

⊕ ONE

MR.

Big Shot

ARDEN STEELE

MR.
Big Shot

+ONE, BOOK 3

ARDEN STEELE

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SYNOPSIS

For Nicholas Coletti, escorting interesting people to business dinners and charity galas isn't the worst way to spend his evenings, but it's not exactly a fulfilling career, either. So, when one of those events leads to a job opportunity, he'll do whatever it takes to land a position with one of the city's biggest marketing firms.

Fully aware of his reputation for being cold and ruthless, Rhys Quinton didn't get to where he is by worrying about what people think of him. It's that no-nonsense attitude and his willingness to take risks that built RQ Creative Marketing into the corporate giant it is today. Well, that, and one simple rule.

Never mix business with pleasure.

It's a principle that has never failed him, and one he's never considered breaking. Until now. Because all it takes is one look, and he knows he won't be satisfied until Nicholas is his.

MR. BIG SHOT

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ONE

~ NICK ~

“HELLO.” I PASTED ON a polite smile and extended my right hand. “You must be Miss Quinton.”

The silky material of her evening gown wrapped beautifully around her slender frame, and the soft shade of lilac complemented her fair skin to near perfection. Her hair fell around her bare shoulders in loose waves, the strands the palest shade of white gold and gleaming brightly in the harsh fluorescent light of the café.

Add her strappy heels and glittering diamond earrings, and she was vastly overdressed for an all-night coffeehouse. As I was also dressed to the nines in a black tux with a bowtie in the same shade of purple as her dress, we were certainly drawing more than a few glances. Those kinds of looks had bothered me in the beginning, but I barely noticed them anymore. It was just part of the job.

“Please,” she said as she took my offered hand, “call me Gabby.”

“Hello, Gabby. I’m Nicholas Coletti. You can call me Nick.”

While I wasn’t physically attracted to her, I could still recognize and appreciate her beauty. Small, delicate features set into a heart-shaped face made her look younger than her twenty-six years. Well, except for the eyes. There was a soulfulness in her emerald eyes, a wisdom that came from experience rather than age. It was a fascinating combination, and I knew I couldn’t be the only one to see it.

In other words, she should have had no trouble finding someone to accompany her for the evening. Not only was she lovely, but she clearly came from money. I imagined she could have taken her pick from any of the eligible bachelors in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. The fact that she’d chosen to pay for a professional actor for the evening spoke volumes.

I just hadn't figured out what it said.

People came to +One for all sorts of reasons. In the nine months since I'd started working for the agency, I had played a wide range of roles from anonymous guest to best man at a client's wedding. More often than not, however, I ended up with gigs like this one—escorting wealthy women to business dinners, charity events, and corporate parties.

In my experience, those women usually fell into one of three categories. There were the ones who had neither the time nor the interest when it came to romance, but they needed to appear “family oriented.” There was almost always a promotion or a raise driving that faction.

The second group also didn't want the complications of emotional entanglements. They were just tired of their friends and family introducing them to random men in hopes of sparking something.

The third set of women—for various reasons—wanted the emotional support of a relationship without the actual commitment. Some were shy or lacked confidence. Others suffered from nearly paralyzing social anxiety. One poor girl had even confessed that she'd employed me for the evening to ensure that at least one person at the party would speak to her.

From what little I knew about Gabrielle Quinton, I didn't think she fell into that third category.

“Would you like coffee?” I gestured toward the counter.

“Oh, no.” She laughed, the sound vaguely self-deprecating. “I'm afraid I'm a bit of a lightweight where caffeine and alcohol are involved. One glass of champagne, and I'll sleep for a solid twelve hours.” She glanced at the chalkboard menu hanging over the bakery display case. “One cup of coffee this late, and I won't sleep until tomorrow afternoon.”

I smiled and nodded while I computed the information to memory. “Water?”

“I'm okay.” She settled onto the edge of one of the chairs and rested her hands on top of the dark-stained wooden tabletop. “Thank you.”

Following her lead, I lowered into the chair across from her, though I didn't hold myself quite so rigidly. "Have you ever hired an agent before?"

"No. This is the first time, and to be honest, I have no idea what I'm doing."

She was clearly nervous, but I liked that she didn't take herself too seriously. That would go a long way in ensuring a successful evening. "Don't worry." I winked, hoping to ease some of her stress. "I do."

A wispy chuckle burst through her lips, and if I had to guess, I would have said she'd been holding her breath up to that point. She certainly wasn't the stereotypical spoiled rich girl. I was liking her more by the second.

"So, where do we start?" She held her hands up, her fingers splayed.

"Tell me about the event," I suggested.

"Okay, well, it's the annual gala to support the Bright Beginnings Foundation. Proceeds from ticket sales and the silent auction go to help women and children escaping domestic abuse."

"And this is your foundation?" I'd heard of the organization, but I'd never had reason to investigate its origins.

She nodded once, a fierce pride burning in her eyes.

It was both impressive and commendable, and I admired her dedication and compassion. Her answer, however, didn't tell me what I needed to know. "And you need a date because..."

She lowered her eyes and sighed. "I know it's necessary, but I don't like being the center of attention. As stupid as it sounds, I guess I'm just looking for a security blanket."

I blinked in surprise, but otherwise maintained a pleasant expression. I'd placed her pretty firmly in the second category, as a woman who wanted to avoid the stares, whispers, and

questions about why she hadn't settled down with a nice guy in her social circle yet.

"You are full of surprises, Gabby, but no, that doesn't sound stupid at all." Reaching across the table, I covered her hands with my own. "I promise everything is going to be fine." I waited for her to look up and meet my gaze before continuing. "Now, what would you like people to know about me?"

She chewed her bottom lip for a moment, then shrugged helplessly. "I really don't know. What kind of questions do you think people will ask?"

"The two most common I've encountered are people wanting to know how we met and how long we've been together." I softened my smile when her eyes rounded with anxiety. "We'll say we've only been dating for a couple of weeks. That should cover any gaps in knowledge." A thought occurred to me, and I squeezed her hands to get her to look at me again. "Will your family be there?"

"My brother is out of town on business, but my parents will be there. They already know about you, though." Her cute button nose scrunched. "Actually, my dad is the one who recommended +One."

While I hadn't expected that, it certainly made things easier. "Okay, how did we meet?" When she didn't answer right away, I added, "I find that sticking close to the truth is a good idea."

"In a coffee shop," she said confidently. "I ordered a decaf Americano."

"And I had a hazelnut latte."

Some of the tension in her shoulders eased, and her smile softened into a more natural expression. "What do you do for a living, Nick?"

"I just graduated last year, and I'm still looking for a job."

She tilted her head, her expression an interesting blend of curious and thoughtful. "What is your degree in?"

“Marketing.”

“Like commercials and stuff?”

“Something like that.” After months of failure and disappointment, I would gladly accept a job in a mailroom if it meant getting a foot in the door. “Companies want to hire someone with experience, even for entry-level positions, but I can’t gain experience if I can’t get a job.”

“Hmm, I see your point.” Dropping her chin into the palm of her hand, she blinked up at me with innocent eyes. “Tell me, what’s your dream job? I mean, if you could work anywhere, where would it be?”

No one had ever asked me that before, but I knew my answer without having to think about it. “RQ Creative Marketing.”

The company had an impeccable record, and the CEO was highly respected in the industry. It had been my top pick out of college, but unfortunately, it just hadn’t been in the cards for me.

“Have you applied?”

I nodded. “The company doesn’t have a lot of turnover, though, so they don’t accept new hires that often.”

“Hmm.” Her brows drew together, forming a shallow valley between her eyes. “I think I can help with that.”

My eyes rounded until they stung at the corners. “Wait... what?”

Gabby shook her head. “I can’t promise you a job, but I can definitely get you an interview.”

“You’d do that?”

“Of course.” She dropped her hand back to the table and dipped her head firmly. “You get me through tonight, and I’ll get you a meeting with my brother.”

“Your brother is Rhys Quinton?”

Of course, they had the same last name, but so did a lot of people who weren’t related. Honestly, the thought that she

would know, let alone be related, to the CEO of RQ Creative Marketing hadn't even crossed my mind. What were the odds?

“He is.” Her lips curved into a sly smirk. “So, what do you say?”

“I think I love you.”

She laughed, a rich genuine sound that carried throughout the café. Leaning across the table, she offered her right hand with her pinky finger extended. “Does that mean we have a deal?”

I hooked my little finger around hers, gratitude making my voice tight when I answered her. “Deal.”

TWO

~ RHYS ~

“THE NEW ATHLEISURE LINE is for every woman, not just celebrities and socialites.” Across the conference table, the client pursed her lips, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “Do you know anything about women?”

The project lead, Berrett Milliken, stared back at her with equal hostility. “I’ve met a few in my life.”

Seated at the end of the table, I clenched my hands together in my lap and choked back a sigh.

Slay the Day Sports Apparel was one of RQ’s newer clients, and also one of the most lucrative. Owner and CEO, Caroline Slayton, had proven herself to be a shrewd businesswoman with a keen eye for detail. She knew what she wanted, the message her company should convey, and she never settled for anything less than perfection. If a campaign didn’t match her vision, she had no qualms about scrapping the entire project.

Since Berrett had taken over her account at the beginning of the previous summer, he’d learned that firsthand. Frankly, she could be a nightmare, but at the end of the day, I respected the hell out of her.

Today, she’d come dressed in a smart, cream-colored business suit meant to intimidate. She had also twisted her inky hair into a severe knot at her crown—likely for the same reason—and she’d foregone any accessories. Not even earrings, though I could see the small holes in her lobes. Since I’d never seen her outside of a conference room, I couldn’t say if that was her normal look, or if she reserved such rigidity for these meetings.

My instincts said it was the latter, but I wouldn’t discount the former.

“I don’t want an ad full of half-naked women doing yoga by an infinity pool,” Caroline continued.

I coughed into my fist to hide my laughter. That had been a particularly brutal meeting when Berrett had presented that exact storyboard for the company's new line of sports bras. In his defense, he was damn good at his job, but after six months and several rejected ideas, I had to wonder if he was the right fit for the account.

Then again, we'd already been through four project leads in as many years, and I was running out of options. At one time, I had even considered taking over the account myself, but I didn't have the time for it. Besides, Caroline and I would probably end up killing each other before we ever accomplished anything.

"I know," Berrett responded with exaggerated calm. "You want your customers to *feel* something."

Her eyes narrowed into slits, and a vein in her temple started to pulse. That was my cue.

"You want diversity," I interjected, hating that I had to give up part of my morning to play mediator. "Something to appeal to the average woman."

After a long, tense moment, Caroline relaxed her posture and turned away from Berrett to address me directly. "Yes, but I don't want them to feel average. I want to make women feel —"

"Empowered," I suggested.

She responded with a brisk nod.

After a bit more back and forth, we concluded the meeting, agreeing to reconvene in three weeks to go over the concept proposal. I stood and walked Caroline to the door, but I didn't follow her out of the room. Waiting until the clack of her heels had faded down the corridor, I turned to Barrett.

"I don't think I need to tell you that this is your last chance." No sense in beating around the bush. "Don't screw this up."

He finished gathering his things, tucked his portfolio case under his arm, and looked at me with a sigh. "That woman is impossible!"

I wasn't arguing that, but I also wouldn't disparage a client out loud. "Don't screw this up," I repeated. "Give her what she wants."

It seemed to take a great deal of effort for Berrett to pull himself together, but he eventually dipped his head. "Yes, sir."

I left without further comment, taking the most direct route to my fourth-floor office. It had been a long, draining morning, and I still had three phone calls and half a dozen emails to return before lunch. As soon as the elevator doors opened onto the waiting room outside of my office, however, I knew that would have to be postponed.

"What is it, Fletcher?"

Young, bright, and efficient, Fletcher Pierce was one of the highest paid assistants in the city...and worth every damn penny. I'd hired him straight out of college three years ago, and it had been the best decision I'd ever made. Frankly, I had no idea how I'd managed before he had come along.

While I commended him for wanting to move to Toronto to take care of his aging grandmother, I shuddered to think of the chaos I would face when he left. He had been interviewing potential replacements for almost a month, but not one of them had met his standards. With only a week remaining before his departure, however, we were both going to have to lower our expectations.

"I'm sorry, sir." He threaded his fingers through his honey-colored hair and frowned. "It's your sister. She's called three times. I told her you were unavailable, but she insisted that it was urgent."

"Did she say what it was about?"

He shook his head. "No, but she wants you to call her back immediately."

I also had three missed calls to my cell phone, each with a corresponding voicemail, and two text messages demanding I call her. One of the texts had assured me that no one had fallen ill or been injured, so I couldn't imagine what was so important.

“Get Phoebe Rhodes on the phone for me.” The owner of Serenity Shores Spa was the lowest on my priority list, but it always took forever for someone to track her down, which gave me time to talk to my sister. “I’ll take it in my office.”

“Yes, sir.”

Fletcher hurried to complete his task, and I retrieved my cell phone from my inside jacket pocket as I crossed the small waiting area to my office. Pulling up my missed calls, I tapped Gabby’s name to connect the call. She answered on the first ring before I had even closed the door behind me.

“Hello, Rhys.”

She sounded good. I detected no trace of anxiety or stress. “What’s going on? You said it was urgent.”

“Yes, well...” She trailed off, a hint of guilt in her tone. “I just wanted to make sure you called me back. Sorry.”

The deception didn’t suit her, and it was so out of character, I couldn’t help but laugh. “Mission accomplished. So, tell me what you need.”

“Actually, I wanted to ask you for a favor?” Her voice lilted at the end, making it sound like a question, as if she was asking permission to ask for said favor.

“Okay,” I said with another chuckle as I lowered into the chair behind my desk. “Ask.”

“Now, just hear me out before you say anything.”

Alarm bells sounded in my head, but I’d never known her to be unreasonable. “I’m listening.”

“There’s a guy. Nicholas Coletti. He’s smart, Rhys. Really smart.”

My brow furrowed, and I tilted my head as I tried to make sense of her words. “And...”

“I’m not asking you to give him a job, but I think his talent will speak for itself,” she blurted out in a rush. “I’m just asking you to give him a chance.”

“And who is this guy? New boyfriend?”

Her laughter drifted over the line, sweet and melodious. “No, nothing like that. Honestly, I think you’re more his type than I am.”

The alarm bells rang louder. “Gabby...”

“Oh, stop it. I’m not trying to set you up on a blind date. I really am just asking you to interview him.”

As far as favors went, it was a small one. “What did you say his name was? Has he applied to RQ before?”

“Nicholas Coletti, and yes.”

Swiveling in my chair, I turned to my computer, brought up the list of resumés on file, and typed in the name. “Does he have experience?”

“No,” she answered hesitantly. “He graduated college last spring and hasn’t been able to find a job yet.”

“What about an internship?”

A cute huff floated over the line. “I don’t know. I didn’t think to ask.”

A quick search provided his name among the list of applicants, and I clicked the icon to bring his information up on the screen. There were no less than a dozen hopefuls ahead of him on the waitlist, all proven professionals with remarkable portfolios. Fortunately for Nicholas Coletti, none of them were interested in an entry-level position with a matching salary.

“Just an interview?” I checked.

“Just an interview,” she agreed, though she sounded a little too hopeful. “If he’s not a good fit, well, that’s unfortunate, but I understand.”

“Okay, I’ll set something up for next week.”

“Thank you, Rhys. You’re the best!”

After we said our goodbyes, I disconnected the call and placed my phone on the desk. It was a simple request, one that cost me nothing but a few minutes of time. Gabby had never

asked something like this from me before, though, and that alone piqued my interest.

My sister might be young, but I wouldn't consider her naïve. She had been rich her entire life, and as such, she had become an expert at recognizing when someone was trying to take advantage of her. If she didn't have romantic feelings for Nicholas Coletti, and he wasn't using her, I couldn't begin to guess the nature of their relationship.

A blinking light on my desk phone caught my attention. Pushing thoughts of my sister to the back of my mind, I lifted the receiver and pressed the flashing button. Fletcher's voice immediately drifted over the line.

"Sir, I have Ms. Rhodes."

"Thank you, Fletcher." I glanced at the resumé on my computer screen again. Mr. Coletti had certainly sparked my curiosity, but any questions I had would have to wait.

THREE

~ NICK ~

THE RECEPTION AREA OF RQ Creative Marketing appeared clean and bright, with large windows and minimalistic décor. The glass tables were sleek and modern, the chairs stylish, if somewhat stiff, and a few accent pieces added pops of color to the otherwise neutral setting.

Seated with my back to the wall of windows, I clenched my hands in my lap to stop their trembling while I took several deep, calming breaths. Neither action did anything to ease my anxiety.

A young man entered the lobby wearing an electric green T-shirt showing a peace symbol on the front. His distressed jeans had been strategically and artfully ripped, and his rectangular glasses looked to be about two sizes too big for his face.

He smiled at me as he passed, and I tried to mimic his easy expression, but I couldn't stop gaping at his bubblegum pink hair. I considered the idea that he might be a delivery guy or possibly a client. Then he swiped his ID badge over the scanner and passed through the frosted glass door into the main part of the building.

I shook my head. I was definitely overdressed.

I loosened my tie. Sighed. Tightened it again and reminded myself that I had come there for an interview. First impressions mattered. If everything went well, and I ended up being offered a position, I could ask about adopting a more casual dress code then.

The front door opened again, ushering in a fragrant winter breeze that held a hint of the coming cold front the forecast had predicted. A woman I guessed to be in her mid-thirties rushed past, carrying a couple of brown paper bags from a deli around the corner.

Her hair was red, but naturally so, and she didn't have any tears or holes in her black leggings. The oversized sweater she wore appeared comfortable, but the fuzzy snowman depicted on the vibrant blue material looked more suited to a PTA meeting.

I frowned as she used her badge to slip through the same employee door as the young man before her.

It was an interview. No one would consider me weird for wearing a suit. With a tie. And shoes so polished anyone could see themselves in the leather.

My frown deepened. Maybe if I just took off my jacket...

"Nicholas Coletti?"

Startled, I stopped fidgeting with my wardrobe, launched out of my seat, and shoved my right hand straight into the air. "That's me!"

A young man with thick blond hair and bright blue eyes stood at the end of the welcome desk with a bemused expression on his angular face. We stared at each other in uncomfortable silence for a few seconds, and I fought the urge to squirm as heat spread up my neck.

Eventually, he cleared his throat and stepped forward to offer his hand. "Fletcher Pierce, Executive Assistant."

Eager to redeem myself, I took a shaky step forward, right into the side of the coffee table, toppling the small white vase of artificial daisies. Cursing under my breath, I righted the flowers and their container, thankful nothing had been irrevocably broken.

Once everything was back where it belonged, I sighed in defeat, rubbed my palm against the leg of my slacks, then finally cleared the short distance to accept the handshake.

"Nicholas Coletti. Thank you for meeting with me today. I promise I'm not usually so...dysfunctional."

Fletcher chuckled and clapped me on the shoulder. "Nervous?"

It was an understatement, but one I appreciated. I gave him a self-deprecating grin and nodded.

“Relax. You’re going to be fine.”

“I hope you’re right, Mr. Pierce.”

“Please, call me Fletcher.” Turning away, he tilted his head, indicating I should follow him. “Trust me, I’ve seen a lot worse. I once witnessed a guy vomit during an interview.” He pushed open a door farther down the wall from where I’d seen the other employees enter and ushered me through it. “If it makes you feel better, he still got the job.”

Actually, it made me feel a lot better. It also eased some of my apprehension to see Fletcher in a pair of gray slacks paired with a black button-down shirt. He’d rolled the sleeves to his elbows and foregone a tie, giving him a casual yet professional appearance that was a lot less intimidating than I’d been building up in my mind.

Preceding him into the conference room, I seated myself in one of the leather rolling chairs and waited while he took his place on the other side of the table. Though the blinds were drawn over the windows, the hum of busyness beyond the glass filtered into the room—the drone of conversation, the clack of keyboards, the rustle of papers. The scent of freshly brewed coffee saturated the air, and I swallowed reflexively when it made my mouth water.

“I see that you interned with Wheeler and Associates,” Fletcher said. Leaning back in his seat, he studied me for a moment before continuing. “Why not accept a position with them?”

I cleared my throat and offered a polite smile. “It didn’t feel like a good fit.”

I would rather be jobless than work for a company that abused its employees the way Wheeler and Associates did. Between the unpaid overtime and the sexual harassment, it had been a miracle that I had lasted through the end of my three-month internship.

I didn't realize my mask of indifference had been rendered imperfect until Fletcher shook his head, his thin lips curving up on one side. Fortunately, he didn't comment.

"Tell me a little about the kind of projects that interest you."

"I'm comfortable working with both large and small businesses." The way I saw it, everyone deserved the chance to succeed, not just those with deep pockets. "I like a challenge. I'm drawn to projects that force me to think outside of the box."

Fletcher bobbed his head all throughout my answer. "Would you consider yourself to be organized and self-motivated?"

"Yes," I answered without hesitation. "I enjoy bringing order to chaos." I flashed him a quick smile. "I'm a team player, but I'm also comfortable working independently with minimal instruction."

He mirrored my grin and folded his hands together on the table. "That's exactly what we're looking for at RQ."

An emotion I hadn't felt in some time flickered to life. Not hope, exactly. More like a cautious optimism, but there, nonetheless.

"Regrettably," he continued, "there are no openings in any of our marketing or creative teams."

And just like that, my optimism burst like an overinflated balloon.

"I understand." I inched toward the edge of my chair and prepared to take my leave. "Thank you for meeting with me, and I hope you'll keep me in mind if a position becomes available."

"Not so fast," he said, a thread of amusement in his voice. "There is one position available. I don't know if you'll be interested, though."

Christ, I wanted off this roller coaster of emotions. "I'm listening."

“I will be leaving at the end of the week, and as such, Mr. Quinton is looking for a new assistant. Before you say anything,” he added, holding his hand up to stop me, “it’s more than just fetching coffee and answering phones.”

Whoa. I hadn’t been expecting that at all, and it took a few seconds to unravel the information before I could speak. “More...such as?”

“You’ll be in charge of Mr. Quinton’s schedule. You’ll also attend most meetings with him, and you will be responsible for prescreening everything from phone calls to project proposals.”

While the job might not technically be a marketing position, if I understood correctly, I’d still be utilizing my skills and ridiculously expensive education. On a more practical note, it was a foot in the door that could potentially lead to a more apt position.

“The salary?”

I almost fell out of my chair when he rattled off a number almost twice that of an entry-level junior marketing specialist. “Seriously?”

This time, he didn’t laugh. He didn’t even smile. “Trust me, you’ll earn every penny.”

There were a couple of different ways I could take that statement. Best-case scenario, it was a demanding job that required dedication and flexibility. Worst case, Rhys Quinton was a tyrannical perfectionist with unreasonably high standards. Whatever the case, there was no way in hell I was going to pass up the opportunity.

“As I said before, I love a challenge.”

“Excellent.” Pushing back from his desk, Fletcher stood and gestured for me to do the same. “If you’ll come with me, we’ll head up to see the big shot.”

I frowned as I followed him down a short corridor to a single elevator. It wasn’t until the doors slid closed and he pressed the button for the fourth floor that I finally found my voice.

“You mean Mr. Quinton?”

Fletcher nodded. “He’ll have the final say, so I encourage you to make a good impression.”

Sure. Great. No pressure.

My anxiety immediately spiked again, making my pulse race as sweat beaded across my brow. Rhys Quinton was practically a legend in the industry, but also a deeply private man. As such, no one knew much about him beyond his reputation. If even half of the rumors were true, though, this was going to be an intense meeting.

The elevator came to a stop, and I exited the cab, pausing just inside what appeared to be a waiting room when I realized Fletcher hadn’t followed. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Just you.” He smiled as the doors began to close again. “Good luck.”

Swallowing hard, I turned back to survey the room. A couple of leather sofas and matching armchairs comprised two separate seating areas along one wall. The opposite wall was occupied by a coffee bar and a U-shaped desk made of gleaming chestnut.

A door next to the elevator accessed the stairwell, while a narrow corridor to the left led to a restroom, both labeled with large, bold signs. As far as I could tell, there were no other offices or meeting rooms on the floor.

Windows that stretched from the baseboards to the ceiling allowed an abundance of natural light to fill the space and offered spectacular views of the city. The back wall directly ahead of me, however, had no windows. Only a few pieces of framed art and a single black door with a gold lever-style handle.

I stared at the door, my brain whirling with questions.

Was Mr. Quinton expecting me? Should I knock? Did I just take a seat and wait for him to come out of his office? Fletcher was still his assistant. Why wasn’t he there to... assist?

Before I could spiral too deeply into my panic, the door swung open, and an insanely attractive man stepped up to the threshold.

I had seen pictures of Rhys Quinton online, of course, but those photographs hadn't done him justice. For starters, despite the veins of silver that ran through his dark hair at the temples, he appeared younger in person, especially for someone so well-known and respected in the industry.

His broad shoulders and powerful frame obstructed most of the doorway, and even from the distance, I had to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. Eyes the most intense shade of steel gray stared back at me, and I fought the urge to squirm under the scrutiny.

Mentally shaking myself, I surreptitiously blotted my palm on my slacks and crossed the room to offer my hand.

"Nicholas Coletti," I said, pleased when my voice didn't waver or crack. "It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Big Shot."

The moment the words left my mouth, my head started to spin, and my vision blurred at the edges as I felt the blood drain from my face. While my conscious mind had been practicing what I would say, my subconscious had been thinking that "big shot" had been an appropriate description of my potential employer. Clearly, wires had gotten crossed, and the result had been nothing short of mortifying.

"Mr. Quinton," I hurried to amend, hoping my face wasn't as red as it felt.

I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd walked back into his office and closed the door in my face, but by some miracle, that didn't happen. While his expression remained utterly impassive, he took my hand and gave it a firm squeeze.

The handshake went on longer than social etiquette dictated, and when he finally let go, a small part of me felt disappointed at the loss of contact. Which was completely insane, but I chalked it up to nerves.

He didn't speak, didn't step back or usher me inside his office. He just turned and retraced the path to his desk, where

he settled into a padded office chair and waited.

Caught off-guard, it took several seconds for my brain to catch up, and my feet to start moving. I didn't know if I should close the door behind me or not. I looked to Rhys for some sort of indication, a clue as to what I should do next. He simply continued to stare at me with that infuriatingly blank expression.

I closed the door.

From there, I hesitated, wondering if I should remain standing or choose one of the twin chairs in front of his desk. Still, Rhys didn't speak. He didn't move. He just sat there, his fingers linked together atop his desk, and watched me.

Was this part of the interview? Was he testing me?

Lowering myself into the armchair closest to the door, I winced at the tautness of the leather. Either the chairs were new, or Rhys didn't often have visitors.

I'd bet my money on the latter.

"Thank you for coming in today, Mr. Coletti."

My breath lodged in my chest, and my stomach did cartwheels as the smooth, rich baritone washed over me. He had what I considered a generic accent, one that might single him out as American in other countries, but not distinctive enough to pinpoint the region.

Yet, I couldn't remember the last time—if ever—I'd experienced such a visceral reaction to the sound of someone's voice.

"Nick." My own voice cracked, drawing my name out into two syllables. I mentally groaned. I was really nailing this entire interview process.

Rhys lowered his head a fraction in acknowledgment of my preference, but he didn't otherwise react. "Well, your resumé looks good. I'm impressed that you managed to survive an internship at Wheeler and Associates."

There was the barest hint of distaste in his tone, which I appreciated. "Thank you."

“I think you’d be a good fit, but tell me, why do you want to work at RQ?”

It was a pretty standard question, and one I thought I’d been prepared to answer. Now that I had met Rhys Quinton, though, I doubted the usual ass-kissing would work on him. I could tell him RQ had been my dream job since before I’d graduated college. I could wax poetic about how much I respected and admired him.

While those statements might be accurate, they weren’t the complete truth, and I had a feeling he’d know it.

“RQ was my first choice after college.” Okay, a little ass-kissing couldn’t hurt. “Your company has an outstanding reputation as an industry leader for producing quality and creative campaigns. I also appreciate that RQ accepts clients of all sizes, not just those with multi-million-dollar budgets.”

He studied me for several seconds, the silence seeming to stretch on for eternity. “You’ve applied here before?”

“Yes, sir. As a recent college graduate, however, I lacked the necessary experience.”

“Do you have that experience now?”

My stomach flipped over, and I fought the urge to sink lower in my seat. “No, sir.

After being rejected from RQ, I applied to several other agencies throughout the Dallas area, but with the same results.”

Rhys arched an eyebrow at me. “So, any job will do?”

Beyond brown-nosing, I’d also been prepared to bluff my way through the interview, even lie if necessary. Again, I had a feeling Rhys would see right through me.

“I’m confident in my ability to do a good job for you, Mr. Quinton. I’m just asking for a chance to prove it.” I swallowed hard, forcing down my pride. “But yes, I need this job.”

Rhys stared at me unblinkingly for longer than felt comfortable, but I held his gaze and did my best to match his

detached expression. Eventually, one side of his mouth twitched, and he lowered his head in a subtle nod.

In return, I released the breath I'd been holding.

"I'm assuming you can start immediately?"

"Yes, sir." When Rhys stood and offered his hand, I followed suit, rising to my feet and reaching across his desk to accept it. "Thank you, sir."

The muscles around his mouth tightened, and he released my hand with a little twitch of his wrist. When he spoke, however, his tone was calm and steady. "Welcome to RQ Creative Marketing."

FOUR

~ RHYS ~

I HAD A PROBLEM, and that problem's name was Nicholas Coletti.

Ever since he had strolled into my office, I had been steadily losing my mind. No matter how I tried to distract myself, I couldn't get him out of my head.

He'd been so nervous during his interview, but I'd found his blunders oddly charming. I probably should have been offended when he'd accidentally called me "Mr. Big Shot." Instead, I'd been fighting damn hard not to laugh at the look of stark horror on his face when he'd realized his slip.

While I hadn't expected him to be quite so candid in his responses, I did appreciate his willingness to speak frankly. I never sugarcoated things, and I valued directness in others as well.

It didn't hurt that he was absolutely gorgeous, either.

Goddamn Gabby. I still hadn't decided if I should thank her or strangle her. Despite her assurances that she wasn't trying to play Cupid, she must have known Nicholas was exactly my type—sweet, smart, and just awkward enough to be adorable.

In the two weeks since he'd started working at RQ, he had more than exceeded my expectations. Apart from myself, he was the first to arrive at the office, and more often than not, the last to leave. His talent spoke for itself, and his work ethic continued to be above reproach. Yet, I persistently found reasons to call him into my office.

Everything I did, both in business and my personal life, had a purpose. The motivation was often self-serving, but I accepted that about myself. Yet, I had never encountered a situation where my two worlds had collided. Until now.

Hence how I had wound up in my current dilemma.

On the one hand, I had made the decision at the beginning of my career to never mix business with pleasure. Office romances might be fine for books and movies, but in reality, I had watched as too many burned bright, then faded quickly. It almost always affected productivity, and I had neither the patience nor the tolerance for it.

On the other hand, I had never been hesitant to go after what I wanted. I could be dogged, stubborn even, and it was rare that I didn't succeed in my pursuit. What—or rather *who*—I wanted right then was the newest employee at RQ Creative Marketing.

“Nicholas!” I called through the open door.

That was something else that had changed recently. I never left my office door open. Never. Lately, however, I had been less concerned with privacy and more preoccupied with having an unobstructed view of Nicholas' desk.

Plus, considering the number of times I had buzzed him in the past few weeks, it was a wonder I hadn't shorted out the intercom button.

When several minutes passed without a response, I called his name again. Still nothing. I had just decided to go look for him when he rushed into my office.

“Sorry. I was downstairs reviewing the storyboard for your meeting next week.” He shuffled a little closer to my desk. “You wanted to speak with me?”

Oh, I wanted to do a lot more than talk. None of which were appropriate given the setting. Hell, some were downright indecent no matter where they took place.

I cleared my throat. “Yes. Come in and have a seat.”

He complied with a nod as he claimed one of the leather chairs across from my desk. The flush of his cheeks and shortness of breath suggested he'd taken the stairs rather than the elevator. For some absurd reason, I found myself questioning his motives.

Maybe he was a health-conscious man who tried to fit in activity where he could. Maybe he had realized he'd been

gone too long and worried I would be upset. He might have needed to make an urgent call to a client.

Or perhaps he'd been just as eager to see me as I had been to see him. It kind of pissed me off that I secretly hoped that was the case.

“The storyboard for the Slay the Day account?”

Nicholas nodded, causing a thick, dark curl to fall forward over his brow. I gritted my teeth and ignored the way my fingers itched to reach out and brush it back into place. I also made a determined effort not to notice how his black slacks molded to his lower body, or how he'd rolled back the sleeves on his charcoal button-down shirt.

They were just forearms. No one in the history of humankind had ever been turned on by forearms. Except me... apparently. Which could only be taken as further proof of my failing sanity.

“What are your thoughts?”

Nicholas hesitated, and his brow creased as he chewed his bottom lip. “The concept isn't bad, but it still needs work.”

Sighing, I rocked back in my chair and rubbed the knotted muscles at my nape. “I knew you were going to say that.”

His smile widened, making his chocolate brown eyes—two shades lighter than his raven hair—sparkle. “Don't worry, sir. I'm certain the proposal will be ready before the deadline.”

He sounded confident, and I trusted him. So, for the time being, I decided to leave it in his hands. “Okay. Keep me updated.”

“Yes, sir.”

I gritted my teeth and did my best to breathe evenly through my nose as a shock of electricity rippled through me.

On any given day, I could expect to be addressed with the honorific at least a dozen times. Helen at the reception desk. The cute barista with freckles at the café down the street. Clients and business associates. My employees.

Nicholas said it no differently than any of the others. Only my reaction was different.

I enjoyed being the most powerful person in a room, and I liked having command of any situation, but neither of these predilections translated to being particularly kinky. Yes, I could be forceful, demanding, and some might even say domineering. I had never asked a lover to call me “sir” in the bedroom, though, and I couldn’t remember ever experiencing any sort of reaction to the word.

Until Nicholas.

I could easily picture him on his knees, eyes wide and pupils blown, his sun-kissed skin gleaming in the light from my bedside lamp. I’d touch his mouth, tracing those soft, pink lips with my thumb. In a low husky voice saturated with arousal, I’d tell him to open for me, and just as quietly, he’d answer, “Yes, sir.”

I blinked rapidly and choked back a groan.

Jesus Christ, get a fucking grip, Rhys.

Banishing those dangerous thoughts, I stared across my desk to see Nicholas watching me expectantly. Of course, he was. I could have easily asked him about the campaign over the phone or intercom. I cast around for something else to say.

“There’s a party Friday evening that I’d like you to attend.”

Wait. I did? It was the first I’d heard of it, and it was my idea.

“Party?” Nicholas frowned and twisted in his seat to look over his shoulder toward the open door. “I don’t have anything on the schedule for Friday evening.”

“It’s my birthday,” I explained. I had never cared to celebrate the day, but I had yet to convince Gabby of its insignificance. “Not technically work-related.”

“Oh.” The lines across his forehead deepened. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“I want you to attend the party with me. A lot of influential people in the industry will be there. It’ll be a good opportunity for you to network.” That much was true, even if it had nothing to do with the reason I wanted him there. “What do you say?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.” His expression still held a hint of confusion, but he pulled his shoulders back and sat up straighter. “Is there anything else, sir?”

I shifted in my chair as my cock twitched. “That’s it for now.”

Pushing to his feet, he lowered his head a fraction, then turned to leave. At the doorway, however, he paused, his hand resting on the jamb, and looked back. “I’m going to the deli around the corner for my break. Would you like me to bring you back something for lunch?”

I could say yes and invite him to eat with me in my office. It would be the perfect excuse to be alone with him, but I didn’t trust myself.

“Actually, would you mind if I joined you?”

His eyebrows winged toward his hairline, but the expression quickly morphed into a radiant smile that had me gripping the edge of my desk. “Not at all. Should I wait for you here or in the lobby?”

“Lobby is fine. Give me ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir.” With another dip of his head, he turned and disappeared through the door.

Alone, I retrieved my cell phone from the corner of my desk and shot a quick text to Gabby, asking her to add Nicholas’ name to the guest list for the party. Then, I dawdled about, straightening papers and rearranging ink pens until a sufficient amount of time had passed.

Since we’d be walking the two blocks to the deli, I debated wearing my suit jacket. While the calendar said we were already in the heart of winter, the temperatures in North Texas had been mild for the past few days. Still, the morning news

said to expect a cold front to sweep into the city in the afternoon.

I grabbed my jacket from the hook by the door and pulled it on. It didn't hurt to be prepared.

Taking the elevator down to the lobby, I emerged five minutes later than the estimate I'd given. I spotted Nicholas at once, standing off to the side of the front doors, his head bent as he peered at the cell phone in his hand.

He hadn't noticed my approach, and I took the opportunity to admire the way the sunlight glinted off his skin, highlighting the warm, golden undertones. Damn, the man really was beautiful.

As I watched, his full lips tightened into a straight line, and a shallow crease formed across his brow. A second later, he turned off the screen, dropped the device into the front pocket of his slacks, and lifted his head. The instant our eyes met, the pensive expression cleared, and his lips curved into a welcoming smile.

"Ready?" he asked.

I motioned toward the glass doors, indicating he should lead the way.

I wanted to ask what had caused the fleeting look of displeasure but decided that would probably be too forward. So, I said nothing as I followed him out of the building.

At that time of day, the sun glared off every reflective surface, and not even the awnings we passed under offered relief from the blinding light. Yet, it wasn't enough to chase away the chill in the air. The temperatures had already dropped several degrees since morning, making me glad I had brought my jacket.

By the time we reached the end of the first block, the sun's bright rays weren't the only thing making me uncomfortable. Neither of us had said a word since we'd left the office, and while I normally craved quiet, the silence between us made me twitchy.

“Tell me,” I said, following Nicholas into the crosswalk when the light changed. “What were you doing for work before you came to RQ?”

Wheeler and Associates had been the last employer listed on his resumé, but that had been almost a year ago. He must have been doing something to pay the bills.

“Oh, uh...just this and that.”

His hesitation and the pinkness of his cheeks only increased my curiosity. “Like?”

Nicholas cleared his throat. “You’ll laugh.”

Now, I *really* wanted to know. “Tell me anyway.”

“You could say I was a professional party guest.”

I didn’t laugh. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I was paid to attend parties, charities, and other functions. You know, to schmooze guests, or encourage them to give generously. That sort of thing.”

“Like an actor.” I bobbed my head a couple of times. While I didn’t know what all it entailed, it wasn’t a completely foreign concept. “I’ve heard of event coordinators hiring actors to fill seats.” I waved my hand in a vague motion. “Make it look like whatever they were hosting was more successful or popular than it had been in reality.”

Nicholas glanced over at me and nodded. “Exactly.”

“So, why didn’t you list it on your resumé?”

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and lifted his shoulders. “It’s not exactly a marketable skill, is it?”

This time, I did laugh. “You can turn anything into a marketable skill. Instead of ‘professional party guest,’ you say, ‘client liaison.’ Duties include maintaining a positive customer experience and mediating conflict. You are detail-oriented, organized, and proficient in orchestrating desirable outcomes.”

His lips twitched, and his eyes brightened when he looked at me this time. “You’re good.” He cleared his throat. “So, what do you usually get at the deli?”

Not exactly a subtle attempt to change the subject, but I didn't push. "Just a club sandwich with spicy pickles." I chuckled when he wrinkled his nose. "Is it the sandwich or the pickles?"

"I'm not a fan of spicy food...or pickles."

"I'll remember that." Because despite the many lies I kept telling myself, this wouldn't be the last meal I shared with him. I was sure of it. "Okay, so what's your go-to at the deli?"

"Cobb salad. Boring, I know."

It was no more or less boring than anything else on the menu. I was beginning to detect a pattern in the way he spoke about himself, however, and I didn't like it. Before I could decide what to do about it, we reached the deli, and I had no choice but to let the topic drop for the time being.

Taking our place in the back of the line at the order counter, I stood a little closer to him than strictly necessary, encouraged when he didn't protest or move away. "Tell me what else you like."

"That's pretty broad," he answered with a half-smile. "What exactly do you want to know?"

I paused for only a moment, considering my answer. "Why do you hate pickles?"

Several of the people in the restaurant turned to stare when Nicholas barked out a surprised laugh. "Really? That's what you want to know?"

Yes, among other things. I figured it would be easier to start with something simple, then build up to the more personal questions. "Oh, don't worry. I'm just getting started."

FIVE

~ NICK ~

“YOU DON’T LIKE SPICY or sour foods.” Rhys bit into his club sandwich and tilted his head while he chewed. “Is there anything else you don’t eat?” he asked once he’d swallowed.

“I don’t really like fruit, either, especially citrus.” Even as an adult, I had a sensitive palate, but I wasn’t as picky as I had been as a child. There had been an entire year in my preteens where I had eaten the same five foods and nothing else. “What about you? Anything you don’t like?”

He shrugged as he took a long drink from his water bottle. “Not really. I don’t eat fish, but that’s just because I’m allergic.”

“Mild irritation allergic, or ER visit allergic?”

“I keep an EpiPen at home, the office, and in my car.”

“Got it,” I said, computing the information to memory. “Is it only if you eat it? For instance, if the person sitting next to you is eating fish, would that be okay?”

An odd little smile pulled at one side of his mouth, but he nodded. “I only run into problems if I ingest it, or if I eat something that has come in contact with fish.”

“Understood. I’ll be careful, sir.”

The corners of his eyes tensed, and he paused with a kettle chip halfway to his mouth. “Call me Rhys.”

The past couple of weeks had been a special kind of torture, and I already had a hard time maintaining my professionalism around him. I’d been glad when he’d suggested we meet in the lobby instead of going down together so I could have a moment to compose myself.

He rarely left his office for lunch, and almost never chose what he wanted to eat himself. Instead, he tasked me with making the decision. At first, it had been nerve-wracking since

I hadn't known anything about his likes, dislikes, or dietary restrictions.

Despite my concerns, however, I liked seeing his reactions when I presented him with new dishes to try. Still, I was his assistant, nothing more, and breaking down another barrier by using his given name wouldn't do me any favors.

I probably should have felt bad about crushing on my boss, but it was clearly his fault. No one told him to be that damn attractive.

I wasn't the only one who thought Rhys Quinton looked like a walking wet dream. It hadn't escaped my notice that the female employees always reached for their compact mirrors when they knew he would be on the lower floors. Shiny lips coated in fresh gloss and an extra button left open on a blouse weren't an uncommon sight, either.

While not unaffected by Rhys' presence, the male employees tended to lean more toward admiration, with a couple of notable exceptions. I'd learned that the guy with bubblegum pink hair was named Chance, and unsurprisingly, worked in the art department.

He was also a grade A diva with a raging hard-on for our CEO, always pouting his lips and batting his lashes anytime Rhys entered the room.

Then, there was Victor from accounting, with his annoyingly perfect complexion and obscenely white teeth. He didn't even have the decency to attempt subtly as he tracked Rhys' every move with big doe eyes.

The worst, however, had to be Love, a content creator from the star marketing team. A tiny thing with a face as adorable and precious as his name, he was easily the most aggressive when it came to flirting with our boss. No matter the situation or circumstance, he always found a reason to touch Rhys when he saw him, whether it be adjusting his tie or caressing his arm.

To make things even more confusing, Rhys neither encouraged nor outright rejected the attention he received. I

wasn't jealous, though. That would be stupid and childish. I just hated them with the intensity of a thousand burning suns.

While I didn't know Rhys' sexual orientation—and frankly, it was none of my business—it would make my life a lot easier if he was straight. After all, I lacked all the necessary qualifications to rival the women in the office.

If Rhys preferred men, however, that meant I had a chance, albeit a small one. There wasn't anything particularly special about me. I didn't have flawless skin or an effervescent personality. I also didn't possess the confidence or shamelessness to throw myself at him in hopes of receiving some scrap of affection.

“Nicholas?”

Jerking my head up, I blinked rapidly. I'd been so busy thinking about Rhys, I had forgotten he was sitting right across from me. “I'm sorry. Did you say something?”

He didn't look angry. Just mildly questioning. “Something on your mind?”

“Thinking about work,” I lied. “You have a meeting this afternoon at one, and I want to go over the documents again before the client arrives.” Despite finishing less than half of my salad, I pushed the plastic bowl away, my appetite suddenly gone. “Did you want to ask me something?”

Rhys watched me, his expression inscrutable, and like always, I fought not to flinch under his penetrating gaze. When he looked at me that way, I couldn't help but feel both aroused and uneasy in equal measure. It was as if he was staring straight into my soul, viewing every thought and emotion I'd ever had.

At the same time, those piercing eyes never gave away anything, not even a hint of what was going on inside his mind.

As the seconds ticked by, it became harder to breathe, until I feared I would suffocate under the weight of his scrutiny. Still, I waited, my lips too numb to form words, even if I had known what to say.

I had just neared my limit, unable to withstand the silence any longer, when Rhys finally grinned. It was a small movement, a mere twitch at the corners of his mouth, but undeniably a smile.

“I’m curious,” he said, his tone conversational. “How is it you know my sister?”

I had expected the question sooner—like during my interview—and therefore, had already prepared my answer. “We met at the Bright Beginnings charity gala.”

While not the full story, I didn’t elaborate. If Gabby wanted her brother to know she had paid for my company, she would tell him. Even if my contract with +One didn’t prohibit me from discussing clients, I would never betray her trust after all she’d done for me.

“I see.” Pushing the scraps of his sandwich aside, he rested his elbows on the table and linked his fingers together. “Were you there with someone?”

“Yes.” As I’d explained to Gabby, the key to an effective ruse was to weave in bits of truth.

“Girlfriend?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No girlfriend.”

“Boyfriend?”

My heart stuttered, and heat crept up my neck. “No.” I stared at my water bottle, unable to meet his gaze. “I’m not seeing anyone right now.”

“Good.”

My eyes snapped back to him, searching for any sign that I’d heard him correctly. I expected to see a smirk, or maybe a hint of mischief in his eyes. Instead, I found only that maddeningly blank expression.

Unsure of how to respond, I struggled for something to say until the familiar chime announcing a new text message sounded from my pocket. Fumbling for my cell phone, I retrieved it quickly and gripped it like a lifeline.

Unfortunately, it turned out to be an anchor.

As the client coordinator for +One, Anna Harkins was brilliant and charming, beloved by everyone who met her. She could also be stubborn, tenacious, and persistent. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say she terrified me. So, the fact that she had texted me three times in the same day did nothing to lessen my anxiety.

ANNA: Jasper Ryan has requested your company for an event on the 28th. Are you available?

Her next message had arrived twenty minutes later when I'd been waiting in the lobby for Rhys.

ANNA: The RSVP deadline is today, and Mr. Ryan is insistent that he will only attend with you. Please let me know if you're available.

The newest text had none of the formality or professionalism.

ANNA: Nick! Mr. Ryan's assistant keeps calling me. I'm losing my mind here. Answer me!

I had no one to blame except myself. I should have resigned from +One as soon as I had started working for Rhys, but I'd been scared, unsure about my future at RQ. Now that I felt more secure in my position, however, I deeply regretted that decision.

Still, I needed to take responsibility. Jasper Ryan was an influential man and an important client. He also happened to be a kind person with a generous heart who sadly suffered from nearly crippling social anxiety.

While I had every right to decline the job, the thought of leaving him to manage on his own filled me with guilt and something a little softer. More tender. Sympathy, maybe?

I had an event coming up on Friday that had been contracted before I had ever met Gabby, let alone her brother. Privately, I had been thinking of it as my last gig with +One.

It sucked that it happened to be on the same night as Rhys' birthday bash, but I would find a way to make it work. Even if

I could only manage a brief appearance, Rhys had personally invited me, and I didn't want to miss it.

I sighed. If it had been anyone other than Jasper, I probably would have refused, but it wouldn't kill me to accept one more contract before officially resigning.

I texted Anna just three words.

NICK: I'll do it.

Her response came almost immediately.

ANNA: Great! I'll email you the details and the contract tonight.

I scowled as I pressed the button to turn off the screen, then slid my phone back into my pocket.

"Is everything okay?"

I flinched, startled when Rhys' voice intruded on my pity party.

"Everything is fine." I smiled to make the small fib more believable.

It *should* have been fine. Working as an agent for +One was honest work, and I would be forever grateful that they had taken a chance on me when I'd been at my lowest.

Not every gig had been enjoyable, but mostly, I'd had fun pretending to be someone else for a while, someone better. Rubbing elbows with the rich and powerful while enjoying free food and booze hadn't exactly been a hardship. I'd met many interesting people and experienced luxuries I would never have been able to afford on my own.

I felt neither shame nor embarrassment at having worked for the company, so why did I hesitate now?

"We should head back to the office." Preparing for the afternoon meeting sounded like a much better use of my time than trying to understand something as vague and abstract as *feelings*. "The client will be arriving within the hour."

With a slight nod, Rhys pushed to his feet and began gathering the remnants of his lunch. "Has legal sent over the

contract?”

“They have.” Half rising from my seat, I reached across the table to stop him. “I can do this.”

He graced me with one of his rare smiles and patted my fingers where they rested on his wrist. “Thanks, but I got it.” Then, he stuffed the wrappers and utensils into my salad bowl and carried the trash to the nearest receptacle. “Ready?”

Nodding, I clambered out of my chair, causing the legs to scrape against the tiled floor, and hurried after him.

The blue skies that had accompanied us to the deli were now shadowed by angry-looking clouds that rolled atop each other and blotted out the sun. The wind had also kicked up as the promised cold front moved into the metroplex.

Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I rounded my shoulders and scrunched down into my collar, trying to cover as much exposed skin as possible. Half a block into our trek, my ears stung, and I sniffled every few seconds to stop my nose from dripping.

I just prayed it wouldn't rain before we reached the office.

“Are you cold?” Rhys asked as we neared the crosswalk.

“I'm fine.”

“You look like a turtle trying to hide in its shell.” With a quiet chuckle, he slipped out of his suit jacket and casually draped it across my shoulders. “Better?”

I dipped my head, feeling suddenly flushed. “Thank you.”

The material was still warm from his body, and I sighed happily as I pulled the jacket tighter around me. Peeking out of the corner of my eye, I caught the vestiges of a smile curving one side of his mouth, but he wasn't looking at me. Unobserved, I turned my head and sniffed delicately at the collar.

A shiver raced through me, and my pulse stuttered as the woody fragrance of his cologne filled my nose. I didn't know the name of the designer, and I didn't much care. Mixed with

subtle undertones of Rhys' natural scent, however, I found it utterly intoxicating.

So, it was with great reluctance that I shrugged off the jacket and held it out as we neared the entrance of RQ.

Rhys glanced down but didn't take it. "Keep it."

"I don't think that's a good idea." No matter how innocent the gesture, I could already imagine the kind of rumors that would spread if I walked into the office wearing my boss' clothes.

After a moment of consideration, Rhys nodded and took the garment, draping it over the crook of his arm. We still received a couple of curious looks when we entered the building together, but their eyes didn't linger, allowing me to breathe a little easier.

Still, it was a stark reminder not to set my expectations too high. Better yet, I shouldn't have expectations at all.

Once we entered the private elevator that went to the fourth floor, I instantly forgot why falling for my boss would only end in heartbreak. Despite room for at least a dozen people, Rhys stood directly next to me, so close I could feel the heat radiating off him. Neither of us spoke, but the electricity that crackled between us made the hair on my nape stand on end.

I glanced over, wondering if Rhys felt it, too. As usual, however, the look on his face gave away nothing.

When the doors parted, I hurried out of the lift and went straight to my desk, my heart pounding painfully against my ribs. I hadn't expected Rhys to follow me, so when he said my name, I literally fucking yelped as I whirled around to face him.

Acting as though my overreaction had been a completely normal response, Rhys reached out and brushed away a curl that had fallen into my eyes. "The party starts at seven on Friday."

My brain short-circuited, and while I understood his words, I couldn't make sense of them. "Sir?"

Dropping his hand to his side, he backed away toward his office. “Don’t be late.”

~ RHYS ~

I HAD STOOD BEFORE hundreds of people to deliver commencement speeches and keynote addresses. I had been the guest speaker at charity galas, lectures, and industry conferences. Despite being comfortable behind a mic, however, I hated being the center of attention.

That didn't stop my dear sister from going all out for my birthday every year. An intimate dinner with family and close friends would be more enjoyable than spending the evening entertaining a few hundred people who were little more than strangers.

Hell, many of them were *actual* strangers.

Gabrielle Quinton had three great loves in life—her family, her foundation, which aided women and children fleeing from domestic abuse, and hosting extravagant parties. Of course, she hired coordinators to help, but she handpicked everything from the invitations to the flowers.

Funny enough, she didn't like attending the parties she planned. We were much the same in that regard. She just loved seeing people enjoy themselves, and I figured I could endure a few hours of banal chitchat if it made her happy.

Still, I would never understand why we needed to rent out an entire manor house to celebrate my birth. I had no memory of the day I had come into the world, but I imagined it had been a traumatic experience for both me and my mother.

Moreover, thirty-eight wasn't even one of the “big” ones.

“Happy birthday!” Gabby sang as she danced over to the corner I had escaped to soon after my arrival. “Isn't it fabulous?”

I hummed something that could be taken as agreement and took a sip of my whiskey.

Undeterred, she clasped her hands together and spun in a circle, making the frilly skirt of her silver cocktail dress whirl around her. “So many people came. You must be really popular.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re just here for the open bar.”

She tutted under her breath as she tossed her pale gold hair over one shoulder. “Stop being such a grouch and come say hello to your guests.”

“*Your* guests,” I corrected, “and that wasn’t part of the deal. I wore a suit, and I showed up. Smiles and conversation will cost you extra.”

I expected a disapproving expression, or at the very least, a pout. So, I went instantly on alert when she smiled so brightly it made her eyes sparkle.

“I know something that will cheer you up.”

Skeptical, I arched an eyebrow at her. “Doubtful.”

“Oh,” she sang. “Then, I guess you don’t care that Nick just arrived.”

Damn her. I thought I had been pretty nonchalant when I had asked her to include Nicholas on the guest list.

“Where is he?” If I smiled a little wider than usual, that didn’t mean anything.

“Being held hostage by Vivienne King.” The little imp had the audacity to giggle. “You should probably go rescue him.”

“Damn it, Gabby.” I downed the rest of my whiskey and pressed the glass into her hand before striding off in search of my assistant.

Vivienne King was a beautiful woman, and thanks to a variety of treatments and surgeries—something she was quite proud of and vocal about—appeared at least a decade younger than her fifty-two years. She was also a damn shark, and while she didn’t often bag her prey, that didn’t stop her from hunting.

A hotel heiress, she didn't need someone else's money, just their company. Young, attractive, and available, Nicholas checked every box on her list.

Squeezing through the throng of bodies, I made my way toward the front of the manor house, searching each room as I went. Apparently, Vivienne had accosted him almost the moment he'd walked through the door, because I finally found them at the temporary bar just off the entrance hall.

Dressed in a sequined sapphire gown with a hem that kissed the floor and a side slit that stopped just short of being indecent, Vivienne stood out from the crowd. The shiny material hugged her surgically perfected curves, and a pair of dangling diamond earrings sparkled from her lobes.

In one hand, she held the delicate stem of a wine glass, gently swirling the burgundy contents. Every other part of her body, however, molded against Nicholas' side as she clung to his arm. She hadn't left even a breath of space between them, and the only way she could get any closer would be to climb inside his pocket.

Nicholas looked stunning in his tailored, three-piece suit. The dark plum tie and matching vest complemented the rich onyx and highlighted his beautiful complexion. He'd cut his hair since I'd seen him earlier in the day, and the soft curls gleamed in the lights from the chandelier overhead.

Besides Vivienne, he had drawn the attention of quite a few other admirers...both men and women. Some stared openly, while others cast surreptitious glances in his direction as they walked past. When a tall, striking man dressed in a plaid Armani suit approached with a predatory smile, I took it as my cue to intervene.

Sidling up to the trio, I lifted my hand to the bartender. He pushed his glasses up his nose and nodded as he reached for the bottle of whiskey reserved exclusively for me. One of the few benefits of being the birthday boy.

I stepped forward to accept the glass with a nod of gratitude, leaning in closer than necessary to make sure I would be seen. Mr. Armani Suit shot me a petulant glare when

Nicholas greeted my arrival with a sharp gasp that could be heard over the music and dull roar of conversation.

Apparently, he had realized he was outmatched because he shook his head and turned to the bartender to order a drink. Satisfied that he would no longer be a problem, I focused my attention on Nicholas.

The relief that shined through his polished veneer, I expected. The sheer joy that shimmered in his eyes, however, made my heart pound and my dick ache.

“Mr. Quinton.”

He took a step forward but stuttered to a stop when Vivienne refused to release his arm. A flicker of annoyance flashed across his face, gone too fast for anyone to notice except me.

“Rhys!” Vivienne squealed in a high-pitched, girlish voice that brought to mind nails on a chalkboard. “What a wonderful party! Everything is just absolutely beautiful.”

I smiled and nodded. “I’m sure Gabby will be glad to hear it.”

Finally letting go of Nicholas’ arm, she turned to face me directly and grabbed her breasts, pushing them up and together as she looked at me expectantly. “Do you like them?” She giggled and did a little shimmy. “They’re new.”

What the fuck was I supposed to say to that?

“They, uh, really go with your dress.”

“I know, right?”

“Right,” I agreed, letting my gaze slide past her. “Nicholas, can I speak with you for a moment?”

“Yes, of course.” He hurried to my side, tucking himself slightly behind me as he addressed the heiress. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Ms. King,” he said with a gracious smile. “I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Afraid she’d stop me if I hesitated, I took Nicholas’ wrist and led him through the house and out the French doors to the

massive patio. Despite several tower heaters and two raised fire pits to chase away the chill of the night, only a handful of guests had ventured outside.

Judging by the acrid scent of cigarette smoke on the air, they wouldn't be staying long, either.

"Are you cold?" I asked, ushering him closer to one of the fires without waiting for an answer.

"I'm okay." Nicholas reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small black box tied with a sheer gold ribbon. "Happy birthday. I don't know if you'll like it, but—"

"I love it."

He smiled as he shook his head. "You don't even know what it is."

True, but it didn't matter. He could have wrapped a piece of chewed gum in burlap, and I still would have treasured it.

Moving to one of the wicker sofas that bracketed the rectangular fire pit, I sat in the middle and patted the cushion next to me. I grinned when Nicholas eased down beside me without hesitation.

Christ, I couldn't stop staring at him. If he'd been stunning before, in the golden glow of the firelight, he was absolutely breathtaking. When our eyes met, he ducked his head, but it was a sweet, shy gesture, not as though he felt uncomfortable with the attention.

I placed my drink down on the stone ledge that surrounded the flames and pulled the end of the ribbon to unravel the neat bow. Once it fell away, I pried open the hinged lid of the box, and let out a sharp bark of laughter as I stared down at the contents.

Nestled in the black velvet lining, a pair of glittery fish cufflinks with gold accents twinkled in the fairy lights that adorned the patio. With tiny emeralds for eyes, they somehow managed to be both whimsical and elegant. While not something I would have ever chosen for myself, I couldn't wait to wear them.

“These are perfect.” I took one last look before closing the box and turning to Nicholas. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” His smile could have lit up the entire universe. “I’m glad you like them.”

I loved them, but it was more about the fact that Nicholas had put thought into the gift, finding a fun way for me to enjoy fish, even if I couldn’t eat it. Apart from my family, no one had ever taken the time to get to know me. No one cared about what I liked or disliked. Their gifts were expensive but generic, nothing more than an excuse to showcase their wealth.

I had barely glanced at the gift table in the entrance hall, but I could guarantee not one of the expertly wrapped boxes were actually about me. Aged bottles of wine I would never drink. Designer watches and bags I had no use for. Cell phones, laptops, and other gadgets I didn’t need.

Every year, Gabby asked for donations to Bright Beginnings rather than material items, and every year, people ignored her. Little did they know that most of their gifts would either be donated or auctioned off to raise money for families in need.

These cufflinks, however, were mine, a gift filled with sentiment that had been chosen just for me.

“I know Gabby asked for donations to her foundation,” Nicholas said, as if reading my mind, “but I figured you should get something for your birthday, too.”

Too. That one word said so much about the man sitting next to me. Nicholas didn’t possess wealth or status, yet he had been the only guest to donate to Bright Beginnings *and* bring a meaningful present.

I might have fallen a little in love with him in that moment.

To cover the awkward silence that stretched between us, I reached for my drink, only then realizing that Nicholas hadn’t brought anything with him from the bar. “I’m going to get another.” I tossed back the remainder of my whiskey and pushed up from the sofa. “What are you drinking?”

“Oh.” He launched to his feet and sidestepped to block my path. “I can get it for you, sir.”

“Sit,” I ordered, a bit more gruffly than I had intended. “You aren’t working tonight,” I added in a gentler tone. “Now, what are you drinking?”

Nicholas sighed but stepped aside. “White wine, please.”

“Wait here.” I dropped the gift box into my jacket pocket as I inclined my head toward the sofa. “I’ll be right back.”

This time, I received the barest hint of a smile in return. “Yes, sir.”

True to my word, it took less than five minutes to retrieve a glass of wine and another whiskey from one of the three bars set up throughout the house. Yet, that had been enough time for Mr. Tall, Dark, and Predatory to try his luck again. I recognized him as the man who had approached Nicholas earlier, but I didn’t think I knew him personally.

As I watched him slide closer to Nicholas on the sofa and place a hand on his thigh, however, I instantly disliked him.

A savage, primal part of me viewed his appearance as an encroachment on my territory. Not a rival exactly, but certainly a threat. At the very least, he was an interloper who needed a lesson in manners and propriety.

It didn’t matter that he was well within his rights to flirt with whomever he wanted. While I had enough self-awareness to realize I was being a jealous, irrational idiot, I couldn’t bring myself to care.

I just wanted him gone.

When Nicholas cringed away from his advances and moved farther down the cushions to put more distance between them, it did relieve a bit of the pressure in my head. Only a little, though. Knowing he didn’t welcome the attention eased some of my jealousy, but in its place, a new emotion surfaced.

Protectiveness.

While I sympathized with those in need, and I helped where I could, I didn't have the burning desire to change the world that Gabby did. Nor did I delude myself into thinking that throwing money at a problem placed me on a pedestal or made me a good person.

As such, those types of fierce, selfless feelings had, until now, been reserved only for my sister and our mother.

Clearing my throat to announce my arrival, I grinned when Nicholas sprang up from the sofa and whirled around to face me, looking guilty as all hell. Even if he'd been receptive to the attention of his would-be suitor, he'd done nothing wrong. As much as I hated to admit it, he wasn't mine. At least, not yet.

Still, I was curious as to what thoughts had produced such a reaction. Anything that came to mind was mere speculation on my part, but I envisioned a scenario in which he worried that I might misunderstand the situation.

“Sir.”

“Am I interrupting?” I asked as I passed him the wine glass.

“No,” he said at the same time the stranger answered in the affirmative.

Rising from the sofa in a graceful, fluid movement, he placed a possessive hand on Nicholas' shoulder. “I'm sure there are other guests you need to greet. Maybe you can come back later.”

Maybe he could fuck all the way off. I turned to my assistant. “Do you want me to leave?”

Nicholas shook his head adamantly, making his dark curls bounce and sway. Then, to emphasize his point, he dropped his shoulder to shrug off the unwanted touch and moved to stand next to me.

“I'm assuming you know who I am.” I wrapped my arm around Nicholas' waist and pulled him closer as I addressed the intruder.

“I do,” he answered coolly. Points to him for not trying to kiss my ass. “Can I assume the same in return?”

“No.” I wasn’t even trying to be a dick. The fact that it sounded that way was just a bonus.

His mask of indifference wasn’t as perfect as mine, but he recovered quickly and stood straight with his shoulders back. “Jordan Wheeler.”

I held his gaze, refusing to be the first to look away. It took longer than I expected, but eventually, he relented. Lowering his head, he shifted his eyes to the side, glancing into the flames that danced in the fire pit.

Once he’d regained his composure, he turned his attention to Nicholas. Well, he leered at him, which I guess was kind of the same thing.

“How about we go somewhere quieter and continue our conversation?”

Nicholas pressed himself more firmly against my side and shook his head. “No, thank you. That won’t be necessary.”

I shouldn’t have laughed. Just because he sounded like he was refusing dessert rather than a thinly veiled invite to take his clothes off really didn’t excuse me.

“Please enjoy the party, Mr. Wheeler.” Still grinning, I raised my glass to him. “Come along, Nicholas.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Call me Rhys.” With my arm still around his waist, I ushered him back inside the manor.

After a long hesitation, he dipped his head resolutely, as if he had decided something. “I’ll try, sir.”

I looked at him to see if he realized what he’d just said, then chuckled when it became obvious that he hadn’t. I didn’t think I had ever met anyone so unintentionally amusing. The idea that he wasn’t trying to be humorous or sarcastic only made it that much funnier to me.

Two steps inside the house, I changed direction when I spotted a couple of familiar faces in the crowd. “Come on. I want to introduce you to some people.”

He seemed confused but didn’t protest as I pulled him along with me. As we neared the older couple dressed simply but elegantly, he pulled his shoulders back and pasted on a charming smile. Christ, he was too damn cute for his own good.

And mine.

I greeted the couple first, hugging them both and pressing a kiss to the woman’s soft cheek before pulling Nicholas close again. “I’d like you to meet Gerald and Regina Quinton.”

His smile slipped, and he mouthed my last name a couple of times, his eyes growing wider with each repetition.

“Mom, Dad, this is—”

Before I could finish introducing him, Nicholas jerked away from me, spilling wine down the front of his white dress shirt in the process. “Fuck!”

Then he immediately followed his outburst with another curse before he clapped a hand over his mouth and turned about a dozen different shades of red. To make matters worse—for Nicholas anyway—Gabby chose that moment to join our small group.

There was approximately three seconds of dead silence before my entire family burst into laughter. My mother, bless her, was the first to recover, and she stepped forward to grip Nicholas by the elbow.

“Don’t worry, honey,” she said as she turned and gave him a gentle push. “It happens to the best of us. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

As she led him away, Gabby linked her arm with mine and rested her head against my shoulder. “You’re mean.”

“By the way,” I said, ignoring her playful insult. “What the hell is Jordan Wheeler doing here?”

She tilted her head up to look at me with a frown. “He’s not on the list. He must have come as a plus-one.” With a huff, she stood straight and poked me in the side. “Don’t change the subject. Why didn’t you warn Nick?”

“Warn him about what?” It wasn’t as if I’d almost given him a stroke on purpose. “Didn’t you introduce him at the charity gala?”

“We didn’t make it to the gala,” my dad interjected. “Your mother wasn’t feeling well, so we stayed home.”

Well, damn. Still, I didn’t see the problem, or why he’d had such a strong reaction to meeting my parents.

“I like him,” my father added, chuckling under his breath. “New boyfriend?”

A smile stretched my lips as I watched Nicholas and my mother disappear into the kitchen. “Not yet.”

SEVEN

~ NICK ~

I DIDN'T THINK ANYONE had actually died from humiliation, but I was beginning to think it might be possible. My heart pounded in the danger zone, and if my face got any hotter, my damn skin would melt off.

I'd done it to myself, though. It wasn't like I didn't know that Rhys had parents. Being his birthday and all, it would be logical for said parents to be at the celebration. I just hadn't been prepared to meet them while pressed so intimately against their son.

When Rhys had first wound his arm around me, I'd felt only gratitude. While fully capable of defending myself against men like Jordan Wheeler, I hadn't known who he was at the time, and I hadn't wanted to cause a scene. Especially if he had turned out to be someone important.

However, after grabbing my ass at the bar, ignoring my polite rebuffs, and putting his hands on me *again*, that was exactly where things had been headed.

I could tell from the way Rhys had looked at Vivienne King that he thought I had rushed to his side to avoid her, but that hadn't been the case. Ms. King had been flirtatious, a little clingy, but ultimately harmless. I'd met a lot of women like her through +One, and her boldness didn't bother me. Actually, I kind of respected it.

Still, I could understand Rhys' perspective.

All he had seen was me take a step toward him, then stop with a look of irritation. It hadn't been Vivienne's hand on my arm that had annoyed me, though. It had been the other, more masculine hand squeezing my ass that I had been trying to escape.

In hindsight, I should have been more assertive. Knowing what I did now, I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

The way Rhys had handled the situation on the patio—cool, calm, and in control—had been both intimidating and incredibly sexy. When Jordan had still possessed the nerve to suggest we leave together, I’d struggled to decide if he was that arrogant, or just plain stupid.

The answer probably resided somewhere in the middle.

“Found it!” Mrs. Regina Quinton sang as she whipped out a sage green dishtowel from one of the kitchen drawers. “Now, remember, blot it, don’t rub.”

Apparently, this was simply general knowledge she wished to share because instead of handing me the towel, she began dabbing it against my shirt. As she attended to the stain, I stood perfectly still and used the time to study her.

I didn’t see much of Rhys in her rounded cheeks or full lips. Where his nose was long and sharp, hers sloped gently and tipped up slightly at the end. Instead of piercing gray eyes like summer storm clouds, I was met with a dazzling green that brought to mind warm spring days. Soft curls of pale gold fell past her shoulders, and though time had turned many of the strands to silver, the look suited her.

It dawned on me that I had just caught a glimpse of what Gabby might look like in another thirty years.

“Okay, honey, that should do it.” She tossed the towel onto the marble countertop, then patted my cheek affectionately. “Make sure you get it dry cleaned as soon as possible, though.”

Her smile was filled with motherly warmth and so damn infectious. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll take it first thing Monday morning.”

“Good,” she replied as she straightened my tie and smoothed down my collar. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch your name.”

Understandable since I’d made a complete ass of myself before Rhys could properly introduce me. “Nick Coletti.”

She turned another of those dazzling smiles on me. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Nick.”

“You, too, Mrs. Quinton.”

I expected her to ask how I knew Rhys, subtly fishing for information about the nature of our relationship the way mothers were known to do. So, when she pulled me into an embrace, I froze, unsure of how to respond.

“Take a minute if you need it. There’s a bathroom down the hall and to the right.” She patted my arm as she released me and took the half-empty glass from my hand. “I’ll have Rhys get you more wine, and you just come find us when you’re ready.”

Unable to form words past the lump in my throat, I could only nod. A quiet moment to myself sounded like a good idea, but reaching the bathroom meant passing through the horde of party guests. I didn’t think I was up for that yet.

Instead, I turned on the tap and leaned over the sink to splash cold water on my face. After blotting my skin dry with the clean end of the dishtowel, I took a deep breath and retreated to the window seat in the breakfast nook to collect myself.

Regina’s kindness had helped ease my panic, but the embarrassment still lingered. When Rhys had introduced his parents, a dozen different questions had flooded my brain, and I’d reacted on pure instinct.

Did his parents know he liked men?

Did Rhys like men? From the way he’d held me, I thought so, but it could have also been a show he put on for Jordan Wheeler’s benefit.

How would Gerald and Regina Quinton feel if they knew *I* liked men? More specifically, would they accept the fact that I liked their son? For that matter, had Rhys worked out that I had feelings for him? If so, what did he think? I did my best to hide it, but surely, it shined in my eyes every time I looked at him.

All of these thoughts, plus a few more, had spun through my head in the split second between Rhys saying his parents’ names and the beginning of his next sentence. The fight-or-

flight response had kicked in, and since I obviously wasn't going to attack his family, flight had been my only option.

Given the situation, I hadn't been able to run away, so I'd settled for putting distance between myself and Rhys...in the most asinine way possible. I couldn't be sure how many people had witnessed my faux pas, but at least Rhys' parents had seemed to find it humorous rather than offensive.

"We really have to stop meeting this way."

Interrupted from my contemplations, I lifted my head to greet the newcomer and instantly wished I hadn't. I agreed with Mr. Wheeler's assessment, though. We really did need to stop meeting.

Clean-shaven, with boyish features and brown hair that curled over the tops of his ears, he was what one might consider "classically handsome." Sort of boy next door meets All-American quarterback. Too bad no one had ever taught him manners or how to accept rejection.

"Excuse me." I offered him a polite smile as I planted my feet and pushed up from the window seat. "I should get back to the party."

"Are you sure?" he asked as he sidestepped to block me. "It doesn't look like you're enjoying yourself."

He wasn't wrong, but not for the reasons he probably imagined.

"Excuse me," I repeated.

I tried to go around him, but he moved with me, then closer, forcing me to retreat until the back of my thighs pressed against the ledge of the window seat. Frustrated with myself for letting him intimidate me, I stiffened my spine, straightening to my full height. I still had to tilt my head back to glare at him, but at least I no longer looked like a frightened animal cowering in the corner.

"Let me take you home."

When he lifted his hand to touch my face, I caught him by the wrist and pushed his arm away. "Please move."

He ignored me. Shocker.

A hard right hook or a swift knee to the groin would get him out of the way, but this wasn't a movie. Violence in the real world often ended in an arrest or a lawsuit. Sometimes, both. Plus, if he decided to retaliate, I had little confidence that I would come out victorious.

"You can drop the act." He chuckled as he reached for me again, grabbing my arm and jerking me close before I could react. "You don't have to play hard to get," he murmured against my ear. "I promise I won't think you're easy."

I didn't give a fuck what he thought about me. Considering the blatant sexual harassment I had witnessed during my internship at Wheeler and Associates, his behavior didn't surprise me. It did, however, piss me off, and all my pretty notions about solving problems without violence went out the proverbial window.

Pressing both hands against his chest, I pushed—hard—knocking him off balance so that he had no choice but to release me as he stumbled backward. "Didn't your parents ever teach you not to touch things that don't belong to you?"

The asshole laughed and tried to grab me again. This time, I was ready for him, and I knocked his hand away with as much force as I could muster.

"Maybe I was too subtle, so let me make myself abundantly clear." I took a step toward him, and to my surprise, he actually retreated. "Do not. Fucking. Touch me." I enunciated each word, my voice dripping with venom. "If you come near me again, I will have security escort you out."

Point made, I strode across the kitchen, resisting the urge to shoulder-check him as I passed. Jordan didn't try to stop me. He didn't follow. I was feeling pretty damn good about that until I glanced up to find Rhys standing on the other side of the room.

I didn't know how much he had seen or heard, but judging by the murderous gleam in his eyes, it had been enough. "Sir."

“Are you okay, Nicholas?” He didn’t look at me when he spoke, but kept his gaze locked on Jordan instead.

“Yes, sir.” I hastened my steps, reaching him just as he took a threatening step forward. “I’m okay,” I insisted, touching his arm to get his attention. “We should return to the party.”

His eyes raked over me from head to toe, his gaze assessing. At the end of his inspection, the hard set of his mouth softened, and some of the tension drained from his shoulders. I could still sense his anger, a fire that hadn’t quite been extinguished, but when he brushed a lock of hair away from my brow, he did so with remarkable gentleness.

“I’m proud of you, little grasshopper.”

I grinned at his teasing, but secretly, I was proud of me, too.

“Mr. Wheeler,” he said, his voice hard as stone as he returned his attention to Jordan. “It’s time for you to leave.”

At first, it appeared as if Jordan would argue, but after glaring daggers at Rhys, he turned and strode out of the arched entryway on the other side of the kitchen.

“Don’t worry,” Rhys said. “Security will make sure he finds his way home.”

In kindergarten, I’d wanted to be a police officer. In middle school, a journalist. I’d waffled a bit in high school before deciding on marketing as my career path. Now, I wanted to be Rhys Quinton when I grew up.

The way he effortlessly commanded a room awed me. It was also hot as hell.

I inched toward him, smiling when he placed his hand on my hip to urge me even closer. “I’m not worried.”

“Good.” Sliding his fingers down my arm, he took my hand and led me out of the kitchen. “I imagine you could use a drink right about now. Something a little stronger than wine?”

He wasn’t looking at me, but I nodded anyway. “I think you’re probably right.”

Now that the adrenaline had worn off, and the righteous fury had faded, I felt shaky and jittery, like my insides had been put through a paint mixer. I could take care of myself, but that didn't mean I enjoyed confrontation. When conflict arose, I was usually the first to compromise, the first to concede. Rarely did I push back, and only when I had exhausted all other options.

At the bar next to the patio doors, my boss ordered two shots of tequila. Once the bartender had poured the liquor, Rhys took them both and passed one to me, holding up his own in invitation. Getting the hint, I clinked my glass against his, then tossed the shot back.

God, it was nasty, like someone had pissed in battery acid. The alcohol scorched my throat on the way down, and I shuddered at the foul taste. Inhaling through my teeth, I slammed the shot glass onto the bar like I'd seen in movies and wiped my mouth on the back of my hand.

"Better?" Rhys asked, grinning as he placed his glass next to mine.

"Not really," I wheezed. Now, my insides were shaky *and* on fire.

Rhys chuckled. "Back to wine?"

"Actually, I think I'll just have water."

He nodded to the bartender, who passed over a bottle dripping with condensation. I accepted it with a nod of thanks, twisted off the cap, and upended it to my lips, drinking down half of it before it became necessary to breathe.

"Do you want to get some air?"

It took me a moment to realize he was asking if I wanted to return to the patio, not commenting on the way I'd just sucked down water like my life depended on it. "Yes, sir."

The patio was quiet, uncrowded, and despite the falling temperatures, the fires and heaters chased away the worst of the cold. With the fairy lights that twinkled from the exposed rafters, and the moonlight that glittered across the frost on the manicured lawn, one might even consider it romantic.

Then again, Rhys could have asked me to accompany him to a public toilet, and I likely would have agreed.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Rhys said, motioning toward the French doors.

It was obvious that he didn’t want me to wait with him, and while curious as to the reason why, I couldn’t find the courage to ask. So, I downed the rest of my water, tossed the empty bottle into the recycling bin at the end of the bar, and nodded as I headed for the exit.

Stepping out onto the patio, my breath caught when the frigid wind assaulted me, but I warmed quickly as I neared the firepit. This time, I found the space completely deserted, a welcome reprieve from the controlled chaos happening inside the house.

Instead of sitting, I stood at the end of the stone table and sighed as I held my hands out toward the flames. I had never been a social butterfly, but I didn’t think of myself as an introvert, either. Still, I had to admit that attending parties as a +One agent carried a lot less stress.

Maybe because I was only playing a part, and as such, I could be anyone I wanted to be. Plus, I had a job to do, a task to occupy me. For those few hours, I only had to concern myself with the comfort of my client. I understood the assignment, knew what everyone expected of me, and I genuinely enjoyed taking care of people.

The sudden swell of music from behind me indicated the patio doors had opened, and I stiffened as I glanced over my shoulder. Once I saw Rhys, the tension drained away, and I grinned in welcome.

Instead of a drink, he carried a soft blanket made of dark fleece. In the dim lighting, I couldn’t tell if it was black, green, or some shade of blue, but given the color scheme of the manor’s décor, I guessed green.

Without a word, Rhys unfolded the throw and draped it over my shoulders. He stroked his fingertips down my nape

before pulling his hand away, and I shivered as warm tingles spread across my skin.

I gathered the material around me and snuggled into it, rubbing my cheek against the soft fleece. “Thank you.”

Coming to stand next to me by the fire, Rhys slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks and stared into the flames. “Are you okay?”

I could have played dumb, but I didn’t see the point.

“I’m okay now.” It hadn’t been my first go-around with the Jordan Wheelers of the world, and I doubted it would be the last.

“I owe you an apology.” A hardness saturated his voice, one that matched the rigid set of his jaw. “I don’t know why he was here, but I should have had him removed sooner.”

“He wasn’t on the guest list?” Considering Rhys’ unveiled contempt for the man, I probably should have guessed that.

“Gabby says he came as a plus-one, but she doesn’t know who he arrived with.”

Taking a chance, I inched sideways until only a sliver of space remained between us. “You don’t owe me anything,” I insisted. “Least of all an apology. Mr. Wheeler alone is responsible for his poor behavior.”

Well, I could probably assign a share of the blame to the guy’s parents, but ultimately, Jordan was an adult with the capacity to make his own choices, both good and bad.

“But—”

“No buts.” I shifted my feet and turned my shoulders so I could face him directly. “You couldn’t have known he would take it that far. I know you don’t want to hear this,” I added with a smirk, “but you can’t control everything.”

Rhys looked down at me with an arched brow. “You get mouthy when you drink tequila.”

“I’m not drunk.” I had a slight buzz, but I was far from being impaired. “I just don’t want you to feel guilty about

something that isn't your fault."

"Mouthy," he repeated as he closed the last bit of space between us and tucked a knuckle under my chin. "What should I do with you?"

Anything you want.

The brazen thought pushed to the forefront of my mind, but I stopped short of vocalizing it. Instead, I bit my lower lip and held my breath, waiting to see what he would do next.

Rhys smoothed the pad of his thumb beneath my lip and tugged gently until I released it. "Say something."

Fuuck. Every nerve ending in my body sparked, sizzling like a live wire, and the blood that should have been feeding oxygen to my brain drained straight to my cock. My mind went completely blank, and it seemed even instinct had abandoned me.

"Sir?"

He made a noise in the back of his throat, somewhere between a growl and a moan, and something dark and hungry flashed in his eyes as his gaze went to my parted lips. Slow and controlled, he wound his arm around my waist, giving me every opportunity to resist him.

I didn't.

Then he slid his other hand into my hair to palm the back of my head, and I had only a heartbeat to brace myself before his mouth crashed down on mine. It was not the tame, tentative touch of a first kiss. It was raw, consuming, and Rhys took possession of my mouth as if he owned me.

His tongue plunged between my lips, hot and searching, not so much coaxing a response from me as demanding one. With my hands trapped between our bodies, I gripped his lapels, trying desperately to anchor myself as I was crushed beneath a tsunami of sensations.

Heart pounding, legs shaking, I arched into him with a soft moan when his teeth grazed over my bottom lip. The sensual act gave me just enough reprieve to gasp for breath before his

mouth was on mine again. He traced the seam of my lips, then dipped back inside, tangling our tongues together in an erotic glide that had my head spinning and my dick throbbing.

I vaguely wondered if this was what it felt like to be struck by lightning. Fire seared through my veins, burning me from the inside out, and I thought I might vibrate right out of my skin.

Wait.

My brain kicked back online, and I realized the pulsation wasn't coming from me but from the rhythmic buzzing of my cell phone. Not a call or text message—both of which could be easily ignored—but the distinct cadence of my alarm.

“Shit,” I gasped as I jerked away, fumbling in my pocket to stop the incessant vibrations. “I have to go.”

Rhys frowned, and his eyebrows drew together. “It’s still early.”

“I know.” Unwrapping myself from the blanket, I pushed it into his hands and backed away. “I’m sorry. I really have to go.”

Without giving him a chance to stop me, I turned and jogged around the side of the house. Not the most direct route to the driveway, but I figured it would be faster than trying to push my way through the throng of bodies inside the house.

I couldn't believe I had forgotten about the other party on my schedule for the evening.

Some part of me must have known I would, though, hence the alarm. I'd also ordered a rideshare to pick me up at eight o'clock and drive me to the Thompson Hotel downtown.

Hopefully, my lips wouldn't look so pink and swollen by the time I arrived.

I couldn't do anything about the stain on my shirt, but at least it had been white wine rather than red. Maybe no one would notice.

Yeah, and maybe pigs will fly.

Anna was going to freaking kill me.

EIGHT

~ RHYS ~

“I HOPE HE DOESN’T turn into a pumpkin.”

Confused by what had just happened, I glanced over my shoulder as a member of the security team emerged from the shadows at the edge of the patio. “That was the carriage, asshole.”

Dressed in a black turtleneck beneath a black suit that had been tailored to his broad shoulders and narrow waist, he didn’t exactly blend in with the other guests. Then again, at six-four with thighs the size of tree trunks and a head of fiery ginger hair, Tobias Golightly stood out, no matter where he went.

Smiling so brightly that the moonlight glinted off his teeth, he arched an inquisitive brow as he strolled over to me. “He’s cute.”

I narrowed my eyes, and the muscles in my back tensed. “Stay away from him.”

Moving to stand beside me by the firepit, he laughed and leaned sideways, bumping his arm against mine. “Possessive much?”

Yes, but my bad mood had more to do with uncertainty than any sense of ownership. Nicholas was more than just *cute*. I’d seen the way people had stared at him during the party, circling like hungry vultures. One kiss, no matter how earth-shattering, did not make him mine. Not officially. Not in any way that mattered.

“Man,” Tobias said with a deep chuckle. “You’ve got it bad.”

Of course, I did, but I wasn’t about to admit it to him. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Come on, Rhys. How long have we known each other?”

Since high school, so more than twenty years. At our age, “best friends” sounded silly and juvenile, but he was definitely important to me. More like a brother than a friend.

“Too long,” I grumbled. “I’ve known you for too damn long.”

Tobias shrugged good-naturedly. “So, what’s the story with the cutie?”

I huffed in irritation, but I knew the stubborn bastard wouldn’t let it go. “He’s my new assistant.”

“And that kiss was what? Overtime?”

I turned my head and glared at him. “Christ, you’re a dick.”

“You like him,” he pressed, undeterred.

I more than liked Nicholas, but I wouldn’t call it love. Obsession might be a good description, but that made me sound like a crazy stalker.

“Yeah, I like him.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

The hell if I knew. When I’d kissed Nicholas, it hadn’t been a matter of finally working up the gumption. I’d lost control, plain and simple. He’d been driving me crazy all night with his shy glances and sweet smiles. When he had looked at me with those big, dazed eyes and called me “sir,” I hadn’t been able to take it anymore.

The way he’d leaned into the kiss with those quiet little moans had led me to believe he wanted it as much as I did. For a moment, I had even let myself believe that he felt something beyond physical pleasure. I’d been careful not to let my hands roam, not to push him for more than he was ready to give, but maybe I’d overestimated my restraint.

Yet, I still didn’t understand why he had run away from me like that. He had been obviously flustered, but there had also been regret in his eyes. I just didn’t know if he regretted the kiss itself or the fact that it had ended so abruptly.

There was no use speculating, though, and frankly, I was done talking about it. I would fill Tobias in on the details when I actually had something to tell him. In the meantime, I had questions of my own.

“What happened with Jordan Wheeler?”

“He had some choice words to say about you, but he left without any issues.”

Disappointment settled in my stomach, and I realized that I’d been hoping his removal from the grounds had been a bit more...forceful. Not my finest moment, but it also didn’t change the way I felt.

“Gabby said he was here as a plus-one. Do you know who he came with?”

“According to the attendance list, he came with Miss Luella Dupree.”

That surprised me.

Luella’s mother, Josette Dupree, had been one of RQ’s very first clients, and we’d helped build her small catering business into a booming empire. I doubted there was a soul in the city or surrounding suburbs who hadn’t heard of Enchanté Event Catering.

Despite being in high demand, Josette believed delicious food shouldn’t be reserved only for the well-to-do. As such, she offered a variety of catering packages to fit every budget and occasion from simple to extravagant.

She had also personally curated the menus for all of my family’s celebrations since starting her company. These days, she especially loved being involved with Gabby’s fundraisers for Bright Beginnings.

Having known the woman for almost fifteen years, I’d watched her only daughter grow from a gangly, timid teenager to a smart, beautiful, sophisticated woman. I also knew Luella to be unfailingly kind and courteous, so I couldn’t imagine how she had ended up with Jordan Wheeler as her date.

The man had become notorious within our shared social circles for being a womanizer, with an ego even bigger than his bank account. To put it bluntly, he was a fucking asshole who thought the world owed him something because he had been born into privilege. An antithesis to everything I knew Josette and Luella to be.

“Anything else I should know?”

“There were a couple of minor disagreements between guests.” Tobias shrugged. “Nothing noteworthy.”

“I meant anything I should know about Mr. Wheeler.”

Lines of concentration creased his brow, but after a moment, he shook his head. “No. Nothing.”

It was little consolation, but at least he hadn’t harassed anyone else. “In the future, I don’t care if he arrives with the fucking governor. I want him banned from any event connected to me or my family.”

“Of course.” Tobias’ expression morphed into something that was one part confusion and two parts curiosity. “What did this guy do to piss you off?”

I still felt angry on Nicholas’ behalf, but the problem extended beyond him. While I didn’t particularly enjoy these events, or even like most of the people who attended, I would never wish for any of my guests to feel wary or unsafe. After witnessing Jordan’s behavior firsthand, I refused to be associated with him, even indirectly.

“He’s a dick. Isn’t that enough?”

Tobias chuckled. “Fair, but I’m guessing there’s more to the story.”

It seemed wrong to discuss what had happened without Nicholas’ consent, but I also didn’t want the same thing to happen to someone else. After a moment of consideration, I gave Tobias the abridged version, leaving out Nicholas’ name and including only the pertinent details.

“I understand,” he said in a biting tone when I’d finished speaking. “I’ll take care of it.”

Gone was the affable demeanor and teasing grin. Revulsion resided in every sharp line of his face, tightening his jaw, and narrowing his icy blue eyes. More than just angry, he looked brutal, and I hoped to never find myself on the receiving end of his wrath.

Because of their impeccable reputation, I trusted Watchdog Security Solutions to keep my family safe. Having worked with politicians, socialites, and celebrities, the company provided a wide range of services, from home security systems to personal protection.

Although every employee received the same level of training, whenever the Quintons hosted an event, I always requested Tobias and his team. Not because we had been friends for more than half our lives—though that helped—but because I knew Tobias didn't let shit slide.

He couldn't be bought or bribed, and he had zero patience for troublemakers. He could also hold a grudge like no one else on earth, apart from maybe me. While not a quality often considered a virtue, it was one I appreciated.

Tobias didn't anger easily, but when he did lose his temper, he kind of scared me.

“By ‘take care of it,’ you mean...” I doubted he planned to off the guy, but I figured it didn't hurt to check.

He smirked as if he knew exactly what I'd been thinking... and wasn't necessarily against the idea. “I'll make sure he's blacklisted from every event we work security for, and maybe a few that we don't.”

One side of my mouth curved up to mirror his lopsided grin. “I like the way you think.”

Instead of the witty comeback I had expected, his eyes glazed over, and the muscles in his face relaxed, forming a mask of neutrality. At first, I worried something had happened to him, but when he nodded, I realized he'd been listening to the voice coming through his earpiece.

“Everything okay?” I asked when his eyes refocused.

“All good, but I should make the rounds.” He sidestepped to clear the wicker sofa, then took a couple of steps backward. “Let’s talk more after the party.”

“Sure.”

“Oh, one more thing.”

“What is it?” I asked, turning to face him.

He gave me a wide Cheshire grin. “Happy birthday.”

With a scowl, I nodded in acknowledgment. His thunderous laughter still echoed around the patio long after he had disappeared back into the shadows.

Alone again, I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and unlocked the screen. It took only seconds to pull up Nicholas’ number, but I hesitated, my thumb hovering over his name. I didn’t want to be *that* guy. If he needed time and space to work through how he felt about the kiss we shared, I wanted to give it to him.

Yet, I couldn’t get the image of his round, panic-stricken eyes out of my mind. I didn’t want him to feel pressured, and I wasn’t entirely sure he would answer if I called. Maybe a text would be better received.

RHYS: Is everything okay?

NICHOLAS: yes

Though he’d been quick to reply, that single word told me absolutely nothing. I tried again.

RHYS: Are you feeling alright?

NICHOLAS: yes

I grunted at the clipped response, but at least he wasn’t ignoring me.

RHYS: I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable.

NICHOLAS: no

No? What the fuck did that mean? No, he hadn’t felt uncomfortable? No, he wouldn’t accept my apology? Damn it, I needed another drink.

RHYS: You have every right to be angry with me, but can you give me something more than one-word answers? I'm worried about you.

I waited, but no reply came. Not even the little bouncing bubbles to indicate he had started typing. Uncertainty was not an emotion familiar to me, and I didn't much care for it.

It felt...itchy. Kind of like when I'd had poison ivy as a kid.

Dropping down onto the sofa, I dragged a hand over my face and tried to breathe normally. I would *not* text him again. If he didn't want to speak to me, badgering him with messages wouldn't change that. It would only make me look like a selfish prick. All I could do was wait. If he didn't reply, I would just speak to him at the office on Monday.

All those rational, grownup ideas vanished like vapor on the wind when my cell pinged a moment later. Suddenly, I had turned into a teenager with his first crush, and I fumbled with my phone, almost dropping it twice in my eagerness to see Nicholas' response. Before I could start reading, however, three more messages followed in rapid succession.

NICHOLAS: You didn't make me uncomfortable, and I'm not mad at you.

NICHOLAS: I'm sorry that I made you worry.

NICHOLAS: I wasn't running away.

NICHOLAS: I wanted to stay, but I really had to leave.

The knot in my chest loosened, and I inhaled deeply, taking my first real breath since I'd watched him disappear around the side of the house. I still didn't know what had forced his departure, but I liked that he hadn't wanted to leave me.

RHYS: As long as you're okay, that's all I care about.

NICHOLAS: I am. Promise.

NICHOLAS: There was another party tonight I had to attend.

NICHOLAS: I forgot about it until my alarm went off. That's why I freaked out.

RHYS: No problem. I'm just glad you're safe.

NICHOLAS: Thank you. I should get back. I'm hiding in the bathroom right now.

RHYS: Go enjoy the party. I'll see you Monday.

I sent the last text and tossed my phone onto the cushion beside me. Nicholas was safe. The kiss hadn't angered him or made him uncomfortable. He had gone out of his way to grant my request for multi-word answers. All good things.

If a little voice in the back of my head demanded to know who was so damn important that he had literally run from me—on my birthday—well, that was a problem for later.

~ NICK ~

MONDAY MORNING DAWNED BRIGHT and frigid as the temperatures plunged below the freezing mark. A scattered layer of salt coated the streets, melting the patches of ice that had formed overnight. Sunlight sparkled off the fog of condensation that covered the windows of nearby businesses, casting a prism of color across the glass.

When my rideshare pulled to a stop in front of a skyscraper six blocks from my office, I thanked the driver and scrambled out of the back seat. She had gotten me there five minutes sooner than I had expected, and she hadn't said a word to me the entire way. Definitely a five-star transaction.

Entering the multi-office building, I tried to maintain a casual gait as I made my way across the vast lobby. I waved to a couple of familiar faces, including the young barista working at the coffee bar. His eyeliner looked more subtle than usual, and I noticed he'd painted his lips in a thin layer of black cherry lipstick.

I knew the precise color, and even the brand, because I'd once asked him about the shade, and he had been all too happy to educate me. While I didn't wear it myself, I found the entire concept of makeup fascinating.

At that time of morning, the place buzzed with frantic energy as workers hurried to their desk jobs. Joining the group that had gathered near the bank of elevators, I watched impatiently as the digital display counted down the lift's descent to the ground floor.

It would have been more convenient to come on my lunch break, but after the fiasco Friday evening, I had promised myself I'd talk to Anna first thing Monday morning. Since I didn't make promises I couldn't keep, not even to myself, there I was, squeezing into the elevator beside a severe-looking woman in a navy pantsuit.

The ride up to the +One office passed in eerie quiet, apart from the terrible music that crackled from the speakers. It was also torturously slow, with people coming and going on almost every floor. I breathed a sigh of relief when the last person exited, leaving me to travel the last two floors in solitude.

When the cab slowed to a stop at my destination, I took a deep breath and reminded myself that I had every right to terminate my employment with the company. Plus, I wouldn't be leaving on bad terms. That had to count for something.

Only, I'd never quit a job before, and while I'd spent a good part of the weekend practicing what I would say, I still felt the clawing anxiety in the pit of my stomach.

Exiting the lift, I strode straight to the reception counter on the other side of the small, chic lobby. "Hi, Gretchen."

Around my age, with a lean, sculpted body and a gorgeous umber complexion, she looked more suited to a runway than an office. "Nicky!"

I fought back a wince and forced a smile. I hated being called Nicky.

"How was the party Friday?"

"It was good." The food had been delicious, the cake beautiful, and the music better than expected. I just hadn't wanted to be there. "I'm here to see Anna. Is she in her office?"

Gretchen nodded. "Is she expecting you?"

"I think so." I'd texted Anna that I would be coming. When I hadn't heard back, I had taken that as her agreement.

"One second." She reached for the phone and pressed a couple of buttons with her long, dagger-like nails. "Anna, Nick Coletti is here to see you. Oh." She jerked her ear away from the handset and stared at it. "She hung up on me."

Well, shit, that certainly didn't bode well. Before I could get too worked up about it, though, the office door set into a wall of opaque windows swung open, and Anna Harkins appeared at the threshold.

“Sorry, Gretchen. I hit the wrong button.” Her bright blue gaze swung to me as she took a step back and jerked her head to the side. “Come on in, Nick.”

Following her, I closed the door behind me and settled into one of the two armchairs in the office. “Thank you for seeing me this morning.”

“No problem,” she answered, tucking a blonde curl behind her ear as she dropped into the swivel chair at her desk. “Your text said you wanted to talk about something? What’s up?”

“I started a new job a few weeks ago, and my schedule is pretty full. I don’t think I’ll be able to accept clients anymore.”

“Congratulations on the new job.” Her smile brightened, and she sounded as if she meant it. “You’re still accompanying Mr. Ryan to the ceremony next weekend, right?”

“Yes, I am, but that will be my last event.”

“Okay, perfect.” Turning to her computer, she clicked the mouse a few times, then began typing, her fingers moving impossibly fast across the keys. “Let me postdate these severance papers so you can sign them. Give me just a second.”

“That’s it? That’s all I have to do?”

She glanced away from the screen briefly and chuckled. “That’s all you have to do. I’ll miss you, and you’re always welcome to come back, but I get that this isn’t a long-term job for most people.”

Well, that had been easy. Too easy. I had a whole speech prepared, with carefully worded arguments, and bullet points of why I would no longer be a good fit for the company. Now, I didn’t really know what to do or say, and I felt more agitated about that than I had about quitting.

We chatted a bit more about nothing in particular while she printed the severance papers and had me sign them. Then, she scribbled her name below mine and asked me to wait while she made me a finalized copy.

Ten minutes later, I headed to work, feeling lighter and freer, as if a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Despite the blustery weather and icy temperatures, I decided to walk the six blocks to RQ Creative Marketing. It was still early, and frankly, I had mixed feelings about seeing Rhys again after that kiss.

On one hand, I always wanted to be near him, and I looked forward to Monday mornings after missing him for two whole days over the weekend. Today was different, though. Things had changed. At least, they had for me. Since I hadn't spoken to him since our short text conversation Friday evening, I had no idea what Rhys thought or felt about what had happened.

Possibly, the kiss hadn't meant anything to him. Maybe he regretted it. He might tell me it had been a mistake. There was a good chance he wouldn't bring it up at all. If that turned out to be the case, I would follow his lead and not mention it, either. I just really hoped things wouldn't be awkward between us.

Arriving to work half an hour early, I found Rhys already busy at his desk, his head bent over a stack of documents. Despite the chime of the elevator that announced my appearance, he didn't look up or greet me as he normally did.

The knot in my stomach tightened.

Slipping off my wool jacket, I hung it on the coat rack in the corner, then hurried over to the counter beside my desk to brew a pot of coffee. Once I had the machine percolating, I booted up my computer and logged into my company account to check for any urgent messages. I found none, so I took a few minutes to reply to the emails that had piled up over the weekend.

Then I returned to the coffee maker and poured the fragrant dark roast into Rhys' favorite cup. Plain black with no witty phrases or graphics, it looked like it had been part of a set. I didn't know why he preferred it, but I'd noticed when he poured his own coffee, he always chose that mug.

I added a splash of vanilla almond milk from the mini fridge at the end of the bar, gave the coffee a quick stir, then

carried the drink to his office.

Just before I reached the doorway, however, I hesitated.

On my walk, I had decided I would follow his lead, but now, I worried he might avoid the topic so as not to make me uncomfortable. It was a strange brand of politeness, but one I had come to expect and even welcome from him.

Watching the steam rise from the mug, I wavered, unsure of how to proceed. Did I broach the subject first? Did I pretend nothing had happened? Did I act as if it was just a normal day at the office?

I shook my head, frustrated with myself. It had been one kiss, not a proposal of marriage. Everything would be fine, and even if it wasn't, I couldn't stand outside his door all morning worrying about it.

Taking a deep breath, I straightened my spine and stepped into his office.

“You're late,” Rhys said in a deep, rumbling voice the second I'd cleared the threshold.

I stopped and blinked at him. We both knew I had arrived early, but I saw no point in arguing the issue. Instead, I crossed the room silently and placed the coffee cup down on his desk.

Okay, so we were pretending the kiss hadn't happened. I thought I had been prepared for it, but the implied rejection still stung.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

“There was a scheduling conflict, so the meeting with Caroline Slayton will be held in my office this afternoon.” He kept his head down as he motioned vaguely toward the conference table by the windows. “Connect the laptop to the flatscreen for the presentation.”

I couldn't say what had him so bent out of shape, but I didn't much care for his attitude.

Although he hadn't looked at me since I had entered the office, I felt his eyes on me now, watching me as I crossed the

room. I ignored him. I hadn't done anything wrong, and I damn sure wasn't about to apologize for *his* bad mood.

“So, about last Friday.”

I froze, my body turning rigid and my fingers stilling over the keyboard of the laptop. My pulse charged into a wild gallop, and my throat tightened with nerves. Taking a deep breath past the constriction, I willed my voice not to betray me when I answered.

“Sir?”

“I'm not sure it's a good idea.”

A rustle of fabric. The soft rumble of wheels over the carpet as he pushed away from his desk. I held my breath and waited.

“I'm all for a catchy slogan, but I don't think the team needs to base their entire strategy around it.”

The stagnant air in my lungs rushed out with a barely concealed groan. God, I was such an idiot. Of course, he was talking about work—specifically, the campaign for a new brewery in Deep Ellum. If I wanted to hang on to even a scrap of self-respect, I needed to stop hoping for more.

It had been one kiss. One...meaningless...kiss.

“Yes, sir.” I willed my body to relax and forced myself to turn and face him. “I'll inform the team lead when I'm finished here.”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “I told you to call me Rhys.”

Nope. Not going to happen. Self-preservation meant learning to be indifferent, or at the very least, constructing the perfect façade. Letting myself become too familiar accomplished neither.

“Should I order coffee for the meeting?” I asked as if he hadn't spoken. “I saw in your notes that Miss Slayton likes the pistachio latte from the café around the corner.”

Rhys scratched the stubble on his jaw as he walked toward me. “That's a good idea. Maybe it'll soften her up a bit.”

“I’m sorry. What was that? Did you just—”

“Don’t push it.” His eyes narrowed, but not before I saw the flash of humor.

I adopted a demure expression and clasped my hands together at my waist. “I wouldn’t dream of it, sir.”

There was that tick again. “Knock it off with the ‘sir’ stuff.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Quinton.”

His lips pressed together so tightly they practically disappeared. “Nicholas...”

I smiled innocently at the hint of threat in his tone. “Yes, sir?”

Yeah, I was being an ass on purpose, needling him despite his obvious irritation, but damn it, I was feeling a little entitled at the moment. Not because of the kiss. I was completely over that. Just like I was over whatever bug had crawled up his ass.

“Ask Barrett for his order, too, and pick up some pastries while you’re there.” His brow furrowed, and he shook his head. “Nothing chocolate. Caroline doesn’t like it.”

I couldn’t imagine someone not liking chocolate, but people thought I was weird for hating bananas. “No chocolate. Got it. Anything else, sir?”

A low rumble rolled up from his chest, and his hand flexed at his side. “Nicholas.”

Oops. I hadn’t even been trying to piss him off that time. “I’m sorry, sir.” I winced when he made that rumbling sound again. “I didn’t—”

My words ended in a sharp gasp when he grabbed me by the waist and jerked me close. The heat of his body engulfed me. The scent of his musky cologne invaded my senses. My head spun, my legs trembled, and in that moment, time stood still.

The hand not squeezing my hip traveled up the back of my neck and carded through my hair, sending a pulse of pure lust

zigzagging down my spine. “I told you,” he growled against my ear, “not to call me sir.”

Then, his mouth was on mine—hot, hungry, and frantic. His tongue flicked over my lips, seeking entrance, and I opened for him with a quiet moan. The fingers in my hair twisted and tightened, adding a delicious sting of pain that had my cock swelling behind my zipper.

His tongue plunged between my lips, hard and penetrating. Clutching the front of his shirt, I leaned into him, humming against his mouth as sensations overwhelmed me. Rhys murmured his approval, using his hold on my hair to tilt my head so he could deepen the kiss. I surrendered willingly, desperate for another taste, another touch, eager for anything he would give me.

The chime of the elevator pierced through the haze of lust, and I jerked away from Rhys so violently that I would have fallen if he hadn’t caught me. Hurrying back around the conference table, I began fumbling with the connection wires on the laptop as the heat of embarrassment filled my cheeks.

Rhys chuckled, completely unfazed. “Calm down. It’s just the morning deliveries.”

Oh. Right.

Since the elevator only traveled between Rhys’ office and the lobby, both carriers and the company mailroom usually sent the packages up in the lift instead of hand delivering them.

“No one saw anything,” he continued, “and even if they did, we aren’t doing anything wrong.”

Logically, I knew he was right, but his reassurance did little to lessen my discomfort. “I...uh...you should probably...” I trailed off and motioned toward his desk. “I have to get the packages.”

He eyed me for a long time before he finally sighed and nodded sideways toward the open door. “Have breakfast with me.”

“I don’t—”

“You were here half an hour early,” he interrupted, rounding his desk to retrieve his thick, black peacoat. “I’m guessing you didn’t eat this morning. Am I right?”

I nodded.

“Then, let’s go.”

Powerless to resist him, I followed Rhys out of his office. Halfway across the waiting room, however, I paused when my cell phone vibrated inside my front pocket. Curious as to who would be texting my personal number so early, I retrieved the device and checked the preview on the lock screen.

My eyes widened and my breath caught when I saw the name attached to the message.

“Everything okay?” Rhys asked.

I glanced up with a frown. “Honestly, I’m not sure.”

Izumi Kimura had been my mentor during my internship, and I’d learned a lot in my short time with her. I hadn’t spoken to her since I’d left Wheeler and Associates, though, and I couldn’t imagine why she would be contacting me now.

I opened the message, which turned out to be a screenshot from a local newspaper. I inhaled sharply when I read the headline emblazoned in big, bold letters at the top of the article.

Rhys’ lips thinned, and his eyes tightened at the corners. “What’s wrong?”

Grinning, I handed my phone over so he could see for himself.

A heartbeat later, Rhys looked up, his smile a mirror of my own. “It’s about damn time.”

Robert Wheeler, president and co-founder of Wheeler and Associates, was being sued for sexual harassment. If that hadn’t been enough to make my whole year, because of the lawsuit, the board of directors had launched their own investigation into his misconduct.

“You look happy,” Rhys observed.

“I am.” To prove it, I practically skipped over to the coat rack to grab my jacket.

Robert was an even bigger creep than his son, and his lecherous behavior had gone unchecked for too long. Like Rhys had said, it was about damn time someone put a stop to it.

“So, what do you want to eat?”

“Me?” With my thoughts consumed by the news about Robert Wheeler, the question caught me by surprise. I had completely forgotten we were headed out to have breakfast together. “Uh, no. I mean, no thank you. I mean...” I took a deep breath while silently praying for a rock to hide under. “Whatever you want is fine.”

“Just answer the question,” he argued, his eyebrows drawn together in disapproval.

His demanding tone should have irritated me, so why did I find it so hot? “Really, anything is fine.”

“We’re not leaving this office until you make a choice.”

He meant it, too. I could tell from the stubborn glint in his eyes. “Pancakes,” I said, picking something at random. “I want pancakes.”

“Good choice. I know just the place. My treat.”

“I can pay for myself.”

“My treat,” he repeated.

Huffing at his satisfied grin, I retrieved the packages from the elevator and set them aside before following him into the cab. “Sir, I—”

“Call me Rhys.”

Yeah, still not happening. “I appreciate the offer, but—”

“Would it make you feel better if I let you buy the coffee for the meeting?”

I took a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. What kind of logic was that? “Not really.”

“Is letting me buy you breakfast really such a big deal?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then, what? Are you worried about what other people will say?”

The thought hadn’t crossed my mind, though it probably should have. It was an out, the perfect excuse, and I should have taken it. Instead, I did the worst thing I could have done. I told the truth.

“I just don’t really know how to act around you.” I couldn’t look at him, so I busied myself with buttoning up my coat.

“Because I’m your boss, because you like when I kiss you, or because you want to sleep with me?”

My next breath lodged in my throat, choking me, and I hunched over in a fit of bone-rattling coughs.

Before I could regain my composure, the elevator chimed, and the doors slid open into the small alcove off the main lobby. Rhys laughed, the bastard, and clapped me on the back a couple of times before squeezing my shoulder.

“Do you need some water?”

“You’re evil,” I wheezed, following him out of the lift. “Pure evil.”

He laughed again, a rich, unrestrained sound that sent a shiver of pure lust racing down through me. “Am I wrong?”

I could hedge, purposely misinterpret the question, but a small, masochistic part of me wanted to know if he’d asked because he felt the same way.

“No,” I answered, smiling at one of the guys from the art department as we passed him on our way toward the exit. “You’re not wrong.”

I couldn’t even claim that his blunt candor had surprised me. Rhys didn’t hold back. He wasn’t delicate. It had been jarring at first, but I had come to like that about him.

“About which part?” He pushed the door open, holding it for me as we stepped out into the chilly morning. “That you like it when I kiss you, or that you want to sleep with me?”

I was ready for him this time, and I smirked as I slid my hands into my pockets to warm them. “Both.”

~ RHYS ~

I SHOULDN'T HAVE KISSED him, not right there in my office with the door wide open, but I couldn't bring myself to regret it. It wasn't in my nature to hold back when I saw something I wanted, and what I wanted more than anything was Nicholas Coletti.

In my defense, he had been practically begging for it with that sassy mouth of his. Maybe he hadn't known exactly what he'd been doing to me every time he called me "sir," but I didn't believe he was completely ignorant to my reaction, either. At the very least, he'd seen my irritation, had known he was getting under my skin.

I had given him plenty of warning, after all.

If he had shown any sign of being unreceptive, I wouldn't have forced him. Still, I worried that my actions made me no better than Robert or Jordan Wheeler. Being in a position of power complicated things, and I didn't want Nicholas to think he had to play along because I happened to be his boss.

Which was why I had wanted a clear answer. I probably could have been more delicate in my questioning, but I didn't want there to be any ambiguity or misunderstanding. His response couldn't have been more perfect.

Once his nerves had settled, the sass had returned, and he'd spent all of breakfast teasing and flirting. Granted, his methods were a little awkward, a little clumsy, but what he lacked in experience, he more than made up for with enthusiasm.

It was fucking adorable.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a more enjoyable morning. Just looking through my office door and seeing Nicholas at his desk soothed me in a way I couldn't accurately describe. Twice, he'd lifted his head to find me staring, and

both times, he'd smiled with such sweetness I'd felt dizzy from the spike of insulin.

I was slowly learning the different facets of his personality. Shy and self-conscious. Bold and sarcastic. Polite and professional. He rarely reacted the way I anticipated, and I never knew which side of him I would get.

Sometimes when I baited him, he turned as red as a summer tomato and ducked his head. Other times, he gave back as good as he got. I had started to realize that the difference was in the expectancy. If I caught him off-guard, I was sure to receive one of those tempting blushes.

I liked catching him off-guard.

"I'm back," Nicholas announced as he swept into my office with a drink carrier in one hand and a brown paper bag in the other. "I almost thought I wouldn't make it in time."

His cheeks and nose appeared rosy from the cold, and I itched to run my fingers through his windswept hair. Rising from my chair, I stepped around my desk to join him at the conference table.

"Did something happen?"

"No, it was just really busy." He placed his burden down and shrugged off his coat, hooking it over his forearm. "I had to wait in line for forever."

A small, brick-faced café wedged between a nail salon and a real estate agency, Morning Glory had been popular ever since the doors opened two summers ago. They trended toward a younger crowd, evident by the fact I felt like I needed a decoder ring to read the menu.

It had taken me ages to realize that something called Spotted Caramel and Cream was just a regular caramel macchiato.

While Nicholas returned to the waiting area to hang his coat, I removed the cups from the carrier and considered their placement. Caroline would sit at the head of the table. I would take the chair next to her with my back to the windows. As for

Barrett, I set his coffee at the other end of the table near the laptop.

I had just finished removing the boxes of pastries—an assortment of petit fours, macarons, and cream puffs—from the bag when Nicholas returned to the office. Carrying a three-tiered serving tray, a stack of dessert plates, and a handful of paper napkins, he immediately set about creating a beautiful presentation of the colorful treats.

“Where the hell did you get those?” I asked, waving in an all-encompassing gesture toward the table.

“Oh, I found them in the cabinet under the coffee bar. I think your previous assistant left them.”

That sounded like something Fletcher would do, but I had never seen the serving set before. Probably because there had never been a reason to use it. I rarely hosted meetings in my office, and when I did, I never offered food or drinks beyond bottled water.

I studied the table with a frown. While the setup looked amazing, there was something missing. “Where’s your coffee?”

“Oh, it’s on my desk.” Nicholas turned to me with a puzzled expression. “Why do you ask?”

“You’re not sitting in on the meeting?”

His eyebrows drew together, and he tilted his head. “Why would I?”

“Because I want you here.”

“Oh.” He bit his bottom lip, but it didn’t stop his smile from spreading.

“Why do you look so surprised?” I took his hands, flinching at how cold they felt. Bringing them to my lips, I breathed warm air across his pinkened skin.

“I didn’t think you’d want me here.” His gaze flickered between my lips and his fingers, seemingly mesmerized by the simple act.

“Of course, I want you here. It’s also an opportunity for you to gain experience,” I tacked on, in case that might sway him.

“O–okay,” he stammered. Then, the fog must have cleared from his brain because his eyes rounded, and he jerked his hands away. “Rhys! They’re going to be here any second!”

It was the first time he had called me by my given name, and I instantly regretted making the request. I had assumed it wouldn’t have the same effect on me as “sir.” Technically, I hadn’t been wrong. It wasn’t the same. It was worse.

My cock went from half hard to fully interested in an instant, and I had to close my eyes when the room started to spin. Naturally, the reaction didn’t go unnoticed, and I opened my eyes again when Nicholas grabbed my forearm.

“Are you okay?” he asked, leaning closer as he studied my face. “You look kind of pale. Do you have a headache?” He glanced over his shoulder. “I have some ibuprofen in my desk.”

When he turned and started to walk away, I caught him by the wrist and pulled him back to me. Giving into temptation, I brushed a lock of hair away from his brow and pressed a chaste kiss to his temple.

“I’m fine, but thank you.” Before I could do or say more, the elevator chimed its arrival. Sighing, I released him and took a step back to put a professional distance between us. “Go greet our guest and get whatever you need for the meeting.”

He took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Deciding he had the right idea, I took a couple of deep breaths myself and willed both my mind and body to calm the fuck down.

Fifteen minutes later, everyone had taken their place at the conference table, and the meeting seemed to be going surprisingly well. Caroline had been pleased with her latte, and the pastry display had pulled a rare smile from her.

She also appeared more relaxed than usual. The tailored pantsuits she preferred had been replaced with a pencil skirt that brushed the top of her knee-high boots, and a cashmere sweater in a delicate shade of pink. Earrings were still absent from her pierced lobes, along with any other type of jewelry, but she'd left her dark hair loose to fall over her shoulders.

While not important to the meeting, I couldn't help but wonder what had brought about the sudden change.

Periodically sipping her coffee, she listened attentively while Barrett presented the proposal for the new ad campaign. Like always, her expression showed nothing of her thoughts. That much, at least, remained the same.

For once, I couldn't match her indifference. Barrett and his team had hit a grand slam with this one, and I was prepared to defend their work if necessary. The storyboard featured a diversity of women representing various sizes, ages, and ethnicities, all wearing something from Slay the Day's athleisure line.

A mother chasing her toddlers around a playground.

A group of middle-aged women laughing as they strolled along a dirt path.

A young woman curled up on a sun-drenched deck with a book and a cup of tea.

Another walking through a parking lot with a bag of groceries clutched to her chest.

An older woman with silver hair arranging a colorful bouquet inside a flower shop.

The last slide was a simple background in Slay the Day's signature marigold yellow with a mixture of script and block text.

"No matter where the day takes you, slay it." Barrett read from the screen, concluding his presentation.

Everyone looked at Caroline for her reaction. For a long time, she didn't say anything. She just stared at the words on the television with a sort of casual detachment.

Then, just when I was preparing to break the silence, her face split into a dazzling smile, and her eyes sparkled with unrestrained excitement. I honestly hadn't thought her capable of expressing that level of emotion.

"It's perfect!" She clasped her hands together under her chin and bobbed her head several times. "This is it. This is exactly what I wanted."

I sat up straighter and puffed out my chest, feeling like a proud father whose child had just made the honor roll. Not only had the team managed to impress a notoriously difficult client, but it was one of the best campaigns I'd seen come out of RQ. If that didn't deserve a generous quarterly bonus, I didn't know what did.

We concluded the meeting a few minutes later, and Nicholas boxed up a sampling of treats for Caroline while I congratulated Barrett on a job well done. Then, I walked him and Miss Slayton to the elevator, waiting with them until the doors opened. Caroline entered first, but before Barrett could follow, Nicholas called his name as he rushed out of my office.

"Here," he said, pushing another box of pastries into Barrett's hands. "For you and your team. Congratulations." Package delivered, he took a step back and gave Caroline a deep nod. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Slayton. I hope the rest of your day is enjoyable."

If it had been anyone else, I would have questioned their motives, but not Nicholas. Taking care of others came as naturally to him as breathing.

Alone again, we both exhaled a sigh of relief and took a moment to appreciate that the meeting had been successful. I couldn't stop staring at him. While he radiated happiness, there was also a stillness about him, like the glassy surface of a lake, that I found incredibly attractive.

The quiet lasted only a few seconds, however, before my cell phone vibrated with an incoming message from my sister.

GABBY: You're still coming this weekend, right?

I smiled at the screen. Saturday evening, my baby sister would be honored at a dinner attended by Dallas' elite for her outstanding work with the Bright Beginnings Foundation.

RHYS: I wouldn't miss it.

GABBY: Is Nick coming?

My gaze slid sideways, and I watched Nicholas return to his desk from the corner of my eye.

RHYS: I haven't asked him yet.

GABBY: Well, hurry up! What are you waiting for?

I laughed and slid my phone back into my pocket. She had a point.

“Nicholas?”

His head popped up, and he stared at me expectantly. “Sir?”

“Are you busy this Saturday?”

A shallow divot formed between his eyebrows. “I have plans in the evening, but nothing during the day. Why do you ask?”

Well, damn.

“I was wondering if you wanted to see a movie with me,” I lied smoothly. I hadn't been to the cinema in at least a decade. “I thought we might grab dinner afterwards.”

His shoulders fell, and creases formed at the corners of his mouth. “I'm free on Sunday.”

Moving to stand beside him, I reached out to caress his cheek. The smile I received in return was worth any amount of disappointment I felt.

“It's a date.”

ELEVEN

~ NICK ~

WHILE THE DAY OF the week didn't inherently change anything about my date with Rhys, I still felt a twinge of regret as I stepped out of the limo on Saturday evening. I would have much rather been at a movie theater that smelled like stale popcorn and perspiration than some swanky party at The Royal.

Hell, I didn't even know what kind of event it was. It had been stated somewhere in the contract I'd signed, but I had barely skimmed the document. I knew where and when, who I would be escorting, and how I was expected to dress. The rest of the details hadn't been that important.

Fully aware that I sounded like an ungrateful asshole, I pasted on a bright smile and tried to bolster my enthusiasm for the evening.

Not everyone had the opportunity to rub elbows with the rich and influential at one of Dallas' premier luxury hotels. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't, either. With the most basic rooms starting at four-hundred dollars a night, I couldn't even afford to sit in the lobby of The Royal.

Considering the number of these events I had attended since working with +One, I should have been used to it by now, but I always felt a little out of place.

Oh, I looked the part, but my black tuxedo was rented, not owned, and I'd found the white dress shirt on a clearance rack at Target. I'd polished my black loafers until they gleamed, and they looked expensive. In reality, I'd paid ten bucks for them at a thrift store.

"Nick?" Jasper Ryan stepped up beside me on the sidewalk and winged his elbow out to the side. "Shall we?"

Shaking off my melancholy, I twined my arm with his and nodded. Whatever I felt at the moment, the night wasn't about

me. I had a responsibility to ensure Jasper remained calm and had a good time.

Tall and muscular, with wavy chestnut hair and golden-brown eyes that warmed when he smiled, Jasper Ryan was undeniably handsome. He also happened to be an authentically good guy who didn't consider himself above anyone else just because he had money.

Thanks to a sizeable inheritance and some clever investing, he didn't need to work. Instead, he spent a lot of his time at Project SafeHouse, the youth shelter he sponsored that offered food, housing, and safety to homeless children and teenagers.

A few kids were runaways looking for a better life. Most of them, however, had been abused, neglected, and abandoned. Sadly, this often happened because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Jasper might struggle with social anxiety around adults, but he didn't have the same issues when it came to kids. Or so he'd told me. I hadn't actually been to Project SafeHouse to witness it for myself, something I hoped to rectify in the future.

I even considered applying to volunteer on the weekends. Not because of Jasper, but because I had a soft spot for the organization. At one time, I could have easily ended up like one of those kids. Thankfully, I'd had a grandmother who had taken me in and loved me unconditionally.

As long as I was happy, Nonna hadn't cared that I liked boys. She had even taken pictures of me and my prom date and displayed them proudly on the mantle. There hadn't been anything I couldn't tell her, and when she'd passed away during my junior year of college, I had been devastated.

Even now, there were still times when I felt like my heart would shatter from missing her so much.

"Don't let me embarrass myself," Jasper whispered when we neared the front doors of the hotel.

Strangely, his worry eased something inside of me, focused me, and I smiled as I tightened my arm around his.

“You’re going to do great.”

During the ride in the private glass elevator to the rooftop pavilion, I kept up a steady stream of conversation. I stuck to light topics, like the weather, my nosy neighbor in apartment 4B, and a new song I’d heard on the radio that morning.

Jasper only nodded and hummed, but I had expected that. I wasn’t really looking for a response. I just wanted to keep him relaxed. It worked, too...right up until we exited the elevator.

“So, what’s this shindig all about?” I asked when I felt him tense beside me.

He didn’t laugh, but he did smile, and his shoulders relaxed a little. “It’s a banquet to honor Gabrielle Quinton and the Bright Beginnings Foundation for their commitment and service to the community.”

This time, I was the one who stiffened. “Did you say—”

“Nick!”

I closed my eyes and groaned when I recognized Gabby’s melodic voice, then quickly rearranged my features into a pleasant smile so I could turn to greet her. Not only did I genuinely like her—and I sort of, kind of, maybe had something going on with her brother—but it was her big night. It would be a total dick move to snub the guest of honor.

“Gabby!” I called, trying to match her excitement. “Congratulations. You—”

I meant to tell her that she deserved the accolades. I meant to compliment her on the stunning ice-blue, strapless dress she wore. I meant to say a lot of things, but they all became lodged in my throat when Rhys stepped up behind her.

Dressed in a black tux with a maroon collar and lapels, along with a matching bowtie, he was absolutely gorgeous. I tried not to stare but failed miserably as I blatantly eye-fucked him right there in front of everyone. A subtle movement caused the lights from the chandeliers to glint off his wrist, and my heart squeezed when I recognized the fish cufflinks I had given him for his birthday.

He didn't say anything, but those sharp gray eyes narrowed as his gaze flickered from me to Jasper and back, clearly trying to assess our relationship. If things weren't already awkward enough, Jasper stepped forward to offer his hand.

"Rhys," he said conversationally, clearly not recognizing the danger. "It's been a while."

When Rhys reached out to take his proffered hand, it required every ounce of restraint I possessed to not grab Jasper's arm and drag him back. Instead, I watched his face carefully for any signs of distress. My worry turned out to be unfounded, and though the handshake was brief, it was cordial.

"Gabrielle, you look stunning." Jasper took both of her hands and moved closer to kiss her cheek. "Congratulations. I can't think of anyone more deserving."

"Nicholas."

Uh oh. I knew that tone, and I reflexively took a step back, feeling like my stomach was going to fall out of my butt. "Sir?"

Jasper looked between us, his smile slipping half a degree. "Oh, you know each other?"

Rhys utterly ignored him. Placing his unfinished whiskey down on a nearby table, he stepped forward and grabbed my wrist. "We need to talk."

"I—"

Without waiting for a response, he dragged me through a set of glass doors and onto an expansive stone terrace that overlooked the city. Backing me against the wall near the safety railing, he planted his feet in a wide stance as if he thought I might try to run.

"What the hell?" he demanded. "I thought you had plans tonight?"

"I do." I stopped short of tacking on something sarcastic, like "obviously," but I figured it was implied.

“What are you doing here with Jasper Ryan?”

“The same thing you’re doing here, I’m assuming.”

There was that tick in his jaw, the tightening that meant he was quickly losing patience. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“You didn’t ask.” Was I supposed to read his damn mind? “You said you wanted to see a movie!”

“Because you said you already had plans!”

I didn’t understand how the two were related, but we clearly sucked at communication. “Can we talk about this later? I need to get back.”

It took me about three seconds to realize that had been the wrong thing to say. The muscle in his jaw didn’t just tick, it bulged, and I could hear his teeth grinding together.

“Back to Jasper?”

Other than a brief affair in college, I had almost zero experience when it came to dating or relationships. Otherwise, I might have realized sooner why my boss was acting borderline homicidal.

He was jealous.

“Yes,” I answered carefully, “but it’s not what you think.” My contract with +One prohibited me from revealing my status as an agent unless the client agreed to it. Jasper would probably understand, but maybe I didn’t have to say it directly. “I just go to parties with him sometimes.”

For a long time, Rhys’ expression didn’t change. Then, as understanding dawned, the lines of his face slowly softened, and the tension drained from his body.

“You mean—”

“Yes.”

“So, you’re—”

“Yes.”

With a huff of exasperation, he closed the distance between us, anchoring me to the wall with his muscular frame. “Nicholas?”

My breath caught, and a shiver rippled through me. “Sir?”

“Stop interrupting me.”

“Yes, sir.”

His eyes narrowed again, and he leaned in until I felt his warm breath against my lips when he spoke. “Call me Rhys.”

“Yes, Rhys.” With every neuron in my brain misfiring, I probably would have jumped off the damn terrace if he’d so much as suggested it.

“Gabby and Jasper are likely wondering where we went.”

“Likely,” I parroted.

“We’re going back inside.”

It wasn’t a question, but I nodded anyway.

“I promise not to interfere, but I need you to remember something.”

I couldn’t breathe, and the lack of oxygen was starting to make me dizzy. “What’s that, s—Rhys?”

His feral grin said he’d heard my slip. “I want you to remember that while you might be here with him, you belong to me.”

It felt like every drop of blood in my body drained straight to my groin, and I groaned when my cock swelled against my zipper. I really needed him to stop talking before I did something humiliating. Like pass out.

“Answer me.”

I blinked stupidly. “What was the question?”

He just arched an eyebrow and waited.

“I...I belong to...to you,” I panted, both flustered and turned on in equal measure.

When his gaze dropped to my mouth, I braced myself for a kiss. Even knowing the evidence would be written all over my swollen lips when I returned to the party, I wanted it, craved it. Just a taste. One taste was all I needed to get me through to the end of the night.

But he didn't kiss me.

Drawing his fingertips down the side of my face, he traced a line from my temple to the curve of my jaw that left me shivery and aching. Then, he rubbed the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip and sighed.

Without a word, he dropped his hand and turned, striding across the terrace without a backward glance. His abrupt departure didn't upset me, though. Quite the opposite, actually. I was grateful for a moment alone to compose myself before rejoining my date.

It seemed like I stood there forever, taking deep, cleansing breaths while I waited for my pulse to return to a less frantic rhythm. Realistically, it had been no more than a couple of minutes. Once my body stopped trembling, I took a moment to straighten my jacket and bowtie and practice what I hoped looked like a natural smile.

I received curious stares from Gabby and Jasper when I reentered the glass pavilion, but even if I wanted to explain, I had no idea what I would say. Thankfully, neither of them asked questions, and after twenty minutes or so of escorting Jasper around the room to mingle, I felt mostly back to normal.

By coincidence or some cosmic joke, I ended up sitting next to Rhys during dinner, and all that nervous energy came rushing back the moment I met his gaze. Why the hell wasn't he at the table with his family in the front of the room?

I tried to focus on Jasper, engaging him in conversation about some of the people we'd spoken with earlier. Yet, every few minutes, my attention gravitated back to Rhys, and I would have to actively stop myself from staring at him.

The first course of the evening arrived soon after we'd been seated. A tomato bisque, perfect for a cold winter night. Smooth and creamy, the first spoonful danced across my tongue with a dazzling combination of flavors. I detected onion, a hint of pepper, and something I couldn't quite place.

It was savory, but with a slight twang and the barest suggestion of sweetness. Unique, yet familiar, and I was certain I'd tasted it somewhere before. Weirdly, it kind of reminded me of the dipping sauce that often accompanied many Vietnamese dishes.

The key ingredient in the dip being fish sauce.

I had read an article once that claimed fish sauce enhanced the flavor of foods like tomato soup and marinara. Beyond a fleeting fascination, I hadn't thought much of it at the time. Now that I had a reason to be more conscious about food, I was angry. It seemed incredibly irresponsible to hide a common allergen in a dish without informing the diner.

My spoon clattered against the ceramic edge of the bowl, and I jerked toward Rhys, my eyes wide with dread. He was deep in conversation with a middle-aged woman in a cherry-red evening gown that had more sequins than a high school homecoming dance. His spoon still rested on the table, and the bisque, so far, remained untouched.

I sagged in relief.

He had assured me that he only had a problem when he consumed fish. Just being around it wouldn't hurt him, but I wasn't taking any chances. Lifting a hand to signal a nearby server, I smiled with gratitude when she hurried over without hesitation.

"Please take these away," I told her, pointing to both my soup and Rhys'.

"Is there a problem, sir?"

As much as he valued his privacy, Rhys probably wouldn't want me to announce his allergy to a table of strangers. "Just take them. Please."

I didn't blame her for being confused, but she nodded and gathered up the bowls. As she walked away, Rhys turned to me with a quirked brow.

I leaned closer and told him in a whisper, "There's fish sauce in the bisque."

He nodded, and his hand came to rest on my thigh beneath the table, squeezing gently in wordless gratitude. Pleased that I'd handle the situation appropriately without embarrassing either him or myself, I placed my hand atop his and smiled.

I had expected the other guests at the table to ask about the incident. No one did. Apparently, sending back food without a reason was a common thing amongst them. The woman seated next to Rhys even bobbed her head a couple of times in approval.

"It is a bit salty," she said to no one in particular.

The rest of the meal passed without further incident, though I did carefully inspect the main course before allowing Rhys to touch it. Once satisfied that it wouldn't kill him, I relaxed and devoted a bit more of my attention to Jasper.

Halfway through dessert—a decadent chocolate mousse topped with fresh raspberries—the presenter approached the podium on the dais to begin the ceremony. He was a portly gentleman with thinning hair and a warm, infectious smile that made me like him instantly.

He started by detailing who Gabby was and what the Bright Beginnings Foundation had contributed to the community. Then, he called her up on the stage to present the award.

Gabby gave an emotionally charged acceptance speech, citing the statistics on domestic abuse and how it affected victims long after they had escaped the situation. Next, she thanked a number of people, beginning with her family, and concluded by reminding everyone about the summer fundraiser.

The room erupted into applause as she left the podium, and I clapped so hard my hands stung. I couldn't have been

prouder if she was my own sister.

“That was amazing,” I told Rhys, my heart bursting with happiness. “I adore her.”

While everyone else focused on his sister, he leaned close and murmured against my ear, “I adore *you*.”

TWELVE

~ RHYS ~

DESPITE THE COLD, I waited on the curb next to the limo, waving the driver off when he came to open the door for me. I usually preferred to drive myself to these types of events, but I'd rented the service for Gabby to celebrate her big night.

Since she had decided to leave with our parents, I now had entirely different plans for the backseat of the vehicle.

Pretending to be interested in my phone, I watched discreetly as Nicholas said goodnight to Jasper and helped him into the back of his own limo. When he had told me he'd been a professional party guest, I had envisioned something quite different. I had also wrongly assumed that he'd been speaking in the past tense.

There were no words on heaven or earth to describe the blind fury that had gripped me when he'd walked into the room on the arm of Jasper Ryan. I had nothing against Jasper. While we didn't associate often, I had always considered him a decent person.

That hadn't stopped me from wanting to drive my fist into his smiling face. Nicholas was *mine*, and fuck anyone who tried to take him from me.

Even after I'd learned the truth, it had been difficult to watch Nicholas acting like the perfect date with someone else. Every time he had smiled at Jasper, or casually touched his arm, or leaned against him, I had wanted to growl like an animal and drag him back to my side.

The soup incident had helped ease some of my frustration. I was grateful that he had saved me an ER trip and a lot of awkwardness. More than that, however, it had been a soothing balm to realize that, despite appearances, I still occupied his thoughts.

Selfish? Yes.

Absurd? Probably.

Did I care? Not even a little.

When Nicholas started down the sidewalk toward me, I dropped my phone into my pocket and held out my hand. His momentum slowed, and he tilted his head, suspicion written into the lines of his face. For a moment, I worried he had changed his mind about me, but when I saw him glance at the other guests milling around the front of the hotel, I realized the problem.

The public setting made him uneasy, not me.

I smiled encouragingly and wiggled my fingers, making it clear that I didn't give a damn what anyone else thought. It appeared to do the trick. With a twinkling laugh, he closed the distance and took my hand.

Once I had a firm grip, I jerked him close and spun him around in one fluid motion, pinning him against the side of the car. A soft gasp burst from his mouth, and his eyes rounded, the dark depths reflecting the city lights. He looked like a debauched angel, and I had never wanted him more.

“Rhys!” he hissed. “People are staring.”

“Let them.” I couldn't even be bothered to look over my shoulder to see if he was right.

“You're my *boss*.”

“Fine. You're fired.”

“People will—excuse me? I'm what?”

“You're fired,” I repeated.

“On what grounds?”

“You are too damn distracting.”

My productivity had definitely decreased since Nicholas had become my assistant. On the upside, however, the view had gotten a lot better.

“I...that's not...you can't...no.” Tilting his head up, he narrowed his eyes and jutted out his chin. “I am not fired.”

His indignation was so damn cute I couldn't help but laugh.

Pulling him away from the vehicle, I opened the door and ushered him into the backseat. After I notified the driver that we were ready to leave, I pressed the button to activate the privacy screen and hauled Nicholas into my lap so that he straddled my thighs.

Fuck, I needed him like I needed air, and I couldn't wait even the fifteen minutes it would take to reach my house in Preston Hollow. Palming the back of his neck, I slanted our mouths together and shoved my tongue between his soft lips. The moan I received went straight to my cock, and I sucked and licked as I fumbled with the buttons on his jacket.

Once I had it opened, I pushed it off his shoulders and jerked the hem of his shirt free from his waistband. Then, I slipped my hand beneath the material and stroked the warm, velvety skin that stretched tight over his stomach. Drowning in his taste, in the feel of his lithe body pressed against mine, my head spun with confusion when he jerked his mouth away.

"What's wrong?" I stilled my hands but didn't remove them, searching his face for an answer.

"Did you mean it?" he asked in a trembling voice.

"Yes." I didn't know what he was referring to specifically, but I rarely said something I didn't mean, especially when it came to him.

"So, when you said I belong to you..." He trailed off and took a deep breath. "That was real?"

I thought I had been clear about my feelings, but if he needed reassurance, I had no problem providing it. Sliding my hand around the side of his neck, I cupped his jaw and smoothed my thumb over his cheek.

"I won't lie. I want you. I want your body." I grazed my fingertips over his belly and up his chest. "I want to taste your lips." Arching my neck, I brushed a tender kiss to his mouth. "I want to hear you moan and feel you writhe beneath me."

A soft, breathy moan fell from his lips as if on cue. The writhing, unfortunately, would have to wait.

“But I also want your heart. I want it all.” I smoothed away the tears that fell from his misty eyes and kissed his cheek. “Not for a night. Not for a weekend. I want you to be mine for as long as you’ll have me.” If he was scared, if he needed me to say it first, I could do that. “I love you.”

“Y—you love me?”

Oh, my sweet baby. So anxious. So unsure of himself. “Yes, Nicholas, I love you.”

“Since when?”

I could tell it mattered to him, so I considered his question carefully before answering. It had definitely been lust at first sight, but I hadn’t loved him yet. Those carnal feelings had softened and become more affectionate after we’d had lunch together at the deli. I had probably started falling for him then, but it hadn’t become evident to me until the night of my birthday party.

“When you cursed at my parents.”

“Rhys!” he exclaimed, slapping his palm against my chest.

I chuckled at his outrage. “I thought Gabby had already introduced you, so I didn’t get it at first. Then I realized you were trying to protect me, like tonight, with the soup.”

“I wasn’t sure if your parents knew you liked men.”

“I know.” It had taken me a little while to get there, but I’d eventually worked it out for myself. “They do, but the gesture was still sweet. Thank you for taking such good care of me.”

“I love you, too, Rhys.” He sniffled as more tears brimmed over to track down his cheeks. “I’ll always take care of you.”

I couldn’t handle it anymore. Holding his face in both hands, I attacked his mouth like a starving man. My teeth grazed his bottom lip, coaxing more of those tantalizing moans from him. When I delved inside to tangle my tongue around his, he rocked his hips, grinding against my aching dick until we were both panting.

With our mouths still locked together, I reached blindly for his waistband, popping the button open and sliding the zipper down to free his erection. I broke free long enough to spit into my palm—not a great lubricant, but the best I could do in the current situation—and fisted his swollen cock.

Then I captured his lips again, swallowing down his whimpers as he began thrusting in a jerky, uncoordinated rhythm. His skin flushed a delicious shade of pink, and his chest heaved with every gasping breath. Planting his hands on my shoulders, he tossed his head back and rocked faster, pushing his length through the ring of my fingers.

“Rhys...I...I...”

I’d teased him all night, purposely keeping him on edge, and he had clearly reached his limit. “Don’t hold back,” I murmured as I laved a line up the side of his neck with my tongue before nipping at his earlobe. “Just let go.”

A curse fell from his lips, and he tensed when he came, making a mess of my shirt as he covered the expensive material in ropes of pearly semen. I couldn’t have cared less. He was so fucking gorgeous in his pleasure, and I would happily let him ruin a dozen shirts just to see that look of rapture on his face.

He collapsed on my chest, his face buried against the side of my neck, and it was probably the most relaxed I had ever seen him. It didn’t last long, though. When the car slowed to a stop a few minutes later, he sprang out of my lap like a jackrabbit and hurriedly began putting his clothes to rights.

“Oh, god,” he breathed. “Your shirt. I’m so sorry!”

Reaching over, I took his chin in a firm hold and looked him in the eye. “I’m not, and you shouldn’t be, either. That was the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.”

The driver’s voice came through the speakers to let us know we had arrived at our destination. Though the privacy screen remained in place, Nicholas still bolted upright and yelped.

That endearing innocence was going to be the death of me.

I pressed the button for the intercom to thank the driver and assured him that he didn't need to get the door for us. Exiting onto the circle driveway in front of my two-story brick home, I offered my hand to assist Nicholas out of the car.

"Holy shit," he breathed when he joined me. "This is your house?"

I nodded.

It undoubtedly looked ostentatious to him, and he'd be right, but it was actually one of the smaller houses in the affluent neighborhood of Preston Hollow. Many of the homes were multi-million-dollar properties that featured amenities like basketball courts, bowling alleys, and putting greens.

"Come on. It's cold out here."

Holding his jacket in the crook of his elbow, Nicholas laced his fingers with mine and followed me up the walkway to the double doors. I entered the code on the keypad and pressed my thumb to the scanner, a newer feature to the house, courtesy of Watchdog Security Solutions.

The automatic lights turned on when we entered the foyer, and the expression of uninhibited awe on Nicholas' face made me smile. I hadn't been trying to impress him, but I'd be lying if I said his reaction didn't stroke my ego just a little.

I briefly considered giving him a tour of the place, but quickly discarded the idea when he looked up at me with a million-watt smile. One glimpse of his kiss-swollen lips was enough to snap the tenuous grip on my self-control. Jerking him close, I crushed our mouths together, walking him deeper into the house as I stripped out of my jacket and soiled shirt.

I fumbled with the buttons on Nicholas' shirt, getting the top two undone before my patience came to an end. With a growl of frustration, I tore it open, sending the remaining buttons clattering to the floor. Fuck it. I'd buy him a new shirt. Hell, I'd buy him a whole new wardrobe.

By the time we made it to the living room, I had him completely naked, except for his black dress socks, and I suddenly had a decision to make. Approximately six feet

separated the L-shaped sectional from the kitchen island, but I didn't want to take the time to walk him around the sofa.

Grabbing him by the waist, I nibbled at the sensitive skin on his neck as I lifted him easily onto the island countertop. His gasp of surprise when his skin met with the cool granite quickly turned to a moan of pleasure when I dragged my thumbnail over his pebbled nipple.

His cock was already hard and throbbing once more, the spongy crown a deep, angry shade of red. Oh, to be twenty-four with endless stamina again. A bead of precum glistened in the glow from the pendant lights, drawing my gaze and making my mouth water.

I had to taste him.

Pushing his thighs apart, I moved between them and lowered my head to swipe my tongue over the leaking tip. Salty yet slightly sweet, Nicholas was my new favorite flavor, and a deep groan rumbled in my chest as I wrapped my lips around the flared head. His fingers tangled in my hair, and he bucked his hips, his moans reverberating around the kitchen as he pushed deeper into my mouth.

I had blamed myself for his hair trigger in the limo, but seeing him already teetering on the edge again, I had to wonder how much—or little—experience he had.

I took him to the back of my throat but backed off quickly when I felt his length pulse against my tongue. Fisting the base of his erection, I squeezed tightly while I lapped my tongue across the tip. Even with my assistance, Nicholas still seemed to be holding on by a thread, but I didn't want him to come again until I was buried deep inside him.

Untangling his fingers from my hair, I urged him to wrap his arms around my neck as I stood straight and pulled him to the edge of the counter.

“Hold on to me,” I ordered, lifting him into my arms.

He did so without hesitation, clinging to my neck and winding his slender legs around my waist. I'd have to start

keeping supplies in other parts of the house, but for now, I had no choice but to carry him up the stairs.

With him squirming against me while he bit and sucked at my neck, it wasn't an easy task, but I managed to get us to my bedroom without bodily injury. Depositing him atop the slate-gray comforter, I stretched his arms over his head and pinned his wrists to the mattress. Moonlight spilled into the room through the windows of the balcony doors, bathing him in silvery light that made his skin glow with an ethereal beauty.

“Do you want more?”

He dipped his head.

“Words.”

“Yes.” His voice was gravelly and hoarse, and he pushed the single word past trembling lips.

“How much more?”

He released a stuttering breath, and I felt him shiver beneath me. “Everything.”

“I promise your answer won't change anything, but I need to know. Is this your first time?”

His hesitation was all the answer I needed, but I waited for confirmation. Eventually, he gave a jerky nod.

“Yes.”

I rewarded his honesty with a tender kiss. “If you change your mind at any time, we can stop.” When he nodded again, I smiled and stroked his hair back from his forehead. “If I do anything you don't like, tell me. Understood?”

“Y–yes,” he stammered. “I understand.”

Watching him for any signs of distress, I caressed his flank from ribcage to hip and back again. Nicholas just stared up at me with a soft smile and the most trusting expression I had ever seen. It was a heady feeling, and while a primitive part of me loved knowing I would be his first, I took the responsibility seriously.

“Don't move.”

Rolling off the side of the bed, I quickly divested the rest of my clothing and reached into the nightstand drawer to find what I needed. I hid the small bottle of lube and the condom in my palm, keenly aware of Nicholas' eyes on me, and placed them on the bed by his feet. The less he had to think about, the less nervous he would be.

A crooked smile tugged at one side of my mouth when I realized he had taken my order not to move quite literally. He still had his arms stretched over his head, and one knee bent slightly out to the side. Other than his eyes, which tracked me as I crawled back onto the mattress, he lay as still as a statue.

Hell, I wasn't entirely sure he was breathing.

I used my knees to push his thighs apart and settled between them, choking back a groan when his erection pressed against my lower abdomen. With one hand braced against the bed, I used the other to caress his smooth skin, my touch light and teasing as I mapped the contours of his body.

The way he gasped and trembled with every gentle stroke set my blood on fire, and I had to take several deep breaths and remind myself not to rush. Starting at his collarbones, I kissed and nibbled my way down his chest, savoring every whimper and gasp. When I raked my teeth across his hard nipple, he arched up from the bed, his back bowed and his head back.

Fuck, he was gorgeous, and his skin was so damn soft and fragrant I could feast on him for hours and never grow bored.

I continued petting and caressing as I laved a wet trail from his sternum to his belly button, ignoring my own building need as I worshiped every inch of him. The birthmark on his left hip fascinated me, and I dipped my head to draw my tongue across the unique pattern. A sprinkling of tiny freckles ran along his hipbone and curved toward his back, growing narrower at one end, like the tail of a shooting star.

Inching lower, I closed my lips over the smooth skin at the crease of his thigh and sucked it into my mouth. Nicholas squirmed and moaned, his voice rising until it rang throughout the room.

He hadn't said a word, at least, not any intelligible ones, but his body said everything he couldn't, practically begging for my attention. His fingers clawed at the comforter. His toes curled. The muscles in his legs flexed. His balls drew tight to his groin, and his cock throbbed as precum streamed from the tip to gleam in the moonlight.

Mindful that he didn't have the greatest control, I swallowed his cock down, then popped back up quickly to trace the ridge of the crown with my tongue. I kept my ministrations light and teasing, not giving him what he really wanted, but just enough to keep him distracted.

Without looking, I reached behind me and dragged my hand across the comforter until I found the small plastic bottle. Flipping the cap open with my thumb, I squeezed a generous amount of the gel onto my fingers.

Then I rested my shoulders against the back of his thighs and leaned into him, urging his knees toward his chest as I slid my index finger along his crease to his entrance. The tight muscles quivered when I stroked them in slow circles, eventually relaxing so I could push inside.

I didn't encounter nearly the amount of resistance I expected, and after only a few glides, I was able to insert a second digit. Maybe he hadn't been with another man before, but I imagined he had a number of different toys at home. My brain helpfully supplied a detailed image of him sprawled across a bed, his body glistening with sweat as he jerked his dick with one hand and worked a dildo into his ass with the other.

My hand jerked, pushing my fingers deeper into his silky channel, and a strangled groan vibrated in my chest, the sound muffled around his shaft.

"Oh, god! Rhys!" A string of curses fell from his lips. Some I knew, and some that sounded completely made up.

His head thrashed from side to side as he writhed beneath me, his hips rising to thrust into my mouth, then falling to fuck himself on my fingers. It was the most erotic thing I had ever

seen, and my own cock jerked as the pressure in my balls swelled to nearly unbearable levels.

I wasn't too proud to admit that my hand shook as I inserted a third finger and pumped into him with quick, impatient strokes. Tingles like tiny pinpricks spread across my skin, and a shiver raced up my back to the base of my skull. My heart hammered, pulsing up into my throat, and I groaned again when a wave of dizziness washed over me.

“Rhys...I...I can't...”

He trailed off, but I had a good idea what he was trying to tell me, and I felt the same way. I had been suppressing my own desire to focus on him, but I couldn't ignore the growing need any longer. I already felt like I was burning alive, and I just knew I would spontaneously combust if I didn't get inside him *right fucking now*.

Rising up on my knees, I removed my fingers from their sheath and reached for the condom. An urgency I couldn't remember feeling with anyone else coursed through me, a wildness I couldn't control. I ripped the foil packet open with my teeth to remove the circle of latex and rolled it down my length.

After applying a liberal amount of lube, I lined the head up with Nicholas' hole and pushed into him. I still had the presence of mind to remember to take it slow and give him time to adjust, but it wasn't easy. My entire body quaked with the effort, but I knew I'd never forgive myself if I hurt him.

“Oh, god. Oh, fuck. Oh...oh, holy fucking hell.”

Nicholas continued chanting a litany of obscenities as I invaded him, sliding in inch by torturous inch. It should have been offensive, hearing such vulgar words from that angel face, but I found it sexy as hell, and it only spurred my desire to new levels.

I fell over him as I bottomed out, bracing my hands against the mattress on either side of his head to support most of my weight. As tantalizing as I found his foul mouth, I could think

of much better uses for it. Lowering my head, I claimed his lips in a bruising kiss, demanding a response from him.

Nicholas didn't disappoint.

He opened for me with a loud moan, sucking my tongue into his mouth and winding his arms around my neck to drag me closer. I moved my hips in microbursts, grinding against him until his cries reached a crescendo. Once I felt certain the sounds weren't derived from pain, I thrust more forcefully, setting up a steady rhythm as I drove into his tight heat.

I could tell from his coiled muscles and rapid breaths that he already teetered on the edge. Speeding up my pace, I pistoned my hips, driving into him hard and deep, not wanting him to fall over without me.

As our coupling became primal and frenzied, I slid my palm beneath his lower back, holding him tightly as he buried his face against my throat. His blunt fingernails dug into my shoulders, and he clung to me with a desperation that fueled my own need. Heat blossomed in my belly and traveled south, my muscles tightening with the familiar warnings of impending orgasm.

Leaning more heavily against him, I trapped his erection between our sweat-slicked bodies, providing an extra bit of friction that sent him flying. My name fell from his lips, stifled against the side of my neck, and he jerked violently in my arms at the same time I felt a river of hot cream paint my stomach.

With a loud, bone-rattling groan, I let go of the last of my self-control and followed after him. I thrust harder, faster, driving us both up the mattress as I spilled myself into his clenching depths.

Though we were both sated, I didn't move right away. I continued to clutch him tight as I peppered kisses over his flushed face. His glassy eyes and dazed smile melted my heart, and I promised myself in that moment that I would do whatever it took to keep him with me.

Only when my dick started to soften did I ease out of him so I could dispose of the condom in the wastebasket beside the bed. Task completed, I rolled back over and gathered Nicholas into my arms, where he snuggled close with a contented sigh.

“I love you,” he murmured, pressing his lips to my chest. “Is it cliché to say that right now?”

His question pulled a chuckle from me. “Not if it’s true.” I hugged him tighter and kissed the top of his head. “I love you, too.”

“I’m sticky.”

“We both are,” I responded with another laugh. We needed to get up and shower, but I just wanted to hold him for a few more minutes. “Nicholas, I don’t want you going on any more dates. Not even fake ones.”

I felt his cheek swell against my shoulder, an indication he was smiling. “I already handed in my resignation and received my severance papers. Tonight was my last gig.”

Thank god. I didn’t want to come off as an overbearing asshole, but there was no way I could watch him pretend to flirt with someone else and not lose my mind.

“Good.” Slipping a knuckle under his chin, I urged his head up so I could claim his lips in a brief but possessive kiss. “Because you are mine, Nicholas Coletti, and I’m never letting you go.”

EPILOGUE

~ NICK ~

One Year Later...

LOUNGING IN THE HOT tub behind the home I now shared with Rhys, I tilted my head back against the stone ledge and stared up at the night sky. The full moon shone brightly over the treetops, and the stars twinkled like diamonds across the black canvas.

I still couldn't believe how much my life had changed in such a short time. Rhys had asked me to move in with him right away, but I had still been skeptical that our relationship would last. Other than our work, we didn't have a lot in common, and frankly, I had been convinced at the time that I didn't deserve him.

Being the stubborn fool he was, Rhys had asked me every day for six months until I'd finally given in and agreed to live with him. It had been the best decision I'd ever made. Wrapped in his arms was my favorite place to be, while waking up with him beside me still felt like a dream most mornings.

Once we'd made our relationship public, including at the office, I had given serious consideration to looking for a job at another marketing firm. I loved being Rhys' assistant, and I enjoyed being able to spend my days with him. He always asked me to sit in on meetings, sometimes in his stead. He also valued my input, which I appreciated.

Still, I had worried my coworkers would think I received special treatment because I was dating the boss.

Rhys had listened to my concerns without interruption, then steadfastly refused to let me resign. Like most things, he'd gotten his way, and so far, I remained on good terms with everyone at RQ Creative Marketing.

"Tired?" Rhys asked, passing me a glass of wine as he sank onto the built-in bench beside me.

“Thank you.” I accepted the glass and took a sip before answering. “Not tired. Just thinking.”

“Good things, I hope.”

“Of course.” Smiling, I slid closer and rested my head on his shoulder. “Oh, I picked up your tux from the dry cleaner today.”

“Thank you, my love.” He wrapped an arm around my back and kissed my temple. “I completely forgot about it.”

Which was why we fit so well together. We might not have much in common, but our strengths and weaknesses complemented each other.

“I know, and since I love you, I really don’t want your sister to murder you.”

Gabby had been working her ass off to plan the annual charity gala for the Bright Beginnings Foundation. From what she had told me, it was going to be stunning, and the entire night would end with a dazzling display of fireworks.

“When is that thing again?”

I rolled my head to press my face against his neck and chuckled under my breath. “That *thing* is tomorrow night.”

“I knew that.”

“I know you did,” I said, humoring him. He really was the worst when it came to remembering dates.

“Oh, did you see the news this morning?”

Leaning back, I looked up at him with an arched brow. I didn’t watch the news or read the paper. If people weren’t talking about it on social media, it was unlikely I knew about it.

“Three more people have come forward to accuse Robert Wheeler of sexual harassment. One of them is claiming he assaulted her in his office.”

“That’s terrible.” My heart hurt for the men and women the bastard had hurt, but I was glad that he would finally be facing

justice. “Maybe they felt more comfortable coming forward now that he’s been fired.”

Technically, he had “stepped down” as president of Wheeler and Associates for “personal reasons.” The press release hadn’t fooled anyone, though. His ass had been canned, and the company had been scrambling to do damage control ever since.

I also hoped his son would face similar consequences for his behavior. I hadn’t seen Jordan since Rhys’ birthday party, and I hadn’t heard any news about him, either. Then again, since he’d been ousted from Dallas’ high society, he didn’t have many opportunities to harass anyone.

A small consolation, but it was something, and it would have to be good enough for now.

“So, I’ve been thinking.”

“Hmm?” I said, only half paying attention.

“We should get married.”

Wine sprayed from my lips, and I hunched forward as hoarse coughs wracked my chest. Rhys reached over and calmly took the glass from my hand as if he hadn’t just almost given me a heart attack.

“Are you crazy?” I wheezed.

He shrugged. “I’m serious. We should get married.”

I had come to learn that my adoring boyfriend was about the least romantic person on the planet. He didn’t buy me flowers, or plan date nights, or spoil me with trinkets. I’d had to remind him twice about my birthday, and in the end, it had been me who had made the reservation at our favorite restaurant.

I didn’t mind, though, because he showed me how much he loved me in all the ways that mattered. He listened when I spoke, and he always considered my questions carefully before answering. When I’d been sick, he’d made me soup. It had been incredibly salty, but I had still appreciated the effort.

He showered me with attention, and he never missed a chance to touch me or kiss me. Even when we argued, he never withheld affection, which was probably why our disagreements lasted an hour at most.

I was okay with the fact that he'd bought me an electric kettle for Valentine's Day rather than chocolates or roses. I didn't care that he always fell asleep whenever we watched a movie together. And it didn't bother me that he refused to dance at any of the events we attended.

So, I really shouldn't have been surprised he'd proposed marriage as nonchalantly as he might suggest we have lunch together. It probably hadn't even crossed his mind that I might refuse. He'd be right, of course, but that didn't mean I was going to let him off that easily.

"I want to get married on a beach."

Rhys bobbed his head. "How about Cozumel?"

Whoa. I would have been happy with somewhere like Myrtle Beach, not a whole different country. I cleared my throat to hide my surprise.

"I want kids."

"We can adopt a dozen."

I chuckled. He was always so over the top. "I was thinking two."

"Done. What else?"

Hooking a leg across his thighs, I slid over to straddle his lap and wound my arms around his neck. "You, Mr. Big Shot, have to let me have my way sometimes."

"I always let you have your way."

Debatable. "You also have to promise to love me forever."

"That's the plan." He pinched my chin and arched up for a kiss. "So, what do you say? Do you want to be Nicholas Quinton?"

I would likely hyphenate my name, but we could argue semantics later. Tightening my arms around his neck, I closed

my eyes and leaned close, pressing my brow to his.

“I do.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arden is a firm believer that words have power, the pen is mightier than the sword, and happily-ever-afters aren't just for princesses in fairytales. A true romantic at heart, she's drawn to the tragically beautiful and the beautifully broken, those flawed men and the stories that make them heroes.

In love with the written word from an early age, Arden has been writing since she was old enough to hold a crayon and a juice box. She has now moved on to more sophisticated mediums to share her ideas and has traded in her juice boxes for copious amounts of strong coffee.

When she's not writing, you can usually find her curled up with a good book or in her makeshift studio creating imperfect but satisfying works of art.

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DRAGON IT OUT

GRIN AND BEAR IT

PIXIE LITTLE LIAR

DEAD OVER HEELS

SILENT KNIGHT

PAIN IN THE ICE

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