



*My Ex*

**BOYFRIEND'S**

*Daddy*

MISTY ELLIS

# **My Ex-Boyfriend's Daddy**

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**An Age Gap Single Dad Romance**



Misty Ellis



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## Chapter One

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### Sidney

Nancy calls me into her office just as I tell her goodbye for the evening. I feel strangely nervous as she refuses to meet my eyes.

“Sidney. Please sit.” She takes a deep breath and I feel the walls closing in on me.

“Is everything okay, Nancy?” I smile nervously to mask my unease.

“I don’t know how else to say this, Sidney. You’re an excellent employee and I hate that things have come to this.” Her kind eyes bore into me and I see a depth of emotion there.

“Come to what?”

“We know what has been happening to you with these ‘visitors’.” She stares at me and I drop my eyes. I don’t need to ask which visitors.

“We’ve had reports of at least three occasions in the parking lot in full view of workers. And quite frankly, employees are

talking. They don't feel safe, Sidney. And I have to think about their safety as well."

I feel it coming. And I'm powerless to stop it. I hear her sigh before she speaks again.

"Management has discussed the matter and we have decided it is best for all parties concerned for you to take some leave."

Silence ensues and it is as though I can hear a pin drop. I lick my lips nervously.

"Take some leave? But I've already used all my vacation time." I wipe my clammy hands on my skirt, praying that this conversation will end.

"That's okay. You can take all the time you need to sort out your personal affairs." She tries to smile kindly but it falls flat.

"Are-Are you firing me?" I whisper the question, my mind racing a mile a minute.

"Firing is such a strong word. It's some time off to get your affairs in order." Her smile slips and her demeanor becomes cool.

"And if they never get in order?" I wait with bated breath for her response, like a patient waiting to hear how long I have left to live after being diagnosed with a terminal illness.

"Then you stay on leave." She doesn't even flinch.

I sit in silence swallowing against the lump in my throat. "So, basically, I need to find myself another job."

“Well, put it this way. If you quit, we would provide you with a glowing reference. You are an excellent worker, Sidney. You’re organized and efficient. Any employer would be happy to have you as an assistant.”

“Just not Shadeed’s.”

“I’m sorry, Sidney. You know how rough this city is. We can’t take any chances and put innocent people in the line of danger. I’ll tell you what, I can speak with accounts and see how best we can work out a salary in lieu of notice arrangement. And if there are a few vacation days that you would have earned, we can pay you for those as well.” She scribbles the details on a notepad. “How about that?”

“I would appreciate that.” I nod and stand. “Thank you.”

I leave the office quickly, my mind numb about what happened.

I’m trying to stave off the thoughts as I hurry home. Suddenly, a hand grips my arm, and before I know it, I’m pulled into an alley and shoved up against a wall, knocking the wind out of me.

“Where’s our money?” I hear that familiar guttural tone and I close my eyes. This day just keeps getting better and better.

“Please, I don’t have any money!” I squeeze my eyes even tighter and whimper as I try to catch my breath without swallowing against the press of the cold blade against my throat. My heart feels as though it’s going to beat out of my chest. My brain is in a fog. All I can think is that I’ll be the

next Chicago news headline when my lifeless body is found covered in blood in some nondescript alley.

“Well, then where is that little boyfriend of yours? He owes us.”

“I told you, he’s not my boyfriend anymore. I haven’t seen him in months!”

I try to control the sobs as the thug presses his face into mine.

“It would be such a crime to mess up such a pretty face. But that boyfriend of yours needs to cough up our money. Find him. Tell him we want what’s ours. Or the next time, I won’t be so kind.” The thug growls while he presses the blade even deeper into my skin, grazing it slightly. A tremble courses through me as I feel the burn of the blade and fear that I’m going to pass out cold. Just as I wonder if I’m going to begin to see my short twenty-seven-year life flash before my eyes as a sign of the beginning of my end, the pressure eases and the chill of the February evening wind sweeps through me. I dare not open my eyes.

Suddenly, my legs give way and my chest tightens painfully as though I have just run a marathon. Without warning, my legs give under me, my body sliding down the wall against which I have just been pinned. Tears pour down my cheeks as I think about how many times in the past three months I have been accosted. And it is all because of Grant.

I hold my head as I sob uncontrollably. I wish I had never laid eyes on him that evening at the coffee shop. Just before

Thanksgiving last year, I kicked him out. A week later, the first thug had shown up as I was on my way to work one morning. At first, I had thought it was just a routine mugging until I realized he was not interested in my meager belongings but was more intent on delivering a verbal message.

“Tell Grant Spike wants to have a little chat with him, little lady.” My heart had hammered my chest with fear that morning. And that had been just the beginning.

I fish a piece of tissue out of my purse. I dab at my eyes as the tears subside. I know I need to get up and head home but I cannot trust my legs. I wonder if it would have been easier for me to have had my throat cut a few minutes ago. At least I wouldn't have to be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life. I struggle to my feet and lean against the wall for support. I look at the streetlight at the end of the alley, outlining the people who hurry to and fro. If only I had left work earlier. But then again, the time wouldn't have made any difference. Spike would have been waiting regardless – as he had been the last few times he approached me. For the first time since this ordeal has begun, I wonder if I should consider getting some sort of protection for myself. But who am I kidding. I couldn't afford it if my life depended on it, which, more and more, apparently it does. I'm screwed.

What else is new?

I take a deep breath and pull my jacket around me even closer. Just like that, five years of a job I really like have come to an end. That is the story of my life – gloom and doom.

I take another bolstering breath before taking a tentative step. I soon find myself back on the main street. People continue to move past me, barely glancing at my disheveled state. If I collapse on the pavement, I know they'll just step over me and keep going. Such is life.

I join the pedestrians and start to move. I trust I'm safe, especially since Spike himself had come calling this evening. But I've had enough. They know where I live if they turn up at my former job and don't find me. I can't stay at the apartment.

Weak tears fill my eyes once more.

I look around as panic sweeps over me. I come to an abrupt stop as I look at a pretty girl with swirling dark hair and huge green eyes. As the girl stares at me, I wonder what could have happened to cause the droop to her full lips. It is not until she pulls her jacket around her at the same time I do that I realize she is me. I feel as though someone punched me in the gut. I all but run along the pavement, not caring if I bump into anyone. I find a little café a few blocks from my apartment and duck into a corner booth. I dig into my purse for my phone and call the only person I can think of – My best friend. She picks up on the second ring.

“Hello, sweetheart.”

“Mich? I—I—”

Without warning, the tears come pouring out and I begin to sob.

“Sidney? Where are you?”

I compose myself just enough to give her my location before ending the call. I place my head in my hands as silent sobs wrack my frame. It's just too much. I have bills to pay. The job market in my field is a stingy one, too. What on earth am I going to do?

I don't know how long I sit there before I feel a gentle touch on my shoulder. I lift my wet face to find Michelle slipping into the booth in front of me. A fresh wave of tears roll in and I start to tremble.

"What's wrong, Sid?" She looks at me, worry etched on her face.

I sniff a few times. "I was fired today."

"What! What happened?"

I sigh. "These loan sharks that Grant owes keep coming to me and the company is uncomfortable with them lurking around. But I'm not to worry," my tone is laced with sarcasm, "they'll give me a glowing recommendation and pay in lieu of notice if I resign quietly. It's been months, Michelle. Months! I can't keep looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life. And now this. What am I gonna do?"

I twirl the bit of tissue I hold between my fingers, shredding it to pieces.

Michelle gives me an encouraging smile, reaches out, and squeezes my hand lightly. "Well, the first thing you're going to do is stay at my place tonight. I'm in a slow zone between projects anyway, so I could use the company. Let's go."

I follow her out of the café, happy that I don't have to think anymore. I follow her lead as we hop on a bus and cross the city. I close my eyes and lean against the window. The attack combined with the emotional upheaval I'm experiencing has given me a pounding migraine. I feel sick to my stomach as well. It's as though the stress of the past months is finally catching up with me. I shuffle along behind Michelle when we get off the bus. I feel dead on my feet by the time we walk up the two flights of stairs to her place. The two-bedroom flat has always been a safe space for me since I met Michelle almost ten years ago. She had come into the restaurant I was working in one morning at the start of my shift. Her bright face and sweet personality had pulled me to her, and before I knew it, I was pouring out my woes into her ear. She has been my confidante and shoulder to lean on ever since.

I have a quick shower and slip into the T-shirt Michelle has left for me in the guestroom. I come out to warm food and a cup of tea. I take a sip of the soothing brew and sigh. "This is just what I need to get this headache to die."

"I have painkillers if you want them."

"I should be fine."

I close my eyes and sigh. "I wish I'd never laid eyes on Grant, Michelle."

"Don't we all. But we're hopeless romantics and suckers for a handsome fella."

"Yes. But who lets their boyfriend move in after just five months of dating?"



She reaches over and pats my hand. “We’ve all had stars in our eyes, hon. Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

I shake my head. “But I should’ve known. The signs were there. He didn’t have a steady job, my salary was stretched trying to cover groceries and extra bills. And if that wasn’t enough, I’m sure he was cheating on me. Do you have any idea how emotionally draining that was?”

“Remember Anthony? You’re preaching to the choir, sweetie. And you were there for me when I broke up with him, the same way I’m going to be here for you. You’ve been toughing it out since you left high school, Sidney. We’re gonna get through this, one day at a time.”

I take another sip of tea and sigh. “These guys are dangerous, Mich. And they don’t believe me when I tell them I don’t know where Grant is right now. The threats are getting worse. They pulled a knife on me tonight.”

I drop my eyes as I see her eyes widen in shock.

I take a deep breath as tears prick my eyes. I close them. I’m tired of crying now. “Thank goodness it was more of a scare tactic.”

A chair scrapes the floor and then Michelle’s arms envelop me. The tears come pouring down my cheeks.

“I worked hard to get this job, dammit! Night school, working three jobs for minimum wage to make ends meet, and it’s all gone because of that damn man! Fuck you, Grant

Duncan. If only I could turn back the last two years and just keep walking instead of going into that damned coffee shop!”

“It’s alright, honey. We’ll get through this.” She strokes my hair comfortingly. I look up at her through my tears.

“Are you sure I won’t be in the way? I know you need every available space when you have these massive projects.”

“I’m between projects now. Look around. Do you see any cords lying around?”

I laugh. “True.”

“Good. And even if I were working, I’ll always have space for you. I haven’t forgotten your kindness to me when I thought I was going to lose my mind, Sidney. I’ve got you, hon.”

“Thanks, Mich. I wish I knew my gift the way you do, though. You know, my calling. Something I can do that makes me happy and gives me enough money not to depend on a nine to five.”

“It’s not all glamour, Sid. I work on commission. And I pray the day never comes when people are no longer interested in macrame and crochet.”

“I just think there’s more to my life than being an efficient secretary and administrative assistant.”

“Well, maybe that *is* your gift. Not everyone knows what it takes to organize an office.” She goes back to her seat and looks me in the eyes. “Sid, I think we should go to the police tomorrow. These thugs are getting more and more reckless.

And they are dangerous. Ruthless. I don't want anything to happen to you, hon. I think it's time to get the authorities involved," she says.

"I don't want—" I start to shake my head, fear slithering back inside my chest.

"We have to. And I won't take no for an answer," Michelle argues.

"At least let me think about it."

"Okay, sweetie," she agrees before standing up and heading to her room. Michelle cleans up while I flip through the channels. She pops back in the living room to wish me goodnight before returning to her room. Lying awake and too anxious to sleep, I mindlessly browse through the news channels. My heart sinks with the reports of criminal activities sweeping through the city – and no one is exempt. By the time I turn off the television in the middle of a report on a family found dead in their basement after a home invasion gone wrong, I'm again in tears. I sniff as I drag myself to bed.

I lie looking up at the dark ceiling for what feels like eternity, the tears running down the sides of my face and into my hairline. There are random screams of emergency vehicle sirens as they race from one scene to another. I feel so lucky to be alive when I remember how close I came to being a statistic this evening. My body could've been lying in a cold dirty alley somewhere. The more I think about it, the more I realize Michelle is right.

Tomorrow, we'll go to the police.

## Chapter Two

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### Archer

“No! You listen! I’ve enabled you long enough and I’m done. I’m sick of it! Do you think this is some sort of joke? You’re a junkie and you need help!” I feel a muscle in my jaw tick as I pace the office.

“You’re a fine one to talk about junkies, you asshole!”

“I am your father! And you will treat me with respect!”

“Drop dead!”

“I’ve done nothing but my best to help you.”

My one and only child rants and screams at me through the phone and my heart breaks. Not for the first time, I wonder what on earth I’d been thinking at age eighteen to have a whole wife and child plus a career in the military. I’d been stationed overseas shortly after he was born and it felt like a slippery slope ever since. Trying to be a young husband, father, and build my military career had been a juggling act, and a juggler I’m not. Needless to say, several balls had been dropped and my wife and child were among them. In between

my overseas stints, I'd often try to be that strict father who would enforce discipline. It'd been a miserable failure. When he turned thirteen, Rebecca asked for a divorce. Without contest, I had signed the papers and given her custody. I had visitation rights but had rarely used them. I'd poured myself into my career. Five years ago when I had retired, I looked back at my accomplishments with a sense of satisfaction. Archer Colleymore had made it. But listening to my only offspring screaming at me right now makes me wonder if it was worth the price.

Rebecca reached out to me a few years ago, just as I'd gotten my security company up and running. She'd moved to Ireland with her parents who wanted to retire in their homeland.

"He's in serious trouble, Archer. I just don't know where I went wrong."

"You did your best, given the circumstances, Becca. Where did you say he was last seen?"

Our conversation had ended after I got the information I needed. I'd put a team on his trail and was thankful to know that he was not too far from where I could keep an eye on him. The first time I confronted him as he sat stoned in an alley, I found it hard to believe that he was in his twenties. He looked older than me. He'd gotten all his mother's features, the red hair, green eyes, and freckles. But his height was all me. I had quickly gotten him into a treatment facility. He'd cleaned up pretty quickly. Our relationship was in the garbage still, but at

least I'd been able to help. I pulled some strings and got him a job as a filing clerk with one of my clients. And he'd been okay. Then about two years ago, the signs of using had returned. He quit his job and fell off the radar, turning up in Ireland with his mother a few months ago. She had merely said that he was there, though, turning up at her door when he wanted money for another fix. She'd given in a few times, though I told her not to enable his addiction. This morning, she'd put her foot down and made the mistake of telling him that I'd told her to stop supporting his habit. Hence the phone call.

“You were never there! Do you know how it felt to watch other boys learn to ride a bike with their father, play catch with their father, have the talk about girls with their father, and all I had was my mother and the maid? Do you, you bastard!? You were never there then, so don't try to be there for me now!” My gut wrenches as he continues to scream.

“Son—”

“Don't call me that! I'm not your son! You're nothing more than a sperm donor! I'm done with this shit!”

I wince as the line goes dead. Very few things can get under my skin, but this is one of them. I'm an accomplished man, the epitome of success. This area of my life, in which I have failed spectacularly, though, is a stark reminder that I am human.

I look at myself in the mirror hanging on the back of my office door. My hair is now accented with silver. My new glasses' frames are silver as well to complement my graying

locks. My face is still nice enough and shows very little evidence of a man in his mid-forties. In spite of the dark suits I wear, which have come to be practically the civilian version of my uniform, there is still evidence of my built physique. I pride myself on my intense fitness regimen. I flex my fist. I can still throw a mean punch if necessary. I stand straight, examining every inch of my six-foot-four-inch height. I'm a strong, successful man. So why does this failure with my wife and son cut so deeply?

Since the divorce, I haven't thought of another serious relationship. I have assuaged my needs when necessary but I focused on getting out of the service alive and in one piece. Then along has come my new baby, More Secure. The company had been a brainchild ten years ago, when I'd started planning my retirement. I'd been given the option to continue to climb up the ranks and retire at an even higher rank, but I'd had enough and was happy to get out with a tidy lump sum and any other related perks. I've poured my soul into the company, resigning myself to the fact that it's my only love. I'd been given a chance at a family and had blown it. I chalk it up to experience and accept my punishment. I don't deserve to be loved by anyone. It is what it is.

I sigh and fling myself into my chair, staring up at the ceiling. The office is my quiet space and safe haven. I came in early as always, to do some work when my phone had rung. And now it's going to take a little while for me to get my thoughts back in order, to focus on the task at hand. I have a

twenty-year plan, and am now at the first milestone. I need to focus.

I sit up and turn on my computer. A few minutes later, I'm wading through the pages of the document related to the new office. As soon as I'm done with my perusal, I close the document and open another one.

In five years, I'll be fifty. And though that is young for some people, I have seen my peers and younger go to their graves. And after being in the military and witnessing so much, I feel the weight of my years. I don't take life for granted.

I skim the document thoroughly. All my known assets are listed in as detailed a list as possible.

My twenty-year-plan is well detailed and everything is oriented, but I can't ignore the possibility of something going wrong. Especially in my line of business. So, I sat down with my attorney a few months ago to prepare my will.

The business model copyright will be left to my right hand man, Jared. He is going to be in charge of the new office. He has been with me from the beginning.

My tangible assets like my cars and the house will go to my son, along with a tidy sum of cash. There will, however, be an executor as it relates to his inheritance. He cannot be trusted with anything related to money in his current state. But he cannot be left out of my will. He is, after all, my son.



I've also included a clause to cover any other offspring I might have. And though I'd love the chance to really be a dad again, to try to right my wrongs, to do better, to be there from the beginning, I don't hold out any hope for being with a woman outside of mutually agreed casual sex. Still, it's there, just in case.

I save it and send an email to my lawyer.

All this success, all these assets and I have no one to share them with. It's just me. I wish life had panned out differently, but this was my roll of the dice.

I shake myself from my funk and go through a few more case files and check on reports. I have gotten five reports completed by the time my assistant Colleen arrives. My day has now officially begun.

## Chapter Three

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### Sidney

While staring at the wall ahead of us, all that is in my head is how cold that blade had felt against my throat yesterday. I try to visualize the face of the man I'm about to report. In the past three months, I have met him twice. Spike. That is all I know. And I also know he is the ring leader as his other thugs make reference to Grant owing Spike.

Michelle and I sit on the cold bench waiting to be seen. We came to the nearest police station right after breakfast. The station is buzzing with activity. People like myself are waiting to report various issues as uniformed police officers exit and enter the station, some even bringing in criminals in handcuffs. Michelle and I wait patiently.

It takes a while, but finally, we are ushered to the desk of one officer Dixon.

“What can I do for you lovely ladies this beautiful morning?”

I hesitate before speaking, “We'd like to report an assault.”

“Your boyfriend’s?”

I look at Michelle, then back at the officer.

“Not exactly. But the threats are a result of my ex-boyfriend. He borrowed some money—”

“And can’t pay it back and now they’re using you to get to him. Okay. Do you know what the person assaulting you looks like?”

“He’s about five nine, shaggy brown hair and he’s got a tattoo on his cheek of praying hands. He has a few piercings as well.” The officer stares at me intently when he hears the description. I see him exchange glances with the officer at the next desk before he pushes back his chair.

“Lemme give you a few pics to look at and see if you can pick the guy out.”

He pushes a folder across the desk and flips it open. I feel his eyes on me as I scan the pictures. By page two, I point.

“That’s him.”

He glances at the picture, then looks at his colleague. He speaks slowly.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. He’s harassed me more than once, both personally and sending other people on his behalf.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Since last November.”

“And you’re only just reporting it?”

“Well, I thought I could handle it. But last night he had a knife at my throat.”

He looks around before leaning forward and dropping his voice.

“Is there any way you can just pay him what your boyfriend owes?”

“No, because like I told him over and over again, I don’t have any money.”

His eyes bore into mine as he continues to speak in hushed tones. “Listen, Deon ‘Spike’ Malone is not someone you want to tangle with when it comes to owing money. It is a pity that you’ve become caught up in this mess. You have no idea where your boyfriend is?”

“No, I threw my *ex*-boyfriend out and never saw him again. I do know he has family in Europe, but that’s about it.”

He sighs and leans back, shaking his head. “That’s a shame. Do you have any witnesses of this alleged assault?”

“It’s not alleged. This man,” I repeatedly point at Spike’s face in the photo album the police officer gave me, “pulled me into an alley and put a knife against my throat!”

“That very well may be, but do you have any witnesses of that?” He scowls at me.

“Of course I don’t.”

“Then, I’m sorry, but we cannot really go on what you’re presenting to us now.”

I'm speechless. I look at Michelle in shock before finding my voice. "So, you're telling me there's nothing you can do?"

The officer shrugs, "Well, you're making a report now for the alleged assault last night so we'll have to look into it, but with no witnesses, it's your word against his." He shrugs.

"What about all the other times? And all the other thugs he sent as well?" I ask.

"Were they violent? Did they physically harm you or use a weapon against you? It's not forbidden to approach someone on the street and just talk to them, so unless there was actually any harm done to your person, there is nothing we can do." The defensive tone in his voice is clear as day. I know he knows I'm right, but he won't do anything about it. That much is clear. And frankly, I cannot be bothered to challenge him.

"So, basically, I have no case."

"I wouldn't put it quite like that. You're making a report now, aren't you?"

"He held a knife to my throat. He could have killed me." I frown, irked that he is not taking it seriously.

"Again, without clear evidence or witnesses, it would be your word against his. And since there's not so much as a bruise on your skin..." He lets the sentence linger as his eyes bore into me and I fight the feeling of intimidation.

"So, if I had come in here black and blue and bleeding, then would I have a case?"

"That is a bit harsh. We wouldn't want that to happen."

Michelle huffs in disbelief at the answer. I, on the other hand, I'm pissed. "Or maybe if he had cut my throat last night and some wino stumbled across my bloody corpse this morning, then maybe I would have a case, right? And maybe not even then because I wouldn't be alive to look through your gallery of criminals to point out who did it. Come on, Michelle. I think this conversation is done." I stand up.

"You need to sign the report Miss—"

"Why? It doesn't matter anyway. It's clear to me that you couldn't be bothered, so why waste any more of my time?" I snap. I hold what's left of my composure long enough to step out of the building. But as soon as I feel the cold air on my skin, my eyes blur. Michelle slips her hand into the crook of my elbow and steers me along the pavement. I sniffle, trying hard to hold myself together.

"Let's get some coffee."

We walk silently and soon find ourselves in a little corner booth. I feel emotionally drained. Helplessly, I allow the tears to fall. I place my head on my arms. The headache is back. Michelle orders, and I don't lift my head until she touches my arm when the waitress brings two mugs of the steaming brew. I take a few sips, allowing it to burn its way into my stomach. Tears stream and fall into my mug.

"This is just too much, Michelle. Whose grave did I step on to deserve such a shitty life? I feel cursed!" I sniff and swipe at some tears with the back of my hand.

“Don’t say that! You’re not cursed. You’re just going through a rough patch. That’s all.” She covers my hand with hers and squeezes my fingers.

“My *whole life* has been a rough patch! Out of all the people in the world *I* had to be the one to hook up with Grant Duncan.”

“You couldn’t have known. It’s not like he wore a sign saying ‘shitty boyfriend looking for a girlfriend’ emblazoned across his chest or something.”

“But I should have known. The signs were all there. I should have known it was drugs, Michelle. The fights we had were just not normal.” I’m slumped over the table, as the weight of my situation bears me down.

“How? Grant was your first real deal boyfriend. He was a far cry from Lenny and all those others. He was the first one who actually acted mature and seemed to have the potential for a permanent relationship. And you’re not the only one to be blamed here. I encouraged you to keep seeing him, right?” She takes a sip of her coffee.

“But ultimately, it was my call. I should have known. It was all good in the beginning. But then he started staying out late and losing interest in himself and everything. He’d barely shower or shave. When I talked to him, he’d snap at me. Then money started disappearing and the arguments got worse. I just couldn’t take it anymore. I wonder how long Spike was after him before I kicked him out.”

“You did the right thing, Sidney. I’d have kicked him out too.”

“You know who I blame? His parents or rather, parent. His deadbeat absent father left him and his mother to fend for themselves.”

“There are kids with stable homes who still turn to drugs. And there are kids from broken homes who turn out just fine. Look at us. Your mom running out and leaving your dad to raise you, and me being adopted did not send us down a road of popping pills or pushing needles. Sidney, Grant is a grown man and he has a responsibility to be a man and take responsibility for his own actions. But I get your point,” Michelle says.

I take a few more sips and sigh. My heart feels like a lump of lead in my chest as I ponder the bleak outlook of my future. “What am I going to do, Michelle? I have no job. My savings can keep me going for maybe a few more months if I scale back and cut my bills and grocery in half. But if I don’t get a job, I’m screwed. And being jobless does not change the fact that these thugs are after me. I just don’t feel safe. And what happened just now with the police does not give me any reassurance either.”

I sit staring into the mug as my coffee grows cold., I’m just like this cup of coffee. All the heat is fading away from me, a cold feeling seeping through my core. Inside, my lack of hope is leaving me emptier and emptier until there is nothing else but an empty shell.



“Move in with me. You know I have that extra room,” Michelle suggests.

“I can’t do that, Michelle. I’d be putting you in danger.” I love that she is offering but I can’t put her through this too.

“I’ll take my chances.”

“You’ll just become another target.” And if anything happened to her, I’d never forgive myself.

“Think about it.”

“I have, Mich. My answer is no.”

She laughs softly and I smile for the first time in what seems like days.

“Think harder. Just know that you have a bed at my place if you want it. And I’m good financially, so there’s no pressure to contribute.”

“I know but—”

“You’d do the same for me, Sid.”

“Yeah. But you didn’t put me in danger of being maimed, crippled, or murdered.”

“I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather be maimed, crippled, or murdered for, honey.”

We laugh and my mood lifts slightly. Michelle orders another round of coffee and pastry. The waitress serves us as I sit, looking at the pedestrians walking along. At this time of the day, I would have been knee deep in files at my desk or

working on letters and invoices for shipments and orders. Instead, here I am, wondering what my next move will be.

“Earth to Sidney. Come in, Sidney.”

I look across at Michelle, “Huh?”

“I was suggesting that since the police aren’t going to get off their fat asses and do anything, we may have to take matters into our own hands.”

“I’ve never held a gun in my life. I’m liable to blow my finger off instead of shooting Spike. And I can’t think of hurting another human being, no matter how despicable they are.”

“We could take self-defense classes. Or walk with mace,” she offers.

“Or get a bulldog.” I smile at her playfully.

“A chihuahua! And just throw it at him the next time he tries to attack you!” We double over in peals of laughter. We finish our coffee and pastry and ask for the bill.

“But on a serious note, Michelle. What am I going to do apart from moving in with you? What do I do next?”

“First, let’s scour the ads. You, my friend, need a job. Next, we need to get you protected. And since guns, mace, karate, and chihuahuas are out of the question, the next best step is to get someone who would do it for you. What about a bodyguard?”

I laugh and then look at her straight face, my smile dying on my lips. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Dead serious.”

“That must be expensive.”

“Let’s at least find out before we write it off, okay?”

“I can’t afford to pay back Spike but I can afford a bodyguard? A bit hypocritical, don’t you think?”

“Grant’s debts are not yours to pay. He took the cowardly way out by leaving you in danger like this. Let’s check some companies and see what the bodyguard rates are okay? Then we can take it from there,” Michelle says.

I nibble my lower lip as unexpected tears fill my eyes once more. Is this what my life is going to be now?

## Chapter Four

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### Archer

“Well, Mr. Jackson, nice doing business with you. I’ll have my team there first thing in the morning for an assessment, and within a week, your cameras will be installed and operational. Excuse me a second,” I press the intercom which had crackled to life. “ Yes, Colleen?”

“Sorry to interrupt you, sir. But just to let you know we have a walk-in.”

“Thanks, Colleen. I’m almost done here. I’ll let you know when to send them in.”

I shake Mr. Jackson’s hand and escort him to the door. Upon returning to my desk, I immediately bring up the reception area cameras to examine the walk-in client. An electric jolt pulses through me as I see two stunning women. The blonde is sitting upright and looking around curiously. She is dressed in a very artistic manner, full of flamboyance and color. Her bag is one of those knotted types that are usually made by hand. At one point, she looks directly into the camera. She is beautiful – from the soft curls that bob from beneath her knit cap to the

gentle curve of her lips. She has her hand on her companion's shoulder.

The brunette sits slumped forward. Her plain jeans and gray shirt with a bulky gray jacket make her seem like a little forgotten child. Her very posture shows dejection. My gut instinct tells me that this is my client. Her hands are gripped so tightly I can see her knuckles turn white. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail. I examine what I can see of her downturned face. There is no evidence of bruising. But maybe they are hidden beneath the clothes or covered in makeup. It wouldn't be the first time I come across someone who has tried to cover up the physical hurt they've gone through.

The blonde leans over and whispers something in her ear and then she looks up at the camera. If I'd been shocked before, I now feel as though I've been punched in the gut and all the air has left my body. Even in her haunting sadness, she is stunning. Long dark lashes frame her green eyes. And the shadows beneath them only give her face a more exquisite beauty. Her cheekbones seem as though they have been carved from the finest marble, and her lips—wow!

I take a deep breath, forcing myself back into my professional mold. Besides, she is far too young—young enough to be my daughter. At the thought of being a dirty old man or, worse yet, having a daughter being preyed upon by a dirty old man, all thoughts of admiring this woman go out the window. As I look at the brunette who seems to be close to tears, my protective instincts are on full alert. Whatever the

problem is or whoever has brought her to this state, I'm going to handle it.

I press the intercom. "You may send them in, Colleen."

"Yes, sir."

By the time Colleen arrives at my door, the camera feed is discreetly disguised and I have two chairs waiting.

"Miss Peterson and Miss Bailey, sir."

"Thank you, Colleen. Ladies, do take a seat."

I wait until they are seated before leaning a hip against my desk. I look from one to the other before I introduce myself. "I'm Archer Colleymore, CEO of More Secure. How may I assist you ladies this afternoon?"

I push my glasses further up my nose as I look from one to the other. The brunette dissolves into tears while the blonde speaks. "I'm Michelle Bailey, this is my friend, Sidney Peterson. Sidney needs your help desperately."

I listen to the young woman sobbing and reach for a box of tissues behind me. I itch to pull her into an embrace and tell her that everything will be okay and that she doesn't need to be afraid.

*What the fuck!?*

I take a deep breath as I lean forward and hand it to her, forcing my professionalism to the fore. I wait until she has taken a few and dab her face. Being this close to her is wreaking havoc on my nerves. I need to get laid and fast. That

has to be the reason for this response I feel toward her. Her friend sits silently, waiting. Finally, she looks at me with red eyes.

“My ex-boyfriend owes some really bad people money and—and—”

“They’re pursuing you for his debts,” I finish her sentence.

She nods.

“Okay. When did this start?”

“Last November we broke up. Well, I kicked him out. It’s a long story. A week later, the first collector showed up. And it’s been happening ever since. But last night—last night was—”

She dissolves in tears once more and I look at her friend.

“Did he—”

“No. But she was quite shaken. He had a knife at her neck and everything.”

“He pulled a weapon? Were you hurt?” I’m immediately on my knees in front of her and tilt her chin upward to examine her neck. Her soft skin feels as though it’s searing my fingertips. I instinctively swipe at a tear as it trickles and instantly pull back. She swallows, and I watch her neck move. Her eyes meet mine. I hold her gaze as she speaks softly.

“I—I wasn’t hurt. But it was the first time he became that forceful.”

“Okay. Do you have any idea how much the debt is?”

“No.”

“Can you describe these guys?”

“The main guy is someone called Spike.”

“Deon ‘Spike’ Malone?”

“That’s what the police called him.”

“You’ve been to the police?”

“Yes. But—”

“Useless asswipes. They probably backed off as soon as they heard it was Spike.”

“They did.”

We look at each other for a few seconds longer before I remember there is someone else in the room. I go back to leaning against my desk.

“What do you want me to do for you?”

“Aren’t you afraid of Spike?”

“Not in the least. He knows not to wrangle with my clients.”

“At least someone’s got some balls,” her friend says energetically. “Do you know they actually told her to just pay Spike and get on with her life?”

“Except, I can’t do that. I’ve even been fired over all of this.”

“But money is no object for us to get a bodyguard, Mr. Colleymore. Sidney knows I’ve got her back.”

“Let’s discuss the needs. The money can be dealt with after. You say you have no idea what your ex owed him?” I look at



Sidney.

“Maybe a few thousand? He never said.”

“I think you underestimate the nature of the business in which Spike engages. He starts in the thousands. So, more than likely your ex-boyfriend’s debt is now in the tens of thousands, especially after their rate of interest has been added.”

Her eyes open wide. “Is that even possible? Or legal?”

“In the world of loan sharks, anything goes. So, since it’s not a case where the debt is going to be cleared, you need to stop the harassment. Therefore, if they see you being guarded, there’s very little they can do, especially if they know it’s my firm. We don’t ask questions if our client seems to be compromised.”

I pull my firearm from my waist as I speak, raising my eyebrows suggestively.

“I told you we should get guns,” her friend whispers. “Or chihuahuas.”

For the first time since they entered the office, Sidney smiles. It is a tiny upward curve, but it’s enough to lighten her face. I take a deep breath and put the gun back in my waist. Then an idea hits me. I look at Sidney.

“Did you say you lost your job?”

“Yes. I was asked to quit yesterday. I haven’t had the chance to look for anything else yet. Plus, I may need to move.”

“You don’t need to do either. I have a proposition for you. And you’d actually be doing me a favor if you accept. You need a bodyguard. And based on the nature of things, you would need a twenty-four-hour service. I would also recommend cameras inside that you can monitor from your phone so you won’t be caught unawares by anyone lying in wait in your apartment.”

“That sounds expensive.”

“It is. But it won’t be as exorbitant as you think once I work out the details. I’m expanding my business and I’m going to need an administrative assistant. My current admin is going to go to the new location and I’d intended to place an ad in the papers by the end of the week. So, if it’s okay with you, would you like to interview for the position?”

“But how do you know if I’m any good in that line of work?”

“I don’t. Which is why I’m now interviewing you. Do you know how to file? Type a letter? Take notes of meetings with clients where necessary? Make appointments?” I question her.

She nods, “I do.”

“You’ve got the job,” I state.

Her beautiful eyes widen in surprise, “Wait! Don’t you want to see my resume or my references?”

“Not particularly. Now, let’s work out the salary. Being that I’m going to be providing round-the-clock close services plus cameras, I would have to work out what that would cost and

deduct accordingly. But rest assured. I pay well and you'll be able to cover your other monthly obligations."

"Can I at least think about it and get back to you?"

"You'll have to think now. Either way, you'll be walking out of here with a bodyguard this afternoon."

"This afternoon?"

"Yes, ma'am. Think about it. You'll be protected on the job as well. Neither my staff nor I take kindly to threats from loan sharks. They won't come around here."

Her friend turns to her, "I think you should take it, Sid. He has a very good point. Shadeed's let you go because they were afraid of staff being attacked. Who's going to intimidate anyone here? And if some payment can be worked out to make it work, why not? Take it, Sid. He's right."

"Yes, I am. So, do we have a deal?" I look down at her as she looks up at me, and I feel that gut-wrenching conflict once more. From a professional standpoint, what I'm suggesting makes so much sense. But what are the emotional stakes? I already know there's a strange attraction, more than I have felt in a long time. And she would be working under me. Under me... that puts images in my head that I prefer not to have. I turn away and go to my desk. I sit, looking at the women.

Then Sidney speaks. "I—I think I'll take your offer, Mr. Colleymore."

"Archer. We're not big on formalities around the office. Welcome to the team, Sidney. First thing tomorrow, I'll have

you on the range.”

“The range?”

“Yes. Every member of staff carries.”

“Carries? Carries what?”

I look at her as she stares at me cluelessly. I slowly pull my gun out again and place it on the desk.

“Carries this.”

“I can’t fire a gun!”

“Which is why you’ll be trained.”

“But isn’t that for the guards?”

“My admin, who you’ll be replacing, is almost as good a shot as I’m.”

“That sweet little lady—”

“Can put a bullet in your head before you even know what happened. Everyone carries. So, you’ll be on the range tomorrow. Now, let me get the show on the road and get your contract done and notify my accountant.”

“Me. Carrying a gun,” she whispers to her friend who is trying her best to hide her smile.

“Told you we should have gotten a chihuahua,” she whispers back.

Despite herself, Sidney smiles.

I really need to know what this chihuahua joke is all about.

## Chapter Five

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### Sidney

I'm waiting in the foyer, with Tony by my side, when Archer pulls up to the curb. Tony does his usual sweep with me a few steps behind him as we step onto the pavement. Without ceremony, he hands me into the front of the heavily tinted vehicle.

“Bye, Tony. Tell Maria I enjoyed the brownies.”

The usually dour man cracks a smile when I mention his daughter.

“I will, Sidney. See you next week.”

I buckle my seatbelt as Archer pulls into traffic. I examine his granite profile for a few moments as we drive. I must admit he is attractive. Without a word, he points to the console. I pick up my coffee and take a sip. The first day that Archer picked me up he asked how I take my coffee. Every morning thereafter my coffee has been waiting in the car when he picks me up or at the office when another driver picks me up.

It hasn't taken long for us to establish a routine. Archer is true to his word when he says that I'll be watched twenty-four seven. He picks me up from home and takes me back home on most days. If he does not do it, he has another guard who does. When I get home, there is usually a guard waiting on the curb. This guard will be on duty until the shift changes and he is replaced because in the morning, I usually find someone else on duty. They would take me down to Archer and the cycle would be repeated. In addition to this, he has followed through on his promise of placing cameras around my apartment. As a matter of fact, that same afternoon after my 'interview,' he had come to my apartment to assess my needs. The first guard had been placed on duty after he left. The next day the cameras were installed while I did some chores. I felt awkward having these strange men in my space, especially as Archer himself was there as well. He is the strangest CEO. Many times I'm tempted to ask if he sees to camera installation personally for each client. But I hold my tongue. I'm having a bit of a challenge as it is to keep my notice of him on a professional level, because even in the midst of my distress, it's been hard not to notice how devastatingly handsome this man is. His dark hair is thick and lays in sleek waves. The way his gray eyes have pierced through me has made me feel as though he is stripping me naked. And his attire is always impeccable. I have yet to see him wearing anything but his trademark suit, though I feel that he can wear a paper bag and still make it look as though it belongs on the cover of a magazine.

But I have to keep my admiration to myself. There are too many hurdles: he is my boss, my bodyguard indirectly, and old enough to be my father, just to name a few.

Colleen has been an angel in training me. I'm a fast learner, so by Monday of the following week, I'm on my own.

I sip the last of my coffee as we turn the last block and the office building comes into view.

The usually muggy Chicago weather has given us a break for Spring. The April weather is just right.

Archer turns into the parking garage and finds his spot. I wait in the car until he has done a sweep before allowing him to take me out of the car. Silently, we walk to the elevator and are soon whisked to the fourteenth floor. I step out ahead of him but he is not far behind me.

“Good morning, Trina. How's Mushy?” I smile at one of the girls in the secretarial pool as I pause to clock in.

“She's doing much better, thanks. The vet said it was just an allergic reaction.”

“That's awesome.” I keep walking, conscious of Archer's impatient energy. It's rolling off of him in waves. I have discovered by accident that most mornings when he picks me up, he is actually already at work. And if he takes me home in the evening, he often goes back to the office. My thoughts go back to a conversation I had had with Colleen that first week of training as it pertained to work hours.

“As long as you’re here by eight thirty and out by five, that is all that matters to Archer. If only he could take his own advice. That man would work thirty hours in a day if he could.”

“Wow! I bet his family wouldn’t like that.”

Colleen had shrugged nonchalantly. “He has none. He’s divorced and has a child who is already an adult, so he’s pretty much a loner.”

“But a man like him must have someone in his life. That’s just wrong. People need companionship.”

“Do you have someone in your life?” her eyes had pierced me and color had stained my cheeks.

“Not currently. I’m still getting over my ex. But it does not mean I’m going to be alone forever.”

“Well, maybe he’ll find someone. But for now, this company is his life.”

I’m brought back to the present as Archer reaches around me to open the door which leads to my reception area. I slip off my jacket and place my purse in the bottom drawer. I look up to watch his tall figure disappear down the hallway to his office.

I sit staring at the space for a while before snapping out of it and getting to work.

The past few months have felt like a breath of fresh air. I actually enjoy More Secure and the intricacies of the company. Looking in, you wouldn’t think that providing security



services comes with so many dimensions. But it's rather interesting.

I feel as though I'm coming out of a shell. Or like a flower that is opening. I know that my heart is lighter and I smile more. Even Michelle has mentioned how it seems as though a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Even going to the range has not been as intimidating as I'd imagined.

As promised, Archer had taken me to the range a few days after I started working here.

"I really don't think this is necessary," I'd wrinkled my nose as we'd signed into the range.

Without batting an eye at my distress, he'd placed a hand on my shoulder and propelled me along the corridors until we came to a cubicle-looking space.

"I'll start you off with blanks. The first task is to get you accustomed to the weight of the weapon, pulling the trigger, and getting your reflexes on point. Not all in one day of course."

With that, he had placed a handgun in my palm. The weight of it was surprising as I had been expecting something heavier.

"It's pretty light." I hefted it from one hand to the other, smiling.

That session ended an hour later with me actually being excited for the next one. Then the day had come when I got to use real bullets on a target. My heart raced as I loaded the gun.

“Now aim for the center as much as possible. Remember how to line up your target.” Archer stood behind me with his arms around me, adjusting the weapon.

“You’re holding it too tightly. Relax. You can do this, Sidney.”

I swallowed as I pulled the trigger with my first live round. The burst of adrenaline that rushed through me was unbelievable. I pulled the trigger until the clip was empty. I whipped off the ear protectors and turned to Archer.

“I did it!”

“Hey! Put on the safety!” he grabbed my hand and pointed the gun away from us both.

“Ooops!” I did as I was told. But I couldn’t stop smiling.

“This is remarkable for a first-time shooter.” He examined the target up close. “With a few more sessions, you can get your license, then we get you a weapon.”

But that was where I’d drawn the line. There were a few more lines I’d had to draw as well, like the filing system in the office, which I learned was not Colleen’s fault. It’s all a part of Archer’s sloppy method. For someone who is so precise and almost OCD in his operations, he has no clue when it comes on to administrative affairs. We have butted heads a few times but I don’t mind. The constant friction reminds me that he is my boss. It curtails any attraction I’m feeling for him that is a little more than professional. It is hard. He is one sexy man.

April rolls into May and soon June. It is hard to believe that I haven't been working here since the inception of the business. Most of the staff knows me, whether by passing through the office or by having been assigned to guard me. I feel like a member of a huge family. And Archer is our father. I have to keep at the forefront that he is that much older than I am.

Our constant angst is the organization of the office. I know that my way is best, but I don't get a chance to enforce that until he has to go on a special assignment outside of the city. I go to town! Furniture is moved around, décor is enhanced and the whole filing room is rearranged. I don't give it a second thought until one morning when Tony drops me off at work. As soon as I sit down, footsteps come down the corridor. I look up in surprise to find Archer glowering from the doorway.

“Hi, Archer. Had a good trip?”

“What the fuck is this?”

“What is what?”

“Don't play with me, Sidney.” He storms over to my desk and plants his hands on it, placing his face a few inches from mine.

“I'm not playing with you, Archer. I would never do that. You're not a toy.”

“Damn right, I'm not. I want this office back to what it was before I left. And it had better be back in order today. I want

my files moved back to how I like them organized—”

“But I think my way is much more efficient.”

“—And my furniture moved back to how I had it,” he continues as if I haven’t talked at all.

“It’s not warm and inviting and client friendly, Archer. Think about your clients and their comfort, and you’ll see that this way makes sense. And the filing system works. Let me show you.” I get up and walk into the filing room which is just off the corridor, pleased when he follows. I flip the light on and walk over to the cabinet.

“Pick a file. Any file. I bet I can find it in a jiffy.”

“I’m not going to play your games, Sidney. Fix it back. Now.” His voice has dropped to a low rumble and he has a glint in his eyes. I’m suddenly aware of how close he’s standing to me and the raw animal energy emanating from him. I feel all my resolve to keep him at arms’ length melt as my imagination begins to run wild. I back up against the filing cabinet as he steps into my space.

“Give it a chance, please,” I reply, holding my ground in spite of my nervousness. His chest rises and falls as he stares at me and I at him. A shiver runs down my spine as I wonder what will happen if he just leans down and presses his body to mine and professionalism be damned.

“Little girl, don’t play games with me,” he growls and leans closer. “Learn to do as you’re told, and don’t play with big men.”

I wonder if he can hear my heart pounding. I hold my breath. My face is almost touching his lapel. I can feel the heat of his body and the musk of his cologne tickle my nostrils. I want to swallow nervously but I can't. His gray eyes hold mine and the charged tension between us rises. It's a magnetic pull that I feel powerless to resist. For a second, I flash back to the night in the alley when Spike had held the knife to my throat. But the terror that it usually brings me doesn't follow. I hold my breath as Archer moves a whisper closer, waiting for the panic to hit me. It never comes, and then he steps back and walks away.

What the hell was that?

My knees are as weak as they had been that night. But the memory of Spike and the fear he invoked have been effectively erased by the way Archer makes me feel. Safe.

There is simply no denying my attraction to him. I go back to my office and look around. Well, the rearranged furniture had been good while it lasted. Reluctantly, I put everything back where it was. I'll tackle the filing room tomorrow.

I have my purse packed and am ready to find out who my driver is when Archer steps out of his office.

"I'll be taking you home." He steps ahead of me and opens the door to the outer office.

Wordlessly, I follow him, brushing past him as he stands in the doorway. Silently, we go down in the elevator and into the parking garage. I feel the heat of his hand on the small of my back as he hurries me to the car. He opens the door for me and

waits until I'm seated and then comes around as usual. In a minute, we are screeching out into the street and merging with evening traffic.

The ride is silent for the most part, and I'm glad. I'm not sure why I feel nervous but I dare not speak. I just want to get home and away from Archer.

“Shit!”

The screeching of the brakes jerks me out of my thoughts. I'm being thrown forward and my heart lurches in my chest. But my forward trajectory is stopped by Archer's arm as he braces me back against my seat. My chest heaves and I'm conscious of my breasts pressed against his arm.

“Are you okay?” He glances at me.

“Yes. What happened?”

“Idiot drivers.”

His jawline tenses as he pulls his arm away and continues driving. A few minutes later, we pull up to my building. My guard is waiting, but Archer steps past him. We climb the stairs as the elevator is old and taking the stairs is always faster. The guard lags behind. I fumble with the keys as they both stand on either side of me. When the door is finally open and I step inside, he steps in behind me. I watch as he does his sweep of the apartment. He comes to a stop in front of me and I look up at him. His gaze is inscrutable. His jaw tenses slightly before he relaxes and speaks. “Have a good evening. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” I reply with a tight smile.

I watch him leave and take a deep breath. What the fuck!?

I go to my room and strip. My body tingles as I think about Archer and how close we were in the filing room and just now in the car. I step into the shower and turn it to the coldest temperature I can tolerate. I feel the arousal ebb somewhat.

I putter around the apartment doing a few chores to keep my thoughts at bay. But finally, exhaustion takes over and I have no choice but to drag myself to bed. As soon as my head hits the pillow and close my eyes, my mind goes wild.

In my dreams, I'm naked and sweaty. My eyes are closed but I feel lips moving across my body. They touch my breasts, pausing to suck my nipples. They grow harder in my lover's mouth and I feel as if I'm being electrocuted by his touch. The lips drift downward, moving over my stomach in ever widening circles. With each pass coming closer to my mound, my body feels as though it is drawn tight like a bow, anticipating release. Then the lips drift lower still. My legs are open and I'm arching upward as they kiss me there. I cry out as they nip at my clit and I feel my blood pounding through my veins. A tongue snakes out and lashes at my slit. I thrash around as it delves into my body, sucking and tasting me intimately. Then it's gone. But before I can protest, a lean, muscular body slides up to cover mine and my legs wrap around the waist of my lover. As he enters me, my eyes fly open and Archer's handsome face is leaning down to meet mine. As he thrusts inside of me completely, I cry out and arch

up to meet him. Suddenly, everything disappears and my eyes fly open to find a dark room. My skin is damp with perspiration and my heart is racing. My panties are soaked. It felt so real!

I sit up in bed and wipe my face. Slowly, I pad to the bathroom. Another cold shower is in order.



## Chapter Six

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### Archer

I've just finished the second report when a sound comes from the outer office. I check my watch. Seven. Everyone left the office hours ago, and, as usual, I stayed behind to get a few things done. My next move is to pull my weapon. Then I check the camera and stop. Sidney. What the hell is she doing here? I take a deep breath, grinding my teeth in mild irritation. It has nothing to do with her, though. I'm the problem.

Sidney is haunting me. And ever since that encounter in the filing room last week, I've been dreaming about the woman. She is an ever present fantasy when I pleasure myself and my hand can only do so much and no more. Even as I watch her move around her office, I feel my cock stir. But what is she doing here? I need to get rid of her and get back to work.

I conceal the cameras and re-holster my gun before walking out. Her head is down as she looks at the computer screen. I take a few seconds to take in her attire. She is in a simple T-shirt and jeans. Her hair is up in a ponytail.

“What are you doing here?”

She looks up and places her hand on her chest. “You startled me.”

“What are you doing here? And how did you get here?”

“Brad dropped me off. I told him I would call him when I’m ready to leave.”

“That’s okay. I’ll take you home, so tell him he can go back to his post,” I offer though I don’t think it’s a good idea, especially not from the way my cock is thinking whenever I’m around her recently.

I wait for her to make the call to the guard before continuing the conversation.

“You still haven’t answered the question. What are you doing here?”

“Oh. I remembered that you needed the update on the Daley case and I hadn’t completed the report. Speaking of, let me just run and get the file. Excuse me.” As she slips by me, I inhale the fresh peachy scent of her skin. And that is my undoing. I follow her to the filing room and the images of last week come rushing back. My heart pounds, and I feel the blood rushing in my ears as everything seems to move in slow motion.

Slowly, I walk over to her as she stretches up to find the file.

“Let me,” I whisper huskily.

“Daley, Fabian.”

I can be mistaken, but her voice sounds hoarse to my ears. I take my time reaching for the file above her head, leaning against her ever so slightly. I hand it to her and she turns into my arms. I place my hands on either side of her head, holding her gaze with mine. I lean down, not breaking the spell under which I have her. I feel the whisper of her breath against my lips. There is a hunger that suddenly rises up in me. I want to know what her lips feel like beneath mine. I brush them lightly with my finger, watching her reaction. She swallows and her breath comes out on a warm puff of air. I lower my head, almost in slow motion. Then I feel the first brush of her lips against mine.

The kiss is soft and sweet at first as I barely brush against her lips. I flick my tongue out, running it teasingly along the seam of her mouth. Shyly, she parts her luscious lips and I slip my tongue between them. My hands skim her sides as I deepen the kiss.

She groans as I pull her body flush against mine. I lift her arms and wrap them around my neck before sliding my hands down to cup her butt.

I lift her slightly and press my now rigid cock against her intimately. She trembles in my embrace. I bring one hand to the front as I continue to kiss her. Deftly, I undo the snap of her jeans and push the zipper down. I slide my fingers along her stomach, feeling it quiver. The elastic waist of her panties is no real barrier as my hand continues its downward journey. Her damp curls caress my fingertips, but I'm not yet at my

destination. She whimpers as I graze her clit. It seems to pulse as I stroke it and I feel her legs shift.

In no time, I synchronize the thrust of my tongue to the stroke of my hand and her hands tighten around my neck. She pants softly as her body moves and presses into my touch. I press my forehead to hers as I tear my lips from hers.

“Do you like that?” I whisper hoarsely.

“Hmmm,” she moans in response.

I laugh hoarsely before capturing her lips once more. Sidney presses into my touch and my cock lurches. I delve deeper, grazing past her clit to find her wet and hot. My fingers easily slide along her slit. She opens instantly for me as I slip the tip of my index finger inside her. She gasps and arches her back, opening her mouth beneath mine. I cup her warm pussy, thrusting my finger into her, forcing her to rock against my hand. I lodge my thumb against her sensitive spot so that with each rock she is being massaged. And soon, her body grows tense against me as she loses her rhythm. Deep in her throat, she moans. The sound sends a shudder through me as I feel her heat and wetness flood my hand. She slumps against me and I stroke her again. She whimpers and attempts to move away and I smile against her lips.

I kiss her cheeks as she breathes heavily. I grip her waist and walk backward out of the filing room. She follows slowly like someone who is drugged. I keep kissing her softly all the way to my office. When we get inside, I kick the door shut behind us and lock it. I brush her lips with mine as I lift the

hem of her T-shirt slowly. Her skin is smooth and warm to the touch. I pull it over her head, fanning her hair around her bare shoulders. I insert a finger under first one bra strap, then the other. I lean down to kiss the skin along her shoulder blades as my hands slide down to cup her breasts. I pull the flimsy lace aside as I make short work of the snaps. As the flimsy fabric joins her shirt, I pull one firm nipple between my teeth. I suckle it hard and she cries out. I laugh softly when she grips my head, tangling her fingers in my hair. I scoop her into my arms and take the few steps needed to the couch in the corner of the office. I lay her down, watching as her heavy eyes gaze up at me. I undo my holster and shirt and drop them in a pile at my feet before I join her on the couch. I press my torso against hers, reveling in how her curves fit perfectly against me. I kiss her once more. I cannot get enough of her mouth. I tear my mouth from hers and trail a line of wet kisses between her breasts. I take my time kissing every inch of skin possible. She wriggles and writhes in my grasp.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do this. You’re simply exquisite,” I lean down to whisper in her ear. I press my throbbing cock against her, leaving no mistake about the intensity of my desire for her. As she trembles beneath me, I chuckle.

“Do you want it?”

She bites her lips and drops her eyes. I take her hand and kiss it softly before pressing it between our bodies. I place it on the hard length pressed behind the zipper. I moan when she

squeezes me lightly. I back off slightly, raising on my forearms.

“Be careful, little girl. Can you handle it?”

Her only response is to run her hand along the length of my cock. I feel her fumble with the snap on my pants and allow her to undo it. She struggles to slide the zipper down but soon has it far enough to run her hand along my stomach. As her fingers slip beneath the waist of my boxers, I grit my teeth. I brace myself as her hand caresses my pulsing cock. I jerk as her finger slides along the wet tip. Without a word, I sit up. She looks at me in confusion – until I bend to tug her jeans down her legs. She raises her hips to allow me to slide the garment away. I hold her gaze as I stroke her ankles. I move my hands slowly up her calves and use the tips of my fingers to caress the back of her knees. I squeeze her thighs lightly before hooking my fingers into her panties and pulling them off as well. Her sweet musky scent rises into the air and tickles my nostrils. I want to taste her so badly! But I have a more urgent need right now.

I touch her briefly, swiping at the juices and coating my fingertips. I hold her gaze as I place my fingers to my lips and lick them. Her eyes follow my fingers and her lips part at the simple act. Her chest heaves as she takes a deep breath. I cup her pussy once more, holding her gaze as I massage her mound. She closes her eyes and leans her head back, biting her lips. I press my thumb into her clit again and she moans softly. I press the heel of my palm against her hard and she cries out. I've had enough.

With one swift motion, I stand and strip out of my remaining clothing. I push my boxers down my legs, holding her gaze as my straining cock comes into view. I slide my hand down my length and tug on my balls. I swipe at the weeping head and groan softly. I sink to join her on the couch. I kiss her lightly as my body hovers over hers. I look into her eyes.

“Do you want this?” I whisper hoarsely, pressing my cock against her belly.

“Yes.” She nods fervently.

“Are you sure you can handle it, sweetheart?” I nuzzle her neck as I wedge my thigh between hers, nudging her legs apart.

Her body trembles beneath mine as her legs part and I nestle more comfortably. I hold her hands between mine and stretch them above her head. I lean down and take her lips once more, ravishing her mouth as the tip of my cock presses against her hot wet pussy.

## Chapter Seven

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### Sidney

I'm almost in tears with need as Archer lies above me.

A few hours ago when I had dashed out of my apartment to run back to the office to update the Daley file, I never imagined that the fantasy that has haunted me day and night would become a reality. The moment I had seen Archer appear in my office, I felt the sexual tension in the air. The second he had touched me, I had been a goner. And now, here I am, underneath him. But my fantasies are mere shadows to the reality of feeling his lips on mine and his hands on my body. I twist beneath him, bucking up to meet him.

“Please!” I beg.

He chuckles softly. I groan and feel a sweet pain rush through my body as he slowly presses his body into mine. At the first touch of his hard length on my pussy, I moan. His lips graze mine before he takes possession of my mouth once more. As his tongue snakes out to find its mate, his body slides into mine. I scream and I press my body against his. There is a sheen of perspiration on his skin making his muscles stand out



in relief. His body fills mine. I part my legs as wide as I can; I want every inch of him. I wrap my legs around his waist, clenching tightly. He pulls back and laughs.

“Greedy little thing, aren’t you?”

He grips my ankles and slowly unwinds my legs. I whimper in disappointment. But then he pulls my knees up, hooking his forearms under them. I feel my body open up more fully and he presses forward. He flexes his cock deep within me a few times. I sob as I feel him fill my body. Out of nowhere, I start to tremble as the pleasure overtakes me.

“Ahhhhhh! Mmmmmm!”

He presses his face into my shoulder and begins to thrust. My pussy feels as if it is on fire and I feel stretched beyond measure. I wind my hands around his neck and press my face into his shoulder as he moves above me. I open my eyes and see nothing but blackness in spite of the lights in the office. I breathe through my open mouth, feeling lightheaded as Archer rocks my world. He thrusts hard and deep, twisting his hips and changing angles to touch parts of me I had no idea existed. I can’t think about anything except the pleasure I’m feeling. There is no doubt that he is very good at pleasing a woman. I wish we were in a bed and not this narrow couch as I get the feeling that it would be an experience like no other. But I’ll take what I’m getting right now.

Archer suddenly shifts and my legs slip off his arms. I protest by clinging to him even more. He laughs. “Relax, baby. I’m not going anywhere. Trust me.”

He shifts to his knees, holding my hips steady as he lifts my legs into the air. This time, he places my ankles on his shoulders. He begins to thrust slowly once more. I watch him as he licks his finger and presses it to my clit. That is my undoing. With every thrust, he rubs my sensitive bud hard. The force of his movements has me arching up into his thrusts once more as my body shakes violently. The sound of his flesh against mine only heightens the moment. I bite my lips as I try to stifle my screams of pleasure. But the ecstasy is too great. Almost painful now. I reach down to grab his hand. He tosses my hand aside and strokes my clit once more.

“Trust me, baby.”

He continues to stroke me and thrusts into me and I close my eyes as tingles of pleasure ignite once more. My legs tremble as I begin to push up to meet him again.

“That’s it. Just like that. You were made for me. Just for me. No one else. This is all mine now,” he growls.

“It’s yours, Archer. All yours!” I whisper and moan.

Suddenly, he lunges forward, bending at the waist as he begins to thrust harder and move faster. My legs bob with the force of his thrusts and he pulls them off his shoulders. He presses his torso into mine as he pulls my legs around his waist. My hands wind around his neck once again as he holds me tightly against his firm body. He rocks back and forth energetically to the point where the couch shifts with the power of his thrusts. I feel his hot breath on my face as that sensation starts creeping along my spine once more. My head

flops back and forth as I feel myself go faint. I'm not sure how much more of this my body can take. I'm spent. He thrusts deep and hard one more time before holding himself there.

“Uggggggghhhh!” he grunts through gritted teeth and his hot cum splashes deep within my body. With his chest pressed against mine, I feel his heart racing, as though it is going to beat out of his chest. Mine is no different. I cling to him limply, as his body slowly relaxes. He takes deep breaths, leaving trails of warm air on my cheek. I open my eyes to find him looking intently at me. His usually immaculate hair is disheveled. I'm sure mine is a state as well. He uses his forefinger to trail along my cheek. He outlines my tender lips and smiles.

“I could stay here with you all night. But all good things must come to an end. I still have reports to finish, you know?”

My cheeks burn as the implication of what I have just done and with whom dawns on me. I drop my legs and he frowns.

“Relax, Sidney.”

“You're my boss. We shouldn't have—”

“It's been threatening for weeks and you know it.” He leans down and kisses me lightly. “And if it didn't happen tonight, it would have happened some other time.”

“I didn't know you were here,” I tell him.

“And I didn't know you would be coming back here. Relax, Sidney.”

“How am I going to work with you now?”

“The same as you did before. Just a little bit better since we’ve gotten the white elephant out of the room.”

I shake my head, “It can’t happen again.” I say unconvincingly.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” He peers at me intently.

“I don’t know what I want,” I mumble.

“I’m a man with needs. You’re a woman with needs. We both took care of our needs. End of discussion.”

“I—”

He presses his lips to mine and I sigh. His lips are firm on mine yet gentle. After a few moments, he raises his head.

“End of discussion.” He strokes my hair. “Let’s get you home.”

Slowly, he moves his body off mine and sits up. He pulls my legs across his lap, stroking my calf gently. He reaches for my hand and pulls me into a sitting position and places me on his lap. He holds my gaze as he trails a finger between my breasts and down my stomach.

“Just a taste. The feast is coming.”

He takes my hand and kisses it gently. We stand and he gathers our clothing. I stand still as he dresses me, his hands lingering on my hips and breasts as he does. I watch as he straps on his gun before slipping on his jacket. He picks up his glasses from where he had placed them on his desk before

coming to my office earlier. He rustles through his drawer until he finds a comb and pulls it through his hair. I hold out my hand for it. But rather than give it to me, he walks over and stands behind me. I feel the heat of his body as he pulls the comb through my hair.

“Up or down?”

“Up please.”

I feel him move away for a few moments before grabbing my hair and pulling it through a rubber band. My lips twitch and I stifle a giggle.

“What?”

“I think it’s best I do it myself.”

“I don’t have a daughter. Sue me. Let’s go.”

I walk ahead of him and fix my hair, waiting in the corridor as he locks his office. I turn off the light in the filing room and lock the door as well. He waits by the door leading to the outer office as I turn off my computer and pick up my purse. We enter the empty elevator. As soon as the doors close behind us, Archer pulls me to lean against him. He wraps an arm across my torso possessively. I feel – protected.

In the car, he places a hand on my knee as he speeds through the streets. The dashboard reads minutes to ten. I’m shocked to find that so much time has passed.

When we get to my apartment, Brad is hanging around in the lobby.

“And the next time you choose to work late, please don’t waste my men’s time by having them drive you back and forth. This is not a chauffeur service. It’s lucky for you that I was still there myself,” Archer admonishes.

I look remorseful enough and hope it convinces Brad. I’m escorted upstairs silently. I open my door and Archer steps ahead of me to do the usual sweep.

“Sidney? Did you leave this window open?”

I race to the bedroom doorway where he is standing. I peer inside but find myself pushed ahead of him. Out of sight of Brad, he presses a quick hot kiss to my lips. He leaves me standing in the middle of the room.

It takes me a few minutes before I can move. I try to convince myself that the past three hours have all been my imagination. But as I undress and feel the tenderness of my pussy, I know it has all been real. I feel an insane desire to hold onto the feeling for as long as possible. So I strip and slide between the sheets. I cup my pussy, wincing slightly at how sensitive I still feel and the wetness that’s still there. My clit begins to tingle. I sigh and roll over feeling no need to act on any feelings. When one tastes whole milk, milk substitutes pale in comparison.

Instead, my thoughts drift to the significance of what happened tonight. I slept, no, had sex with my boss. *My boss!* What the hell had I been thinking?

“You were thinking about how good a lover he would be and you were right.”

I roll onto my back and stare at the dark ceiling. Not only is he my boss, but technically he is my bodyguard, my protector. And now he is my lover.

I sigh and close my eyes. What a predicament!

## Chapter Eight

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### Archer

I have to remind myself that I want to get home in one piece and that I need to ease up off the accelerator. But I drive as though the hordes of hell are after me.

“Fuck!” I slap the steering wheel. “You fucking idiot!”

I sniff and I can still smell Sidney. I feel possessed. And I need an exorcism. I drive along my avenue until I get to my gate. It cannot open quickly enough. As soon as I’m inside the house and have checked and armed the security system, I head upstairs to my room. I stand by the window and look out over the dark yard, seeing nothing. The images of Sidney in my arms replay like a movie in my head. How could I have let that happen? I’m not some horny teenager. I’m a grown ass man of almost forty-six and she is young enough to be my daughter. *My daughter*. I shudder to think of how I would feel if I did have a daughter and she tangled with someone my age. I would probably use my weapon collection on the bastard.

I close my eyes and lean against the window. I press my hands against the cool glass, forcing myself to breathe. It is so



wrong. But damn if it hadn't felt good. All those months of feeling the pull toward her have finally come to fruition. And I'm scared as hell. Sidney is not going to be a casual fling. The second my lips touched hers I knew that I was in trouble. And when my cock slipped into her – fuck! It felt like heaven. But now, looking at the stark reality of what has just transpired, I feel like hell. And if the truth is to be told, I'll gladly go to hell for eternity if I can have an evening like this all over again – and again. But it's not going to happen. As much as I want it to, I have to remind myself that a relationship is not for me. And especially with someone as young as Sidney.

I turn away from the window and undress. I'm halfway to the shower when I stop. I head to bed and slip between the sheets. If I'm not going to have this happen again, the least I can do is console myself knowing that I still bear the scent of her body on mine.

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The days and weeks slip by and with them comes an awareness of Sidney in my space. Whenever we are around others, it is business as usual. But the instant we are alone, it is as though both our thoughts go back to that night. It feels like I'm fighting a losing battle, especially when she stares at me with those big green eyes of hers. I'm torn, and it feels like I'm putting myself through deliberate torture. I still pick her up and take her home most days when I could easily task one of my men to do it. It's always tempting to think of simply taking her to my home for the night. But I pride myself on being as close to the temptation as possible, yet not giving in

to the need. However, there is a breaking point coming. It is just a matter of time.

I sit at my desk late one Friday evening a few weeks after Sidney and I had sex. I stare at the couch in the corner, remembering every second of that evening. I take a deep breath as I feel my cock twitch. I haven't so much as touched myself since that evening. It won't suffice for the real thing. The reports that I have to go through became secondary as I sigh and rub my hand across my face. There will be no concentrating this evening, especially since the source of my mental turmoil is but a few feet away in her office, waiting for me to take her home. I have just decided to do just that when my door opens. Sidney is standing there.

"Yes?" I look at her questioningly.

"I got an email regarding picking up my handgun?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"I thought we agreed that I'm not getting a gun." She leans against the doorway and I note the stubborn set to her chin.

"*You* said you don't want a gun. *I* never agreed to that." I stand and fold my arms.

"But you made it seem as though you agreed when I said it. I don't want a gun."

"You don't have a choice." She needs to be protected and able to protect herself at all times. That is not negotiable.

"I think I do."

“I beg your pardon?” I walk over to her, holding her gaze. She doesn’t even flinch.

“I don’t feel comfortable carrying a weapon, Archer. And I’d prefer not to do so against my will.” She lowers her voice as she speaks and I frown.

“Calm down. And if you don’t, I’ll have to calm you down myself. You do remember that I know how to do just that, don’t you?”

I step into her space and reach behind her to close and lock the door. I lean forward, effectively pressing her between the door and my body. Her unique musk wafts upward and my heart begins to race. Just like that, all my defenses come crashing down.

I lean down and capture her lips, pleased when her mouth opens beneath mine immediately. I search for and find her tongue, suckling it urgently like a dying man. I groan deep in my throat, matching her whimpering moans. Without relinquishing her mouth, I scoop her into my arms. I carry her over to the couch and place her in a seated position. I kneel on the floor and place my hands on her knees meeting her eyes.

“Have you ever been tasted by a real man before?” I growl.

Slowly, she shakes her head and whispers, “No.”

I grin and huskily reply, “Well, today is your lucky day.”

I hold her gaze as I slide my hands up her legs. Today she is wearing a skirt. That will make my task much easier. Her thighs are warm beneath my fingertips. Slowly, I push the hem of her skirt up until her panties come into view. “Let’s just get these out of the way.”

I lift her hips and hook my fingers into the elastic waist. The scrap of fabric slides down. I pull it off her ankles and shove it

into my pocket for safekeeping.

“Now, let’s see what we have going on here, hmmm?” I part her knees and slide my hands up her inner thighs. I watch as she swallows hard. I bunch her skirt up around her waist, baring her pussy to my view. I slide her legs apart even more, pleased to see her clit pulsating with desire. Her wetness glistens. I lick my lips and bend forward.

At the first lick of her slit, her body arches. She buries her hands in my hair. I look up and remove them. I place them at her sides.

“Keep them there,” I order.

Her eyes are smoky with desire as she peers down at me.

I bend to lick her slit once more and a surge of electricity moves to my cock. I’m hard and pulsing. But this is not the occasion for that. I draw her pulsing clit between my lips and she whimpers.

“Archer,” she moans, obediently, balling her hands into fists but keeping them at her sides. Good girl. As a reward for both of us, I spend a few minutes just savoring her.

“You’re so fucking sweet,” I rumble. Her nectar lingers on my tongue as I slowly lick her up and down. Her soft moans of pleasure above me are like music to my ears. I reach up and cup the mounds of her breasts, finding her stiff little nipples through the fabric. I pinch them slightly as she presses her pussy into my face. I suck her clit hard, pleased when she

bucks and arches. She attempts to pull away but I follow, pushing my face deep into her sweetness.

“Archer!”

I laugh, knowing the vibrations will carry through on my tongue. I squeeze her breasts as I feel her juices begin to flow. She sobs out as the intensity of her climax washes over her. One thing that is great about youth is her responsiveness to my touch. I sit back on my heels and look at her. There is a sheen of perspiration on her forehead as she bites her lips. I have an image of her lying naked on my bed, her body on full display for my eyes only. Maybe another time. But for now, I’m only getting started.

I reach out a finger and stroke her, pleased to see her pussy jump at my touch.

“That was just the appetizer, love.”

I lean forward again. This time, I pull her hips to the edge of the couch and drape her thighs over my shoulders. I place my forefinger and middle finger at the bottom of her slit and slowly stroke upward. I lean in and lick her swollen clit as I insert my fingers. Her walls immediately grip my fingers. I place my free hand beneath her ass urging her to rock into my touch. I zero in on three things: my hand, my fingers, and my mouth. My cock throbs almost painfully, but I can wait. This moment is about her. I double my efforts as she whimpers.

“Right there. Ooooh. That feels so good. So good,” she moans.

I curve my fingers up to rub against that special bundle of nerves. Without warning, she grabs my head.

“Shit!”

I press hard as I suck her clit. She dissolves into a series of bucks and jerks, and I’m rewarded with a rich helping of her sweet cream. I breathe deeply, allowing my hot breath to caress her delicate parts. Slowly, I withdraw my fingers. Then lean back. Her head is thrown back and her mouth is open as she struggles to breathe.

I lean forward and place a gentle kiss on her pussy.

“Let’s get you home.”

Her eyes fly open. “B-But aren’t you—don’t you want to \_\_\_”

“More than anything. I could drive a few nails with this thing right now. But not tonight. Tonight was for you.”

I kiss her pussy and clit before reluctantly sliding her thighs off my shoulders. I stand. Instantly, her eyes go to my pants and the imprint of my erect cock as it presses and strains against the zipper. Her cheeks color and I smile and pull her to her feet. She sways slightly and I pull her against me, pressing into her stomach.

“Don’t ever doubt how much I want you, Sidney.”

I kiss the top of her head before stepping back. “Let’s get you home.”

## Chapter Nine

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### Sidney

I dust the window, sliding the cloth a little too hard along the ledge, grumbling under my breath. I have been in a funk for days. And I know what it is – Archer. Ever since that evening weeks ago, when I had gone back to the office and we had crossed that line, it has been a slippery slope, and boy, am I sliding! Archer and I cannot keep our hands off each other. I push the thoughts of him away, especially in light of how I'm about to defy his orders.

I finish cleaning and call Michelle to finalize our plans for the weekend.

“Are you sure about this, Sidney?” she sounds worried and it worries me. But I refuse to be daunted.

“Of course. Mich, I've been like a prisoner for almost a year now.”

“Now you're just being dramatic.”

“Count how many months there are between February and October.”



“Dang! You’re right, Sid. You deserve this break.”

“Exactly. Now, like I said, there’s this one guy who is a little more relaxed than the others. He’s usually on duty on a Saturday evening. He’s always on his phone, especially when he doesn’t think I’m watching him.” My voice lowers as I add, “Sometimes, I even have to remind him that I’m there. Last week, I took the garbage downstairs, and he let me go alone. I came right back, of course. But it means I can do that again. This time, I’ll be out clubbing with you, girl! I can’t wait!” I squeal with joy.

“That makes two of us. It feels like ages since we’ve gone out, Sidney. I’m actually looking forward to Saturday now. But what if Archer finds out?”

“How will he find out unless Ben reports me missing? Ben can’t make a report because it would mean he wasn’t doing his job of watching me. We’ll go out for a few hours, have a few drinks and dance, come right back, and Archer won’t be any wiser.” I throw myself on the couch and a shockwave rushes through me as I stare into the camera in the corner. For a split second, I wonder if my plans will come to naught before they take flight. Then I remember – no audio!

“So, about nine is good?”

“Nine is perfect. We’ll talk later, Sidney. I’ve got to call this client.”

“Okay, hon.”

Saturday can't come soon enough. And when it finally does, I'm on pins and needles all day. But, as planned, Ben is on duty. I text Michelle a few hours later to let her know that I'm ready when she is. She responds and says she'll let me know when she is downstairs. I pace my apartment in nervous anticipation. It's hard to think that I haven't been out of my apartment without a guard in months, eight months to be exact. I check my outfit carefully once more. It is warm enough for October. I'm wearing leggings and an off-the-shoulder blouse. I plan to cover it with an oversized sweatshirt when I walk past Ben with the garbage bag. My boots, purse, phone, and jacket are in the bag and I plan to stuff the sweatshirt and slippers I have on right now into it and leave it in the foyer until I get back.

My stomach is in knots at the thought and anticipation of 'escaping' my prison. The phone rings and I grab it before it rings a second time. My heart is in my mouth.

"Hello?" I whisper.

"I'm here," Michelle whispers back.

I take a deep breath. "I'll be right there."

I end the call and muster the courage for the act of a lifetime. I drop my phone and keys into my purse and place them in the trash bag. I step outside, discreetly locking the door behind me. Ben is sitting on a camping chair in the corner on his phone.

"Making a trash run, Ben. Be right back." I smile tightly at him.

“Okay.” He nods.

I step past him, my heart racing. I creep down the staircase slowly, wondering if I look behind me, I’ll find that Ben has changed his mind and is following me after all. I get to the lobby alone and swiftly divest myself of my disguise. I get my boots and jacket on quickly and grab my purse. The cold October night air hits my face the second I step outside. I look around and find Michelle standing by the curb. A relieved squeal leaves my mouth and we run off like two little children up to mischief. We find a club and order a few drinks to start the evening. Being out without a guard breathing down my neck feels so exhilarating. Before I know it, the drinks begin to creep up on me and my tongue feels looser.

“I’d like to propose a toast. To good friends,” I say.

“To good friends!” Michelle clinks her glass with mine and we down our drink. I play with the rim of my glass a little, looking at Michelle with a small smirk on my face.

“What is it, Sid?” she asks, “You’ve got that ‘I’ve got a secret’ look.”

I laugh. “You know me too well.”

“Oohh! I love a good secret. Tell me! Tell me!”

I laugh. “I’ll give you three guesses.”

“Is it a person, place, or thing?”

“It’s a person, a place, *and* a thing.”

Michelle throws her head back and laughs. “Juicy. Tell me.”

I lean forward conspiratorially, and she leans in as well, “You know how sexy my boss is, right? And remember I told you what went down a few weeks ago?”

“Uh huh...”

“Well, let’s just say I’ve been experiencing a lot of that sexiness again, and again, and again, and you get the picture.” I bite my lip.

Her eyes grow as round as saucers. “You’re still sleeping with Archer!?”

“Well, technically, we haven’t really ‘slept slept’ together in a bed. But he does have a pretty comfortable couch in his office.” I giggle uncontrollably. “And like I said, we have been putting it to good use.”

She exclaims, “Oh my god! I can’t believe you! So, tell me, is he good?”

“Girl! Good is an understatement. All I know is you need to get an older man. They know where to touch and what to do. And when he gives me that tongue of his down there—” Michelle squeals and claps her hand over her mouth, looking around to see if anyone is overhearing our conversation.

She slaps my hand and laughs. “You lucky bitch!”

I wiggle in my seat and laugh. “That, I am! There’s something to be said about old wine. It’s fine. Very fine!”

We laugh and order another round of drinks. Michelle is all smiles.

“You deserve this, Sidney.”

“You don’t think he’s too old for me?” I ask, concerned about what she thinks of the relationship with my boss.

“Age is just a number. And let’s face it, the guys in our age group do leave a lot to be desired. Grant messed you up. Maybe Archer is bringing you back in alignment,” she remarks.

“We’ll see. It could be just an office fling.”

“Does it feel like just an office fling?”

I drop my eyes and look into my drink, then take a sip. I look back at Michelle who is watching me closely. “I honestly don’t know.”

“How do you feel?”

“Truthfully? I thought that I had things under control, but I don’t. Archer and I just can’t seem to I keep our hands off each other. Take last week for instance. I was getting a file for him in the filing room. One thing led to another and before I knew it, my skirt was up around my waist and I was against the wall with my legs wrapped around his waist.”

Her eyes bulge even more as she fans herself. “Wow! Did someone turn the heat up in here or what?”

I smile and take another sip of my drink. “I must admit that Archer is the best lover I’ve ever had. He is not the kind that is all about his own satisfaction. And I cannot believe how responsive my body is to him. All he has to do is look at me

and I begin to tingle. But it is more than just sex. And that's a big part of the problem."

"Problem? What problem? You're an attractive woman, he's an attractive man, and you've both hit it off. So what?"

I take a deep breath. "I'm concerned that Archer is old enough to be my father. And it feels so wrong to be involved with him this way, especially since he's my boss as well. And yet, something else about him makes me feel like we could actually be in a relationship outside of those two things. But we haven't had so much as a date or anything like that, and it scares me. Suppose he sees me as just a casual fling and when he's had his fill he'll toss me aside in favor of a new and improved version?"

"Not on my watch. I'll have his head if he does any such thing." Michelle scowls.

"But I have no idea how he feels about me," I mumble.

"Well, just keep enjoying yourself and allow things to unfold organically."

"I just hope I can keep my heart out of it."

"Do you feel that seriously about him?"

I worry my bottom lip before replying, "It's been a few months, Michelle. And every time we're together, it just feels so right. He knows just how to please me. But a relationship is not just sex. And that's what scares me. We haven't even so much as spent the night together. I don't see him outside of the office at all."

Michelle takes a deep breath. “Play it by ear, hon. Enjoy the ride. And I’m sure he gives you a good ride, right?”

I cannot help but giggle. I clear my throat. “Excuse me, hon. These drinks need to move on to their next destination. Be right back.”

I get up and make my way across the crowded dancefloor to the bathroom. I wait patiently and do what I need to do. I rinse my hands and dry them before fixing my hair. As I step out of the restroom, I bump into someone standing there.

“I’m so sorry!” I attempt to step around the person, but they block me. When they turn and push me into the wall, I’m caught off guard. Then I feel something hard being pressed into my side and I finally look up at the person in front of me. A scream lodges in my throat as I find myself face-to-face with Spike.

He leans down, presses his face to mine, and warns in a whisper, “If you make one sound, it’s over.”

I start to tremble, my hands shaking. Patrons move to and fro around us with barely a glance as we look like nothing more than a couple having a private moment in a dark corner.

Spike continues to speak. “I knew if I waited long enough, I’d catch you without your guard dogs. I’m not happy, Sidney. You’ve made me very angry. And I don’t like being angry. I want my money. And I want it now. I’ve waited far too long for you and your boyfriend. And I’m tired of it. So, I would suggest that you find some way to get it from your boss or goldilocks over there.”

He presses the gun into my side even more and I feel my knees go weak and my body clammy. “I’m not averse to writing off bad debt and adding a body to the morgue. It’s just that it would be a pity that it has to be you.”

Tears fill my eyes as I stammer. “P-Please. Don’t hurt me.”

He smiles evilly. “I don’t want to, honey. You’re such a pretty little thing.” I cringe as his eyes move up and down my body. He breathes deeply and leans into my face. His hot breath makes me feel nauseous. I close my eyes and try to move my face away. He presses his body into mine and raw panic races through me as I feel his hardness.

“I never gave it a thought before. But perhaps we could work off that debt in other ways.”

I cry out and try to push him away and he laughs. “Keep that option in mind. I’ll be stopping by your place tomorrow. You’ve got twenty-four hours to produce the first fifty grand.”

“F-F-Fifty grand?” My body goes into shock. “B—B—But —”

“The rest we can work out. Pretty girl like you would feel real good underneath me.”

He kisses my lips ruthlessly, bruising them as I push at his chest. Then he is gone. I feel as if I’m having a seizure as my body goes into convulsions. I begin to slide down the wall.

“Hey! Are you okay?” The voice seems to be muffled. I hear other voices raised in alarm. Then I hear Michelle. I struggle to open my eyes, but I feel as though I’m walking



down a long dark road. Then blackness overtakes me as I pass out.

## Chapter Ten

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### Archer

I breathe deeply as I slowly reduce my speed on the treadmill. My heart is pounding, and I feel the adrenaline rushing through my body. There's nothing like a good workout to boost one's energy levels. Installing the home gym in my basement has been one of the best decisions I've ever made. I reach for the towel hanging on a bench nearby and mop my wet face. My T-shirt sticks to my wet torso and sweat runs down my back. I reach for my glasses and phone and head up to my room. Twenty minutes later after a shower, I head downstairs wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt. I have just decided to grab some popcorn when my phone rings. I frown at the strange number. It's minutes to eleven. Only a security emergency warrants a call at this time.

“Colleymore.”

“Is this Archer Colleymore?”

I frown at the noise in the background and the strange voice.

“Speaking,” I reply.

“This is Michelle. Sidney’s friend. I don’t know if you remember me.”

“I do.”

“Sidney was attacked tonight. We went out for a few drinks and – it’s okay, Sidney. You’re safe, honey. Archer, you need to come get us. Please.”

I have already gotten to my feet and grabbed the handgun I keep in the coffee table before she finishes speaking. I hurry to the door leading to the garage. “Where are you?” I demand, “Better yet, just send me your location.”

I shove my feet into my shoes by the door of the garage and jump into my car. I’m halfway down my street when the message comes. I struggle to clear my mind and put the pieces together. What the hell is Sidney doing at a nightclub downtown? Who is supposed to be watching her? My usually acute brain draws a blank on my weekly roster, and the name does not present itself. But where is he? I’m overtaken by panic for Sidney. I press the accelerator as I race toward the club. The phone rings.

“Yes.”

“Are you almost here? Sidney is beside herself and I can’t control her,” Michelle says, sounding worried.

I grit my teeth. “I’m about ten minutes away. Where in the building are you?”

“Right now we’re in the bathroom. The club security is helping us stay safe.”

“Stay there.”

My mind goes blank as I try not to think about anything except getting to Sidney. A few minutes later, I come to a screeching halt in front of the club. I jump out of my car.

“Hey, buddy! You can’t park there!”

“Official security business.”

I sprint inside and am immediately inundated by a throng of people. I zero in on a wall on the far end which I assume leads to a corridor and the restrooms. I push my way through and run into a bouncer.

“No entry.” The bouncer stops me.

“I’m picking someone up.” I fight the urge to push him out of the way, but sometimes taking thirty seconds to answer questions saves me hours of trouble, and I can’t afford any trouble right now. I need to get to Sidney as soon as possible. I need to see if she is okay.

“Let’s see some ID.”

“I’m Archer Colleymore. I’m the bodyguard for a young lady who was attacked tonight.”

“Did you say Colleymore?”

“Yes.”

“Right this way.”

I follow the man, and together, we burst into the restroom. I find Michelle leaning over Sidney who is sitting on the floor

rocking back and forth. I'm instantly beside Sidney. I lift her into my arms and kiss her forehead.

"I've got you, sweetheart. I've got you," I whisper.

"I-I-I'm sorry! I'm s-s-so sorryyyyyyy!" she sobs.

"It's okay, love. Let's go." I run my hand through her hair soothingly and help her up. I carry her in my arms.

Michelle steps ahead of us and basically cuts a path through the crowd. Sidney is shaking like a leaf in my arms. We step outside and I get her into the car and strap her in. I turn to Michelle. "Get in. I'll take you home."

She gets in obediently and gives me directions. The car is silent except for Sidney sobbing softly beside me. I look in the rear-view mirror and find Michelle staring at me.

"What happened?" I demand, trying my best to keep my anger out of my voice, but some of it still laces my tone.

"Please don't be mad at her. She just wanted some space."

I measure my words carefully with a deadly edge to them. "What happened?"

"We decided to go clubbing."

"Where's her guard? What happened to him? Is he hurt? Who is it?"

"She, she kinda slipped away from him."

I clench my fingers around the stirring wheel. As soon as I'm able, I'm going to check the roster to see who's assigned to Sidney tonight. Someone's head is going to roll.

“What happened at the club?”

Michelle takes a deep breath. “I’m not quite sure. But it seems to be a repeat of Spike demanding his money.”

“Did he touch you, Sidney?” I look at her tear-stained profile.

“H-H-He said – H-H-He said that i-i-if I couldn’t g-g-get the money, h-h-he could take it out in o-o-o-other—” She hugs herself tightly and dissolves into hysterical sobbing once more.

I have heard enough. Michelle continues to give me directions to her apartment, and we soon pull into the parking lot.

“Are you okay getting in alone?”

She nods slowly, “I’m good.”

I watch Michelle as she gets out of the car and walks to the passenger seat.

“Her jacket and purse are on the back seat,” she tells me.

“Okay.”

“Sid. You’re going to be okay. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

Michelle leans in and kisses her cheek, then whispers in her ear. Sidney nods and hugs her back.

“Thanks for being there tonight, Michelle.”

I watch as Michelle enters her building and the foyer door closes behind her. I pull out of the parking lot.

“Archer, I’m—”

“Not now, Sidney.” I reach across and squeeze her knee comfortingly, trying not to let her feel my anger.

We drive in silence. I force myself to be calm, but inside I’m conflicted. My adrenaline rush and anger since the moment Michelle had called until now have been on a high. Now that it’s beginning to wear off, I’m faced with some stark realities. When I heard that Sidney was in trouble, I was scared – thoroughly. And now I have to examine the reasons for that. It’s more than being upset with her for getting herself into danger. It’s more than just the professional concern of a client being in crisis. This is Sidney. And though I have been skirting around the issue for the past months and relegating our little trysts as casual office sex, knowing that she was in danger tonight forces me to confess. I like Sidney. A lot.

“A-Archer? This isn’t the way to my apartment.”

“I know. We’re going to my place.”

“But—”

“We’ll talk when we get there.”

Obediently, she shuts up. I continue to drive.

## Chapter Eleven

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### Sidney

I wisely remain silent as instructed. I know Archer is pissed and I have no idea what I'm going to do. My heart is beating like a drum at the ominous tone in his voice. I look through the window, noting the houses we are passing. This is clearly an upscale neighborhood. I wonder which of the homes we pass will be Archer's. After a few minutes, we turn into a gateway. I watch him press a button on the dashboard and the gates light up and swing open. He drives through and they close silently behind us. I cannot help but feel as though I have exchanged a low-security prison for a high-security one.

I look at the curved driveway with trees. The lights at the bases of the trunks make them appear majestic in the darkness. He stops in front of the garage and presses another button. The door rolls up and he drives into the spacious area. I sit and wait as the door rolls down. He turns off the engine. And there is silence. All that can be heard is the sound of our breathing. Tension creeps over me.



He slowly gets out of the car and walks to my side. He opens the back door and retrieves my belongings, then he opens my door and extends his hand. I take it nervously, meeting his eyes as I step out. His gaze is inscrutable. I squeeze his hand slightly and I see a flicker of emotions. But he masks it quickly.

He reaches behind me to close the door and then leads me into the house. He slips his shoes off in the kitchen and I do the same.

“Archer, I really just—” I start to say, but he stops me.

“Sidney, we’ll soon talk. Okay?”

“But I just want to say—”

“Sidney, please.” The cold edge in his voice makes me swallow my words. I have never felt this much tension between us before, not even when we were fighting our sexual desires. He releases my hand and places my coat and purse on the kitchen island. He leaves me standing in the doorway as he walks deeper into the room and begins rustling through the cupboards. I notice, for the first time, that he is in casual attire, and I must admit that he looks good. He comes over to me with a glass of water and hands it to me.

“I’m not thir—”

“Drink,” he orders.

Obediently, I swallow half the glass. He watches me like a hawk, and I feel the color rise to my cheeks. It reminds me of the way he looks at me whenever we have sex. I drop my gaze

as I finish the glass of water. He takes the glass from me and goes to the sink. Wordlessly, he picks up my jacket and purse from the island and turns to me.

“Come.” He takes my hand, and again, I follow obediently. I feel strangely calm now despite the evening’s turn of events. He places me at the foot of the stairs and I begin to ascend, conscious of him behind me.

We enter a large room and I immediately feel my heart begin to race. This is Archer’s domain. We cross the floor and enter another room. My nostrils tickle as I’m assailed by his scent.

“Take a shower,” he says before turning around and walking out. Beyond, I see him leave the bedroom as well. I stare at the doorway for a few moments before undressing. I leave my clothing on the back of the door hook and step into the cubicle. I put my hair into a messy bun before I turn on the faucet. I set the temperature and get caught up in the luxurious experience of having nozzles shooting at me from all directions. I find a setting I like and soon lather my body. As I shower, I scrub every part hard, willing the scrubbing to erase Spike’s touch. At the thought of him, I shudder.

I rinse my body and reach for the towel on the rod outside the door. It is slightly damp and I sniff it. Archer. I feel warm and cozy as I take deep calming breaths. I look at the hook where I had hung my clothing and am surprised to find that they’re gone. In their place is an oversized T-shirt. I remove the towel and slip on the T-shirt.

I step into the bedroom and find it empty. But on the trunk at the foot of the bed, there is a covered tray. I'm drawn to it by the smell. I lift the cover to find a grilled cheese sandwich and a glass of water. My stomach growls in response and I'm halfway through the sandwich before I come up for air. There's a bit of spiciness about it, so I take a drink of water. I finish the sandwich and water just as Archer returns. I look at him as he removes the tray and places it on a low table beside the window.

Without a word, he pulls back the sheets and says, "Get in."

I stand but my feet feel as though they are disconnected from my body and I wobble. Actually, my entire body feels woozy. I wonder if I'm in shock from what had happened earlier. As soon as I slide between the sheets, my eyes feel unbelievably heavy. I watch as he closes the bedroom door and arms the security. He pulls off his T-shirt and takes his gun from his waist as he walks over to the bed. He sees me watching him and holds my gaze. I search his eyes for something but I come up empty. He places the gun on the night table within reach before taking off his sweatpants. He is clad in a pair of boxers.

Archer slides into bed beside me. He flicks a switch somewhere by the night table and the entire room is plunged into darkness.

"Archer?" I mumble and bite my lip between my teeth.

"Sleep, Sidney." He slides to the center of the bed, where I am, and pulls me into his arms. I allow him to pull me slightly

atop him so that I can rest my head on his chest. I yawn widely as I feel his fingers undo my hair. He combs through the strands, and I can barely keep my eyes open. I want to stay awake, but it is a hard fight. I yawn again and I hear him sigh above my head.

“Stop fighting, Sidney. Go to sleep.”

“But we need to talk, please.”

He kisses my forehead gently. “In the morning.”

The soothing strokes of his hands finally work their magic, and I slip into slumber.

It’s much later into the night when I move restlessly. I feel my leg touch another and I’m instantly awake. My eyes fly open and I look beyond the window to find a sky tinged with pink with the impending dawn. I try to roll over and feel a hand come over to still my movements. I look up and find Archer looking down at me. Last night comes rushing back and I feel my cheeks stain with color. He reaches out and rubs one with the back of his fingers.

“Hey,” he whispers.

I take his hand in mine and lean to kiss him softly. “I’m sorry.”

“I know. But we’ll fix it. Trust me, okay?”

I nod silently and take a deep breath as desire begins to run through me at the realization that I’m in Archer’s bed. Our thoughts seem to be one and the same as he lowers his head to capture my lips. There is a hunger between us that cannot be

ignored, and before I know it Archer's head is buried between my spread-eagled legs.

“Ahh!” I close my eyes as I buck up to meet his pressing tongue. I grab handfuls of the bedsheet as pleasure rocks me and my body begins to shake.

“Ahhhhhh! Archer!” My head thrashes back and forth as he licks my pussy mercilessly. My clit is on fire as he rubs it hard. I arch up to meet him one last time as my climax crashes over me. I sob as I struggle to breathe.

Archer slowly moves up my body, kissing a line along my stomach and up between my breasts. When he reaches my lips and takes possession of my mouth, I moan as I taste myself on his tongue. He wedges his body between mine and I feel him tremble as he reaches between us to grip his throbbing erection. I reach for him as well, and together we join our bodies. I lift my legs to wrap familiarly around his waist as he presses into me, groaning and trembling. This feels like no other time. Tears come to my eyes as our bodies find synchronization. He holds me close as we begin to move harder and faster. My body falls apart as he drives his cock into me. And I explode. He is not far behind and moans above me as he loses control. For the first time, I feel Archer shudder uncontrollably, gasping for air as he pours himself into me. He holds me tightly as if he'll never let me go, burying his face in my neck. I hold him, stroking his hair as he continues to tremble in my embrace. His warm breath on my face soothes me as his lips find mine once again. His tongue is soft as it slides against mine. His shaft within me is still hot and hard

and it stirs. I groan as he shifts his hips and begins to move within me once more.

This moment is surreal, almost magical. It feels like we are on a level we have never transcended. Archer holds me tighter still. And I don't ever want him to let me go.

In the still of the early morning, our voices ring out with ecstasy. I'm hoarse with my screams of passion. There is a certain freedom in knowing there are no limits and boundaries to our lovemaking. This time, there will be no getting dressed and going home. There are no hushed climaxes in fear of being overheard. There is no time limit as we cling to each other. For the first time, I'm in Archer's bed. I slept through the night in his arms. Tears come to my eyes as my heart fills with emotions for this man holding me, making love to me. I allow my body to say what I dare not even think of verbalizing. We flow as one. And as I urge him on, giving as he takes, taking as he gives, I wish it could be like this forever. And in that moment as we both shoot for the stars, it feels like forever.

The sun has completely risen as I lie in his arms. He strokes my back and I stroke his chest. We have been lost in thought for the past hour or two. Admittedly, I have dozed off a few times during those hours. But I know he is wide awake and staring at the ceiling. Somehow, I don't want to break the silence for fear it'll break the magic. He clears his throat and I look up to find him staring at me with those mesmerizing gray eyes.

“Did you sleep well?” His voice is raspy.

I blink before answering. “If you mean before you had your wild way with me, I did.

“Good.”

I reach up and kiss his lips gently, then pull back. I stroke a lock of hair away from his forehead. “Thank you for coming for me, Archer.”

“You shouldn’t have been there in the first place, you know?”

I look down sheepishly. “I know. But I just wanted to have some fun.”

He furrows his brows, “Fun without a guard cannot be on your agenda, Sidney. Who was on duty, by the way?”

“Ummm.”

“Tell me. Just to confirm. I’ve already checked the roster, so you know.”

I sigh. “It’s not his fault.”

“A name.”

“Ben.”

“Thank you.”

“Please don’t fire him,” I mumble.

“That’s not your shot to call, baby. Now, tell me what happened. Was it Spike?”

I take a deep breath and lay my head on his chest again. I close my eyes.

“Sidney? Talk to me, sweetheart. Was it Spike? What did he do?”

“It was. He had a gun this time. He alluded to taking his payment in ‘other ways’.”

“Did he touch you inappropriately?”

“Yes.”

“What did he do?”

“He kissed me. And he-he pressed himself against me.”

I hear him take a deep breath and exhale above my head. He shifts and places one arm behind his head as he looks up at the ceiling again. I reach up to stroke his cheek and he looks at me.

“I’m sorry, Archer. I understand now why you have me guarded around the clock. I never thought that being unguarded this one time would put me in danger,” I apologize.

“Guys like Spike don’t give up, Sidney. I had security as tight as it was because I’ve tangled with him before and know what he’s capable of, and without remorse too.”

“I’m sorry.”

He strokes my arm. “That’s okay. We’re going to fix it. You’re moving in with me.”

I sit up and look at him. “I’m what?”



He strokes the side of my breast. “You’re moving in with me.”

“The hell I am. Archer, do you know how that would look?” I frown.

“How would that look to whom?”

“Everyone.”

“Everyone who?”

“Everyone at work is going to know we’re living together.”

“And why would that matter?”

“Archer. I can’t just move in with you.” I shake my head.

“You need protection. And if you’re going to ditch my guards, I have to be the one to do it,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Archer, we’ve crossed a lot of boundaries that we shouldn’t have. The lines are getting a little blurred here if you ask me. What are we really? Boss and secretary? Client and bodyguard? Or are we in a relationship? Which is it? If it’s option A or option B, we should be pulling away rather than growing closer.”

He gives me a strange look.

Slowly, he sits up and kneels before me. He takes a few deep breaths and then slowly reaches for me. There is no resistance on my part and I allow him to draw me into an embrace. There is a slight smile when he says, “I don’t care what people think, Sidney. We’re both adults. And we’re not obligated to live our lives according to other people’s

expectations. And I don't care about blurred lines. And what rule says we cannot operate as all three at the same time? I want you to move in with me, okay? I want you to be safe."

I look at him, my heart racing. I search his eyes and see something deep within that eludes me. My eyes drift down his body. Without thinking, I reach out to trace the tattoo on his stomach. I feel his abs jump in response to my touch. My hand drifts lower and I trace the length of his cock. I hear him sigh softly.

"Don't wake him if you don't intend to feed him," he growls softly. "And don't think you're distracting me from the business of moving in with me."

I look at him as I continue to stroke him. Slowly, he comes to life in my hands. I see the pleasure in his eyes as I continue to touch him. Then I do something I have never done before. I lean down, shuffling backward until my head is level with him. I hear him sigh again and his hand tangles my hair. "Take your time, baby."

I lick his length, loving how smooth the skin is with the hardness beneath. I continue to stroke with my hand as I plant tiny kisses around the head. His musk is tantalizing. I use the tip of my tongue to tease the juicy slit. His salty flavor is tangy on my tongue. Slowly, I lower my head and suck gently on his crown.

"Fuck! Sidney!"

I take it as a sign to continue.

“Grip harder, stroke faster.” His voice sounds almost hoarse with pleasure.

I do as I’m told.

“Yes, baby. That’s it. That’s it. That’s so good.”

He thrusts slowly as I continue to stroke and suck him. I grow wet with desire and can’t wait to have him inside me. Suddenly, I pull back, catching him off guard. I push him back and follow him, straddling his hips. He laughs and pulls me down to meet him.

“Take what you want, baby.”

I grip him and position myself above him. I sink onto him, throwing my head back and closing my eyes as he fills me. He holds my hips, urging me to move back and forth as we find our rhythm. Before long, all that is heard is the sound of our bodies and the creak of the bed as we lose control. I revel once more in the newfound freedom of privacy.

I don’t know how many times he takes me to the peak before he finally follows me. As we lie spent in each other’s arms, he strokes my damp back. My eyes are drifting close.

He whispers in my ear, “Can I take that as a yes?”

“Not yet. Can I think about it?”

“Will I have to keep you in bed until you agree?”

I chuckle. “That doesn’t sound like a bad idea at all.”

“Greedy.”

“You’ve made me so.”

“How long do you need to think?” he asks calmly. But I can see he really wants to know.

“Let’s see how I feel after I wake up, and you’ve fed me breakfast or lunch or whatever meal is required at that time, and after you’ve ‘fed me’ again,” I touch his soft cock and he jerks at my touch, “and then we’ll see how I feel about moving in with you.”

“That’s a whole lot of feeding. I hope I can fill all your orders, especially the last one.”

“I’m sure you can.” I reach up to kiss him gently before spooning into his side and closing my eyes.

I feel his body curve around mine and his arm rests securely beneath my breast. He pulls the covers over us once more. I drift off to sleep in his arms.

## Chapter Twelve

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### Archer

I wake before Sidney as usual. It's hard to believe that two weeks have passed since she agreed to move in with me. We decided to make it gradual and start with just a few pieces of clothing. Her other things are in the apartment as her lease is up at the end of the year. By then, we'll have made the move complete.

I play absentmindedly with her hair as I watch the sky lighten with the coming sunrise. I look at the ceiling and feel a sense of peace sweep over me. It has been decades since I felt this peaceful with a woman in my arms.

After the nightclub incident and taking disciplinary action with Ben, it has been obvious to the office that Sidney's living arrangements have changed. For starters, there are no guards assigned to her apartment. And the icing on the cake is her arriving and leaving with me each day. But the nine-day wonder at the office has ended and we are discreet with our relationship. There were a few speculative looks during the first week. But now, it is business as usual. And home has

been spectacular. And it hasn't all been about sex. Outside of our physical relationship, we have started to discover things about each other. For example, I learned she can't fall asleep without covering her feet. It could be a sheet or a pair of socks. But her feet have to be covered. I also found out that she is tone deaf and can't hold a note to save her life. She, on the other hand, has discovered that I'm a bit of a chess geek. I have taken great pleasure in explaining the basics of the game and find her to be a satisfactory student.

She stirs and I look at her. Her eyes are still closed, the long, thick lashes lying on her upper cheek. I allow my imagination to run wild for a moment. It runs in the direction of her left hand and I imagine my ring there, announcing to the world that she is mine. It continues to race and I see a perfect blend of us both, nestled in her arms and suckling her breast. I see us on family vacations. Perhaps with her by my side, I can finally get out of the city more and relax. I'll be turning forty-six in December and I'm pleased to know that Sidney's birthday is a week before mine. I plan for us both to take a vacation, perhaps to Hawaii. Maybe we'll spend the Christmas holidays there as well. As long as we are together, nothing else will matter. I feel as though my life has taken a turn for the better. Perhaps my penance for the mistakes I made with my first family have been paid and the powers that be have seen fit to give me a second chance. Whatever the reason Sidney has been allowed into my life, I'm not going to fuck around and mess it up.

“Mmmmmm.” She stretches and slaps me in the face. I grab her wayward hand and bite her fingers gently.

“Ow,” she moans.

“You slapped me.”

“Good morning.” She looks at me with sleepy eyes and I smile.

“Good morning. Sleep well?”

“Very well. What time is it?”

“About eight-ish.”

“Wow. You are bad for me, you know? I never used to get up this late on a Saturday morning.”

“The blame is mutual. Usually, I’ve already done a ten-mile jog, pumped some iron, and had my protein shake before the sun even begins to show. But I had this woman sleeping on my chest and I don’t want to disturb her rest.”

She reaches up and caresses my cheek before sitting up beside me. I grab her hand as she swings her feet to the floor.

“Whoa! Where are you going?”

“Well, unless you want a wet bed I suggest you let me go and take care of nature.”

“Hurry back. After you take care of yourself in there, maybe we can take care of each other in here.” I wiggle my eyebrows suggestively and palm my cock through the sheet. She laughs as she gets out of bed.

“You dirty old man.”

I laugh. “I may be a dirty old man, but you love what this dirty old man does to your sweet young body, don’t you?” I sit up and swat her bare bottom. She yelps and I watch as she runs to the bathroom.

My smile is a mile wide as I get out of bed and pull on a pair of sweats. By the time she returns, I have stripped the bed and have new sheets out of the closet. She pulls on an oversized T-shirt, and we make the bed together. I follow her downstairs with the laundry hamper and assist with loading it.

“I can do it, Archer.”

“I know. But I want to help. You are so independent.”

“You become independent when you have no one you can depend on.”

“So, I take it your ex was a—?”

“Freeloading junkie. He charmed his way into my life, but then the prince became a frog again.”

“I guess he gave us a bad rap, huh. I hope I can make up for everything you didn’t have with him.”

She turns and hugs me. “You have more than made up for the failings I have experienced with your gender. But I don’t blame him if the truth is to be told. I blame his deadbeat father. He ran out on him and his mother. With a start like that as a child, it is rather difficult to grow into a well-rounded adult, you know? Now, if he’d had a father like you—”

“Hell no! If he had been my son where would that leave you and me? It would be awkward to have me lusting after my



son's girlfriend, don't you think?" I make a face.

"I'm just saying, a father like you could have taught him a thing or two about relationships and life."

I feel a twinge of guilt as Sidney showers me with praise. "I'm not a paragon of perfection, you know, Sidney? I've made my share of mistakes in the past."

She stretches up on her toes and kisses my cheek. "You're perfect for me."

We complete the chores and spend some time rearranging the kitchen cabinets for her to have easier access. Having lived alone for so long, I have never given any thought to the height at which things are in the house. But when I found her standing on chairs to reach things, I immediately brought in the step ladder as a temporary fix.

I leave her to wash her hair upstairs and go to the garage. There are a bunch of boxes with stuff that I have never gotten around to sorting since I moved there. Over time, I have been getting around to some tasks. I pull out a box of pictures I've been meaning to go through and hang around the house, but I never got the motivation or the time. Having Sidney here makes this house feel like a home for the first time, and I want it to look like one too. I know I'm not doing this now, but I want it done soon rather than later, so I place the box by the kitchen door as a reminder. I know myself well enough to know when I have tripped over it often enough, they'll get hung.

I head upstairs to find Sidney sitting with a blow dryer and brush as she dries her hair. I lean against the doorjamb.

“Would you like to go out tonight?”

She turns to look at me. “Out? As in leave the house with you for something other than work?”

I laugh. “Yes.”

“You mean like a date?”

“That’s the sort of thing couples do, right?”

She goes silent as she stares at me. I walk over to stand behind her. I place my hands on her shoulders, massaging them slightly. She looks up at me.

“Are we a couple?” she asks softly.

“We’re seeing each other exclusively, and now we live together. And if you say yes to tonight, that could be considered a date. I think we’re definitely heading in that direction.”

“Okay. I would love to go out tonight.”

I smile and bend to kiss her lightly. “Great. I’ll go make dinner reservations for eight. By the way, can you skate?”

“Skate? As in ice skate?”

“Yes.”

“Ummm. Can you?”

I wink at her. There’s only one way to find out.”

I whistle a happy tune as I head back downstairs. In a few minutes, the reservations are made.

Dinner goes well and I take her to Skateland afterward. It's the first I've really gone out socially in years and it feels good to be rolling on a polished floor again instead of my driveway. I see the looks we get and I try to gauge Sidney's response. On my part, I really don't care if anyone wants to judge our age difference. She seems not to notice, or if she does, she doesn't care. We have a good time and spend a few hours skating.

Finally, we decide it is time to head home. She leans into me as I drive. I use my free hand to stroke her cheek.

“Had a good time?”

She smiles brightly and nods happily, “The best. Thank you.”

“You're welcome, sweetheart. I have a lot in store for us. Have you ever left the country?”

“Noooooo. What do you have in mind?” She sounds giddy.

“Well, someone has a birthday coming up, don't they?”

“You mean, other than you?” she teases.

“We can make a birthday week of it.”

“Really?” She is beaming. And then her smile falters. “What about the office?”

“What about it?”

“We can't both be out of the office.”

“It’ll be around the holiday season. I can make it work for us.”

“I know. But at least the last time you traveled I was there to hold the fort and direct certain calls to one of the other senior guys. With me gone, then what?”

I think for a while. Should I put this on the table now? I think better of it and hold my peace. We haven’t been living together for even a month so my desire for a more permanent arrangement cannot be discussed just yet.

“What’s going to happen to my desk if we both leave, Archer?”

I shrug. “Maybe we can get a temp. Honestly, I haven’t given it that much thought.”

“I fail to believe that. You are always thinking ahead.”

I laugh softly and squeeze her knee. “You’re getting to know me a little too well. Let’s just say I have a thought but I’m not yet ready to share it. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, okay? Just know I have plans for our birthdays.”

“Okay.” She smiles at me and my own smile is plastered on my face.

We get home and head inside out of the cold quickly. I arm the system and take her hand as we head upstairs. She turns on the bottom step and places her arms around my neck.

“Thank you for a great evening.” She kisses me gently. I move to deepen the kiss when my phone rings. I pull it out of

my pocket and frown. Why is my son calling me at this time of the night?

“Let me take this call. I’ll be up in a few.” I brush her lips once more, then head back to the kitchen.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Daddy dearest.”

I sigh at the obvious drunkenness in my son’s tone. I listen as he starts to say how he wishes he had never been born and that no one loves him.

This has been our routine over the past few months whenever he calls. Ever since his mom cut him off too, he takes pleasure in calling me occasionally to either berate me about how worthless I was as a father, or to pity himself to ask for money.

“Stop that, son.”

“Don’t fucking call me that! You don’t care. You never have and you never will.”

“If I didn’t care, would I be always begging you to let me help you?”

“All you want to do is stick me in a nuthouse.”

“All I want is for you to be okay.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Then can you buy me a ticket to come home? I don’t want to be here anymore.”

I blink a few times as I process the request with skepticism. His mother must have really cut him off for good, otherwise he'd never ask to come back here. To be close to me.

“Well? Can you?”

“Of course, I can.”

“Okay, good. As soon as you wire me the money, I'll book an airline.”

“I'm not going to do that. My money will end up in your veins and you know it.”

There is nothing but silence and his heavy breathing for a while. Then he explodes.

“Go to hell, you fucking bastard! I knew you wouldn't help me. I knew you were worthless. You've never been there for me when I needed you! Well, fuck you very much for nothing.”

The line goes silent as he cuts me off. I sit staring in silence for a while. I feel the weight of my years, and the lightness of being out with Sidney dissipates. I remember this morning when she said she was proud of me. I wonder how proud she would be if she knew about him.

I randomly check the windows and doors, though I have already locked the house. I stop in the kitchen and accidentally kick the box I placed there earlier. I look down and spot a frame just beneath the one on top. I pull it out and my heart sinks. It is a family photo collage with various pictures and our names. I know if I dig deeper, I'll find others in various stages

of our lives. I find the one that I cherish most. My son's high school graduation picture that Rebecca had sent. I don't know how she had gotten him to sign it but he had. I trace the innocent face and feel a weight in my heart.

“Archer?” Sidney's voice floats down to me.

“Coming, sweetheart.” I place the picture back in the box and head upstairs.

## Chapter Thirteen

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### Sidney

I race back to bed as I hear him coming up the stairs. I lay across it and look at the door, hardly daring to breathe at my boldness. He comes into view and I smile, my heart pounding wildly. He stops and stares for a brief second. Then he smiles. He walks over to the bed slowly and sits. He reaches out a hand and trails it across my breast and then down my stomach. My center begins to grow wet with anticipation as his hand creeps down to my mound. I reach up and pull him in for a kiss as he strokes me. My legs open as though they have a mind of their own. He pulls back and I watch him undress, his eyes roving over my body. I wiggle to the center of the bed and sit up on my knees, waiting for him to join me. When at last he is as naked as I am, he comes to me. Our mouths meet and fuse. I feel him harden against me and I can think of nothing more than having him inside me. He pulls back and says gruffly, "Turn around."

Obediently, I turn. He pushes my torso forward until I'm on my hands and knees. He continues to push me until my breasts



press into the bed and my butt is sticking in the air. He slaps it gently and I giggle. “Ow!”

“Liar. Close your eyes.”

I do as I’m told, breathing deeply. He nudges my knees apart. I feel the warmth from his breath as he kisses down my spine. I shiver as he plants little bites on my fleshy ass. Then I feel his tongue glide along my slit. I curl my fingers and toes, expelling a shaky breath as he licks me. My pussy trembles with each glide of his tongue. He knows just how to please me. I’m close to peaking when he finally moves away. I protest softly and he laughs.

“Patience.”

He grips my hips and nudges my knees apart even further. Then I feel his cock nudge at my core. I hold my breath, letting it out on a whimper as he slides home. He thrusts slowly, pulling me back to meet him each time. Having my eyes closed heightens the sensation. I focus all my senses on this experience. Archer moves up to crouch over me, laying his torso flat against my back. He wraps one arm under my breasts while the other cups my mound. With unfailing accuracy, he finds my clit between my engorged lips. With one flick of his thumb, electricity shoots through my body. I jerk spasmodically, pushing against him in every way as I seek relief from the mounting tension in my body. He continues to press into me, stroking me in every possible delicious way. A sob escapes me as my body goes tight like a string pulled

tautly. Then he presses once more and rubs my clit hard and I fall apart.

I feel my juices run down my thighs as I climax hard. My mouth is open but no sound comes out. He continues to thrust and I feel the wet heat of my juices coating his cock. He does not stop pounding into me, pushing me toward another climax. My body is wet and shaking from the effort to keep up with him. But the ecstasy is wringing me dry. Finally, as he pushes me to a third high, I feel him grow tense. His body swells within mine just as I cry out hoarsely. He holds me close, his breath hot on my neck as he pours himself into me. I feel his hot seed coating my womb as he fills me. His heart pounds, matching the beat of my own. He breathes harshly as he tries to catch his breath. Slowly, he stretches me out and joins me briefly, kissing my neck. My eyes are drooping as he moves away from me and covers my feet. I hear him go to the bathroom. I'm almost asleep when he returns. I feel a warm dampness as he wipes my body with a towel. I don't know when I fall asleep. All I have is a vague sensation of being completely covered with a blanket and pulled into his arms.

I wake up with my leg thrown over Archer. He is snoring softly. The sky is light and I wonder how late we have slept. My stomach rumbles but the call of nature is stronger. I slip out of the bed and hurry to relieve my bladder. Archer has barely stirred. I rummage through the drawer and find a T-shirt. It hits me just below my butt. I go downstairs to get some juice. I pour myself a tall glass and take a sip while I contemplate breakfast, or at this time, brunch. As I move to

the sink with the glass, my eyes fall upon a box at the door leading to the garage. I go over to the box – and stare in shock. My hand trembles and I have to place the glass on the nearest surface. My heart is pounding as I pick up a picture.

It was taken at least ten years ago and the face is innocent and almost unrecognizable to the man I had known. But that distinctive mole on the left corner of his mouth leaves no doubt that this is Grant. I pick up another picture. It is a family. The little red-headed boy smiles with a gap from a missing tooth. The woman is a replica of the little boy with the same red hair and green eyes. But my eyes are drawn to the tall man. I stop breathing for a split second.

His hair is less silver and he is not wearing glasses. But this is Archer.

What the fuck!?

I'm trembling as I recall all the conversations Grant has had about his deadbeat father. I recall the snippets I know of Archer being divorced with an adult child. But this can't be. Grant's father cannot be Archer! Archer's son cannot be Grant! It doesn't make any sense!

But as I look through even more pictures, I find a grade school certificate made out to Grant Colleymore for perfect attendance. Where the hell did Duncan come from!?

My heart is racing as I try to gather my thoughts. My spirit plummets as I try not to allow the reality of what I have just discovered to sink in just yet – but it's forcing its way into my

consciousness nevertheless. I need to get out of this house – and fast.

I creep upstairs, not sure how I'm going to get dressed without waking Archer. I peer into the room just as he is getting out of bed. He looks over at me and smiles.

“Morning, sweetheart.”

I smile nervously, struggling to hide my agitation, “M-Morning.”

“Something the matter? You sound out of breath. And I had nothing to do with it.” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively and I force a laugh.

“Just running up the stairs. That's all.”

“Well, care to run into the shower with me?” He walks over and I realize that I'm still standing in the doorway. I smile nervously and wrap my arms around him.

“I'll be right there. Go on and get started.”

“Okay. Don't be too long.” He kisses me briefly and I watch as he heads to the shower. My heart is pounding as I wait for the water to start.

I move like lightning as I snatch up a pair of sweats and grab my purse with my phone and keys. My sneakers and jacket are downstairs. I control my fingers long enough to dial a cab. I thank heavens that the company says they'll send one as soon as I send my location. I do so and hang up. I spend a minute and get my shoes and jacket on, all the while looking at

the stairs. I open the front door to go and wait by the gate and am immediately bombarded by the tripping of the alarms.

Shit!

There is no way around it now. I take off running down the driveway. I stare in panic at the locked gate. Why had I not paid attention when Archer had wanted to show me how to get in and out of the property?

I look at the wall and pick a tree I think I can manage to climb. The adrenaline rush is real as I clamber up the trunk and onto a branch. I get one foot on the wall. Then the other. I scramble down on the other side and begin to run. I run for a full minute before I see a taxi heading toward me. I stop it and hop inside.

“Just drive! Please!” I lean back in the seat, trying to catch my breath, looking in the rear windshield. There is no way Archer did not hear the alarms. And being who he is, he could be in his clothes and car in record time. But by the time we get to the main road, he is nowhere to be seen. I relax and take a deep breath.

I give the driver my address and lean back into the seat. The Sunday morning traffic is light and so I'm soon home. I head upstairs and enter my apartment. It feels surreal to be back here. The past two weeks feel like a dream. I begin to clean. It is what I do when I don't want to think. But soon the apartment is squeaky clean and I have nothing to do but think.

I step out to take my garbage downstairs and come to a screeching halt. Tony is lounging in the corner. My mouth

drops open as he stares at me.

“I-I—”

“Mr. Colleymore’s orders.”

I step back into my apartment, garbage and all. My mind goes blank. Where do I go from here?

## Chapter Fourteen

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### Archer

I've been slowly stewing all morning. All that's in my head is what had unfolded yesterday morning. The blaring alarm had been the last thing I expected to hear as I waited for Sidney to join me in the shower. I raced to the bedroom soaking wet. I grabbed my gun with one hand and flipped the switch to bring up the camera feed. The front door stood ajar. And there was Sidney racing down the driveway. I had watched in horror as she had climbed a fucking tree and gone over the wall. What the hell?

I tried calling her all day yesterday. But after a while, I knew her phone must be off as the calls went straight to voice mail. I was confused. I could not begin to even process what could have caused this. I needed an explanation but I was damned if I was going to grovel. I reinstated her security detail immediately because, in spite of everything, I need her to be safe.

I check the camera in her office once more. I ordered Steve to pick her up this morning and to let me know when they

were on their way. If the truth is to be told, I had not even been sure she was coming to work. But Steve has confirmed that she is in the car and they are on their way. So now I wait.

I sit staring at the monitor until at last, she comes into the office. I zoom in on her face. Her eyes are red and puffy as though she's been crying. And the circles under them tell me she hasn't slept well. Quietly, she slips into her chair and puts away her purse. I reach across the desk and press the intercom.

“Sidney? May I have the Bernard Lodge file please?”

“C-Certainly, Mr. Colleymore.”

I feel as though someone punched me in the gut. So, that is how it is going to be?

I watch as she slips into the filing room. I conceal the cameras just before she comes to my office. I look up as she stands in the doorway, refusing to meet my gaze. I hold out my hand. She comes forward, places the file on my desk, and walks out. My heart plummets as I watch her go. What the hell is going on?

I watch her for the entire day as she moves around, a shell of herself. I catch her wipe at her eyes now and then. I order out for lunch for both of us as usual. She doesn't touch her lunch but remains at her desk working. I'm torn in so many emotional directions that for the first time in my life, I don't quite know how to approach her for fear of making whatever the problem is worse. But as the afternoon winds down, I can't take it anymore. I press the intercom. “Sidney?”



“Yes, Mr. Colleymore?”

“Can you please bring me some printing paper?” I figure that if she doesn’t have a task requiring her presence in my office, she can refuse to comply. I stand and wait behind the door. As soon as she steps inside, I close and lock the door.

“I’ll scream if you touch me.” Her cold words startle me, and I feel a shard of pain pierce me. I look at her searchingly, but she refuses to meet my eyes. I go to my desk and sit quietly.

“Speak your mind, Sidney.”

I watch as she takes a few angry paces back and forth. Then she stops in front of my desk.

“You never told me you had a son.”

“Okay? I’m single. So, you don’t have to worry that you’re the other woman or something. I’ve been divorced for a long time. My son and I don’t speak really.”

“Grant was right about you.”

I’m startled as she calls my son by name.

“How do you know my son’s name?”

“Why is he Grant Duncan and not Grant Colleymore?”

“It was his choice to take his mother’s maiden name when he turned eighteen. Like I said, we don’t really speak. Not unless he’s calling to curse me for his miserable life. But you haven’t explained how you know Grant.”

“Remember that deadbeat boyfriend whose debts have my life in danger?”

I look deep into her eyes as the weight of her words hit me. I don't want to think about what she is saying.

“Well?”

“Please tell me it's not Grant.”

“I can't do that.”

I spring up. “Fuck!” I slam my hand against the desk hard. I go to stand at the window and look outside. But I see nothing. My world feels as though it's crashing in on me and I'm powerless to stop the weight under which I'm being buried. Of all the beautiful sweet things I had to pick, it had to be my son's ex-girlfriend. Our conversation on Saturday morning comes back to haunt me, and I feel my heart begin to tear apart. There is no way I can try to maintain a relationship with Sidney now. I'm a big part of her problem, and based on the picture Grant has probably painted of me to her, she more than likely hates me now. Hurt cuts through me at the thought of losing her. And I feel horribly guilty about how I had pushed away all caution and taken advantage of her from the beginning. I know I'm being tough on myself. But it is what I need to do right now – remind myself that I don't deserve her at all.

“Is that why you ran out on me yesterday? How did you find out?”

“The pictures in the box by the door.”

I turn to look at her. “Sidney, you have to believe me when I tell you I had no idea you were involved with my son,” I tell her.

She looks at me with doubt in her eyes. “I thought you were a good man. But you’re the reason Grant is the way he is. You’re the deadbeat father he was always ranting about. I can’t believe you could leave your wife and child like that to fend for themselves.”

I stare at her. “To fend for themselves? Rebecca and Grant were far from destitute.”

“He needed a father and you weren’t there.”

“Do I at least get the chance to explain myself? Even a condemned man gets a last speech.”

She rolls her eyes and looks away.

“I was young, barely out of high school. Rebecca and I had been seeing each other since junior high and we thought we knew all about what life had to offer. So, a few months after graduation, we got married.” I sigh and shove my hands into my pockets. “In short order, I entered the military and Rebecca got pregnant. I’ll admit, I was not around much being overseas so often. And yes, I’ll admit that when I was around, I was more of a drill sergeant than a father.” I shrug and walk back to my desk, taking care not to make any contact with her. I’m already feeling the pain of separation from her. “I made my mistakes and I own up to them. Grant needs to do the same. He keeps using me as a scapegoat. I bet he didn’t tell you how many times I’ve begged him to go to rehab. Or about the time

I found him stoned half to death, got him into rehab, and got him a job with a client after he cleaned up only to have him go right back to using. I may not have been the father that he wanted. But I tried my darn best with my limitations despite the hatred that comes my way because of it.” I’m a mess of emotions right now. “He was the one who called Saturday night just before I came upstairs, you know?” I hold my head in my hands. “He wanted me to send him a plane ticket to come home. Of course, when he wanted the cash up front, I refused.”

I look at her, feeling nothing but pain. Her head is down and I see her wipe her cheek. I want so badly to pull her into my arms and hug her until this passes. But I dare not. I stay where I’m.

“I didn’t know he had been to rehab,” she says quietly.

“He has. And I’m trying to get him to go back but he refuses. He’s in Ireland with his mother right now.”

“I see.”

There is silence for a few minutes. I look at her, but she refuses to look at me. After a while, she clears her throat.

“Can you pack my things and bring them here for me please?”

Her words are stabs to my already shattered heart. I force my tone to be nonchalant.

“Sure.”

“Also, we both need to move forward and get on with our lives. So, the past few months never happened.”

If I had thought my world had come to an end before, those words are the final nail in the coffin. I want to order her to perish the thought of breaking up with me and that there is no way we’re going to separate. But there is that side of me that knows I don’t deserve to be happy and that this disappointment is my punishment for all the mistakes I have made in every relationship in my life. And it’s that same side coupled with the guilt now riding me that has the last say.

“Okay.”

“Thank you.”

I watch her leave the office, and for the first time in my life, I feel real fear. I’m losing someone who means the world to me and I’m powerless to stop it.

I sit and watch her through the camera for the rest of the afternoon. It’s as though I want to memorize every detail of her. She keeps her head down and averted for the most part and I suspect she is crying. That gives me no solace. I don’t want to be the source of her tears and sadness.

When it’s the end of the work day, I watch as she packs her bag. I have already arranged for another officer to take her home. I see the surprise on her face when he turns up at the door. She looks briefly at the camera as though she knows I’m watching her. Then she takes her bag and leaves.

I give her a half hour head start before I leave so I don't run the risk of running into them in the parking garage. When I arrive home, the house feels eerily empty. I look at the box which caused all of this.

I drag my leaden feet up the stairs. I find a duffel bag and pack the things she had taken to my house. But I leave a few of the T-shirts I love and the cut-offs that she always wore. I take a few deep breaths as her peachy scent overwhelms me. I sigh and lie on the bed, suit and all. I stare up at the dark ceiling. I cannot even think straight. I feel empty. I feel cold. I feel alone. I take another deep breath and let it out slowly. I'm alone.

I'm not sure how much longer I lie there. But eventually, I get up and take a shower. I make a sandwich. As I eat, I look at the box again. The damage is already done so there is no sense in putting the box away again. I grab the box along with the hammer and nails and go to the living room.

It's almost midnight before I have every picture hung the way I want it to be. It's a reminder of my punishment. I have no picture of Sidney, and never will. I stare at the blank space briefly before closing my eyes and turning away, forcing my thoughts back to the present. It's over with Sidney. And there's nothing I can do about it.

## Chapter Fifteen

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### Sidney

I'm still feeling shell-shocked after my conversation with Archer. All day I stewed and painted him as the villain. But that afternoon when he'd given his side, I felt awful. I want to hate him. But all I can think of is the anguish of a father who wants to help his child. He'd tried to hide it but I heard the pain in his voice when he spoke about getting Grant into rehab.

After leaving his office, I did a lot of thinking. And I'd been hoping to talk to him on the way home. But when I saw Jeffery turn up as my driver, my heart dropped. And it serves me right. After all, I'd been the one to set the parameters. But there's a tiny part of me that wonders if I've done the right thing. I don't know what I wanted his response to be. But the agreement is not it. There had been no emotion when he responded either, and it cut me to the core. I guess I'm that disposable.

I hold my tears back as I walk past Tony in the lobby.

“Hi, Sidney! Maria sent these for you.”

I force a smile and take the package he hands to me. I see him stare at me briefly, and for a split second, I think he's going to say something. I know that if he does, I'll fall apart. But he remains silent as he escorts me upstairs. The first tear falls as I close the door behind me.

I message Michelle and ask her to come over to my apartment before I go into a complete meltdown. I haven't seen her since that fateful night at the club. But we have spoken every day except yesterday. Yesterday, I was still in shock. She'd been elated when I told her about moving in with Archer. But now that she's being summoned to *my* apartment, I know she'll have questions.

I take a quick shower and get some dinner started. By the time she arrives, I'm a little more composed. But as soon as I see her face, I break down all over again.

“Awww. Come on, sweetheart. Tell mama Michelle all about it.”

“Grant is his son!”

“What!?”

I nod rapidly. “Yup.”

“But how? Grant is Duncan. He's Colleymore.”

“Grant took his mother's name when he turned eighteen. It was awful, Michelle. One minute I was getting juice and heading back to bed, the next there was Grant's picture, looking up at me from a box of family photos by the kitchen



door. I ran so fast! I still don't know how I made it over the wall."

"Wait. What?" Her mouth hangs open for a second, "You jumped a wall? Start from the top and leave nothing out."

She pulls me to the couch and I lay my head on her lap. I tell her all I can remember about how good the two weeks were. I'm near tears again when I get to how things unfolded yesterday morning.

"And the thing is, Mich, I was really beginning to think there could've been some sort of future for us."

"Why can't there be?"

I sit up and look at her. "You're joking, right?"

"No. What's stopping you and Archer from having something? And don't say Grant. Your era with him has ended."

"But he's Grant's *father*, Michelle. It's not some random older man. He's my ex-boyfriend's *father*. I can't continue to live with him and sleep in his bed knowing that."

"Sidney, you and Archer are adults. You love him, and he loves you—"

"Love is a very strong word."

She fans me off quickly. "Oh please! Even a blind man can see that you guys are head over heels for each other. Girl, I saw how he took care of you that night at the club."

"He was being my bodyguard," I argue.

“Of course he was. And I’m a natural brunette. Sidney, he looked at you like you were his woman, not his client. Trust me, even if you refuse to admit it to each other, actions speak louder than words. I think you should give him another chance. Besides, I’m sure Archer, by your own confessions, has been very *very* good to you in terms of intimacy. I haven’t heard you complaining.”

My cheeks grow hot and Michelle laughs. “You’re incorrigible.”

“And you’re one satisfied woman.”

We both have a good laugh. Then we grow serious.

I sigh. “Michelle, what am I going to do?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I really want to know.”

“I think you should give him another chance.”

I roll my eyes. “I knew you were going to say that.”

“Archer is a good man. He treats you right and he can protect you. And you’ve said yourself that you’re good intimately, not that intimacy is the foundation of a relationship. But I think you both have enough ingredients to make a real relationship work. Age is just a number when it comes to love.”

“There you go using that word again.”

“It is what it is. But let’s change the subject. I know I saw Tony out in the hall so I know what you’re hiding somewhere

in this apartment. Where are they?”

I allow her to change the subject and we enjoy Maria’s cookies. We watch a movie before she decides to leave. I want to ask her to stay but I remain silent. My heart sinks as the silence echoes. I replay Michelle’s suggestion. But there is no way I’m going to do that. I’ve already made my decision and I’m not going to crawl back to Archer to ask him if we can give our relationship another try. Looking back at this afternoon, I now know that I spoke hastily and in the heat of my emotions. And I regret every word.

I sit in bed and look around. My eyes get misty and tears begin to flow again. I realize that Michelle is right on one point and it scares the crap out of me. I have (yikes) ‘feelings’ for Archer. I dare not put a name to it. But in my heart, I know. And I intend to do nothing about it as I’m still stuck on the point of having dated and lived with his son.

I check my windows and doors, brushing away the tears that refuse to stop. I climb into bed and a gnawing loneliness grips me as I think about being at Archer’s. I would give anything to feel his arms around me. Just that would be enough. No kiss, no lovemaking, nothing. Just his arms around me.

The stark reality that I may never experience that again hits me, and it breaks me completely. It feels as though I’m crying for hours. It’s the middle of the night before I finally fall asleep.

I try to open my eyes the next morning and they feel as though someone hasn’t only dumped sand directly into my

eyeballs but they're weighed down with a ton of bricks.

The phone rings and it feels like a thousand jackhammers pounding on my head. I check to ensure that it is not Archer and am relieved to see that it's Michelle.

"Hello?" I croak.

"I'm just checking up on you. You sound like hell."

"I feel like it." I go to the bathroom and examine my face in the mirror. Just as I suspected. It is puffy and swollen. "Hold on, Mich." I put the call on speaker mode.

I grab a washcloth and wet it with cold water, then press it to my eyes and face. I sniff in an attempt to relieve my stuffy nose.

"Seriously now, Sidney. You actually sound sick. Do you want me to come over?"

"Nah. I just need some aspirin to get rid of this headache." Hunting through the medicine cabinet, I find a pack, then take the phone to the kitchen. I down the tablets and head back to bed.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come over, Sidney? I can be there in a flash."

"I won't be good company. I've gone back to bed actually."

"Ok. Good. At least you're going to get some rest. Call me when you wake up, okay? I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Mich."

Putting the phone on the nightstand, I roll over. The medicine soon kicks in and I feel some relief. I still feel tired, and before I know it, I drift off to sleep.

It's closer to noon when my eyes open again. They feel better and the headache is gone. I use the bathroom and find the strength to brush my teeth. My face is less puffy but there is still evidence of tears. I feel a sinking emptiness in my spirit. I don't even think about what I would be doing at work right now. I have resigned myself to the fact that my job at More Secure is a thing of the past. I have no choice but to leave because there is no way I can be around Archer. My resolve to keep my distance might crumble, and I would just embarrass myself.

I shower and dress carefully for the early winter weather. Stepping outside of my apartment, I do a double-take.

“Good afternoon, Sidney.”

“H-Hi, Brad. Umm, what are you doing here?”

“Mr. Colleymore's orders. So, where are we headed?”

I walk down to the parking lot in a daze. I'd forgotten everything about my security detail. I head to a deli and have a sandwich and coffee, then stop at a newsstand and grab a few papers. After that, I head back to my apartment.

“Thanks, Brad.”

“No problem. I'll be right here if you need me.”

I nod and go inside. I change into something more comfortable and pick up the first paper. Before long, I'm knees

deep in ads, looking for a job.

## Chapter Sixteen

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### Archer

“Okay. Thanks, Brad.”

I stare at the phone for a few seconds after the call ends. I haven't seen Sidney since she left the office last Monday. When her driver for Tuesday reported that she had not come downstairs, a quick check of her cameras showed that she was asleep. We don't make it a habit of checking on home surveillance unless specifically requested by the client. But in this case, I needed to know that she was okay.

She did not come in for the rest of the week. And tempting as it was to check her cameras, I did not. I had guards on rotation in eight-hour shifts when it became obvious she was not coming to work. It was a hard week and an even harder weekend. And now here I am, one week after that conversation that sealed our fate.

I have thought of so many scenarios that can unfold if I reach out to her. But they all end in the same way – rejection. Her silence haunts me. I feel my grip on pride slipping each day. I know that one day, I'll throw caution to the wind and

turn up on her doorstep. And it's looking more and more like today is that day. I'm about to call the officer on duty to tell him I'll take over when the door to the outer office slams. Before I can pull up the camera feed heavy footsteps come down the corridor. I pull my gun and position myself.

There is a loud knock on my door. "Oh, father! Your darling son is home!"

Grant? What the hell is he doing here? I put the gun away and open the door only to find a shell of a human being.

Grant is gaunt. His skin appears paper thin and I can see the veins stand out in relief. He is poorly dressed for this time of year and there is a blue tinge to his lips. His eyes are sunken and as he smiles leerily, his teeth are stained. His clothes are filthy and he stinks.

"How did you get in here?" I ask him.

"How do you think? I told them I needed some security services and they directed me straight to your office." He laughs. "For a security company, you sure are an easy target. I could've come in with guns blazing for all they care. Does your staff like you or do they want you gone? I mean, look how easy it was to get—"

"When did you get back?" I cut off his rambling, filing what he has said in the back of my mind. His rambles are accurate, though. I would've been a sitting duck just now. That outer office person is important. But I'll have to deal with that another time.



“Last week.”

I’m amazed that he’s allowed to travel in this condition, but the few days difference between his arrival in America and now make it make sense why he would be high. He continues into the office and throws himself on the couch.

He looks around and remarks. “Nice digs. Maybe I can crash here sometimes.”

I instantly have images of my office being overrun with junkies and thugs. I speak as gently as I can.

“Or maybe you can crash at a treatment facility. Grant, you have to get help. Let me help you.”

“Hell, no! That’s the same shit mom tried, so I left.”

“You left? Freely?”

He shrugs. “She paid for the fucking ticket and practically strapped me into my seat.

I nod understandingly. I’ll have to call Rebecca later and chide her for not giving me a heads up that he was on his way back.

“Grant, I need to help you. And this is for your own good. I’m going to call Dr. Ferguson and ask him to find a room for you by the time we get there.”

He frowns and hisses, “Didn’t you hear what I said? I’m not going.”

“So, what are you doing here?” I ask, trying to keep a cool head.

His demeanor changes as he looks down at his feet.

“I’ve got a good lead on a job, so I’m just wondering if you could tide me over for a week or two with a little cash for food and maybe to get some clothes and an apartment or something.”

I cannot believe what I’m hearing. I speak slowly, not wanting anything in my tone to trigger an argument. “Where are the clothes you came back with, Grant?”

He laughs hollowly and sneaks a peek at me. “It’s the strangest thing, you know? I got mugged when I left the airport and they took my clothes.”

“Where’s your passport?”

Irritation crosses his face. “I dunno. So, you gonna spot me some funds or not?”

I look at him searchingly, staring until he drops his eyes and his sunken cheeks flush.

“Do you think I’m stupid, Grant? I know if I give you one cent, as soon as you leave this office, it’s getting shot into your arm. I don’t have time to waste running in circles around you and listening to your made up stories.”

“What do you care, sperm donor?” He stands and comes up into my face. I force myself not to recoil. I try to picture the little boy so full of innocence, and am hard-pressed to find any evidence of him in this ragged junkie.

“You’re going to rehab, Grant. And there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

“Oh yeah? Oh yeah? I’d like to see you try.” He pokes my chest, and I feel my temper flare. I grab his hand and push him away.

“You are going to respect me as your father! And you’re going to get help! That is the end of this discussion! Do you understand me!?”

He pushes me and I take a step back. “What the fuck don’t you understand in ‘I’m not going’!?”

He punctuates each word with a push to my chest, and it takes every ounce of restraint in me to not treat him as a threat. I step into his space, forcing him to take a step back. I keep moving forward until the back of his knees hit the couch. But he refuses to sit. Trying instead to go around me.

“I’m not playing your damn mind games and manipulation! It may have worked when I was a kid, but I’m all grown now! I’m grown!” he screams into my face once more.

I look up as two of my men appear in the doorway, their hands on their holsters.

“Sir?” They look from me to Grant.

“It’s okay. I have things under control. This is my son, Grant.”

“Yeah. I’m his son, Grant. And one day imma be your boss, so you better respect me.”

I wave the men away and close the door behind them. Grant laughs.

“You’re embarrassed by me, *daddy*? You don’t want your staff to know you have a son like me?”

“Let me help you, Grant. I’m calling Dr. Ferguson.” I take out my phone and he is up in my face again, gripping my hand with the phone, his grip surprisingly strong.

“I said, I’m not going. And you can’t make me!”

I grab his lapel and haul him up to me. “Now you listen. You have no say here. And if I have to tie you up and cart you off myself, so be it.”

“The hell you will!”

He kicks at me as he flails his arms wildly. I avoid any serious blows as he attempts to punch me. Had it been someone else, I would’ve had my knee in his back already. But this is my son.

“Let me go!”

I need him to get help. And I fear that if he doesn’t, soon I’ll be identifying his body.

“Let me the fuck go!”

My heart breaks for my little boy. And I make a gut-wrenching decision. Slowly, I loosen my grip on him. As I do so, he almost falls to the floor. But he manages to stay upright. He opens the door wildly and storms down the corridor. The outer door slams, and he is gone. I want to go after him, but my feet feel as though they are glued to the floor. I want to get a team to watch him, but the phone remains in my hand. I want to take the hard road and say I don’t care what he wants to do

as I gave him too many chances to accept my help, but I know I can't. This is my *son*. My only child. So I put aside Archer Colleymore the security company CEO and ex-military officer, and become Archer Colleymore the father. And the state of my son scares the hell out of me.

I sit at my desk, my head in my hands as I wonder where Grant could be right now. Belatedly, I think that I should have offered him my coat or something. But I'm glad I didn't. If he could trade his very clothes for a fix, my expensive coat would have fetched him a few fixes.

At the thought of fixes and money, I come to a stark realization. Not only is Grant in danger from himself by being out in this weather poorly clothed, but he is also in danger from his debtors. I recall the issues with Sidney and can only hazard a guess as to the possibilities that can unfold if Spike knows that Grant is back.

At the thought of Sidney, I check the roster and pick up the phone. All is well. She is inside and safe. I go through a somewhat sleepless night as my thoughts are filled with dread at getting a call about Grant. The next morning, I arrive at the office as usual and pour myself into work. I don't come up for air until sometime after ten. I pick up the phone to do my usual check on Sidney. Ben is on duty today. After the club fiasco, I had chewed him out properly and had been on the verge of even firing him. But Sidney had begged me to give him another chance. I did. But I made sure to take him out of the rotation for Sidney's close protection. I also ensured that he worked with a partner who could keep him in check and

focused. When Frederick had called in sick this morning, he had been the quickest fix to take the rotation.

“Ben. Colleymore. Report.”

“Good morning, sir. All is well.”

“Good.”

I go through the remainder of the day as best as I can. My travel agent calls at some point and it's then that I remember I've been planning to book tickets for Sidney and me to go to Hawaii. I ask her to put the trip on hold until the new year. Maybe, by then, this thing with Sidney will be sorted out and we'll be able to take that well-needed trip. That's what I hope will happen, at least.

At about four o'clock, I call to check on Sidney again.

“Ben. Colleymore. Report.”

Before he can speak, I attune my ears to his background and hear random noises. I frown.

“Is she out of the apartment?”

“Yes, sir. We're at the mall, actually. She's gone to pick up a few personal items, and I thought I'd give her a little space to \_\_\_”

“You what!? She's not in your line of sight!?”

“N-Not quite, sir. I just wanted to give her some space.”

“Close protection services does not accommodate a client being given space. Close protection means if they're taking a shit, you wipe their ass. Find her. Now!” I disconnect the call,

furious. This is his final strike. There is no way I can keep him on staff as a bodyguard. He is a risk and a liability. I won't fire him this close to the holidays. But he is going to have a rude awakening come January when he finds himself without a job.

I sit looking into space. All I can see is Sidney on the bathroom floor of the club after Spike threatened her. She was a mess. And if what she had told me is true, Spike is becoming more problematic. There is an unease in the pit of my stomach as I think about the few minutes she has been out of Ben's sight. Anything can happen in a second much less a minute. All it takes is one bullet. Or one slash. I dare not think about the possibilities.

## Chapter Seventeen

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### Sidney

It feels good to be away from the overbearing guards. When I see Ben on duty, I know I can leave the apartment and get some wiggle room. After that first day that I had stayed home, I simply refused to leave the apartment at all. But now that I'm low on groceries and other household items, I've made up my mind to grin and bear the shadow of the guard. Ben is like a breath of fresh air due to his being more lenient with me.

He drops me in front of the mall and I hurry inside while he parks the car. I'm in the supermarket when he catches up to me. I'm slightly deflated at his closeness now as he follows me up and down each aisle. Then I have a stroke of genius. I wander into the feminine products aisle and pick up a box of tampons and a pack of pads. I hold them up and turn toward Ben.

“Which do you think makes more sense? This is a bit bulky and tends to shift. And honestly, it feels as though I'm wearing a diaper. These on the other hand—”



He holds up his hands. “How about I give you a few minutes to sort out our ‘stuff’? I’ll be in the next aisle.”

I smirk as he walks away. I dodge in and out of the aisles, keeping an eye out for Ben. I don’t need him to be on my tail again until I’m ready to go back home. I dodge into the cosmetics aisle and get caught up looking at lotions when the hair on my neck stands up. I look up and my heart flies to my throat. The access to the aisle is blocked by two men who are staring at me intently. I have a bad feeling about this. I begin walking in the opposite direction and am almost at the end when I come to a screeching halt. Spike!

I look around wildly, hoping that Ben will turn up. Spike closes the gap between us.

“Let’s take a walk, little lady.”

My feet feel like lead. The other guys come up behind me and one of them pushes me. I forget about my cart and hang on to my purse as I move forward like a zombie.

We walk quickly to the back of the store and Spike forces me through the ‘employees only’ door. We find ourselves in a stuffy warehouse. But we don’t stop there. Soon, I feel a blast of cold air and we are in the alley that runs behind the supermarket. As soon as we step out, I’m backed up against the wall. I attempt to scream but it dies in my throat as a knife is pressed against it. There is also a gun being pressed into my ribs. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Ben coming toward us and I feel relief. But Spike and his thugs don’t appear deterred. I soon know why when Ben simply lounges against the wall a

few feet away. Spike laughs when he sees me look at Ben and the realization dawns.

“How many clubs are there in the city and I just happened to find the one you were at?”

I look at Ben. “You followed me that night.”

He smiles. “I’m paid to guard you, aren’t I?”

“You told him where I would be. And you called him today. How could you betray me like that? Archer trusted you to protect me—”

Ben sneers. “Colleymore’s an asshole. And I’m sick of protecting his pussy. I wonder if you’re that good. Maybe we can find out, right, Spike?”

The men laugh, and I feel real fear creep along my spine. Spike places his hand along the wall and uses the knife to trail down my cheek. I shiver and take a deep breath. Suddenly, he flicks his wrist and I feel a piercing heat. Despite the cold, I feel warmth trickle down my cheek. He swipes at it with his finger and holds it in front of my face. I see the tip is red and a scream rises to my throat. He clamps his hand over my mouth.

“One fucking sound and I slit your throat. It’s been over a year and I ain’t got one damn cent from you or your rotten boyfriend. I’ve warned you and warned you and I’ve had enough!” he hisses.

I’m crying as he’s trailing the knife along my neck as he speaks. He grabs a handful of my hair and I cry out at the pain on my scalp. He bends my head back at an uncomfortable

angle as he continues to rant. I hear something different in his tone this time as anger takes over. The back of my head is beginning to hurt when he suddenly pulls back. But not for long. The cheek he cut stings as he backhands me and I go flying a few steps away. I fall to the cold hard ground and feel my leg burn with the impact. Before I can process it, I'm hauled unceremoniously up by my hair and I scream in pain. He does not care. None of them do. The men snicker and watch as he manhandles me.

That same burning pain rushes up my arm as he slices the knife at me. He grabs my arm again and flings me against the wall. My shoulder connects and I'm now in tears from all the impact of the assault. I scream again as he grabs me once more and pushes me against the wall. He presses his body into mine and I feel bile rise to my throat when I feel his erection pressing into me.

"I should just take what I can get as it's clear there'll be no getting anything else."

I hear his cronies laugh and snicker about getting a piece of the action from such a hot piece of ass. I scream and push against him and he laughs gutturally.

"I love a fighter. It makes it that much sweeter." He presses his mouth against mine and I recoil. The nausea I had felt a moment ago sends vomit spewing and he shouts and pulls back.

"You bitch! Now I'm going to give you something to scream about. Come here!"

He grabs my hair once more and tears at my coat. “When I’m done with you, there’ll be nothing left to bury!”

I feel faint from the cold and the beating and my eyes drift close. He gropes me and I feel my skin exposed to the cold as he rips at my clothing. Maybe it’s better this way. I feel so tired of running and tired of hiding.

Suddenly, sirens sound in the distance and they are getting closer. One moment, Spike is all over me and trying to strip me as I lie bloody and bruised, then a split second later, feet are running away down the alley and I’m left shivering. I imagine that I hear car doors being slammed and the screech of wheels. But that can’t be. I’m alone.

The sirens are louder. I’m cold as I lie on the ground, parts of me exposed to the harsh December temperatures. Then warm hands are moving over me. I cry out in despair, thinking Spike has returned to finish what he started. I try to move away from the hands and pain shoots all over my body.

“It’s okay. We’ve got you. We’ve got you.” I’m covered with something thick and heavy and I begin to feel some warmth. The hands and voices move away and behind my lids there are flashing lights. I struggle to stay awake but I know that shock is weaving me in and out of consciousness. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, I’m being lifted off the ground. I have the sensation that I’m floating before doors slam shut. It is only when I feel that I’m moving that I allow myself to let go into the alluring darkness.

## Chapter Eighteen

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### Archer

I can't shake the feeling I've had all night.

After speaking with Ben, I poured myself into work before dragging myself home. Between Grant's reappearance and the issues I'm having with Sidney, I feel torn. I open up the office and try to focus on getting some reports completed. I check the roster and am relieved to see that Andrew is on duty to guard Sidney. I try calling Ben to ask him to come to the office for a meeting but he doesn't answer his phone. I find it strange but brush it aside.

I get caught up in work. It's my only solace. Sometime around eleven, my phone rings. It is a strange number but I think nothing of it.

"Colleymore."

"Archer Colleymore?"

"Speaking." I listen as the disembodied voice of a woman begins to speak. I feel as though I'm back in the field facing

enemy fire as she asks me to come to the hospital. I hear Grant's name and spring into action.

"I'm on my way."

I grab my coat and lock my office. I know I look like a wreck as I pass through the outer offices. I barely have time to ask one of my officers to take over for the rest of the day before I hurry to the parking garage. I drive like the wind, bobbing and weaving in and out of the midday traffic. I park as close as I can to the ER and rush inside. I find the first desk that looks as though they can give me some information.

"Archer Colleymore. I got a call about Grant Duncan."

"Duncan, Duncan, oh yes! Duncan. Third-floor, trauma unit."

"Thank you."

I find the stairs and take them two at a time. I barely break a sweat as I find the reception area.

"I'm looking for Grant Duncan. I'm his father, Archer Colleymore."

The nurse exchanges looks with her colleague before addressing me.

"Could you please have a seat, Mr. Colleymore? I'll let Dr. Beaumont know you're here. I'm sure he'll want to speak with you."

I walk over to the row of chairs in the waiting area. But rather than sit, I stand. It feels like ages before someone finally

taps me on the shoulder.

“Mr. Colleymore?”

I turn to see a small woman smiling up at me. She holds out her tiny hand.

“Hi! I’m Dr. Beaumont. If you could just follow me to my office for a little chat, I’d greatly appreciate it.”

I follow as instructed.

“Have a seat.”

I sit and wait for her to close the door. I try to read her face but she is deceptively calm. I wait patiently as she fiddles with her computer.

“Ah! Here we go. Mr. Colleymore.”

“Please call me Archer.”

“Archer. Let’s just cut to the chase, shall we? How long has Grant been using?”

“Almost ten years. I don’t know what he’s using, though. We’re not exactly on good terms as father and son.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Either yesterday or the day before. Forgive me if I can’t recall exactly. I’ve been under some stress lately. Before that, he was in Ireland for months.”

As I speak she is making notes.

“Who was he with in Ireland?”

“His mother lives there, but based on what she says, he was basically drifting. As he does when he is here. Is he okay? What happened?”

“He was brought in early this morning. He’d been beaten quite badly and we suspect there are a few broken ribs. There are severe cuts and discolorations all over his body. He might be unrecognizable due to the swelling. Also, when we did his bloodwork, it’s a wonder he wasn’t brought in for the morgue. He was this close to OD’ing. And we almost lost him a few times while we were treating him as well. But I’m happy to say we’ve got him stabilized.” She smiles at me for a second, reassuringly. Then her face turns serious again. “We do have a bigger problem. While he is here, there will clearly be a withdrawal phase. We have him heavily sedated right now, but as soon as that wears off, he’ll begin craving a fix. In a day or two, we’ll move him to a psych ward where he can be better monitored based on that condition.”

“How long will it take before I can have him transferred to a rehab facility?” I ask.

“I’m glad that you already know the next step that needs to be taken.”

“He’s been in rehab before, and I’ve been fighting tooth and nail with him to let me admit him. That was what we last spoke about, as a matter of fact. I hope that this now convinces him that he needs to let me help him.”

“Do you have a facility or would you like a referral?”



“I have Dr. Ferguson waiting for me to say I’m on my way with him.”

“Good choice. He would be my referral as well.”

I sigh and rub my hand across my face. “Is there any way the hospital can force him to go to rehab?”

“Unfortunately, we can’t. Not unless it can be proven that he is mentally unstable. And if he was sane enough to tell us your name and where to find you, we can’t plead insanity. We just have to hope that he sees that this is for his own good and perhaps to save his life.”

“I hope so. I really do want him to get the help he needs. And money is no object for me to do that.”

“Would you like to see him?”

“Please.”

We leave the office and she escorts me back to the main reception area. The nurse at the desk looks up at the same time that two police officers turn around. I frown as they walk toward me.

“Mr. Colleymore?”

“Who wants to know?”

“I’m officer Clarke and this is officer Evans. We brought your son in this morning. Could we have a private word with you?”

I turn to Dr. Beaumont. “I’ll be right back.”

I follow the officers down the corridor until we find a somewhat secluded alcove. They check the surrounding rooms and find them empty.

“Sometimes, it’s best to speak privately in public,” Evans smiles wryly.

“How can I help you, gentlemen?”

“Do you know of any dealings your son may have with Deon Collins?” Clarke watches me intently.

“Spike?”

They exchange looks. “So, you have an idea of what I’m about to tell you, then.”

“Not a clue. Can we just cut to the chase?”

“We have it from a good source that Spike is responsible for beating your son last night. He intended to kill him but had to leave the job unfinished.”

“So, why not just put a bullet in his head?”

“You know Spike. He likes to leave a mess. Do you know why Spike is after your son?”

“Why is Spike after anyone? Money.”

“Does your son have a family? Wife, girlfriend., children, anyone who could be used as a target?”

At that, I freeze. I have been so caught up with dealing with Grant, I have forgotten all about Sidney.

“I know of one person, but she’s under my protection and has been for a few months.”

“Good. Just wanted to give you a heads up on who you’re dealing with so that you can deal with it accordingly.”

“Thank you, officers. I appreciate it.”

I walk back to the reception area where Dr. Beaumont is still waiting. I follow her down the corridor.

“Our timing is perfect. He’s conscious and pain free. We can squeeze you in before we dose him up again and he’s knocked out. Here we are. For the love of everything as a parent who wants to do right by their child, try and get him to agree to rehab. As soon as he says yes, we’ll have the forms signed in your presence.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I take a deep breath before stepping into the room. I’m greeted with the sound of beeping machines and that typical antiseptic hospital smell. I move as though in slow motion as I walk toward the bed in the center of the room. A shock of red hair sticks out from the bandages around his head. I’m glad that Dr. Beaumont warned me about how he would look. I swallow – hard.

“Grant?”

His head shifts and I see his eyes try to flicker. But they are so swollen he cannot open them completely.

“Dad?”

The sound is almost like a croaking whisper and a lump rises to my throat. I walk over to the bed slowly and pull up a chair beside it.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I’m so sorry.” Tears begin to run down his cheeks and I feel my eyes grow misty. I remove my glasses and dab at my face, mildly surprised to find that my fingers are wet.

“It’s okay, son. We’re going to get through this.”

“I-I owe some bad people a lot of money, Dad. They were going to kill me!”

He breaks down sobbing and it breaks my heart. I hold his hand tightly.

“I’ll take care of it. I promise. But, Grant, you need to let me help you. Please!”

He tightens his grip on me as he nods slowly. “Please! Help me!”

I feel as though a dam of emotion bursts within me at the words I have longed to hear. I hug him.

“I will. I promise I will. I’m going to get you back into rehab. You’re going to clean up and be fine, Grant. I promise.”

He sobs like a little boy, and I hold him with silent tears running down my own cheeks. I don’t know how long I stand there. The door opens behind me and I turn to find a nurse. I dab at my face quickly.

“It’s time for his pain medication.”

“Is Dr. Beaumont still around? Could you ask her to bring the forms please?”

The nurse slips out and I turn to Grant.

“We’re going to sign the papers right now so that, as soon as you’re strong enough, you’ll go into treatment, okay?”

He nods. “Okay, Dad.” He sniffs once more. “I’m so sorry. So sorry. Sorry to put you through all of this.”

“I love you, Grant. You’re my son and I’ll move heaven and earth before I let anything else happen to you that I can prevent. I want you to focus on getting better, okay?”

“Okay.”

Dr. Beaumont comes in just then with a clipboard.

“You gave us quite a scare there, Mr. Duncan. I’m glad to hear that you’re ready to turn over a new leaf. Now if you could just sign here, and here, we can get the recovery show on the road.”

I assist Grant with signing in the appropriate spaces, and sign where I need to as well. I step aside and watch the nurse add his medication to the IV. In less than five minutes, he is asleep. I stand looking at him for a little while longer. He is so peaceful. I kiss his forehead and slip out of the room.

I lean against the wall outside his room and look up at the ceiling. I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. My brain kicks into gear as I begin planning my course of action.

First, I need a meeting with Spike. He needs to be dealt with once and for all. Next, I need to have Dr. Ferguson prepare to receive Grant. Hopefully, he’ll be sufficiently healed in a week or two and be ready for transfer to the rehab center. I also feel the need for some time off. With my birthday coming up, there

is no time like the present. The year has been a tumultuous one, and I feel the need to pull away from it all for a little bit and do some introspection. Ultimately, I need to make up my mind about Sidney. Am I going to allow a slip of a girl to call the shots and end our relationship or am I going to fight for the woman I—

I cut the thought off at the pass and walk toward the reception area. I reach across the desk to shake the nurse's hand.

“Thanks for everything you've done. I really appreciate it.”

She smiles and looks back down at her clipboard. I head toward the elevators. I wait for the door to open completely. But just as I'm about to step inside, I catch a glimpse of something or rather someone fleetingly familiar exiting the other elevator. I step back and cannot believe my eyes. There, slumped in a wheelchair with her face black and blue, is Sidney. The orderly leaves her by the elevator as he takes a clipboard over to the nurse.

“Sidney?”

Her head snaps up. And for the first time in more than a week, I'm staring into the eyes of the woman I love. I can't deny it anymore. Not now.

She stares at me, and for a few moments, it feels as though there is no one around except us. My brain registers several things at once – hospital, wheelchair, yesterday, no guard, Ben! Shit! There are no two ways about it now. I have to fire him now. I can no longer allow my personal feelings to cloud

my professional judgment, and especially when so much is at stake. What the hell happened to her?

My feet move in her direction and I watch as her face goes white.

## Chapter Nineteen

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### Sidney

I stare in disbelief. Archer!? What the fuck is he doing here?

Throughout this ordeal, he is the last person I want to see.

When I woke up in the hospital that night, I cried for hours relieved that I was alive and safe.

But now as I look at Archer, I don't feel despair. I feel anger. He walks over to me and I recoil. The orderly comes over immediately as Archer tries to touch me.

“Sir. You can't do that.”

“The hell I can't. I'm her boss and security provider. Sidney, what happened?”

I feel angry tears prick my eyes as I stare up at him. I'm so tired of everything and I need to end this once and for all.

“Do you really want to know what happened? You and your damn family are what happened! I wish I'd never laid eyes on any of you. You put my life in danger! I'm here because of you, your son, and your so-called bodyguard!”



“So-called bodyguard?”

“Ben is on Spike’s payroll. He practically fed me to them!”

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. You’re upsetting the patient.” A nurse comes to my assistance along with the orderly.

“Ben?”

“Yes, Ben.”

I allow that to register as the expression on his face changes from confusion to anger.

“I’m going to deal with it, Sidney. I promise.”

“Do that. And while you are at it, stay away from me. Forever.”

“Sir, we’re going to call security if we have to ask you to leave the patient alone again.”

Archer ignores them and stoops down to my level. As he attempts to touch me, I push him away, screaming, “Don’t touch me!” then wince in pain as my bandaged arm hurts. Tears come to my eyes. My vision goes blurry as tears roll down my face.

“Leave me alone, Archer.” I turn my face away, using my hair to hide my bruises. I close my eyes and bow my head.

“Excuse me, sir. Kindly come with us.” The security personnel speaks quietly in order not to create a scene.

“Sidney, tell them who I’m.”

I hear the pain in his voice and it pricks my heart.

“Leave me alone, Archer.”

“The lady has asked to be left alone, sir. Kindly come with us.”

I keep my head averted as the elevator opens. My heart is racing. What the hell is Archer even doing here?

“Miss Peterson? Your room is ready, so I’m going to take you there now. It’s a short ride and you’ll soon be comfortably tucked in, okay?”

I sniffle and nod. I swallow against the tears as I’m wheeled down the corridor. It has been a harrowing few days, and I’m finally glad to begin the road to recovery.

That evening when Spike and his cronies attacked me, I thought for sure that I was going to be killed, or worse yet, raped, then murdered. I still have no idea why they left and who called the police, but I’m grateful. Seeing Archer just made my cup full.

The nurse helps me onto the bed as I continue to cry.

“It’s okay, dear. You’re young and resilient and will heal fast. They look horrendous, but your prognosis is good.”

I nod in agreement, not willing to tell her that my tears have nothing to do with any physical pain I’m feeling. I wince reflexively as she changes my bandages. The cuts on my cheek and arm are itching from the stitches. The nurse rubs an anti-bacterial ointment on them before replacing the gauze.

“In another few days, those bruises on your face will fade and you’ll be as good as new. The doctor will speak to you

tomorrow about the x-rays of your shoulder and leg. Now, the dinner cart will come around soon and then it's nightie night."

I manage to smile as she leaves. "Thank you."

I sit staring into space when she leaves. For the first time since getting here, I'm alone with my thoughts. I try not to think about that afternoon in the alley. But it is necessary for my memories so that I can understand the gravity of my current situation. I need to fix things and I need to fix them now. And with my turning twenty-eight next Monday, there is no time like the present to contemplate life.

First, I need to get better. And for my sake, I pray that it'll take a while as right now the hospital is the safest place for me. Next, I'll need to intensify my search for a job. I have always ensured that I have a few months' worth of savings to take me through any mishaps, so I know that I'll be fine in that regard. Finally, I'll need to move. At the thought of moving, Archer comes to mind again.

What was he doing at the hospital? I have a fleeting thought that he was contacted regarding me. But I don't know how the hospital would have known to call him. Then again, he had looked just as shocked to see me as I him. But of all the moments for him to run into me, this is the worst. I'd had no intention of even reaching out to let him know one of his men is a traitor. But it had slipped out. What he does with Ben is his business, not mine.

"Dinner."

I accept the covered tray and find my stomach growling. It is my first real meal since being admitted. I polish it off in no time and push the tray to the foot of the bed. I dig into my purse and find my phone. The battery is running down and I'll have to figure out getting it charged tomorrow. I dial Michelle's number.

"Sidney? Where have you been? I haven't heard from you in *days!*"

I sigh. "You almost had to identify my body."

"What!?"

"I'm in the hospital, Michelle."

"What!? Which hospital? I'm on my way."

"Visiting hours aren't until tomorrow at ten again. Can you bring me some clothes when you come?"

"Sure. But what happened, Sidney?"

"Spike. The same guard who let me go to the club was on duty. I figured I could have a little less restraint and went to the store. Spike got to me. But I also discovered that Ben, the guard, was in on it the whole time. He actually called Spike that night at the club. He had followed me. And he called him at the store as well."

"Shit!"

"Yup." I take another deep breath and tears fill my eyes again. "Michelle, he was really serious about hurting me this

time. H-He cut me, slapped me around, and when he threw me to the ground and started ripping my clothes off—”

“No! Sidney! No!”

“H-He was going to-to—”

“Nooooo!”

I break down at the pain in Michelle’s voice. I hear her crying as well.

“We’ll get you through this, Sidney. We’ll get you counseling.”

It takes a few minutes for us to get our emotions under control.

“Thank goodness he didn’t get to carry out his intentions. Someone called the police and they ran. The police called the paramedics and here I’m.”

She takes a deep breath. “Sidney, I know you want to have nothing to do with Archer, but don’t you think you need to—”

“Oh, about that. I don’t know what he was doing here, but I saw him in the corridor when they were transferring me from observation to a ward this evening. I told him to leave me alone. And I mentioned Ben’s betrayal as well. But Michelle, I’m done. I’m done with Grant, Archer, and everything that has to do with them. I need to move on, even if it means leaving Chicago.”

“I’ll leave with you.”

“You can’t do that, Michelle.”

“I’m an entrepreneur. I can live anywhere as long as I have space for my material. We can do what I’ve wanted you to do for ages: move in with me.”

“I need to be independent, Michelle. We both do. One day, you’re going to meet a nice guy, and where will that leave me?”

“You’d live with us as the spinster aunt.”

We both laugh, and for the first time in hours, my spirits feel light.

“Michelle, I love you. You’re the best friend ever. You’re always there when I need you.”

“And I always will.” The love comes through her voice.

“When I get out of here, I need to find a new apartment. And I need a job that allows me to work from home. I can have things delivered to my door. I guess I’ll just become a prisoner.”

“And what about the issues with Spike? Is there any reason you can’t look into security services again, just not from Archer’s company?”

“That is an option. I’m just going to have to take it one day at a time. And maybe I’m going to have to bite the bullet and learn how to protect myself. I have done the lessons at the range and everything...”

“Are you thinking about getting a gun?”

I pause before answering. “Yes.”

Michelle goes silent. Then I hear her chuckle.

“Are you sure you don’t want to get the chihuahua?”

I laugh and then groan as I feel some tenderness in my chest. The conversation ends shortly after with Michelle making plans to visit me tomorrow. I remain awake for a while looking up at the ceiling. I feel hopeful that I’ll get my life on track as planned. There will be no Grant, no Archer, no Spike. I’ll protect myself. I’ll be fine.

I roll over as comfortably as I can, given the different areas that are tender. I sigh and close my eyes. I’ll be fine.

## Chapter Twenty

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### Archer

I don't know where I'm heading when I leave the hospital. I'm seeing red. What the hell happened to Sidney? And what did she mean when she said Ben was a traitor? I need to think. And I need a clear head to do that.

I take a deep breath. Then another. I turn the car in the direction of home. When I get there, I head straight to the basement. I'm soon working up a sweat and the tension begins to ebb. I continue to pump iron until I feel exhausted and relaxed all at the same time. I'm dripping wet when I strip down to my boxers and head upstairs to shower. I allow the hot water to sluice down my body as I press my palms to the tiles. I close my eyes and begin to think rationally.

I find it hard to believe that the two people in the world that I care most about are lying in a hospital and there is not a damned thing I could've done about it. I feel helpless. Whatever put them there is something I was unable to prevent.

There is no doubt that no matter what Grant does, he'll always be my little boy. And I feel grateful that he has finally



agreed to let me help him. And as for Sidney, I'm done denying it. I love her.

I shake my head as a shiver runs through me. Just thinking it sets me on fire. I love her and I'm not going to lose her. I just need to find a way to let her know it too. I'm going to fight for her and I won't stop until I get her back into my life. She is going to move back in with me. And when the time is right, I'll make her my wife.

As for Grant, I'll follow up on his recovery to ascertain the best time for him to be released to rehab. At the thought of Grant, I remember that I have a few calls to make. It's time to deal with Spike. I call people who know people who know Spike, and within an hour, I have a meeting set up and a payment figure. Of course, I'm not going to make the mistake of going alone, and I get five of my best men on board to accompany me when the time comes.

Then I turn my attention to Ben and what Sidney had said about him being on Spike's payroll. It doesn't take long for me to check on his movements since Sidney and Grant were attacked. He hasn't turned up to any of his assignments and all calls to his phone go unanswered. I make another call and get a detail to track him immediately. I'm promised that I'll have word within twenty-four hours.

I rifle through the refrigerator and find some leftovers. I serve a portion and stick it into the microwave then pop a beer. I sit staring into the backyard as I organize my thoughts. I need to take a few days off, that's for sure. First thing in the

morning, I'm going to withdraw the cash I need for my meeting at ten with Spike. Next, I'll go to the hospital to check on Grant, and hopefully, try to see Sidney. Depending on what comes out of the discussion with Sidney, I'll know what my next move is. I have no idea what I'm going to say. I know I need to convince her to give us another chance.

I eat and place my plate in the dishwasher. I check the windows and doors and ensure that the alarm is armed before I head upstairs to bed.

I sit in a corner of the diner waiting for Spike. I feign nonchalance as I appear to be engrossed in my phone while waiting on my order. But the second a man slides into the booth behind me, I'm on high alert. I glance sideways at the glass window and see his reflection. He is looking down at what appears to be a menu.

“You here to meet Spike?”

“Who wants to know?”

“We're moving the meeting to Chuck's.”

“Why?”

“He's taking care of some business on that side of town. Be there in twenty.”

“I'll be there in thirty.”

“Spike says twenty.”

“Spike doesn't dictate my time. He changed the place. He'll wait till I get there. Besides, I've got something that he

wants,” I say.

When the man leaves I send a quick text to Jared who is at the newsstand outside.

*Green coat. Black hat. Tail him.*

*On it.*

I tell two of my men to get to Chuck’s ahead of me. The other two will follow me there,

I wait a full ten minutes before I move. I leave payment and a tip for the coffee I had when I arrived and walk outside. The chilly December air makes me pull my coat a little closer.

I get into my car and circle the block before heading in the direction of the seediest bar in the city. Spike wants to be on his own turf, clearly. I suspected he would pull a switch like this. Within five minutes of the spot, I know all of my men have already blended in seamlessly with the general population. I park and remain seated for a while before getting out. I doublecheck my holsters and the envelope in my jacket. I step inside and am immediately engulfed in dim lighting. I allow my eyes to adjust before walking further inside. The bartender looks up and looks around nervously as I slide onto a stool. He comes over to me.

“We’re closed,” he tells me.

“I have a meeting with Deon.”

“Oh. In that case. What can I get you?”

I have a beer while I wait. Two of my men slink in and sit in the shadows. The bartender looks up again and I wink. He relaxes. The minutes pass as I sit and stare. Finally, I sense movement at the other end of the bar. I look up to see the same man from the diner. He points his chin in the direction of the kitchen and I nod. I wait for him to slide off his stool before I follow him. I see my men follow out of the corner of my eye.

When I step into the kitchen with my men behind me, I'm facing three men, one of whom is from the diner. I focus on the man in the middle.

“Deon. It's been a while.”

“Colleymore. Imagine my shock to find you at the bottom of this triangle. Had I known little reds was your boy, I'd have come to you in the first place. You got something for me?”

He turns and walks toward the back of the kitchen. I follow him to an office. It is a stark juxtaposition to the overall air of the bar. It is luxurious and feels like it belongs in a penthouse suite uptown. I feel the tension in the air as the men crowd in behind us. He takes a seat behind the desk and I slide the thick manilla envelope across the desk. I watch as he counts it all. He hands it to one of his cronies and smiles as he looks at me.

“Nice doing business with you. See you in a few months when he comes back to borrowing again and comes up short on payment.”

“That won't happen. And that covers Sidney as well.”

“Ah yes. The little lady. Such a pity I didn’t get to taste that the other day when I was shaking her down. I’m sure she’s tight and hot too. Otherwise, you wouldn’t’ve had her under wraps like that.” He throws his head back and laughs. “Maybe I’ll pay her a visit sometime.”

I see red as he mentions Sidney. I’m across the desk in a split second. I grab his lapel and throw him halfway across the room. I see his men pull their guns but he waves them back. He comes at me like a bull and I grab him and push him into the desk.

“Not so tough when you’re not beating up a defenseless woman, are you?” I punch him across the face. He grabs my shirt and manages to land a headbutt. His attack fuels my anger and we are soon wrestling back and forth. Our men stand around. This fight is on principle, not weaponry.

I get the upper hand and have Spike pinned to the floor, punching him back and forth. I hit him one more time and he coughs.

“Quit. Quit.”

I grab his lapel again and growl, “Leave Grant and Sidney alone. Got that?”

“Yeah,” he mumbles breathlessly.

“And if you forget it, don’t forget what went down with Joong five years ago. My principles are the only reason you’re still walking around after this stunt with my son and my woman.”

I'm pleased to see him go as white as a sheet and fear comes into his eyes. I give him one more shake for good measure before I get off him and straighten my clothing. I'm not entirely unscathed as my knuckles are bruised. I walk out of the office, my men covering me. We walk out of the bar and I get into my car. Adrenaline is pumping hard as I drive away. I head straight home, anxious to have a shower and wash away the stench and feel of having touched a vermin like Spike.

The phone is ringing when I get out.

"Colleymore."

"We've got him."

"Basement. I'm on my way."

Smiling at the phone in my hand for a few seconds, I spring into action. I grab an extra set of clothes and head to More Secure. As I head to the basement, I slip on the brass knuckles Jared hands to me. When I enter, two of my men haul Ben unceremoniously out of the chair. I storm into the middle of the room and punch him hard in the gut, then hit him across the face.

"How does it feel to be defenseless and at the mercy of someone else's hands?"

"Go to hell, you bastard!"

"You're lucky I don't wish to send you there with a bullet between your fucking eyes!" I punch him in the mouth, pleased to see his lip split and begin to bleed.

“How could you lead a defenseless woman into a trap?” I land a blow on his chin and his head snaps back.

I pull off my gloves and start unbuttoning my shirt. Two of my men assist and I’m soon bare from the waist up.

“Let him go.”

I watch as he stumbles toward me, lashing out wildly with his fists. I get a whiff of his unwashed body. He must have been hiding out in a sewer or something.

I urge him forward.

“Hit me. Come on.”

I allow him into my space and he lands a blow on my cheek. I take it as an opportunity to light into him. I don’t care about my bruised knuckles from the fight with Spike. I don’t stop until he is lying in a bloody, bruised and crumpled heap at my feet. Perspiration is dripping from me onto him. I step away as he groans.

“You’re fired, by the way.”

I head upstairs to the shower to freshen up and change. Now my head is clearer.

Half an hour later, I’m heading back to the city and go straight to the hospital. Thankfully, it’s the same nurse from yesterday, so I’m allowed to see Grant, though it’s outside of visiting hours. Dr. Beaumont, a nurse, and an orderly are in the room with him. He seems a bit agitated but manages to give me a wan smile.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Hi.”

He twitches and I look at Dr. Beaumont. She beckons to the door and I step outside with her.

“He’s having withdrawal symptoms. And I have to say he’s being a real trooper about it. Most cases like his become violent, but he’s fighting it. We were getting ready to move him to the psych ward where it’s safer and we have the equipment to restrain him safely. He’ll also be under more security to guard his every move.”

“Okay. How long will it be before I can get him to rehab?”

“His injuries from the beating are significantly improved, though it’s been just a day. There is something to be said about the resilience of youth. I would give him another week or so before we transfer him. He’ll be in treatment before Christmas.”

“Thank you, doctor. Can I still see him for a little while before you move him?”

“Certainly. He lit right up just now when you came into the room. That boy loves you.”

Her words hit me like a bolt of lightning and I smile. “And I love him dearly.”

We go back into the room to find Grant straining while his arms and legs were restrained by the nurse and orderly. Dr. Beaumont hurries over to the bed and strokes Grant’s forehead.



“There, there. One, two, three, four—”

I stand back helplessly while she counts Grant through the tremors. When he relaxes, I see him breathing heavily. Sweat is pouring down his face and I can see that his hospital gown is soaked. He looks over at me, his eyes dazed. I hurry to his side.

“Hey, son.”

“Hey,” he says breathlessly. “I, I, ugh!” he squeezes his eyes shut as another tremor takes over.

“It’s okay. We’re going to get through this. I just want you to get better, okay?”

He nods. Dr. Beaumont touches my shoulder.

“We’re going to administer his sedation medication so we can move him. You can stay with him until he falls asleep.”

“Thank you.”

I watch as the medication is injected into his IV and he relaxes almost instantly.

“How was your night?”

He tries to smile. “Rough. But I’m going to be fine.”

“Yes, you are. You’re a Colleymore. We always land on our feet.”

I hold his hand until his eyes close. When he is completely unconscious, I leave to allow the staff to do their job. I stop by the reception area.

“Excuse me. Where can I find Sidney Peterson’s room?”

“She’s not accepting visitors.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry, sir. If you’re not her family nor next of kin nor a specifically allowed visitor as per her permission, we cannot allow that. At least not on this ward.”

I’m silent for a while. Then I have an idea.

“I’d like to make a payment on my son’s bill. Could you direct me to the cashier please?”

I follow her instructions and am soon standing in line. I’m soon at the window.

“Good afternoon. I’m making a payment for Grant Duncan and Sidney Peterson.”

“One moment please.”

I wait for the cashier to check the records and tell me the total. I swipe my card and wait for the receipt. I complete the transaction and head to the parking lot. I check the paperwork and am pleased to see that I have the information I need. Sidney’s room number. Now all I have to do is wait for the shift to change tonight and pay her an emergency visit as her ‘father’ who just heard about her hospitalization and rushed right into the city on the first flight.

## Chapter Twenty-One

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### Sidney

I slip into the clothing that Michelle brought for me this morning. I have been waiting practically all day to hear how soon I can leave and the doctor has only just given me my marching orders. It is the best news ever and I don't waste any time. It's just a pity that they've only just decided that they don't need to keep me for another night. I could've left with Michelle this morning. I look up as the door opens.

“Someone seems happy to be going home,” Dr. Beaumont smiles at me.

“I am.”

“I'm only sorry I didn't get to you sooner but I had a critical case that had to be moved to a different ward. There are a few things I need to tell you, though, before you go. You're very lucky you're so young. If it had been someone older, the results might have been more detrimental.”

I smile. “It's just a few bruises and they're already fading.”

The doctor smiles. “Yes, the bruises will fade. But if something had happened to your baby, it would have been a tragedy.”

Oh yes. The baby. I cover my stomach instinctively, still trying to wrap my mind around the news I’d received when I’d gone back to my room after the encounter with Archer and the call with Michelle. Another doctor had come into the room with the results of my blood test.

“I’m happy to say that your blood work is very good, Sidney. But we need to do an ultrasound to make sure the baby is fine.”

I had stared at her, not sure that I had heard her correctly.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re pregnant, Miss Peterson.”

“P-Pregnant? I-I can’t be pregnant. I’ve had my cycle regularly – I think.” My voice had become shaky. When *did* I have my last period?

“When was your last period, Sidney?”

“I-I-I’m sure I had one last month. But I can’t be pregnant.”

“Trust me, my dear. You can be and you are. Have you been using protection?”

“I-I was on the pill last year. But I came off because I didn’t think I needed it anymore as I’d broken up with my boyfriend.”

“How recently have you been sexually active? And did your partner use protection?”

“We didn’t use protection.”

I snap back to the present.

“How far along am I again?” I take a few deep breaths.

“You’re six weeks along and doing fine. I’m going to give you a referral to our resident obstetrician. Of course, you can decide if you want to find your own, but it’s a start. Whatever you do, you should be checked out again before the end of the week.” She looks at me curiously and drops her eyes. “I’m sorry I’ve been rambling on like this when I should have asked a pertinent question, especially since I know this news has taken you by surprise. Are you keeping the baby?”

I stare at her. “Of course!” I blurt out without hesitation. It may have been a shock, sure, but there is no doubt in my mind that I’m keeping my baby.

She smiles. “Good. Now let’s get you discharged.”

I follow her like a zombie with my purse and the small overnight bag Michelle brought for me. I sign the relevant documents, and before I know it, I’m heading to the lobby to wait for Michelle to pick me up in a cab. I step out of the elevator and gasp. There, heading down the corridor is Archer. He’s in plain clothes but there is no mistaking that hair and height. I watch several heads turn in his wake and I feel a strange twinge of jealousy. It’s as though I want to tell them to keep their looks off my man. My man. I place a hand on my

still flat stomach. I'm still in shock at the fact that I'm pregnant with Archer's child.

I hold my breath as I watch him continue out through the main door. I give him a few minutes before venturing tentatively to the lobby. I look around nervously, wondering if he'll jump out from behind something. But he's gone. I'm waiting for no more than five minutes before Michelle calls. She comes inside with a coat and ushers me into the waiting cab. I lean into her and rest my head on her shoulder as we drive.

"Thanks, Michelle. I really appreciate this."

"No problem, hon."

I close my eyes and allow the turning of the wheels to lull me to sleep. I don't wake up until Michelle touches me gently on the arm.

"We're here."

I sit up and wait for Michelle to pay for the taxi before I allow her to help me out onto the pavement. We walk briskly and are soon out of the cold. I'm quickly settled into the guest room under a ton of blankets and a space heater. There's a small television that she mounted for my entertainment.

Michelle plies me with food and tea and ensures that I take my antibiotics and apply salve to my bruises. She is lying across the foot of the bed flipping through channels while I stare into space. I'm nervous as I think about what I have to share with her.

She settles on a comedy and I watch for a while before nudging her with my foot. She looks around and I smile wanly.

“We need to talk.”

“You’re staying here until all those bruises fade and those cuts heal and I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer,” Michelle states.

“It’s not that. The doctor spoke to me before I left. She wanted to remind me to take care of myself. And she also wanted to give me a few recommendations for obstetricians.” I pause and wait for the penny to drop. I see the second what I’ve said dawns on her. Her eyes grow as wide as saucers and she mutes the television. She sits up and looks at me.

“Did you say ‘obstetrician’?”

I nod slowly.

“You’re *pregnant*?” she whispers.

I swallow hard. “Yes. Six weeks.”

“Are you going to tell Archer?”

“You’re so sure it’s his?”

She purses her lips and looks at me as if to say ‘duh’. I roll my eyes and look away.

“What am I going to do, Mich?”

“You’d better pick up that phone and call him.”

I shake my head. “Nope. Not gonna happen in this lifetime or the next.”

“But he has a right to know, Sidney.”

I go silent. She’s right, of course. He does have a right to know, but I don’t know if I want to tell him this, especially with how I kicked him out of my life. I shake my head again.

“I’m not going to tell him, Mich.”

“Sidney, this is a reason for you both to make amends and start afresh. This is his *child*.”

“He has a child, and we all know how he turned out.”

“I’m sure he’s learned from his mistakes, and besides, you’ll be there to keep him on the straight and narrow with this one.”

“I don’t want him to think I trapped him, Mich.”

“He’ll think nothing of the sort.”

“It would be too complicated, Michelle. My child would be Grant’s brother or sister, and I would be Grant’s stepmother or some shit like that. I’m not putting my child and myself through that. Then there’s Spike to contend with in the midst of all this. I have to protect myself and my child.”

“Why do you have to when you have a protector in Archer? And as for being Grant’s stepmother? Hell yeah! He deserves some karma shit like that for the hell he put you through.”

I know Michelle is trying to make jokes, but out of nowhere, I feel tears prick at my eyes. I try to speak but a lump lodges in my throat. A tear rolls down my cheek and I begin to sob.

“Awww! Sid! I didn’t mean to upset you! I’m sorry.”



I allow her to hug me as the tears stream.

“It’s not you. It’s me. The last couple of days have been really hard.”

“I know, sweetie. And we need to be grateful that you’re here and alive and that nothing more serious happened to you. I can’t begin to think how you felt at that moment. Forget I said anything. We’ll do it your way. Shhhh. Shhhh.”

She rocks me back and forth while I regain control of my emotions. I sniffle and sigh, then pull away slightly.

“Thanks. I needed that cry. I don’t think I’ve been able to fully wrap my head around everything that happened as of yet.” I take a deep breath and whisper, “I’m pregnant.”

Michelle strokes my cheek. “Yes. And you’re going to make a fantastic mother.”

“I’m still going to move and I need a job now more than ever.”

“You can work for me.”

I chuckle. “Doing what? Cutting the cord?”

“You’d be surprised how time consuming that can be especially for a big project.”

“I was joking.”

“I wasn’t. Do your job hunting if you must. But you’d really be helping me out.”

I give her a side eye. “We’ll see. I also plan to find another apartment. Hopefully, I’ll be able to get something in my

current price range.”

“You’re staying with me until you do. That’s not debatable.”

I laugh. “I know which battles to pick. I want to start packing tomorrow if that’s okay with you?”

“I can borrow Jerry’s van to help us move what you need. And you’re not lifting a thing.”

“Thanks.”

We find a movie and Michelle does some buttered popcorn. After we say good night, I lie looking at the ceiling for what feels like ages. All I can think about is how yesterday morning I woke up wondering when I’d be discharged and hoping I could stay in the hospital a few more days, and tonight I’m home and a mother-to-be. I still don’t know how to feel about it.

Finally, I fall asleep.

The next day, Michelle is as good as her word and we begin to pack a few boxes and bags with essential items. I decide what will go into storage as we pack. Michelle is still on my case about Archer, but I’m not entertaining her. We begin to run short on boxes. It is amazing what one accumulates over the course of a few years.

“I’m going to run down to the store and see if I can get a few more boxes for the stuff in the kitchen. I’ll be right back. With any luck, we’ll be done by lunchtime. I’m starving and I’m sure you two are. And auntie Michelle has got to feed you!”

She pats my stomach with a cheeky grin before she runs out the door. I chuckle and go to the bedroom to continue going through my clothes. Anything that is a perfect fit will have to go into storage for a few months. Hello, baggy clothes! I want to spend as little as possible on maternity clothes as my funds will be needed elsewhere.

As I empty the closet, I catch sight of the mirror on the back of the door. I put down the dress I'm holding and look at my reflection. My hair is almost at my waist now and needs to be trimmed. I might do just that for my birthday on Monday. I look at the cut on my cheek. It was not very deep and all that is left are a few scabs and a white scar has started to form. The bruises are almost gone too. My shoulder and leg are still discolored but the soreness is almost gone. I hold out my forearm and look at the long slice. There are still a few stitches, which I can have removed at a clinic next week.

I feel nervous as I run my hand down my torso. It lands on my stomach and I feel my heart begin to race. Slowly, I raise the hem of my T-shirt and my stomach comes into view. I place my hand on my bare skin. The palm is warm. I turn sideways. There is not even the hint of a bump. But in a few months, there will be.

My throat feels tight and I grow teary-eyed. I wonder if I'm making the right decision by not telling Archer about the baby. But my pondering does not last for long when I see the bruise on my cheek and the stitches in my arm. I'll be fine on my own without Archer Colleymore.

I continue to fold my clothing as I wait for Michelle to return with the boxes.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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### Archer

I spend the rest of the week going between the hospital to check on Grant and working from home. Jared has loaned Colleen back to me until I return. It's on Friday that she informs me that Sidney has sent in her resignation. I'm not surprised. The evening after I saw her in the hospital, I pulled her security detail. It made no sense to be guarding an empty apartment. But I couldn't have pulled them at a worst time. Yesterday, I learned that Sidney checked out days ago. Now, had I still had my security detail, they would be able to tell me exactly where Sidney is. Going to her apartment this morning hasn't yielded anything. I get in under the guise of being her security provider and needing to check her camera. Plus, the building supervisor has been more than familiar with my men and myself for months now. He allows me into the apartment and I get the shock of my life. It is empty. All that remains are my cameras. I spend the afternoon removing them, taking my time as I process Sidney's disappearance. I don't have to ask where she is: Michelle. And I remember where I dropped her off as well. But something holds me back from the pursuit

right now. And this is not my normal operating mode when there is something that I want badly, but I have to be strategic with Sidney. The sticking point for me is the fact that she was Grant's girlfriend. And it makes me feel like shit. And I suspect I'll continue to feel this way until I deal with Grant. When he is settled into his treatment, I'll leave no stone unturned to find Sidney.

I look at the box of camera equipment sitting in the middle of the living room floor as I complete the last report for the week. I email it to Colleen and shut down my laptop. I take the equipment to the garage and head back inside. I go through my exercise routine and head upstairs more than an hour later. After my shower, I double check one of the guest rooms downstairs. Grant will be released into my care tomorrow and I want him to spend the night with me before I take him to rehab. I can't wait to have him under my roof if even for a night. It'll be the first time I've had my son in more than a decade.

In the morning, I head to the store and replenish the refrigerator and pantry. I give the house a once over before heading to the hospital.

"Hi, son."

"Dad!"

I smile broadly. "Ready to come home?"

"Yes!"

"Awesome!"

I look at his shining eyes. There is an alertness and they are no longer sunken in their sockets. The road to recovery is long. But a few days being sober and off drugs has done him a world of good. His bruises have begun to fade and each day his bandages are reduced. Now he has only his ribs bandaged and one leg. He is going to need physical therapy as well to repair the muscle damage from when he was beaten.

“How long has it been since I was home, Dad?”

I look up from the bag I’m packing with his personal effects. I see tears in his eyes and hear the thickness in his voice. This tugs at my heart.

“It’s been too long.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been as awful as I was. I didn’t mean it. I was so angry and stupid. I just wanted you around.” He breaks down sobbing.

I sit on the side of the bed and pull him into my arms. He holds me as tightly as he can and simply sobs. I feel the years of separation between us melt in that embrace. I hold him for as long as I need to, not caring that the nurse and orderly have been waiting to assist us with the discharge process.

Finally, when he regains control, I help him into his clothes. His discharge papers are completed and he is wheeled down to the lobby. I have brought a few blankets to shield him from the cold when he is transferred to the car. He settles into the passenger seat and I leave the parking lot.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Can we get a pizza?”

I look across at him. “Sure. We could do drive thru so you don’t have to try to get out of the car.”

“That would be great.”

I call one of the popular spots and we are soon enroute. We have to wait for a few minutes but soon our pizza is on the back seat and we are again heading for home.

“Is this where you’ve always lived?”

“No. I got this place about seven or eight years ago. I was about to get out of the service and I knew I needed to put down some solid roots. I’d really been hoping that you would take up one of my many offers to visit. And though it’s under these circumstances, I’m grateful.”

“I’m grateful too, Dad. I’ve really worked hard all week on fighting the pull. That’s the only way Dr. Beaumont said I could survive spending the night. By the time the meds wear off tomorrow, I’ll already be in rehab where I can really get better. But I had to spend some time with you.”

“I appreciate it, Grant.”

“Thanks for doing this for me,” he sighs. I hear the soft sobs again. “I’m sorry. Dr. Beaumont said I’m going to have some emotional outbursts. I can’t seem to stop crying like I’m fucking pregnant and hormonal!”



I cannot help but laugh at the comparison. His sobs turn to laughter and we both dissolve into chuckles. We laugh and talk and catch up during the rest of the drive. Soon, I pull up to the gate.

“This is it. The Colleymore compound.”

“It looks well-protected.”

“It is. Let me have your phone.”

He hands it to me.

“I’m going to program the code and you can use the speed dial. I’ll put it under number one. Now you open the gate.”

He clicks the number on the dial pad and the gate swings open.

“Now close it.”

I wait until the gate is secure behind us before we continue up the driveway.

“The same code opens the garage.”

I drive into the space and switch off the engine as the door closes behind us.

“Let me get the kitchen door open and get your things and the pizza inside before I help you in, okay?”

“Sure.”

It takes me less than a minute before I come back and help Grant out of the car. He looks around the garage and points to a covered vehicle with the cane he is using.

“What’s that?”

I smile and walk over to the car. I whip off the cover to reveal a sporty jeep.

“I got this for your twenty-fifth birthday.”

“You’ve had that sitting here for three years?”

”Not exactly. I keep it gassed and tuned up. License, registration, and insurance are up to date as well. I try to take it out at least once a week to keep the battery alive. It’s yours when you get back home.”

I put the cover back on the vehicle and walk back to where he is waiting at the foot of the steps. I stand behind him as he takes his time to get up the steps. As soon as we are inside, the heat hits us. I place my keys, phone, and wallet on the table by the door, then turn and arm the system. Grant is watching me as I do so.

“How does that work?”

I briefly explain the system to him, enjoying the rapt attention he is paying. He looks at me in fascination.

“It’s that simple, huh?”

“Simple, yet effective. It trips within a second of being opened without the code.”

“Wow.”

“Let’s get you settled. Your room is down here. I didn’t want you climbing the stairs.”

“So, I won’t see upstairs?”

“Do you want to see it?”

“I do.”

“I’ll take you up.”

Without hesitation, I carefully lift him into my arms. He laughs.

“We’re really making up for lost time, aren’t we?”

“Tell me about it.”

I take the steps carefully. Just as I put him on the landing upstairs, I hear my phone ringing downstairs.

“I’ll be fine, Dad. I’ll hobble around until you come back.”

I give him a thumbs up and take the stairs two at a time. I catch the phone on the fourth ring.

“Colleymore.” I put the phone on speaker while I move around the kitchen fetching plates for the pizza.

“Archer Colleymore?”

“Speaking.”

“Hi. It’s Michelle. Sidney’s friend.”

At the sound of Sidney’s name, I stop in my tracks.

“Look, I can’t talk for very long, so I’ve got to be quick. It’s about Sidney. She has no idea I’m calling you. And she’s actually forbade me to call you. There are a few things you need to know. She cares for you a lot. But Spike has her really spooked. The thing with your being Grant’s father does not sit

well with her either. But I think that she's using these things as excuses."

"Michelle, I've paid Spike off. He's no longer a threat."

"Oh my gosh! That is amazing. I wish I could tell her that, but I'll keep it under wraps. At least I don't have to worry about her being attacked. And especially in her condition, she needs to be as unbothered and unstressed as is possible."

"Her condition?"

"She was in the hospital. A few days ago, Spike roughed her up a bit. But the doctor says the baby is fine. Sidney's carrying your baby."

I go silent as I process the information I just heard. I speak slowly and emphatically.

"Sidney's *pregnant*?"

"You bastard! I should have known better than to trust you! What the hell were you doing with Sidney? Why are her clothes here?"

I turn to find Grant in the kitchen door. He is holding one of Sidney's shirts I'd left on my bed because I have taken up the habit of sleeping with it.

"Grant. Calm down."

"Don't tell me to fucking calm down. I want to know what you were doing with my girlfriend, and I want to know now!"

"I didn't know she was your girlfriend when I met her."

“And she’s pregnant? With *your* baby?” Grant advances on me until he is standing directly in front of me.

“I’m just finding out, Grant. Calm down. Remember you’re on medication, and you don’t want to become agitated. Please, calm down!”

I hear a gasp and realize the call is still open. I reach over and end it.

“Can we talk about this, Grant?”

“No!”

“Grant.”

“You make me fucking sick. I’m outta here.”

I watch as he turns and walks away. I hear him cursing as he tries to find his room. I grab his bag and find him sitting on the bed, his head in his hands.

“Grant.”

“Get out.”

“If you would just listen—”

“Leave me alone.”

I stand looking at him as he keeps his face averted. Slowly, I walk out of the room and close the door behind me. I sit at the kitchen island and stare into space. Sidney is *pregnant*? With *my* child?

I don’t know how long I sit there. Nothing that I think even registers beyond the words ‘Sidney’ and ‘pregnant’. But finally, I drag myself upstairs, mentally exhausted. I don’t

know when I finally fall asleep. But when I awake, the sky is a pale gray, like my mood. I drag myself out of bed and shower quickly. It is almost nine. I need to get Grant some breakfast and get him to the rehab center by ten. The heavy dose of pain and desensitization medication wears off at noon.

I toss the untouched pizza into the garbage, then put the kettle on the stove. I go down the hall and knock on his door.

“Grant? It’s time for breakfast. You didn’t have anything to eat last night.”

There is silence. I knock once more.

“Grant?”

I push the door and step inside. I go absolutely still as I find the room empty. His bag is gone. I don’t know how I’m so calm as I walk into the kitchen. My wallet lies open and the key to the jeep is gone.

Shit!

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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### Sidney

My birthday finds me on Michelle's couch going through the job ads. I have changed my job hunt focus to working from home if possible. It makes no sense to get a job now only to quit in a few months when I need to have the baby. Plus, I'll have to spend time at home in those first few months. Working online and maybe even with flexible hours would be a good option right now. I feel encouraged in my search as I actually found an apartment two days ago. It is about ten minutes from Michelle's and in a nice neighborhood. It is a little less than what I was paying, so that is a good thing. But it is a studio rather than a full-fledged apartment with walls separating rooms.

The second Michelle saw it her face lit up.

"This is you, Sidney."

My smile had been a mile wide. "Yes! I feel it too!"

I'd paid the deposit on the spot and made arrangements to move in by this Friday.

I take a sip of my juice and circle yet another job possibility. I feel oddly optimistic for the coming year. It's been just a few days, but already I cannot think of myself as an individual. I'm part of a pair.

I place my hand on my stomach. Next week is Christmas. Archer's birthday is the twenty-third. At the thought of Archer, I wonder what he planned for our birthdays. And I banish the thought immediately. Thinking of Archer will do me no good right now. I take a deep breath and get off the couch.

I'm in the middle of doing the few dishes that are in the sink when Michelle comes in.

"Where's the birthday girl?"

I turn and smile as I see her holding a cake.

"Michelle! I told you not to make a big deal out of my birthday."

"Well, that was not your call to make. Now, let's get this cake cut and some wishes made."

She places the cake on the counter and I fish out a knife from the utensil drawer. Michelle sticks some candles and light them.

"Blow them out and make a wish."

I close my eyes and scrunch up my face. Then I take a deep breath and blow the candles out. I also open my eyes and see Michelle across from me with her eyes closed. She is muttering to herself. Then she opens one eye and looks at me. She grins.



“Don’t mind me. I’m just making my own wish.”

I cut into the cake and begin sharing slices. “Oh yeah? What did you wish for?”

“I wished that you wouldn’t kill me.”

“Kill you?” I pick up a fork and dig into the succulent chocolate pastry. “Whatever for?”

“I did something you didn’t want me to do.”

I look up sharply and she looks away. I put down the fork.

“What did you do?” My heart is racing. I’m hoping that it’s not what I think it is.

“I called Archer.”

Shit.

“Please don’t be mad at me, Sid. I had to call him.”

“How could you, Michelle? I told you that I don’t want him to know!”

“I know! I know! And I don’t know why I picked up the phone and called him. I was going to hang up and then he answered. And-and I told him.”

“No!” I place my head in my hands. “Why!?”

“He has a right to know, Sidney.”

“What did he say?”

“That’s just it. He didn’t say anything.”

I feel as though I have been punched in the gut. Archer was not interested. I felt tears prick my eyes.

“Okay. So I guess we have our answer—”

“Don’t be too quick to judge him, Sidney. He really didn’t get the chance to say anything. I did most of the talking, and when he could respond, he got into an argument with Grant.”

I look at her and my face goes pale. “Grant? Grant is in Chicago?”

“So it seems.”

I suddenly feel nervous as the enormity of the words hit me. Grant is in *Chicago*. He could be anywhere in the city. I have instant flashbacks to the last time I saw him. I also can’t help but think about what happened with Spike. I start to shake. Michelle grabs me and shakes me slightly.

“Sidney! It’s okay.”

“No! It’s not okay! Spike is going to be after him. And if he can’t get to him, he’ll come for me! I can’t let that happen! I *won’t* let that happen!”

“Sidney! Relax. Archer took care of Spike.”

I stare at her, blinking stupidly. “What do you mean, Archer took care of Spike?”

“He told me that he paid off Spike. You and Grant are off the hook. But, Sidney, listen to me. The little of the quarrel that I heard before he cut the call, they were quarrelling about you.”

“About me!?”

“Yes. Just as I told him that you were pregnant, I heard Grant in the background attacking him for being with you.”

I take a deep breath as Michelle continues.

“It sounds as though Grant was sick or something. I heard Archer tell him to calm down and remember that he’s on medication.”

I begin to pace the kitchen. “Grant is back,” I whisper to myself. “What am I going to do?”

“Sidney. Spike is no longer a danger to you. Relax.”

“Spike isn’t. But Grant is.”

“What are you talking about?”

I sit and look at Michelle, fear racing through me.

“When I kicked him out, he threatened me. He told me that when he came back, he’d make me pay. He was holding me by the throat when he said it, so I know exactly what he meant.”

“Sidney! You never told me that!”

“I couldn’t.”

“Oh! Sweetheart!”

I dissolve into tears as Michelle’s arms come around me.

“Who the fuck did I piss off so badly in my former life to merit this existence? Abusive junkie ex-boyfriend, and I manage to get knocked up by his father.”

“It’s just the luck of the draw. Your ace is gonna come up soon. I mean. You’ve got a great apartment. And you’ll get a

great job. And you're going to be a fantastic mommy."

She rubs my stomach and smiles at me. "Sidney, you're going to make it. You're one of the most resilient people I know, and I just know you'll get past this just like you always do: one day at a time."

I take a deep breath. "You're right. I'll figure it out."

"And I'll be right here to help you."

"I really appreciate that, Michelle."

"You're welcome. Now can you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Can we shut up and eat cake?"

I laugh and the mood lightens. "Sure."

Friday comes all too quickly; before I know it, it is Friday night,, and I have moved into my new apartment. Michelle had helped me hang a few curtains the day before and had even gifted me one of her wall pieces. I hang it over my bed.

"That's the last box, miss."

"Thank you." I tip the mover and wait for Michelle to come in with a package she had refused to let me see.

I close the door behind us and take a deep breath. I let it out with a squeal. It feels so good to be in a space to call my own again. I have lots of unpacking to do but that will have to wait until next week. I pull a set of sheets out of my backpack and Michelle helps me to make the bed. I excuse myself and go to

the bathroom to brush my teeth. When I get out, I see the lights off.

“Michelle?”

“Give me a sec.”

I hear her flick a switch and I hear music. Then I see it light up. Tears come to my eyes as I watch the soft light on the baby mobile change from one color to another.

“It’s beautiful, Michelle. You’re so gifted!”

“It’s the least I could do for my niece or nephew.”

“I love it!”

She turns off the mobile and turns on the lights. “I’m glad you do. I’m going to just put it back in the box right here, and when the time is right, it’ll be in its place.”

We talk a little longer before Michelle heads home.

I lie looking, up at the ceiling as I stare into the darkness. Peace comes over me. I’m going to be okay.

I spend the rest of the week between job hunting and unpacking, pausing long enough to go over to Michelle’s on Christmas day. Then she comes over on boxing day to help me with some more unpacking. By New Year’s Eve, I have the apartment how I want it to be. Michelle and I ring in the year at a party thrown by one of her clients. We splurge on a taxi that night. She drops me off first and I wait patiently for her to call to let me know she is home safely. I pop a piece of chocolate into my mouth as the phone rings.

“Are you home, hon?”

“Happy New Year, bitch!” The noisy background almost drowns out the harsh tone.

My heart skips a beat and I choke on the chocolate. Grant!

“W-why are you calling me?”

“Did you have fun fucking my dad? Whore!”

“Leave me alone!”

“And now I hear you’re pregnant. Have fun getting that deadbeat jerk to pay attention to your kid. So, if you did it for the money, you’re on your own. I always knew you were a little tramp! You gold digger!”

Something inside me snaps. I’ve had enough of this conversation.

“You’re a fine one to talk about being a jerk! Or have you forgotten the shit you put me through? If you’ve forgotten, I haven’t, Grant. I haven’t forgotten the money you stole from me, the used condoms I’d find when I came home from work. If I had the chance to relive the past three years, I would have turned you away the first time I met you. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have been threatened by Spike and I would never have gone searching for help and met your father. So if you’re looking for someone to blame in all of this, try looking in a fucking mirror!”

My chest heaves with emotion as I finally get some of the pent-up feelings off my chest.

“Sidney, I—”

“I wish I’d never met you! I wish I’d never met your father!  
Now leave me the fuck alone!”

I’m about to hang up when I hear Grant sobbing.

“I’m so sorry, Sidney! You’re right! I’m a horrible person!”

He coughs and sounds like he’s gagging.

“Grant? Where are you? Are you okay?”

He doesn’t appear to hear me and continues to ramble.

“It’s better for me to be out of both your lives! I’ve been  
nothing but trouble!”

He coughs again and I become seriously alarmed. I’m  
suddenly aware that this is winter. I also recall Michelle saying  
that Grant has been with his father as she had overheard him in  
the background. He is supposed to be on medication as well.

“Grant? Are you at your father’s house?”

“I left days ago. I don’t deserve to be helped. I’m sorry I  
called and bothered you, Sidney. You’re right. I’m a horrible  
person.”

“Where are you, Grant? We need to talk. Can we talk face to  
face? Tell me where you are.”

“No! It’s no use! I won’t bother either of you anymore! I  
won’t be a problem for you or dad anymore. Goodbye,  
Sidney! I’m sorry!”

He hangs up the phone abruptly. I sit staring at the phone for  
a few seconds before I jump into action. I call back the number

but there is no response. I call back twice, my thoughts racing as I ponder my next move. When the phone continues to ring without an answer, I quickly search my phone book. I press the call button before I lose my nerve.

“Colleymore.”

My heart skips a beat at the sound of his voice.

“Archer?”

I hear him pause before he answers. “Sidney?”

“I-I’m sorry to call you so late. Grant just called me. He doesn’t sound good at all. It’s cold out and he’s got a nasty cough and I have no idea how to track him. He refused to tell me where he was and—”

“Can you give me the number?”

I give it to him.

“I’ll call you back.”

I sit looking at the silent phone, my heart pounding. It rings and I answer it immediately.

“Sidney?”

“Yes?”

“He called from a payphone at a bar named *Clawfish*.”

“I know that bar. I’ll meet you there.”

“It’s late. I’ll pick you up. Give me your address.”

Warning bells go off in my head.

“It’s okay. I’ll meet you there.”



I hang up and grab my sweater and jacket. The night is still busy and it is not hard to grab a cab and head to the bar. It is only ten minutes away. When I get there, I wait at the door. About five minutes later, Archer pulls up at the curb. I try not to ogle him as he swings out of the car. His long stride reaches me in no time, and I drop my eyes as he stares at me. He presses his hand to the small of my back and ushers me inside.

There is music playing and a few patrons are milling around, still celebrating the first hours of the new year. I stay by Archer's side as he asks the bartender about Grant using the payphone. He recalls changing a dollar into quarters for the 'red-haired fella', but he didn't see where he went. We leave the bar and I turn to Archer.

“What do we do now?”

He goes to the trunk of his car and pulls out two flashlights. “We search. And it's quicker to do this on foot.”

I follow his lead as he begins to scour the narrow areas running off the street.

“When did you last see him?”

“It's been more than two weeks since he left my house. He was supposed to go to rehab but we got into an argument the night before. When I woke up the next morning, my wallet was empty and he had taken the jeep. I found the jeep abandoned two days later. At least he didn't sell it for drugs.”

“Do you think he's still using?”

“Anything is possible. He wasn’t stable enough to be off pain medication.”

“Pain medication?”

“Spike beat him up pretty badly.”

I connect the dots. That must have been why he was at the hospital.

A breeze blows and I pull my jacket closer. I don’t want to imagine Grant being out in this weather right now, especially if he isn’t adequately clothed.

We continue our search, dodging in and out of people as they head to and from various places. Archer speaks with random people, describing Grant. Finally, we get a lead from an old bum who recalls seeing him this morning. He describes him perfectly, down to the mole.

“Last I saw him, he looked a bit ragged and out of sorts. I’ve seen a lot of ‘em come and go. And he looks like he’ll soon be a goner.”

His words strike fear into my heart. I see Archer’s face turn to granite as he struggles to remain aloof. But I can only imagine what’s going through his mind at the thought of his son being found dead in an alley somewhere.

I feel as if I’ve been walking and swinging the light for hours and I’m losing hope that we’ll ever find Grant. Suddenly, Archer ducks into an alley as something piques his curiosity. Then I hear him call out excitedly.

“He’s here! Sidney! Call an ambulance now!”

I dig into my purse and dial the emergency number. I hand Archer the phone and listen as he rattles off the location. In what seems like a few minutes, an ambulance turns into the alley and paramedics spring into action. In a whirl of activity, I find myself being loaded into the ambulance with Grant and Archer. Thankfully, the quickest route to the hospital goes by the bar and Archer is let out to collect his car. I stay in the ambulance.

The emergency room is like a beehive, and I shrink into the background while Archer springs into action to get Grant the attention he needs. I watch and wait for my chance to slip away and do so quickly. I catch a bus and head back to my apartment. It's not until I undress that I remember that Michelle was supposed to call. I see several missed calls and texts.

*We'll talk tomorrow. Had a bit of drama tonight.*

I'm snuggled in bed as tiredness overtakes me when my phone rings. Something tells me to check it before I answer. Archer. I feel my heart begin to race. I take a deep breath as I press the reject button.

I roll over on my back and cross my hands over my stomach. Just because we united for a cause doesn't mean that we forget about the past few weeks and go back to what we were before I knew he was Grant's father and everything that came after that. The phone vibrates with an incoming text.

*Answer please*

I stare at the ceiling until my eyes close and I drift off to sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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### Archer

It is difficult not to remember how my life changed a year ago when I first laid eyes on Sidney in my waiting room. I look at the woman sitting in her space now and my heart is sad. At Colleen's recommendation, I hired her a week ago. Lisa is older, efficient, and actually has experience working in the security industry. But she is not Sidney. I'm not oblivious to her not so subtle signals of her being single and available either. But I'm not interested. My life is completely consumed with work and Grant.

After Sidney and I had got him to the hospital that night, it has been nonstop ever since. The doctor said that he had been in the first stage of hypothermia, and with the predicted temperature drop later that night, he would have been a corpse. He had a severe case of pneumonia as well. They placed him in a medically induced coma in order to treat his body as well as deal with the severe agitation he had suffered as a result of his withdrawal symptoms. Two weeks later, they woke him up and discharged him to the rehab center. He has been there ever

since. For the first few weeks, I was not allowed to see him as they wanted him to focus all his energy on getting better. It is only last week that I have been able to see him in person. The conversation was a bit strained and I could tell that he was embarrassed about what he did at my house. But I refrained from bringing it up.

The intercom crackles to life. “Mr. Colleymore?”

“Yes, Lisa.”

“There’s a Miss Bailey here to see you.”

“Thank you. Send her right in please.”

I open my desk drawer and withdraw an envelope. The office door opens and Michelle walks in ahead of Lisa. Lisa comes to my desk with a file. She smiles alluringly as she leans over to place it on my desk. Her cleavage is on full display. I see Michelle smirk out of the corner of my eye.

“Here’s the Johnson file that you wanted, Archer.”

“Thank you.”

“Will there be anything else?”

“No. That will be all.”

There is silence. She looks from me to Michelle and back at me. I raise an eyebrow at her.

“Is there something else you need, Lisa?”

“Oh! No.”

“Then you may go.”

There is silence once more as she slowly walks away, swaying her hips. She looks over her shoulder again at Michelle and me. Then she closes the door behind her. Michelle turns to me with a cheeky smile I have come to know. She fans herself and rolls her eyes.

“Someone’s got the hots for you, Archer!”

“Trust me when I say I haven’t encouraged it.”

“I know.”

“Nor will I take up anything that is offered. I find it in poor taste to be chased like a piece of meat.”

Michelle laughs. “I can give her the memo if you’d like.”

I laugh as well. “I know you have ulterior motives for wanting to do that. Protecting someone else’s interests and all.” I grow serious.

“How is she doing?”

Michelle takes a deep breath.

“She’s fantastic. She’s been going to her appointments and everything is going fine with the baby.”

“How far along is she now?”

“About sixteen weeks. She’s just starting to show.”

Michelle passes her phone to me and I feel my chest tighten as I see Sidney’s smile.

*“Why are you recording me?” she laughs as she looks up at the camera.*

*“I just want to catch you at this size. In a few months, I’m going to have to roll you!”*

*“Please! Don’t remind me.”*

*“Let me see the little bump.”*

Sidney smiles into the camera and raises the hem of her shirt. I feel my eyes burn as I see her stomach and the tiny bulge where my child lies. I sit in silence for a while.

“I’ll send it to you if you like,” Michelle says softly.

“Thank you. I would appreciate it.” I slide the envelope across to Michelle and she places it in her purse. “Does she suspect anything?”

“Nope. I’m being quite discreet.”

“And she doesn’t wonder where you’re getting all this money from to spend on her.”

“I have several ‘wealthy’ clients who just happen to have a ton of baby stuff they need to give away. And they know my best friend is expecting.”

“Suppose she wants to meet her benefactors to express her appreciation?”

“I’ll cross that bridge *if* I get there.” Michelle winks and I smile. “Thank you for reaching out to me to do this for Sidney. She’s too damn stubborn for her own good.”

“That, we know.”

“How is Grant doing?”



“He’s much better. He’s got a few more weeks to go but he’s making good progress. I should be seeing him this evening as a matter of fact.”

“That’s good to know.” She stands and shoulders her purse. “Thanks again, Archer.”

“It’s me who should be thankful. I just wish she would allow me to be, to be *there*.”

“I know. But let’s give her some more time. I’ll keep you posted.”

I watch Michelle leave and sigh. It was a stroke of genius when I thought of reaching out to her when Sidney refused to take my calls. Together, we decided how I could help Sidney financially until I could work myself up to taking a stand and winning her back. I just wanted to get Grant better before I refocused on Sidney.

I finish my reports for the day and soon head out. The evenings are getting a little warm even though it is the end of February so I only need a light coat. When I get to the center, I head straight to Grant’s room. I frown when I see it empty. I go down to the lounge and find Grant at the air hockey table. I stand back a bit and watch as he plays.

He has filled out a lot in the past weeks. His hair, which had grown stringy from malnutrition, is thicker and has a sheen to it. It reminds me of when he was a child. His skin has a healthy glow now and his eyes are alive. More importantly, he is close to being one hundred percent clean.

I hear him laugh and it's a musical sound that melts my heart. He sounds – happy. Someone nudges him and points in my direction. He turns and his smile widens. He excuses himself from the game and walks over to me.

“Dad!”

He hugs me tightly and I return the embrace. “How are you, Grant?”

We walk out of the room and head down to his room.

“I'm good. Dr. Ferguson came and saw me today and he says I've made a lot of progress since the last time he saw me.”

We sit on the window seat and look out over the garden below.

“That's good. Grant, I'm so proud of you.”

He looks down shyly and color stains his cheeks. “I'm really trying,” he says softly.

“That's all I ask.”

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“I-I hate to sound like a scratched record. But thanks for everything. You paid off my debt with Spike and got him off my case. I'm so grateful to you for not giving up on me, even when I gave up on myself. When I left your house that night, I was on a suicide mission. And that night when I called Sidney, I was planning to overdose. But I passed out before I could.”

His voice breaks. “I can’t imagine what would have happened if I had been successful.”

“It would have broken my heart.”

“I’m sorry, Dad! I’ve caused so much trouble for you and for Sidney. I feel responsible for your break up, and she’s pregnant! She needs you now more than ever, and I’m standing in the way. All these years, I’ve allowed my hatred and resentment of you to be an excuse for everything I did. Yet, no matter how I pushed you away, you still tried to help me. And now I’m going to help you.”

I look at him strangely. “Help me?”

“Yes. Dad, I know that being apart from Sidney is hurting you.”

“Grant—”

“I know you’re sad, Dad. And I know you need Sidney. I was wrong for making a big deal out of her being your girlfriend. She’s a great woman and if I hadn’t fucked up so badly, I’d be begging her to take me back.”

I look at him. “If it hadn’t been for her, we wouldn’t have found you that night, you know? She was worried about you and how you sounded.”

“See what I mean? She went from cursing me out to worrying that I was at death’s door. And put aside her own feelings and called you to help me. She’s a very forgiving person. And I think you should reach out to her. She’ll give you another chance.”

“I like your confidence.”

“I know her, Dad. It was sheer frustration that caused her to kick me out. But outside of that, she tried her best to put up with me. You’re nowhere near as difficult as I was. If you reach out to her, you’ll get a second chance. You don’t take no for an answer. Look at how many times I told you to leave me alone and you still came badgering for me to go to rehab. And where am I now.”

I cannot answer and he smiles.

“Go after her, Dad. And don’t take no for an answer. And I’m going to make it easy for you. I know that I’m well enough to be discharged soon. And when I am, I’m going back to Ireland. I’ve already spoken with mom and told her of my progress and how I’ve changed. She’s agreed to let me move back in with her and that she’ll pick up where you left off here with my treatment. But I think if I’m out of the way, things will be okay with you and Sidney.”

“Grant, you don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do. Maybe in time, when you guys are settled in with the baby and everything, she’ll come around to tolerating me again. I’ve done some things to her that I’m not proud of as a man. She deserves someone like you who wants to protect her. I sure didn’t.”

“If she’s as forgiving as you say she is, I’m sure she’ll forgive you as well.”

“I’m sure she will. By the way, I’m going to pay you back every penny you’ve spent.”

“You don’t have to do that, Grant. You’re my son. I’d spend my last dollar if that’s what it would take.”

“I know. Well, if you won’t take the money back for your sake, how about for my little brother or sister?”

That shakes me to my core. I look him squarely in the eyes. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“As a heart attack.” He gets up and goes to the small table beside his bed. He comes back with an envelope and hands it to me.

“What’s this?”

“Your icebreaker. I’d appreciate it if you delivered it personally.”

I look down at the envelope and see Sidney’s name scrawled on the front. I look at him and see a cheeky grin that reminds me of when he is up to mischief. I take a deep breath and smile.

“Okay, Mr. Matchmaker. I’ll deliver it personally. And we’ll see where it goes from there.”

“That’s all I ask.”

We stand and hug. He walks me to the main door and we hug again.

As I drive home, I replay the conversation with Grant. It feels like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I

haven't wanted to admit it, but a part of my hesitation in approaching Sidney has been Grant. But now that I know I have his blessing – game on!

When I get home, I make a phone call. The discussion is an intense one but at the end of it, there is a plan.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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### Sidney

Michelle is right. During the first three and a half months of my pregnancy I was still as flat as a pancake. But by the time I hit month four, I was barely starting to enjoy the tiny bump before it seemed I was growing by the second. All the oversized T-shirts I had thought would be a perfect fit for a few months were soon clinging in a few weeks. And I'm beginning to feel my skin stretching. Michelle has made it her duty to lavish me with gifts from her clients. It feels as though I have fairy godparents as every week she comes with some trinket or other from them. My flat is running out of space and I shudder to think what it'll really look like when I'm close to delivering. I still have to get a crib and a stroller. Plus, all the furniture a baby needs. I don't want to say anything to Michelle, but I'm seriously considering taking her offer to move back in with her and share her rent. It would make sense to turn her storage room into a nursery as she suggested. She got me a job transcribing for one of her clients and the money is pretty decent, better than I expected, actually. I have been

squirreling away as much as I can and being pretty frugal. I'm simply living one day at a time.

The weather begins to warm up and before I know it, we were in April and nearing the middle of my second trimester. It is hard to believe that by sometime in the summer I'll have a baby in my arms. I'll be a whole mother!

I'm going through my closet and doing another period of culling when Michelle calls.

"I want to take you shopping."

"Shopping! For the baby or me?"

"Both. Your wardrobe needs some stuff and I was thinking we could look at a gift registry for the baby."

"A gift registry? I don't know anyone, Michelle. Who's going to buy me anything from a baby registry?"

"That's for me to know and for you to find out. My clients love you sight unseen. I'm sure anything you choose for your registry will be bought."

"I don't think so."

"Well, it still can't hurt to look."

"I guess not."

"How does Saturday sound? We could have brunch first, then go shopping."

"Saturday sounds good."

"Great! It's a date."



Saturday morning finds Michelle and me at one of our favorite coffee shops. She reaches across and rubs my stomach. I'm wearing an oversized flannel shirt paired with leggings. I have my hair up in a bun and have even put on some light make-up and a pair of cute earrings. It feels like ages since I have been anywhere but home.

"You're getting so big!"

"I feel like I'm a balloon getting ready to be popped."

"You're nowhere near being ready to be popped, hon."

"She who feels it knows it."

We spend almost an hour enjoying our meal before Michelle urges us on to the second part of our day's activities. I pull back a bit as she steers us toward one of the most expensive maternity stores in the mall.

"Michelle, are you sure about this store?"

"Very sure."

"But, I can't afford—"

"I didn't ask you that."

"But Michelle—"

"Shush. Come along now. Even if we don't buy anything, at least you'll get some ideas of some of the things you want that we can maybe find elsewhere."

"Okay."

We walk in and I'm immediately in awe of all the baby things. I feel as though I'm sucked into a sea of clothes, shoes,

cribs, strollers, mobiles, and anything else I can think of for my precious child.

“The registry’s over here, Sidney. Look at this stuff!”

I wander over to the display which has an assortment of items other mothers have chosen for their registry.

“Look at this change table. Isn’t it the cutest thing?”

I smile, then gasp and whisper, “Look at the price tag.”

Michelle rolls her eyes. “We’re here to get ideas, remember? Besides, this is just the first store.”

“Yes. But if all the stores are like this one, I’ll just be frustrating myself. I don’t have this kind of money. I have to think about what I need, not what I want.”

“And what is it that you want?”

“A few tops that I can wear until I deliver and enough diapers to last me a lifetime. Anything else is a bonus.”

“Sidney, work with me please. Dream with me a little. Let’s pretend that you can afford all of this. What would you get?”

I look around and laugh. “I’d get everything of course!”

“Come on. Be serious now. What would you get?”

“Okay.” I walk over to the display and allow myself to dream a little. I run my hand along the smooth wood of a crib.

“This is gorgeous. You can tell this is real teak. I love the stain on it. I like the fact that it’s flexible. This can serve for at least five years as it’s got these detachable rails that can turn it into a bed. It’s like an all-in-one piece really. Look at all the

space for storage underneath, for diapers and blankets and all those kinds of things.”

“You always were an innovative thinker in the most efficient way to use space.”

I feel a shiver go down my spine. I turn around. His gray eyes are boring into me. I take a nervous step back and back right into the crib. I’m finding it hard to breathe as he steps into my space. The past four months seem to disappear as I’m overwhelmed by emotion at seeing him again. Every time that my thoughts tried to drift to Archer, I pushed them aside. But looking at him now as he stares at me makes me wonder if I have made a mistake in keeping him out of my life. I see his jaw tighten as he continues to stare at me. There is something in his eyes that I cannot describe, but it hypnotizes me.

“Sidney? Can we talk? In private?”

“I-I’m here with Michelle and I wouldn’t want to—”

“Trust me. Michelle will be fine. Right, Michelle?”

Michelle materializes out of nowhere. “I just remembered that I have a piece to finish for a client. Gotta run. But I know Archer will take care of you.”

“But, Michelle!”

I watch as my best friend hurries out of the store.

“She wants you to be happy, Sidney. The same way Grant wants me to be happy. And they both seem to think that our happiness lies with one another.”

I swallow against the lump that rises to my throat as tears prick my eyes.

“I’m going to have Michelle’s head for this.”

“She loves you and wants what’s best for you.” He chuckles and steps closer. He places a hand on my shoulder, and just like that, I break completely.

The tears roll down my cheeks as he pulls me into his arms. He holds me carefully, conscious of my belly bump between us. I place my hands flat on his chest.

“Sidney?”

I look up as he speaks, his voice is husky and his eyes are surprisingly bright.

“Yes?”

“We need to talk and I’d rather it not be in front of a store full of people. Please?”

Time seems to stand still as we stare at each other. Then, still holding his gaze, I take his hand. Our fingers intertwine and I smile. He cracks a smile and raises my hand to his lips for a kiss. I think I hear some soft sighs and realize that he was not exaggerating when he said we had an audience.

I nod. “Okay.”

It feels as though I’m coming home from a long journey as I sink into the familiar passenger seat of his car. As he drives, I don’t have to ask where we are heading. Home.

I take a deep breath when we enter the compound. I try not to remember the last time I was here. Archer laughs and I look over at him.

“I had no idea you were so athletic. Running down driveways and climbing trees.”

My cheeks burn as he verbalizes my thoughts. I almost jump out of my skin as he touches my stomach. He rubs it gently and smiles.

He parks in the garage and we sit in silence. I can almost hear our hearts beating. Then he gets out of the car and comes around to my side. I allow him to help me out of the vehicle, and I enter the kitchen. I’m immediately assailed by tantalizing scents. Against my will, my stomach rumbles.

“I know you’ve already had brunch, but Michelle said that she wouldn’t overfeed you so that we could have lunch together.”

“Michelle said that? She’s been a busy little bee.”

He laughs. “A busy little bee and my little secret helper.”

I look at him curiously. “Secret helper?”

“There’s a lot of confessions she and I’ll have. But all in due time.” He takes my hand and leads me to the dining room. There I find the table spread with a three-course luncheon. He seats me, then takes his own seat. We eat in silence. About an hour later, we are on the couch. He pours himself a drink while I have juice.

“There are a lot of things we need to get out of the way, Sidney. And I think I need to start with an apology. I never knew you were involved with my son. I swear. All I saw was a beautiful woman who mesmerized me in every possible way. And I wanted you in my life. Sidney, I’ve had a whole lot of experiences in my life. And especially with my failure as a husband and father the first time around, I never dreamed in a million years that I deserved a second chance at happiness in a relationship. But that all changed when I met you. You made me believe that I was worthy of love again, and that I could open my heart to love.”

He reaches out and takes my hand. His fingers are warm and dredge up memories of what they used to do.

“Before I say anything else, Grant left a letter for you.” He reaches into the drawer on the coffee table and pulls out an envelope and hands it to me.

My hands shake slightly as I pull out the single piece of paper and open it.

*Dear Sidney,*

*Words fail me. I’m torn between emotions. This is my fifth attempt at writing this letter. You do remember that I’m not the best at expressing myself, so here goes.*

*I fell in love with you the moment I first laid eyes on you. And even though I was a mess, I still wanted to be in your life. So I know exactly what my father felt when he fell in love with you. He is not a man of many words and you might have to pry it out of him with a crowbar. But he loves silently and deeply.*

*The mere fact that he has allowed you into his space like that speaks volumes. I know I messed things up between you two. And I'm hoping to use this letter to make it right. Give him a chance. If not for his sake or mine, for the sake of my little brother or sister. He may not have been the best father for me. But I think he has learned from those mistakes and deserves a second chance. So please, I ask you, don't use my mistakes to punish him.*

*Love*

*Grant*

*PS. He has no idea I'm writing this.*

I can barely see the signature through the blur of my tears. I feel Archer slide closer to me on the couch and I rest my head on his shoulder.

“Grant is playing cupid.”

“I figured. Before he went back to Europe, he told me to go after you and not to stop until I have you. And I'm taking his advice.”

I look up at him and find him staring at me. I think he is going to kiss me when he shifts and stands. He stretches out his hand, and I take it. He helps me to my feet and we go upstairs. My heart is beating like a drum as his fingers tighten around mine.

“There is something I want you to see.”

We walk past his bedroom and he stops at the door to one of the guest rooms and looks at me.

“It’s not finished. But I think we have a little time.”

He opens the door and steps aside. I step inside and my heart stops. Tears begin to flow once again as I look at the nursery in progress.

“I wasn’t sure of the gender, so I tried to pick a neutral color. There are some other things that I’ve ordered that I hope you’ll like. I’ve kept the receipts for these things, though, so if there’s anything you don’t like, we can return it or exchange it.”

I walk deeper into the room and he follows.

“I have a friend who does a lot of woodwork. I’ve commissioned a rocking chair to match the crib and change table. This one is oak, not teak like the one you were admiring. But if you prefer the teak, we can make the switch. I’ve got another stack of diapers in the basement in bigger sizes. Babies grow, you know?”

I turn as his voice grows husky. I see the tears in his eyes. I reach up as the first tear falls. He swallows hard when I wrap my arms around him.

“Sidney, I love you. I can’t think of any special ways to say it except to say it. But I’ll try. From the moment I laid eyes on you in my lobby, I knew there was something about you. And after we made love the first time, I knew I was in trouble. Sidney, I’m begging you to let me love you. I’m begging you to give me a chance to love my child. Please?”



Without a word, I pull his head to meet mine. And finally, his lips meet mine.

They are firm, warm, and dispose of months of loneliness. His arms come around me, deepening the kiss. Then his mouth leaves mine and trails down the familiar path of my cheek and neck. I feel his hands on my blouse and the buttons come apart. When my belly is bare to his gaze, he goes down on his knees. I close my eyes and bite my lips as he kisses my belly. I allow him to do that before I lean down and take his lips once more. I pull back slightly.

“I love you, Archer. I’ve been so scared that my life was shot to hell and that all I would have to remember you by is our child.”

He stands and takes my hand. “You have me.”

Without a word, he leads me to his bedroom. He undresses me slowly, kissing every inch as he bares me to his gaze. His hands skim my body, and I cannot help but respond to him like an instrument under the masterful touch of its musician. He strokes me intimately, tasting me like a man who has long been denied of life-giving juice. Then, as I lie wet with perspiration and trying to catch my breath, he undresses and joins me.

I stroke him and he gasps and trembles.

“Sidney, it’s been so long, baby,” he whispers.

I sit up slowly and gently push him onto his back. I straddle his thighs before I grip his cock and position myself. I sink

slowly, crying out as I feel him inside my body.

It is the beginning of a very long afternoon.

Later, as we are wrapped in each other's arms, it is as though we cannot keep our hands off each other. He strokes the side of my breast and smiles.

"I like this perk of pregnancy. The girls are out!"

I giggle and swat at his hand.

"You dirty old man. But you're my dirty old man."

"So, when are you moving back in with me?"

"As soon as you want me to."

"Yesterday."

I laugh. "Point taken. I do some transcription work for one of Michelle's clients. But I work from home, so that's fine."

"Hmmm. I don't think Mrs. Gopaulsingh will be requiring your services any longer."

I look at him curiously. "How do you know that?"

"Meet Mrs. Gopaulsingh." He stretches out his hand for me to shake. "And while I'm at it, I might as well tell you that I'm also the client giving away baby stuff."

"You and Michelle have been up to a lot of mischief, haven't you?"

"Like I said, you can't blame her too much. She loves you and wants you to be happy."

I hug him. "I *am* happy."

He kisses me. “Good.”

“And I’m even happier that you and Michelle have sooooo much energy to plot and scheme behind my back. I hope you have some in reserve to clean your guns.”

“Clean my guns?”

I smile. “You’re going to need them to protect your girls.”

It is a split second before the realization dawns on him. He places his hand on my stomach.

“My girls?”

“Yes. Your big girl and your little girl.”

“I’m having a little princess? I can’t believe this. I’m going to be a little girl’s dad. Wow!”

I smile up at him. “You’ll make an awesome father for her.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

He kisses me and pulls me into his embrace. My spirit feels free as I’m enveloped in his loving arms.

# Epilogue

## Archer

“Dad? Would you like to cut the cord?”

I take the scissors from the doctor and cut it at the precise spot. I’m torn between tending to Sidney and wanting my daughter immediately. Her lungs are healthy and strong and she makes no bones about making her presence in the world known.

The medical team works quickly as they process Sidney and the baby and I just stand in a corner looking at all they do.

Last night, when Sidney told me that she was feeling more tired than usual, I had not expected that we would have to rush to the hospital first thing this morning. And now, ten hours later, we were a family of three.

“Dad? Would you like to hold her?”

“Yes!”

I follow the nurse’s instructions to sit and remove my shirt. They give me a quick wipe down before they place my naked daughter on my chest. She is a bundle of squirming flesh. I

look down into her little red face. Her fists are balled up and her little legs are kicking. For something so tiny, she is powerful. My eyes grow cloudy as unexpected tears roll down my cheeks.

“My little Francesca. I love you so much already, and you’re not even ten minutes old. I want you to know that I’ll always be there for you. I’ll always protect you. Nothing will ever harm you. That’s a promise and a guarantee.”

I sit with her until the nurse tells me they have to finish cleaning her up and get her to the nursery. With much reluctance, I give her up. I walk over to where Sidney is still being cleaned up and kiss her forehead.

“I’m going to step outside and allow the doctors and nurses to do their job, okay?”

She nods tiredly. “Okay.”

As soon as I step outside, I call Grant. He answers on the first ring.

“Is she here? Is Sidney okay? What’s going on? Dad! Say something!”

I laugh at the excitement in his voice. I knew that when he saw my message so early this morning he would know what was happening. “I would if you’d let me get a word in edgewise. She’s here.” My voice chokes with emotion and tears fill my eyes. “And she’s absolutely beautiful. The only feeling that can compare to this is the day you were born.”

As we talk a little longer, I feel at peace. We've been on good terms since he left for Europe, talking every week. I finally feel like I've come close to become the father Grant deserved all those years I've been absent from his life.

I'm not sure how long I waited before I'm ushered to Sidney's room. I watch as she strokes our sleeping daughter's head as she nestles in her bosom.

"Hey."

She looks up. "Hey."

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

"Tired. But happy."

"I have something for you."

"I don't think you can top this." She gestures to the sleeping baby. "Can you put her in her bed please?"

I take the baby and place her in the small bed beside Sidney. Gingerly, I sit on the side of the bed and kiss her forehead.

"You're so beautiful. Now, let's try again. I have something for you."

I take out a rectangular-shaped box and hand it to her. She smiles up at me as she opens it. She gasps and holds up the bracelet.

"Archer! It's beautiful!"

"It's your push gift. Sidney, you've given me such a beautiful treasure. This is the least I can do." I reach into my pocket once more. This time, I slide off the bed and kneel. I

see her shocked expression as I open the small square box and take out the diamond ring. I reach for her left hand.

“Sidney, today has been one of the happiest days of my life. But I could be happier still if you would do me the honor of becoming my wife. So, here it is. Sidney Peterson, will you marry me?”

She laughs and then starts to cry. “Do you even have to ask? Of course, I’ll marry you!”

I waste no time in placing the ring on her finger. We call Grant and Michelle to share all our news and accept their congratulations. I refuse to leave Sidney’s side until I’m sure that she is resting well. I literally watch over them all night.

The next day is a rush of activity as they are discharged. When we get home, I find that Michelle has been very busy in the time that we were gone. The refrigerator is stocked with pre-cooked meals and juices. Laundry is done and the house is as clean as a whistle. I leave her to visit with Sidney and the baby downstairs while I go upstairs and shower. When I return, Michelle has left and Sidney is sitting on the couch with Francesca.

“May I?” I hold out my hands for the baby. She smiles and places the dozing infant in my arms. She cuddles into my side as I hold the baby carefully.

“She’s so beautiful,” I stroke her pink cheeks. “Just like her mother.” I look at Sidney and lean over slightly. She meets me halfway with her soft lips.

“She is. And she’s going to be as tough as her father.”

“If I have anything to say about it, she will.”

We sit a while longer before making our way upstairs. I place Francesca in her bassinet and stand looking down at her. I feel Sidney’s arms creep around my waist and I turn to embrace her. I look down at her as she smiles up at me with love in her eyes. I swallow against the lump in my throat.

“I love you so much. So much. Thank you for giving me another chance.”

“And I love you, Archer Colleymore. More than you’ll ever know.” Her eyes are shining with unshed tears. “Please, don’t ever stop loving me.”

“Never.”

Our lips meet. And as I kiss her deeply, I know this is one promise I’ll keep forever.

The End.

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**Never fall in love with your fake fiancé. Especially when he’s your new boss.**

Silver fox billionaire bachelor Roscoe Bridges lives and dies by his three strike rule.



**Strike 1:** I accidentally ruin his date with a drop dead gorgeous model.

**Strike 2:** I send him a totally embarrassing email.

**Strike 3:** Well, strike 3 hasn't happened yet, but when I get a job at his family's company, trouble is sure to follow.

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He wants me to pretend to be his bride in exchange for the career of my dreams.

But he's clear, he doesn't do happily ever afters.

This shouldn't be hard considering he's possibly the most attractive man I've ever met with a god-like body and eyes that promise to devour every last bit on me.

The more time we spend faking it, the more the lines between business and love start to blur.

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**And pursuing a real relationship with Roscoe could mean losing everything I have.**

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## SNEEK PEEK- Faking It with the Billionaire Boss

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“That’s strike one.”

I know life isn’t easy and some have it better than others, but the truth is, there is no such thing as a perfect life, no matter how much money someone has. Take me for example. At thirty-six, I have more money than I can spend in a few lifetimes, I’m fit and healthy, and yet, for someone who seems to have it all, something’s missing. I just wish I knew what.

Ever since I was eleven or so, I live life by one rule: “Three strikes, you’re out.” It has served me well so far, both in business and in bed. In the twenty-five years since I formulated it, this personal directive in my life has made my personal wealth increase at the expense of my contentment.

But now, something is changing. It’s like some part of me is on the prowl, hungry for something to happen. Truth is, I always thought that, by now, I would be sharing my life with

someone. Someone with whom I can share my successes and even the occasional failure. As the big 4-0 looms, something heavy about my stagnant heart rises to the forefront of my mind more often than I'd like. Which brings us to Sergio's this evening. I glance down at my watch. It's just gone past eight and already this is not looking good. The beautiful woman seated across the table from me is frowning.

"I...I don't play baseball," she says.

My date's beauty alone is probably enough for most men. It would probably be enough for me too, not long ago. But at this point, I find myself needing more. The fact that such a simple analogy seems to throw her off her game, no pun intended, is a bit of a turn off, really. And though I could put her out of her misery and explain myself, I realize I want to give her a chance to prove me wrong.

So, I bide my time. The food here is good and I want to give Ms. Melissa Makings, currently New York's top supermodel, a chance to work it out on her own.

I wasn't even supposed to be here tonight. I was meant to still be visiting with my father, discussing some paperwork I had handed to him before coming here. But after lunch, Ben stopped me in the power corridors to ask me if I was still on the market for a hot date. "Ben, I am always on the market for a hot date." This was my go-to answer. I was on auto-pilot, not really paying attention – riffling through some paperwork that Karl, my personal assistant, had just handed me. The same paperwork I handed to my father just under two hours ago. I

needed to check the figures before I left to see him at his house. He was in no condition to be sitting in front of a computer screen, or any screen, for that matter, so I'd offered to bring him the printouts.

"It's Melissa Makings." Even Ben's suppressed air of excitement did not catch my interest. The boys down in Acquisitions were always in raptures about the latest single and attractive women roaming the streets of Manhattan – and there were thousands of those. "You know the one I'm talking about? The supermodel? She does that mascara campaign on all the billboards? Deb in Accounting is her cousin, if you can believe that, and she says if any man can catch Melissa's eye, Roscoe, it's you."

Ben could be a real asset when it came to setting me up on blind dates. He has taste and discretion – two things that I value in the people who work under me. But I was starting to get tired of this life of new day, new girl. I guess, I could give it one more shot, though. I had nothing to lose, and who knew? Maybe she was the one who would make me break my rule. "Right. Give her my number and tell her I will only be texting my replies – no calls." I had a lot to do today, so that would have to be enough. I made to walk away, and then stopped.

"I'm free tonight." I said to Ben over my shoulder.

I met with the CFO at the request of my father, and twenty minutes after leaving his office, my phone vibrated. A text.

*Hey there. It's Melissa. I got your number from my cousin, Debbie. She says we might hit it off. MM xxx*

Not much I could read into it. Also, poor timing. I was due in a meeting in two minutes, so my time was counting down fast and I still had to go by my office. My thumb flew over the keyboard. I always text one handed. One of the benefits of having large hands.

*Hi, Sergio's. Tonight at seven. Table under the name of Roscoe Bridges.*

I like Sergio's. It provides a five-star 'dining experience' and it's in one of Manhattan's most famous hotels. If she runs an online search, Ms. Melissa will get all the information she needs about it. Seven o' clock is considered early dining in Manhattan, but not even the hottest date in the world is going to get in the way of my early morning workout routine.

Enjoying the excuse for a mini-breathing-break, I wait for a beat, leaning back against the wall, staring at my phone. It vibrates and shows *That's so cool. See you there. MM xxx ; )*

And now here we are. Melissa Makings, supermodel, and Roscoe Bridges, rapidly getting bored, but not enough to make me not want to see where tonight may lead. Apparently, according to Deb in accounting, Melissa's on-again-off-again boyfriend is out of town and Miss Melissa wants to have some fun before he returns. They are in an "off again" status, but she wants to change that when he gets back. So, she is going for a 'last hoorah' sort of night. It's a good thing I'm not looking for a relationship, or I might be disappointed to be deemed worthy of a hook-up and nothing more.

“I didn’t mention baseball, did I?” I finally break the silence, placing the silverware down. “I said, that’s your first strike.”

Melissa frowns as if I just asked her to perform calculus.

“What’s my first strike?”

I can feel my eyes widen. “You asked me if my father had long to live – that’s a strike one question if I ever heard one.

Everyone that comes into my life has three strikes, then they’re out.” To give the supermodel credit, she has the grace to blush. Melissa begins to push the lobster around her plate, and I watch her thinking about how to explain herself.

“I just thought, you know, you said you’re the eldest in your family...and that you can’t stay out too late because you have to be at the offices early tomorrow because your father is still recovering from lower back surgery, so...” her explanation trails off and I note to her, “Key word, for the record, is recovering.”

It just makes me mad when people hear that I’m next in line to the throne and then presume I want my father to pass away so I can step into his shoes. It might interest them to know I’m not stepping into anything any time soon because my father, Bryson Bridges, has his own ideas about what makes a world class boss, and we come from an extremely long-lived family.

My Grandpa Bridges has made it all the way to his ninety-second birthday and is still alive and kicking, thank you very much. So much for stress being a killer. We, Bridges, thrive on it.

I lean forward, picking up my fork so she understands I'm ready to continue with our evening. "So, tell me a little bit more about yourself, Melissa. What did you think of Paris when you went there for fashion week?"

Open ended question? Tick. Getting her to talk about herself?

Double tick. Melissa gives a small sigh of relief because it looks like I have forgotten about her first strike and launches into an explanation about why she loves Paris so much. She's preaching to the converted here – I love Paris too. And I like to think my three strikes rule is not the heartless dictum it might come across as – if someone hurts or offends me, don't I have the right to protect myself from it happening again? What is that saying? Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me? Yeah, Fool me a third time and you're gone from my life. I think it's only fair.

This being America, and even though I stay off social media and avoid giving interviews, I have to keep in mind that every stranger I meet knows a whole lot more about me than I do about them. And I learned really early on, at my own expense, that everyone expects me to give them something. For them I am an asset. A wallet, a status, an eye-candy.

Being the first of three sons, I was delegated at a very early age to being their minor caregiver and glorified babysitter. My mom always loved telling us the best things in life come in threes. I must have been around eleven, off to boarding school in Switzerland for the first time, when I told her: "One is acceptable. Two is pushing it. And three means you're out the door. Some things should never come in threes." This firm

statement had a lot to do with the fact that my two younger brothers took up a large portion of my mother's attention, and even though I love my brothers, I guess I begrudged it—a little bit.

As I got older, my rule about three strikes stuck. It made me ruthless, but I was bound by some obsession to hold by it. Maybe it seems like a childish rule to everyone else, but it's been useful so far, so I haven't felt the need to break myself out of it. Not sure if I even want to, to be honest.

I tune Melissa's voice out a little bit. A soft young female voice promising to create her own solutions at the table behind me catches my attention. I can't see who's talking, but I find that voice incredibly alluring, for some reason. It's husky, without being raspy. The tone she is using is compelling, without me even having to take her words into account. I imagine that voice whispering into my ear in bed, and become ever so slightly aroused. I have to fight the urge to turn around to look at the speaker.

“That's my favorite part of Paris,” I hear Melissa saying. I catch the server's eye, which is easy because he's observing my table like a hawk, and point at our plates. I'm pleased to see my date has finished her appetizer, but I'm not surprised.

The food here at Sergio's is really good.

Melissa is looking at me expectantly and I give her points for not filling the silence with more chatter. I nod. “Is it true you stayed with Cousin Deb when you first came to Manhattan?” Earlier on, I got Ben to text me a few details that Deb Westing



down in Accounting provided for me. Like my father, I know every single person who walks through the revolving doors at the Bridges Building, but when I need personal info or gossip, I like to go straight to the source. The truth is that I want to tune out Melissa's voice again and go back to listening in on the conversation going on behind me.

"Rutherfords is the best placement agency in the city, Mom," the husky feminine voice emphasizes. "I've told them to push the marketing side of my degree and not focus too much on the fashion and design aspect of it. Once I get a job, I'll start chipping away at my student loan. It'll be easier with Charlie and me sharing the rent over in Washington Heights."

A man's voice, "You're twenty-four, Tess. You should be set up in your own place by now, not sharing a one-bedroom apartment with your old school friend. Why don't you come back to Jersey?"

That must be the Dad. I can see his reasoning, but young girls and their obsession with Manhattan are a rite of passage here on the East Coast.

The sweet, husky voice replies kindly, "It's okay, Dad. Charlie sleeps in the living area with a sheet pulled across the room. We doddle along just fine."

I turn my attention back to Melissa. I want to close the deal with her before we get to dessert. "Do you want a third course or would you prefer to go back to my place for a drink?" She looks at me innocently, but we both know why we're here. I can see the barely contained lust lurking beneath those long,

dark eyelashes of hers. Melissa's eyes dart over my tailored suit, crisp white shirt, and the Ulysse Narden watch strapped around my tanned wrist, and then sweep up to my face. I watch her pupils dilate as blood rushes to her cheeks. She is imagining what it would feel like to have my hands run over her body, and for my mouth to kiss her a bit more than just that brief greeting I gave her when she came to sit down at the table, holding her upper arm and gently brushing my mouth against the side of her face. But I also see something else there. Is that hesitance? Uncertainty? Could she be having second thoughts about this?

“Th-that sounds nice,” she says. “Do you have bathroom accessories for women there? I have an early morning shoot tomorrow.”

“Sorry, I have something on even earlier, Melissa, remember I told you? You can't spend the night.”

One heartbeat, then she pushes her misgivings away. “Okay. I'll just pop into the restroom here...” The server is at our table when he sees my date preparing to stand up, and he pulls the chair out for her. “Check, Rob, please,” I tell him before he goes back to his corner. Bridges Wealth and Asset Management has an account here, but I choose to leave it for business only. It's one of the ways I can hide my private life from my father's inquisitive eyes.

That voice. I hear it again, only this time it's coming from in front of me and it's talking to Melissa. I whip my head to the right and see a girl. Young, blonde, medium height, slim, but

that's all I can see because she has her back to me. She's waylaid Melissa on her way to the restrooms.

“Are you really going to leave with that man? I'm sorry, but I couldn't help but overhearing parts of your conversation, at least *his* part of the conversation because his voice is pitched so much deeper than yours... anyway, I think the way he's treated you this evening has been appalling! And you deserve better.”

Melissa doesn't ignore the young woman like I thought she might. I can't believe she's giving what the woman is saying to her any credence. “What do you mean?” Melissa asks. And at this point, I can't tell if she is amused, annoyed, or genuinely interested.

The blonde shakes her head. She doesn't care that I can hear what they are saying. She doesn't even bother looking over her shoulder at me. At least Melissa is dividing her attention between the blonde woman and staring at me to watch my reaction. Thank God the tables at Sergio's are spaced far away from one another and no one else but me can hear, because the woman is going for it. “Look, I know this might sound rude of me to say, but my parents eat more than they talk so that's why I could hear that he makes no effort at keeping up his end of the conversation. He interrogates you about your life, but offers no information about his own. He asks you to his place for ‘a drink’, but then doesn't even do you the courtesy of letting you decide if you want to spend the night or not. You are a gorgeous woman and can do better for yourself. Maybe not as far as his looks go, but definitely as far as his behavior

does! What guarantee do you have that he's all that, anyway? He doesn't seem to have much of a personality. What if that is proportional to his *bedroom* performance? What are you going to do if he's one of those three-second wonders? Or even worse...he can't get it up?"

I'm the outsider now. These two women on their way to the restrooms have suddenly become the girls I hated at boarding school. The ones who formed unassailable friendships and cliques, and had their own conversational codes and way of rating the boys. Now I can feel what it is like being on the wrong side of their attention, wondering what I ever did to them.

Having said her piece, the young woman allows Melissa to head off to the restrooms. Then she turns around and my breath wooshes from me. Ms. Husky Voice is stunningly beautiful. We lock eyes, and strangely enough, it's not an awkward moment. She's satisfied her job is done and I am bowled over. Her eyes sparkle with intelligence and just a tiny bit of defiance. This woman looks like the last person in the world someone would want to cross swords with when it comes to a challenge.

She's not five feet, ten inches tall like Melissa, perhaps three or four inches under, and she's a little too large in the chest to be a model, but the woman has one of those faces that makes a man give her a double and then a triple take when he checks her out. I can't stop this pull her eyes have on me. And then her mouth tips into a small smile. That smile tells me

everything I need to know. What name did her father call her again? Ah, yes. Tess. Tess has a naughty side.

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