Now, sit down, right on top, get good and covered. I want to taste my cake."

I settle down, letting the icing and cake cover me. Humiliating. Strange. Sensual. It's cold and wet and squishy. It feels super weird but kinda good. I'm confused by the feelings of arousal that come. I can't believe I'm actually doing this.

Now that I've done the hard part, I start to look forward to his promise, his hot tongue against my cake covered pussy.... and... other areas.

My knees are starting to hurt but I know I have to wait for his permission to rise. I can tell by the set of his angled jaw, it's just that kinda night.

Finally, his voice fills the room. "Come here, baby. Let me lick you clean."

I go to stand, chunks of cake falling as I move. I have to press my hands back into the floor to steady myself as I rise. I stand there, cake everywhere, and look around the room. There's only us, the table, and what's left of the cake. If you can even call the mangled confection by that name at this point.

My voice is shakier than I want it to be. "Where do you want me to go?"

"Where does one eat dessert?"

"The table?"

"Yup. Climb aboard and lay down on your back."

I stare at the polished wood tabletop. I'm going to destroy it. "Oh my God. Are you going to at least put down a towel or a cloth or something?"

"No way. I find the cold, hard feel of wood a turn on. You will too. Come on. Up you go." He pats the table. "Now."

My knees feel like jelly still. I take a timid step forward. The memory of his promise that he'll be eating—all of me—rattles my brain and makes my stomach flip.

Ashe, where are you, you sexy goddess?

I'm going to need you for this.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Boston

SHE'S CUTE, all little and covered in chocolate, a smear across one of her bare breasts. She cautiously climbs onto the tabletop, painfully aware of the chocolate trail she's making on the floor. I know she despises a mess. And this is about to get all kinds of filthy. Choosing such a dirty way to fuck is another layer of my plan to take her out of control, to break open the freak shell and free my Ashe.

Forget about her comfort zone, she's a good million miles away from it right now. She eases herself back onto the table. Still sitting up, she rests her weight on her palms behind her. She closes her legs, crossing her ankles, like a lady. She folds her hands in her lap, starts as they land in a pile of icing, then delicately moves them to her side.

She gives a shuddering breath, peering up at me. "Are you totally sure about this? I mean, it seems a little crazy."

"You know I'm crazy, girl. It's time for you to get a little crazy too." I slide my hands over her trembling knees. "Now lay back and part those sweet thighs for daddy."

She lays back with a moan. "I've told you I'm *so* not going to call you that."

We'll see if she changes her mind when I've got my cock in her ass. I grab her hip, rolling her to the side so I can smack her gorgeous ass.

“Ow!” She pops back up. “What was that for?”

“Just reminding you who’s in charge in this room. Now lay back down.”

She gives me a saucy little look but obeys, lying back down on the table. Her knees are bent, her calves hanging over the edge of the table. She throws an arm over her eyes like she can’t bear the humiliation.

Never mind that. A few licks of my tongue and she’ll be grabbing my hair in her hands, begging me for more.

“Shame to waste the rest of the cake,” I say. I bend down, finding an untouched spot on the side of the two-layer chocolate cake. I take a small piece, bringing it over to her. “Open your mouth.”

Her arm flies from her face, her eyes widening. She parts her lips. I slip the cake onto her pink tongue. She chews daintily.

“Lick my fingers clean.” Shame blooms rosy on her cheeks. She swallows the bite, then licks the icing from my fingers with her warm tongue. She wraps her lips around my finger, her eyes catching mine as she sucks off the last of the chocolate.

My cock is fucking throbbing. “There’s my dirty girl. There’s my Ashe.”

I part her thighs, revealing her chocolate-covered everything. I want to taste her, I want to make her come, but I don’t know how long I’ll be able to hold off from taking her ass. She turns me on so damn much. The sight of her covered in my cake, the thought of being the first to explore her ass almost makes me come right where I stand.

I bend over, slowly lapping the rich icing from her clit. “Does that feel good, baby?”

She bends up, looking at me. “How can you still look that darn handsome with a beard of chocolate on your face?”

“I’m going to eat your asshole while I’m wearing this beard.” I dive back down into her, burying my face between her ass

cheeks. I wrap my hands behind her knees, lifting so I can better access her asshole.

She whimpers, wriggling her hips to try and get away from me, at the same time, thrusting her hips toward me to get more. I lick her icing-covered asshole, slipping the tip of my tongue inside.

A shame-filled whine rises in her. The sound makes my cock throb. I love pushing her out of her comfort zone. I'm sure before me she had a hard and fast rule that no man was ever going to touch her here.

Fuck her rules.

She covers her face with her hands. "Oh my God. I can't believe you're doing that right now."

Never heard her say "God" before, either. I must really be throwing her over the edge. Maybe one day I'll even get her to cuss.

I slip two fingers into her, pushing to fill her as I lick back up to her clit. I suck on her swollen bud, working up a rhythm, pumping those fingers as I eat my chocolate-covered wifey-to-be. I love being in control, taking her out of control like this. She's moaning, her thighs locking around me.

I take her just to the edge. I don't want her to come but I want her all worked up. I want her climax to come when I take her in the ass. I want her all built up, I want that orgasm to rock her world.

I pull away from her, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "Time for me to take you in your ass, baby."

She watches, wide-eyed and panting, wanting to come, fearful of my cock in her ass.

Gently, I clean her with a rag I stowed away in my pocket. I lather my cock with the lube I had in my other pocket, smearing a generous amount on her asshole. I leave her on her back, wrapping my hands around the backs of her thighs, lifting her legs. I push the head of my cock against her tight ring of muscles. She moans at the feeling of me pushing

against her. With a little effort, I get the tip of my cock inside her ass.

She gives a little gasp as I enter her tight hole. "I'm scared," she says.

"Don't be, baby. I've got you. I'm going to make it feel good." I knead her breast, chocolate icing smearing all over her skin. Her hole locks down around the head of my cock. "Fuck, that feels good. I'm going to take every inch of this beautiful ass then fill it with my cum."

"Chocolate-covered cum," she murmurs. The good feelings come back to her as her ass relaxes, accepting me.

"That's right. Chocolate-covered cum, baby." I thrust hard, burying myself inside her. She's so tight. I want to come. It takes all my willpower to not.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! I'm going to come." She's already close, the cake foreplay doing its job. Thank God, because she feels so good, I'm not going to last much longer. "Boston, fuck! Boston!"

Victory. I drew the f-word from my precious babygirl. "There you go, baby. Go crazy. Let it all out."

She moans, "Fuuuuck..." She curls up in a ball around me, her ass milking my lubed cock.

I explode into her, leaving the earth as my mind travels sky-high to euphoria. I feel invincible, the most powerful man in the world. After that comes a wave of relief. As it crashes through my body, the tension ebbs, slowly bringing me back down to earth.

I slip out of her so I can bend down and kiss her. She cups my face in her hands, kissing me back.

I needed to show her who's in control, so when I tell her what I have to tell her, I have some sliver of power. When she finds out what's about to go down, its gonna go so far beyond her hands on her hips and that look of stubbornness she gives me. The tension in me already starts to come back, thinking about what I've gotta do.

The shit's about to hit the motherfuckin' fan.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Ashely

I'VE SHOWERED TWICE, scrubbing every inch of my body inside and out. I still smell like chocolate. Tonight, Boston's taking Beckett and me to the city for dinner. We're sending Beckett off in style. To be honest? I'm excited to dress up, to eat at one of the hottest new restaurants.

But I'd be just as happy dining with them on the brick patio of our house.

I've loved having my brother with us, but I know it's time for him to go back to his real life. His boss has been calling him like crazy. The boss is too scared of the Bachmans to outright demand Beckett's return, but we know he must be losing business without him.

Besides, I'm sure Beckett's missing his old friends, his apartment, his parks and rec baseball team.

Beckett'll be re-kidnapped and brought to the estate every other weekend for the next six weeks. I've made sure of that. I have him scheduled to test-drive my Audi with me when it arrives, to come back for the tux fitting for the wedding, and then for the bachelor party—golfing, no girls. Planned it myself. Boston didn't even want a bachelor night, but I'm not passing up the chance to see him in a pink polo and white pants.

We're sitting at dinner, our little trio. Beckett looks handsome in his white V-neck and gray sport coat. Boston orders for all of us. The starters come and my mouth starts to water.

"A. I have a confession to make," Beckett says.

I look up from the stuffed mushroom I was about to devour. "Okay."

There's an expression on his face I don't recognize. My stomach suddenly feels funny. I put the mushroom back on the plate. I wait for him to speak.

He folds his hands in his lap. Gives a long exhale. Every second he's not speaking is twisting my stomach into knots.

Finally, he says, "The scholarship? The one that got you through college?"

"Yes?" I have a grateful thought about that scholarship at least once a week. I never would have gotten my first PR job, the one that launched my career in the city, without that degree. "What about it?"

He looks down at the table. He can't meet my eye.

What is going on?

I feel sick. "Beckett? Talk to me."

His brown eyes meet mine. "Your scholarship—it got you through freshman year. I got you through the rest."

This makes no sense. "What are you talking about?"

"We got a letter at the house, the summer after your freshman year. From your admissions office. Remember when you had mono?"

I'd never been so sick in my life. Headache, body aches, extreme fatigue. I missed twenty days of school freshman year. Took six months to get my energy back. I kept up with my work, shaking in my bed as I held my computer in my lap, doing my best. I still managed to pull off a 3.9 GPA.

Nothing he's saying makes sense. What does mono have to do with anything?

“I could never forget that.”

“Yeah,” he continues. “So apparently, there was a clause in your scholarship. You couldn’t miss more than five days in a semester in order to keep the scholarship for the following school year.”

“But my absences were excused,” I say. “I made up all the work.”

He shakes his head. “I got Mom to call the school. She was pretty with it at the time. I was proud of her. She pushed back, she really tried. There were no exceptions. Butt in the chair or you lose the funding.”

My tuition and housing were always paid for. Every single semester. I never even thought about the payments after I won that scholarship. I just showed up to class. It never even crossed my mind there was an issue.

An icy feeling creeps up my spine. “What did you do?”

“Mom’s credit was shot. Dad was nowhere to be found. I was a freshman in high school, it’s not like I could go to a bank or apply for a student loan.” Finally, his eyes meet mine. “I did what I had to do. I found a guy.”

I don’t have to ask what kind of guy. I know it by the look on his face. We didn’t exactly live in the nicest part of town. Poverty does things to people, makes them desperate.

There were plenty of shady characters where we lived. “You went to a loan shark.”

“I went to a guy.” His jaw locks, that little muscle in the corner twitching. He won’t say more. “And my college applications? The truth is, I didn’t want to go to college, not at all. But I couldn’t have gone anyway. I had to start working full-time when I graduated high school. The deal was that the first payment was due the month after I graduated. I needed to make payments.”

“That was years ago. You’re still paying?”

He nods. “The interest ballooned. I’ve been doing my best, taking overtime, jobs on the side, but they wanted more than I

had.”

“Why didn’t you come to me?” I ask.

He looks back down at the table. “I didn’t want to come clean. Didn’t want you to worry. You’ve worried over me enough.”

“But Beckett, I could have helped, I could have done something—”

“There’s more.”

My heart sinks.

“The white SUV?” he continues. “They were looking for me. Found out who you were working for at Enterprises. Waited for you at the gates of the Village. Followed you. They were going to get to you, to punish me for my missed payments. I’m so sorry—I had no idea it had gone that far, that they would come for you. I assumed they’d come for me.”

My heart leaps to my throat. “They were going to hurt you?”

“They were going to hurt *you*. I just didn’t know. As soon as I heard about the SUV and put two and two together, I went straight to Boss.”

Boston reaches across the table to put his hand over mine. “I took care of it. There’s nothing to worry about.”

The sick feeling ebbs away, replaced by an angry heat. I pull my hand away, looking from Beckett to Boston. “And you both kept this away from me.”

They sit in silence.

Beckett, I get. But Boston? Why would he have secrets with my brother? If we’re going to spend the rest of our lives together, shouldn’t we tell one another everything?

I’ve been protecting my brother his whole life. He’s been hiding things, trying to protect me as well. I can’t believe he was in danger. Come for me? Go ahead. I’ve got the entire Bachman family behind me. You’re going to get your ass kicked.

But what if they had come after him? He could have been hurt, or killed.

I stare at his beautiful face, remembering that moment the nurse laid his tiny, swaddled body in my little arms.

His soft baby smell. He was just a little drop of heaven, fallen from the sky. Pure and sweet.

Did I do this? Is it my fault he got in with the wrong crowd? I've always admired the Bachman family, their crimes seem justified. I know Boston or any other Bachman would never prey on the weak. But Boston's a debt collector. Is he so different than the men who targeted my brother?

Part of me wants Beckett to join the family so he has the full protection of the Bachmans. The other part of me wants to grab him, get on a plane, and disappear in Switzerland to start a new, pure life. I hear they're a peaceful country.

What I really want is for him to be my baby brother again. Not this big, strong man that sits in front of me, making his own decisions, living his own life, one I have no control over.

My world spins. I feel faint. A cold sweat breaks out over my forehead, making me clammy. Suddenly, this fancy restaurant, the sound of utensils clanking against plates, is too much. I can't breathe.

I need to take him and get out of here.

I stand, taking my napkin from my lap and putting it on the tabletop. "Beckett, let's go. We need to talk. I need to get out of here."

"Where are you going?" Boston asks.

"Back to my place. My apartment. I need a minute. I need space."

Boston stands, slowly. His dark eyes flash as he narrows them at me. "Space from what, exactly? Me?"

"Everything." I shake my head. "I'm sorry I can't explain better what I'm feeling right now. Just respect it. Please." I turn to Beckett. "Let's go."

Beckett looks from me, to Boston, back to me. I give him the big sis look. He gets the message. Beckett clears his throat, rising from his chair. "Sorry, Boss. See you tomorrow?"

“We’ll see,” I say, grabbing my purse from the back of my chair.

Boston’s deep voice rumbles behind me. “Don’t walk out that door, Ashe.”

There’s just enough warning in it to send a shiver down my spine. I grab Beckett’s hand and take off for the door before I turn around and throw myself into Boston’s arms.

I have to sort out my head.

We don’t speak on the cab ride back to my apartment. The place is dark, cold, devoid of my personal possessions. All my furniture is here, though—I had no need for it at the estate.

I find a bottle of red in a kitchen cupboard. It’s up high. Short people problems. To my humiliation, I have to get Beckett to reach it for me. He doesn’t even have to stand on tiptoe as he effortlessly grabs the bottle from the shelf above my head.

I go to open the bottle, but he sees my hands are shaking.

“Here,” he says, taking the wine from me. “Let me.”

I leave him, going to curl up on the sofa. A minute later, he brings me a glass of wine. He sits beside me, taking a sip from his glass. He wrinkles his nose. “Tastes funny.”

It makes me laugh. He’s still my baby brother. Just a giant, grown-up version. With more secrets than I’d care for him to have.

The thought makes me say, “I guess I have to let you grow up, don’t I?”

“It’s too late. It happened whether you wanted it to or not.” He sets his wine on the coffee table.

I hold the stem of my glass, swirling the dark wine against the sides of the glass. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

He rests his forearms on his thighs, leaning closer. “You always saw me as the good boy. I’m not. You were the good one.”

That hurts my heart. “What are you talking about? You were always good.”

“You know that test I got the perfect score on in sixth grade?” he asks.

I get a creepy crawling feeling like spiders walking over my arms. I don't think I'm going to like this conversation. “Of course. The science one. The one you had to pass to stay on the baseball team.”

“I broke into the school the night before. Found the answer key in the teacher's desk. Took a picture on my phone, then cheated off it during the test.”

My hand freezes as I go to take a sip, my glass hovering in the air. “You're joking.”

“No. I'm not. And remember when I didn't have the money to pay for drivers ed right before you left for college?”

“Yes. But you borrowed the neighbor's mower and mowed Mr. Fritz's lawn to earn the money.” He doesn't respond. I stare at him, hard. “That's what you did.”

“That was my plan, but the old grump wouldn't let me. Told me to get Mom medicated so she could work for a change, so we could stop living off the government. I stole the fifty bucks from his glovebox after he slammed the door on me.”

“You didn't.”

“I did. And countless other things I would never tell you about. I'm not like you, A.” His eyes burn into mine. “I'm not good.”

“What are you saying? Of course, you are.”

“I'm different from you. I was just born with this darkness inside me. I don't know how else to describe it. Sometimes, it comes out. I don't see things as black-and-white, right and wrong. I made the best decision I could in the moment, whatever was going to propel us forward, get us out of that house.” He shakes his head. “I would have done anything to keep you from having to leave school and come back.”

“I've never seen this side of you before,” I say.

“What about when that kid wouldn't leave you alone? The one that lived on the corner with the big dog tied to the chain. The

guy that used to torment you on the way home every day?”

“Ugh. Brandon Sikes. He was awful.”

“He had four years and a good fifty pounds on me. I couldn’t kick his ass, but I had to stop him somehow.” He looks at me, waiting for me to put the pieces together.

Brandon used to run up and pull my hair, throw things at me as I walked by, threaten to let his dog off the chain. Then one day, he stopped. I saw him watching me from his porch, a cast on his right arm. He never messed with me again after that. I just figured during his recovery, he forgot about me.

“Beckett.” The cold creeps in again. I know I’m not going to like the answer to this question. “How did Brandon get that cast?”

“He biked home every day. Really fast. I think, so he could get home before you. One day, I skipped school. Hid in my room till Mom went to work. I got a broom handle. Waited in the bushes by his house. He came flying around the corner on Maple, just like he did every day, only that day, I held the broom handle out. Kid went flying. Splayed out on the concrete like a bug that hit the windshield.”

Oh my gosh...

“But you were just protecting me,” I say. I try to make excuses, to let him know I understand.

I’m not sure I do.

His eyes hold mine. “I liked it. It made me happy to see him lying there. No one fucks with my sister. The guy in the SUV found out the same thing.”

I think I’m going to be sick.

My little brother isn’t who I thought he was.

“See? We’re different. It’s easy to hide it from you,” he says. “You always had these doe eyes for me. I could do no wrong. And you’d moved out by my freshmen year in high school. That’s when guys start to figure out who they are, what path they’ll go down.”

“And I wasn’t there to help you choose,” I say.

He shakes his head. “It’s not like that. You weren’t there, so I didn’t have to hide who I was.”

“Wow. This is a lot.”

“Have some more wine,” he says. “I know it’s a lot. And I’m sorry. But there’s one truth in all these lies. What happened with me had nothing to do with Boss. You need to go back to him. Don’t hold any of this stuff against him.”

“He never told me that SUV was after you. He let me think it was something else, that he was still figuring it out. That’s the same as lying. He withheld the truth from me,” I say.

“Only because I asked him to. He gave me till the end of this week to tell you. That’s what tonight’s dinner was for. But now you know everything. It’s a lot to process, but you can do that at home. It’d be better if we go back.” He stands, grabbing my purse. “Let’s go.”

My brother’s not who I thought he was. Or maybe he is, and I just didn’t let myself see who he really was. I could use more time to think, but I’m already missing Boston.

“Okay.” I get up slowly, still stunned by the truth.

I look around as we leave. This apartment feels sad, lonely. I can’t believe I was ever happy here. And it’s not because G’s missing.

It’s just not... home anymore.

I’m happy for the long ride back to the estate. I need the time to think. Every so often, I sneak looks at Beckett. He’s fallen asleep against the window. I reach over, moving a lock of hair from his forehead. When he’s sleeping like this, he looks so peaceful. So innocent. Like all those stories he told me were tall tales.

But I know they’re true.

He’s right. I do have special rose-colored glasses on when it comes to him. I’m okay with that. Boston and Beckett are my good bad boys and I’ll always have their backs.

I think of Boston's warning voice, telling me not to walk out the door.

A nervous flutter comes to my stomach, wondering what fate awaits me at home.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

Boston

I HEAR her before I see her, her laugh echoing down the hall. It's her giggly laugh, the one she has when she's been drinking wine. I usually love the sound. It's fucking adorable.

Tonight?

I'm pissed.

I understand she needed space to think, to breathe. It was healthy for her to have time alone to talk to Becks. God knows the two had enough to talk about.

But to leave me, sitting by myself, without even a backward glance?

Then, to have me pace my floors for hours while I call and recall her dead phone. Sure, I've got trackers all over her, in her phone, her ring, her purse, the heels of her shoes. Of course I had a driver follow the cab she rode in. I wouldn't be a Bachman if I hadn't. And yes, Becks was sneaking me text updates the entire time but still...

I'm pissed.

She enters my room, tossing her purse into the armchair by the door. She does a little pirouette, humming to herself. "Dun, dun, da, dun."

It's Carol of the Bells.

Fuck.

I feel my anger dissipating. I try to cling to it, to hold on to it as it wisps away like curls of smoke. She's just too damn cute.

My voice rumbles through the room, letting her know I'm here. "I told you not to walk out that door."

"Oh!" She turns with surprise, her lips in that "O" that makes blood pulse below my belt. "You're here."

"Yes. I'm here. Where you should have been."

"I had to talk to Beckett, Beck, The Beckster—you know that." She throws her hands on her hips. "He had a lot of secrets to spill. Ones you should have told me."

"They weren't mine to share," I say.

"Yeah, true." She smiles, throwing her arms around my neck. She stands on the balls of her feet for a kiss. "Kiss me."

Stay strong. Don't fall for this cuteness. Show her who's boss. "Did you have to walk out on me without a backward glance? Did you hear me say, don't walk out that door?"

"Hmm. I think I remember something about that." She bops me on the nose with the tip of her finger. "You're sooo cute when you're mad."

My hands run down her back, cupping her ass and squeezing it. Her eyes flutter closed and she leans against me. She's like a kitten being petted when you touch her ass. My fingers dig into the cleft of her ass, grabbing her harder.

She moans, her breasts pushing against me. She wraps her arms around my neck, kissing me deeper. I pull away.

"There is one way you can make it up to me, babygirl."

"What's that?" She gives a lazy smile.

I unbuckle my belt buckle. "You can get on your knees and suck my cock."

"Oh!" Her eyes shine bright, her cheeks go pink. "Oh."

I grab her shoulder, pressing her down. I push till she's kneeling on the floor, looking up at me with wide eyes. I unzip my pants, grabbing my already stiffening cock from my

clothing. I hold it out, offering it to her. “Take it in your mouth, baby.”

A look of uncertainty crosses her face. She reaches out with timid hands, wrapping her pretty fingers around the base of my cock.

“Take my balls in your hands. Cup them and play with them while you put me in your mouth.”

She holds me with one hand, the other cupping and fondling my balls. I stare down at her, slipping my fingers through the hair at the back of her neck, tugging at it as she leans forward, parting her lips.

My breath catches as she wraps her full lips around the head of my cock. It’s like the first magical moment you’re easing into a hot tub. My eyes close, my head lolls back, a low moan leaving me as her tongue swipes against my cock. I already feel the climax rising in my belly. Her hand is cupping me, playing with me. I want my cock deeper in her mouth.

I pull her head forward till she makes a gagging sound. “Take me, baby. Take all of me.”

She’s a good girl. She works hard to suck me off, to please me. She works my shaft with her hand, rubbing it up and down as she holds it. She’s tugging and pinching the skin beneath my balls like I like. Her tongue travels up and down my cock. As she brings her mouth back to the tip, she plays with the head, circling it, licking it, sucking it.

Seeing her on her knees like this, my cock going in and out of her mouth, working so hard to please me, it makes me come, cum rushing up in my balls, pulsing and throbbing. My core clenches. The feeling is otherworldly. It’s like she’s on her knees at an altar, worshipping my body.

“God, that feels so good. You know how to make your man happy. Suck it, babygirl. Suck me good.” My coaxing words turn her on, and she gives a moan, the sound vibrating off me as she dives in, sucking harder, tonguing me faster. Her mouth is so wet and soft, her hands feel so fucking good as they play with my balls.

“I’m so close. Keep going, baby.” The orgasm starts in my cock, reaching out and rippling through my entire body. I release into her mouth. She makes a choking sound as the cum fills her mouth. I hold her head tight, making her swallow down every drop of my cum. “There you go, baby. Take my cock. Every drop, baby. Swallow every bit.”

I release her and when she pulls away, my cum drips down her chin. It’s so fucking hot, seeing her hair all messed up, her lips swollen from my cock, her skin glistening with my cum.

I smooth her hair back. “There’s my good girl. You did so good.”

“Did you like it?” She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

“I loved it, baby. Come here and let me show you how much.” I take her in my arms and lay her on the bed. I push her dress up, pulling her panties down, watching her shy face as I tug them over her ankles. Dipping my tongue into her slick folds, I kiss her smooth pussy, licking her and fingering her till she’s curled around me, mewling like a kitten, her slickness all over my face and fingers.

Afterward, we take a bath together. Candles and bubbles, and tea for her. We sit, and soak, and chat, our slippery limbs tangled under the bubbly water. We talk about the dogs, the wedding, the moat. Finally, we get around to the elephant in the room.

She has to realize Beckett is safer with the protection of the Bachmans than without it. She has to want him to join us, to be included in all the family events that we’ll both be at once we’re married.

Hell, I want The Beckster by my side.

She drags her fingers through the sudsy water. “If he wants to join the family, I’ll support him. I just want him to make his own choice, to do what’s best for him.”

“I agree.”

“And I can’t wait to be a Bachman, a Beauty, and your wife.”

“I can’t wait either.” I lean forward, kissing her.

The next day she’s abducted by a pack of Beauties. They carry her out of the house, putting her on a party bus. Over the weekend, I get pictures from Ashe. The girls hugging the giant purple cactus. Wearing cowgirl boots and drinking margaritas. A selfie with her snuggled in bed in a white yurt tent. I zoom in on the picture. They have electricity, a sink, a fridge, a TV, and is that a...dishwasher?

So glamping is *not* camping.

But it looks like they’re having a great time.

I just want her back here, back in my arms.

Now that she’s mine, I’m never letting her go.

It’s time to hang up the Glock and get that desk job I prematurely asked for five years ago. I call Rockland to make the ask, but he has other plans.

“You know, Boss, remember that idea you brought up a couple years ago? About training dogs to help protect the Village, the Hamlet, and the Parrish? Having our own army of loveable but deadly guard dogs protecting our women and children?”

“Yes? But I never thought it would happen.” A glimmer of hope tightens my throat. “Are you thinking it’s something you might want to look into?”

“I am. Ashely was here before they left on their trip. She casually mentioned the idea, that you’d shared it with her over wine one night. She also said you’d be miserable behind a desk,” he says. “She’s right.”

Just when you thought you were marrying the most incredible woman in the world...

She fucking tops herself.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

Ashely

I STAND beside Boston on the brick patio behind the kitchen. The mini moat was finished just in time, defining the space for this moment. Little candles float along the water, their flames flickering against the bright petals of recently planted flowers as they pass by. We're surrounded by the Bachman family, ready to perform the ceremony that will officially bring me into their fold. After all these years, I can't believe I'm finally becoming a Beauty.

Rockland, Tess's husband and the head of the family, looks handsome in his black tux. He hands a red leather Bachman's Jeweler box to Boston. Rockland gives me a warm smile.

Boston turns to me. "All Bachman women wear this necklace. It is a symbol of our creed, the way we live our lives, the eternal care of a man for a woman. For as long as the stars have lit the sky, men have cared for and loved the women they have pledged their lives to. And women have loved and obeyed those men, accepting them as the headship of their family. Choosing to give the gift of their submission to these men—men who would lay down their lives for the ones they love. The sword is our symbol—the length we are willing to go to, the sacrifice we would willingly make."

Boston takes the necklace from the box, a platinum setting with blue gems that match my eyes. He steps around me. His body brushes up against my back. He brings the chain around

my neck. The little charm sits heavy against my chest. His fingers are at the back of my neck, clasping the delicate necklace into place.

“Ashely, I freely give you this symbol, and pledge my very life to you. Do you accept?”

Don't cry. You'll ruin your makeup. Happiness wells in me as I say, “I do.”

He kisses me and when we break away from our kiss, I see everyone passing out white candles. I've ordered them for the family before, but never seen them in use. Each person with a flame turns to someone's unlit candle till the night is filled with candlelight.

Rockland holds a candle high as he speaks. “Fire, also as timeless as the Earth, symbolizes the Bachman family's pledge to one another. To guide, care for, and protect one another above all others. Bachmans, do you accept the union of these two?”

We do, the hushed voices reply.

Finally, I think. Finally, I'm home.

“And Bachmans, do you pledge to care for and protect Boston and Ashely as you would your own blood?” he asks.

We do.

“And how long will you hold these two in your care?”

Forever.

I walk through a barrage of hugs and congratulations, eager to find my brother.

Beckett's waiting for me at the wall of the garden. He has a bodyguard on either side of him, their job to ensure no non-Bachman guests witness the ceremony.

“Beckett!” I go to him, happy to have him wrap me in a big hug. “Can you believe it? I'm married.”

“Hello, Mrs. Bachman. So nice to see you. You look beautiful.” He leans down, kissing my cheek. I get a waft of his cologne.

“Thank you. You’re looking handsome.” He wears a blue suit, looking every bit the grown man that he is. Boston was right. Beckett doesn’t need me to be his mom or bossy big sister.

I’m so glad we’re friends.

I don’t know if he’ll join the family or not but how can I discourage him when I’ve just joined myself? It’s his decision to make.

Boston takes my hand. I link arms with Beckett as we lead the family down the path that’s alongside the garden wall, toward the gates that will take us to join our other guests. They’re already enjoying the festivities. A smile plays at my lips as I hear the whispers as we enter the garden. The entire family is shocked by the event they arrive at. It’s nothing like the traditional reception they pictured prissy little Ashely having.

This reception? This is all sex-goddess Ashe.

I thought today it was only fitting to tap into the Ashe that Boston made me into. After all, I’m marrying the tatted bad boy that broke me out of my shell. He deserves a wedding that reflects his spirit and personality as much as mine.

There’s no church, no white wedding dress. No string quartet playing the *Bridal Chorus* as I walk down the aisle. There isn’t even an aisle. I didn’t want one. I have no dad to walk me to the altar and we didn’t even exchange traditional vows or wedding rings. I’ve wanted to be a Bachman so long, all I needed was the family ceremony to feel complete.

No tall layer cake. I was just craving something... different.

I look around, holding back a laugh as I take in the astonished faces. Boston stands at my side. He leans down, whispering in my ear. “You fucking knocked it out of the park.”

“Don’t cuss,” I tease. “It’s our wedding day.”

He knows I’m joking. Other than putting him in a blue shirt every once in a while, I’d never try to change him.

“This,” he says with a grin, “does not look like a wedding reception. It’s ripper, but Ma’s gonna kill me.”

“No, she won’t. She’s the one who ordered the painted ladies,” I giggle, watching the shock ease into his face.

“No fucking—sorry—freaking way.” He glances over at the beautiful naked women, their bodies painted like landscape art pieces. They stand in front of a matching mural we had painted on one of the stone garden walls.

“Yes. It was her idea. She said she did this once when she was younger, painting her body at a friend’s party in the financial district of Boston.” The women’s bodies almost disappear into the painting. Then they move, turning around so their painted backsides now face the crowd.

“God, I don’t need to hear that.” He grabs a cream-filled shot glass off a passing tray. He takes it and knocks it back, licking his lips. “This is delicious. What is it?”

“It’s a buttery nipple. Butterscotch syrup and Irish Cream.”

“You weren’t kidding when you told me you were creating a sexy wedding.”

“Weddings are about sex and love. Why not celebrate it? And you love art and I love color, so I threw in a little bit of that too.”

“You surprise me. Every day.” He leans down, kissing me, leaving the taste of butterscotch on my lips.

Another waitress walks by, dressed in a full body suit modeled after Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, the material shimmering as she moves. She pauses, offering me a Hot Shot. I let the delicious coffee-flavored drink slide down my throat.

She takes the now empty glass back, staring openly at my gown. “I love your dress. It’s exactly what I would want for my own wedding.”

“Thank you.” I look down, admiring my dress. It’s black, to match my man, with some gold for me, a classic asymmetrical, sleeveless, knee length black dress, with a fashion-corset around the middle for a bodice, golden flowers painted on the silk. I turn to show her the back, laced with gold ribbons that trail down to the hem of the skirt. “I’ve always dreamed of

wearing something like this but never thought I'd be brave enough to."

"Confidence. That's what a good man will do for you." She shoots an appreciative look to Boston as she moves on to the next guest.

"You hear that," he says. "I'm a good man. And here you thought I was some kinda bad boy."

"You're both. And I love you for it." I turn my face toward him for another kiss.

He's wearing his own dream outfit. Black tux, black shirt, black vest, black bow tie, black Doc Martens boots on his feet.

I wanted him to be comfortable at our wedding. I'm hoping to get a dance out of him later. I thought I'd have a better shot if I gave him the okay to wear the Docs.

"Hey," he says, pulling me off to the side. "I want to show you something."

He holds out his left hand for me to see. On the base of his left ring finger, where a wedding band would traditionally go, is a tattoo. Beautiful angel wings, branching out from either side of a swirling letter *A*.

"Oh my gosh! You did that for me?" I grab his finger, bringing it closer. The wings have intricate designs on them. "It's beautiful."

"I wanted something permanent to show you're mine. You should get a matching one."

I look up to see if he's serious. Luckily, there's a teasing glint in his eyes. He knows I'd never get a tattoo. "It's perfect for you. And I love it. Thank you."

The enticing aroma of dinner hits us. "I'm starving," he says.

"Let me show you the food." I grab his hand, pulling him to the tent. As we go, we pass the various activities I've planned. Face painting, wine and design class, body painting with your partner. "You can create a five by four canvas of abstract art designed by your naked bodies rolling around in your choice of colors."

“We’re doing that later,” he says, wagging his brows at me.

I can’t wait to feel the cold paint on my naked skin. “Of course, we are. I already know where I’m going to hang it. Over our bed.”

Tess comes up, tugging Rockland behind her. “Oh my God, Ashely! Body painting art? Seriously? You’re a genius!”

Rockland rubs a hand along his forehead in relief. “Thank God you two finally hooked up. You have no idea how much of a living hell this woman has been making my life. Pacing the floors day and night every day you were locked up here, telling me how she’s never, ever gotten a single match wrong.”

Tess flashes a brilliant smile. “And I haven’t! My track record still proves perfect. Now come on, honey, the line is going to get long. I want to feel that paint on my skin.”

I have to laugh as I watch her guide him to the giant canvases. Only that feisty redhead could get Rockland to cover his naked body in paint and roll around in it.

We go into the tent, the scent of all our favorite foods wafting over to us. I want our guests full and content. For dessert, there’s a decorate your own tiny vanilla cake station, thirty shades of pastel icing ready for your use. We each make a plate, standing at a bar top table as we eat, chatting with our guests as they mingle about the tent. I’m all about casual. We exchanged our vows at the Bachman family-only ceremony, so the formal part is out of the way. There is no cutting the cake or toasts or programmed dances. This reception is a celebration of love.

Just grab your partner and have the night of your lives. As we dine, Boston shares the plans he has for the dog training facility we’re going to be building on site. I’ve already officially said farewell to G, thank goodness, with all the dogs we’re going to have here at the new facility. It was terrible, horrible, devastating. For me, anyway. You know what G did when I was saying my gut-wrenching goodbye? He hopped into Talia’s lap and purred. I was part brokenhearted, part relieved.

Talia cried happy tears when I told her he was officially hers.

Boston is taking Booker on as his assistant. There's a light in his eyes that brings me joy. I'm so happy he'll have a job he loves, and Booker will be staying on in the guesthouse. Booker's been coming to me more and more for advice about girls, clothes, his hair. My heart goes all warm and fuzzy every time I get a text from him, or he pops his head into my office, saying, "Hey, Ashe, you got a minute?"

Now, Booker comes up to me, a hand on my shoulder. He plants a shy kiss on my cheek. "Welcome to the family, Ashe."

"Thanks, sweetheart." I pat his hand. "You look so handsome. I love that gray on you."

"You picked it." He scratches the back of his head, looking around the room. Probably for girls. The boy is obsessed.

I hide a laugh.

After we eat, there's one more thing I need to show Boston. It's been nearly impossible to keep my secret. "Come with me."

We leave the tent, walking out to the driveway behind the garden. Under the blue-tinged light of the moon, his car is parked. His dad's silver 1964 Aston Martin DB5.

I had his mom sign over the title to him this morning.

I walk down the side of the car, running my fingers over the smooth lines of the hood. "It's beautiful. I can see why you wanted it so badly."

He slips his hands in his pockets, staring at the car. "It's not that. I mean, it is a beautiful car but..." His words choke off as he shakes his head. He can't hide the emotion from his voice, though he tries.

He's clearly overwhelmed.

His mother steps out of the shadows, joining us. "Boston?"

"Ma." He turns to embrace her. The look they share, I don't understand, but I can see the love and the pain in their eyes.

I catch her choked, whispered words. “I just miss him so much.”

“Me too. This car...”

“I know,” she says. “I wanted you to have it, but when the time was right.” She pulls away from their embrace to offer me a sweet smile. “And Ashely made it the right time. Now, you’ll have a family to share it with.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes, like he’s holding back tears. He wraps an arm around his mother’s shoulders, his other around me. “It’s the memories.”

“Tell me more.” I put my hand on his lower back. I’ve never seen him like this.

He leans his head back, opening his eyes, staring at the empty sky above him. He’s totally trying not to cry. “My dad and I, we didn’t get much time together, but every once in a while, he’d grab me on my own and take me for a ride. We’d listen to music, and he’d sing. As I got older, we’d have these long talks about life. But every ride ended the same. He’d tell me he loved me, and he couldn’t have asked for a better oldest son.” His eyes finally meet mine with a smile. “And that’s why I wanted the car.”

His mom stands on tiptoe, kissing his cheek. “I never knew where you two went when you got into that car, but I knew when you got back, you were happy.”

She steps back, wiping the tears from her eyes. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll let you two have a minute. There’s a man who’s asked me to save him a dance, and you know what, Ashely? I took a page out of your book. I’m going to take a risk and say yes.”

Boston asks, “Who is it?” There’s a protective edge to his tone.

“Bobby.”

“Bobby?” I rack my brain, trying to think of a guest we’ve invited named Bobby.

A shyness comes over her. She suddenly looks twenty years younger, her cheeks rosy with blush. “Your driver?”

“Oh, Robert! Go. Hurry. He’s literally the sweetest guy on the planet and I’m sure he’s a wonderful dancer.”

“Alright. Wish me luck!” She leaves us with a wave.

“I’m glad she’s letting herself move on. I know my dad’s death has been hard on her.”

I feel honored that he’s being so vulnerable with me. “I’m sure it’s been hard on you, too, especially being the oldest. I’m glad you have this car and your memories. I’m sure he’s here now, just as proud of you as always.”

“Doesn’t matter to me now.” His dark eyes bore into mine. “What I want to know is if you’re proud of me.”

Seeing this softer side of him melts my heart. “I’m so proud of you, Boston. I love you. And I’m proud to be your wife.”

“God, I love you.” He brushes a tear from his eye before it can fall.

He takes me in his arms, leading me in a romantic, private, swaying dance under the moon. And he kisses me. The kiss takes me back to that very first time, in his mother’s hallway, outside that secret room of his.

He’s never been my captor. Not really. I could have left at any time.

But from the first time he kissed me?

He’d already captured my heart.

EPILOGUE

Beckett

I GOT my revenge but was dying in the street...

She saved my life.

Breathed air back into my lungs.

I still feel her lips against mine.

I owe her everything.

BUT SHE'S the only witness to my crime.

And I have a family to protect.

I can't do that from jail.

She gave me life.

Now... I have to get rid of her.

NORMALLY IT WOULDN'T BE a problem for me.

But the thought of losing her...

Makes it harder and harder to breathe.



ASHELY'S BROTHER Beckett is getting his own book. Will he be able to find the girl that saved his life, and what will happen if he does? [Mafia Savior](#), coming soon!

ALSO IN THIS SERIES *VOW TO THE KING*



Vow to the King is another book in the same series as Mafia Fire, Mafia Beast, Mafia Captor and Mafia Savior.

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER ONE...

EMILIA

STRONG FOREARMS DIG into my belly, knocking the wind from me. No! My assailant holds me tighter, my back pressing into his chest. I can feel the muscles beneath his shirt shifting.

His arms lock around me, creating a prison around my ribcage.

“What do you want?” I hiss, grabbing at his arms, trying to push them away.

His mouth finds my ear, his breath hot against my cheek, and it tickles my skin, making the bits of hair that loosened from my ponytail flutter. “To teach you a lesson.”

It’s the same deep voice that reprimanded me from the SUV.

His hard palm runs over my trembling midriff. My cropped shirt rises, his hot skin caressing my cold torso. My muscles constrict, my belly going hard as a rock. Fear and remorse fill me.

What have I gotten myself into? What is he going to do to me?

One big hand presses into my belly, holding me against him, pushing my ass against the tops of his hard thighs. I dig my fingers into his forearm, a feeble attempt to dislodge him.

Heat from his body travels through his clothing, warming my skin. The clean scent of him hits me, cedar and man. This is the closest to a stranger I've ever been. My mind goes to my mother's other collection of books, the ones that hide under my bed. The spicy romance novels that I've dog-eared, re-reading my favorite scenes time and time again.

Is it the cool night air or the feel of his body that has my breasts heavy, my nipples tightening against my sports bra? A shiver tears through me, making me shudder and as I do, my hips roll, my ass accidentally circling his lap.

Who *am* I, responding like this? I'm acting like one of the women in my books, wanting this and fearful of it all at the same time. My body is at war with my mind.

He lets out a low groan. The hand on my breast becomes his pinning hand, the one on my belly changing position, sliding up around my neck. He holds it lightly in his hand, his mouth so close to my ear now, his lips are touching my skin.

"What," I say again, my voice shaking, "do you want?"

"I told you." He drags his hand upward, smoothing over my curves, the pad of his thumb brushing ever so slightly over my traitorous nipple. "I want to teach you a lesson."

"I'm all good on lessons, thanks." Why is my ass pushing harder against him? My hips moving with a mind of their own... What is wrong with me?

"There are bad, bad men out here. Men that would take an innocent little girl like you and destroy her." He cups my breast in his palm, squeezing. "Let me tell you what you're going to do now..."

Is he one of the men my father warned me about...?

The idea and his touch cause my body to go to war with itself. Fear and adrenaline unite, wrapping around my spine. At the same time, dampness creeps between my thighs.

He continues, breath hot on my skin. “You’re going to turn around and run home. We’ll follow you in our car to be sure you get home safely. And don’t let me find you out here again.” His hand moves from my breast, slowly palming my belly, my hip.

He turns me slightly and snakes his arm around my waist, grabbing half my ass in his hand. A gasp, sharp and shocked, comes from me as he clutches my curves, the tips of his fingers pressing into my crack, one wandering middle finger pressing hard against my rear entrance.

This stranger has his finger pressing into my asshole...

His intrusion makes me shoot up on the balls of my feet, my fingers clutching at the forearm of the hand that holds my neck. His touch becomes more aggressive, his finger pushing harder through the spandex of my shorts.

I can’t breathe. I can’t think.

His words tear me from my cloud of shock. “I don’t ever want you on this road alone again. Do you understand?” His finger pushes harder through my clothing. The unspoken threat of where he’d punish me if he found me out here again hangs between us in the air, heavy and cold as a block of ice.

His fingers tighten around my nipple till I squeal. “If you understand, say ‘yes, sir.’”

Should I try to kick him, stomp on his foot, run away? I look to the SUV. The door in the back is open. He has a driver, so at least one other man is with him.

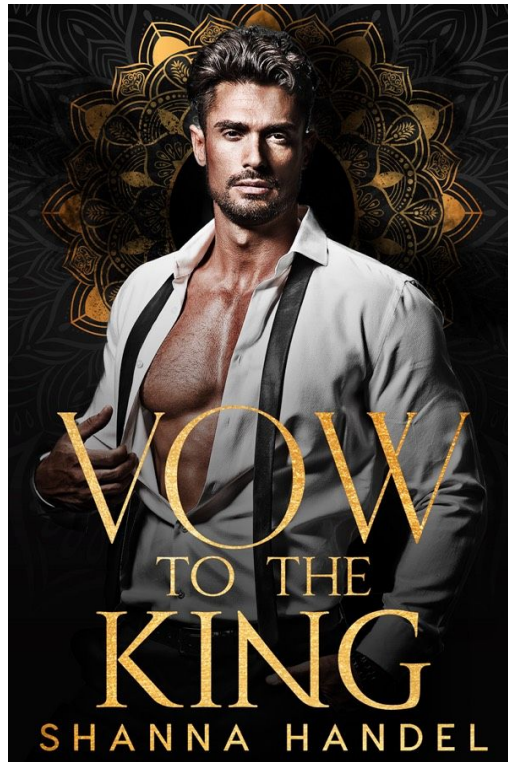
What can I do other than obey?

I force the shameful words from my mouth. “Yes, sir.”

He gives another groan like when my ass rubbed against him. He likes that. When I call him sir, when I obey.

“Now run home to daddy and tell him what you’ve done.”

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PSST! DO YOU LIKE DARK DADDY ROMANCE?



Doesn't every good girl need a daddy?

It's him. The man from the texts *is* watching me. I mean... I knew he would eventually contact me but I wasn't expecting...

My fingers shake as I tap back a reply.

Who are you

I wait. Prickles rise on my forearms. I can't tear my gaze away from the screen.

I'll be your daddy now

Little Reece

Doesn't every good girl need a daddy

What. The. Actual.

Fear and angst rise in my throat. "Daddy? What the heck..."

It's sick.

And wrong.

And scary...

But somehow mixed in with the fear is a delicious thread of danger...

One that trickles through my core like a hot lick of a flame.

I should delete this number. I should tell someone. I should probably call the police.

But I don't do any of that.

Instead, I reply.

How far will I let this go?

Order this addictive page turner NOW: [Stalk Me Gently](#).

BONUS CONTENT MORE MAFIA

DARK CROWN

SHANNA HANDEL

F *elicity*

I'VE DREAMED of my wedding day since I was a little girl. I knew I would wear a white dress with longs sleeves and a full skirt. I would dance with my father to his favorite song, *Figlia Mia: My Daughter*, and I would carry a bouquet of deep red roses.

And my groom—my prince charming, my knight in shining armor—I didn't know who he would be, but I knew *what* he would be. A warm, funny man with a crooked smile and an easy laugh. One that would hold me tight, kiss my forehead, shower me with his love.

A kind man. A gentle man.

Now, as strangers surround me, preparing me for what should be the happiest day of my life, I find myself swallowing back bitter tears. I watch them in the mirror as they curl my dark hair, blush my cheeks, and pin my veil into place, smiling and laughing with one another as they work.

After all, a wedding in the family is a joyous occasion.

I take in my reflection. Other than the flashing terror behind my hazel eyes, I'm the picture perfect bride. They've thought of everything, no detail has been overlooked.

He's thought of everything.

My keeper, my dark king. And by the end of this day, my husband.

I will be his.

His will be done.

The youngest member of his staff, seventeen year old Esme, hovers at my side. She's eight years my junior, impulsive and flighty, but there's a deep wisdom that resides within her. With her light hair and contrasting dark eyes, they call her *perla neara*, the black pearl. She longs to please, to prove her place in the ranks. She can read this unhappiness in my face and she fears she's the one who's put it there.

Placing a birdlike, fluttering hand on my shoulder, she says, "Miss Felicity? Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Catching her worried eyes in the mirror, I try to reassure her with a smile. It comes out forced and tight. My voice breaks as I speak. "No, my darling. You've done everything perfectly. Thank you."

Her face etched with concern, she gives me a timid nod. I've noticed she can be a bit distracted and seems somewhat boy crazy, but now, sensing my need to be alone, she gathers the other women, shooing them out the door. For someone so young, she's extremely perceptive and helpful.

I tuck the thought in the back of my mind. Perhaps Esme will be of assistance when I plan my inevitable escape. Because though I may be legally bound to this man in a few short hours, there's no way in hell I'm staying here.

Where will I go?

I've no idea.

And to complicate matters, I must save my father as well, even though he was the one who put me in this hell. After borrowing money from the Russo family that he couldn't pay back he sold the only thing he had left of value.

Me.

His only child. His precious daughter.

There's only one thing I take solace in on this day. Marrying this man means my father will live out his days in safety. And thanks to my husband gifting my father a monthly stipend, he won't be living in the streets.

My groom is generous with his wealth to those who are tied to him. For that, I cannot fault him.

Vincenzo Russo.

I've heard his name plenty of times, but never seen the man in person. Everyone calls him Vincent. Sophia, the matronly woman who's been employed by his family all her life tells me his name means to win, to conquer.

And he does. In every avenue of his life. He always gets what he wants.

And he wanted me.

Apparently, a few months ago, he visited my father's shop before we had to close it down due to money troubles from Dad's gambling addictions. I must have made an impression because he took me for his own, plucking me from the store, like a can of dry goods from the shelf.

I've racked my brain, wondering what possessed him to choose *me*. Surely there were other girls whose fathers were indebted to him? Girls more beautiful, or interesting. Girls who longed to be the queen of the mafia, to live the lavish lifestyle he offers.

Why choose me?

As a shy bookworm, I often kept my nose stuck in the pages of a fairytale as I worked the counter at my father's shop on the main street in the village. I'd often spent lonely afternoons gazing upon, watching the members of the Russo family as they made their way home from the village to their chateau in little clusters. *Talking. Laughing. Happy.* I'd envied them their lives.

The irony grows bitter in my mouth.

Sophia briskly enters the room, shuffling over to my side, her generous, floral-covered hips pressing against my arm. "Get

up, *il mio amore*, my love. It's time."

It's time.

I find myself frozen to the chair, unable to move.

She grabs my shoulder, gently tugging at me to stand. "Come, come. You mustn't keep him waiting. He's not fond of delays."

"I'm not fond of being forced to marry."

My words make her face fall and I instantly regret them. I soften my tone, putting a hand over hers where it rests on my shoulders. "It's not your fault, I don't mean to take it out on you."

She sniffs as if I've complained of my hairpins being too tight. "I understand. But my dear, things could be worse. In my day, our parents had the say in who we married. And it was difficult to move up in this world other than through marriage. At least in Vincent, you will never want for anything."

Anything, other than love.

Though her demeanor is tough, in her gaze I can read her apologies. She's not the one at fault. I give her the same tight smile I braved for Esme.

Patting her hand, I say, "I know. He's been more than generous."

She gives a grateful sigh, as if I've taken the weight of guilt from her shoulders. "I understand this isn't the way you envisioned your life heading, but you will grow to love him. I have a sixth sense about these things and I've not been wrong yet."

There's a first time for everything, Sophia.

I will never love him.

As soon as I can break out of the castle walls safely, I'm going to flee. Grab my father, and get us out of the country. Maybe we can go back to New York, where we lived before coming to Italy.

But first, I must play the part of the bride.

Standing, I smooth my shaking hands over my dress, a slinky white silk slip gown, the seaming hugging my curves, the back rising into baguette-encrusted halter straps that lead to a black grosgrain bow-topped T-back. It's nothing I would have chosen for myself, but as I gaze in the mirror, I find it suits me.

“How do I look?” I offer Sophia a smile I hope is kind. She hemmed this dress for me, painstakingly making every stitch by hand when I arrived the other morning, telling me if she left it up to the castle's tailor, he'd snag the silk with his rough hands.

Tears brush up in her eyes as she gazes at me through her wire-framed glasses. “Dear, you look lovely. Vincent is a very lucky man.”

Taking my arm in hers, she leads me from the room. We make our way through the castle.

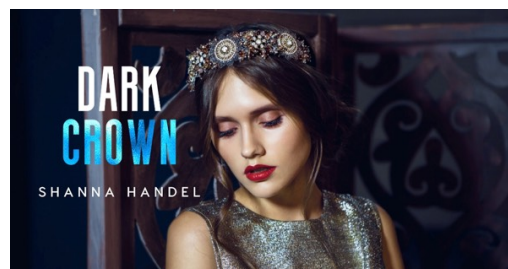
It's a truly beautiful building, a structure built for fairytales. I've read so many books, and in every one pictured myself walking along the halls of the castles on the pages. But now, it's real.

Deep red rugs line the halls. Paintings of the Italian countryside, and the regal ancestors of the family hang from the walls below black iron sconces that holding burning candles. Servants flutter behind me, ready and willing to meet any need I may have.

I've dreamed of castles like this.

And now, my dream feels like a nightmare.

[GRAB Dark Crown NOW](#)



BONUS CONTENT SPICY BILLIONAIRES



Ella

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'm back. It happened weeks ago. I shouldn't still be coming here.

"Miss?" The cab driver's voice pulls me from my thoughts. He studies my face, concern etched in the lines of his. "You sure you want me to leave you here?"

"Don't worry. I'll be fine." My fingers reach for the car door handle. "Thanks."

"Um...you sure we're at the right place?" His eyes dart up to the sign arching over the entrance. "Should you be here alone? At midnight? You sure you don't want me to stay and wait for you?"

I shake my head, offering what I hope is a convincing smile. "No, really. I'll be okay."

"Hmm." He remains unconvinced this is a good idea.

I'm with him; getting dropped off alone in a graveyard probably isn't my best idea. But we're already here.

"Thanks again." I open the door and the cool night air rushes into the car. I've got one foot on the ground, but a clearing of the driver's throat stops me.

He says, "Ah...are you forgetting something?"

"What?"

He glances at the phone in my hand. “You gonna pay me?”

“Oh, shoot. Sorry! Hang on.” I pull up the app, sending him the payment and a generous tip I can’t afford. “Thanks. Seriously.”

“You’re welcome. And be safe.” He shoots me one last worried look.

I shut the door, my boots crunching over the gravel drive as I make my way to the paved path. The cab pulls away slowly, like the driver is unsure about his moral obligation in leaving a woman alone in a place like this in the middle of the night.

I’ll be fine. The angry squawk of a low-flying crow makes me glance up. He’s so close I can see his glittering eyes. Creepy. Okay, I’m 99% sure I’ll be fine.

The full moon is bright, lighting the night with an eerie bluish tint. It’s beautiful, but in that haunting way that finds you holding your breath, waiting for something to happen. A chilly gust of wind caresses my face. Tendrils of my long dark hair get stuck to my lip gloss. I stare up at the moon as if it’s a promise of something beautiful to come.

A ding from my phone startles me, making me pause my journey. I look down at the screen. “Shit.”

It’s an alert from my bank.

Of course.

My little splurge on the cab over-drafted my checking account. Looks like I’m walking home. I quickly splash a little cash from my dwindling savings account over to my checking.

I keep going, my eyes scanning the headstones. I’m almost to his. As soon as I see the name on the grave, tears spring to my eyes. I shouldn’t still be crying. I don’t even miss him. But here I am, standing at his headstone dabbing my eyes with a crumpled napkin I found in the pocket of my trusty yet worn gray wool coat.

Why do I keep coming back here?

He’s gone.

And I've got to move on.

I don't know what haunts me more...the guilt or the sadness. After all, the death of a monster is still a loss of life. I just hate that I was involved in someone's violent end.

My phone dings again, this time with the sound I use for an email notification. Kinda late for an email. I slip the phone from my pocket, sighing as I swipe my finger over the screen. It's from my boss. My ex-boss, as of today. My fingers shake as I hold the phone closer to read the email.

Dear Ella,

I received your letter of resignation. Thank you for aiding The Primary School in making this a smooth process in what is otherwise a very unique situation.

"Unique. Code word for disastrous," I tell the headstones.

As we discussed, two weeks' pay will be transferred to your account tomorrow as severance.

Best,

Ms. Ross

Two weeks' pay gives me time to find a job (hopefully) and hey—being unemployed means I can sleep in tomorrow. I guess being a person of interest in a murder investigation has its perks after all. I slip my phone back into the pocket of my coat.

The wind is growing stronger, rustling up a tornado of dried leaves at the heels of my black leather boots, equally as worn as my coat, but with a little polish they're no worse for the wear. I pull my coat tighter around me. It's time to leave. I give his name one more glance, my emotions caught somewhere between anger and relief.

Why did he have to do what he did?

And why did I do what I did?

My heels click against the pavement as I make my way over the moonlit hill. Huge concrete memorials mark the graves to my right, smaller rounded headstones like his to my left. A

chill runs through me, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

I'm ready to be home. If you can call my bleak, three hundred square feet of New York City real estate a home. I live in a crumbling Victorian that was chopped up into apartments in the late Seventies, the only thing I can afford by myself.

A streak of black darts across my path. I stop in my tracks. Rabid raccoon? Deranged possum? A ghost of critters past? A pathetic little meow rings through the night.

Awww...it's a cat.

An all-black cat, no less. Good thing I'm not superstitious. Just a little stitious. "Too late, buddy—I've already had all the bad luck one girl can take."

Green eyes flash from behind a headstone in response. Another meow, this one more desperate than the first. Being orphaned myself, I'm a sucker for a stray.

I crouch down, offering an opened palm. "Here, sweetheart. You want a little pet?"

The cat gives me a curious look, but his desire to be scratched behind the ears wins out. He curls around me, making figure eights around my ankles as I stroke his silky fur. He's almost all black but with white markings on his feet like boots.

I scratch behind his ear. He purrs. "Boots is too cliché a name for you. Isn't it? How about..."

"Pepper."

I'm startled by the deep rumbling sound of a man's voice. Shit. I'm not alone after all.

I look up into the bluest set of eyes I've ever seen. The man clears his throat, then his husky tone caresses the night air once more. "His name is Pepper. At least that's what I've been calling him."

I rise, brushing fur from my hands. "Oh. Is he yours?"

He shakes his head. "No. He's just always here. I started bringing him treats when I come. He's already emptied my

pockets for the night.”

“That’s sweet.” I’m probably safe. But who is this man alone in the graveyard feeding a cat?

Trying to not be too obvious, I sneak in a gawk. Thanks to the bright light of the moon I get a good look. Upon further inspection?

The man is gorgeous. Tall enough you could wear your highest heels next to him and still feel dainty. Broad shoulders that fill out what looks to be a ridiculously expensive suit that fits him so perfectly it had to be made just for him. Square jaw. Perfectly formed lips that curl at one corner. Dark hair makes a stunning contrast with his blue eyes. His hair is cropped in a utilitarian look, but judging from the scent of his clean cologne and the just-barely-there shadow darkening his chiseled jawline, he’s not one to overlook his grooming.

With this backdrop he could be one of those Cullen vampire men. He’s that good-looking. In fact, he’s *drop-dead* gorgeous. A fitting description for a man in a cemetery. A nervous giggle brims up. I cover my mouth with my hand, trying to hide it.

He lifts a dark brow in a perfect arch. “What’s so funny?”

The steely look he’s giving me dries the giggle right up. I shake my head, clearing my throat. “Nothing.”

He takes a step toward me. “What the hell are you doing alone in a graveyard, anyway? Not exactly the safest place to be, is it?”

The sternness in his tone surprises me. The cemetery is suddenly eerily quiet, and I’m painfully aware of how alone I am with this stranger.

I take a step back. “I could ask you the same thing.”

He gives one of those caveman-like grunts. “I’m perfectly fine. But you—”

“Are a woman?” I offer a grin. “Yes, I’m well aware. Have been since birth.”

His eyes cut into me, making me rethink my cheeky stance.

I clear my throat, glancing down at the toes of my shoes. “But I’ve been coming here for weeks and you’re the first person I’ve even seen.” I nod to the cat. “Well, besides Pepper here.”

Pepper gives a whiny meow, brushing up against Mr. Handsome’s eighty-thousand-dollar suit, surely leaving a dusting of fur behind.

“You’ve been coming here alone...for weeks?” His brow cocks even higher—a feat I’d not have thought possible if I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes.

A shiver runs through me at the look he gives me. Like I’m a naughty little schoolgirl caught by the principal. He stares at me, hard, waiting for an explanation.

I don’t have one for him.

He presses. “Well?”

I clear my throat. “Ah, I’m not sure it’s any of your business, sir.”

Sir? Where did that come from? A flicker dances through his gaze. Did he like me calling him sir?

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Shanna Handel is an internationally bestselling author of over 50 romance novels. She is currently living her own, hard-won happily ever after.

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