



HE'S
UNBEATABLE.

MY

Ruthless

NEIGHBOR

SANJANA NIDHI

MY

Ruthless

NEIGHBOR

SANJANA NIDHI

Copyright

My Ruthless Neighbor

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Also by Sanjana Nidhi

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Dedication

*To all the people who don't fit in. Embrace your quirkiness.
It's okay to be different.*

Blurb

I never thought I would ever want Archer Kim—My foe.

My damnation.

My Ruthless Neighbor.

He hates liars and lying is my forte.

It all started when I lied to get a chance to work for one of the most famous advertising agencies in LA. I had to bluff because I was desperate.

I didn't expect to be interviewed by a grumpy, sexy as sin man. I certainly didn't expect to be kicked out by that same man who I later learned was the owner of KIM Advertising.

After that humiliating experience, I never wanted to cross paths with that jerk again. But turns out, I have to. Over and over. Because I moved into the apartment next to his and now, he is my neighbor.

A neighbor who hates my guts. A neighbor who also can't take his eyes off me.

Prologue

Summer

“Call the security.” His deep harsh voice makes me flinch. My chin trembles and my nose tingles. But I don’t look down. I keep staring into his dark eyes.

The black woman who was present in the room since the beginning steps forward. “That’s not necessary, Archer. I can handle it.”

The man in front of me—*Archer*—doesn’t take his eyes off me as he says, “Oh, it’s very necessary. We have a trespasser after all.”

This time I didn’t flinch. I was indeed a trespasser. I look around and find people peeping inside the conference room through the glass wall. The spectators watch as Archer towers over me and insults me.

The acute pain in my chest increases the longer I stare at them. My willpower is about to buckle down and land on its knees. The need to give in to the negativity that slowly clouds my mind grows. But I don’t give in. Instead, I lift my lips. They feel stiff as I form them into a smile.

I am scared. I am so scared that my feet are practically trembling. The thought of men dragging me out makes me sweat.

It’s okay, Summer. They won’t hurt you. They won’t hurt you unless you co-operate.

When the security guard's hand closes on my arm, I itch to lash out. The need to scratch his hand off me makes me almost blind. But I curb my demons. Not now. Please.

I whimper when they begin to pull me out the door. My vision covers in red but I don't let my smile waver. I might be looking like a crazy person who's smiling while getting kicked out.

Think of colors, Summer. Think of rainbows. Picture your favorite bird, a flamingo.

I will not let Archer or any other person for that matter see my fears. I will not disclose how shaken I feel.

We are almost down the hall when I lift my gaze. Through the glass wall, I see him. There he is, staring at me with those cold, cold eyes.

"This is not over, asshole." I mouth. As if he understood what I said, his jaw clenches.

His eyes, the dark orbs that were glaring at me shift down to my arm when the guard jerks me roughly. The movement causes my sunglasses that were hooked on my blouse to fall on the white tiled floor.

He barks out something and seconds later the same black woman who was trying to save me earlier comes out and says something to the guards.

Their grip slackens and I frown. "You need to leave, Summer." She says to me but I look over her shoulder. Toward him.

"Summer?"

She urges me to look at her and I nod.

The people are still staring as I bend down to pick up my sunglasses. Instead of hooking them back on the front of my top, I wear them with trembling fingers.

Disapproval flashes across the crowd when I pass them. I don't cower away from their disdain. They think a little humiliation could break me. I have been through a lot worse growing up. At this point, I don't think anything would ever pierce my jaded heart.

Reaching into my pocket, I fish out a strawberry lollipop. Unwrapping it, I shove it in my mouth. With my head held high and welling eyes, I make my exit.

As always, candy makes everything easy.

Chapter One

Summer

A few hours earlier...

“Summer?” My landlord, Mrs. Bowers calls out just as I press the elevator call button.

Fuck! I grimace as my feet halt. Oh, how I wish to be a cartoon character rather than a human at this moment. Because I want nothing more than to just dart out of this building, leaving everything, including my landlord behind in a puff of smoke.

Sadly, I am very much human, and judging by Mrs. Bowers’ voice, I can tell she is now right behind me. That means I have to turn around and face the music.

Taking a deep breath, I turn around.

Mrs. Bowers is in her late sixties with pale skin and gray hair. She is also skinny. Her sunken cheeks and bony limbs give her a creepy look.

Her eyes land on my purple beret before sliding down to my hip-length brown hair that’s untied. Her scrutiny doesn’t stop there. She regards my turtle neck yellow short sleeves top and dark purple high-waisted trousers with contempt.

Slinging my multicolored backpack higher up my shoulder, I tilt my chin, silently bating her to say something about my bright outfit or the huge yellow sunglasses I am donning.

Mrs. Bowers is the type of person who dresses in dull and boring colors and likes to pull her gray hair in a bun so tight it could make you wince. And whenever she sees me, she has this judgy look on her wrinkly face that makes me want to howl.

I mean, dude. What's your problem? I don't give you sidelong glances for your choice of clothes. Why judge me for mine? Yes, I admit, I love wearing bright colors. So what? That doesn't give you the right to look down on me.

She is clever enough to keep her mouth shut and only express her distaste through her eyes. I can't say anything for the judgy looks, but if she were to pass a rude comment, she might as well be ready for a war. I never make snarky remarks about others so I expect the same courtesy in return.

When she stares at my black and white mismatched boots for a second too long, I cross my stance. "They're cool, right?" I grin mockingly.

My landlord clears her throat, her eyes jumping up to mine. "I've been meaning to get a hold of you."

"You did?" My eyes widen. "Oh, is this about the leak in the apartment? I told you about the black mold the other day—"

She sniffs, her neck craning a bit to stare at me. I am tall. I am almost 5'9" and my heels make me taller.

"We... can discuss that later. I wanted to remind you that you're late."

I frown. "I'm sorry?"

"It's the second day of the month, Summer. I wanted to remind you that you have to pay your rent." She folds her arms across her chest. "In case you forgot."

Ah. The not-so-subtle threat. She owns more than half the apartments in this building. And she is very particular about her dates. She personally reminds you that your rent is overdue and doesn't let you breathe until you've paid it. She will send you texts, call you and sometimes even post notes on your door if you fail to respond to her.

Mrs. Bowers doesn't bat an eye before kicking someone out. No matter how much desperate you are, she doesn't see reason.

I have been living here for almost three years now. I make sure to pay the rent before any other bills.

“Of course, of course. How can I forget?” *You won't let me.* “I am actually heading for a job interview. I'll wire the money by the end of the day, kay?” I smile and turn on my heels and take the elevator down to leave.

I have zero ideas about how I am going to manage the rent. I lost my waitressing gig two weeks ago. I am surviving because I work at a resort on weekends where I have to swim in a mermaid costume for hours.

I hardly have couple hundred bucks in my bank account. Each day is a struggle. I need to get this job if I don't want to be homeless!



I park my old Honda civic two blocks away and walk to the office building.

I take a moment and stare at the huge glass building. My yellow-tinted sunglasses do a shitty job of protecting my eyes from the sun.

KIM Advertising.

I hesitate for a moment after reading the name. My best friend, Raleigh works here. And he has no freaking idea I am here for a job interview. Yep. I am about to step inside this gigantic, architectural masterpiece.

KIM Advertising is one of the biggest advertising agencies in LA. And I am not sure what I am doing here. Well, I am here for a job interview. But the twist is, I don't have the qualifications or the degree required to work here.

I was just eighteen when Raleigh and I left the foster home together. He went on to study and wanted me to do the same. I tried, but I realized that I wasn't great at it. I wasn't sharp like him. I lacked the drive he always possessed. He wanted to conquer the world. And he worked harder day and night to achieve it.

I dropped out of college and began working odd jobs to support myself.

Raleigh always encouraged me that I would find my calling one day. That I wouldn't feel so lost. My foster brother may not be my twin but we sure as fuck were attuned to each other. He sensed that having no goal, and no passion really disturbed me.

Now he is practically on the top, working at KIM Advertising, living in a great apartment and I am still at the same stage where I started all those years ago. I am twenty-seven years old and it sucks to admit that I still haven't found the purpose in my life.

I sometimes eat ramen for dinner and to be honest... I have no complaints that life is treating me so hard.

Raleigh doesn't voice it but I know he aches when he visits my studio apartment. He once tried helping me financially, but that ended up with me not talking to him for a week.

I am an independent woman. I am in this situation because of me. So *I* am going to be the one supporting myself. Yes, life is tough, but I don't whine about it. Instead, I find reasons to smile and laugh. Because however my current circumstances may be, it is far better than the hell Raleigh and I were in.

I may not have a degree to work, but I can do temporary work until I can find something else. I have worked as a receptionist before. Right now, anything would do. Any gig. I am desperate.

I had heard Raleigh saying there was a vacancy here. I didn't pry for information from him and decided to come here myself.

To try my luck.

I hope to God I don't cross paths with Raleigh. I know he would've arranged something if I had just gone to him directly. But I don't want that. I don't need favors. I don't want to take advantage of our friendship. I will tell him everything later this evening. *If* he is free, that is. He has been crazy busy with a new project.

I square my shoulders, flick my hair back and take a long breath. *You are going to go in there like you fucking own this*

building, Summer. You've got this. Confidence is the key to success.

I stride toward the building. One step before the other, a small smile flirting my lips.

A young doorman dressed in black scurries forward and opens the glass door for me.

“Thank you.” I grin.

A huge smile breaks across his face. When he keeps staring, I shake my head and step inside. See? That guy seemed to have no problem with my bright-colored outfit.

As soon as I look up, I stop mid-step. Taking off my yellow shades, I hook them on my top. I gawk at the surroundings.

The luxurious lobby of the building makes me feel like I am in a five-star hotel rather than an advertising agency.

The curved glass building is designed in such a way that it provides natural light from two sides of the space. I turn to my right and my eyes widen. A whole wall looks like a gigantic TV. I have read about the interactive LED walls that can react to people moving through the hallways but it's my first time seeing one in person.

The logo of KIM Advertising flashes on the screen. The letters turn into colorful threads when someone passes by the wall. Ohmygod! So many colors!

Before I know it, my feet are carrying me toward the wall. I want to walk by the wall and watch the logo bloom into thousands of colors!

Is it childish? Yeah, it is. But you only live once, right?

My boots click on the marble floor as I sprint in the direction of the huge screens. The front desk people and a few of the employees stare my way but I ignore them. I am not sure if I would ever work here. This might be my only chance to watch this beautiful thing in action up close.

As I near the wall, the entire LED lights up with some female model's face. Oh, it is an advertisement for some makeup line.

Tentatively, I bring my hand up and wave at the screen. Nothing happens. It is still playing the same advertisement. My brows snap together. I raise my other hand too, hoping the sensors could pick up my actions.

“Come on, show me the colors.” *Please*. In this intimidating-looking place, the only thing that calmed me a little was the colors displayed here.

Some might say I have an obsession with colors. But I don't care. I believe if doing something soothes your soul, you should do it and be unapologetic about it. Well... not if it is something illegal!

I make a last-ditch effort by walking side to side to bring back the threads on the interactive wall.

When the same video starts playing again, my shoulders slump. I stand there for a few more seconds then heave a sigh of disappointment.

I swivel on my heels and start walking.

I should probably ask someone for directions. Because I am lost. This place is so huge.

Maybe this was a bad idea. The disappearance of the colorful threads from the interactive wall could be an omen. But I can't just leave. I have to pay the rent. I also spent the money on gas that I won't get back. So I might as well try my luck.

Landing a job doesn't mean instant money but I could try to convince Mrs. Bowers for an extension.

I look over my shoulder at the wall one last time and gasp. Colors! At the sight of them, I turn again. A lady interrupts my view. I crane my neck to the side. One more person walks past me. Were there really these many people around here?

Worried I might miss the opportunity to watch them closely again, I start toward it. Pushing through the group of people dressed in suits, I make my way to my destination, my eyes never leaving the 3D threads.

In my haste, I totally ignore the shadow that falls over me and I regret it instantly as I collide with a hard body. I cry out in surprise when I stumble.

The suit I collided with has an amazing reflex. He tactfully swings with momentum to avoid falling himself. He breaks my fall by dipping me low as if we were dancing.

“Whoa!” I whip my head up to the man who’s still cradling me in his arms. I freeze when his dark brown eyes meet mine.

With his smooth pale skin, sharp cheekbones, and jet-black hair, he looks like the CEO of South Korean dramas I sometimes watch.

His chiseled jawline draws my attention. My mouth goes dry at the sharp angles of his jaw. As I keep staring, a muscle jump in it.

Holy shitballs! That was hot.

“Are you hitting on me right now? Seriously?”

My eyes shoot up at his deep voice. The man stares down at me. Or more like glowering. His words finally register and I realize that I must have said that out loud.

My unguarded compliment must’ve offended him. But rather than being a gentleman, he just went ahead and insulted me. Beside us, someone snickers. And just like that, my blood boils.

I struggle in his hold and he straightens. I am a tall girl. And still, this man’s chin grazes my forehead. I regret wearing the two-inches boots. I should’ve chosen heels.

The man in the dark suit keeps staring at me. His intense eyes latch onto mine. I force myself to maintain eye contact.

You can’t intimidate me, Mister. I convey with an arched brow.

He tilts his head ever so slightly. Like he is trying to read me. I scoff inwardly. You can try, Mr. Cold and Handsome. But you will never succeed.

I tip my chin up. Only few inches separate us. That’s when something terrible happens. His scent floods my nose. It sends a shockwave through my system.

For a second, my lids fall shut as I inhale his cologne. The woody smell with a hint of spice makes me lean closer to him.

Why the hell does a nice, sexy cologne makes a man more attractive than he already is? It's so not fair!

Slowly, I open my eyes, and there he is. Still surrounding me, his stance confident and powerful. Dare I say a bit arrogant? As if he owns this damn building.

My gaze strays and falls on a person a few feet behind the suit. Not just any person. Raleigh. Fuck!

He can't see me here. He will ask a thousand and one questions if he catches me here. He would be sad that I didn't contact him before coming here. And knowing how protective he is, he would dig for more information. And knowing myself, I would vomit all of my worries. I don't want that.

Before I could scan the area for a possible hiding place, strong fingers grip my chin. The hot arrogant man lifts my chin and stares into my eyes. "Who are you?"

"Huh?"

His dark gaze falls to my lips before asking, "What's your name?"

I flinch at his clipped tone. Damn, this man. From the intense spark in his eyes, it looks as if he is seconds away from kissing me silly but that tone.... his question was curt. As if he can't tolerate my presence. He didn't just ask my name. He demanded it.

"I think I asked you something." His deep timber and that authoritative tone make me grind my molars. The need to take him down a peg overtakes me. "Do you mind?"

"Excuse me?" A hint of annoyance rings in his voice. It pisses me off even more.

I sigh. "Dude, I know it's hard but you really have to let me go. I have places to be."

A burst of choked laughter from behind snaps him out of his thoughts and he looks down.

Realization dawns on his face. Yes. He still has his arms around my waist. He snatches his hands back as if he is burned. The action rubs me the wrong way.

“Asshole,” I murmur under my breath.

“What did you say?” I hear him ask as I look around frantically for an escape. Without thinking, I choose a direction and slip away.

“Hey! Who the hell are you?” The man calls out but I don’t stop until I turn into the hallway.

“You would never know.”

Chapter Two

Archer

I watch how she practically sprints away from me, her multi-colored backpack colliding against her curvy hip. That small movement highlighted how her purple trousers clung to her ass. I stare until she disappears into the hallway.

When I notice that every man in the vicinity was ogling the brunette's hourglass figure, my jaw hardens.

"Show's over." I bark. I shove my hands into my pockets. "Get to work, everyone." It doesn't even take two seconds for everyone to scurry around and empty the lobby. Better.

Julietta, one of my employees, frowns at me. My jaw clenches once more. That girl made me lose my temper in front of everyone.

I treat my employees as friends. I built this empire by creating a friendly environment. Rather than making them fear me, I won their trust so they could be free around me. This has benefited me and them a great deal. Having an easy-going boss and fun surroundings leads to higher job satisfaction which increases productivity and promises loyalty.

And today, I let one girl affect me to the point that I snapped at them.

For a moment earlier, I thought maybe she was a new intern and was lost. But that possibility was squashed when she failed to recognize the owner of this agency. This girl had absolutely

no idea who I was. That's why she had the gal of sassing me in my own building.

While I treat each one of my employees like my friend, I never gave them the liberty to disrespect me.

Never, not once have I tolerated someone talking back to me. This girl with questionable fashion sense had the audacity to waltz in here and make me a laughingstock.

Well, technically it wasn't her fault. I walked right into that one.

I was late for a meeting when I saw her. Her purple beret matched her trousers. And her huge yellow shades were hanging onto her bright yellow top.

The said yellow top was stretched across her chest and like the man I am, my attention lingered there for a second too long.

When my gaze slid down, I saw that she was wearing mismatched shoes. The clicking of her boots made me look back up.

She was running straight at me. Her long silky locks that trailed down to her hips were flying and her eyes were trained on something behind my back. I watched her naturally red lips parting in surprise then stretching in a huge grin.

I stared as red bloomed on her porcelain skin as her pace quickened.

I didn't get the chance to move. Or maybe I couldn't take my eyes off her. She may have lost her footing and bumped into me, but it was me who got lost in her mesmerizing eyes.

The moment my eyes settled on hers, I forgot all about her mismatched boots or her bright sunglasses, or her beret and colorful outfit. Because I had never seen such beautiful eyes in my entire life.

Her eyes were huge and the dark lashes covering them were natural and thick. But the thing that snagged my attention was the color of her eyes.

Her right eye was a color of clear blue sky and her left eye was green. Or more like dark green. The startlingly beautiful

combination of two different colors caught me off guard. And that pissed me off.

It pissed me off because for the first time in my life, I was distracted from work by a woman. I had a meeting to get to. And she was unconsciously delaying my departure.

I run an advertising agency for fuck's sake. I see countless beautiful women on daily basis. And yet this woman gripped my attention with both hands in a vice grip.

And when she opened those full lips of hers? Yeah, I was irritated. Because like her beauty, she had a husky voice that made my cock hard.

I should've shrugged it off and continued with my day. Only, I didn't do that. I asked her name. For two reasons. First, because I wanted to hear her voice again. And second, curiosity.

She slipped away without answering my questions. Fuck. Why did she have to be so tempting yet infuriating?

Maybe it was for the better. The *brunette Rapunzel* looked like trouble. Just a small encounter with her had me all worked up.

It takes a lot more than just looks for me to be attracted to a woman. I want my woman to be sophisticated and ambitious. Meek with a soft voice. The one who knows how to carry herself with grace and is an independent individual.

Despite my better judgment and taste, I realize I am attracted to a clumsy and feisty brunette Rapunzel with unique eyes.

I slam the door shut on the myriad of thoughts swirling in my head about her.

Under no circumstances would I spend another second analyzing that meaningless encounter with her. She is a further thing possible from my type of woman.

Shrugging off the remnants of the effect she had on me, I clear my throat.

"Let's go," I mutter to Julietta before leading the way to the exit. Technically, my assistant usually comes with me to the meetings but as I don't have one at the moment, I am taking

Julietta with me. She is from the admin department and has been working here for almost four years now.

She falls into step beside me. “Are you okay—” I glance at her.

“O-kay! You don’t have to answer that.” She forces a smile, then stares ahead, wringing her fingers.

I sigh. I don’t like when I intimidate anyone. Least of all my employees. I halt. “I am fine. Just a bit irritated.”

Julietta pauses too. “Right. Because of that girl.”

Just when I am about to forbid Julietta from mentioning *her*, Janet’s hard voice falls on my ears.

Dressed in a beige pantsuit, Janet strides toward us. She is forty years old and is one of the oldest employees of this agency. Her mocha color skin peppers with perspiration as she reaches us. “Oh, thank god I found you.”

“Is this urgent? We were heading out for a meeting.”

“Please cancel it.”

My brows knit together. “What?”

“Cancel it. Or better yet, let RJ or Hannah go because you *have* to come with me.”

Hannah Cooper and Raleigh Jackson aka RJ are the two creative directors and the most valuable assets of KIM Advertising. They also belong to the small circle of my most trusted people.

Julietta jumps in, all wide-eyed and grinning. “Oh, RJ and Hannah are unavailable and have informed everyone they are not to be disturbed. You know they are working on the Maui resort project!”

Whenever I hear about the Maui project, my temples begin to throb.

Few days ago, Hannah and Raleigh gave me the good news. They were getting married. I should have been happy for them like any other friend would. Only, I wasn’t. How would I?

Their engagement news shook me. Some might think, why would it affect me when my two friends are getting married? Well, here's the twist. The two said friends are each other's sworn enemies.

Their rivalry is not bounded by the agency's walls, no. It is well-known in the advertising industry. So obviously I was taken aback by their engagement.

And suspiciously enough, they came up with this news just when I announced the merge of the two creative departments they are leading now. Only one of them could snag the promotion to the main creative director. And to get the promotion, they'll have to bring in a new client in a limited time.

Things escalated when they gave me the second good news. They had magically landed a new client and were going to work on the deal together. Yeah, it was hard to digest that the two ruthless opponents of KIM Advertising were not only engaged but were ready to work together. Not just work, no.

You see, the client they landed happens to be a billionaire who was looking for the best advertising agency to promote his Maui resort.

And these two—Hannah and Raleigh—decided to get *married* at the resort. This way, they can have a destination wedding and they could carry out a successful marketing campaign.

For the first time in my life, I was doubting my star employees. I was hesitant to trust my friends. The logical part of me says the whole marrying-at-the-resort thing is utter bullshit. But the illogical part, my heart says that they would never deceive me like this.

Everyone knows I hate lies and I hate liars. I cannot stand dishonest people. I have fired many just because they lied to me. In fact, my latest assistant was fired for lying about her tardiness. I can forgive you for backbiting. I can turn a blind eye if you're late for work because, hey, we are all humans. I can even let it slide if you leave me and my agency to join my competitors.

What I can and will not forgive is being lied to.

Whenever someone lies to me, my skin begins to crawl and my throat closes up. I have no place for liars in my agency or my life. I might be the coolest boss, but I can turn into pure evil if I sniff your lies.

To think that Hannah and Raleigh might be lying to me knowing my aversion to lies gives me a headache from hell.

Janet shakes her head. “Then find someone else. Anyone, because I need Archer here today.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Care to tell me why I am needed here?”

“Remember how you fired your last three assistants in a matter of weeks?”

“Yes, and you know why I did that.”

She nods. “I went through five rounds of interviews to select the best assistant for you, Archer. Five.” She raises her hand, displaying five fingers.

I stare at her blankly.

She sighs. “I am not doing that any longer.”

“You’re quitting?”

“And lose the benefits package? Hell Nah.” She huffs.

“Then what is it?”

“You are going to sit while I interview the candidates.”

“I don’t have time for that.”

She takes a deep breath. “Okay. If I select a new assistant this time, would you promise to not fire her at least for a month?”

“I can’t make any promises.”

She throws her hands up in frustration. “This is an endless loop of torture. You just have to sit in the room. I’ll do the talking. Just sit and observe them from a corner.”

I regard her silently. At her desperate expression, I give in. Releasing a sigh, I turn to Julietta. “Get Rondell and ask him to accompany you.” She nods.

Facing Janet, I say, “Lead the way.”



As soon as I cross the threshold of the conference room, I shed my suit jacket. Walking past the large glass table and green chairs surrounding it, I drape it over one chair and stand in front of the floor-length window.

“How many applicants in total?” I ask Janet as I unbutton my cufflinks and roll the sleeves of my shirt over my arms.

“Around seven.”

“Hmm. An hour should suffice to wrap this up.” I murmur as I whip my vibrating phone out of my pocket.

I am sifting through the business emails when her phone chimes with an incoming message. She checks it and grimaces. “Make that eight.”

I don’t respond, just tilt my head in question.

“There’s one more girl who showed up. My assistant just updated me about her.” She gestures to her phone.

I lower my brows in confusion. “I assumed the applicants went through numerous rounds before you interview them.”

She bobs her head. “That is correct. I usually don’t allow this but my assistant mentioned this person is your friend.”

“What?”

“Yeah, well, we can’t ignore someone who has ties with you.” Even if Janet doesn’t look at me, I can tell she doesn’t approve of the idea.

I don’t practice biasedness in my work. Even the interns have to work hard to get the internship. I don’t give chances based on connections. If you have the talent, I can give you a chance to prove yourself. I would never serve you anything on a silver platter.

Whoever works here has acquired their position in this agency purely because of their dedication and efforts toward their job.

Needless to say, I don’t approve of Janet or any other of my employees ever doubting my ethics.

Pocketing my phone, I move then. Rounding the table, I slide into a chair and lean back. “Sit, Janet,” I instruct softly.

She sits at my side of the table.

“Is there something you need to say to me?”

She shakes her head.

My mouth curves into a smile. “Even though you don’t use words, I see the stiffness in your body language.”

Her eyes whip up. “It’s nothin—”

She stops herself before she could lie. She knows better. When she goes to talk, I cut her off with a hand. “If you or anyone of my employees for that matter have any questions or doubts, I would love it if you’d talk to me.”

“Archer...”

“I don’t know who that girl is who claims to be my friend. But let me tell you this. I don’t support nepotism or partiality. Nor do I encourage it. You should know better than to cast me doubtful looks considering the years you have worked for me, no?”

She gives me a sheepish smile. “Forgive me, boss.”

“Apology accepted. Now let’s get this party started.”

“Okay.” She nods and begins to type on her phone, assuming to usher the first applicant in.

I rub my chin. “Janet... hold up.”

She looks at me. “What’s up?”

“Ask them to send her in first.”

She frowns. “Who?”

I smile darkly. “My friend. Who else?”

Chapter Three

Summer

They say childhood shapes individuals' adulthood. What we are now is the product of the experiences we had when we were young. A child's mind is like clay in the hands of parents. They have complete control in molding them.

I had no one to mold me. When I was placed in a foster home, I came face to face with reality.

To escape hell, I landed on something much worse. Soon I realized, that no one would help me mold my future. I'll have to do it myself.

I am proud of my handiwork. Instead of blaming God, I set to make my life better since I was young. Just because I have been dealt a crappy hand, doesn't mean I can't bluff my way out of it.

Yes, I bluff. I lie. I deceive. I have been doing it for survival for as long as I can remember. Funny thing is, there was no one to reprimand me. No one to clutch my hand and guide me to the right path.

Raleigh and I were with a foster family for over a decade. The foster parents were good people. Only on the outside, though. Only for show.

During inspections, they would act as the most doting guardians and as soon as it was over, they would morph into their true evil selves.

When they used to make us sleep on empty stomachs, I used to steal food. It started out as a necessity. I lied and stealth for me and the other kids.

And I used to get caught. Often. Mrs. Samson, my foster mother would often discipline me by spanking or even punching me in the face. Did that deter me? No. Because other foster kids in that house relied on me.

And while everyone relied on me, I used to rely on one boy. Damian. Who was older than me and Raleigh and was also our savior.

He was adopted and that left us in a vulnerable position. Because we never fought back. He did. When we kids took the beatings, he fought back with all his might.

He was not stronger by his physique. But his will to survive was. Every kid envied him. And like two lost puppies, Raleigh and I used to follow him around.

He was our shield. And when he was gone, the abuse became worse.

Whenever Mrs. Samson or his son Caleb used to hit me in the face, whenever darkness used to cover my vision because of my swollen eyes, I always thought that this wasn't permanent. That my misery would not last forever. That I would get adopted soon.

But that day never came.

As the years passed, understanding dawned on me that I could never be free of this hellhole until I was eighteen.

To save our skin, Raleigh and I used to sneak out of the house almost half the day after school. The others were too scared to rebel against the Samsons. But my best friend was a daredevil. Just like me.

When being interrogated about our whereabouts, I used to lie about having group studies and stuff. By then, lies started coming to me naturally. I embraced it. The art of deception even earned me waitressing gigs when I was still underage.

My art of trickery helped me make money. It helped me escape my nightmare.

Like any other individual, even I have some morals. I lie only when I am in a dire situation. When I started earning, the need to steal was no longer there.

I am far from perfect. Yes, I lie. Still do so if it helps me in any way, but I have never hurt anyone with my lies. I never play with people's emotions. I am not that person.

Knowing that my falsehood doesn't harm anyone really helps me make decisions and move forward.

I believe hiding the truth sometimes makes me infinitely ahead of the game than most. Like now.

After inquiring, I learned they weren't hiring at the moment. Upon seeing my dejected expression, the receptionist tipped me off about the assistant interview going on the third floor.

As a token of gratitude, I fished out a mango-flavored candy and gave it to her before making my way up to the third floor.

With a sorry excuse of a resume in hand, I approached a lady in a white button-down and gray pencil skirt. She didn't even spare my resume a look. The pale woman curtly informed me that this wasn't a walk-in-interview.

When I don't budge, she snaps at me. "Do you see the ladies waiting there?" She points at the waiting chairs where at least seven women were sitting.

They're all dressed in formal attire. Their outfits coincidentally match. All grays, blacks, and whites. Which is completely out of my comfort zone. Each one of them looked elegant and poised. Their hair is neatly made up while mine is hanging loose and draping behind my back like a cape.

Each one of them is wearing makeup while I am bare-faced. I am almost tempted to reach inside my backpack for my lip balm but I refrain.

"They were selected after five rounds of interviews. And you think you can just waltz in here and demand an *opportunity*." The woman says.

At her cold tone, I lift my chin. "Yes. I deserve it."

"Oh. Why do you have such an outrageous thought, pray tell?"

That's the exact moment when my brain conjures up a plan. "I am an old friend of the owner of this agency."

Her brows go up. "Is that right?" From her tone, it is clear she didn't believe me at all. Apart from knowing the owner's name, I don't know the first thing about him.

Archer. That's the name Raleigh mentions often when he is not talking about his nemesis, Hannah.

The chances of me getting selected for this job are slim. I still want to give it a try. What if I did pull it off? Many people lie on their resumes to get hired.

It's just an assistant's position. How hard can it be?

When she still regards me skeptically, I up my game. "I think I'll have to call Archer. This is humiliating. He *insisted* I come for the interview but you are not letting me through."

She doesn't stop me when I whip out my phone. Doesn't interrupt me when I announce for the second time that I am calling Archer.

I'm about to call Papa John's Pizza and pretend it is him when she cracks. She excuses herself and types furiously on her phone.

I have no idea who she texted because in minutes, I am being ushered toward the conference room.

It baffles me a bit that I am going in first when others were waiting.

Maybe throwing his name around helped.

"Right this way."

As I approach the huge door attached to the glass wall, my heart rate jacks up.

Calm down, Summer. It's just an interview. How hard can it be? I breathe deeply through my nose.

I love watching Netflix. From serial killer documentaries to south Korean dramas to thrillers. There are numerous office interview scenes I have watched. I just have to appear confident.

But what if they ask me about *him*? About Archer.

My steps falter. But only for a second. If they ask me about him, I'll have to come up with a backstory. There's no point in getting nervous. Creating imaginary stories and lying is my forte.

The woman leading me stops in front of the door and motions at it, signaling to get inside. My eyes zone in on her nails. They're perfectly done, her acrylic nails painted in off-white color.

Not so subtly, I peek down at my hand. My fingernails are short and painted in different colors. Damn. I never felt so out of place before as I do now.

Shaking it off, I paste a bright smile and enter.

"*Whoa.*" An incredulous laugh escapes me as I take in the vibrant mural that takes up the whole wall of the room.

In my peripheral vision, I can see a floor-to-ceiling glass window and a gigantic glass table in the center of the room. But all I can focus on is the art.

I move forward with eager steps and place my hand on the glass table that is between me and the mural.

Bursting with colors and characters, the artist has done an outstanding job of converting a blank space into a colorful flourish. There are inspiring phrases like *Dream big, Actions speak louder, and Teamwork makes the dream work* painted on the wall along with illustrations of electronic gadgets like laptops, tablets, and phones around it.

I don't even realize how big my grin is until my cheeks begin to hurt.

"You like?" a voice asks from my side.

My nod is fervent and I face the person. "I loveee..." My breath hitches. "You!"

Dark brown eyes pin me in place. My body stiffens.

It's him.

The hot stranger from the lobby.

His mouth pulls into a small smile. "Me."



Archer

Ah. So the woman who claimed to be my “friend” is the *brunette Rapunzel*.

Her unique eyes widen and her pink tongue peeks out to wet her plump lips. And now my cock is growing hard. Fucking great.

My jaw tightens. I have to stay focused. This innocent-caught off-guard look of hers is arousing as hell but it can't fool me. She just manipulated Janet's assistant into giving her a free pass at the final interview round.

I knew at first glance that she was trouble. Her long thick eyelashes sweep down as she blinks several times accompanied by a little shake of her head. Then she gives me a bright smile.

Taking a step toward me, she extends her hand. “Hello, I'm Summer Donovan.”

I drag in a breath and immediately regret it when her strawberry scent fills my nostrils.

When I keep glaring at her delicate hand, she leans closer and whispers, “Rumor has it that it's not polite to reject a handshake.” Her enchanting eyes are wide as if she just told me a secret. Then something happens. She smiles again. And I feel a dull ache in my chest. It's like I was given a chance to breathe after being smothered with a pillow for hours. The feeling so unusual, that it shakes me.

I briskly walk to my chair to sit. What the fuck was that?

When I look up, I find her scowling at me. Janet stands and goes to her. “Ms. Donovan, I am Janet Foley.” They both shake hands.

“Oh, please call me Summer.”

At her warm smile, Janet’s expressions soften. She was pissed not one minute ago at the imposter. And look at her now.

Summer smiles at her and then slides her eyes at me. Her smile vanishes then. Her eyes narrow slightly. Hmm. She is not so subtly letting me know that she doesn’t like me.

“Please take a seat, Summer,” Janet says as she resumes her seat to my left.

She bites her lip and stares at the twelve vacant chairs. “Um, where should I sit?” she asks with a sheepish grin while playing with her backpack’s strap.

I roll my eyes.

“Wherever you are comfortable.” At Janet’s amused tone, I turn to frown at her.

I have to admit. Summer has a charming personality. Just like her name, her smile reminds me of the smell of the sea and clear skies. And with her naivety, she managed to win over Janet.

Summer chooses the farthest seat possible. Exactly opposite mine, at the end of the table.

She shrugs her backpack off and places it on the vacant chair beside her. Right when she is about to sit, I say, “Stop.”

Her body stops mid-air. Her beautiful heterochromia eyes glare at me.

“Come here.” At my command, she straightens.

“Pardon?”

I simply stare at her, then slowly nod at the chair to my right.

She doesn’t move. She is being disrespectful. She came here lying that she is my friend. And now that she is standing in front of me, instead of appearing scared she is pissed. She has guts.

This little liar needs an attitude adjustment. Or maybe it’s my pants that need adjustment. I thought her smiles and her

strawberry scent had an effect on me. Well, everything falls short in front of Summer's fiery gaze.

"Are you having a bad day?" she asks.

"What?"

"I asked a simple question. Are you having a bad day?" She lifts her shoulder as if my confusion at her random question is not warranted.

When I don't answer, she asks again. "Are you? If so, I can remedy that." She reaches for her backpack. She roots inside for something before holding it up. "Want this?"

I squint at the lollipop she is holding.

"Having something sweet can improve your mood."

"Maybe for a teenager like you."

She gasps. "Take it back!"

I stare at her with a cool expression.

"I am a twenty-seven-year-old woman!" she throws her hands up.

I rub my chin with my fingers. "Is that right?"

She nods her head frantically.

"Then how about you start acting like one?"

"Y-you!"

"Yes, me. And Janet here whose time you're wasting have things to do. So how about you get over here?"

She opens her mouth as if to argue. I cut her off with a hand. I take the file on the table that has the resumes of the candidates. "Or better yet you can get out."

"Can't you be a little courteous toward me, Mister... what is your name?" at that, my eyes snap up.

Her face has turned a deep shade of red. She doesn't know who I am. That explains her attitude. She has no clue who I am. She may have thought she would get away with using my name. And maybe get selected and I would never know.

My fingers curl into fists. Janet goes to speak, most probably to introduce me but I hold a finger, stopping her. “It’s Mr. Kim. I work here.” I supply. And wait for her to put two and two together. I told her my surname so she could figure out who I am.

Janet’s head snaps to me. But I keep my attention on Summer Donovan. Still waiting.

“Mr. Kim.” She grits out. “You don’t know who I am. So I suggest you show me some respect.”

She is dumber than I thought. She still has no clue who I am.

Despite the seething anger, I keep my stare blank as I ask, “Who *are* you, Summer?”

“It’s Ms. Donovan for you.” She sniffs, making me suppress a humorless chuckle. The audacity of this woman.

I nod. “Ms. Donovan, care to answer my question?”

“I don’t have to but I will because I am *courteous*.” She juts out. Then, “I am a close friend of Archer.”

This woman. She is lying to my fucking face. All the attraction I might have felt toward her quickly dies a fatal death. Tearing open two buttons of my shirt, I try to breathe.

Janet gets to her feet and within seconds, she is handing me a small plastic water bottle. Unscrewing the cap, I down the whole thing, not once taking my eyes off Summer.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I get up. “In that case, I must apologize to you, Ms. Donovan. I hope you could forgive me for my insolence and please join us.” I gesture to the seat beside me. “Although you are Archer’s *close* friend, we’ll have to continue with this interview. It’s a process we can’t ignore.”

She bites her lower lip. After a couple seconds, she lifts her backpack and makes her way to me.

“It wasn’t so hard now, was it?” She mumbles as she plops down on the chair.

I tone my boiling temper a notch and sit down. I want to see how far she will go. How many lies can she spew? Even if it is

almost intolerable, I'll have to sit through this ordeal. By the end of this interview, she'll regret setting foot in my building.

For a few minutes, nobody speaks. Janet clears her throat. When two sets of eyes turn her way, she says, "I am assuming you didn't fill out the application."

"Yeah, but I've got my resume." Summer unzips her backpack once again and pulls out a folded paper.

Janet takes the paper and begins reading.

The tension in the atmosphere is unmistakable. I could feel it in my stiff shoulders. And despite the sweet smile gracing Summer's lips, the way she is shrinking ever so slightly in her seat tells me she can sense it too.

"Summer..." Janet looks up. "You do realize that you don't have the qualifications required for this position, right?"

"I am aware." She sits straighter. "But I am efficient. I can do right about anything. You can even give me labor work and I wouldn't bat an eye."

The anguish in her voice makes me want to break something. Is it an act too? The desperation in those colorful eyes looks genuine. But at this point, it is hard to believe anything that comes out of her mouth.

Either she is a great actress or she is truly financially distressed. Anyway, she can't expect to get the job if she's not qualified.

Taking her resume from Janet's fingers, I read it for myself.

After going through it, I stare up at her. "You are a dropout, Ms. Donovan." That's not a question. It's written here. If she wanted this job, why didn't she lie on the resume like people often do? Instead of doing that, she cooked up a story of knowing me. I don't get her. At all.

She addresses us both. "Yes. But I have some experience in admin-level work." She motions to the paper in my hand. "It's written there. Along with the other gigs I have done."

I cock an eyebrow and then read the resume out loud. "Waitressing, Cashier at Walmart, office clerk... carpenter?" I ask flatly.

She glares at me before tilting her chin. “Yes. I did that for a while. The gig included assisting them. I learned pretty cool tricks. Tricks that might come in handy someday.” She looks proud of it.

I continue reading. Then stop at one thing that makes me curious. “Professional mermaid.”

“Oh, yes. I work at a resort in West Hollywood. But only on weekends. You should visit sometimes.” She grins at Janet. “I am a great swimmer. Oh, and if you have children you could come by the aquarium I work at. Kids love me!”

Is she for real?

Janet smiles widely. “I will. My seven-year-old daughter absolutely loves Ariel.”

“Fabulous!” She takes out a card from her backpack. “I do shows in this aquarium every other week. Bring her along, she’ll love it.”

Janet pockets the card eagerly. “Will do.”

“I hate to interrupt your fun little chit-chat, ladies but can we get on with the interview?”

Janet winces, then mouths sorry. Summer on the other hand looks as if she is seconds away from giving a rebuttal. I speak before she can. “Ms. Donovan, while we can see that you have many talents—”

“I sure do.”

“Like I was saying, despite your skills we can’t—”

“Your agency is lucky. You won’t get this opportunity again. I am an all-in-one package. I can even do the cleaning duty. I am a fast learner. So when do I start?”

Despite myself, I feel bad for her. “We have cleaning services for that. We can’t hire you.”

She swallows hard, color draining from her face. “You are making a huge mistake.”

“Am I?”

“Yes. You don’t understand. You won’t meet a hardworking person like me ever again. I might not have a degree, but I am smart. I have creativity. I can be helpful.”

Now it is getting uncomfortable. Any other person would have gotten up and fled. But not this one. She is downright begging for the job. “I don’t doubt it. But we don’t have any other vacancy except for the position of Archer’s assistant—”

She leans forward, placing her palms on the glass table. “You can appoint me as his assistant. I am his friend after all.”

“Don’t cut me off again,” I say tersely.

“Huh?” She touches the sunglasses hooked on her blouse nervously before continuing, “Did you forget who I am? I am Archer’s—”

“You are not Archer’s friend.” My temper is flaring once again. Just when I was feeling bad for her, she goes ahead and starts with her lies.

She lowers her hand, her eyes narrowing. “Did you just accuse me of lying?” She asks sharply.

I am so close to losing my shit. Instead of speaking, I regard her for a long time. She squirms in her seat.

“I asked something, Mr. Kim. Answer me or—”

“Or what?” I incline my head.

“Or you might have to face the wrath of your boss.”

I’d really like to see how she would make it happen. Swiveling my chair closer to hers, I lean closer. “Is that a threat?”

She doesn’t pull back. Her eyes fall to my lips for a second before she whispers, “It’s a promise.”

Chapter Four

Archer

I smirk when her gaze blazes. I am surprised my body didn't catch fire. Because the flames in her eyes are scathing. "One phone call." She holds her index finger. "And he'll come running. I won't be responsible for what would happen next."

"All right. Go ahead."

Summer can't keep the surprise from showing on her face. She assumed I would quake in my boots at the mention of my *boss*.

"You don't believe me?"

"He is a very busy man, Ms. Donovan. He might be your *close friend* but for him, work always comes first. So no, I don't believe your claim about him showing up on your *one* phone call."

She jerks her attention to Janet. "You seem to be the smarter one. You need to understand. Archer... has a temper. When it comes to me, he is very *protective*." She lowers her lids and shakes her head before sighing. "I didn't want to disclose this... but Mr. Kim has left me no choice."

Janet sneaks a glance at me. "Uh..."

"Archer and I were childhood sweethearts."

"What?" Janet chokes out.

“Yeah. We broke up before he left for college. And when we reunited couple days ago, he insisted I come for this interview. He didn’t want to spend a single minute apart from me. So he came up with this idea. If I got this job, I would be with him all the time.”

She smiles at Janet and then glares at me. “You are making things difficult for yourself, Mr. Kim.”

“Am I?”

She nods. “By not appointing me, you are kind of keeping the two destined lovers apart. You might lose your job and on top of that, your cruel actions would bring seven years of bad luck upon you.”

Janet is covering her face with her palm. As if she is having second-hand embarrassment.

“I’ll take my chances.” I motion toward the phone in her hand. “Call him.”

Disregarding my command, she throws Janet a worried look. “We shouldn’t get him involved. Trust me.”

“Is that worry I hear in your voice, Ms. Donovan?” I tilt my head. “Are you worried for us?”

“Y-yes.”

“I’d be touched if I believed your charade.”

She jumps to her feet. “This is the second time you called me a liar.”

I stand too. I am done with her bullshit. “Come on, call Archer.”

“As you wish.” She squints and her slender fingers fly on the phone screen.

For one full minute, I stand with my arms crossed watching her panic.

“Don’t have his number?” I mock softly.

She scoffs. “Found it.”

She hits call and holds her phone to her ear. Walking a few feet away, trying to escape my scrutiny.

“He’s not answering.” She lifts a shoulder.

I stride toward her with purposeful steps. Snatching the phone from her fingers, I peer at it. “Are you hungry, little liar?”

She gulps, backing away. I don’t allow space between us. I step closer. “I thought you were calling Archer Kim.”

Summer takes another retreating step and her back hits the wall. “I was. I may have accidentally clicked on Papa John’s Pizza’s contact.”

“Stop lying, would you?”

She glares up at me. “And you stop accusing me of lying.”

“Oh, but you are lying, aren’t you? You have been since you came here.”

She stands straighter, our chests almost grazing. “No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I know for a fact that you and Archer can never be childhood sweethearts.”

“Now I am offended!”

I snort.

“I don’t give two fucks if you believe me or not,” Summer says calmly.

“Well, you should, because you are about to be thrown out of this building if you don’t get the fuck out of here in ten seconds.”

“Excuse me?”

“I am done with your lying ass.”

I begin to pull away when she grabs my tie. Jerking me to her, she says, “You are going to regret this day. The moment Archer finds out—”

“Oh, he found out, all right.” Wrapping my fingers around her small wrist, I jerk it away from my tie.

“What do you mean?” She asks, frowning.

“If I ever catch sight of you anywhere near my agency, I’ll call the cops on you.”

She stills, her face hardening. “You don’t call the shots here.”

I smirk darkly. “But I do, considering I am the owner of this building.”

Summer pales, her eyes bulging. When she opens her mouth, her voice is nothing but a whisper. “That’s not true.”

My jaw tightens. She thinks I am lying. The irony. “It is. And you are lucky I am not taking any strict actions against you. Get your things and get out.”

She shakes her head. “You are Archer Kim?”

“Yes. And I am not your *anything*. Least of all a close friend.”

She just stands there, staring at me. It’s a shock, my revelation. I guess this is the first time she was caught in her lie. And in the worst way possible at that.

When she doesn’t move, I repeat. “You are no longer needed here, Ms. Donovan. Don’t waste my time and see yourself out. *Now*.”

That shakes her out of her thoughts. “I know I lied. But can’t you give me a chance?”

My jaw tightens so hard, I’m surprised it doesn’t snap. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“Please. You don’t understand...” She wrings her trembling hands. “I need a job. I need money.” She bows her head.

Without wasting my breath, I reach into my pocket and pull out my wallet. Taking out several hundred-dollar bills, I say, “Here. Take it and get out.”

Her head snaps up. She looks at the money and shakes her head. “I need a job, not charity.”

Enough is enough.

“Call the security.”

Summer flinches. Still, she maintains eye contact with me. She is trying hard not to cry. I can see it in the slight tremble of her chin.

Janet who was silent all this time decides to speak. “That’s not necessary, Archer. I can handle it.”

“Oh, it’s very necessary. We have a trespasser after all.” I tell her without looking away from Summer.

She looks around. From the corner of my eye, I notice people gathering outside. They are watching us through the glass wall. She notices the audience too because she pales slightly. Her throat works as she swallows. Her shoulder rises and falls rapidly.

Summer lets out a shaky breath, then her eyes move back to me. Suddenly, it’s hard to breathe. The innocence in the depth of her unique eyes guts me. For a moment, I rethink my decision. Should I be this harsh with her?

By seeing the panic and fear in her gaze, sharp pain races through me. Mixed with anger. I am angry at myself. At her. And at this circumstance. *Why* am I angry?

I shouldn’t be shaken about it. She called it upon herself. I gave her many chances to get out of here. But she chose to stay. Chose to beg. Beg for something I can’t give her. I can’t go against my oath. I can’t ignore her lies. I can’t help her. Then why is it bothering me so much? Why is it pissing me off to see the helplessness in her eyes?

I tried to give her money, didn’t I? I can’t bend my rules for her. I just can’t.

Her distressed eyes find their way back to the glass wall.

Shocked, I watch as her lips lift up. She is smiling. The smile is so full of pain. The dull ache in my chest intensifies when I catch her body trembling slightly.

That’s the exact moment when the security guards enter the room.

I feel the weight of Janet’s stare. I hope my face is blank and isn’t showing any kind of regret I am feeling inside.

As soon as the guard grabs Summer’s arm, her head snaps down, and then she immediately sucks in a breath. Rage clouds my vision. Summer whimpers when he begins yanking her toward the door.

What fucks with my mind more is that even though she is clearly hurting from the humiliation, the smile never leaves her lips.

Like a man turned into stone, I remain standing like a statue as they drag her out of the conference room.

It takes all the self-restraint not to bash the man's head who's manhandling her.

But this is what you wanted, right?

You are the one who called the security, Kim.

My feet carry me to the glass wall so that I can see her. They are almost down the hall when she lifts her gaze. Those gorgeous eyes tangles with mine through the glass. There was defiance and challenge in them.

"This is not over, asshole." She mouths. My jaw clenches. This aggravating woman. She is so fucking brave. Or maybe stupid. Even in this situation, she is spiting me.

Our eye contact breaks when she is jerked roughly by the same guard. Her sunglasses hooked on her top fall to the floor from the impact. Something dark and ugly snakes in my chest and settles in the pit of my stomach.

"Get the asshole off her," I growl. "Now." I bark out. Not needing to be told twice, Janet springs to action.

Swallowing my fury, I turn around and stalk away from the wall. If I watch Summer for one more second, I might go out myself and wrench her from their clutches.

I try to inhale and exhale. It doesn't fucking work. I stand in the middle of the conference room, not sure what to do.

In just a few minutes, this girl evoked emotions in me that I thought were dormant. Irritation itches under my skin. She had no business barreling in my life like a storm and shaking everything up.

Her infuriating resolution may be laudable but she bluffs like it's her second nature.

While I am not proud of my actions today, it had to be done. This incident would force her to rethink every time she'd open

her mouth to lie.

I just hope to God we never cross paths again. Because if we did, there would be war.

Chapter Five

Summer

I heard the best things happen unexpectedly. I am in Hawaii. Yeah, that's right. I won the lottery and became a millionaire overnight. Now I am sightseeing in Maui, living my best life.

I am sorry, I'm just kidding.

Here's a little update on my life. A lot has changed since I was kicked out of KIM Advertising a little over a week ago. And not in the best way.

After Archer smashed my self-respect and stomped all over its shards, I found a waitressing gig in a dive bar not far away from my apartment.

I couldn't even last three days there. I punched a drunk asshole who tried to cop a feel. I may be desperate but that doesn't mean I would tolerate this bullshit.

So long story short, I was fired. The bar owner refused to pay me the day's wages. He said I was lucky they didn't call the cops on me.

I was jobless yet again. And I still didn't have enough money to pay my apartment's rent.

Compulsion made me approach the resort owner in the hopes of getting hired full-time. But they had mermaid shows only on weekends. So he couldn't help me.

To escape Mrs. Bowers, I began using the fire escape to get in and out of my apartment. I sent her a text explaining I was out

of town for a few days because of a family emergency. I have no family but she doesn't know that.

Raleigh was my last hope. And as much as it hurt to ask him for financial help, I knew I had to call him. He is my best friend. My only friend to be honest. He is more like a brother I never had. It should be easy to turn to him when I am in need, right? After all, we made a pact to be each other's pillar forever.

But there was this uneasiness in my chest at the thought of calling him. I don't like asking for help. From anyone. Even him.

For some, it might come across as absurd, but I can't explain it. I have always been independent. I prefer to take care of myself. Part of the reason why I never let anyone get close to me.

I don't want to be dependent on anyone. Both financially and emotionally.

I was kind of relieved when my calls to Raleigh went unanswered. He's always busy so I didn't think much of it. But that changed when I read an article about him online.

He was getting married to his nemesis, Hannah Cooper.

I couldn't believe what I was reading, so I did some internet searching. And found out that he was getting married in Hawaii! On some billionaire's resort.

The news was also trending on Twitter.

Why would a billionaire sponsor Raleigh's destination wedding? Things weren't adding up. So I did some more digging and found out the reason.

The billionaire, Mr. Smith wasn't doing this out of the goodness of his heart. No. Raleigh and Hannah are promoting his resort by getting married there.

He wanted his advertising campaign to be based on true love. So the star employees of KIM Advertising came up with a plan that worked in both their favor.

My eyebrows reached the ceiling when I found TMZ's published article about their engagement and the upcoming nuptials.

This was pure genius. The other website stated.

My fiancé wanted a fairytale wedding and through this campaign, Mr. Smith helped make this possible—Raleigh Jackson, R.J. Creative Director of KIM Advertising.

Of course, I didn't believe a single word. Raleigh and Hannah? Never. Because he hates her. With a passion.

I wanted to know what was happening though. Was it a publicity stunt? Was it a planned strategy for his advertising campaign?

My questions were answered when he called me. Actually, we face-timed. He was at some exotic resort. And he was indeed getting married. But it was all for show.

Raleigh and Hannah wanted to snag the billionaire client so they came up with the whole idea of getting married at the resort.

As I was listening to him, I knew one thing. I couldn't tell him about my situation.

He was already stressed with all the drama and I didn't want to add more to his stress.

So instead of telling him that I was about to be homeless any day, I asked him to book me a ticket to Hawaii.

It wasn't a great solution, but at least I'd get to eat something other than cup noodles.

To convince my landlady that I was indeed out of town, I had to turn off all the lights in the apartment. And I am fucking scared of darkness. Hawaii sounded more and more appealing.

So here I am. In Hawaii. Only, I am not living my best life. Nor I am a millionaire. I am running. From reality. But instead of having the time of my life, I am in misery.

Raleigh was supposed to pick me up. He didn't.

I walked for hours to find the resort. I had no alternative. My phone's battery was dead. So I couldn't contact him. There are so many resorts on Maui, I was lost.

Raleigh had texted me the resort's address but I couldn't access it.

Technology has turned humans lazy. I should've at least scribed the resort's name on a paper. It could've made my hike a hell of a lot easier.

The sun had set when I reached the oceanfront resort.

The cool wind blows my long tresses and I sigh in contentment. My eyes flit over the resort's name.

Euphoria.

I gawk at it for a beat. I can't believe I was stopping people for directions to a resort named Hysteria. I feel my face heat up.

"Ugh!" I growl. I want to hurl myself into the ocean.

My legs are killing me. I walked for fucking miles. That could've been avoided if I had remembered the damn name.

Shaking my head, I trudge up the stairs and into the lobby.

My black cropped halter top is sticking to my skin, my yellow pleated plaid mini skirt is creased. And my mismatched thigh highs are itching.

In a nutshell, I am fucking uncomfortable as I drag my trolley behind me and make my way to the front desk.

"Hello, I am Summer Donovan. The groom's best friend." I say to the friendly-looking woman across the desk.

I grit out the "best friend" part. I am so pissed at him. He didn't come to receive me. I felt so out of depth all day wandering in an unknown place.

My legs tremble a bit. They're sore. I feel lightheaded and weak. I just had a couple of jolly ranchers for lunch.

My shoulders slump when she informs me that Raleigh is out with Hannah. I am told to wait until he shows up.

Apparently, the whole resort is booked for Raleigh and Hannah's creative team. They're not accepting any visitors until the grand opening. She says she can't let me check in until she confirms it with Raleigh.

When the lady directs me to the atrium and asks me to wait there, I thank her and turn to leave.

My legs feel like rubber as I slog through the beautiful resort. My lids feel so heavy I can't even appreciate the interior architecture around me.

I step inside the massive atrium. The marble floors and pillars and the beautiful fountain in the center illustrate a scenic picture.

The gentle sound of trickling water from the fountain attracts me.

There's no place to sit here. Without thinking I plop upon the edge of the fountain. Reaching down, I massage my calves.

My throat is dry. Being on an empty stomach has left me drained. Where the hell are you, Raleigh?

"Miss..."

I look up and find a man clad in a hotel staff uniform with a tray in his hands, carrying a glass of ice water. Snatching the glass with both hands, I take a greedy swallow.

Heaven.

My eyes fall shut in pleasure as the cold water erases the dryness in my throat, quenching my thirst.

I tilt the glass to down the entire thing when a hand closes on my wrist. The glass is plucked from my grip. The motion makes the water drip past my lips and onto my chin, turning me into a wet mess.

"What the fuck?!" I jerk my head up and freeze.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

Archer Kim. What in the world is Archer doing here?

Dark brown orbs filled with irritation flit across my face.

"You." He seethes. My breath catches when I am hauled to my feet.

"What the hell? What are you doing here?"

Raleigh told me only Hannah, and their teams were staying here. Why the hell is *he* here? I know he is the owner of KIM Advertising but does he always accompany his employees on business trips?

Well, this is not just a business deal. Raleigh is getting married. But I didn't know Raleigh and Archer were close. Anyway, I don't like that he is here.

After the humiliation, I took solace in thinking I wouldn't see him again. My relief was short-lived. Because here he is. Right in front of me. With only a few inches separating us. And now that the initial shock has subsided, I gawk at him.

If it weren't for his fierce gaze pinning me in place, I would've concluded Archer has a twin brother who lives in Hawaii. Because the guy in front of me is a far cry from the sophisticated and polished suit who kicked me out a week ago.

His raven hair isn't sleeked back for starters. It's disheveled, and the dark locks are hanging over his forehead, giving him a soft look.

A floral shirt has replaced the custom-made suit. What boggles me is that the shirt is hanging open, flaunting his eight packs abs. The white shorts he is currently wearing teases me with his killer deep-set *v*. I swallow hard.

The deep baritone hits me straight between the legs when he says, "I should be asking that question. What are *you* doing here?"

When I realize he is still gripping my upper arms, I jerk out of his hold. "None of your goddamn business."

"Get out." His words sting. More than they should. The exhaustion was taking a toll on me as it is. I just need some food. And bed. Deciding not to respond, I begin to turn.

It's not like I am afraid of him. I just refuse to waste my energy on him. It doesn't matter how insanely sexy he looks, it's useless if the guy isn't respectful toward me.

Yes, our last encounter was... complicated. I lied. But I got my punishment. Right now, I am not breaking any rules. I am

not lying either. So I am silently going to go somewhere else to wait for Raleigh. A place where this jerk can't reach me.

He clutches my elbow and I'm spun around, colliding with his steel wall of chest. A very bare chest.

Dragging my eyes upward, I grit out, "Decide at once whether you want me to leave or be all over me."

We glare at each other for a long moment. "First you need to tell me what you are doing here. Are you stalking me?"

I laugh. "You're too full of yourself, Archer."

His eyes narrow into slits. "Who said you could call me by my name?"

"Ooh, you want me to call you *sir*?" I say with a smirk. "Kinky," I add just to rile him up.

Archer's nostrils flare, and his breath grows ragged. "Watch your mouth."

My smile is cold as I stare at him. "And you keep your hands to yourself, asshole." He removes his hand from my elbow.

"Touch me one more time and I'll knee you in the fucking nuts."

He cocks his head. "You think I am dying to touch you?"

"Seems like it." I shrug. Well, I may have met him only twice but in those two incidents, I ended up in his arms. The first was when I collided with him in the lobby. And now this. He always manhandles me like he has every right.

"Why are you here, hmm?" He towers over me.

It's on the tip of my tongue. I could tell him that I am Raleigh's friend. But for some reason, I don't say that. He thinks he can demand answers from me. He can't.

He arches an eyebrow at me. "Are you planning to get a free room by lying about us again?"

I purse my lips into a line.

"Or maybe you are trying to bluff your way into working here. Did you buy your airplane ticket or did you con someone for that too?"

“Shut up,” I growl.

“Why? Did I hurt your feelings?”

I point a finger at him. “You don’t know anything about me. So I suggest you keep your mouth shut.”

“Or what? Are you going to cry?”

I shake my head. I can feel the vein in my neck throbbing. I am so livid. “*You* might after I am done with you.”

“I’d like to see you try, little liar.”

I stomp on his foot. Hard.

He doesn’t even wince. But his eyes flash with annoyance. He takes a step back. “Who let this crazy woman in?” His loud and hard voice booms around the atrium and people begin to gather around us.

I am so done with his crap! I eat up the small distance between us. “How dare you call me crazy! Take it back. Take it back now!” I scream in his face.

He glares at me. “Call the security!” I am coming to think those three words are his favorite.

“Yes! Call the security so they can dump this jerk’s ass out!” I shout the words.

“You are the one trespassing among the two of us.”

“Shut up before I do something!”

The corner of his mouth curls at my threat. And I lose it. I go on my tiptoes, about to scratch that smirk off his face when I trip. I stumble over my foot, my face hitting his chest.

Archer’s arms wrap around me and stabilize us. It infuriates me. I am in his arms. *Again*. “Get off me!”

“That should be my line, don’t you think, little liar?” He grunts as he cages my flailing arms.

My head connects with his jaw, making us both grunt. “I hate you.” I breathe out, my fingers curling into his shirt.

He jerks me closer to him and bends down. His eyes flick back and forth between mine. “The feeling is mutual.”

I hold his darkened gaze while I fight his possessive grip on me. My cheeks are on fire. The intensity in his eyes is burning me. For some reason, my mouth goes dry.

People have gathered in the atrium. Clearly to watch the spectacle unfolding. I immediately feel a sense of déjà vu.

Why do we always end up being the center of attraction in a room?

I hadn't intended for our argument to escalate. Hell, I wasn't even the one starting it. I was about to leave too when he stopped me and started grilling me with his questions.

"Summer!"

As soon as Raleigh's voice reaches us, Archer frees me. I whirl around.

There he is. Clad in dark jeans and a leather jacket. My best friend who is responsible for this mess. His dark longish hair is messy. As if he just came from a bike ride. He was having fun while I was walking for miles, lost.

"You are the biggest jerk on this planet!" I am about to wrestle him when a slender brunette steps between us. Her stunning features halt me for a second.

She is also in a black leather jacket and cut-off jeans shorts. She somehow makes the simple outfit look classy. Her jaw-length hair also appears to be all over the place as if tussled by the wind.

As her sharp gray eyes meet mine, I know who she is in an instant. Hannah Cooper. Raleigh's archenemy who also happens to be his fiancé.

I know their engagement is fake. So imagine my surprise when Hannah tactfully inserted herself to protect Raleigh from me.

"Hey, I am Hannah Cooper, Raleigh's fiancée." She extends her elegant hand. I take it.

"Summer Donovan." My smile is small as I add, "Raleigh's potential murderer."

"You know her, Raleigh?" Archer asks in an icy tone.

At his question, Raleigh steps forward. “Yes, she is my best friend.” He shoots me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come to receive you.”

I stare blankly at my best friend’s baby blue eyes. “You forgot I was coming today, didn’t you?” Crossing my arms across my chest, I wait for his answer.

A sheepish smile tugs at his lips. “I am sorry?”

“Apology rejected,” I say calmly before lunging at him. Clutching his ear, I twist it.

“Ow, Ow, Ow.” He winces and tilts his head down to ease off the pain. I use the opportunity to yell in his ear. “How can you forget?”

He grabs my wrist but doesn’t apply enough pressure to force me to release him.

“You didn’t even send someone to pick me up. I waited for you at the airport for two hours. Then spent another two in search of this stupid resort!” I let go of his ear to slap his bicep.

“I had texted you the address!” He holds his hands up and tries to dodge me.

“My phone was dead. And I couldn’t for the life of me remember the name of this place. So for two freaking hours, I was asking people to give me directions of the resort called Hysteria!”

Archer snorts. I grind my teeth. I feel my face going red with anger. He makes it worse when he inclines his head to the side and smirks. As if he is relishing in watching me all flushed and frustrated. The jerk cocks his eyebrow as if challenging me to say something.

When Raleigh snickers, my head snaps in his direction. I narrow my eyes. “Don’t. Laugh. Asshole!” I punch his arm thrice, enunciating each word. I may have imagined hitting Archer while doing so.

“Sorry! I am sorry!” He speaks as he tries to hug me but I shrug him off, pushing him away half-heartedly. I can’t stay pissed at the asshole for long. He knows it. And takes advantage of it. Every damn time.

“You know how much I had to walk? And when I finally reached here, the front desk person told me you were out so I was waiting in the atrium. A staff member offered me a glass of water. I was so parched that I couldn’t even mutter a thank you. I was gulping down the water when he ambushed me.” I point at Archer.

It feels like I am a kid who is complaining about a naughty kid who was bullying her at school.

Raleigh frowns at Archer. He stands a bit straighter. His shoulders tight. The change is minimal but I see it. He is very protective of me.

It’s like one of those days when we were young. Raleigh used to stand up for me against the asshole Caleb, our foster parents’ son who used to bully us for shits and giggles. Raleigh and I were no match for him, but that didn’t stop him from fighting for me.

This situation is different from our past though. Archer hates me. But he has a reason for it. His impression of me after that disastrous interview is not so great.

While Archer was rude to me, comparing him with Caleb would be wrong because he was pure evil.

Not to mention, Archer is Raleigh’s boss, and I don’t want them to have a conflict over me. Raleigh is still unaware of the interview.

Before I could say anything to divert his attention, Hannah speaks, “Have you eaten yet?”

A sharp pain pierces my stomach at her question. I am starving. I avert my gaze and shake my head. My face heats up.

“Ignore these jerks, there’s a cool open-air restaurant with waterfalls here. Let’s go grab a bite.”

At her suggestion, I slowly look at her. I don’t know why Hannah is being nice to me. But I feel utterly grateful. My lips lift in a smile before I nod.

Looping her arm with mine, she begins walking in the opposite direction of the atrium. A few steps after she stops. “Get Summer’s luggage to her room, will you?” She throws the

words presumably at Raleigh before walking out of the atrium with me.

At that exact moment, I wished Hannah would marry my idiot friend for real. Because she is a keeper.

Chapter Six

Summer

Two days later...

“I am almost at my apartment building, Raleigh. If you don’t call me back in 10 minutes I’m coming over.” I hang up and slip the phone into the back pocket of my green high-waisted shorts.

It’s almost eight in the morning. Raleigh and I landed in Los Angeles about an hour ago.

I didn’t want to leave his side but he insisted to be left alone. The last thing I wanted was to crowd him. And I guess my presence would’ve done just that. So I get where he is coming from. But I told him to give me a call once he’s home. He didn’t. And I am worried sick.

He was supposed to get married yesterday. They both had made a deal to get married purely for business but Raleigh fell in love. He was going to confess his feelings after the wedding ceremony but Hannah didn’t give him a chance. She said she couldn’t deceive the people she cared about any longer and left.

To say Archer was shocked would be an understatement of the century. When Hannah and Raleigh were having a confrontation, Archer and I were close enough to hear everything.

From his stunned expression, I gathered that unlike me, he was in the dark this whole time. They didn’t tell him about the fake engagement.

My heart ached for Archer. He was played by his two friends. After I learned from Raleigh about how much he despises liars, I knew this would happen one day. I definitely never imagined something like this.

That day, I witnessed Archer's hurt. He was close to Hannah. So much so, that he was her bridesman. He looked devastatingly handsome in a pale pink tuxedo.

I heard his trust shattering the moment he heard about the fake engagement. When he left the venue, I almost ran after him. I wanted to console him. But I didn't. He calls me a little liar. I doubt he would've appreciated my company of all people.

Archer packed his bags and left before everyone. Hannah left shortly after. We left in the night with the rest of the staff.

For the first time in my life, I had a glimpse of hope in my best friend's eyes. Hope for a new beginning. Hope for dreaming about a happy ending. He chose to be brave. To love someone.

After what we've been through, I never thought Raleigh had any feelings left inside of him. Turns out, he had. Or maybe Hannah's love changed him.

Yes, Hannah loves him. I am sure of it. I saw jealousy in her eyes a couple of times when Raleigh and I were together. The emotions brimming in her eyes were because she loves him.

One way or another, I am going to meddle until they get back together. My best friend and Hannah deserve a happy ending.

With that positive thought, I jump inside the elevator and punch the button to my floor.

When the door opens to my floor, I get a sick feeling in my stomach. I wheel my trolley out of the elevator.

The elevator door shuts with an ominous boom, further adding to my uneasiness.

The queasy feeling spirals out of control as I walk down the hallway. Fishing out the keys from my handbag, I look up. My heart slams in my chest.

The door to my apartment is wide open. A chill runs down my spine. The handbag that was slung over my shoulder slips

down my stiff shoulder and falls on the floor.

Someone broke into my apartment. I have no valuables but my laptop is in there. I'm still paying its EMI. If they stole it, I might have a stroke.

I catch a glimpse of a figure and back away. They're still in there. My pulse jumps.

They didn't leave. It means there's a chance I can still fight and save my laptop. I am not sure whether the person is a man or a woman. But I think I am going to find out soon. I can't let this jerk waltz in and steal the things I spent my hard-earned money on.

I'd rather die trying to beat the burglar's ass than run away like a coward.

I crouch down and fumble with my purse for the pepper spray but find a half-eaten apple. Damn. How old is this shit? Whatever. I can just hurl this at their head to catch them off-guard. That'll give me enough time to spray their eyes and push them out of my apartment.

That's not a foolproof plan but it'll have to do. What if they're armed? I don't want to die. Life is tough and sometimes shitty but I want to live.

I should call the police.

"You're here, good," says a voice, making me jump. The rotten apple along with other things scatters on the floor. It takes a second to realize that it's my landlady's voice.

I get to my feet. Mrs. Bowers is standing in my doorway.

Before I could fire my questions, a young couple emerges from my apartment.

They smile at Mrs. Bowers. "We love it."

She doesn't return their smile. "Great. You can move in by tonight."

Wait, what? "The hell they can!" A new fear engulfs me. This one more potent than the thought of facing the burglar.

Mrs. Bowers turns back to me. "You don't have to create a scene by screaming, Summer."

“I live here.” I hate that desperation rings in my voice. “You can’t break into my apartment in my absence let alone give them a tour. That’s illegal.”

“Talking about illegal activities.” She crosses her bony arms. “What should I think of you lying about being out of town and using the fire escape to avoid paying rent?”

I burn with embarrassment when the couple stares at me disapprovingly. I avoid them.

My throat tightens and I try to swallow and find my voice. “I am sorry. I won’t repeat it.”

“Too late.” She turns her nose up.

Unshed tears sting my eyes. I can’t lose the apartment. Raleigh is suffering from a broken heart. Invading his space wouldn’t be ideal. Where would I go? I don’t have enough cash to spend on a motel.

“Please,” I utter the word I hate. I beg. “Don’t do this. I have nowhere to go.”

“Sounds like your problem, not mine.” She sniffs.

I shake my head. “I’ve lived here for three years, Mrs. Bowers. You can’t do this to me!”

The guy interrupts. “Look, we don’t need this drama. You asked us to pay the rent in advance and we did.” He looks at me with suspicion. “Get rid of this trouble or give us our money back.”

I narrow my eyes. “Dude, you don’t have to be an asshole.”

“What did you call my boyfriend, bitch?” His curvy girlfriend reaches up and pushes me hard. I stumble back.

Steadying myself, I smile darkly. “Asshole. A perfect match for you.” I step closer and shove her and her asshole boyfriend catches her. “And don’t fucking touch me. *Bitch.*”

“Don’t bully my tenants.” Mrs. Bowers says sharply.

“Fuck you and your tenants!” Enough is fucking enough. She had no right to do this. I glare at her. “I may have lied about being out of town for a couple of days but I really did end up

flying to Hawaii. I could show you my airplane tickets but that wouldn't be enough, would it?"

Her left eye twitches. "Don't you dare talk to me like that."

I get in her face. "Or what, old hag? Are you going to call the police? Go ahead. Call them. Let them see how cruel are. You torture people for fun! Would it kill you to cut me some slack? I was late only eight days. Eight. Days!" The couple steps back as I shout.

"Can't you have a little humanity!" I take a deep breath. I am worsening my case here. I take a step back. "Look, I have nowhere to go. Give me a few more days. I'll pay the rent."

The pause is long and uncomfortable after my outburst. I know the outcome even before she opens her mouth. "You have approximately five hours to pack your things." She sidesteps me and leaves. So does the couple.



I have lived in this studio apartment for the past three years. And it's hopeless to see my things all packed in just few boxes.

As for the furniture, I have a second-hand sofa. A wooden table I use as a dinner table as well as a workstation whenever I had to work on my mermaid costumes. And a single bed.

There's nothing special about this place. But I have spent three long years here. It was a big deal considering how much I moved. I always preferred a change in scenery. Like a nomad. But I never left L.A. Because of my best friend.

In these past years, I grew attached to this apartment.

I painted these walls with vibrant colors. I remember painting them with Raleigh.

One wall has a huge rainbow painted while the opposite one has an art of his Harley.

I smile sadly as I lift a photo frame. It's a picture of me and Raleigh. Posing with slices of pizza in one hand and a beer can in the other.

It was taken right after we finished painting. Raleigh managed to look adorable with the yellow and green paint all over his face and coveralls. I on the other hand am a mess in the picture. My long hair is pulled in a messy bun on top of my head. My pale neck is smeared with red paint.

I remember I was wearing a white tank top. But in the picture, the top is no longer white. It is filled with splashes of colors and I am grinning from ear to ear.

With a resigned sigh, I pack the photo frame with newspaper and drop it in one of the cardboard boxes.

I still have a couple of hours left. Instead of looking for a new place or panicking over being homeless, I settle for going to the mall.

It is my way of dealing with problems. When I feel like crying or when my heart feels heavy like right now, I immediately look for ways to distract myself. I visit places like parks or wander around the city and people watch to avoid crying.

So that's what I am going to do. I am going to go to the mall. I am going to pretend my life isn't about to change. Because if I don't do this. If I don't pretend, I'll be forced to face the reality. I don't want to do it. Because the reality is ugly. Reality is dark. It's menacing.

Pretending everything is okay helps me. It helps to avoid the hollowness that settles in my chest.

My palms turn clammy. Leaning against my living room wall, I close my eyes. Just for a second. To gather my strength. When I open them, I gaze at the mirror hanging across from me. My features aren't dull anymore. The sorrow is neatly tucked under my smile. Better.

I take a quick shower to chase away the jet lag. I pull on the orange floral flare pants and white crop top, before shrugging on the hot pink topper coat.

I never apply any makeup except when I have the mermaid gig. So I don't bother to unpack my cosmetics. I give myself a once-over in the mirror. I'll have to unmount the mirror from the wall soon.

How would I move my stuff out of the apartment when I don't even have money to rent a storage space?

The thought hits me like a train. I stand motionless for a moment. Melancholy descends over me.

I shake my head a couple times before staring at my reflection again.

"Not enough colors." I blurt then stride to my boxes. Once when I get what I am looking for, I return to my spot in front of the mirror.

Reaching up, I put on the retro red sunglasses with shaky fingers.

"Perfect," I mumble, then snatch my multi-colored backpack and leave.

My stomach growls loudly as I exit the building. Rubbing my stomach, I begin walking but stop when it growls again. This time it hurts too. It has been hours since I ate anything.

If I even look at my wallet, I will end up in McDonald's. I can't do that. I might have something in my backpack. I lean against the brick wall of the building and begin digging.

My lips lift when my fingers graze against something. I take it out. A pack of digestive biscuits. Oh, thank God.

I tear the packet and fish one out. Licking my lips, I bring it to my mouth when a small whimper draws my attention down.

My heart wrenches when I find a small golden retriever right next to my leg. His fur is covered in filth and his eyes look tired.

When I sink to my knees, the puppy startles and takes a hasty step back.

"Hey, buddy. It's okay." I raise my palm. "It's okay," I say gently.

From its small frame, it seems to be around two months old. It doesn't have a collar too.

He looks at something longingly. I follow his line of sight to find he's staring at my hand. At the biscuit. Slowly, I reach out.

“Are you hungry, buddy?” His eyes jump to me. “Here. Take it.” I smile softly at the small bundle of cuteness. He blinks back at my outstretched hand then at me again, tugging at my heartstrings.

“You can have it,” I murmur. Our eyes remain locked for a long time. The vulnerability on this little one’s face breaks me and tears form in my eyes.

It’s like he is fighting an inner battle about whether he should trust me. It makes me wonder if someone harmed him before to make him this skeptical. He doesn’t look injured so that’s a relief.

Just when I think he will turn away, he surprises me by inching forward. I remain motionless as he slowly comes closer. When he is close enough to take the biscuit, he stuns me by nuzzling my free hand.

“I hate crying, you know.” I sniff. He tilts his head as if asking “why is that?”

“Well, I just do. So don’t melt my heart with your cuteness, got it?” I raise my eyebrow. He pokes my palm with his nose as if agreeing.

“Good.” I sniff again. “Now eat this before I do.” I joke. Again, as if understanding, he starts nibbling the biscuit.

I feed him the rest of the packet before helping him drink water with my water bottle. With the remaining liquid, I try to wash him a bit.

“I can’t leave you alone,” I murmur as he nuzzles into my side. I am sitting down on the tarmac with my back against the wall as I pet him. “I’ll have to take you to a dog shelter before I go to the mall.” He lets out a small bark. As if he hates the idea.

“No can do, Goldie. I won’t be able to sleep at night if I leave you by yourself here.”

A mewl makes me look down. “I’d have adopted you if I wasn’t in this mess.”

I smile when he playfully takes my finger in his mouth. “Tell you what. You stay here. I’ll go upstairs and get a cardboard box for you as you don’t have a leash.”

He barks again, his tongue hanging out.

“Genius, right?” I get to my feet. I lay him on my backpack.
“Sit tight. I’ll be right back.”

I should have taken him upstairs with me because when I ran downstairs with a cardboard box and a plushie, he was gone.

Chapter Seven

Summer

I failed him. I let the thought hurt me.

After spending an hour searching for the puppy, I couldn't find him. It was like he just disappeared into thin air.

I was practically falling apart, covered in sweat from running around like a mad woman with a cardboard box in hand. When people began giving me strange looks, I decided to leave.

I thought I would feel a bit better after coming to the mall. I was wrong. First, the catastrophe from this morning and then the puppy. The weight of guilt after losing the little one was twisting my insides.

The neighborhood I live in is shady. It's filled with a crowd of young teens that are notorious for getting in trouble and torturing people, even at times, animals. If they got their hands on him... No. I refrain from pondering on the negative thoughts that cross my mind.

Too disturbed by the graphic pictures in my head, I begin panicking.

I have a momentary flashback to the time when Caleb and his friends tortured the stray dog just because he caught me feeding it my portion of food. When I tried to intervene, I was beaten within an inch of my life. Raleigh faced the same fate when he attempted to save me.

I feel like puking my guts out at the memory. I close my eyes to calm my roaring heartbeats. Swaying a little, I clutch the steel bar of the railing.

It's over, Summer. I remind myself.

You're free. I rub my heart through the layer of clothes, soothing it, and calming it. Making it believe that I really am free.

When the flashbacks come, it becomes difficult to separate my past from the present.

When the memories trap me, it gets harder to believe that it's all over.

I am not a weakling. Not by a long shot. I am a tough cookie. But sometimes when the ugly parts of my past stare me in the eye, it drains me. It leaves me feeling vulnerable and breakable. It lowers my guard... this happy façade behind which I am blissfully living.

When a woman few feet away stares at me, I realize that I am trembling all over. She is watching me with concern. Pity. She saw it all, didn't she?

She saw how I was losing it. Unconsciously, I let her have a peek into something I would never otherwise allow anyone let alone a stranger. It's written in her eyes as the middle-aged woman stares at me. Her concern makes my skin crawl.

It's funny how I spent my childhood yearning for that concerned-filled gaze from someone but now I loathe it.

Before she could reach me and ask if I am okay, I turn around. I spot the ladies' restroom and march toward it.

It's ironic. I came here to avoid being alone with my depressing thoughts. Now, all I want to do is find a silent corner where I could just breathe.

I push the door open and exhale in relief when I find it empty.

Anxiety drives me forward as I stumble my way to the sink. My knees feel shaky as I gulp down the air. Then, I splash water on my face. The cold water calms me a bit.

It's okay. I am okay. Chanting the words helps. The affirmations work. I send a quick prayer for the little pup.

Wherever you are. Survive, little one. I hope you find your way back home.

A snuffle-like sound reaches me and I straighten. Wiping my face with my coat sleeve, I look around. There's no one here. Now my brain is playing games with me.

I jump when I hear the faint buzzing of my phone in the quiet room. Fuck. It scared the crap out of me. I take it out of my backpack.

It's a message from Raleigh. So he finally listened to the strings of voice messages I left.

I promise I'm fine, Summer. I just want to be alone for a while. I'll give you a call soon. Not sure when that would be, but know that I am going to be okay. Stop worrying. It's an order.
(raised eyebrow emoji)

The last sentence makes me smile. I drop the phone inside my backpack again and look at my reflection. Puffy eyes. Red nose. Haphazard hair.

"Wow, I look like shit," I say out loud. I try to finger-comb my hair but end up tangling it even more.

My movements halt when I hear a rustle behind me. I am not alone. There's definitely someone here. It wasn't my paranoia.

There's another sound. No not a sound. A snuffle. It's so low that I think I imagined it until it happens again. Followed by a sob.

My head snaps in the direction of the stalls. Someone is in there crying.

Seems like I am not the only one having a bad day.

When I hear another pained whimper, I almost reach the stall to ask if they're okay. But I stop myself. I practically ran here to escape being questioned by the lady. Whoever is in the stall, doesn't want anyone to witness this either.

A hiccup followed by a muffled sob draws my eyes back to the gray-colored stall door again. I can picture this stranger

covering her mouth tightly to stop crying but failing miserably.

I am fighting between staying here for the stranger and leaving when the door of the stall opens.

A beautiful woman with wild curly raven hair wrapped in a sleeveless expensive-looking brown dress exits the stall.

Her black heels click sharply on the tiled floor of the restroom as she strides straight toward me.

I don't know why but I spin around. I feel a bit out of depth. She probably knows that *I* know she was crying in the stall. And that kind of makes this situation awkward.

She reaches the marble countertop and drops her black handbag on it. She is right beside me.

I sneak a look at her through the mirror. She is a beautiful woman. In her mid-twenties. Her tear-streaked face is pale. Except for her small nose. It's all red. Like mine. I can't see her eyes as they are downcast.

Swiping her thick curls aside, she crouches and washes her face. When she is done, she reaches for her black Chanel handbag and pulls out tissues to dab her face.

Now I feel sort of uncultured for wiping my face on my hot pink coat sleeve. There's a visible wet spot on my sleeve. I subtly place a hand over it to cover it.

When my eyes travel back to her side of the mirror, I freeze. She's still dabbing her face but her hands are trembling. Her chin trembles. Other than that, her face is blank. There's no expression.

Now that she is no longer crouching, I can see her eyes. They're pale green in color. So beautiful yet devoid of emotions.

Her cool and collected front is immediately betrayed when two tears stream down her face.

Not caring that I might come across as intrusive, I turn to her and blurt, "Everything is going to be okay."

She clutches the marble countertop with both hands and bows her head. Her waist-length curls shield her face.

I don't know what's bothering her but it seems like she is barely hanging there by a thread.

A humongous diamond and a platinum wedding band on her ring finger catch my attention. She is married. Did she catch her husband with another woman? Or worse... did he... die? Or maybe it's not about her husband. Maybe someone else. Or something else. Damn. It can be anything.

Despite being strangers, seeing her break in front of me is making my chest squeeze. Moisture gathers in my eyes when her shoulders begin to shake. She is not even trying to conceal it anymore.

I wring my hands. The need to console her makes me anxious. I shrug off my backpack. Dump it on the counter and sift through the items until I find a strawberry lollipop.

I extend my hand. "Here."

She doesn't look at me. Or at my outstretched hand. "It makes the pain go away."

She still ignores me.

"I know it's hard. But hang in there. Nothing is permanent. Not even bad days."

The petite woman who is a few inches shorter than me finally acknowledges my presence. She lifts her head and turns to stare at the lollipop I am clutching.

When she makes no move to take it. I take a step closer. I should leave her be. Her posture screams that she doesn't want my company. But for some reason, I want to be there for her.

Something tells me I shouldn't leave her alone.

"Take it. I promise it'll make you feel better." I try to smile. It's hard to fake it. But I try.

"Leave me alone." She rasps. Her voice is hollow. Soft but detached.

"Trust me." I try to broaden my smile. "Eating something sweet would surely brighten up your mood. Scientifically speaking, consuming sweets quickly goes from the stomach to

the bloodstream and then travels all the way to the brain. Which then causes a surge in dopamine.”

She hasn't not once looked up at my face. She is just staring at my hand. When she remains silent, I continue. “Dopamine is the magical hormone that gives you the feeling of joy and happiness. It—”

“Who told you that bullshit?” She interrupts.

“My mom.”

“Well, then tell your mom her logic sucks.” She says making me flinch.

“I can't do that,” I whisper.

She snuffles and wipes a tear, still not looking at me. “Why not?”

A tear falls down my cheek. Then another. “Because she's dead.”

Her head snaps up at that. I give her a sad smile and shrug my shoulder. “Her logic might suck but it gives you hope. Hope that it can make the pain go away. And that hope makes you feel a bit better.”

Her lips tremble. She looks guilt-stricken. Her gaze flits over my face, probably taking in my puffy eyes and face. “I-I'm sorry.”

I shake my head. More tears fall. “It's okay. We often talk shit we don't mean when we are hurting.”

She shakes her head. “It's not okay. I shouldn't have talked like that. I am not this. I am not...” She blinks several times before whispering. “I am not a bad person.”

“I believe you.”

She smiles sadly. “You don't even know me.”

“Yeah, but I don't have to know you to sense that you're in pain.”

She lets out a deep breath. “You must think I am crazy for crying in front of a complete stranger.”

“Quite the contrary. It shows you're only human.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” Her sad pale greens stare at me.

“Because I am awesome.” I grin. That earns me a small smile from her.

Wiping another tear, she extends her hand. “Can I have it?” She motions to the lollipop.

I narrow my eyes. “Hmm. Let me think.”

She lets out a watery chuckle. “Please?” Her chin trembles. “I want this pain to go away.”

“Here’s the deal,” I tell her. “With the lollipop. You get a free hug. Still want it?”

She nods. And I open my arms. She rushes forward and wraps her arms around me, sobbing quietly on my shoulder. “Let it all out,” I murmur. As I rub her back. And I follow my advice. I let it all out too.



Sometimes you need a good cry to release the pent-up pain brimming inside you. I never cried in front of anyone, except for Raleigh and Damian—my foster brothers.

When my mom died, I let the hurt build inside of me. My heart was so full of anguish that it made me numb. I remember the police officers made the arrangements and placed me in a foster home.

I held it in until I was alone at night. That night, I was in a foreign house, in a foreign bed that lacked my favorite pink comforter. That night I silently left my new bed and locked myself in the unfamiliar bathroom and finally cried.

Something had changed that day. I felt my emotion shut down.

From that day onwards, I developed a habit to rein it in. As I continued to live in that foster home where I was beaten almost every day, I realized that I was simply existing. Not truly living. That was a pretty lonely life. And I hated it. I wanted to feel happiness again. But it was hard to find it when I was living in a hellhole.

So I adapted a new persona. My sole purpose of life was now to act as if I am happy. Not to fool others but myself. Things began to look better. Because I was looking at the world with colorful glasses. It made living a bit easier.

The more I laughed, the more I hid my tears. I don't let anyone see them. But for the first time, I let someone in.

I let my guard down and let this stranger see me. The real me. Who's not always sunny. The Summer who's not chirpy. I let my tears loose.

We both were unaware of what the other's issues were. But somehow... we understood each other's pain. Without words, we communicated. Through our misery.

Today in the women's restroom of the mall, we formed a connection. A friendship of some sort that was born by our accidental encounter.

After letting ourselves cry for what felt like forever, we washed our swollen red faces and left the restroom.

We got many side-eyes from the ladies that came to use the toilet during our crying session. Things should've been awkward but strangely it wasn't.

We wandered around in comfortable silence for a few minutes before stepping outside the mall. Our minds were much calmer now.

"What's your name?" She turns to me as we come to a stop.

"Summer Donovan. Nice to meet you." I smile. She offers me a soft one in return.

"River Montgomery." As soon as she says it, her smile falters, and she clutches her Chanel handbag tighter. She peers down at her fingers. The ones that are gripping her bag in a death grip. And her entire body stiffens.

Slowly as if the movement is costing her, she removes the diamond ring and then the wedding band and drops them in her bag. When she lifts her face, there's a fleeting look of pure agony on her face. But it passes away quickly and she masks her emotions. "I'm River Gibson."

There's something terribly wrong between River and her husband. But instead of asking her any questions about it, I simply offer her a smile. "River. That's a beautiful name. I like it."

Her shoulders sag, and a genuine smile blooms on her face. "Thank you." Then, "I would like to apologize once again for earlier—"

"And I told you, it's okay." When she begins to argue, I reach up and rest a hand on her shoulder. "Don't." I shake my head.

She nods.

"Remember what I said. Nothing is permanent. Not even bad days."

She listens in silence, her lids closing briefly. Her hand immediately latches on to her ring finger. Then she snatches her hand away from the barren finger. "I hope that's true."

"It is." Then I remember, I have to go back to my apartment and get my things out of there. "Are you going to be all right, River?"

She nods.

"Good. You are stronger than you think. Keep chanting that until you believe it." I shrug. "Affirmations always work."

"I'll try it."

"You do that." I encourage her. Then, "I have to go."

I wave at her before turning. "Summer, wait!"

I halt, then face her again.

She pushes a dark curl behind her ear. "Can we be friends?"

Before I could reply she quickly adds, "If you don't mind." Her pale face goes red.

"I'd love to," I say softly.

"Can we grab a bite?" She suggests. "I really don't want to go home."

At the mention of food, my stomach grumbles. Pretty loud for her to hear it. I cough to cover it. My face heats up.

She is polite not to tease me about it and says, “I know a great Italian place not far from here.”

“Actually... the thing is...”

River glances at me in question. “You don’t like Italian? There’s an Indian restaurant right across from it. We can go there.”

“I can’t.” I look away.

“Why? Do you have plans?”

I don’t like the disappointment in her voice. Thinking of going with honesty, I decide to come clean. “I don’t have enough money to dine out let alone at a fancy restaurant.”

I study her then, searching for any signs of pity or something much worse. Disgust. River is rich. It’s painfully obvious. She comes from money. Her elegant dress, the expensive bag. The diamond studs.

We may have bonded in a short time but it doesn’t guarantee that she would like my company once she learns I am broke.

I talk from experience. I have been looked down on countless times by rich snobs my whole life. I work in a luxurious resort for heaven’s sake. Spending my weekends around elites has taught me just enough to make me steer clear of their group.

River and I come from different worlds. Different class.

But instead of fleeing or regarding me with a judgy look, she just says, “It’s on me.”

“I don’t know...”

She holds up her palm. “We are friends now, aren’t we?”

I nod.

“Then it’s settled. We are going out to feast on delicious food until our stomachs hurt.”

I chuckle at that. “Sounds like a plan.”

Chapter Eight

Summer

I lean back against the chair and sigh. I ate a bit too much. “I am about to burst. I don’t think I can eat more.” I stare longingly at the butter chicken, naan, and shrimp pulao that’s still on the dark wood table, tempting me.

After convincing me to go with her, River drove us to a high-end Indian restaurant. I am not a picky eater. Sleeping on an empty stomach most of my childhood and teen life made me appreciate and value food. So I agreed to it. And I am so glad that I did.

It was love at first bite. The moment I tasted the first morsel of the chicken bathed in the spicy tomato-rich curry—which I now know is Butter chicken—I fell in love. Head over heels.

Generous with butter and cream, I devoured the sweet-savory flavored dish. I tasted the other dishes but this one had my heart. I thank the stars for my superpower of not gaining weight despite eating like a horse.

River chuckles. “You can. One look at the vanilla bean ice cream kheer and you will change your mind.”

“Give me a few minutes,” I grumble.

She watches me with amused eyes. “What for?”

“To make room for the dessert you just mentioned.” I deadpan and she burst out laughing.

I smile as she continues to laugh. Just as fast as it started, her mirth dies down.

“Is it about your husband?” The words are out before I can stop them. She pales, her gaze widening fractionally.

I curse myself internally. Why can't I keep my mouth shut?

Like earlier, she tries to mask it. Her feelings. Her long lashes brush down her cheeks as she cuts eye contact. Keeping her face blank, she runs her gaze across the room.

“I'm sorry—”

“Yes,” She mutters finally. “It *is* about my husband.”

I stare at her side profile guiltily. I ruined the good mood. There's a somber note in her voice when she speaks again. “He is the love of my life. My first everything.”

I don't move a muscle. I remain mute as she continues, her eyes glued to the floor-to-ceiling window. “Do you believe in fairy tales, Summer?”

“Fairy tales?”

She turns her head to me. “Yeah. Do you believe in them?”

“I don't.” Because I have seen the ugly side of this world early on.

“I did.” She confesses softly. “I believed in fairy tales. He made my dreams come true.” She shakes her head. “No. *He* was my dream.”

River's eyes fill with tears and I get to my feet. Circling the table, I move my seat beside her. Sitting down, I take her hand in mine. “We don't have to talk about it.”

She blinks the tears away. “Today's our first wedding anniversary.”

“River—”

“And he is in Ireland on a business trip.”

“What an asshole.” I hiss.

She laughs, then snuffles. “Tell me about it.”

What a jerk! What man leaves his wife alone on their first wedding anniversary?

“But I am glad, you know.” River says, making me pause.

“What?”

“I don’t have to watch him pretend to love me.”

WHAT? Did she just tell me that her husband doesn’t love her but instead pretends to do so? What kind of fuckery is this? One second she was reminiscing, talking about him being her dream. And the next, she is revealing that he doesn’t love her. I am concerned.

She shakes her head, then regards me with her cursory gaze. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“You were crying. I saw your red-rimmed eyes. I wasn’t the only one hiding inside the women’s restroom. You were having a bad day too.”

I swiftly retract my hand and plaster a fake smile. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Tell me, what’s wrong?”

My chest twists when I think of the puppy. I tell her everything. How I found him outside my apartment building and how he disappeared when I returned with the cardboard box. I also tell her about the negative thoughts that were torturing me.

“I am a terrible person. I should’ve taken him upstairs with me.”

“It’s not your fault. Stop being hard on yourself.” River wraps her arm around my shoulder.

“What if something happened to him?” I shudder.

“Thinking about such things will only hurt you. I’ll inform my bodyguards and have them scan your neighborhood first thing in the morning, okay? We’ll find him.” She reassures.

My lips part. “You have bodyguards?”

“Security. My husband’s orders.” She mumbles.

“O-kay. Can’t they do that now while we are dining?”

“They won’t leave my side.” She grimaces.

I frown in confusion. “But you drove us here. I never saw anyone.”

She clears her throat and motions toward my right. I turn my head. First, I don’t see anything out of the ordinary. There are people wining and dining. But then I see it. Two men dressed in black suits lurking in the corner of the entrance.

I whip my eyes to her.

She nods solemnly. “There are two more.” She points at her side.

“Holy shit,” I whisper when I see them.

“Yeah.”

“It’s okay. Tomorrow works.” I jerk a nod.

She gives me an apologetic look. “I would’ve asked them to go now but they only follow my husband’s order—”

I shake my head, stopping her. “Hey, I appreciate it.” I squeeze her hand.

She smiles too. The heaviness forgotten. Maybe not completely but it’s put aside as the waiter returns with our dessert. We keep chatting for another hour or so before my phone starts ringing. And reality comes crashing down.

“Who is it?” River asks.

“The witch.” I grit out. My blood boils as I read my landlady’s text. It states that she took the liberty of moving my things out of the apartment as I was MIA. I shouldn’t be surprised.

“What in the world?” River gasps. I lift my head to find her hovering over me.

She reddens. “Sorry. That was impolite.”

“It’s okay,” I mumble before reaching for the glass of water. I chug down the cool liquid, battling to process everything.

“I couldn’t help but read the text.”

I rest the glass down. I try not to picture my boxes lying outside the apartment in the narrow hallway of my apartment building. I won't get to bid final goodbye to my place.

"Where will you go at this hour?"

The wind is knocked out of me by her question. It's 10 p.m. I can't move my things alone. Nor do I have enough money to go to a motel.

"I don't know." I force the words out through tired lips. I wasn't ready to dwell on it. I sit straighter and smile. "Don't worry about it."

I lift my backpack and rest it on my lap. "I am sorry but I have to leave."

She motions to the waiter for the check. "Wait a minute, I'll drop you."

My body is so stiff, I am afraid it's going to snap like a twig at any moment. "You don't have to. I'll walk. It will help with digestion." I grin but she's having none of it.

She quickly pays, leaving a generous tip before getting to her feet.

Outside, two of her bodyguards are waiting for us as we approach her sleek black car.

"I'll be home after dropping Summer at her place." River tells the muscular black man in the suit.

"We are coming with you."

He holds the back door open for us. River stiffens beside me. "That's not necessary. I can drive. We didn't consume alcohol."

"Mr. Montgomery wants us to accompany you and your friend." The other one with brown hair pipes up.

River purses her lips. "You told him I am here."

He holds his tongue. The man gripping the back door clears his throat. "Mrs. Montgomery?"

"I am going to drop Summer off. If you two are going to stop me, I'll just call a cab."

"Ma'am," The brunet glances at his partner in uncertainty.

Without another word, River moves forward, opens the driver's door, and gets in. "Hop in, Summer."

Hugging my backpack to my chest, I round the car and get in. The man shuts the back door and backs off as River starts the engine and pulls away from the curb into the chilly night.

"You look stunned." River comments.

"Kind of... That was something."

She flushes. "Yeah. I never argued with my security. It's a first."

"Why do you need so many bodyguards?"

She grips the wheel a bit tighter. "My husband is *very* protective of me."

I hug my backpack and watch her intently. "Are you happy in your marriage?"

She glances at me for a second. "I was."

I'm at a loss for words. The car ride is silent after her blunt response.

"Do you have a place to go, Summer?"

I open my mouth but she cuts me a glare. "Don't lie. You asked me a question. I answered truthfully. Now I want you to be honest with me. I read that text from your landlady."

I close my eyes, dropping my head against the headrest. Panic settles in my stomach at the thought of what awaits me. The dread falls over me as I attempt to come to grips with what was going to happen.

"Summer?"

"I'll be fine. I can crash at my friend's place."

"All right. I'll have my bodyguards move your things into storage space nearby and then I'll take you to your friend's place."

There's not an ounce of doubt when it comes to Raleigh. He has always been there for me. And he'd come to me with just one phone call. And he would be so pissed if I didn't tell him sooner.

But he is going through a rough time. Like me, Raleigh doesn't like the audience when he is down. He stays low. He avoids even me when darkness takes over. He needs some time alone. I can't go to him. But I don't have anywhere else to go.

I take a shuddering breath. "I'll appreciate it if you arrange for the storage space." I look at her and smile, praying that it's convincing. "But you don't have to drive me to Raleigh's place. I'll just call him."

"I won't be able to sleep tonight if I left you all alone at this hour to fend for yourself."

At this moment, I realize that except for Raleigh no one ever cared for me. And to have River worry for my safety makes me happy.

We just met today and somehow, I already feel closer to her. She is a resilient woman. She had many melancholy reflections of her life throughout the day. Any other person would've just respected my wishes and dropped me off.

But I am coming to think that she is unlike most people. Because she is insisting on going the extra mile to make sure I have a roof over my head. At least for tonight.

And for some reason, I don't want to lie to her anymore.

"My friend, Raleigh. He is going through a messy breakup right now. And I don't want to invade his space."

The car rolls to a stop at the side of the road. River faces me. "If you don't want to go there then where would you go?"

"I don't know. I don't have enough money to spend the night at a motel. I am broke, River. And I am scared. So scared that I feel like throwing up. Normally, I fight tooth and nail and never back down from my problems but this time I am helpless. And I hate feeling helpless."

Silence fills the confines of the car for several minutes. Breathing out, I meet her stare.

River reaches for the box of tissues lying in the backseat and passes it to me. That's when the wetness on my cheeks registers. I am crying again. A despair-filled laughter bubbles from my throat.

My fingers shake so much that I can't grasp the feathery light tissue and it's so pathetic that I bow my head, exhausted.

River replaces my fingers, taking the tissue she reaches forward and wipes my tears. "Shh..."

"Nothing is permanent. Not even bad days." River murmurs my words to me gently.

Hot tears sting my eyes. I am missing my mom so much. I want her comforting arms around me. Her memories, her familiar scent of home, everything begins suffocating me.

Just when I'm about to completely lose it, River unbuckles her seatbelt, then mine. She shuffles closer and wraps her arms around me. Just like I did this afternoon.

She rubs my back as I will the pain to uncoil around my chest.

We stay like this for a few minutes before leaning back in our seats.

"I have a proposition for you." She says after a beat.

I face her. "What proposition?"

"Why don't you move into my apartment in downtown L.A.?"

"What?" I choke out.

"My husband wanted me to sell the apartment I was living in before marriage. I always followed his commands without questioning him but for some reason, I couldn't do it. And I am glad I didn't. He wanted me to be dependent on him completely. He manages my cards, my money, practically my life." She says with a hard expression. "Anyway, I kept delaying contacting the property agent for my apartment, and as the months went by, he forgot about it too. Maybe because he believed I would never go against him."

She looks at me. "You could stay there. For however long you wish to. This way, if he investigates, he'd think you bought my apartment."

"River, this is a big deal. Do you know what you're offering me? You don't even know me. You shouldn't lay your trust so

easily in people. I could be a con artist.”

She lifts a shoulder. “Or I could be one. You spent the day with me knowing nothing about me or my background. I have bodyguards following me. Why did *you* trust me so easily?”

She has a point. She could be anyone. A mafia princess. Truth is, we don’t know each other at all and yet the fact we are here proves that we already trust each other deeply. I am in need. And she is willing to help. She wants to keep her apartment and I need a roof over my head. It sounds like a win-win.

“If I agreed to do this, I am paying rent.”

She begins to object but I hold my hand. “No. If I am staying at your place, I am paying for it.”

River smiles. “All right. But you will pay the same amount you were paying for the *witch* and not a cent more.”

My brows furrow. She can’t rent her luxurious apartment for pennies’ worth. “But—”

“No buts. The only reason I am even allowing you to pay rent is that I am aware you wouldn’t accept this otherwise. I don’t need the money, Summer. I am filthy rich. And besides, you are kind of doing me a favor by agreeing to do this.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

I smile at her, the damn tears welling in my eyes again. “Yes. Thank you so much.” I whisper.

She smiles and wipes my tears. “We are friends, remember?”

I nod.

“So no need to thank me.”

I swallow thickly and nod again. “You’re an angel.”

She chuckles. “No, Summer. I am just a normal human, helping another in need.”

She starts the engine again. “Let’s do this, shall we?”

My lips lift. “Let’s do this.”



Within a matter of couple hours, my boxes were moved from the dingy hallway of my apartment building and placed in storage space. All thanks to River and her bodyguards.

Life is unpredictable. Who'd have thought I would go from being homeless to meet a kind woman who would offer me her home? Everything happens for a reason. In the end, it's all for the best. I lost my place but I gained a friend.

My heart was breaking this morning but now it's filled with hope again. Not all are bad in this world. People like River are a prime example of that.

I crane my neck to look at my apartment's window one last time. As I watch, a lump grows in my throat. The lights are on. The couple has moved in already.

Time to say goodbye. I close my eyes.

Thank you. You've shielded me from rains, harsh summers, and cold winter nights. Thank you for witnessing some of my great memories and bad days. Above all, thank you for being something constant for the past years. Our time together has come to an end. But you are the closest thing to home for me. I'll think of you often. Goodbye.

"Ready to go?" River asks as she stands beside me.

Opening my lids, I smile at the rectangle window last time and nod. "Yes."

I feel so tired. My legs feel boneless. The last bit of strength has left me. I just want to sleep for a long, long time.

We walk back to her car. Rubbing my cold palms, I turn my head to stare at the building one last time. End of a chapter. Time to start a new one.

I open the passenger's door open and freeze.

"What is it?"

"I think I heard something." I frown.

"You're just tired. Come on, let's go."

I shrug and bend to get in but I hear it again. My eyes widen. I straighten, spin on my heels and take off, running in the direction of the sound.

I hear the car door opening and slamming shut. Then footsteps follow.

“Summer!”

I sprint until I am at the end of the darkened alley connected to the building’s entrance. I skid to a stop, River joining me a second later.

“I don’t usually curse... but what the fuck?” She pants and sags against the brick wall.

“Oh, my god! Look!” I point a trembling finger to the ground. When I sink to my knees, River steps closer to look at it.

Golden furry face peeks in between old newspapers and other rubbish. A set of brown eyes locks on mine. As soon as he recognizes me, he lets out a small whine.

“Goldie,” My lower lip trembles. Hearing my voice, he recognizes me and comes out of the newspaper castle he was hiding under.

I reach a hand for him. He pokes my palm with his nose for a second before launching himself into my waiting arms.

I gather the furry bundle and hug him to my chest. “I found you,” I whisper. Then I say it again. And one more time. I rock him as tears leak from my eyes. He burrows his head in my coat, his tail wagging.

“Where did you go? I looked for you everywhere.”

He whines, wiggling and sniffing.

“I was so scared. So scared.”

He barks as if to say he was scared too.

“You are not allowed to leave my side. Ever.” Lifting the tiny cuteness up, I stare at him. “You are bound to me, you hear me? Don’t scare mommy like that again.” My chin trembles. He soothes me by licking my jaw.

I hug him again. Closing my eyes when his paws cling to my coat.

Upon feeling a hand on my shoulder, I look to the side and find River kneeling beside me. Her eyes are brimming and a soft smile is playing on her lips. She pets his head and he turns to lick her hand.

“Let’s get you both home.” She says and we share a smile.

Chapter Nine

Archer

Three weeks later...

I lean against the wall of the elevator. With mounting impatience, I watch the digits on the digital display screen. My grip tightens on the strap of my black briefcase.

I inhale a deep breath and let it out slowly. I check my watch. It's half past midnight. My phone hasn't stopped vibrating for the last thirty minutes. Sighing, I take it out.

Fifteen missed calls from mother. Seven from my father.

Series of messages and voice messages from my employees. I am sure all of them contain best wishes for the new year. It's exactly why I don't check any of them and put the phone back in my pocket.

I hate new year celebrations. There's nothing to be happy about it. It just serves as a reminder of what I had lost.

They say time heals everything. It's a fucking lie. Time heals nothing. Not the wound left behind and certainly not the gaping hole inside of you. It just helps you learn to live with it. To exist with the pain ever present. With the hole still there. With your heart missing.

You feel it. The absence of what you lost. Every new year is a reminder of it.

Stabbing my fingers through my hair, I swallow hard. In a flash, the four walls begin to close in on me. The pressure on my chest increases and I wrench my tie loose. Unbuttoning the top two buttons, I attempt not to succumb to the panic attack.

I stare hard at the digital display, willing the elevator to climb faster.

The door slides open to the twenty-fifth floor and I release a harsh breath. Finally.

As I step out, I shed the sorrow and anxiety in the elevator behind me. It's like a switch that has gone off inside of me. The enormity of the pain in my chest that was threatening to blow up is successfully smothered down.

I specifically chose to live in one of the tallest buildings in downtown L.A. because it offers privacy. My unit is on the twenty-fifth floor and it takes up half of the floor. The apartment next to mine acquires the other half.

That's what I wanted. Solitude. Little to no contact with anyone.

I may be the "coolest boss" to my employees but outside the office, I don't like to mingle.

That's why I spent New Year's Eve working in my office instead of going to the parties I was invited to. I declined to join my parents for dinner as well.

They should quit inviting me to such things because they know I would never show up.

As I near my apartment door, blaring music coming from next door assaults my eardrums.

I missed the time when I had this floor all to myself. The apartment next to mine was vacant for a year. It was a peaceful period.

During that year, I tried buying that place so that I would continue to lead a reclusive life. But the owner refused to sell.

It was fine by me because it remained unoccupied. Up until three weeks ago.

While I never crossed paths with my neighbor, I was made to endure their interesting choice of music.

The most unfortunate thing is, they like to watch movies at full volume too.

Often, I wondered walking next door and having a talk about noise pollution. Because it was getting to the point where I couldn't take it anymore. But I refrained. I didn't want unnecessary drama.

Issuing a complaint against my neighbor was the right step but I never got around to doing it.

I should've known better than coming home tonight.

The sudden loud female laughter startles me and it's followed by the barking of a dog.

Sighing, I quickly unlock the door and get inside. A shower might help.



Wrapping a towel around my waist, I grab another from the rack to dry my hair. Wet strands fall over my forehead as I stroll out of the bathroom.

The soft glow in my darkened bedroom accompanied by the faint vibration attracts my attention. I walk toward the nightstand where it's resting. Glancing down, I read the notification.

It's from Hannah.

After a few seconds, the screen turns black. Before I could pick it up, it lit up again with a new message. Then another and another. She sends a series of messages.

I shake my head, a small smile playing on my lips. I don't have to open the messages to know what they contain. Pictures. From her little getaway with Raleigh.

It's their first New Year as a couple and to celebrate it, they embarked on a road trip.

In the beginning, they were in a fake relationship but they ended up falling in love.

I initially refused to talk to either of them since the wedding day in Hawaii. On that day, my trust was shattered. The pain so blinding shot through me when I learned about their fake engagement.

I was deceived. By two of my closest friends. I was mad. But more than that, I was disappointed in them. The betrayal cut me deep because they knew. They knew about my aversion to lies and liars. They were aware I was going to get hurt but they still did it.

I didn't want to understand. I didn't want to listen to their reasonings. So I shut them out. I ignored both of their attempts to reach out to me. They sent text messages when their phone calls went unanswered. They even began to flood my emails to make me respond.

While Hannah and Raleigh knew about my dislike for lies, they didn't know the reason. The realization dawned on me after a few days and I began feeling guilty for not allowing them to explain their actions.

Another couple of days flew by. While the sting was gone, the memories of their lies throughout the week in Hawaii were embedded inside of me.

The choice of whether to give them a chance or not was snatched from me when Hannah sought me out. And I was grateful for that. Hannah and I are close. It was clear from her sad eyes that this rift between us was affecting her as much as it did me.

If it weren't for Raleigh's last-minute intervention, I would've walked out on years of my friendship with them. Watching them both misty-eyed, ripped my fucking wounds. My anger was forgotten and I embraced them and accepted their sincere apology.

Chuckling the towel into the laundry basket, I pull on gray sweatpants before heading to my bed.

As I lay on my back, the words escape me. The ones I always say before my eyes fall shut every night. The words that often linger long after I've fallen asleep. The words that would never cover my emotions. The words that destroy the slightest bit of

happiness I might have felt throughout the day. Because those words serve as a reminder of my deeds.

“Forgive me, Amy.”



My eyes pop open. A vein throbs in my forehead. Glancing at the illuminating digits on my nightstand indicates it's three in the morning. I managed to get two hours of sleep tonight.

Fortunately, it wasn't the nightmare that woke me up. It was the pulsating rhythm of the music from next door.

This is a four-bedroom, 4.5 baths apartment. The master bedroom falls in the corner that is quite far from the wall I share with my neighbor. And still, the music manages to travel through the wide space and reach me.

This is heights.

Getting off the bed, I quickly throw on a white t-shirt over my sweats and stride out of the bedroom.

With a hand, I push the hair back off my forehead as I cross through the living room and reach the front door.

I think it's about time I introduced myself to my loud neighbor.

Chapter Ten

Summer

“I look silly.” River giggles as we stand in front of a huge floor-length mirror in the living room.

I grin at our reflection. She is in a sexy red dress. And I am wearing a sparkly golden dress. “We look hot.”

She pauses, her eyes meeting mine through the mirror for a moment. Then she bursts out laughing.

Tilting my chin up, I arch a brow. “You don’t like my hair?”

River rolls her lips between her teeth as she watches me tuck the short bright red strands of my wig behind my ear. While doing so, I accidentally pull it, making it slide off my head.

She snorts and begins laughing again.

“Don’t laugh!”

She laughs hard, clutching her sides.

“Stop right this second or I’ll snatch your wig.” I make a move to go for it and she takes a step back, almost stumbling.

I bought these specifically for tonight’s party. And she is laughing!

She pushes the blue bangs off her eyes and regards me with amusement. “You’re drunk.”

“So are you.” I counter.

We both stare at each other before giving in to laughter.

When something wet and warm touches my calf, I look down. “Goldie!” I pick him up. He has gotten a bit bigger in three weeks. “You look so handsome! Look!” I hold him facing the mirror. He lets out an excited *woof*.

He is sporting a hot pink wig. We would’ve removed it if he was irritated but he seems to like it. Just like how his mommy likes her red wig.

“Wait let me get my phone.” River disappears on wobbly legs. I hoist him up, rocking him to the beat of The Weeknd’s song playing in the background.

When River returns, we pose together and she snaps mirror selfies. I straighten his bling personalized blue collar with his name and snuggle him as she takes our pictures.

“My turn!” She takes him from my arms. I begin taking our pictures.

When Beyonce’s Single Ladies starts playing, River squeals. “Dance with me!”

She puts Goldie down and pulls me into the middle of the living room under the disco ball I installed.

My jaw drops when she moves. Like really moves. She launches into a seductive dance, her hips moving smoothly. Damn, my friend can dance. It’s like she is feeling the lyrics.

Don’t pay him any attention. Just cried my tears, for three good years. Ya can’t be mad at me.

River throws her hands in the air, her blue wig slides off her head and her thick raven curls fall all around her. The shimmery disco ball lights cover our bodies and the entire dark room, giving the vibe of a nightclub.

Joining her, I lose myself in the music. I throw my head back in laughter when Goldie begins circling us with his tail wagging.

The alcohol in my bloodstream makes me feel free. I feel good. Life is good.

She shimmies to the table where party accessories are lying. She wraps a red feather boa around her neck and picks a yellow one and saunters back to me.

Her glimmering eyes meet mine as she lifts her hands and wraps the boa around my neck. I just shake my head. A few minutes ago, she was complaining about looking silly.

The song ends and she runs barefoot to choose her next song. NO by Meghan Trainor floods the speakers on full volume.

She twists, her cheeks flushed. Grinning, she begins singing.

I think it's so cute and I think it's so sweet.

She wags her eyebrows, probably signaling me to sing the next line and I do. With a sassy walk, I act as if I am in a music video.

How you let your friends encourage you to try and talk to me.

When we are a foot away, we sing together...

But let me stop you there. Oh, before you speak

When Megan's voice sings *Nah to the ah to the, no, no, no* River and I twist and twirl. Laughing and singing.

My cheeks hurt from how much I am smiling as we work it on the dance floor. I mean the living room floor.

Sweat trickles down my back but I don't stop. It is the best New Year's party I've ever had. Raleigh is out of town and it's the first time we are apart on New Year's Eve. But I have zero complaints. He has a girlfriend now.

I am ecstatic that Hannah and Raleigh reconciled. They even managed to make up with Archer.

And I have my new best friend. River Gibson.

"I've missed you," I shout over the music.

Her face grows soft. "I missed you too." She hugs me then. I squeeze her.

After moving into River's apartment, I met her only a couple more times before she said she had to get away for some time. When I asked where she was going, she just said, "*Far away from here.*"

I didn't pry. She was running away. From something or someone. I didn't question it but made her promise to keep in touch. And she kept her word.

She called me almost every day. And when she couldn't, she texted me. Then today, she gave me the best gift for New Year by coming here. It was a surprise visit. She didn't call or text informing me about her arrival.

I was so happy that it made me emotional. We hugged for a long time before moving inside and then we talked for a couple of hours.

Then we went shopping. We bought things and the party for three commenced.

My feet are killing me but I am so happy that I don't want this night to end. Ever.

"You know I never had a house party or been to one before." The confession pours out. As soon as we embrace each other, things just seem to get out of my mouth without any notice.

"Me neither."

That surprises me.

Pulling away, I ask, "Really?"

She sighs, "Yeah. It was against the reputation of my family."

My eyebrows go up. There are so many things we haven't shared with each other. I am not ready yet. And it appears like she isn't either. Because she quickly refills our drinks.

She made a margarita with her secret recipe. While I am not a drinker. I loved the cocktail she made and I lost count of the number of drinks we consumed. I can sense the hangover from hell coming already.

"Oh, we forgot to take pictures in party sunglasses!" I exclaim, spilling the precious liquid.

She chuckles as she takes my glass and rests it on the table next to hers. "Yeah, let's get those baddies out."

I choose silver star-shaped sunglasses and she dons pink heart-shaped sunglasses.

Holding the phone at arms-length, I snap several selfies of us.

She is something else. She doesn't judge me for my choice of clothing. She enjoys my quirks. She accepts me as I am. And

that's what you need in a true friend. I am very lucky to have River as my friend.

She comes from a reputable family. An heiress. And yet, she is unlike the stuck-up women I've come across.

River is cool. She is down to earth. She is a breath of fresh air.

"So are you going to travel some more?" I ask.

Before she could answer, there is a sharp knock on the door.

She frowns. "You expecting anyone?"

I shake my head and everything blurs for a second. Fuck, I am definitely drunk. "No. Are you?"

She giggles. "No one knows I am in L.A., Summer."

"Then who is it?" My eyes widen. "I think it's the ghost I see every night."

She gapes. "What?"

"Yeaaaah," I whisper. "I think I see them lurking in the empty rooms in this apartment at night."

"You're being paranoid."

"I am not."

She rolls her eyes. And now I am certain she is drunk. Because River is way too polite for her own good. She doesn't roll her eyes or throw sass. "I've lived here for years. This place isn't haunted."

"Hmm. Maybe. Maybe not." I am afraid of the dark and I have never in my life stayed in a gigantic apartment before. This place has four bedrooms. Four! Every night I sleep with a light on because of the ridiculous size of my room.

I never sleep with a foot out of my blanket in fear of the ghost under my bed grabbing it. I am not going to share this with her though. I am not *that* drunk.

This time, the knock is more urgent. Goldie barks and dashes in the direction of my bedroom. Maybe he is nervous.

I stride into my bedroom and grab a baseball bat as Goldie hides under the bed.

Kneeling by the bed, I bend my head to stare at him. “Stay here. Mommy will be back soon.” I hold my hand out and Goldie nuzzles his nose into it. With one last caress, I get up. And immediately regret it.

Fuck. Everything is spinning. Blinking a couple of times, I try to focus.

When I walk back to the living room, River is swaying. I hurry and grab her and direct her to the couch. Pushing her down gently, I tell her. “Sit tight. I’ll be back.”

With the bat in hand, I hit pause on the music and start toward the door.

When I am a foot away, the doorknob rattles. I jump, almost peeing my pants. My fingers shiver when I lift the baseball bat, ready to hit the ghost across the face.

When the door flies open, I yelp, dropping the bat on my fucking foot. The pain is sobering and I promptly bend and pick up the bat. My hands tremble from fear. My pulse is racing.

The sight of black leather shoes directly in front of me robs me of my senses. There’s a man in my apartment. Not a ghost. Or is it a ghost who likes to wear expensive shoes? Could be because I am staying in a luxurious residential building. Why did I assume the ghost of this building would be broke?

I shake my head. Why the fuck am I thinking about the ghost’s financial status when my life is in danger? I look up and my mouth goes slack. With effort, I manage to push to my feet.

Standing in front of me, dressed in a three-piece black Armani suit is a tall man with a muscular physique.

He is wearing a lot of black. Even the shirt underneath the suit and the tie is black. His entire persona is dark and... mysterious. And just like his suit, his thick hair is black. This man is not a ghost. He is the devil himself.

When I meet his black eyes that are darker than night, I stumble back. There’s something about the ferocity of his gaze

that seems awfully familiar. I shake my head a little to clear the fog in my brain.

His strong jaw, straight nose, and olive skin come together to build a picture of perfection. I have seen this face before. I think. But where?

He prowls further inside the living room with such confidence that it stuns me.

“Where’s my wife?” His deep voice resonates across the living room.

“Excuse me?”

A muscle jumps in his jaw. “My wife. Where is she?”

A rustle behind me followed by a loud gasp makes him look over my shoulder. I watch as his entire body stills. His eyes darken. Sidestepping me, he strides forward.

Confused, I turn around and find him standing face-to-face with River.

Reaching up, he cups her cheek. “I’ve been looking for you, angel.” His voice is soft but it hardens when he speaks his next words, “How dare you run from me?”

River’s face is deathly white and her whole body trembles as she stares at him. Her husband.

“Da—”

He presses a finger against her lips. “Shh... We’ll talk about this later. Let’s get you home first.”

His words wake her up and she takes a hasty step back.

He takes a step toward her. “Tsk. Tsk. That’s not wise.” She takes several back. But doesn’t escape him. Because he is right there as he erases the gap easily.

With an arm circling her waist, he pulls her flush to his chest. “You have no idea how angry I am. You shouldn’t test me now, angel.”

“Let go of me. I am not going anywhere with you!”

“Oh, I don’t remember asking you.”

“Fuck you.” Her hands land on his chest as she tries to push him.

There’s a frightening pause before he lifts her hand in his. “Where are your rings?”

The question makes her shudder. “I threw them away.” Her voice is small.

“You are in a lot of trouble.”

“Get out!”

I march toward them. “You heard her, buddy.”

He takes a solid minute to look at me. Then his eyes slide back to River. “Let’s not trouble your friend any longer. We can talk about this at home.”

She pushes him with all her might and he releases her. River hugs herself as she stares at him with unshed tears. “I am not coming. I’ve told you that. I want a divorce. I—”

He cuts her off when he steps into her personal space. “Divorce?” He asks incredulously.

She lifts her chin. “Yes.”

His eyes blister into hers. “Well, until we get a divorce you’re my wife, aren’t you?”

She doesn’t get a chance to answer as he jerks her left hand up. He fishes something out of his pocket. My eyes widen when I see what it is. The rings. Her wedding band and the diamond ring.

She struggles but he thrusts them back to where they used to be. On her ring finger.

River is shocked by his actions. Her pale green eyes are locked on the rings. “Where did you get them?”

“Doesn’t matter.” He takes advantage of her stunned silence. With an arm under her back and the other under her knees, he lifts her up.

“Put me down!”

“No.”

With a fluid motion, he turns and carries her across the living room and out the door.

Ruff! Ruff!

Goldie flies past my frozen state and dashes out the open door. That shakes me out of my stupor.

River's husband carried her out of here without her consent! He manhandled my friend in my presence. That's barbaric!

"Argh!" I roar and take off, following my puppy who's braver than me.

The marbled floor of the hallway is cold against my bare feet as I come to a stop. He is pressing the elevator's call button while River thrashes in his arms.

Goldie tugs at his slacks, making a rumbling sound. He glares at my fur baby.

"I said let go!" River pants.

The sight rouses more anger than I felt a second ago. My body begins to shake with rage.

"Release my friend. NOW!" I scream at the top of my lungs.

He twists his head and watches me and my raised baseball bat with a bored expression.

River gasps.

I march to him and lift the bat. "Put her down. Or you die."

He thinks I am bluffing.

"I will beat the shit out of you. I mean it. I won't let you kidnap my friend. I will fight till my last breath if I have to."

When he snorts, I swing my bat. With all my might, ready to hear the crunch of his skull but instead nothing happens.

What the hell just happened?

I blink twice and stare at my hands. The bat is missing. What?

Then I look up and find the bat in his hand. River is now on her feet and her husband is towering over me. The hard lines on his face are tightened as he pins me in place with his black eyes, a thunderous look shadowing them.

“You could’ve hurt my wife.” He growls and I pale. I glance at River. Her eyes are round and she is trembling.

“N-no. I was trying to hit you!”

He takes a threatening step toward me. “You are intoxicated.” He says with disgust. “While it was amusing that you think you could tackle me, your bat was inches away from my wife’s face.”

I swallow hard. His unnerving eyes are trained on me. This isn’t the first time someone intimidated me. So I don’t show it that he scares the shit out of me. I focus on my friend. “I’m so sorry, River.”

She shakes her head and tries to reach me but her husband pulls her back. He gets in my face. “If my reflexes weren’t quick, she could’ve gotten hurt. And you don’t want to know what I do to people who hurt my wife.”

“I suggest you back away from her.” Another deep tenor voice makes me still. My skin prickles in response. Recognition of that voice floods me and I turn my head to the side.

Archer pushes away from the doorway and walks in our direction. A shiver shoots down my spine when he faces River’s husband. “Back. Off.”

Chapter Eleven

Summer

Either I am drunk as a skunk or my mind is playing a trick. Because Archer and River's husband are nose to nose.

The man who kicked me out of his building. The man who insulted me and tried to kick me out for the *second* time in Hawaii is defending me.

This has to be a dream. I reach up and pinch myself and wince. Nope. Definitely real. He is here. Archer is here.

He is wearing a white fitted t-shirt and gray sweatpants.

I gawk, unable to ignore the way his sweats are hanging off his narrow waist. His hair is disheveled. Like he just woke up. He also smells divine. Like he showered before going to bed.

Wait a second.

Wait a goddamn second.

If this isn't a dream. And Archer is indeed here looking like he just got out of bed. That means he *lives* here.

All this time, I was living next door to him and I didn't even see him.

River mentioned a neighbor who kept to himself and barely interacted with her.

The silent neighbor I never crossed paths with is... Archer Kim?

River's husband clenches his jaw. "You stay out of it."

Archer tucks his hands in his pockets and regards him with an unreadable gaze.

Despite his relaxed posture, I sense tension radiating off him. His brows pinch as he tilts his head. "I decline."

River's husband's eyes narrow. "You decline?"

Goldie lets out a small bark. Archer looks down at him. The attention makes Goldie excited and he begins wiggling his tail.

Bending down, Archer lifts him. Goldie rubs his face against his chest, inhaling his scent. Seriously? Now my dog is smitten with him.

When I look up, my eyes lock with his. For a few short seconds, all I can do is stare. There's something in his dark brown eyes. Something I can't really name. Oddly, it makes me feel... safe.

"Take him to the apartment. Lock the door behind you."

I open my mouth to argue when he speaks, "Do as you're told for once, Summer."

His expression is unmoving, his eyes never leaving mine.

I clamp it shut, take my baby from him and walk back to my apartment. But instead of doing what he said, I lock Goldie inside and charge over to them.

He sighs as he watches me like he expected me to defy him.

"Where were we?" Archer asks no one in particular. "Ah, yes. I just witnessed a man threaten a woman half his size in my hallway."

Silence.

The hallway is buzzing with tension.

"Hmm." River's husband murmurs. "Let's pretend that I was. What are you going to do about it?"

Archer looks at him with a piercing gaze. "I am not a violent man. But that doesn't mean I wouldn't consider becoming one if need be. But the real question is whether there *is* a need for it."

My heart skips a beat. Archer subtly threatened River's husband. He is defending me. The thought makes my insides

feel ticklish.

The man in the black suit doesn't get offended. Instead, he lifts a single brow. His voice is dark as he says, "Is she your woman?"

I inhale sharply at the question.

"What if she is?"

"Then I think you should have her on a short leash. So she would keep her nose out of other's business."

My eyes flare. What the hell? Indignation burns in me.

Archer's lips tighten in a thin line, his fingers curling in tight fists. "She will do whatever she damn well pleases. If I were you, I would shut my mouth and think twice before disrespecting her."

The way they are snarling at each other doesn't sit right with me. I always wondered about the reasons behind River's somber eyes. Now I know. I hate her husband. If he is this rude with strangers, I don't know what he is like with her.

"Enough!" River snaps. Pushing between the two men. He tears his gaze off Archer and stares down at his wife. She meets her husband's eyes with a hard glare.

"Stop it." She grinds out. "Fine. I'll go with you." Her cheeks are red with anger.

"River..." I interrupt their intense staring contest. "You don't have to. He can't force you."

She smiles wryly. "It's okay. I'll live."

Snatching his wrist, she enters the waiting elevator. As the elevator door closes, I notice one thing. As soon as she touched her husband, Archer and I became invisible to him. All that mattered was his wife.

He didn't take his eyes off her since she clasped his wrist.

What just happened?

The booze and the confrontation, the grand entry of Archer, and their almost fight overwhelm me. So much so, that my legs give up on me.

I wait for my body to hit the marble floor but I am suddenly surrounded by strong arms. The warmth of the embrace makes my lids flutter open.

Archer's face comes into view. He's wearing a frown as he stares down at me. Reaching up, I try to erase the lines between his brows with my finger.

"Summer."

My name on his lips makes me smile. For the first time, he uttered my name without hatred or irritation lacing it. Out of all the things I wanted to say to this infuriating man, "Mmm. You smell good," are my last words before darkness takes me under.



Something wet swipes against my cheek. I try to open one eye and cringe as the blinding sunlight streaming from the large window assaults my eyeballs.

Shielding my eyes, I crack an eye open and find Goldie licking my face.

I lift the blanket and he gets the hint. He climbs inside and I spoon him, snuggling the softness.

"I feel like shit." I croak, my mouth is dry as hell.

I always sleep with a water bottle. It's still resting on the nightstand. But my bones aren't ready to function yet. I allow myself to cuddle Goldie for ten more seconds before scooting over to grab it.

My lids are still pinched shut as I gulp down the water. Silently cursing when it escapes my lips and dribbles down my chin.

With the back of my hand, I wipe my mouth. The action triggers a memory.

"I don't feel so good." I moan. There's a burning sensation building again in my throat. And then I am reaching for the commode.

I make it just in time, and bracing my hands on the seat, I begin vomiting.

“Why drink when you can’t handle it?” Archer wipes my brows, his other hand securing my long hair.

My stomach churns as I slowly turn my head to look at him. “Why care for me when you hate me?”

He doesn’t say anything after that. Just keeps holding me. Keeps supporting my tired form whenever I go to rise on my knees for throwing up.

I have no idea how much time we spent in the bathroom but Archer doesn’t make a move to leave.

When the vomiting stops and my body trembles from the dry heaving, I tell him that he can leave now.

But he doesn’t.

When the ordeal finally ends, I slump back to his chest.

He brings a bottle of water to my lips. He helps me drink it because all the vomiting has exhausted me. There’s no energy left to lift a finger.

“No more.”

He glares at me and makes me finish it.

When a few droplets spill out and over my chin, he wipes it with the pad of his thumb. The tender touch makes my heart ache for some reason. I am not used to this.

“Let’s get you out of here.” He says.

In a daze, I feel him picking me up and carrying me out like a child. The last thought that plays in my mind before passing out again is that I ended up in his arms. Once again.

He stayed with me. After I passed out, he could’ve left, but he didn’t. And I am grateful that he didn’t.

But he saw me puking my guts out.

I cover my face with my hands. Then frown. Pulling back, I take a glance down. I remember wearing a sparkly dress, a crimson wig, and goggles.

I even had it on when River left with her husband. I had no idea how I didn’t think of taking the stupid wig and glasses off

while fighting with her husband. He must think I am batshit crazy.

Anyway, my main concern is... I am not in my sparkly dress.

I am wearing the pink flamingo-printed oversized tee I usually sleep in.

He changed my clothes.

My temple throbs, my embarrassment deepening. He shouldn't have undressed me. What pisses me off more is that I don't fucking remember any of it.

Agitated and furiously blushing at the thought of him seeing me naked, I jump out of the bed.

"Fuck," Grabbing my head, I stagger back and fall back on the bed. What the hell did River mix in our cocktails?

My eyes fly open. River. I need to check up on her.

My head begins to pound when I don't see my phone in the usual spot. At the nightstand. Why do I keep forgetting where I put my things?

My gaze flits across the room and I spot the phone resting on the dresser.

With a deep breath, I try to stand again. I manage to not stumble as I slowly walk toward the dresser.

The battery is dead. Of course! I place it back down and straighten, ready to drag myself to look for the charger. My eyes lift and I jump at my reflection.

Yesterday, River insisted on me wearing makeup. But now my face is bare. I expected mascara stains and smeared lipstick. Because I don't remember taking it off.

"She can't stay still even in her sleep." I hear a deep voice grumble seconds before a warm wet cloth touches underneath my eyes.

I try to open my eyes but still when I feel a gust of air against my ear. "Go back to sleep."

My brows furrow at the order and open my lips to say something. A finger presses against my mouth. It silences me.

But I part my lips and take the digit in my mouth, gently biting it.

Having lost control over my senses, my tongue begins to swirl around the finger, moaning as heat travels through my body.

“Summer.” The male voice is low and much deeper than when he commanded me to go back to sleep.

“Mmm...” I answer, my eyes still shut.

“You don’t know what you’re doing, Summer.” He growls. The low sound hits straight between my thighs.

I want to argue with him. I know exactly what I am doing. I want to taste him. And I want him to shut up and let me do as I wish. It’s been so long since someone touched me, aroused me.

“You taste like candy.”

I hear a clearing of the throat before the finger is pulled away from my mouth.

I moan in frustration but the man begins to trace the wet cloth over my lips and cheeks. The soft caress helps me forget the surroundings and I drift back to sleep again.

“No,” I whisper in horror. “No, please no.” I twist away from my reflection and lean against the dresser. Please tell me this was a nightmare and not a memory. I did not just do that.

My fingertips trace my lips. I balk when my brain replays the memory.

Why would I do that?

My face is hot and my skull feels like it’s going to split in two.

I don’t even like Archer Kim!

How am I ever going to face him after this?

What all went down last night? And why is it coming back to me in bits and pieces?

Don’t torment me, brain. Please. Just finish me at once by showing me all the things that happened last night. I can’t handle any more flashbacks, please.

I commit a mistake by shutting my eyes for a second because there it is. The picture, the feel of his finger in my mouth.

I don't want to live on this planet anymore! After what I did... I think it's time to relocate to mars!

My stomach churns as I helplessly watch Goldie. "You have the permission to slap me, scratch me, or destroy my favorite rainbow pillow if I ever mention drinking again."

A rustle from the living room brings me back to the present. Putting the plan of moving to mars on the back burner, I move to the bedroom door.

I look over the shoulder at the bed. Goldie is happily jumping and nibbling at the comforter.

Dogs are supposed to be on alert, right? Mine is totally unaware of the activities happening around him.

I shake my head when he stumbles and falls face-first onto my pillow. Then, taking a deep breath, I open the door.

At first, nothing seems out of place. I swear I heard something. But maybe it's the hangover that's playing the trick on my ears.

Shrugging it off, I pad to the living room, rubbing my eyes.

Now that I am out here, I should look for the charger.

I need to call River.

"Morning."

I jump and whirl around so fast that my vision blurs for a second. "Fuck."

A large hand grips my elbow and steadies me. "Are you all right?"

At the question, I slowly look up.

Nothing, and I repeat nothing could have prepared me for what I am seeing right now.

Archer stands in front of me, involuntarily shielding me from the sunlight pouring in from the glass windows.

He is wearing a white button-down shirt and black pants. A gray silk tie is hanging sensually on both sides of his neck. His jet-black hair is wet as if he just had a shower.

I manage to nod and his brow furrows. As if he doesn't believe me. As if he figured out that I am lying. Oh, shit. He hates lying.

I open my mouth to confess that I feel like shit but he quickly releases me. He clears his expression and steps back.

"You need to eat." He reaches up and gathers the two ends of the tie. I watch as he begins tying the knot as he moves. "Eat before your breakfast gets cold."

"You cooked for me?" I ask incredulously.

He stays quiet as he adjusts his tie knot and collar while stepping inside my open kitchen. I follow him aimlessly and when he stops abruptly, I run into his back. He stumbles a bit, then turns around. When his eyes penetrate mine, I blush furiously.

I sucked this man's finger like a lollipop last night. The reminder has me jerking my eyes on the floor.

"Sorry." I grimace.

"What exactly are you sorry for?"

At his dry tone, I look up. Then jerk my gaze to the side. Clearing my throat, I say, "I'm sorry for all the inconvenience you suffered because of me."

It pisses me off when he ignores my apology and moves again. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch him pour juice into a glass that I am pretty sure I didn't buy.

"Drink."

I clench my jaw as I finally slide my eyes back to him. "I'm going to have coffee. But thanks for all this." I wave at the tray of food. I should be grateful but his behavior doesn't help. He is rude.

He only looked after me last night because he thought he had to. I am sure he thinks of himself as a responsible citizen of

society. And any responsible citizen wouldn't abandon a drunk woman.

"Coffee is bad for hangovers. Drink this." He motions to the glass.

His tone is irritated. Not an ounce of concern in it. I don't understand. Why does he act like he cares when he clearly doesn't?

"I'll drink whatever I want." I snap. Then, "Thank you for everything. But you can leave now. I bet you are getting late for work."

"I am the boss. I am sure I can make an exception for one day." He lifts the glass and extends it. "Here."

I frown. "Why are you doing this? Why are you so hell-bent on me drinking the damn juice?"

He is staring at me as if I have lost my mind. "It will help with the headache."

I want to yell that I don't have a headache but something stops me from lying. I also don't want to yield. He can't just boss me around.

When I try to sidestep him, he moves with me. We are so close that his scent fills my nose.

Maybe I am still drunk because I catch myself subtly leaning toward him.

Archer Kim is heartbreakingly handsome. The ire in those dark eyes of his should turn me off. But it doesn't. Instead, it awakens something in me. My stomach tightens.

A wet strand has fallen over his forehead. My fingers itch to touch it. To feel its silky texture. To trace the little frown between his brows. I want to run my fingers into his wet hair and... No. No, no, no.

Alcohol is definitely not for me. Because these thoughts... are messed up. He freaking kicked me out not long ago from his agency.

But he was there for you the entire night.

That doesn't matter. He still can't give me orders. "Move."

He doesn't.

Massaging my temples, I repeat. "I said move."

"No."

"I'm not doing this with you." I turn on my heels but he catches my wrist with the other hand before I can leave.

"Drink the damn juice so I could go to work in peace." He seethes.

"You can't force me, Archer." I grit out.

There's a pause before he finally says, "Suit yourself." He sets the glass on the counter and moves past me to leave the kitchen. I catch him muttering "Nuisance" as he goes.

My fist flexes as I march toward him and stop in front of him before he could go any further. "Take that back."

I glare at his face. His chiseled jaw tightens. Everything about this man is cold. Raleigh told me he is the best boss. A great leader. But all I see in him is bitterness.

"What?" He narrows his eyes.

"I heard you. Take that back."

He shoves his hands in his pockets and examines me. "Do you always do this?"

"Do what?"

He takes a step forward. "Be difficult when you should be grateful. Ranting first thing in the morning. Parading without pants. Take your pick." He stalks toward me with purposeful strides as he speaks. My back hits the door and I startle.

We stand there for a moment. I can feel my face going hot. His eyes flit down, taking in my heaving chest.

With a growl, I shove his chest. "While we are on this topic, I'd like to discuss something. You say that I am parading without pants. But here's the thing, asshole. I don't remember changing into this tee. That means you undressed me while I was fucking unconscious!"

When I go to shove him again, Archer grabs my wrists, his nostrils flaring. "Choose your words very carefully, Summer.

You don't know what you're insinuating."

"Oh, really? So you are telling me I shouldn't be pissed that you changed my clothes while I was out cold?"

"Is that what you believe?"

When I frown, he leans down and levels me with a look. "You don't remember, do you?"

Chapter Twelve

Summer

My mouth starts filling with saliva and the need to move wakes me from my slumber.

The bed beside me dips. “What’s the matter? Do you need anything?”

I stare up and find Archer beside me. “What are you doing here?” I manage to get the question out while I fight the feeling of nausea.

“You passed out in the hallway. I carried you inside.”

“But why are you still here?”

“To make sure you don’t choke on your vomit and die.” He deadpans.

“You don’t want me to die. That means you like meeee.” I giggle.

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

“Nope.”

“Yep.” I get in his face. “You just don’t know it yet. You dig me, Archer Kim.”

“You are delusional.”

“And you are in denial.”

The muscle in his jaw jumps at that.

“I hate liars. And you are one.”

I bristle. Why does he have to remind me of that?

I begin to move, the need to hunch taking over.

His large palm settles on my back. “Don’t move too fast.” He scolds.

“Leave me alone.” I moan, trying to shrug him off.

“No.”

“I don’t want you here.”

“Too fucking bad, little liar.”

Bunching his white t-shirt with my fingers, I speak, “You are so mean. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“You just did.”

My head swims and I collapse against his chest. His strong, hard chest.

I press forward, nuzzling my face in his warmth. It helps with nausea. I don’t feel sick anymore.

“Are you a doctor?” I hiccup.

“What?” He asks, and I feel him winding his muscular arm around me. The gesture makes me smile. The embrace feeds the emptiness inside of me. His warmth satiates the deepest sense of longing. It makes me want to stay like this forever.

Archer breaks the moment by abruptly releasing me.

“Lay down.”

When he starts to help me back to bed, I break out in a sweat. I twist from him in time and vomit all over my dress.

“Fuck.” Archer grunts. Just when I think he’d pull back. He doesn’t. He shocks me by cradling my body as my world spins.

“I’m gonna die.” My eyes roll back as my throat hurts.

“Shut up.” He snaps as he tries to clean me up.

“Time to meet my maker,” I mumble before gagging at the pungent smell.

I wince as I try to reach behind me to get the zipper of my dress.

“What are you doing?”

“I need out.” I huff before saying, “Of this dress.”

“Wait. I’ll take you to the bathroom.”

My lids feel heavy. But I get hold of the zipper and yank it down. The motion pools the dress to my waist.

“Shit.” He gets off the bed. He is about to turn when I throw up again. All over my bra and torso.

Archer turns and hurries to my side when I am about to crash down to bed. He carries me to the bathroom.

“Are you going to be sick again?” He asks.

I shake my head. The action makes me dizzy. I glance down and wrinkle my nose. “I need a shower.”

He slowly sets me on my feet. It’s not even a second before I am staggering. But he steadies me. I stare up to find him contemplating this situation. He looks... troubled as he runs his hand through his hair.

His internal struggles last for a few seconds. Because his hands are fisting my dress that’s bunched around my waist. He lowers my dress until it pools around my feet.

I step out of it and almost fall but Archer wraps his arm around me. “Your t-shirt is ruined,” I mumble.

“Thanks to you.” He says dryly.

“Asshole,” I say under my breath.

“I heard that.”

“Good.” I glare up at him. “Because you are—” My words are halted when it starts raining.

“Whoa. I gotta go.” I struggle against him.

He merely stares at me with controlled anger.

“Seriously? Brute much? I’m getting wet! I need to go get my umbrella.”

“You wanted a fucking shower.” He says and my mouth falls open.

“Oh.” I look around and notice that we’re standing under the shower head. “Shower time!” I reach behind my back, this time to unclasp my lace bra.

But Archer grabs my wrists and rests them on his chest. When I try to wrench them away, he tightens his grip. “Leave it on.”

“But I am gross.”

“Summer,” he bites out and I still.

“Jerk.” I glare at his chest. The water runs in rivulets down his body, making his t-shirt see-through.

Archer moves around, all while keeping me glued to his chest. He quickly washes me the best he can then carries me out and sets me on the bathroom counter.

He exits and quickly returns with a towel. Dries me at record speed and throws a tee in my lap. “Get dressed.”

I look at my pink flamingo-printed tee with concentration and then at him before nodding. I reach back but yelp when I slip off the counter.

He is there. Again. Exhaling a harsh breath, he reaches behind me and unhooks my bra in a second. Then he pulls the tee over my head, and tactfully slides the bra out of the way before pulling it down. All while looking away from me.

In the meantime, I ogle his wet body. “You are a jerk. But you are a hot jerk.”

He grunts and pulls me off the counter so he could reach inside and pull my panties down my legs. As he bends, I lose balance, so I grip his hair to avoid falling.

My hands fall limp at my sides when he gets to his feet and glares at me. His fingers find my hair as he tips my head up. “You are not drinking again. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m serious, Summer. You shouldn’t drink this much. It’s not safe.”

“Okay, Dad.” I giggle and he tightens his hold.

“I want to spank you until you feel my handprints for a fucking week. Not only were you reckless drinking like that, but you also put yourself at risk by provoking that tool earlier.”

“I didn’t—”

“I am not finished talking.” He grinds out. His other hand delves into my hair. “Instead of calling the cops, you decided to fight that man with your baseball bat. What are you? A superwoman?”

I squint at him.

“Answer me.”

I swallow then say, “I think I am gonna throw up again.”

As soon as I say it, he rushes me to the bowl.

My eyes fly open. What happens next becomes clear. After spending a long time holding me in the bathroom, he carried me to bed.

He left my apartment then. But was back after changing out of his wet clothes. Then proceeded to wipe the remnants of makeup off my face because the hasty shower couldn’t.

And how can I forget the finger-sucking thing? I grimace.

“Looks like you remember after all.”

When I remain mute, he towers over me. “Still going to accuse me of undressing you while you were unconscious?” He mocks.

“I hate you.”

“Hmm. You didn’t hate me last night.”

I clear my throat. “I’m sorry for what happened. I was intoxicated and didn’t know what I was doing.”

“If you say so.”

I stiffen. “Thanks for your help. I owe you one.” I mean it. I don’t take favors from anyone.

He is not my friend. He is just my neighbor.

He takes a step closer. “Good. Because I didn’t go through hell last night to be nice. I am not nice. Not at all. I *will* call in a favor one day.”

My jaw drops. What an...

He is not just my neighbor. He is my ruthless neighbor.

“Fine. All right then. I’ll be ready.”

“You’ll be ready, huh?” He says, looking slightly amused.

“Yes. You can reach out in the dead of the night if need be. I will return the favor.” I spit out the last word.

“You aren’t lying, are you?” His tone is soft and mocking. It enrages me.

Spinning around, I face the door. “Aren’t you getting late for work?”

I feel his chest grazing my back before his warm breath tickles the shell of my ear. “You better drink the juice.”

With that, he opens the door and leaves.



“You are late.”

Hallie—the manager of the upscale Italian restaurant in West Hollywood who also happens to be my boss—grits out.

I turn. The woman is a huge pain in my ass. I had already informed her I’d be late tonight. It’s Friday night. I was at the resort since morning and got off only an hour ago.

In the haste of coming here, I couldn’t even grab a bite at my usual stop between shifts.

My hair is still wet. In just an hour, I somehow managed to get the makeup and costume off me, change into my casuals, pack my stuff, and rush here.

My stomach is growling and I am shivering and dreading the night already because I have to stand for hours.

On top of everything, I have to remind this woman that she had agreed when I offered to work extra hours in case I was late

tonight.

And although I am only thirty minutes late, I am down to work an hour extra because I need this job. It fits around my mermaid gigs perfectly.

Hallie knows this. She knows I work at the resort during weekends and sometimes take aquarium gigs on weekdays. She knows this but still never misses a chance to reprimand me. Especially when the staff is around.

They all know she *loves* to indignantly rebuke me.

“I will work an extra hour.”

“Make that two.” She sniffs, crossing her arms across her blazer-covered chest.

My jaw hardens. “I am only half an hour late, Hallie.”

“You should’ve reported to me if you were running late. You will work extra hours. It’ll help you remember not to repeat your mistake.”

I’ve got fired countless times because I couldn’t take shit from stuck-up assholes in the past. The old me would have given her a befitting rebuttal. But the present me knows better.

I have learned that if you want to earn money, you have to keep your mouth shut sometimes. You have to swallow your anger because you need to survive. To pay bills, you need money. And to earn money, you have to deal with shitty people.

So instead of giving her a cutting response, I reach inside my royal blue pants pocket and pull out my phone.

A few clicks later, I hold my phone to her eye level. “Maybe this will jog your memory.”

She glances at the thread of messages between us for all but two seconds before clearing her throat. “All right. Go and get changed.”

When she leaves, I stick my tongue out at her back. Then I head to the back door that leads to the changing room.

Once I am changed into the waitressing uniform, I watch myself in the mirror. My pink top and royal blue pants are replaced by the white short-sleeved shirt and black mini-skirt

that ends on the top of my thighs. Sheer black pantyhose covers my long legs and black high heels cover my feet.

My long hair is tightly pulled back into a ponytail. The lack of colors makes me avert my gaze. I don't like to stare into reality. And that's what happens

when I see myself without the colors.

I close my eyes.

Mommy's fingers tremble as she pulls the bright yellow dress with colorful patterns over my head. Next, she helps me with my arms that get tangled in the dress.

A loud crash coming from the living room makes me jump. I bite my trembling lower lip. My eyes are wide, my body shaking.

Mommy stares at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Her smooth skin is deathly pale except for the blue bruises on her face.

She unwraps a lollipop and holds it up. I take it and pop it into my mouth. The taste of strawberry explodes in my mouth but instead of calming me like it usually does, I feel more restless.

I reach up and touch her face. "Mommy..."

She shakes her head, silently asking me to stop talking.

Once she has dressed me, she reaches for my long hair and starts braiding it. She secures it with my favorite rainbow-colored hair tie. But right now, I want to shred it with scissors.

I hate colors. Whenever she dresses me in them and asks me to hide in my bedroom, something bad happens to her. Her beautiful face gets more black and blue and swollen.

I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

It hurts watching mommy in pain all the time. I want to protect her. I want to hide her from the evil like she hides me.

I feel helpless. And scared. So, so scared. Because sometimes, I dream of her never returning to me. Sometimes, I have bad dreams about never seeing her again. Hear her voice again.

Last night, I dreamt that I was lost. There were so many faceless people around me but none of them were mom. It terrified me so much that I wet the bed.

By the time I am dressed, tears are streaming down my face.

Cupping my face, she smiles. "You know what to do now, don't you, darling?"

I nod, hiccupping. "I will lock the door of my bedroom and will stay inside the covers until you come back."

"And..."

I swallow thickly. "I won't open the door. No matter what." This is the part I hate the most.

"Good girl." She kisses my forehead before wiping my tears.

"I hate colors, mommy." My chin trembles.

"But I love colors, darling. You know why?" She sits me on her lap.

When I shake my head, she begins, "They give me strength. Seeing you covered in them reminds me why I shouldn't give up." Her green gaze strays in the direction of the bathroom where I have seen her hiding colorful pills.

I touch her face and bring her eyes back to me.

"You are my sun, Summer. You shine so bright, my baby girl. When you are dressed in colors, it makes me forget my ugly reality. When I see your beautifully unique eyes, it brings me comfort. You keep me going."

My heart hurts when her tear lands on my cheek. "If you love it so much... I'll always wear them for you, mommy."

She gives me one of her sad smiles. "Pinky promise?"

She holds out her pinky finger. I curl mine against hers. "Pinky promise."

My eyes fly open when someone knocks on the door.

Sniffling, I say, "Coming."

The five-year-old me never understood why my mother used to find strength in colors. Now I do. It's easier to fool yourself

than to face the reality.

The colors not only make me happy, but they also make me feel as if my mom is still here.

I dig in my handbag and retrieve my floral red collar scarf. I quickly put it on.

This time when I stare at my reflection in the mirror, I am not sad anymore.

I have my colors with me. I have *her*.



Evening shifts are the worst. Although this restaurant is new, it has garnered great reviews from patrons and established itself as one of the best places in the city to dine.

People have to wait for weeks to get a table in this gorgeous and posh restaurant. So, the dining room is always packed.

After swimming for hours, standing and waiting tables in high heels is a punishment straight from hell.

Two hours into my shift and my limbs are already screaming in pain.

Can I go home already? I want my bed and Goldie.

I face-timed with the dog sitter before starting my shift but it was not enough. I miss him. A lot.

This was the reason I never had pets.

I never wanted to get emotionally attached to anyone. Even animals. Because before you know it, they become your weakness.

After losing Mom and getting placed in a shitty foster home, I vowed to never let anyone close.

Raleigh was my only friend growing up and he was enough. Until Goldie and River.

In such a small period, they both have become a part of my life.

River and I talk daily on the phone. I am still unaware of the problems in her marriage. But it doesn't take rocket science to figure out that she is not happy.

I have seen it firsthand a week ago how dominating her husband is.

Every day without fail, I not so subtly suggest she come live with me if she wants to get away from him.

She stresses that she is doing okay and to not worry. I don't buy it one bit. Because the other day when I asked if I could come over, she started making excuses. And when I asked her to visit me, she declined, her voice melancholic.

I was hysteric. She is my friend after all. And I always protect my friends.

She calmed me down by promising to visit soon.

"Give me a date, River. Give me something!" I practically yelled on my phone. Was she in trouble like Mom was? I need to save her. I have to.

"I can't. But I will come to visit soon. I promise." She said softly.

"Is he... hurting you?" I asked, dread filling my stomach.

"No!" Her response was instant. She sighs then. "My husband is ruthless. He wouldn't bat an eye before destroying someone's life. He hurts me emotionally? Yes. But he's never hurt me physically. Ever."

The conviction in her voice helped me finally relax.

I couldn't call her tonight. I glance at my wristwatch. It's 7 p.m. I can call her now. My stomach is cramping from hunger. I should take a break before I fall face-first on the tiled floor and lose my front teeth.

When another sharp pain hits my abdomen, I hunch. It has been more than eight hours since I last ate.

Using the hunched position, I act like I am wiping the already clean table.

I should've stuffed my pocket with M&Ms. I stop the act and scan the vast room, hoping to catch one of the server's eyes. I

need the break. Stat.

I don't think I have the energy to run behind them and inform them that I am going on a break. I could call them but carrying a phone on you while working is absolutely prohibited here.

I am still bent over, eyes darting around, sending telepathic messages to my co-workers to look my way when a body brushes against my ass.

I straighten abruptly, causing me to lose my balance. My back crashes against a chest.

A familiar spicy masculine scent envelops me as warm hands settle on my upper arms, steadying me. The touch sends a chill running down my spine.

I tilt my head to look at the person who's holding me with a searing touch.

A surprised gasp emits from my lips when my eyes clash with dark brown eyes.

“Archer.”

Chapter Thirteen

Summer

I try to pull away but my heels wobble and I crash into him again. My heart skips a beat when his grip tightens on me.

“You okay?” He asks, his deep velvety voice raising goosebumps all over my skin.

I nod, blushing. What the hell? Why am I suddenly feeling shy?

It has been a week since I last saw him. A week since he whispered to me to drink the juice before walking out of my apartment. A week of my face getting hot every time I think of him.

I blame that night for my fascination. The night when he took care of me.

Archer Kim is brooding, silent, and mysterious. Not to mention sexy. Any woman would be attracted to him. Hell, even men would.

I won't deny my attraction. It's there. The tension between us, whenever we are in the room, is palpable.

If only he weren't so annoying.

I am attracted to him but that doesn't miraculously make him likable.

He has always made me feel he doesn't like me. He still harbors some kind of animosity toward me because I lied in my

interview.

It's frustrating that I am the only one to endure these confusing hormones whereas Archer is immune to them.

Maybe I should get laid. If I don't even remember the last time I got action means that it has been too long.

The problem is, life has become so hectic because all I do is work.

Or that's merely an excuse because the cute bartender had asked me out couple days ago.

I could've hooked up with him. But for some reason, I didn't. Because a certain someone was occupying my thoughts recently.

This is so unfair.

Why do I find Archer attractive when he grates on my nerves all the time?

"You know her, Archer?" At the feminine voice, I jerk away from him.

A beautiful strawberry-blonde woman with blue eyes is standing beside Archer. She looks stunning in a knee-length rose gold dress.

She looks back and forth between us, a frown marring her forehead.

I blink. Then look back at Archer. My heart kickstarts when I take him in.

He is in a tailored gray suit, looking flawless as usual. His inky-black hair is parted at the side, creating a refined look.

I glance at the blonde again.

Something sharp pierces my heart when I put two and two together. They're here on a date.

Of course, they are. They look like they belong together.

In minimal makeup, she looks absolutely gorgeous.

From diamond studs to the black velvet crystal embellished Gucci clutch purse, she looks like old money.

She is the complete opposite of me.

Poised. Sophisticated. Rich.

If that wasn't enough, her body was perfect. Like those Victoria's Secret models.

I am also taller than average like those models but my breasts are huge and so is my ass.

Archer and his date, they both complement each other. Like a match made in heaven. A pang of jealousy hits me.

Before Archer could reply, I speak with a forced cheery voice. "Please have a seat." I move aside and gesture at the table I was cleaning.

This is ridiculous. There's nothing between Archer and me. Just because he spent the night with me, and cared for me, doesn't mean I should romanticize him.

This is a reality check. This is the moment where I should murder the teeny tiny crush I have developed on Archer.

In my dilemma, I totally missed Hallie standing beside them. She glares at me before pasting a huge smile on her face. She talks to them as if they're regulars. Maybe they are.

It hasn't been long since I started working here. Does that mean they come here often?

Fuck. I sucked this man's finger with gusto not one week ago.

I step backward when he pulls out a chair for the blonde to sit.

Such a gentleman. Apparently, he can be chivalrous but not with me.

Watching them together feels weird. Wrong.

I don't even like him that much. Right?

That break seems to be a nice idea. Because one thing is for certain. I am not going to stand here and watch them.

I turn around and start to walk to the back door where I can eat in peace.

Enjoy your overpriced dinner with your perfect date, Archer.

I don't give a damn. I don't. Seriously, he can—

A hand wraps around my elbow, startling me to a halt.

I stare up and find Archer.

He leans down. "Bring us the menu."

My jaw drops. I point a finger at myself. "Me?"

He cocks a brow. Then steps back. His eyes move over me and I control the urge to squirm.

I manage to school my expression and try to appear indifferent to him checking me out. The key word *try*.

This man has an unusual ability to get under my skin.

One second I was feeling jealous of his date and the other I am filled with annoyance.

In a matter of minutes, he successfully reminded me why I dislike him in the first place.

He doesn't have to open his mouth to irritate me. His silence is enough.

When he doesn't say anything and things begin to feel awkward, I give up. "Stop, will you?"

"Stop what?"

"Staring at me."

"What's going on?" His date asks.

"Nothing." He states while staring at me.

My gaze flickers to Hallie so I could excuse myself but she is nowhere to be seen.

"You're the waitress, correct?" He asks.

We both stare at each other for a few seconds before I grind out. "Yes."

"Then get the menu."

With that, he takes a seat opposite the blonde.

The need to claw at his face and ruin his expensive suit races through me. I quickly look away and leave.

My teeth are clenched tight the entire way I go and fetch the leather folders for them.

I say nothing as I place them on the table.

When they begin to browse the menu, I scan the surroundings and catch the eye of the server. I motion him to come here.

“Mike will serve you tonight.” I give them a thin-lipped smile and quickly leave before he can stop me again.



I'm a masochist.

I have to be. Because why would I be doing this? By doing this, I mean spying on Archer.

I have claimed a spot in the darkened corridor that connects the dining room and bathrooms.

This is ludicrous. I am smart enough to detect that. So why am I not putting a stop to this spying business? I don't know.

Or maybe I do.

Watching him with her is bothering me. It is bothering me so much that it is ridiculous. That's why I am doing this.

I want to get rid of the stupid attraction. And I think watching him with another woman would help.

The sight before me is a prime example of why I shouldn't want someone like Archer.

It's simple. Because I have no chance with him. And to get that fact ingrained in me, I need to watch.

We've just met a handful of times and yet he is affecting me so much.

He says something to which the blonde throws her head back in laughter. He watches her with an amused expression.

I gnash my teeth hard.

My heart sinks when she reaches across the table and wipes the corner of Archer's mouth with a thumb.

I bite furiously into my cheeseburger. Then another bite. One more. My cheeks get full but I bite again until I've polished off the entire thing.

A server passing me by gives me a weird look.

“What?” I snap. I chew swiftly and swallow half of my food before saying, “Never seen a girl with an appetite?”

He holds his hands up in surrender and walks out.

I chew slowly still glaring at the guy’s retreating form before glancing back at Archer. Our eyes collide and I choke on a mouthful of food.

The amusement in his eyes a moment ago vanished. An unreadable expression takes its place.

He watches as I cough and sputter.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I cover my mouth, my eyes watering and my face on fire.

I think I am going to die. Either by choking on my cheeseburger or embarrassment.

Freaking great!

He knows I was spying on him now.

I want the ground to open up and swallow me. I whirl around, eyes watering, throat sore, and run.

I stalk from the darkened hallway as fast as I can. Turning a corner, I push the door to the exit and stumble outside.

I shiver as a gust of cold air meets me.

Except for one streetlight at the far end, the alley is covered in darkness.

I lean against the brick wall and try to catch my breath.

I’ve turned into a ball of nerves because he caught me watching him.

I am not the type to run away. This is insane. I shouldn’t let him get to me like this.

My entire body stills when the door opens. It’s him. Archer. He followed me outside.

He left his date alone. Why?

My pulse races as he moves toward me. My breathing quickens when I feel him getting closer and closer.

I don't dare to look up as his shadow falls over me.

When his hand brushes mine, my head jerks up. A chill runs through me and I feel the hair rising on my arms.

The close proximity shouldn't faze me this much.

When I swallow hard, his eyes slide down to my throat.

At this point, my breathing is out of control. I want to run. But my feet aren't moving.

I hope and pray to God that he can't see my body's reaction to him. Because if he did, then there's no way I'll be able to face him again.

He curls my fingers around what feels like a water bottle.

My mouth falls open. Did he come here to bring me a bottle of water? He saw me choking and came to me. I am not sure what to make of this.

I am so confused that I keep staring at him. Hypnotized.

He studies me intently. When I don't move, he touches me again.

My heart starts pounding in my chest when he uncaps the bottle and using my hand, he lifts it to my lips.

“Drink.”

Still holding my gaze, he pushes the tip of the bottle to my lips, commanding them to open. When I part them, satisfaction burns in his eyes. His hand that's still covering mine, tips the bottle and cool liquid floods my mouth.

That's when the dryness of my throat registers. He watches me as I down the water. I didn't realize how parched I was until the first drop of water hit my tongue.

When the bottle is empty, he lowers it. “Good girl.”

I go still. Those two words sent heat racing to my lower body. The surge of desire within me shocks me. It also pisses me off.

I step to the side.

“Thank you for the water. You can go back to your date.”

“Jealous?”

Heat rises from my neck and over my face. I scoff even when my heartbeats are accelerating. “You are too full of yourself.”

He crosses the distance I created between us. “I was right.”

“Right about what?”

“That you are a little liar.” His eyes gleam.

I push off the wall to straighten. I am wearing heels. The added inches lift me almost to his nose level. “Don’t call me that.”

Planting his hand next to my face on the wall, he leans in. “Then stop lying.”

“What are you trying to prove, Archer? Do you want me to stroke your ego? Is that it?”

“I just want the truth. Why did you run?”

I open my mouth and he places a finger against them. “Don’t even think of lying to me.” He narrows his eyes.

“I don’t want to talk about this.” I take a step to the side to leave but his other hand comes up too, blocking my way.

My nipples harden at his act of dominance. I should quit watching romance dramas. I always got butterflies when the hero did this to the heroine.

I never thought this could happen to me.

I shake my head internally. This is toxic.

We hate each other. I don’t want to get involved with a person like him. So larger than life. So accomplished.

He thinks of me as a pest. A nuisance he had said.

He has been ignoring me before he knew I was his neighbor. And nothing changed *after* he knew that fact. That means one thing. He doesn’t want anything to do with me.

It’s understandable. I am unlike anyone who works for him. I am a far cry from that blonde he is on a date with. So why the sudden change?

Why is he acting strange?

“I have work to do. If you’ll excuse me—”

“Running again?”

I glare at him. *I am not running!* I want to shout in his face. But I wouldn’t intentionally lie now that I know it’s a trigger. I am not an asshole. But it’s hard not to lie.

I want to run. I want to get away from him because with every second I spend standing this close to him, my body temperature is rising. I wouldn’t be surprised if I go up in flames.

I choose a smart approach. “What do you want?”

His gaze drops to my lips. “You already know what I want.”

“Do I?” At my sarcastic tone, he looks up. “Let’s cut the BS, shall we? We both know you don’t give a damn about me or why I ran. There’s something else you are not telling. Something that you want. So how about we get to business, hmm?” I am so proud my voice remains steady the entire time.

“That’s a great way to dodge my question.” He arches a brow. Then, “It’s surprising to see you are smart enough to understand my motive.”

My hand flies to his tie in fury. Yanking him closer, I pierce him with a hard look. “That was the last time you’ll ever insult me again. In the past, I let it slide because I was in the wrong, but no more. You have no right to make me feel like shit. You will not disrespect me again.” I look back and forth between his eyes before saying, “Am I clear?”

I gasp when he wraps an arm around my waist, tugging me closer. My core clenches when my breasts bump into his hard chest. “Threatening me, little liar?”

I am horrified when I feel my panties sticking to my pussy. Damn. What is happening?

Only one word could describe this. Madness.

“No. Simply stating facts.” I say, my chest heaving with labored breaths. He makes me flush all over again when he stares down.

I do too. The top buttons of my shirt were undone. Right now, my breast looks ready to pop out with how snugly I am pressed against him.

When he looks up, his eyes darken as if he sensed my arousal.

In a blink of an eye, he releases me and takes a step back.

The disappointment that fills me at the loss of his touch infuriates me. It takes a second for me to relax. With great effort, I raise my gaze to his.

I can still feel him pressed against me. Can still smell his cologne which I can only define as masculinity.

I am so aroused and angry at the same time. The desire raging through me makes me tremble. Still, I keep staring into his dark gaze.

No matter how hot Archer is, I am not going to fall to his feet.

Other women may be into his mysterious aura but I am not one of them.

And even if my body is aching for him, I won't ever get involved with him. I should stay away from him.

After a few moments when he says nothing. I break the silence. "I guess this conversation is over."

Before I could move, he is there. Blocking my path again. His nostrils flare and a muscle clenches in his jaw. "Remember a week ago we had an agreement?"

"Agreement?"

"I told you I would call in my favor one day."

"Of course, I remember. What about it?"

"You said you'll return the favor."

"Yes, yes I did but why are you bringing this up right now?"

"Because I need you to do something for me."

At first, all I do is stare at him, feeling befuddled. Then as if a light bulb goes off in my head, I finally get it. My eyes widen with realization.

“You want a discount, don’t you?” I wrinkle my nose. “Didn’t expect that from you, though.”

He looks at me as if I am stupid to even think it. I narrow my eyes. “If you’re so displeased by my guess, why don’t you go ahead and say it? We both have things to do—”

“I want to cut this date short. And you’re going to give me an out.”

I’d never imagined he’d say that. “Why would you do that?” I ask, bewildered.

“That’s none of your business.”

“You just won the biggest douchebag of the year award. Here’s your trophy.” I flip him off as I turn to leave.

“That woman wouldn’t take no for an answer, okay?” He says, his voice gruff.

I stop in my tracks at that. I face him again.

He stabs his fingers into his hair. I cross my arms. “I’m listening.”

“She is the daughter of my mother’s friend.” He struggles for a second. It seems as though he can’t believe he’s having this conversation with me.

I am having a hard time comprehending this situation too.

“I was coerced into this by my mother.” He motions to the back door of the restaurant, most probably hinting at the date.

“She wants me to settle down with someone. Get married. Have a family.” He grimaces like the idea repulses him. He continues, “With KIM advertising consuming almost all of my time, dating isn’t on my radar at this point.”

“Why don’t you talk to your mother? Tell her what you just told me. Maybe she would understand.”

His mouth twists into a humorless smile. “You haven’t met my mother.”

“What about your date? You could talk to her.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said? She wouldn’t take no for an answer. I tried to politely decline on the phone earlier.”

“What happened?”

“She called her mother who then called mine.”

“What?” I laugh.

“Yeah.” He sighs. “Meagan has all the qualities I need in my future wife. Well educated. Independent. Genteel.” *A complete opposite of me.*

“If I overlook her act of disobedience, she is exactly my type. But like I said, I don’t have time for a serious relationship.”

A lump forms in my throat. There’s a heaviness in my chest after hearing him say she is his type.

There was a point in my life where I craved to have a perfect life that someone like Meagan had.

When I was in high school, I always used to wish to be someone else. Like the popular girls who had everything.

Nice clothes.

Beautiful house.

Parents.

A meal on the table every night.

But then I grew up. I understood that appearance or a degree doesn’t define a human being. One should have a kind heart.

I was bullied by those beautiful girls in high school because I tried to blend in.

I remember that day as if it were yesterday when I experimented with a hand-me-down dress. I used scissors and sewed shimmery fabrics over it to make it look fashionable.

All I wanted was to look pretty like them.

I was naïve because I was trolled and ridiculed.

Raleigh never tried to fit in because he was wiser than me. He knew they would never accept people like us. Orphans with old clothes who rode bicycles instead of cars.

“Why do you want to be like them? They are fake.” Raleigh had said when he found me crying after school.

“Fake?” I hiccup as I mount my bike.

“Yeah. Take that group of girls for example. They all sit together. Eat together. Laugh together and go home together. But the other day, I heard the two of them back bitching about their leader.” He grips the handlebar of his bike beside me.

“Really?” I ask, sniffing.

“Yep. They may have better clothes and better rides but you are the one that stands out. You know why?”

I shake my head.

“Because you are friends with the most handsome boy in school.” He smirks.

I swat his bicep, chuckling. He laughs.

He sobers up. “You are awesome, Summer Donovan. It would suck if you transform into one of those barbie girls. Never change. Okay?”

“Okay.” I smile.

Men would prefer women like Meagan over someone like me and that’s okay. I never liked that crowd anyway.

But after hearing Archer, I don’t know why it pricked my heart.

It shouldn’t trouble me.

I shouldn’t have researched him like a mad woman the past week. I told myself that I was googling him purely because he was my neighbor. That I wasn’t intrigued by him.

Once I typed in his name in the search engine, several articles turned up including his google knowledge panel. The man is a celebrity.

I read about his achievements in the advertising sector. He even founded a hospital and supports several animal centers in the city.

In a nutshell, Archer Kim is an ideal man every parent wants their daughters to marry.

Then why do I think there’s more to him than that? I had a glimpse of melancholy behind the façade he fools everyone with.

The depth of his dark eyes hides many secrets. But those aren't mine to discover.

I tried to dig deeper, in the hopes of finding information about his personal life.

The only thing I could find was about his parent's migration from South Korea to the States. That's it.

It's like his life before KIM Advertising doesn't exist. Also, he doesn't date.

He always attended the galas and events alone. That was odd. Because he is one of the most eligible bachelors in the world.

The gossip columns featured Raleigh more than Archer. There were no pictures or bad comments about him. Zilch.

Now I know the reason. He doesn't want to date. He is a workaholic. And he wants me to do his bidding. Because he doesn't want to settle down with Miss Perfect. It's okay.

I'll do it if it makes us even.

A favor for a favor.

I clear my throat. "So what do you want me to do?"

Tension swirls in my gut as I wait for his answer.

"You have to tell her that I followed you out here and kissed you."

Chapter Fourteen

Summer

“What?” I shout, making him grimace.

Did I hear him right? I am totally going to ignore how my heart did a backflip when he said that.

I would never and I mean never ever admit out loud that I’d been fantasizing about kissing Archer. Last night, I even dreamed about it.

I shouldn’t have spent so much time researching about him. Because he has been living inside of my head rent-free ever since. And its side effects are him making an appearance in my dreams.

“I don’t like repeating myself.”

I prefer dream Archer over the real one any day. Because the real-life Archer is an asshole. Through and through.

“I heard you the first time, okay? It’s just... why would you do that?”

“Why would I do what?”

“You hate lying, don’t you?”

“That is correct.”

“Then why do you want me to lie? I thought you despised liars and can’t stand watching someone lie.”

He shoves his hands in his pockets and regards me with a hard look. “You are not wrong. I don’t tolerate lies or liars.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Yet here you are, asking me to lie to your date.”

At his silence, I continue. “Don’t you think it’s kind of ironic that Mr. Honest himself requires a liar’s help?”

He glares at me and I laugh. “Damn. I am honored to witness this historic moment where Archer Kim would commit an immoral act of lying!”

“Enough, Summer.” His tone is harsh.

“Or what?” I mock and he scowls. “Tell me, Archer. What happened to your ethics? Principles?” I chuckle but it dies down quickly when he begins to head toward me.

The distance between us is obliterated in a second. Stepping into my personal space, he grabs hold of my chin, forcing me to stare into his darkening eyes. My stomach clenches with desire.

“I’d watch that mouth if I were you, little liar.”

My fingers curl into the lapels of his suit jacket. “If I am a liar then what does that make you? A hypocrite? Because you are no saint, Mr. Kim. You are asking me to deceive your date—”

“See that’s where you are wrong.”

My heart beats loudly in my ears when his fingers leave my chin and slips beneath to cup my jaw. He tips my head back.

He leans down, down, down until his face is inches away from mine. “Did I tell you to lie?”

The air between us feels charged, my breathing uneven.

I swallow hard and his lips curl into the barest smile. “I merely told you to go back out there and tell her that I kissed you.”

“But you didn’t—” His mouth lands on mine without warning. The touch of his warm lips against mine is like an electric shock. The softness of the contact lasts for a second before the kiss turns harsh.

At first, I go completely still. Then I feel something strange. Something stirs in my belly. Something new. Something I never felt for anyone up until now. The rush of butterflies in my stomach.

It's as if I am getting kissed for the very first time.

My eyes fall shut, my traitor body doesn't care that he didn't bother asking before kissing me.

Before I could process what was happening, he breaks the kiss and lifts his head. He studies my face, searching for something.

I feel my lids hooded as I watch him watch me.

"Now you know," My already heavy lids threaten to fall shut when he brushes my lower lip with his thumb. "I never lie."

His gaze dips to my mouth. And this time when his head drops, I find myself willingly going on my toes to have his lips on me again.

His long fingers weave into my hair. My own hands land on his chest, feeling the hardness beneath his shirt.

Archer Kim turns me on. There's no secret to that. But tonight I got to see the extent of it.

It's frightening. The intensity of my need for him. My ability to think, breathe, to function is stolen from me. By his kiss.

I don't know what we are doing. I might regret it later. But for now... all I want to focus on is this. Us. His lips moving, caressing against mine.

My eyes roll back, shiver taking over me when his arm comes around my waist while his other is still tangled in my hair.

Archer takes full control. His lips firm and hot, sliding over mine sensually.

I back up when I feel him stepping forward. Grabbing me, he walks me backward until my back bumps against the wall. I gasp, my lips parting.

He wastes no time. He takes advantage by sliding his tongue inside, demanding. Like him as it flickers and entwines with mine.

His scent, his taste goes straight to my head. I feel dizzy. Like I am drunk.

I try to remember that this means nothing. He is kissing me because I'm his only way out of his forced date. I convince myself to not read too much into this kiss.

He is a man of his word. He never lies. He just proved it. He is kissing me because this way he won't be lying. This way, his rules will remain intact. His vow to never lie stays unbroken.

That doesn't mean I can't take advantage of this situation. If he can use me for his gain, I can use him too.

When Archer deepens the kiss, I wrap my arms tightly around his neck.

Groaning low in his chest, he grabs one of my hips and pulls me to him, even when there's no space between us. I curl my leg around him and not missing a beat, he rolls his hips.

I moan loudly in his mouth when he thrusts again, his hardness hitting my clit.

It's not enough. I need more. I want more. The ache between my legs intensifies when he bites my bottom lip. Hard. Ow.

My fingers grip his hair. I tug it. Hard. And he growls against my lips.

He wrenches his lips from mine and glares at me. I glare back. Our chests rising and falling.

"Nuisance." He says.

"Asshole." I snap, catching my breath.

His gaze flits down to my swollen lips at the same time I stare at his.

Somehow, our heads are moving closer again. Just when our lips are about to touch again, the back door of the restaurant opens.

Archer freezes. We both turn to find Meagan staring at us with accusation in her eyes.

We jerk apart. My legs turn to jelly and I stagger. Archer wraps his arm around my shoulders.

What is he *doing*? The damage is already done. I don't have to go to her to deliver his message because she saw it firsthand.

She saw our tangled bodies.

My face burns in humiliation. I slap his hand away.

This is not right. I shouldn't have done that. Everything escalated so quickly. One second we were talking and the other we were mauling each other.

I don't like to think that I might be the reason behind this woman's sadness. I don't like to hurt people.

If you can't make someone happy, then try your best not to become the reason behind their sadness either.

But today, I hurt someone. I can't even blame all this on Archer alone. I lost control too.

I don't bother righting my ruined ponytail. I can't move. I am too embarrassed. It's like I made out with her husband. I know they weren't in a relationship. But I can't help but feel like a criminal.

I bow my head when she walks to us, her heels clicking mutely against the pavement.

She reaches out and smooths his lapels. Lapels I creased by clutching onto them while he was devouring my mouth.

I twist my fingers into the hem of my skirt.

"Didn't know you liked slumming it with a lowly waitress." She muses.

I stiffen. I try not to let it show on my face how much her words affected me. My hand sneaks up to touch the colorful scarf around my neck in the hopes of drawing some strength from it.

It's just three of us out here. I stick out like a sore thumb. It hurts. The feeling of not belonging.

I resent the awkwardness that takes over me.

I should defend myself. Say something equally mean to her. But that would jeopardize Archer's case. He wouldn't want me to create a scene. He just wants her gone.

He may not have pictured this outcome, but it's still in his favor. She caught us. I don't have to deliver the message

anymore. My role here has ended.

I want to walk away and leave the two alone but I force myself not to.

They are currently engrossed in a staring contest. A silent battle of sorts. Something tells me, that if I so much as breathed loudly, it would shift their focus back at me. And I don't want that.

So I remain standing, rigid and uncomfortable. I can also feel the tension radiating off Archer.

He is the one to shatter the silence. "I was wrong."

She shoots him a smile, her eyes glinting. It's creepy as hell. "That's all I wanted to hear. Let's go back. Food's getting cold."

When she reaches for his arm, he steps back, pocketing his hands. "I wasn't finished, Meagan."

"Oh," her brows raise as her hand drops to her side, her fingers curling. Her expression stays calm and composed. But the clenching of her fingers betrays her act.

"I was wrong that I deemed you to be perfect wife material. I was wrong to overlook the fact that you forced me to go on a date with you by snitching." He clenches his jaw. "And last but not least, I was wrong to waste my time looking for alternatives to reject you politely."

She sniffs. "I am willing to ignore what you just said. Let's forget about this. I didn't see anything. Nothing happened." She looks at me, her gaze moving from my head to my feet. Her lips tip down in disgust. "We shouldn't let anything disrupt our union."

"You think like a businesswoman." Archer comments. Meagan smiles at that.

"And although a woman like you would be suitable for a workaholic like me, I still wouldn't give you the time of day."

"What?" She shrieks. No longer composed now.

"A person who looks down on another based on their economic class sickens me." His tone is hard. Then, "I would've

demanded you to apologize to Summer but I know it would lack sincerity.”

For a moment, no one speaks. Archer ruthlessly destroyed her in seconds. He took a stand for me.

Meagan’s mouth is tight as she glares at him. But in a second, as if a switch went off, her expression is back to being calm.

Her lips curl in a smile once again. “I am going back in there now. Fix yourself and join me soon. It’s rude to keep your date waiting.” She says softly before entering through the back door, leaving us both stunned.

“Holy Shit,” I mutter, still staring at the door, mouth agape. “You weren’t kidding. She really doesn’t take no for an answer.”

He turns to me with a sigh. “Not much shocks me. But she definitely did.”

“I’ll deal with her.”

“No, you will not. I already fucked up stringing you along. I shouldn’t have done that.” His eyes fall to my mouth for a beat. He clears his throat. “I’ll have to talk to her parents.”

“Your plan failed. So we are going to do this my way.” I grin.

He closes the gap between us. “You mean by lying.”

I open my mouth but he beats me. “No.”

“You called in the favor I owe you, right? Now you can’t stop me.”

“Summer—” I place a finger against his lips.

“Shh... Just leave. I’ll handle her.”

He clutches my finger and lowers it. “You don’t know her.”

“Oh, I know plenty. I know her type. Born and bred to conquer the world. They only let their ugly side out when no one’s watching. Because they care too much about what everyone thinks of them.” I smile as a plan begins to form in my head.

“What are you thinking?” He demands and I roll my eyes.

“That... you leave it to your little liar.” I joke and his gaze darkens.

“Now go.” I give him a shove. He doesn’t budge.

“I won’t lie, okay?”

He arches a brow.

“Gah! Just trust me on this.” This time when I usher him forward, he doesn’t protest.



Lies fall easily from my lips. I don’t have to think for long to conjure up a story.

Raleigh says I have a great imagination. I come with unconventional thoughts, pluck some scenarios from my mental journal, mix them with believable facts, and voila! A fictional tale is ready to tell.

But I put myself in a tight spot when I promised Archer I wouldn’t lie.

After a bathroom visit, where I righted my clothes and fixed my hair, I make my way to the dining hall.

Meagan’s head is bowed, her attention on the phone in her hand.

Remember, Summer. No lies.

No lies.

No lies.

No lies.

I keep chanting as I begin walking toward her table.

As soon as I reach her, she looks up. Her face is a mask of elegance and softness. She stares at me with a slight frown but her lips don’t lose their smile.

“Hello? Do you need anything?” She asks with feigned innocence. As if she didn’t just catch Archer with me. As if she didn’t make a remark to disparage me.

Yes, I am a waitress. I am practically poor. Yes, the cost of the feast on the table would probably equal my monthly rent.

I never tasted most of the dishes on the table. So what? Who gives this spoiled brat the right to treat me with cruelty? She probably treats everyone below her “rank” with scorn.

I am going to teach you a lesson, Meagan.

You probably got everything you ever wanted. But now it’s time for you to learn that the world doesn’t revolve around you.

I close my eyes.

This is not just for Archer. This is for me and every person like me whom she has treated poorly.

Lights. Camera. Action.

I crack my eyes—which are now filled with unshed tears—open. “Why?” I ask in a shaky voice. It’s loud enough for other diners to take notice.

“Why what?” She asks in confusion.

I lift my trembling fingers to my mouth and snifle. I shake my head, the tears now falling.

“Why don’t you leave him alone?” I ask, louder. More heads turn our way.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Hallie. She is across the hall, standing and watching me with eagle eyes.

I don’t have enough time.

“What are you talking about?”

I place my palms on the table and bow my head in defeat. “You know exactly what I am talking about.” Then, after a dramatic pause, I look up. “You are trying to seduce my baby daddy.”

She pales. The gasps of disbelief around me make me realize I fucked up.

I internally face-palm myself.

What the fuck?

I said I won’t lie.

What happened to the promise? Why, oh, why brain? Why did you do that to me?

It just came naturally. I realized what I said *after* I said it.

I am sorry, Archer.

I didn't lie to you.

Now that I went back on my word, consider it as a white lie since I am doing this for you.

She staggers to her feet, her chair scraping against the floor. Mimicking me, she lays her palms on the table and leans closer. "What is this nonsense?" She whispers through clenched teeth.

"Nonsense?" I sob.

This moment is far more enjoyable than I thought it would be. I love the way she sneaks nervous glances around her.

She is panicking. Her image is on the line after all. My calculation was accurate.

I figured out her weakness and successfully cornered her.

Getting back in the character, I say, "Time and again you made advances on my boyfriend. When he didn't respond, you changed your tactics, didn't you?" I feign a sad smile. "You decided to blackmail him into meeting you here."

I purposely refrain from using Archer's name. Because this could backfire. Knowing how famous he is, my making a scene here would tarnish his image.

It's a good thing he isn't present.

Her hostile eyes shoot daggers at me. "Cut the bullshit right now, or I'll ruin you."

I gasp, stumbling back. "You are threatening me because I begged you to stop harassing my boyfriend?"

The entire room breaks into shocked whispers. Meagan's face is red.

I note the exact moment she drops her mask. Narrowing her eyes, she lets out an angry grunt. "I want to speak to the manager."

Within seconds, Hallie is beside her, apologizing profusely. Taking a step toward me, she clutches my elbow. “Come with me.” Hallie tries to pull me.

A brown woman dressed in a pantsuit who was seated at the table beside Meagan’s suddenly stands. “Get your hands off her, lady.”

Hallie tenses. “I need to talk to my employee in private. Please don’t let us bother you.”

When she tries to pull me again, the woman interrupts. “Employee or not, you can’t manhandle her.” She frowns. And I feel sad. The kind woman fell for my act.

Hallie reluctantly eases her grip.

“Thank you.” My lower lip trembles. It’s all an act. Though I don’t particularly feel good deceiving her, I have no choice. I have started this, I’ll have to carry on until the end.

“No problem.” She says then her eyes flick to Meagan. “Instead of calling the manager, you could simply leave and solve this matter outside.”

Meagan holds her palm up. “You stay out of this.”

“Since you insist on making a fool out of yourself, I am not going to stop you. Please continue.” With that, she sits back down. Everyone chuckles.

I cover my mouth to hide my smile. Damn, I guess Meagan is going to remember this day forever.

“You!” Meagan says when she catches me smiling. “Apologize to me right this second.”

“Apologize for telling the truth? For protecting what’s mine?” I touch my stomach.

“You fucking bitch—”

“If calling me names satisfies you then go ahead.” I take a stuttering breath. “Just leave us alone. That’s the only thing I am asking of you. Stop blackmailing him into dating you. He is not interested—”

Cold liquid hits my face a second before it registers what she has done.

Indignation burns in Meagan's eyes as her chest rises and falls. Her fingers tightly wrapped around the stem of the now empty wine glass.

Silence ensues.

I stand there with a soaked shirt and stare at the woman in front of me.

Without any word, she snatches up her designer bag and stalks away in the direction of the exit.

Taking a deep breath, I paste a smile on my face. "Well, at least the wine was delicious." I joke, licking my lips and some of the customers chuckle softly. I give them a sad smile. "I am sorry for the disturbance. It wasn't intentional. Please enjoy your evening."

With that, I turn on my heel and escape. My heart is pounding in my ears as I reach the kitchen.

Hot tears sting my eyes as I wipe my face with my palm. I don't even have a napkin.

It's okay, Summer, I tell myself as I stop at the changing room door.

You've gone through humiliation like these many times. It's okay.

I am about to enter when Hallie catches up to me.

"Summer."

I face her and find her rigid posture. I predict it even before she speaks. "You are fired."

Chapter Fifteen

Archer

I used to believe that patience is my strong suit. Turns out I was wrong. I resent being proven wrong.

I begin to pace the length of the employees' only exit of the restaurant. The very same exit Summer directed me to when she persuaded me to leave.

My attempts to prevent myself from going inside are slowly falling weaker and weaker.

It has been ten minutes since I received Meagan's voice messages. Aside from calling me a hundred colorful names, she informed me that she was through with me. And that Summer and I deserve each other.

That didn't sit right with me.

Summer's plan worked. And while I am happy about that, I don't know why I am getting this gnawing feeling in my stomach. That was my first inkling that something was amiss.

That is why I have been waiting here. I don't know when Summer's shift ends. I don't have her number. All I know is that I need to talk to her.

Meagan's passive-aggressive attack on Summer earlier gave me a glimpse of her personality.

I have met her family on numerous occasions. I always noted one thing. Meagan's desperation for her parent's approval.

She doesn't even realize what person she has become because of this.

My fingers curl into fists when I recall the insult she threw at Summer.

I shouldn't have left. I shouldn't have let Summer talk me into leaving. How does she do that? Make me listen to her.

I am a hardass. No one has the potential to convince me into doing things I don't want to do.

I listen to everyone. That's my nature. I am an attentive person. I make you believe that I am open to your suggestions and pieces of advice when in reality, I do what I feel like.

But this girl. Summer. She parted her ruby-red lips and asked me to leave and I couldn't say no. I caught myself following someone else's orders for the first time in my life.

Actually, ever since I discovered Summer is my neighbor, nothing has been the same. The recent chain of events made it impossible for me to deny my physical attraction to Summer Donovan.

This attraction I have for her is inhumane. It makes me act out of control. Like earlier tonight when I kissed her.

A rush of blood hits my cock at the mere thought of me devouring her lips.

Instead of slapping me, she kissed me back.

The knowledge that my little liar wants me just as much made me harder than I've ever been.

Her body's slightest reaction to me was arousing.

I shake my head. No. She and I can never happen.

Then why can't I get her out of my mind?

Her unique eyes haunted me this past week. Her beguiling eyes have kept me up at night. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw them. Those different colored eyes.

Her right eye color is crystal blue, so mesmerizing. Her left eye is a shade of green that reminds me of the forest on rainy

days. Her unusual eyes are bewitching. With little to no effort, they can suck you in.

Those eyes have a language of their own. I still can't forget how she kept staring at me with unfocused eyes the night she was drunk.

That's why I couldn't control my feet when I felt those eyes on me earlier.

She was watching me. It bothered her that I was on a date. And seeing her all worked up made my day.

Before I knew it, I was excusing myself and following her outside.

My resolve to stay away from her began to waver. And like the selfish bastard I am, I concocted a plan on the spot.

A plan that promised me a taste of Summer. A plan that would help me ditch Meagan.

When I told her I wanted an out, I wasn't lying. I never lie. I just let her believe that the kiss was to serve my truthfulness. I let her believe that the kiss was meaningless.

What was I thinking?

I was craving a taste. And now that I've gotten it, it would be ten times harder to stay away from her. Scratch that. It would be a hundred times harder because she lives right next door.

Summer is trouble. Her mere existence is making my life a living hell.

She is the complete opposite of me. I hate people like her who lie without a second thought.

But it's her quiriness that held my attention from the beginning. She is unusually weird. Her dressing style is weird and yet I can't take my eyes off her whenever she is around.

She is unknowingly torturing me.

My infatuation with her is a mystery. Maybe it's temporary and it will pass. Whatever the case is, I have to stay away from her.

She is something that I want with a ferocity that is vicious, and bestial. But I can never have her.

Because I would never bend my rules for anyone. There's no place for dishonest people in my life.

And judging by Meagan's voice messages, I think Summer has done it again. She chose to lie despite promising me that she wouldn't.

My thoughts are interrupted when the door opens, and the woman I was waiting for steps out.

Summer is wearing a pink top and a pair of royal blue pants that hugs her ass. Her long hair which was tied in a ponytail earlier is now set loose. She really is a brunette Rapunzel.

Her face is clean of the makeup she was wearing.

I prefer her like this. She is naturally beautiful. She is a vision. And doesn't need any makeup to enhance her beauty.

I shake off the thought clouding my brain. I don't have room in my life for a liar, no matter how temptingly beautiful the said liar is.

I begin to walk to her.

Her mismatched eyes lift when she senses me. It makes me halt.

Previously, I had a suspicion, but one look at her face solidified all the doubts in my head. Something is terribly wrong.

The hollowness in her gaze makes me uneasy.

She covers the distance between us and stops in front of me.

"I told you I'd handle it." The corner of her mouth lifts into a tired smile. "I did it. You are free now. I don't think she'll ever trouble you."

My brows pull together as I try to read her. "What have you done, Summer?"

She bows her head, breaking eye contact. "I did what you asked me to do. You know, to repay your favor."

I reach out and grip her chin and lift her face. Meeting her eyes, I ask, “Did you lie?”

She chuckles and pushes my hand away. “What if I did? Did you forget I am a liar? Lying is my forte, Archer. I lied through my teeth and it worked.” She stares at me with those somber eyes. “You must hate me more now that I broke my word.” She lifts one shoulder and snuffles. “I am sorry.”

When she tries to leave, I grab her upper arm. Tugging her back gently, I ask, “What happened?”

When she doesn’t answer or look at me, I lean down. “Was she rude to you? Did she hurt you?”

She stiffens at the question. “No.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you are lying again?”

She shakes her head. “Why are you still here after I told you that I lied?”

She is right. Why indeed? I didn’t get the familiar feeling of breathlessness I usually get when she confessed to lying.

Neither did I feel the awful sense of someone holding my head underwater. Nothing happened.

Maybe because those feelings got buried under a new one. A foreign feeling that hit me when I saw her sullen look.

I take her face in my hands. “That’s not important right now. Tell me what happened.”

She reaches up and grabs my wrists but thankfully doesn’t make a move to remove my touch. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you care? Why do you want to know?”

“Because.”

She rolls her eyes. And it looks like even doing that cost her an ample amount of energy. “I am just tired. I want to go home and snuggle my pup.”

I don’t buy it. She is hiding something. And I am not going to force her. I am well aware of the need to keep things to myself. “All right. Let’s go then.”

With a hand on her lower back, I start to lead her toward my car.

“Thanks for the offer but I drove here.”

My hand flexes against her back. “There’s only so much I can take, Summer. I suggest you stop testing me.”

“What?”

“You are lying again. Your car was parked at the spot beside mine at our building’s parking lot this evening.”

She exhales. “Okay. You caught me. But don’t you get it? I don’t want to go with you.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Summer,” I warn.

“I did what you wanted. Now that I have returned your favor, please stay away from me.”

I should be relieved by that, no? After all, that’s what I want. For this ridiculous fascination I have for her to end. Then why did it piss me the fuck off when she asked me to stay away from her?

“We are neighbors, remember?”

“Yes. I do remember. I wouldn’t have known about that little fact if not for the new year’s disaster.” A beautiful blush spreads across her cheeks. My cock hardens.

She clears her throat and schools her features. “That’s why I don’t want anything to do with you. If you ever find me in a difficult situation, turn around. Don’t help me. I can’t afford to repay any more of your favors.”

“Summer,”

“No, Archer. Please. I can’t.”

Something is bothering her. Not knowing the reason behind her discomfort is irritating me. I feel that *I* am the main cause of it all.

That's why I don't attempt to stop her again when she brushes past me and leaves.



I am intent on having what I want. Summer was reluctant to tell me what went down at the restaurant. But she wears her heart on her sleeve. Her face said it all.

So when I couldn't make her talk, I chose another way.

It only took a few hundred dollar bills to make one of the restaurant's staff spill the beans.

Summer was fired.

I never misused my money, but for the very first I wanted to.

With great struggle, I tamped down the urge to buy this restaurant and run it into the ground.

My anger was aimed in the wrong direction, though. Meagan shouldn't have done that. She threw the wine in Summer's face thinking she would get away with it.

She assumed that because she knows Summer is powerless. She is right. Summer may be powerless but I am not.

After paying the server for the information, I drive straight to my office.

I was only hesitating because I didn't want to ruin my mother's friendship with her mother.

Letting Meagan talk me into going on a date with her was a wrong move on my end. I should've been stricter.

An innocent girl lost her job because of this.

She shouldn't have used such a drastic solution to deal with Meagan. Whatever the case may be, Meagan shouldn't have done that.

She'll learn just how royally she fucked up.

I dial Ettinger as soon as I enter my office.

"Mr. Kim." He answers on the second ring.

“Ettinger, I told you to do a thorough background check on Meagan Carver, correct?”

“Yes, and I did. Found lots of interesting things.”

“Good. Send it to me now.”

Two hours later, I lean back against my seat, feeling somewhat better.

This should put Meagan in her place. She didn't leave me much choice.

Sometimes you have to receive retribution for your bad conduct.

Growing up, life wasn't easy because of my Asian roots. I learned early on that good grades, kindness, and civility are not enough for society to accept you.

That's why whenever I witness someone getting harassed simply for their looks or status, it sets me off. I despise people who treat the working staff at a restaurant or bar or any other localities like they are not humans. Like they are beneath them.

I lost what little respect I had for Meagan today.

On any other day, I would've simply cut ties with her and never looked back.

I wouldn't have bothered going to the lengths of planning and plotting things. Because let's face this. You can't change the world by punishing a bunch of assholes.

So I usually do what is in my power. I walk away. Not this time though.

I did more than that. Because for some reason this feels personal. Because of Summer.

The image of Summer being vulnerable, her face covered in wine in a room full of people affects me adversely.

My mouth flattens into a line. I hate what she's doing to me. The emotion that turns my stomach at the mere thought of her suffering humiliation like that.

If retaliating against Meagan's actions by ruining her life makes me ruthless, then so be it. I never claimed to be

otherwise.

Chapter Sixteen

Archer

Raleigh yanks the darts out from the board and saunters over.

I hold my palm open. When he doesn't pass the dart, I turn my head and frown at him.

"Why don't you sit down for a second, hmm?" He asks with a strained smile and shoves his leather bands-covered hand in the pocket of his dark jeans.

"Archer," Hannah calls out from my other side. She is wearing a white blazer dress, her makeup up to the mark. But those gray eyes look tired as she stares at me. "It's not a big deal."

I turn to her and ask in a low voice. "It's not a big deal?"

Raleigh hurries to her side and wraps his arm around her shoulders, pulling her to his side. "No glaring at my sweet and delicate girlfriend, please."

Hannah narrows her gray eyes at him. "Delicate?"

He smirks at her, then leans down. "And sweet."

"No, I am not." She rolls her lips between her teeth, trying hard not to smile.

"You most definitely are, princess." Raleigh brushes a strand away from her face.

She smooths a hand down his leather jacket. "What did I tell you about flirting with me at work?"

He crosses his arms across his chest and squints his eyes in mock concentration. “I don’t know. What was it again?”

Her lips curl up. “You can’t flirt with your opponent, *RJ*.”

“Oh, but you are not my opponent anymore, are you?” He grins. “We are a team.”

“Look at you, all jolly. You weren’t this happy at the idea of working as a “team” in the past.”

“That was before. Now I can’t picture doing anything without you.”

She goes crimson. Her hand reaches up to play with her short hair. “You are so cheesy sometimes.”

“Only for you, princess.”

They smile at each other like two lovesick fools.

I rub my temples. “Enough you two before I shoot the darts your way.”

I can’t believe these two are the same Raleigh and Hannah who were at each other’s throats only a month ago.

There was a time when my star employees used to fight like cats and dogs all the time. I almost miss it. Because now all they do is flirt. It’s sickening to watch them get all lovey-dovey.

“How would you do that when I have them,” Raleigh says with an unapologetic grin.

“Hand them to me.”

“Nope.”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you going to argue with your boss?”

“I am not arguing with my “boss” I am trying to calm down my big bro.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

They both raise their eyebrows and look pointedly at my attire. My suit jacket is missing. My shirt sleeves are rolled up to my elbows, my tie is loose and my hair is probably a mess from running my fingers through them.

I am worked up. Actually, no. I am furious. I just lost an important deal to my competitor. And when I am furious, I like to throw darts at the board until the frustration leaves my body.

“Give me the darts right now and leave my office. Both of you.” I speak sternly.

They just stand there, giving me a bored look.

“You think deepening your voice is going to scare us?” Hannah asks.

Raleigh regards me with a worried look. “You know we are not going to leave you alone while you are all worked up. We are a family, remember?”

I breathe a sigh and sit down in my chair. “I don’t understand how the hell you two are so cool about all this.”

Hannah plops down in one of the guest chairs. “Do you seriously believe I am cool about losing to Genesis Media again?” Then, “I am so not cool, Archer. I just have a great poker face. I am fuming inside.”

Raleigh drops his easy-going grin and takes a seat in a vacant chair next to Hannah’s. “Great!” He glares at Hannah. “What happened to *“let’s not bring our rival’s name in front of Archer”*?”

“I’m sorry, okay!” She bursts out. “I’m only human.” She runs her fingers through her hair in agitation.

I lean forward in my chair, sobering. “Hey.” I stare into Hannah’s eyes. “As a leader, I should be the one looking after my team. Not the other way around.” I glance at Raleigh. “Don’t blame her.”

Rising from my chair, I study them. They look haggard. “You both have worked hard on the pitch. It’s not our fault they are the best.”

“Bullshit.” Raleigh grinds out.

Hannah nods. “Exactly. *We* are the best. After snagging Mr. Smith’s contract we are now one of the top advertising agencies in the world.”

Yes. We are. A thrill goes through my bloodstream.

The only thing that makes me feel alive is my work. I am passionate about what I do. I get a kick every time I land a deal. Adrenaline soars through me when I witness KIM Advertising reaching a new milestone on the road to success.

It pleases me a great deal when I see my people—who do hours of hard work without batting an eye—smile after every victory.

Obviously, KIM Advertising is the best. It's not my arrogance talking, it's merely a fact.

It's only a matter of time. KIM Advertising would acquire the title of the number one advertising agency in the world one day.

I didn't get to where I am today by being scared of competition. Instead, I crave a fair battle. It makes success all the more sweeter.

But there's something about Genesis Media that seems off.

We lost three deals to them. Three. Consecutively. It was like they were purposefully pitching the clients we were already in talks with.

When we lost for the first time, I was impressed by them. It's not every day you see an up-and-coming advertising firm grow so fast and begin competing with giant companies like ours.

Genesis Media was only a year old and it managed to make a strong presence in the market.

They reminded me of the time when KIM Advertising was in its initial stage.

Genesis Media is run by a small group of individuals I have yet to meet. They hardly attend any seminars or events. Not much information is available about the people working behind the scenes.

In truth, I was happy for them. It pleased me to see them progress. Until... well until my star employees began noticing a pattern.

Unlike me, they weren't so happy about gaining a new competitor. They are ruthless like that.

They began keeping an eye on them. Like they usually do with others.

To be on track in cutting-edge competition in the marketing industry, you need to learn everything there is to know about your rival.

That's what they did.

They noticed that each time a new client contacted us for hiring us, Genesis Media latched on to them. They offered great discounts on the same services we provide.

But that's not it, they mimic our style too. Or at least try to. Raleigh and Hannah conduct Marketing research in a trendy way that usually attracts a lot of attention.

My people noted that they began using similar strategies to ours.

I didn't give it much thought at first. They were copying our style, true. But that doesn't mean much in the grand scheme of things.

I tried telling them that by doing this, they can only land deals. If the clients keep returning to them, then that means they have talent. And if they can't sustain them, then no matter how much they plagiarize our work, they would never flourish.

So I let it slide. But when I began noticing similar ad campaigns, I knew they were blatantly recreating our old work.

Sadly, the world doesn't care who the original content creator is as long as they get the product at a cheaper rate.

So that's how they were able to defeat us not once, not twice but three times. Just because they charge way lesser than us.

"We need to do something, boss," Hannah says, bringing me to the present.

"Yes. This is not great for our agency's image in the market."

"You are unbeatable, Archer. Those three deals wouldn't affect our revenue, nor would they stop the billionaires from choosing us. But Raleigh is right." She props her elbows on the desk and interlinks her fingers, brows pulled together in deep

concentration. “We have to create something impactful to give all of our competitors a message. And for that, we need you.”

I pace the room. Up until now, Hannah and Raleigh were handling all this. I didn’t interfere, simply observed from afar. But I guess I’ve been silent long enough. It’s time I step in and take over the reins.

A minute later, a plan begins to take form in my head. Piece by piece like a puzzle, it creates a picture. When the final piece falls in its place, the picture becomes crystal clear.

I stop pacing. Reaching down for the dart, I pick it up and turn to face the dartboard sideways.

“Get your creative department ready,” I command as I put my right foot forward. Gripping the barrel of the dart with three fingers, I raise it to eye level.

Both of them stay silent, their focus entirely on the dart between my fingers.

I aim and throw. It lands dead center, striking the bullseye.

The silence is pierced by their loud clapping.

I face them. “Let’s conquer the world, shall we?”



I am striding toward the meeting room when my latest assistant Chad calls out my name from behind. He falls into step beside me.

He is wearing a gray shirt and black pants.

On this floor, there is no dress code. You are free to wear casuals. But he favors formal attire. Just like me. He is also by far the only assistant who is proving his worth.

He doesn’t lie. He is efficient. Works well under pressure.

“Speak,” I tell him without slowing my pace.

“Ms. Carver called again.”

Meagan. I shake my head. She should quit trying to reach me. She is wasting her time. And mine.

“She was crying,” Chad informs, making me stop.

I stopped not because he told me about Meagan crying over the phone but because Chad’s hands were full of binders and an iPad.

He is not going to attend the meeting, so there’s no meaning in making him jog all the way to the meeting room while carrying all the stuff.

His mocha skin is covered in sweat.

“She threatened to sue you for ruining her life.”

“Yeah? Well, she could try.” I say dryly.

From the file Ettinger sent me on Meagan, I discovered that she is having an affair with her bodyguard.

Not only that, Ettinger found bank transactions between her and her bodyguard. She wired millions of funds to his account.

The funds were then later used for insider trading. An illegal practice that would earn the bratty heiress and her bodyguard boyfriend years in prison.

I could have released the evidence to the press and her life would be actually ruined. All I did was email them to her parents.

Her “best daughter in the world” image is shattered. The power she so often flaunted to look down on others is no longer in her possession.

The best revenge. I could have caused more lasting damage but I didn’t do it. She should be grateful.

“The next time she calls, just tell her that the email I sent to her parents could be forwarded to the LAPD if she continues to call.”

Chad’s eyes widen. “O-kay.”

I turn to move but halt again when his stomach growls. “Head to the seventh floor while I am in the meeting.”

I specifically built the seventh floor of this building for them. It has a gym if you want to work out, a yoga corner, a library,

sleeping pods if you want a power nap, and a big cafeteria providing a variety of food.

I aim for both customer as well as staff satisfaction.

These facilities are made available so my employees could head over to that floor whenever they feel stressed, hungry, or tired.

I expect one hundred percent dedication. Improved well-being of employees leads to enhanced productivity.

We are a family. We look after each other here.

His face lights up but he hesitates. “I can’t. I have to send these—”

“Chad,” I interrupt. “Those can wait. Do what I say. I don’t like repeating myself.”

Chad breaks into a beaming smile. “Thank you, Archer.”

I nod and continue toward the meeting room.

As soon as I enter the meeting room, everyone stops talking. Pin-drop silence.

I didn’t bother righting my tie or shrugging on my jacket. This is probably the first time they have seen me disheveled. And they are worried.

The deal fell through. And they think it’s affecting me.

It is. But not in the way they are thinking. I feel challenged. And that has ignited a fire in me.

Until now, I let them fight on their own. Now it’s time for their leader to step up.

Putting my hands in my pockets, I stop at the center of the room and scan the long faces of the creative team. Raleigh and Hannah stand at the corner, unlike others, they are at ease because of our conversation earlier.

“I started this agency alone. Had to struggle for investors to give me a chance alone.” I look at each one of them. “Like any regular person, I had doubts and negative thoughts after getting rejected all the time.”

I turn around slowly, watching them watch my every move. “But I didn’t let it overwhelm me. I changed my mindset. I began thinking to myself... ‘They are refusing to help me because they can’t see my future. My vision. They couldn’t see how big the brand KIM Advertising is going to become, but I could.’”

I reach up and tap my temple. “In here, the picture was clear. I felt sorry for the people who denied helping me because I knew one day, they would regret it. It was for the best.” I look each one of them in the eye. “I am a self-made man. And it all happened because I didn’t give up.”

The entire room bursts into applause. Hannah gives me a proud smile while Raleigh says, “That’s my brother.”

I shake my head, the corner of my mouth lifting. “I can’t take the sole credit for KIM Advertising’s success. This agency is on top because of you all.” I point the finger at them. “So chin up. I will not tolerate any kind of sad looks from you all.”

Brielle nods enthusiastically. Mia wipes a tear. Jason and Chris holler.

“Quit thinking of the past. You can’t change that. That’s not in your power. However, what *is* in fact in your power is what you’d do next. This is where I come in.”

More cheers follow. Their enthusiasm is contagious. I can’t help but smile at them.

“All right, listen up. Can anyone answer why clients choose KIM Advertising over anyone else?” I ask.

Justina, Brand Marketing Manager stands. “Because we are versatile. We have all the resources and expertise that caters to every industry.”

“Correct.” I motion for her to sit. “So you see. We have more scope than any specialized agency. And Genesis Media is a specialized agency.”

Chris jumps up. “Oh, yes! They can’t provide all the services we do, that’s why they could only get three deals from us.”

“You mean they’ve been chasing all of our clients?” Brielle screeches.

Chris sighs. “Pretty much.”

Brielle’s gaze flies to me. “One signal. All I need is one green signal from you and Imma drop a missile on their building!”

Mia chuckles. “And how are you going to get your hands on a missile?”

Brielle rolls her eyes. “Have you surfed YouTube lately? They’ve got tutorials on everything. I am going to make one myself!”

Bursts of laughter greet her declaration.

“Pay attention, everyone.” Hannah’s voice booms, quieting the chatter in seconds. Then, “Please continue, Archer.”

“Okay, that was hot,” Raleigh murmurs. It is loud enough that everyone chuckles.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Raleigh.”

“Sorry.” He murmurs.

I sigh. “Let’s be serious, guys. Focus.”

When they fall silent, I start. “We need to plan a new advertising campaign that will blow up just like the Smith’s.”

This time Hannah speaks. “But how is that possible? You know why the Euphoria project got so much attention.”

Raleigh and Hannah had planned to get married at the resort to promote it. How could I forget?

“We are not doing anything like that.” I give them a pointed look.

“Then what are we gonna do?” This is from Nina.

“You remember we were approached by a new clothing line?”

“Yeah. Modern Closet.” Nina nods. “They wanted to hire us but couldn’t afford it. They are very new and not quite famous.”

“Good. Call them and say that we are ready to negotiate because we are interested in working with them.”

“What?” At least three people shout simultaneously.

“You all know I hate repeating myself.”

“Don’t overreact, guys. Let’s hear the whole thing first.” Hannah says.

“We have promoted endless brands. Each one of those brands are well known. And they recorded a commendable increase in their sales because of our excellent ad campaigns. This time, I want to work with Modern Closet.”

“Isn’t this risky?” Mia asks.

“Oh, it is. But it’s also the risk that could pay off.”

“How?”

Before I could answer, Raleigh steps forward, his face alight. “This will be the message to our competitors.”

The corners of my mouth kick up. “Exactly.”

He continues. “As Mia pointed out, this is a risk. A challenge that would test our capabilities as advertisers. Good marketing can either make or break you. By choosing Modern Closet, we get to show off our abilities to promote. And if this campaign becomes a hit, the entire credit would go to us because no one quite knows about this brand.”

Raleigh walks to me and grabs my shoulders. “You. Are. Genius.”

“But what if the campaign fails to draw the desired results?” Hannah frowns. “This is a gamble. Not to mention they can’t afford us.”

“You were the one who said earlier that the billionaires won’t stop coming to us, nor will our profits would suffer. So why not make an exception for once? After all, it’s a win-win.”

“I just don’t want to lose again.” She murmurs.

“Are you underestimating yourself and your creative team?” I cock a brow.

She turns her head, her gaze running around the room. “No.”

“Then it’s settled. We are doing this.” I announce.

Taking a long breath, I begin shelling out orders. “You both, contact them right now. Don’t affirm anything on the phone. Schedule a meeting.”

Then I turn to the star duo. “Hannah. Raleigh. I want you to begin planning a campaign. Everything should be fresh. Nothing like our old work. Make it so complex, it’d be harder for Genesis Media to even think of plagiarizing it.”

Raleigh grins. “Got it.”

“I also want new models. New faces. Hire newbies if you want to, I don’t care. I want the best of the best, am I clear?”

Hannah’s expression becomes serious, her shoulders straight like she is ready for war. “Yes, Archer.”

“Good. Let’s get this show on the road.”



Cracking my neck, I saunter to the elevator of my apartment building.

Luckily, I don’t have to wait as the elevator arrives when I reach it. I step inside and hit the button to my floor.

The elevator’s door begins to slide shut but at the last second, a hand slips through it to prevent it from shutting completely.

I should’ve known the only person who would risk losing a limb just to stop the elevator can only be her. My neighbor.

Summer Donovan.

She takes one step inside the elevator and comes to an abrupt halt.

She twists, ready to get out.

My hand closes on the backpack she has slung over and tug her back inside.

With a startled yelp, she lands on my chest. I don’t release her until the door shuts.

“Ugh!” She struggles out of my grip and moves all the way to the side of the car. Leaning against the wall, she glares at me with her exquisite eyes. “What is wrong with you?”

Instead of answering her, my eyes slide down her body. She is wearing a red vintage-looking dress. Her hair is tied up with red ribbons. Her lipstick matches the outfit.

My eyes narrow. “Why are you wearing that?”

“Huh?”

“The lipstick. You don’t wear makeup.”

Her lips part. Then her eyes turn into slits. “Stop talking as if you know me.”

My goddamn cock is hard as a rock. She is here spewing venom and all I can think of is taking her against the wall.

And judging by her labored breathing and flushed face, I can tell she is not indifferent to me either. There’s something between us. She can sense it too. Which makes it ten times harder to be with her in the confines of the elevator.

Exhaling, I try to calm down. “Are you still upset about the other night?”

“What night?” She pushes off the wall and faces the door.

Oh, so we are going to play this game? All right, then.

I lift my hand to hit a button on the control panel. The elevator jerks to a halt, making her jump.

Her wide eyes flit over to me and finally meets mine. That’s better. “Why’d you do that?”

I lean against the wall and cross my arms around my chest. “Because you are ignoring me.”

“I am not—”

My jaw ticks. She is clever to trap the lie before it’s out. Good girl. “This morning when I was leaving for work, I saw you coming out of your apartment. But as soon as you saw me getting in the elevator, you ran back inside.”

“I forgot something—”

At her blatant lie, I push away from the wall and take a step forward. “Tread carefully with me, little liar.”

She stiffens. Her eyes turn glacial as she takes a step closer. She tilts her chin. “Or what?”

Grabbing her chin, I lean down. “You want to find out?”

A beautiful shade of red tints her cheeks. I want to feel her soft heated skin on my fingertips while I taste those red lips of hers.

I want to smear the lipstick she's wearing by kissing the fuck out of her. My cock gets harder at the thought.

Like a magnetic pull, my head begins to lower. Her pupils dilate, and her breath hitches. But she doesn't step back.

Her gaze slides to my mouth. When it stays there for a beat too long, my jaw clenches, my control about to snap.

Then she blinks. Like her mind couldn't process what is happening.

She places her small palms on my chest and pushes me away. I don't budge.

"You are invading my personal space."

"Am I?"

"Yes, you jerk. Back off." She hisses.

"I might consider it when you tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Why were you ignoring me this morning? And just now when you saw me inside the elevator."

"I don't know, man. Take a hint."

"You are mad at me because you lost your job."

She tilts her head and gives me a stiff smile. "If you already know it then why are you pestering me?"

"Because I am sorry."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "What?"

"I am sorry. I wanted to apologize since that night."

She shakes her head. "I don't want your apology. I want you to leave me alone."

"I can help you—"

"Hard pass. You helping me that night led to this in the first place."

“Until you get a job, let me support you financially.”

Her features harden. “Don’t ever suggest something like that again. I am not a charity case for you to *support*. I said it the last time, and I’ll repeat it again. Stay *away* from me.”

The argument was on the tip of my tongue but I swallow it down. She misunderstood my intent. I was trying to help.

She lost her job because of me. This was the least I could offer.

Why do we always end up fighting or arguing?

Maybe she is right. I should stay away from her.

There was no question about my desire for her now. It is also not wrong that I want to get her out of my mind.

Even her lies aren’t so off-putting for me to get over my fascination.

Clenching my jaw hard, I stomp down on the need to stop her.

Stopping her would lead me to touch her in some way. And I know one more touch will push me over the edge.

I don’t stop her when she turns and slams the button that starts the elevator again.

This is for the best. Is it not?

Chapter Seventeen

Summer

Today is one of those days when you don't feel like getting out of bed.

I curse myself for getting up early. I robbed myself of peace.

When I am asleep, I don't have to worry about anything. Because spending my time sleeping feels much better than existing in a state of hopeless despair.

A small whimper compels me to wipe my eyes and lift my head.

A tired smile lifts my lip. Reaching out, I caress Goldie's head which is propped on a pillow beside mine. The sight melts my heart.

"Thank you for being my constant companion, buddy. It's exhausting to be alone sometimes."

He lifts his head when my chin trembles. I open my arms. He wastes no time and burrows himself against me.

Ever since I lost my job a few days ago, it's been hard.

It's scary to end up in the same place where you began. Over and over again.

It's a cycle. Get a job. Work your ass off. Get fired. Repeat.

I need to grow. It's frightening to see the world around me evolving and here I am, stuck.

What's more frustrating is, that I am not doing anything to change it.

I don't get time from waitressing or the mermaid gigs to think about picking a career. Because when I am unemployed, I utilize my time into finding a new job. And if I am working two or more jobs, I get consumed by it. So much so, that I barely get any time to sleep much less stress over finding a new career.

People have highs and lows. I experienced only lows. My life graph is a constant horizontal line.

I feel so drained. Pretending to be happy isn't working anymore. Colors don't help too. It's terrifying.

And on top of that, I bumped into Archer last night. The man who has been making my life difficult ever since I met him.

My heart had stopped and then started beating out of control when I saw him last night.

I have to admit, his action of stopping the elevator just so he could get my attention was hot.

But he ruined it by mentioning financial support.

I had a bad day yesterday. And to top it off, he said something that struck a nerve.

I will never let anyone support me financially. I am an independent girl.

Life is tough. True. But I won't ever allow myself to be dependent on anyone like that. It's against my ethics.

"I wish we could stay like this all day, Goldie." I kiss his furry head. He tilts his head and licks my cheek.

"You hungry?" I ask.

He lets out a bark and licks my face again. He is the only reason I get out of bed. If he weren't there, I would've gone back to sleep and probably would've wasted the entire day.

Once on my feet, I glance at him. "Race you to the kitchen." I challenge and take off, Goldie following suit.



I swallow audibly as I stand in the snack aisle, eyeing the pack of Oreo cookies longingly.

I hesitate for a moment before reaching for it. I drop it in the cart and push it forward.

After feeding Goldie, I quickly showered, did some chores, and stepped out for grocery shopping.

Aside from a couple of granola bars, I found nothing to eat in the apartment. It was now noon. And my stomach is aching from lack of food.

It takes about ten minutes to pick up the groceries as well as Goldie's food and chewy treats. Then, I make my way to the cashier.

After waiting for a few minutes in line, it's my turn.

"Hi! Good morning." She greets me with a smile.

I smile back. The lady chats with me as she rings my things. I don't mind it at all as I love talking.

"And your total is \$149, ma'am."

"What?" My mouth falls open. I stare at the ball I picked for Goldie. "Umm... well, how much would it be without these?" I ask as I reach beside the ball and remove the Oreo cookies and two bags of chips.

"That'll be 134 dollars and 50 cents. How are you paying?"

I fiddle with my neck scarf. "I'm sorry, could you exclude the peanut butter and the cereal?" I have a couple of days' worth of cereal left. But I can't go without the oatmeal and milk.

After I pay her with cash, I exit the store.

I am almost at my apartment building when I feel my phone vibrating in my jeans pocket.

I dig it out. Hannah's number flashing across the screen surprises me. I pick up the phone.

"Hello, princess." I tease.

Her laugh on the other end makes me smile. "Hello, Summer. How are you?"

“I am good. How are you?”

“Great. Where are you right now? I hope I am not bothering you.”

“You can bother me anytime.” I chuckle. “Anyway, to answer your question, I was just heading home. Why do you ask?”

“Can we meet?”

“Umm... sure.” I wanted to go back to lying on my bed and doing nothing but that will have to wait. She sounds serious. I’m hoping she’s not breaking up with my idiot friend. My poor heart wouldn’t handle it. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. When will you be home?”

“I am standing outside my building,” I ask, frowning, the sinking feeling in my stomach not leaving.

“Superb. Turn left.” She says and I do.

Hannah stands a few feet away from me, looking absolutely stunning. She is wearing a black turtle neck and skinny jeans with a black blazer. Black sunglasses and black heels complete her boss lady outfit.

Her chin-length hair which is parted at the side brushes against her cheeks as she strides toward me.

She has a brown paper bag in her hand. Before I could ask anything about it or her relationship with Raleigh, she wraps her arms around me.

“Missed you, Summer.” She murmurs. My eyes fall shut.

Wrapping my arms around her, I smile. “Missed you too, Hannah.”

She pulls back and lifts the bag she was holding. “I brought lunch. Hope you’re hungry.”

I swallow thickly. I am famished. But I am also happy to just have her around. “I am.”

“Great. Let’s go.”

She links her arm with mine, just like she did in Hawaii. Then we head inside.

After lunch, I begin cleaning.

“He’s so cute.” Hannah gushes as she plays with Goldie and his new ball.

“Just like his mommy,” I smirk as I throw the empty cartons in the trash bin.

“I couldn’t agree more.” She smiles at me. Pushing to her feet, she joins me when I start clearing the dining table.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.” She begins.

At my expression, she laughs. “It’s not about Raleigh. I already told you.”

“Then tell me what it is! You said you will tell me after we finish eating. We did. Now please tell me. I hate suspense.”

She shakes her head. “Okay, okay. Sit down first.”

My panic doesn’t lessen when she leads me to the couch. Goldie abandons his ball and jumps in my lap.

“Well...” I prompt, cradling Goldie to my chest.

“I...” She hesitates. And my pulse quickens.

“Tell me already!”

“I want you to come work with us.” She blurts.

Exhaling in relief, I lean back on the couch. “Oh, okay... I thought...” I sit back up. “Wait what?”

“I want to hire you, Summer.”

“Is this a prank?”

“I’m dead serious.”

“I’m not qualified to work at KIM Advertising.”

“Oh, but you are.”

“I am?” I ask, puzzled.

“Yep. I am looking for a fresh face for our new ad campaign for a clothing line. And you, my dear, fit the bill.”

Getting on my feet, I shake my head vehemently. “No way. Have you seen me?”

She crosses her arms. “Yes. You are taller than the average height. You’ve got the angular face of a model. Toned figure. Gorgeous hair. And the cherry on top is the unique set of your eyes.”

I am speechless. Truly speechless.

Can this be the opportunity I was waiting for? This is the chance life has presented to me to do something new.

The big question is, can I do it? Do I have the courage to try something I have never done? What if I fail? I have no experience in modeling after all.

But now that I’ve got this chance, I am going to take it. Even if I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing it, I am going to give it a try.

But doubt creeps in. I look at her. “Was this Raleigh’s idea?”

The corner of her mouth kicks up. “He is smart. But I am smarter. He has no idea I am here.”

“You are not doing this to help me right?” They both know the whole story behind my moving into River’s apartment. To say Raleigh was furious would be an understatement.

He is still upset that I went to a stranger for help rather than calling him.

“This is strictly professional, Summer. No one can persuade me to do anything when it comes to my work. Not even Archer. I aim for the best when it comes to my projects. And you are the best.”

Archer. How can I forget he is Hannah’s boss? I swore to stay away from him. Accepting Hannah’s offer would defeat the purpose of staying away as I’ll be working in the same space as him.

“I can’t do this.”

She frowns. “Is it about your other jobs? Give me your schedule, I’ll make the shoot dates flexible so your work doesn’t suffer.”

I bite my lip. “I only work on weekends at the moment.”

“Oh, that’s great. So what is the holdup?”

When I don't say anything. She touches my shoulder. "KIM Advertising pays well to the models it hires. And besides, Raleigh and I will be there with you throughout the process. You'll feel right at home."

I glance down at Goldie in my arms.

What do you say? Should I accept? I ask with my eyes.

He licks my chin.

Hmm. Should I take that as your approval?

But what about Archer? Then I frown internally. What about him? Why should I change the routes of my life simply to avoid him?

He won't be there anyway, right? He is the bossman after all. He has bigger responsibilities than keeping track of the models his agency hires.

Hannah and Raleigh operate things like these. They work and carry out every small activity in the agency. He had told me himself.

Archer might not even notice I am working there.

"I don't want to look elsewhere when I have a gem right here," Hannah says. Then, "I wouldn't have pressed if I had an inkling of doubt about you, Summer. You have potential. I can see it."

"But I never did this before, you know. I don't know how to... pose."

Her expression softens. "I have a team full of amazingly talented people who will be there to help you. You have nothing to worry about."

"Okay." I smile.

"Is that a yes?" She waits with a hopeful look.

I grin. A strange feeling of excitement fills me. "Yes. Yes, it is."

She grins and squeezes me and Goldie in a hug.



The air of déjà vu fills my nostrils and wraps around my lungs like barbed wire, making it impossible to breathe.

My palms are cold and clammy and it trembles slightly as I wipe them on my green pants.

I am standing outside the KIM Advertising building. I never thought life would drag me here once again.

The menacing sight of the tall, intimidating building triggers me.

I feel dizzy. I wrap my arms around my middle, trying to stop the trembling of my body.

There's nothing to be scared about, I reassure myself. I am expected to be here.

But they all saw you getting kicked out of the building, Summer.

The last time when I was here, I was desperate for a job. Not much has changed since and that realization makes my situation more depressing.

Standing here is giving me more anxiety. So I decide to rip the band-aid off.

I glance down at my green high-waisted pants, white tube top, and pink blazer. Colors.

Give me strength, mom. I am going to need it today.

With straightened shoulders, attention directed at the entrance, I stride forward. There's no way I am going to show them my weakness.

The immense structure and polished interior catch me off guard even though this is not my first time here.

My eyes involuntarily move toward the interactive LED wall. Like last time, it's displaying another advertisement created by KIM Advertising.

I stare at the full-body pictures of the models posing with bags of a famous brand. They are so beautiful. The colors are so rich.

“Do you like it?” a voice asks. I turn to find Hannah’s smiling face.

I nod, smiling back.

“Soon you’ll be on there too.”

I bite my lip. “You think so?”

She shakes her head no. When my brow creases, she says. “I know so. I love your outfit.”

“Too many colors, right?” I chuckle, stroking the hot pink headband.

“It suits you.”

I start to grin but it wavers. “I’m nervous.”

“It’s natural. When Raleigh and I had to do the photoshoots in Hawaii, I was nervous as hell.”

“How did you overcome it?”

“I didn’t. I was sweating and awkward while posing in front of the professionals.” She laughs softly. “But the tension left my body as the shoot progressed. Believe it or not, the whole team working behind the camera plays an important role in your shoot.”

“How?”

“It’s all about a personal connection with the people you are going to work with. One must build a relationship with the photographer and the team before starting the shoot. It affects the journey in a great way because you are all comfortable around each other.”

“Oh...”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, the photographer we hired for your test shoot is Raleigh’s good friend, Mason.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of him. Speaking of Raleigh... how did he take the news of you hiring me?”

She types something on her phone and then looks up. “Let’s find out.”

“What?”

“I just told him.” She points to her phone.

My eyebrows go up. “You told him now? Over a text?”

“Yeah.” She shrugs.

“You could have told him yesterday. He’s still mad about me not telling him about my apartment situation.” I should’ve called him myself. But the idiot is behaving like a brat.

He says I broke our pact by choosing someone else over him when I needed help.

I let him lecture me thinking he would get over it. No such luck.

“He’s just messing with you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he can’t stay mad at you forever.”

“True.” I crack a smile. “But still, you should’ve told him beforehand. He’s your work partner. Aren’t you supposed to discuss things before arriving at a decision?”

“Well... ever since our departments merged, I miss the days when he used to be my opponent, you know. The thrill to defeat him. So sometimes, I like to mess with him by doing something without informing him.”

“It must piss him off.”

She smirks. It seems as though that’s the reaction she wants from him. “Exactly.”

“Does he retaliate?”

“Oh yeah. He is a competitive man after all.”

I laugh. “And you *like* competing with him even though you are a team?”

“I live for it.”

I roll my eyes. “You both are made for each other.”

“I know right.”

It’s so good to see Hannah talk so freely about her feelings for him. To express her playful side so often.

She wasn't like this before. She was dubbed an ice queen by her co-workers. Because she never let anyone get close to her. Always remained guarded.

My heart smiles when I see them together. It almost makes me wish I had something what they have. Almost.

But I am better off it. I have seen Raleigh's state after his break up. I never want to go through that.

Whoever you love, is going to abandon you someday. Either by choice or by dying.

Why put yourself through so much pain when you can avoid it altogether?

I have Goldie and a few friends I can count on. That's all I need. Oh, no. I need money too.

I want to earn so much money that I could never hesitate before buying my favorite cookies. So I could quit buying clothes from thrift stores.

I want to be so rich that I won't ever have to feel embarrassed about the gifts I give my friends.

I want to be financially stable so I could fill my house with fur babies and take good care of them.

Last but not the least, I want to be powerful enough to do something for orphan kids. Being an orphan myself, I know how many times I had wished for someone to come and save me. To love me. To give me the most basic things which others often take for granted.

So, yeah. My new goal is to become filthy rich. And this test shoot can be the first step toward it.

"Come on, let's head over to the studio. Everyone's waiting for you."

"Wait, you have a studio here?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you guys rent it or something. I didn't know the test shoot will be happening here." Right where Archer is.

“It was Archer’s idea to turn one of the huge rooms into a studio. It saves a lot of money. And we utilize it for many purposes like filming video content, hosting LIVE talk shows, et cetera. Having our very own studio allows us to work at any hour of the day. That’s why I told you we were flexible and could arrange our shoot dates around your schedule.”

“He’s smart,” I mumble.

“Archer? Oh, yeah, he sure is. That man is the backbone of the agency.”

Hannah opens the black door and asks me to step inside first. When I do, I am overwhelmed by the scene before me.

The size of the room is massive. There are people scattered around the floor, each concentrating on their own task. A pop song is playing over the surround speakers.

White curtain-like fabric is stretched across the wall and the floor in an arc.

“What’s it called?” I ask Hannah about the white background.

“Oh, that’s an infinity cove. Another term is cyclorama. It gives a seamless background which allows the photographer to capture their subject and create amazing visuals.”

“It’s... fascinating.” I gawk at the surrounding.

“I forgot to mention, we sometimes use the studio for car photography and advertisements. That’s why the studio is on the ground floor.”

I can picture a car here because this room is spacious.

Light equipment is placed around the white background. Few feet away from the infinity cove are monitors and other electronic gadgets mounted on tripods.

“What are those monitors for?”

“To review the pictures during the shoot.”

“Whoa.”

“Cool, right? To your left, you can see the makeup vanity set up for you. There’s a changing room right beside it. Also, if you want to use the restroom, it’s to your right at the far corner.”

I can only bob my head.

“Today’s just a test shoot, so you’ll be given only one outfit to change into.”

As Hannah continues to speak, my brain tunes her out. Unease ripples through me.

I want to run. But it’s too late. I am already here. These people are here for me. I can’t let so many people down. I can’t let Hannah down who has put so much trust in me. A noob.

I don’t even realize I am moving backward until I crash against someone. I twist around to find Raleigh.

My best friend.

I stare up at him, my body trembling.

“In case you forgot, I am still mad at you...” He trails. He takes one look at my face and pulls me in his arms.

“Summer, what’s wrong?” Raleigh strokes my back as he asks.

I shake my head, inhaling his familiar scent of leather.

I feel a small hand ruffle my hair. “She’s nervous,” Hannah says.

Raleigh pulls away. “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to, okay?”

I stare into his blue eyes.

“But I am happy that you are here. Hannah couldn’t have chosen a better face for this campaign.” He smiles at Hannah.

“I... I want to do this.”

“But?” He cues.

“But I’m scared I might suck.”

“You silly, silly girl,” He hugs me once more. “The Summer I know isn’t a scaredy cat. She is a fighter.” He leans back. “Isn’t she?”

I slowly nod.

“There’s no pressure, you hear me? The moment it all gets too much, you tell me. I’ll drop you home. No questions asked.”

He brushes my strands away before saying, “But you won’t know until you give it a try. There’s a chance you might end up liking it.”

“You’re right.” I give him a watery smile. Suddenly feeling emotional. “Thank you.” Maybe I was on edge since I entered KIM Advertising. Maybe I am still rethinking my humiliation. There can be many reasons, but Raleigh’s presence opens the damn floodgates.

I missed this idiot friend of mine.

“Summer!” A voice calls out my name. Hannah moves aside and I see Brielle running to me with Mia in tow. I’ve already met them in Hawaii and hung out with them at Raleigh’s place. It’s so good to see more familiar faces. It eases the tension in me.

I chuckle when they hug me. My cheeks hurt from smiling as they gush about my outfit.

“I styled it,” I say proudly.

“It’s so trendy! I need tips! Stat.” Brielle says with a grin.

“Sure thing.”

“Give me your number!”

Raleigh and Hannah watch us with amusement as we exchange numbers.

“Cool. Now come on let’s get you ready for the photoshoot!” Brielle grasps my hand and starts leading me away.

Mia falls into step beside us. “In the meantime, here’s the moodboard I made for you. These are the poses and styles we are going to capture you in.”

In a matter of seconds, I am seated in a chair in front of a mirror with light bulbs and stylists and professional makeup artists surrounding me.

Chapter Eighteen

Archer

A knock on my office door makes me look up from the file I was reading.

“May I come in, sir?” Raleigh grins as he stands in the doorway.

“No, you may not.” I deadpan.

“Ha-ha.” He strolls inside and throws his weight on the guest chair.

“Why are you still here?” I ask. It’s 9 p.m.

“I can ask you the same.” He frowns. “You should go home before ten sometimes, you know. For a change.”

“Don’t dodge my question.”

“I’m just worried for you man. All you do is work.”

“I am a workaholic.”

“You state that as if it’s a good thing.”

“Because it is.”

He throws his hands up in surrender. “Anyway, I am here to give you this.”

I glance at the flash drive in his hand.

“It contains a surprise.” He grins.

“A surprise?” I ask.

He nods, still grinning.

“For me?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Leave it here and go.”

He frowns. “It doesn’t pique your curiosity?”

“No.”

“Why not? Don’t you have questions about it?”

“Maybe.”

“Then why are you not asking it?”

“Because you will tell me regardless of me asking,” I say flatly.

He sighs. “You are boring, man.” He straightens, his features lighting up. “Anyway, we did a test shoot today.”

That gets my attention. “You are fast.”

“Hannah is.” He says with pride shining in his eyes. “She arranged everything. I was unaware until this morning.”

I raise my eyebrow in question. “She didn’t tell you who the model she was recruiting was?”

He chuckles. “I didn’t even know she was on a hunt and found a female model in just one day.”

“Sounds like something she would do.”

“We still have to find male models. And a few more female ones. But this one will be the main focus of the campaign.”

“Who is she?”

“Like I said, it’s a surprise.”

“Do I know her?”

He shrugs. “See for yourself and find out.”

“I told you I needed a fresh face.”

He pauses then grins. “She is new, don’t worry. In fact, today was her first day facing the camera.”

“How did she do?”

“Mason was impressed. Said she is a natural.”

“All right. I’ll take a look once I’m done going through this file.”

Raleigh doesn’t like the answer. “How long are you going to stay here?”

“As long as it takes to get this done.” I lift the file in my hand.

“How long has it been since you last ate?”

I pause, trying to recall.

“You don’t even remember, do you?”

I lift a shoulder. “I’m not hungry.”

“But I am.”

I glance up from the file and look at him. “Then why are you still here?”

“I came here to give you the flash drive but now I am taking you out to eat.”

“Like a date?” I tilt my head, amused.

He scowls. “Your sense of humor sucks.” Jumping to his feet, he claps his hand. “Come on, we are leaving.”

“Where’s Hannah?”

“She is waiting for us in the lobby. I already told her you are joining us for dinner at our usual Korean BBQ restaurant.”

“I don’t like it when you manipulate me,” I grumble, snapping the file shut. He knows I don’t like the idea of Hannah—who I love like my little sister—waiting downstairs tired and hungry.

He merely grins. “I know. Now let’s go because my girlfriend gets cranky when she is starving.”

After having dinner with my star employees who are also the pains in my ass, I bid them goodbye and head to my place.

As soon as I am alone, the feeling that was muted because of Hannah and Raleigh comes over me. Guilt. The familiar sense that never escapes me.

The small smile that was lingering on my lips has now vanished.

I breathe out a silent apology. And just like the thousand others, it never does any good.

No matter how many times I apologize, it would change nothing.

I don't think I would ever stop feeling guilty whenever I am happy.

That's why I never let myself have a free moment. I avoid meeting my family. Or mingling with acquaintances.

I don't deserve it.

But Raleigh and Hannah are relentless. They care for me. Their efforts weaken my resolve every time.

I've come to accept people's animosity for my aloof behavior. But those two never bought it. They fought through the narrow opening they saw in my façade and were able to reach the real me.

It was a boon as well as a curse.

They make me forget about why I shouldn't be happy. And when I forget, it becomes worse.

Like right now. The bitter taste of guilt and grief in my mouth is the penance of spending a good time with my friends.

I crave solitude because I can't bear to face the consequences of indulging in companionship. Friendship.

My phone buzzes in my pocket when I am outside my apartment door. I pull it out and see a message from Raleigh.

Call me as soon as you see the photos. Can't wait to hear your thoughts.

Grateful for the distraction for the night, I quickly get in and go through my routine.

Shedding the jacket and tie, I walk through the living room, not caring to flip on the lights.

I turn left and enter the master bedroom while unbuttoning my shirt, eager to douse myself in the cold shower. I need to

numb my senses.

About five minutes later, I am out. Feeling a bit better.

Wearing a white undershirt and a pair of gray sweatpants, I walk out of my bedroom.

Once I'm back in the living room, I approach my home music system.

As I hit the button, the entire apartment is filled with soft jazz music.

Pushing my slightly wet hair off my forehead, I grab the flash drive from the table.

On my way to the study, I grab myself a cup of black coffee. Sipping it, I continue down the hall.

I connect the flash drive to my computer and it takes a few more minutes to connect it to the projector.

Right across my desk is the white wall that would display the slideshow of the pictures from the test shoot. I am about to take a seat behind my desk when my phone rings.

I frown when I read the contact number flashing on the phone screen.

"*Yeoboseyo?*" My mom starts speaking in Korean. Although her English is fluent, she still prefers to converse in Korean.

"Eomma," I speak in Korean too. "Why are you calling at this hour? Is everything okay? Is Abeoji okay?" Even though my father and I aren't close, I still worry about him.

"He is. Do I have to have a reason to call my son?"

I lean back against the edge of the desk. "It's not that. You never call so late. I got worried."

"You worry too much." She chides softly. "And I always call you around this time to check if you are still working in the office. But you never answer my calls."

I swallow thickly as guilt slices my heart. "I'm sorry. I..." I trail off.

"Come home to visit, son. It has been more than three months since you last came over. We miss you a lot."

Reaching for the cup, I down the steaming coffee. “I’ll visit soon.” I rasp.

“You always say that.” She says quietly. After a pause, “Is it because of Meagan? I promise I will not force you to go on dates anymore.”

My eyes fall shut.

“Archer?” When her voice trembles, I grip the edge of the desk. “Son, I stopped dropping by unannounced after you told me to but now you stopped answering our calls.”

Pain spirals through me.

“It’s not your fault, Archer.” She says it with so much sadness, that I know she isn’t talking about Meagan or the unanswered phone calls. She is talking about *her*. Amy.

I stagger to a stand. “Don’t.”

“You are carrying a burden that’s not yours.”

My chest is now too tight to breathe, unsettled by how she can bring that up when she never talked about it in a long time.

“I’ll talk to you later, Eomma.”

“But—” I hang up.

I toss the phone on the desk. It lands on the keyboard, hitting the buttons. The slideshow of the pictures starts and the dark room is illuminated by the glow of the projector reflecting on the wall.

“Fuck,” I curse through clenched teeth. Beads of sweat drip from my brow as I reach for my phone but something lures my attention to the wall. I turn my head and freeze.

Mismatched eyes.

Ruby red lips.

Long dark hair.

The sharp claws of panic that was about to pierce my skin suddenly disappears.

With one look at the picture, my heartbeats return to normal.

Staring at me through the lens of the camera is none other than Summer Donovan. My loud neighbor who always wears bright fucking colors and loves spouting lies.

It's a close-up shot that highlights every beautiful detail of her face. Posing sideways with her hair cascading down her side, Mason—the photographer—caught her dazzling smile while her hand cupped her jaw.

The slideshow moves on to the next picture where Summer is propped on a stool, her body facing away and only her face turned to the camera.

She is wearing a pair of jeans with a denim jacket that is slung down, showcasing one of her creamy shoulders. In this shot, she is playing with her hair. Her unique eyes flirting with the camera.

Before I could stare at her some more, the image is gone and replaced by a new one.

Still seated on the stool, her body is now facing the camera. My jaw clenches when I take in the full-body picture. She has discarded her denim jacket and is only in a sleeveless black lace crop top.

Her jean-clad legs are spread open and her palms resting on her knees.

By the time the next picture rolls in, I'm grinding my molars hard.

In this one, she is on the floor, her upper body arched and supported by her palms.

When another picture same as the previous one takes over the wall, I am striding out of the study.

Summer is not just a liar. She is also a hypocrite. A couple of days ago, she didn't want anything to do with me. Wanted me to stay away from her. Then what is she doing modeling for my ad campaign?

In minimal makeup and a casual outfit, she slayed the shoot. She looked like she was born to be a model.

My fingers ball into a fist when the photos of her playing with her hair flash before my eyes. Her fucking long hair. Just staring

at those pictures made me want to wrap it around my fist.

She smiled at the camera with her full bee-stung lips like she knew what effect she has on men.

I am fucking pissed because just watching them makes me want to sink my teeth into her slightly bigger lower lip.

The sight of her lips floods my head with fantasies of having them wrapped around my cock.

Even on her knees, she would glare at me with those different-colored eyes, wouldn't she? And that specific thought makes me impossibly hard.

I'd been so angry when she told me to stay away from her. Now, look at her, planning to become the face of KIM Advertising's brand new project.

If she thinks I will allow her to toy with my sanity like that, then she is sorely mistaken.

Opening the door, I step out of my apartment and head straight to hers.

I lift my hand to knock on her door but as soon as it connects with the surface, it gives way and opens.

Her door was fucking unlocked. Great. This girl has no qualms about her safety.

Last time she slipped her hand to stop the elevator and now this. Why is she so damn reckless?

Booty Wurk by T-Pain is playing on full volume. Is she having another one of her parties?

However, I don't step inside. "Summer," I call out.

No answer.

She has a dog, right?

It seems she didn't train him. Dogs are always on alert. Seems like her pet is just like her.

"Summer, are you in there?" I call out louder this time. When she doesn't answer, I begin to worry.

"I am coming in," I announce and enter.

It feels like I have entered a disco. The room is bathed in multicolored lights coming from the disco lights on the ceiling.

Wait... is that a disco ball?

What the fuck?

“Pay attention, Goldie!” At Summer’s voice, I turn left and walk forward.

Summer and her dog come into view.

She is wearing an emerald green sparkly dress. It’s similar to the one she wore at her New Year’s party. Only this time, she is not wearing a wig.

“Look at mommy doing the catwalk.” She sways her hips as she walks for her puppy who’s seated on a couch. She didn’t spare her dog from this absurdity. He’s wearing a bow tie and a black hat.

“Mommy rocked today! You should’ve been there, Goldie. I was killing it!” She bounces and laughs. She starts singing off-key in full confidence.

I lean against the wall and cross my legs at the ankles when she decides to twerk.

I have to give it to her. She is so happy, so immersed in her celebratory dance that she doesn’t realize someone’s in her apartment. And that dog? Yeah, he is busy enjoying the show.

I should admit one thing though, if we ignore her terrible singing and rapping, she can move.

She is belting out the lyrics as she really moves. When she turns, still doing her sexy hip movement, her eyes widen the moment it lands on me.

She lets out a scream that makes me wince. Her dog finally takes notice of the stranger in the apartment and instead of fighting me, he jumps off the couch and dashes to the open room. Maybe her bedroom.

Such a brave dog.

I reach her in two long steps. She is still screaming when I clutch her upper arms. “Shut your dramatics, Summer. It’s me.”

She stops screaming. Thank God. Then her hand comes up. Touching my face, she says, “Archer?”

“Yeah.”

Her gaze drops to my chest for the briefest moment. I am still in my undershirt.

I enjoy her eyes on me more than I care to admit. And the longer she stares, the harder it gets to hold on to my slipping control.

Taking advantage of her silence, I take my fill too. My eyes roam over her face and notice she is not wearing any makeup. Just the way I like it.

How can the mere sight of her face abate the storm inside of me?

One look at her picture helped me fight off my demons. Just how?

This new discovery adds more to my fury.

She blinks herself out of her stupor and pushes me away. “What are you doing inside my apartment? No. Wrong question. *How* did you get inside my apartment?”

I turn on my heel and walk away.

“Answer me!” She follows me.

First, I switch off the stupid disco lights, then hit the lights that won’t hurt my head. Next, I pause her blaring music.

Facing her, I narrow my eyes. “You know what time it is?”

“Excuse me?”

“Stop playing loud music at night.”

Her brows go up. “You broke into my house to complain about the music?”

“No, and I didn’t break in. Your door was fucking left open. I just let myself in.”

“Liar!”

Taking a step toward her, I lower my voice. “Want to say that again?”

She averts her eyes. “Maybe I forgot to shut the door. So what? It still doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

“I am here because I wanted to talk.”

“I am not interested. You can go.” She motions at the door.

“Yeah, well I am not leaving until we talk.”

She puts her hands on her hips. “Okay. All right then. Talk. You have two minutes.”

She is damn good at pretending. She loves to pretend that there’s nothing between us. She acts like I am blind to the obvious attraction in her eyes for me.

As if she wasn’t ogling me a moment ago.

Fuck that. And fuck the strange feeling that stirs in my chest every time I look at her. I am here for a reason.

“I am here to talk about the flash drive Raleigh handed me tonight.”

She frowns. “A flash drive?”

“Yeah, a flash drive full of your photos.”

Understanding flickers in her eyes, her lips forming into an o. I stare at them for a second too long.

“Yeah, so?” She says with a stubborn expression.

“Care to explain?”

She acts oblivious. “What part of it do you want me to explain?”

“The part where you decided to apply for modeling in my agency.”

“You need to get your facts, straight mister. I didn’t apply for modeling in your agency. Hannah offered me the job and I simply accepted it.”

I say nothing.

“Your two minutes are up.”

I ignore her not-so-subtle hint of kicking me out. “You are going to call Hannah and tell her that you changed your mind

about modeling. You are going to tell her that you don't want to work with KIM Advertising."

She stiffens. "And why would I do that?"

Because having you so close to me and not being able to touch you would be torture. And I refuse to put myself in such a situation.

"Because you wanted to stay away from me, remember?"

I have no idea how, but sometime during the argument, we moved closer. So close that I can see a small freckle under her left eye.

She lifts her chin in defiance. "I still do."

Unable to resist, my fingers close around her chin. "Then why are you willing to work for me?"

She scoffs, jerking back from my hold. "Hannah came to me with the proposal. And I am willing to work for *her*. Not you. Never you." She hisses the last words.

Grabbing her, I pull her to me. She squeaks in surprise when her chest collides with mine. "Never, huh?"

"Yes. Never, ever, ever—" My mouth lands on her. I go straight to what I wanted to do when I saw her picture. I sink my teeth into her plump lower lip. Not hard enough to break the skin but hard enough to make her retaliate.

She slides her fingers in my hair, tugging me close as she bites my lip. Groaning, I cup her ass through her dress and haul her to me.

She gasps in my mouth when she feels my erection straining my sweatpants. "I hate you." She curls her arms around my neck, practically climbing me.

I thrust against her, my fingers digging into her ass. "I know." Then we are kissing again, both trying to dominate the kiss.

My heart thunders in my chest. I breathe in the sweet, intoxicating scent of her skin.

I can feel her breath hitching when I trace her lip with my tongue, demanding entry. She parts her lips for me.

I've never kissed someone with such intensity and hunger before. I am not sure what it is about this woman that makes me act like this. Unhinged and the complete opposite of myself.

She influences me to do things I wouldn't normally do.

I feel someone tugging at the hem of my sweatpants. I break the kiss and look down. Goldie growls as he yanks the fabric with all his might.

Summer breaks apart from me and gasps. "Goldie, no!" She bends down and manages to separate my sweats from the dog's teeth.

The dog stopped us from crossing all the boundaries tonight.

She stands with Goldie in her arms, her face crimson.

When she doesn't make any move to look at me, I clear my throat. "I should go."

She nods, still not looking at me. I turn to leave. I am one hundred percent sure that if we end up alone once again, we would either kill each other or fuck each other's brains out.

When I am at the door, I stop. Without turning my head, I tell her, "You should call Hannah to decline."

"And you should fuck off and mind your business." She replies. My jaw clenches as I slam the door shut behind me.

Chapter Nineteen

Summer

I think I took the modeling career too seriously. My lungs ache and I am panting from the exertion.

This morning, I decided to go for a run at the park near my apartment building. You know, to keep myself fit. I love eating. And I doubt I could ever stop the consumption of candies.

So here I am, barely breathing, my throat dry and my legs trembling.

The breeze is cool but I am sweating profusely. My rainbow-striped t-shirt is sticking to my skin. Even my leggings feel damp. I am sweating all over. I grimace. I need a shower. Stat.

I ran for about fifteen minutes. It's enough for the first day, right? I nod to myself. It is.

Wiping the sweat off my forehead, I turn. Dread arrests me at the thought of running all the way home. I hope I don't pass out of dehydration.

I resort to walking instead of running. Because my thighs won't stop shivering.

I keep walking, not even stopping when I spot a bench to sit on. Resting would only result in more fatigue. I fear once I sit, I wouldn't be able to get back up.

I should've driven here. But I am saving gas. I won't get paid until the campaign officially begins. Money is tight. Hence, no car.

Bending, I massage my calf. Damn. My legs already feel sore. Great!

Stalling will only worsen my agony. Shaking my head, I straighten.

My heart jumps when he comes into view.

About ten yards ahead, running straight toward me is Archer.

My muscles scream at me to run and hide. Do something, anything. But all I do is freeze and take him in.

He is clad in dark shorts and a white t-shirt. The fabric stretching across his broad chest and shoulders. His wet hair hangs over his forehead.

When he swipes the strands off his forehead with his hand, my teeth sink into my lower lip.

I am so busy eyeing his glistening body that I forget that he's heading in my direction.

When I look up, my eyes meet his. I jerk and twist and start running.

Cringing, I slap my forehead. I was supposed to go home. This path doesn't lead to home. It leads to my death.

Because if I don't stop, I sure as hell am going to pass out.

This is crazy. I should just turn around and keep my head down until I've passed him.

But what about my traitor eyes? What about my body that wants to be held by his glistening arms?

I can't pretend that last night's kiss didn't happen. It was different than the kiss in the alley.

That kiss was for Meagan. He wanted to cut the date short by telling Meagan that he kissed me. And he kissed me because he didn't want to lie.

Last night was different. There was no reason behind it. He kissed me because he wanted to. I kissed *back* because I wanted to.

I tried to remind myself that he was a ruthless man. For his selfish needs, he can jeopardize anyone. I was fired because of

him. I was suffering because of him. But my lips kept moving against his with urgency.

I want that man. And my want for him infuriates me to no end.

Last night proved that he wants me too. That piece of information kept me up most of the night.

I am lusting after the man who devours my mouth and then asks me to quit modeling.

He is right behind me. I can feel him. The thousands of butterflies in my stomach are proof.

Stop! My body whimpers.

But I don't. Where the hell is my confidence when I need it the most?

I swallow hard when he falls into step beside me. His body is so close. So close that I can feel the heat radiating off him.

I watch him from the corner of my eye. His breathing is even unlike mine.

It pisses me off to see him composed, running beside me while I am a nervous wreck.

He runs lightly. His body is also in great shape. I wonder if he runs here daily?

Watching his athletic body and stamina makes me wish I had at least ten percent of his energy.

I notice how he acts like I am invisible. If that wasn't bad enough, he not only ignores me but also picks up his speed, outrunning me.

My jaw drops. It wasn't a race, jerk. Or was it?

If it was, then I can't let him win now, can I?

I don't suppress the competitive urge to defeat him. I work my protesting muscles and run after him.

The man doesn't slow down, which means I have to quicken my pace to catch up to him.

I am breathing through my mouth now, drawing as much oxygen as I can so I don't faint on the pavement.

When I finally reach him, I quickly snap my mouth shut, arch my back and try to run like a professional.

Then turn my head slightly to glance at him. He's already watching me.

When he raises a brow, I tilt my chin in defiance and outrun him by pushing my limits.

That lasts for like four seconds because Archer passes me by like a gust of wind.

My feet come to a stop then. I watch his retreating back as I bend, hands on my knees, panting.

"I-I..." I swallow the remaining saliva to wet my throat. "I... didn't quit. I am just letting you win today, asshole." When I move, my eyes get blurry and my head swims.



Archer

Amusement tugs the corner of my mouth.

I run about seven miles a day on this route. It helps clear my head. I needed it, especially after last night. I needed to clear the fog that's been taking over me.

Imagine my surprise when I find the person I was trying to forget right in front of me.

I was looking forward to burning some calories as well as Summer's thoughts.

Throughout the night, I found myself replaying our kiss.

The way she responded to me. Her telling me that she hates me while wrapping her arms around my neck. Her gasps. Her fucking strawberry scent.

When I couldn't sleep, I spent hours working in my study. No matter what activity I was doing, she was constantly on my mind.

When our eyes met earlier, she took off in the opposite direction.

Her shoulders were tensed, and her posture showed signs of exhaustion but she was adamant about getting away from me.

So I decided to make it easier for her. I ran ahead of her, silently giving her an out.

Instead of turning back and going home, she decided to race me.

When she reached me again, she lifted her chin and passed me. I let her because I was distracted by her flushed skin. I was itching to touch her again.

The illicit thoughts started pouring into my mind. My eyes slid to her ass which looked sinful in those colorful tight leggings she was wearing.

My body's reaction was grating on my nerves because I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't take the little liar and claim her as mine.

While I welcome a distraction from my busy life now and again, I can't choose her to be my new distraction. She is trouble with a capital t. Not to mention a living breathing trigger to my aversion to lies.

So I increased my speed and left the girl behind whose eyes haunt my dreams.

The whole scene was amusing, though.

I still had two miles left but I decided to cut the run short. She didn't look okay. So I trekked through the park and to the convenience store to buy her a bottle of water and an energy bar.

When I get to the spot where I left her, I freeze.

Summer is seated on a park bench. But she is not alone.

There's a man dressed in running gear seated by her side.

He says something to her and she smiles at him.

She fucking smiles at that prick. My fist tightens around the bottle, almost crushing it.

She hands him the half-empty water bottle; her mouth forms the words *Thank you*.

My blood starts boiling when he reaches out to brush something off her hair. Seriously? So this asshole is finding ways to touch what's mine?

Wait. She is not mine. And the reality makes me furious.

My temper loses some of the heat when she draws back. But when they fall into a conversation, it begins climbing again.

He looks about her age. In his late twenties. And knows how to crack a joke. Complete opposite of a grumpy man in his thirties. Me.

I want to stride to them and snatch her up and away from his grabby hands. But she seems to be enjoying his company.

She is not yours, Archer. Walk away.

I listen to my own advice. Dumping the water bottle and energy bar in the waste container, I walk away.

Chapter Twenty

Summer

I think I need help. I am not okay. Something seems to be terribly wrong with me.

I am currently flushed against a very hot guy. When I say hot. I mean *hawt* hot.

It's day two of the test shoot. This time I am paired with an uber-sexy male model.

We are both wearing black t-shirts, white pants, and leather jackets. His arm is curled around my waist, the other in his back pocket.

I am arched up against his chest, slightly facing the camera. One of my hands is around his neck and the other is pushed into my back pocket.

"You are doing great." He whispers in my ear. I wait for a spark. But nothing happens.

I look at him, the photographer continuing to click our pictures. "Thanks."

He is a professional model. Receiving a compliment from him is definitely something.

"Your eyes are so beautiful." He says in a husky voice.

I smile at the compliment. "Thank you."

I am disappointed that his words couldn't send shivers down my spine like *his* does.

Just two words from Archer. *Little liar*. And I feel it everywhere.

Like I said, there's something wrong with me.

Take this morning for example.

After Archer defeated me... sorry, let me rephrase it. After *I* let Archer win our little unofficial race, I was about to fall on the pavement as I had predicted.

My body had given up on me. My legs had turned to jelly.

I remember descending down, down, down as if in slow motion, my hands not even flailing, they were that tired.

Just when I thought I would have to kiss my modeling career goodbye, a hand shot out and gripped my elbow, saving me from kissing the hard ground.

It was a perfect Korean drama moment. The only difference is, that my Korean hero was missing.

He was an all-American guy with a sunny smile, blue eyes, and dark hair. He helped me to the park bench and handed me his water bottle.

He was sweet and caring. And from his compliments about my eyes to the flirtatious little touches, it wasn't hard to figure out that he was interested in me.

So why did I not feel anything? It's like I'm broken beyond repair or something.

A good-looking guy was into me. Showed signs that he was into me, actually went all the way out and asked for my number, and there I was, thinking about every excuse under the sun to politely decline him.

Why? Because I didn't want sweet talkers and sunny smiles. I wanted my grumpy neighbor with his sexy frown and growled warnings.

That's why such close proximity with another handsome hunk right now does nothing for me.

"That was great." Mason grins. "Let's take five." He says and I happily rush toward the two smiling faces. My favorite people. Hannah and Raleigh.

“How did I do?” I waggle my eyebrows.

Hannah chuckles and pulls my cheek playfully. “Like I expected you would. Amazing.” She glances at Raleigh. “Told you my choice is the best.”

“Never doubted it, princess.” He tells her then shoots me a grin. “Summer look! We are twinning today.” He runs his hands over his leather jacket.

“Yeah! Let’s take a picture.” I suggest.

“Good idea.” He takes out his phone and begins snapping selfies. After a few seconds, he tugs Hannah so that she is curled at his side.

We force her to make funny faces. She does it reluctantly, chuckling throughout the time.

“You guys are taking selfies without me?” Brielle gasps dramatically.

“Join in.” I wave her over.

She bounces over, her purple box braids flying. “Babe, get over here!” She calls her girlfriend, Nina.

Before I realize it, half of the crew is now surrounding us.

Raleigh walks a few steps forward so his phone could capture everyone. Right before he could click, Mason interjects with a smile. “Is there still room for us?”

Mason and the hot model are the only ones left out.

“Of course!” I grin.

Mason walks toward our group. “My husband, Lucas often complains I don’t send him behind the scene pictures.”

Raleigh smirks. “You might want to switch places with Brielle.”

He frowns. “Why?”

“You want Lucas to see you standing next to Freddie?” Raleigh points at the male model.

His eyes widen. He runs his fingers through his blond hair. “Fuck. Thanks for the heads up, man.”

Raleigh winks. “Anytime.” Then he angles his hand that’s gripping the phone upward. “Everybody, say cheese!”

“Cheese!”

Snap, snap.



Archer

I am about to shoot the dart at the board when there’s a knock at my office door.

I turn to see Raleigh entering with his brows pulled together. “Um... why does your assistant looks like he’s about to cry?” He points the door at his back with his thumb. Then tilts his head. “And why are you playing darts in the middle of the day?”

“He got a warning because he lied to me about a report I asked him to email me. He forgot to do it. Instead of telling me the truth, he lied.” I throw the dart, but it misses the bullseye, pissing me off. “And I can play darts whenever I want.”

“Is something bothering you?”

Using another dart, I aim. “No. Why do you ask?”

And missed again. Tossing the remaining two haphazardly on the desk, I face him when he doesn’t say anything.

“Because you throw darts only when you are frustrated.” He states as if it’s obvious. Then, “Is this about Chad?”

I frown. “No. What made you think that?”

He shrugs. “Um... because he lied to you?”

“Ah. Well, he got a stern warning for that.” I take a seat behind my desk.

“And that’s it?” He plants his palms on my desk.

“Yes,” I reply as I read a work email on my laptop.

“Hmm.” His voice is doused in suspicion. It makes me stop what I am doing and look up.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Raleigh,” I warn.

“It’s weird, okay?”

“What is?” I ask, perplexed.

“You not firing Chad.”

“He was remorseful for his actions and he apologized.”

“You’ve fired people without giving them a chance to explain in the past.”

“Your point?”

“What changed?” He asks curiously.

I clear my throat. “You are thinking too much. Why are you here?”

That distracts him. “Oh, yes. I am here to ask for ten minutes of your time.”

“All right.” I snap my laptop shut. “What’s up?”

“You’ll have to come with me.”

“Where?”

“Stop asking questions and trust me.”

I sigh. “Listen, if you want me to have lunch with you guys, I can’t. I have a meeting and—”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. You are a busy man who can’t spare some time for his friends, I know.” He mocks goodheartedly. “It’s about work.”

“Oh?”

“See? You are a workaholic through and through. As soon as you heard this is about work, it grabbed your attention instantly.”

“Never denied I wasn’t. Now let’s go before I change my mind.” I get to my feet.

“Why are we here?” I ask as we near the studio.

He stops and faces me. “We are doing another test shoot today.”

That means Summer is just behind the doors. A mixture of desire and rage courses through me. I chase it away.

“I don’t know why you texted me last night to replace Summer but I wanted to prove that Hannah’s choice is perfect.” I already know it.

But how am I going to tell him that I am insisting on replacing her for a different reason?

I am this close, this close to giving in. And if I gave into my lust, nothing will stop me from having her.

“The decision was final, Raleigh. You can’t change my mind.”

“I am not trying to. I just want you to see for yourself. Watch her performance, judge her. If you still find her unfit for this campaign then I will accept your decision.”

“Raleigh...”

“And please don’t think I am biased toward her. She is important to me but that doesn’t mean I would compromise the quality of my work.”

“I know,” I say softly. Raleigh has a carefree persona. A polar opposite of mine. But there’s one thing we have in common. The passion for creativity.

He says I am a workaholic but the truth is, he is the one who lives for his work. He loves what he does.

I would never doubt his sincerity toward his job. He would’ve never approved Summer if she wasn’t good.

“So, you coming in?” He asks as he pushes the door open.

I nod and follow him inside.

An unpleasant coldness shoots through my veins. Watching her talk and smile with that prick in the park this morning had already fucked with my mood.

Now as I see Summer plastered all over this fucker's body, my inner beast is itching to surface.

She does that to me. She brings out the darkness in me. This ugly, possessive side makes it hard for me to not lose control.

With the effort of steel, I manage to stand beside Raleigh and watch another guy touch my little liar.

She is not mine. Yet. I want her to be, though. I want to consume her. I want to taste her. I want to punish her for heating my blood every time I look at her by fucking her thoroughly.

I want to grab her and shake her when she looks at the male model because I want her eyes on me. Only me.

It's fucking irritating that I could sense her easily when she is in the same room as I am.

For her, it's not the same. She is unaware of my presence. And I don't like it.

I try to pay attention when Raleigh speaks about new ideas for the upcoming shoots but it's entirely fixated on the most beautiful girl in the room.

When the male model wraps his arms around her waist and pulls her close, I lose it. "That's enough!" My voice thunders so loud, that the female staff standing before us jumps.

The chatter stops, and the entire room is startled to silence. Heads turn in my direction. Including *hers*.

The territorial feeling won after all.

"Archer—" Raleigh starts but I cut him off.

I walk over to her and take a hold of her elbow, pulling her away from him and toward me. "Summer. My office. Now."

"But—"

She shuts her mouth when she stares at my hardened face and follows me out.

Chapter Twenty-One

Summer

I shoot a quick text to Raleigh as I enter Archer's office.

When he practically dragged me out of the studio, Raleigh looked like he was on the verge of stepping between him and me. He is protective of me like that.

His face relaxed a bit when I waved him on my way out, signaling with a thumbs up that everything is okay.

"Close the door," Archer says as he unbuttons his suit jacket, shrugs it off, then yanks his tie loose.

His low, deep voice sends a shock of electricity straight down my spine. I am so rattled by his order that I stand there, dumbstruck.

I am so stunned that I don't move a muscle to take in his sleek, spacious office. It's my first time here. And all I can do is stand like a statue.

When he turns to me, a shiver of arousal runs through my body.

Swallowing, I open my mouth. "I don't think that's a good idea."

When he stares at me hard, I quickly turn around and shut the door, trapping us in his office. I feel his eyes on me the entire time. I feel hot suddenly. As if the temperature of the room has increased.

When I spin to face him again, I am startled to find him right in front of me.

He takes a deliberate step toward me. “I told you to decline the modeling assignment last night.”

My back stiffens. “And I told you to mind your goddamn business.”

“Did you like it?” He grinds out, his voice dark and menacing.

“Like what?”

“Him touching you.”

My nails dig into my palms when I realize he is talking about Freddie. “I was just doing my job.”

He stalks forward. “Were you?”

I brush past him and walk to his desk. The tension in the air is so thick, that I had to get away from him.

My cheeks flame when I feel my panties dampen.

What has gotten him in such a dark mood? And why am I finding it so hot?

When he dragged me in here, I half-expected him to force me to quit modeling. And while our conversation started with that, it has taken a different direction.

My pussy clenches when his footsteps echo on the wooden flooring. I feel him before his hands land on me. He abruptly turns me around to face him.

“Don’t turn away from me.” His dark gaze moves back and forth between my eyes.

“Don’t ask stupid questions then.”

“Stupid questions?” A frown mars his forehead. My fingers itch to reach up and erase it.

“Yes. He and I were just following directions, okay? Why would I like it?” I like your touch, only yours, you unbearable ass!

“What about the runner from this morning?”

I shrug out of his hold. “Okay, first of all, I don’t know who you are talking about. And secondly, why are you gaslighting me?”

“I am talking about the young man who was all over you this morning in the park.”

I gape at him. How does he know that? He was long gone by the time that sweet guy came to help me. Wait a second. “Did you come back?”

“This is not about me.” He clips.

“Of course, it is.” My eyes widen. “You are jealous!”

He steps back but doesn’t say anything. Hmm. He can’t even deny it. A drawback of being Mr. Honest.

“This is what all this is about? You want me to quit modeling because you are jealous?” I stare at him in disbelief.

A humorless laugh bubbles out of me. “Wow. Just wow.”

His hostile expression makes me quiet. I shake my head. “How could you do that and sleep at night?”

“What?”

“I lost my job because you demanded me to repay your favor. You know I don’t have a degree, don’t you?” I push at his chest. “You knew it’s hard for people like us to survive without a job, yet you had the gal to ask me to quit this modeling assignment.”

“Summer,”

“I am not finished yet, *sir*.” I grit out and take a step forward. “At first, I thought you wanted me to quit because I wasn’t good enough for this project. I doubted myself because of you.”

“Calm down.” He tries to touch me but I push him again.

“You did all this because you are jealous! You don’t care about anyone else except yourself!”

“I offered you money, didn’t I? I even apologized!” He shouts.

“What do you think of me? A charity case?”

He throws his hands up. “You are one difficult woman, you know that?”

“You dragged me here over your petty jealousy and call me a difficult woman?”

“Petty jealousy?” He eats up the remaining space between us.

“That’s right! And I hate—”

He clasps my face with his hands, yanks me closer, and kisses me. His tongue stroking and tangling with mine. He backs me up against his desk as he sucks my bottom lip.

He presses his body into me. I can feel the length of his hardness against my lower belly.

I am so shocked and aroused by his hunger, his need, and his urgency that I let him devour me ruthlessly.

My nails dig into his shoulders. I wonder if he can feel my throbbing heartbeat. Because my heart is going crazy in my chest right now, beating wildly.

Why do I always let him take control of my body so easily?

Because you want him to. My inner voice answers, closing the discussion in one single sentence.

It’s true, isn’t it?

I moan into the kiss and bury my hands in his thick hair. Not hiding my want for this man anymore.

Yes, he infuriates me. Yes, he drives me absolutely crazy. But I can’t deny that I want him just as much.

I bring him closer. My nipples harden when they brush against his muscled chest.

He kisses me passionately like he wanted to do it for a long time. Like he was hungry for my lips. Like he didn’t just kiss me last night.

I move one of my hands down until I am fisting his dress shirt and kissing him like my life depends on it.

He growls in approval and it makes me wet instantly. I see stars when he bends a little to grind his cock against my pussy.

His hands roam over my body, teasing my pebbled nipples. When it feels like I am going to pass out from the lack of oxygen, I break the kiss, panting.

He uses the opportunity to drop open-mouthed kisses on my throat and neck. Another wanton moan escapes me when he bites my neck and then licks the assaulted skin.

“Archer...” I moan, shuddering.

His head snaps up. Curling his hand around my nape, he drops a hard kiss on my lips. “I am going to fuck you.”

My breathing stutters from the hunger in the depth of his dark eyes.

He leans down and kisses the shell of my ear. “I am going to bend you over my desk and fuck you until you can’t walk straight.”

I whimper with need. He pulls back, and his fingers dip into the waistline of my jeans. I gasp when he tugs at it, jerking my hips to him. “Tell me you want it.”

“I want it,” I say without any hesitation.

His mouth crashes down on mine as he unbuttons my jeans and pulls them down.

One hand holds my neck immobile so he can kiss me deeply and the other one glides inside my panties.

I groan against his lips when he thrusts two fingers inside me. I cry out, my hips jerking into his hand.

He trails his lips to my ear. “You’re soaking wet.”

Yes, I am. My whole body ignites by his touch.

I get wetter when he bends his head and kisses underneath my jaw. He tastes my skin while his fingers prepare me for his cock.

My pussy clenches around his digits as if it wants to keep him there.

This is so different from when I touch myself. The sensations, the heat in my stomach, everything is just so... *intense*.

An orgasm starts to build when he scissors his fingers. The moment he pinches my clit, I shatter.

A sob tears from me as I come.

Archer swallows my cries by bringing his lips back on mine. He keeps kissing me as aftershocks wrack my body.

He then breaks the kiss and sucks my juices from his fingers while staring at me with hooded eyes.

Bunching my fingers into his shirt, I pull his mouth down on mine, tasting myself on his tongue. My neck and face feel hot.

I have never done such things before. I've never ridden on the thin line of hate and lust before. The feeling is exhilarating and fearsome at the same time.

With a growl, he breaks our kiss, turns me around, and bends me over his desk.

He jerks my panties down. When cool air hits my wet pussy, I shudder with anticipation.

The clink of his belt opening accelerates my heartbeats. Then I hear the crinkle of a packet.

My toes curl as I wait for it.

But he shocks me by wrapping my hair around his fist. I try to turn but he keeps me in place.

“What are you doing?” My voice is brimming with lust, I almost can't recognize it.

“I always wanted to do this.”

“Stop wasting my time and do it!”

“Do what?”

“You know what.” I grind out.

“Say it.”

“Fuck you.”

“That works too.” He murmurs.

A smart comeback is suspended in my throat when he thrusts inside me.

“Oh, God...”

He is big. Impossibly thick. And it hurts a little despite the wetness. But I don't tell him to slow down. I want the pain. I want all he can give me.

His fingers dig in my hip as he pounds into me.

Using the grip on my hair, he pulls my head up, arching my upper body.

"Give me that mouth." He growls before taking my mouth.

Sweat drips from my forehead. We are still mostly clothed, our bodies heated.

He rams his cock inside me over and over again.

I want to spread my leg but my jeans are around my ankles, making it impossible to do so.

"You feel so good, little liar."

"Just so you know, I still hate you." I breathe against his lips, my body rocking with his.

He stills. Then pulls all the way out and thrusts inside in one punishing go. My mouth opens in a silent scream. His eyes gleam, probably proud of rendering me speechless. Asshole.

I glare at him.

When he smirks, I take his bottom lip in my mouth and bite down. Hard.

Drawing back, he scowls. Then flattens me until my breasts are flushed over the desk, and fucks me hard.

I brace myself as his thrusts turn vicious. When he hits the spot, I let out a strangled moan.

"Keep your voice down."

"Fuck. You."

"You want my staff to hear you getting fucked?"

Fuck! That's when I realize where we are. And what we are doing.

Sensing my panic, he bends over me and nips my neck. "Focus on me."

I try. Closing my eyes, I focus on him.

He hits that spot again and again. I buck against him, chasing my second orgasm which is inches away from my grasp.

“Archer!” I muffle my scream as I come. He speeds up, fucking me ruthlessly until he reaches his peak.

His grip on my hair loosens and I turn right in time to watch him come undone. Throwing his head back with a hoarse cry, he grinds against me, giving me another mini orgasm.

I lay unmoving on the desk, my breathing hard, my heart pounding. Too lightheaded to do anything.

The moment he withdraws his cock, I realize what a bad idea this was.

He is not just my neighbor. He is also technically my boss.

Cool air hits my behind when he steps back. I straighten slowly.

I stumble a bit but grip the desk for support.

Archer stares at me with an unreadable expression. He is also thinking the same thing, isn't he?

This was a fucking mistake.

I quickly pull my panties and jeans up. He doesn't speak. It makes this situation more awkward.

After I've righted my clothes and hair, I sneak one last glance at him. “Thank you,” I murmur and make a run for the door on shaky legs.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Summer

Thank you.

Thank. You.

Thank you?

From all the things I could've said... I cringe every time I recall how I *thanked* him after we had sex on his desk and did the walk of shame.

I practically ran out of his office.

I ran before he could give me the “this was a mistake” speech.

It was written all over his face. The blank expression told me things he couldn't say. That he regretted it. That he didn't know what to do with me. So I made it easy for him. I ran.

He wanted me. I knew he did. But he fought it. He fought it tooth and nail because he hates me. Because I am a liar. Because I am not his ideal type.

The anger, the lust that was brewing inside him finally exploded and he fucked me on his desk. And right after he was finished, he must have realized his mistake.

I am not naïve. He and I belong to different worlds. He would never want a repeat of that. I know that.

It's true that he gave me the most intense orgasm of my life. Okay, orgasms. Plural. But I will not kid myself into believing

something that's not there.

Did it hurt to see him so... detached, unfeeling seconds after he fucked me? Yes. It hurt. It stung because he made me feel insecure after bringing me pleasure.

The sex had made things ten times more complicated between us. But I guess it was bound to happen one day. The sexual tension between us was spiraling day by day. Just because we gave in, doesn't mean anything.

And yet, I want more. I was sore and felt used by him in the most delicious way and I liked it. Craved it even.

I am not the same anymore. I don't feel like my old self.

I kept replaying the part where he got jealous and dragged me out of the studio yesterday.

I felt the change in air the moment he entered the studio. I was so damn proud that I controlled my urge to turn my head and look at him. I ignored him and focused on work.

One second I was posing with Freddie, and the next, I was pulled away with a possessive hand on my elbow.

I bitterly acknowledge that I am thinking about him again. Thinking about his hot touch again when I should be focusing on the main issue: How am I going to face him now?

I read about Elon Musk's mars mission. I think it's time for me to enroll myself. I hope they accept fur babies, though. Because I can't live without my Goldie.

"Momma, look!" A little girl with pigtails gasps, bringing me back to present.

Her face lights up when our eyes meet through the glass wall of the aquarium. "Mermaid!" She points at me, jumping up and down.

Crowd forms around her. The kids and their parents gather to watch me.

I smile and swim toward them. As soon as I touch the glass, the kids start cheering and laughing with glee. The parents get their phones out and begin snapping pictures and recording videos.

Reaching out with my two hands, I move them swiftly in the water, creating a shape of a heart before blowing them bubble kisses.

The fishes around me create a magical moment as I glide across the water.

Many professional mermaids use wigs but I don't have to as I already have long hair.

I have waterproof makeup on which goes with my green silicon tail and seashell top. I have invested in my costume a lot because this business has a lot of competition. And it's hard to find work when you are not a full-time professional mermaid.

I chose to become a certified professional mermaid because I love swimming. Water calms me. Whenever I am in the water, it relieves my stress.

I forget about the land problems when I am in the water.

I choose to think that I am a real mermaid who is beautiful and glittery, wears starfish as a clip in the hair, and blows kisses to the kids. The one who is carefree and has fish friends.

It's an escape.

The kids start clapping when I perform my usual tricks.

This is my favorite part of the job; watching pure joy blooming on the kids' faces.

But this job is hard. It's risky. And it requires a lot of work. From getting ready to being carried out here, it's not easy.

But I get my reward when I see the excitement in the children's eyes. The happiness they get when they lay their palms on the glass, trying to touch mine.

I also love that I get to wear colors. Swim around beautiful-looking colorful fishes. This is my very own utopia.

After my shift, I am back in the dressing room. That means back to reality.

I am starving and I can't wait to go home. Kind of relieved too that I don't have to rush to another job and stand for hours.

I didn't like waitressing. I mean, who does, right? But it paid the bills.

My phone rings when I am packing my costume in my trolley.

Raleigh's face lights up the screen.

"Hello," I answer.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" He asks. Oh, yeah. He thinks I have a stomach bug.

After leaving Archer's office, I made an excuse of not feeling well and left.

Not very professional, I know. But my emotions were all over the place. And the test shoot was almost done anyway.

My phone was blowing up with calls from Hannah and Raleigh. They were concerned. But I wasn't in the state to talk to anyone. So I simply didn't respond.

"I am much better now," I say, zipping the bag.

"Did you go to the doctor's?"

My hands still. Here comes the lie. "I did. He said it's nothing to worry about. He prescribed me some meds. Said I'll be fine in a day or two."

"Why do I think you are lying?" Umm... because I am.

"I am not. Let me eat my soup in peace."

"All right, I won't bother you."

"Okay."

"Call me if you need anything."

"Yes, Raleigh." I smile.

"And stay away from sugar. It'll make it worse." He speaks in a dad tone.

I chuckle. "Anything else?"

"What did Archer say to you yesterday?"

His question makes me choke. I begin coughing.

Just hearing his name sends a zap of electricity down my spine. My skin tingles and my clit begins to throb.

“Hello? Summer? Are you okay?”

“Ahem... yes, I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“What happened?”

“The soup went down the wrong pipe.” I lie. Then, “Archer just asked if I was committed to another job. You know, to ask if my dates were free for the shoots.”

“He agreed to hire you?” He asks incredulously.

“Not exactly,” I say, grimacing. Why can’t I stop talking? “He was just inquiring.”

“Okay.” He murmurs. Then, “Anyway, you finish your soup. I’ll call tomorrow.”

“All right.”

After we hang up, I take a long breath.

I don’t like lying to my best friend. I close my eyes. My frustration battles with anguish.

Archer, what are you doing to me?



The elevator door opens and I step inside with my trolley.

Massaging the back of my neck, I stare at the illuminated digits. My stomach hurting with hunger pangs.

Instead of devouring my cheeseburger, I decided to come home and eat with Goldie.

Ever since he came into my life, I’ve developed a habit of eating with him.

I never knew having company while eating could bring so much peace to your heart.

I was used to being alone before him. But now I can’t picture life without him.

I am late. The dog sitter has called me three times already. I’ll have to pay her extra.

But it's worth it because I can't imagine leaving Goldie all alone in the apartment.

I push my hands in my camouflage printed dungaree's pockets and wait as the elevator climbs up, my body feeling worn out.

I am going to fill my tummy and hit the bed with Goldie. The thought is welcoming.

When the door opens to my floor, I get out, wheeling my trolley.

My mouth opens on a huge yawn, my eyes falling shut. I stretch my arms in the air and crack my neck.

"Home sweet home—" I open my lids and freeze when I see Archer standing at his door, staring at me. "Holy shit!" My arms fall limply on my sides.

I knew I had to face him someday. But why the hell that day had to be *today*?

He is in a fitted cream sweater and dark jeans. His tousled hair makes me want to run my fingers in it.

Archer slays suits as well as casuals. How can he look so yummy all the damn time? So unfair!

I on the other hand am in a dungaree with my hair all over the place. I probably have bags under my eyes and my shoulders are slumped. Just great.

In my head, I had these scenarios where I am dressed in my brightest colors, my face radiant, having a good hair day while I run into him. I would act like I didn't see him and he would have a difficult time taking his eyes off me.

I glare up at God. *Why do you hate me so much?*

When I look at him, he's still standing there, staring at me. His expression tells me that he wasn't expecting to run into me either.

That makes two of us.

You were not supposed to see me like this. You were supposed to catch me on my best outfit day and drool over me.

He is the one looking drool-worthy today.

A series of images flash before my eyes. Him kissing me passionately. Him bending me over. Then driving into me, biting my neck.

I shake my head to gather my wits.

Blushing furiously under his scrutiny, I lift my chin at him in greeting and scurry to my apartment door.



First, *thank you* then a chin lift in greeting.

Fuck. My. Life.

I slap my forehead. Goldie snaps his head toward me.

We are curled up on the sofa after dinner, watching a documentary. It's almost over and I don't even know what's it about. Because I have been rehashing my run-in with Archer.

"I should've said Hi, right?" I ask Goldie.

He growls.

"Hmm. You are right. That would've been more awkward."

He rests his chin on my chest, staring at me. I give him a head rub.

"What is he doing right now?" I pause, then sit up. "Is he on a date?" I shout, scaring Goldie.

"Sorry!" I lift him and place him on my lap.

My chest squeezes painfully at the thought of him with someone else. Moisture fills my eyes.

I am going off track. He's making me lose my sanity and I am letting him.

He probably isn't even thinking about me. And here I am, scaring my cute little puppy.

I hug him close to my chest.

"I don't care if he dates someone else." Goldie licks my face.

Sniffing, I clear my throat. "Alexa, play Thank you, next."

When Goldie gives me a side-eye, I hold a palm up. “He’s not my ex, I know but I feel like dancing, okay?” I squint at him. “And you are going to join me.”

I set him on the floor and then push to my feet.

When the song begins, I start dancing even when there’s a weird feeling growing in my chest.

Standing on haunches, he dances with me. See? He’s the best roomie ever.

The next day, Saturday... I spend the morning going on a walk with Goldie.

This time I didn’t forget to bring a water bottle with me. You learn from your mistakes, right?

When I return home, I begin with house chores. I like to clean the house before leaving for work. Today I have a shift at the resort where I usually have to stay on the land and click pictures with the kids.

Yeah, folks. I am famous.

I’m in the middle of moping the living room floor, singing out loud, shaking my ass on Blinding lights by The Weeknd when I feel my phone vibrate in the back pocket of my shorts.

I fish it out. I read the name of the caller. Hannah.

“Hey, what’s up?” I answer, still dancing.

“Hello, Summer. How are you?”

“I’m great,” I say then slap my head. She thinks I have a stomach bug. My memory is getting worse each day, I swear. “I mean, I am feeling much better now.”

“Good to hear that. I have good news.”

“Oh?”

“Take a guess.”

“Umm... you won a lottery?”

There’s a pause before she bursts out laughing. I chuckle with her.

“I suck at this guessing game. Tell me! I hate suspense. That’s why I often google the whole plot of the movie I plan to watch beforehand.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I like to know if the movie’s safe to watch, you know. It pisses me the hell off when they kill my favorite character!”

“Yeah, that sucks.”

“Right? I cried for weeks when my favorite character died in Train to Busan.” Just thinking about it makes me sad.

“Okay, okay, I’ll cut to the chase. You are officially selected for the Modern Closet ad campaign!”

“I am?” My mouth falls open.

“Yeah. Archer gave his approval last night!”

I wonder what changed? He was hellbent on replacing me. He was jealous of watching me with Freddie. So what happened?

Did he fucked me to get me out of his system? Did he succeed in doing that?

I have so many questions.

“Hello? Are you there?”

I clear my throat. “Yes, well... wow, that’s great news.” Then why am I not happy?

“Come to the agency on Monday to sign the contract! Welcome to the KIM family.” I can hear the smile in her voice.

“I’ll see you on Monday.” We hang up.

I am officially going to start a new phase in my life. New career. New opportunities. I was waiting for a moment like this. Then why am I not excited about it?

Sinking to my knees, I call out to Goldie. He appears at the doorway of my bedroom, his favorite ball secured in his mouth.

“Mommy got a new job. Come, hug mommy.” I open my arms. A smile lifts the corners of my mouth when he drops the ball and runs straight into my waiting arms.

“Good days are here, buddy.” I kiss his head, praying that my words are true.



Today I am going to sign with KIM Advertising.

The little old me is going to be modeling for the top Advertising Agency.

So for the special occasion, I picked out a special outfit.

I am wearing a sky-blue mini dress with a blue leather jacket. I opted for neon thigh-high boots to go with the look.

The colors are not bright. Just right and screams professional, right? Right.

I wanted to go with my pink blazer and red boots but I decided to go for lighter colors to appear more... serious.

I specifically chose white-rimmed sunglasses instead of my yellow-tinted ones.

With confidence, I enter the building. When people stare at me, I tell myself that they are looking at me because of my unique outfit.

I am still not over the day when they saw me getting kicked out by security.

It will take some getting used to.

I am not going to work down here anyway. The real magic happens on the fifth floor. Because that whole floor has an artistic vibe that resonates with my colorful soul.

The lobby, however, is filled with suits and pencil skirts. I stand out like a sore thumb. But then I always stand out because of my colorful eyes and my colorful clothes.

Ignoring their blatant stares, I walk to the LED wall. The colorful ribbons move when I take a step to the left.

“Today’s a big day,” I whisper. “Wish me luck.” On cue, the LED screen bursts into colors.

“Thank you.” I smile and walk with a bounce in my step to the elevator.

As I wait for the elevator to arrive, I take out my phone and snap a few selfies.

It's a big day for me. I need to capture it in a picture.

I make a V sign with my index and middle finger and pose. Then I wink at my phone.

After clicking enough pictures, I go through them.

"I am going to show these to Goldie." I grin.

The ding of the elevator startles me and I get in quickly.

Maybe I should take one inside the elevator too.

I lift my phone up and poke my tongue out. I am about to click the picture when someone enters the elevator at the last second.

My eyes grow large when I find it's him. Archer strides inside wearing a designer suit that fits him like a glove.

I lower my hand and close my mouth, my cheeks on fire.

He saw me pose for a selfie with my tongue hanging out.

Lovely.

I want to crawl into a hole and die.

It's not too late, Summer. You can still bail. My mortified inner voice tempts me.

But I shake my head internally.

This little embarrassing moment aside, I should take advantage of this opportunity. I wanted to talk to him about... the other day.

I've thought long and hard. Before he could reject me by saying that it's not going to happen again, I will do it myself.

We are going to work together. I don't want him to feel uncomfortable around me.

It's not be a mistake for me, but for him it clearly is and I want to address it before he does.

Because he *will* address it. Now that he decided to hire me, he will talk to me about keeping that day between us. To never mention it and stuff like that.

It happens all the time in soap operas.

I can't let him do that. His aloof behavior is already hurting me as is, hearing him admit that it was indeed a mistake will affect me greatly.

Now is the chance to talk to him.

“Archer, I—”

“Summer,” We both speak together.

“I'll go first,”

He closes his mouth and nods.

“It was a mistake and I know it can't happen again so let's forget it ever happened and work like professionals.” I blurt in one breath.

“Is that what you think?” He asks in that gravelly voice, making my toes curl.

I nod vehemently. “It's for the best. Today's a beginning of a new chapter. We should forget about the past and focus on the present.” That's a load of bullshit.

His jaw ticks, but other than that, he has that same blank expression. He nods once.

“Great!” As soon as the door opens, I dash out, all while my heart beating fast.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Summer

“To the best team in the world,” Raleigh says and we all raise our glasses for a group clink.

“Bottoms up!” Brielle announces and I down my margarita.

We are gathered at Raleigh’s place to wrap up the ad campaign today. Seven days of hard work and dedication. A week of watching the creative team of Hannah and Raleigh in action.

It was an experience of a lifetime.

From the selection of models to creating different looks using the casual wardrobe of Modern Closet, I saw the campaign coming to life.

I formed a special bond with these people. It feels like we’ve been friends forever.

It feels good to have a group of friends I can hang out with. Laugh with. Eat with.

They all met Goldie. Now they’re whipped too.

Working with them was fun. They made me feel right at home.

When I was struggling, they were patient. Came up with strategies to extract the vibe they wanted for the concept without pressuring me.

Like a few days ago, I was really not feeling it. The poses were accurate, the makeup, outfit, everything was perfect except me.

I was having trouble giving them the kind of expressions or vibe they wanted. I wasn't an actor or a professional model. I was grateful they got that.

The team including Mason sat with me and gave me a scenario. They asked me to picture myself as the main character of a story.

It helped. I always liked to escape reality. When they gave me a story, it was easy to shed Summer and become this new woman.

The shoot went well, and I got to learn a new thing. And from that point onward, I learned something new each day. As I got to see the advertising world from a closer lens, I realized that a simple advertisement requires so much energy and work.

We often skip advertisements on YouTube and other platforms. Never paying attention to the creative details and long hours of input it takes to make the said advertisement.

Another thing I liked about them is the pay. They paid me ten times more than the average salary.

When I asked Hannah about it, she simply said that they paid me what they do to every model they hire.

I argued that I was a beginner and that I didn't deserve such a big amount. She simply said, "You are too innocent for your own good. I've never seen someone hesitate to receive "extra" money."

I don't connect with people easily, but when I do, it's for life. The connection I made with these kindhearted, amazing people is genuine.

Raleigh often used to invite me to his parties but I always declined. They were his friends. His team. I feared I would feel excluded, unwanted

I was so wrong.

These people, they don't judge each other. They're openminded. And we need more like them in our society.

They accept you as you are.

They taught me that friendship isn't defined by the number of years.

It's strange but I've felt a little less empty since I started working with them.

"I am going to miss you guys." I smile sadly.

"Aww, come here," Mia wraps her arms around me. "I'll miss you too."

"Me too!" Brielle starts to stand but Nina jerks her down on the couch.

"What?" She snaps at Nina.

"Stop clinging to other chicks as if I am not here." She grumbles.

"You know I love her like a friend!"

"We all love Summer. But stop hugging her all the time." Nina says with a feigned annoyance.

"I like it when you are jealous." Brielle curls her arm around Nina's neck and kisses her temple.

Hannah who's sitting on Raleigh's lap speaks, "Why does it sound like you are telling us goodbye?"

"Because I am." My chin trembles. "Today was the last day of the shoot and I... I'll miss you all." A tear slips from my eye.

She scrambles off his lap and rushes to my side. Motioning Jason to get up, she takes his seat beside me. "Hey, shh..." she closes her arms around me.

"Didn't know the girl who always made us laugh with her jokes was so emotional." She rocks me.

Chris walks over to us and plops down on the tufted pouf across us. "Summer, look what I've got for you."

I pull back and sniffle. He has a box in his hand.

"What is it?"

"See for yourself." He hands it to me.

I open it and gasp. "Rainbow donuts with sprinkles."

“I baked them.”

Mia, his girlfriend raises her brow, “Really?”

Chris rolls his eyes. “All right, all right. You baked them but we are a couple. So it’s the same thing.”

Mia shakes her head. Then glances at me. “Come on, taste it.”

“Thank you, Mia. You’re so sweet.”

“We know you love colors so much, so I tried these at home.”

Raleigh stands and snatches the box from my grasp. “She is a model now.” He says then looks at me. “I don’t think you should eat these.” He sighs dramatically. “I guess I’ll have to finish them.”

I jump up. “No effing way. They’re mine. Give them back!”

“Let me think.” He squints, then. “No.”

I lunge for him. But he is faster. He easily glides across the room.

“RJ, if you drop them, I swear to God I’ll never talk to you!” Mia shouts.

Hannah sighs before getting up. She strides toward him and holds out her hand. He scowls at her.

“Raleigh...”

He huffs and gives the box back.

I pull a face at him when she brings it to me. Then I lift one and take a bite. “Mmm... this is....” I stuff my mouth with another bite, “delicious.”

“Why do you annoy her?” I hear Hannah ask Raleigh.

“Well, she isn’t crying anymore, is she? Mission accomplished.”

“Aww, you are such a softie, RJ.” She teases.

“No, I’m not.”

I turn to him. “You totally are.”

“Were you eavesdropping, smartass?”

Walking to him, I pick one donut and lift it to his mouth. “Here, before I change my mind.”

He smirks before tasting it.

“I want one too!” Jason crowds us. Then Chris rushes to get one too. And just like that, the box is emptied in seconds.

“I wish Archer was here,” Mia says. “He would’ve loved those.” She motions at the now empty container.

A shudder jolts through my system at the mention of him. Ever since our encounter in the elevator a week ago, I hardly saw a glimpse of him.

He agreed to hire me but never once set foot inside the studio again.

A couple of times when I did see him, he nodded his head in acknowledgment. That’s it.

Well, I asked him to behave professionally so he was simply giving me that.

I also observed that Archer was worshipped by his employees. And for good reasons. He was a great leader.

I caught him helping out a couple of interns on my third day of working there. They fawned over him. Even males.

He is their hero.

Even in his absence, the team used to talk about him. At the end of the day, they used to discuss excitedly about reporting to him about the progress of the campaign.

He is loved by them. And he cared for them too. It made me respect him even more.

Another thing that I felt in these past days was... longing. I missed him.

I missed bickering with him. I missed his dark intense eyes on me. I missed his grumpy grunts.

I found myself getting jealous when the others so freely used to mention meeting him because I couldn’t.

Ever since I got to know what’s it like to have him inside me, to feel his burning touch on my skin, I have not been the same.

There's not a day that went by when I didn't think of him.

I thought he would be here today, and was disappointed when I learned he wasn't coming.

"Did he ever attend our parties?" Raleigh asks.

Everyone shakes their heads.

"Stop wishing for a miracle to happen, guys," he murmurs. "He hates partying or socializing."

"Why is that?" I can't help but ask.

He lifts a shoulder. "He is different."

"Different how?"

Hannah leans forward. "He helps others when they are in need. He is protective of us. The best boss one can ever ask for. And he's unbeatable in his job. But other than that, Archer Kim is a mystery."

"But you are close."

"We are. He stood by me in the toughest time of my life. He is the big brother I never had." She smiles softly. Then it turns somber. "But he never shares his secrets with me. We don't know anything beyond what he chooses to tell us."

Raleigh nods slowly. "And we don't push him to open up. During the years, he has changed. When I joined his agency several years ago, we barely talked."

Brielle makes a sound of agreement. "He definitely is less stern now but the boundary is still there, know what I mean?"

"Yeah. It's like something is stopping him from opening up." Mia murmurs. "It would be fun if he started joining us in these things."

"You guys get to dine with him now and then." Brielle points a finger at Hannah and Raleigh.

"Perks of being his Star Employees." Raleigh gloats, annoying everyone. They start throwing popcorn at him.

While the room erupts in chaos, I remain seated, wondering why Archer loves conquering but never takes part in the victory celebration.

Why does he care for people around him but also push them away?

Why does he choose to stay lonely when he is clearly adored by many?

What are you hiding, Archer Kim?



Archer

1 week later...

“The traffic of Modern Closet’s official website has drastically increased after the launch of our Ad campaign.”

I nod at Mia. “What about the sales?”

Chris types on his laptop. “Just received the analytics. We can see a huge difference between the previous and current month’s sales report.”

I assembled the team to review the progress of Modern Closet’s campaign.

After wrapping up the project a week ago, we began the next phase of the plan. Promoting the campaign.

“Status on return on investment?” We have taken a risk with this campaign. For the first time, we financed more than half the amount of investment because Modern Closet couldn’t afford it.

“We covered it in the initial hours.”

“Good.”

I turn to Brielle. “What’s the response on social media?”

“Posts featuring Summer’s pictures have received a lot of positive feedback. Her Instagram followers are skyrocketing.”

I take a deep breath and steel myself. The mere mention of her name does things to me I couldn’t acknowledge.

My cock swells just thinking about her. My jaw clenches.

Each time I walked through the lobby, I hoped to catch her glimpse but because she was the main model of the campaign, she was always busy.

The infuriating woman had asked me to forget about what happened between us.

She wanted me to act like a professional when I wanted nothing more than to pick her up and wrap her legs around my waist and pound inside her.

The entirety of two weeks, I spent reviewing photo after photo of her looking so fucking gorgeous and breathtaking. It was torture. I was fighting with myself every second to stay away from her.

The beast inside me wanted to take her again but I tamped it down.

This campaign was the main priority. But that didn’t stop my imagination from running rampant.

I spent more time than I would like into imagining me striding inside the studio and carrying her over my shoulder back to my office.

Only this time, I’d strip her bare and fuck her against my office door until she cried out with ecstasy.

The graphic images in front of my eyes screwed with my sanity every time I had to sit with my employees and review her photoshoots.

Every time I sat on my desk, it reminded me of the day when I bent her over it and fucked her brains out.

Never in my entire life was I this distracted over a woman before.

I thought fucking her once would be enough. Enough to quench my thirst for her. I was wrong.

She was the polar opposite of the woman I usually go for. I need someone who is sweet, not someone who devours sweet candies like an addict.

I want a sophisticated woman who carries herself with confidence and knows how to behave, not someone who loves to twerk on loud music and like taking selfies while making stupid faces.

The girl I can't take my eyes off of is not the one for me. So why the hell do I crave her?

I grit my teeth and try to calm down.

Clearing my throat, I ask, "Any weak spots?"

"None." Raleigh grins.

I glance at Hannah. "The final verdict?"

She looks at me. Slowly, she stands from her seat. Looks at her team. "The campaign is... a huge success!" A large grin splits her face.

Everyone jumps up, hollering and applauding.

"We did it, boss," Hannah says as she approaches me.

"We did, didn't we?" The corner of my mouth curls.

Raleigh walks to us and wraps an arm around her.

"Choosing Summer was the right decision," Hannah says with a proud expression.

Raleigh squeezes her to his side. "My fiancée is a genius."

She rolls her eyes but blushes at the same time.

Yes, this week was full of good news. Raleigh popped the question. And Hannah said yes.

Seeing them happy and about to begin a new journey together gives me great joy.

They both fought hard to get their happy ending.

"So..." Hannah starts. "Are you coming to the party tonight?"

I cock an eyebrow. “You already planned a party before knowing the results?”

Raleigh grins. “We were sure this campaign was going to be a massive hit. So we booked the rooftop restaurant for the victory celebration.”

“That’s great. You all deserve it. Have fun.”

“You’re not coming?” Hannah’s forehead creases.

“You know I don’t like partying. I am too old for that thing.”

“You are thirty-one, Archer. Not eighty.”

“Some other time.” I give them a small smile and turn to leave, feeling hollow by the sadness shadowing their faces.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Summer

A smile plays on my lips.

I am standing in front of the LED interactive wall in KIM Advertising.

Like always, there's a full-body portrait of a model displayed on it.

Clad in an off-shoulder white mini dress, she is sitting on a bar stool with her leg crossed, her high heels glinting.

Her brown hair is loose, draped artistically over her shoulders. She is smiling at the camera.

Her startling different colored eyes are the mirror image of mine.

Come to think of it, the model looks exactly like me.

I reach up and pinch myself. Ouch.

Nope. I am not dreaming. It's real.

My smile widens.

From swooning over this LED wall to being featured on it, I've come a long way.

Raleigh and his team were confident about the success of the Modern Closet's campaign. But even they were unaware of just how big the success will be.

One week ago, we had a success party at the rooftop restaurant in downtown L.A.

Apparently, KIM Advertising had taken a huge risk in promoting the Modern Closet.

More than half of the investment in the campaign was done by Archer himself.

That's why the entire team was over the moon for this victory. They not only got an equal return on investment but also became the talk of the town.

The agency proved that they were the best for a reason. They showed their competitors that they can help small businesses reach new heights.

They showed how capable they are in their field of work.

That night, everyone was high on the win. We were so engrossed in celebrating, that we didn't expect what would come next.

The very next day, I woke up to one million followers on Instagram.

I became an internet celebrity overnight.

One of the posts of the ad campaign went viral. I was tagged in the pictures like the other models.

Through that post, people began checking out my Instagram account. I had like ten or so pictures there. And most of them were with Goldie.

Imagine my shock when I opened the app and saw the notifications flooding in.

It was overwhelming. All of it. The thousands of likes. The comments. The DMs.

While the majority of them liked me and my heterochromia eyes. Not everything was positive.

Some called me weird. I even found a few comments calling me a witch. That one was funny.

It was all fun and games until they started attacking me for my choice of clothes.

That day, I realized what a dark place social media is.

Another thing I understood from this was people loved hating on others for no reason.

I was being criticized by people I didn't even know and had never met in my life.

When I was a regular girl, I used to get 5 to 10 likes on each post. No one to spread hate. But once my account blew up, people began loving and hating me.

In a nutshell, it was hell.

I would've deleted my social media accounts if it weren't for Raleigh. He said I am an "influencer" now. And I should take advantage of it.

I didn't understand a thing. As he was the expert, I let him handle it.

Turns out, that going viral isn't really a bad thing. Because I started getting new modeling assignments.

In just one week, I did about six photoshoots. Hannah taught me how to negotiate the payment. She also taught me a few tips and tricks to appear confident while handling such matters.

I even got emails regarding paid posts on my Instagram. It was all too much to handle for me. So Hannah proposed me a better plan.

She said KIM Advertising not only advertises the brands but also represents many models. Like any modeling agency.

The models they represent get to feature in KIM Advertising campaigns as well as work in the fashion industry.

I was on board. Because that meant spending more time with my new friends here.

I had a meeting today and I was just on my way out when I saw the LED wall.

I'll be forever grateful to Hannah. She gave me a chance to do something new. She believed in me. Sought me out because she thought I was the best for the campaign.

She practically gave me a new life.

I am not rich. I am still a newbie who has to figure out a thousand different things in the modeling career but I am earning well. Because my debut assignment was so successful, I charge the same as the next famous model. All thanks to Hannah.

Now, I don't eat cheeseburgers for dinner anymore.

I am going to start paying River more than the amount I am paying now. I love the apartment. It is my home. So I don't want to move again. But I intend to pay the actual rent the next month.

That reminds me... I pull my phone out and snap a picture of the wall and send it to River. I shoot her a quick text.

Me: Look at that! Your girl finally arrived.

She replies almost instantly.

River: So proud of you, Summer. You deserve it and more!

I smile widely. I start typing.

Me: When are you coming over? Goldie and I miss you so much.

She takes several minutes to reply.

River: I'll try to meet soon, okay? Give him kisses for me.

A cloud of disappointment hangs over me. I miss her so much. She is one of the most important people in my life. One of the very few I trust with my all.

Yes, I have new friends but I will never forget what River did for me. She'll always hold a special place in my heart.

Me: I will. Please take care. Call me if you need me. I mean it. You know I'll be there in a heartbeat.

River: I know and that keeps me going. I'll visit soon. Love you.

Me: I'll hold you to that! Love you too xoxo

I exit the building and walk to my car.

Once inside, I drop my backpack in the passenger seat and pull the door shut. It doesn't shut properly on the first try as usual. So I push it open and then jerk it close with force.

I turn the ignition. Nothing happens.

I try again. "Come on, don't die on me!" I mumble to my beat-up Honda Civic.

I open the door. Or try to because once it's shut, you have to shove it open with your feet. It finally gives and I snatch my backpack and get out.

It's time to say goodbye to my car, I guess. I'll have to buy a new one soon.

Or maybe I can spend some money on servicing the car.

I'll have to call a cab for now.

Letting out a sigh, I walk toward the exit.

I don't like taking a cab. It's pretty expensive. Although I can afford a ride back home, I dislike wasting money.

I decide to walk for a while.

The sunset paints the sky orange and red with a hint of purple. So beautiful.

A chilly breeze makes my hair flutter. I huddle into my colorful bomber jacket, cursing myself for wearing the black mini-skirt instead of going for the jeans.

My over-the-knee graffiti high-heeled boots are doing nothing to protect me from the chill either.

Why can't I find a cab when I need one?

Ten minutes pass.

Should I text Hannah? I can ask her for a ride. But she must be long gone by now. My meeting ran late. I didn't see her while I was leaving.

Instead of bothering her, I rummage through my backpack and pull out a purple lollipop.

Hmm. Grape Flavor. I don't love it a lot. But it's sweet so it'll do. I unwrap it and pop it into my mouth.

“Mmm,” My eyes widen in delight. “So gwud,” I speak around the lollipop.

“What are you doing here?”

I jump out of my skin at the deep voice and stumble, almost tripping over my foot.

I should be more careful about my surroundings because I missed a car pulling up beside me.

I spin around and take in the sleek black Jaguar. I tilt my head to the driver’s seat and gasp at the familiar eyes meeting mine. My insides jolt with the shock.

“Archer...”

“Get in.” I am struck as his authoritative voice wraps around me, holding me captive.

It has been three weeks since I last saw him. Twenty-four days since we slipped and had sex in his office.

He was not present at the success party nor when I signed with KIM Advertising.

I was never under the impression that he would personally congratulate me on my newfound fame. But it still hurt that he completely shut me out.

I had asked for him to forget about what happened, true, but I also expected us to be cordial.

We didn’t interact for almost a month. A month!

Did you ever think of me during that period? Or were you too busy to remember that I existed?

My knees almost fold when he rakes his eyes over my body. He does that leisurely like he has all the time in the world. His gaze goes from my long hair to the crop top and jacket, then falls over my mini skirt, sliding down.

I don’t miss how he stalls in specific places.

It’s the case with me too, how I can’t stop myself from taking him in.

He’s in a dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. I try not to bite my lip as I stare at his sexy hands on the wheel.

“Summer,” His voice shakes me out of my stupor.

“Yeah?” I speak with the lollipop sticking in my cheek.

“Get in the car. I’ll take you home.”

The last time we were together alone, we ended up consuming each other like there was no tomorrow.

Is it wise to be with him again? A month couldn’t alleviate my attraction to him. The distance only made me want him more.

I also don’t miss the way he *tells* me what to do. Instead of offering me a ride, he’s ordering me to get in. Earlier, his domineering nature used to piss me off. Now I am finding it hot.

Yeah, no. Going with him is a bad idea.

“Thanks, but I’ll take a cab.”

“Our destination is the same.” It is. But I also think it’s risky. Because for starters, I find you insanely hot. And if I sit so close to you, my body will get ideas. Ideas I don’t think you would appreciate.

“I…” What happened, brain? You never had any problems conjuring up a lie. Now, why are you leaving me dry?

“Summer,” He calls out in a much gentler voice. When I stare at him, he continues, “You work with KIM Advertising now. That means you’re my responsibility. And I take them pretty seriously.”

“Responsibility?” My chest feels tight. He is offering me a ride because he feels responsible for my safety.

“Yes. Now get in.” He tilts his chin, motioning for me to hop in.

I yield because there was nothing left to argue. So without another word, I climb into the passenger’s side and pull the door close.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“Put on your seatbelt.” He reminds me as he starts the engine. I pout at his terse reminder and do as I am told.

“Why so serious?” I mutter under my breath with my best mimic voice.

“What was that?” He asks and I shake my head frantically.

I suck on my lollipop in silence for a few minutes when he speaks again. “Can you stop?”

“Stop what?” I lick my lollipop and eye him inquisitively.

“Making those sounds.” His grip on the wheel tightens, the veins in his forearms flexing. Yum.

I suck my lollipop in earnest.

“Summer,” He warns in his sexy dark voice.

Maybe he dislikes eating or chewing sounds. Does he have OCD?

I don’t torment him further and bite on the now small ball of the lollipop. It cracks under my teeth, making another loud sound.

I wince. “Sorry.” I try to chew it fast but it only leads to me making more noises.

When I am done swallowing the sugary sweetness, I take a relieved breath. My relief is short-lived when he breaks the silence.

“What were you doing outside the building at this hour?”

“My meeting ran long.”

“Then why were you wandering around instead of driving home?” He blasts me with a question.

“Because I wanted to do a catwalk in the middle of the road.” I deadpan.

He takes his eyes off the road briefly to stare at me, unblinking.

I sigh. “I was waiting for a cab.”

“Where’s your car?”

“It drew its last breath in your building’s parking lot.” I feign a look of pain. Then fake a frown, wiping an invisible tear.

His brow creases. “You should’ve walked back to the building. One of the guards would’ve helped you with the cab.”

“Seriously, it’s not a big deal.”

Archer hits the break, stopping at the side of the road. “Give me that.” He tilts his chin at my lap.

I look down. “My phone?”

He nods.

I give it to him only because I am curious. He asks me to unlock it and I do. Then he punches a number and hits call.

His phone on the center console lights up. He passes the phone back to me.

“Next time you need help, call me.”

My mouth parts in surprise. “You mean that?”

He nods.

“What if I need you in the middle of the night?”

“You can call me anytime for anything at all.”

“Anything, huh?” I can’t help but tease him.

He ignores me and pulls away from the curb.

“Just to be sure, what all does *anything* involve?”

He ignores me again.

“What if I want a chocolate milkshake at three in the morning? Can I call you for that?” I goad him. It’s fun to mess with him.

When he doesn’t reply, I go on. “Do you like ice-cream?”

Then I shake my head. “No, I don’t think you do.”

“And what makes you think that?”

I clap my hands. “Oh, he speaks.”

When he gives me a dry look, I chuckle and answer his question. “Because I can’t picture someone like you eating something so sweet.”

“Someone like me?”

“Yeah. Bitter and brooding.”

He sighs. “All right, how about you let me drive in peace now?”

I shoot him a dirty look and turn away from him. Facing the window of his car, I open my mouth and blow air on the glass.

The surface immediately covers in white mist. I pull away and then use the tip of my index finger to draw a figure.

When I am done, I grin at my art and turn my head to find him staring at me with a cocked brow.

I point at him and then point at the figure I drew.

“What are you doing?”

I gesture to him, then at the window again. “Why aren’t you using your mouth to communicate, Summer?”

I raise a brow. He understands then. Rolling his eyes, he says, “You may speak, smartass.”

“I was saying that I drew you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” I point at the window, “This is the red angry bird.” I squint at it then murmur, “Okay please imagine it’s red. But yeah, it’s you because you’re always angry.” I laugh.

Archer looks at me, one corner of his mouth kicking up into a smile. A smile. Albeit a small one but it’s a smile nonetheless.

“Did you just smile?” I shout in astonishment.

“No.”

“Oh, you so did! Ohmygod. He is human after all.”

He stops the car again and I huff. “Now what did I do?”

“We are here.”

I look around. “Oh.” So soon. With hesitation, I unbuckle my seat. “Thank you for the ride.”

He nods.

As we live on the same floor, we ride the elevator together. The entire time we remain silent.

When we get out of the elevator, I feel empty at the thought of parting with him. Which is odd as hell.

We are in front of our respective doors now. I turn to see him one last time and gasp when my eyes collide with his.

“Good night, Summer.”

“Good night.”

“Lock the door behind you.” He says, reminding me of the time when he walked in on me dancing. Feels like a lifetime ago.

I nod. When he doesn't move, I get the message. He will not go inside until he sees me go in.

Sneaking another look at him, I unlock my apartment and step inside.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Archer

A whimper jolts me awake.

I groan at how stiff my neck is. I must've fallen asleep while reading in my leather chair.

I place the book that was lying on my lap on the table.

The entire room is dark except for the lamp perched on the table.

Another whimper startles me. My head snaps at my study's closed door. At the same time, the lamp starts to flicker.

I push to my feet.

The sound of the thudding footsteps confirms my doubt. I have an intruder in my apartment.

How did that happen? The building has the best security. Plus there's no way someone could try to break in and not trigger the alarms.

Not wasting a second, I stride to the door. That's when the lamp goes off, snuffing the only source of light in the room.

That's strange. The electricity never goes out here.

I feel for my phone in my pocket. I breathe out when I find it.

Taking it out, I turn the flashlight on.

I reach it in big strides and open the door.

The electricity is out. My prediction was accurate. Because the entire apartment is dark.

My skin pricks with awareness. The feeling of being watched makes me alert.

Then I hear the footsteps again. I hold my breath, trying to figure out my next course of action.

I raise my phone in that direction where I heard the sound of footsteps. It barely illuminates the few feet of the path.

I wave it around in an arc, shining it across the hallway.

I am about to check in the opposite direction when I catch sight of something.

It catches me off guard. I fumble with my phone, nearly dropping it.

When I lift the phone to the spot again, I find nothing.

A surge of adrenaline propels me to stalk forward.

“Archer,” A soft feminine voice stops me in my track.

“Hello?” I call out.

“Archer....” That same gentle voice echoes around the living room.

I turn a full circle with my phone, trying to catch a glimpse of the woman who’s uttering my name.

On the third time, I begin to follow the voice. Passing the corridor, I trail the voice until I am standing in front of the balcony.

I don’t use the balcony much as I barely get time to hang out here. That’s why I often keep its glass doors closed. But right now, they are wide open.

As I step closer, a figure comes into view. A woman.

I enter the balcony and notice that the woman is dressed in a white dress, her shoulder-length hair is loose.

When I am a few feet away from her, I stop.

“Who are you? And how did you get inside my apartment?”

“I was waiting for you...” She says, her voice sounding so sad. Something about her voice makes my stomach sink.

“Who are you?”

She moves then. Slowly, she turns to face me, stealing the breath out of my lungs. I stagger back.

Ice spreads in my chest, a familiar ache grows at my core.

“Amy?” I whisper.

She smiles a small smile. Her pale skin still the same, radiant, flawless.

I erase the distance between us. Cupping her jaw, I stare into her eyes. “Amy, is this really you?”

She reaches up and covers my hand, her touch feels ice cold. “Why didn’t you come?”

“I’m sorry,” My voice breaks as I touch my forehead with hers.

In front of my eyes, her beautiful skin turns ashen. Her dark eyes which were expressive a second ago are painfully blank.

“No,” I croak as I clasp her face with both hands. Something wet coats my fingers.

I pull one hand back and my insides turn to stone when I see them covered in blood.

I look back at her face and stumble back when bruises start to appear one by one until they are all I can see.

Her white dress is soiled in blood pooling from the cuts on her forearms and collarbone.

“No, no, no!” Crippling pain spreads through my limbs and I lunge forward.

She falls lifelessly on the marble floor.

Dropping to my knees, I take her in my arms and hug her to my chest. “No, please! Please. Amy. I’m sorry!”

Her eyes become lifeless. “Amy,” I shake her as fear runs down my spine. “No!” I shout. Over and over.

My eyes snap open and I jerk up.

For a second, I am disoriented. Then reality sets in slowly. I am in my bedroom, my skin covered in sweat.

I shove a hand in my hair and pull.

It was another nightmare.

Climbing off the bed, I walk to the floor-length window. Laying a hand on it, I double over as the pain courses through me.

I reach up and rest my other hand on my heart. I let the sorrow take over as a tear slips down my face.



Summer

I tiptoe around Brielle's cubicle and sneak behind her.

She is busy working on her computer. I've never seen her sit so still. She is that person in a group who's always hyperactive.

Maybe she has a deadline to meet. Anyway, I am glad she didn't feel me inching close.

"Brielle!" I shout in her ear, causing her to jump off her seat.

"Fuck! Summer!" She leans against her desk, one hand on her chest.

"Got you." I grin and am greeted with a glare.

"You want war, Summer?" Brielle snaps. "Because we have a reputation for playing pranks on our targets. And you," she pulls my cheek. "are my prime target."

I smirk. “Bring it on!” I lay the disposable coffee tray on her desk. “In the meantime, drink your coffee while it’s hot.”

I motion to the others to take their cups.

Mia whose cubicle is right beside Brielle’s jumps up. “You are so sweet, Summer. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I am here for another long meeting which doesn’t start for the next thirty minutes, so I thought we could hang out.”

Brielle sighs. “You make it really hard to stay mad at you.”

“I know.” I take one cup and hand it to her. She takes it with a smile.

“What are you working on? Did I disturb you?”

“Not really. I was about to take a break. But wanted to finish one PowerPoint. The workload has increased since the Modern Closet campaign.”

“It’s a good thing, no?”

Brielle nods. “It is. But it’s hella tiring to sit in one place and work on a computer. I love when we are on set, you know. It’s so much livelier than this.”

I agree. During the photoshoots, I have seen how much they enjoyed working and bringing their ideas to life.

Nina saunters to her and wraps an arm around her waist. “I can finish that if you want.” She motions to Brielle’s monitor.

She leans her head against hers. “I don’t deserve you.”

“I am taking that as a yes.” Nina chuckles.

“No. I wasn’t agreeing to your offer. I am going to do it on my own.”

“But we are on the same team. We are not rivals, remember? I can help my teammate.”

I sometimes forget that before the merge, there were two creative departments. Department I was led by Raleigh and Department II by Hannah.

Nina was in Department I and Brielle was in Department II.

They had some serious animosity toward each other. And that's why they were merged. Raleigh and Hannah were furious by this but look how it worked out in the end.

"Yes, we are a team but that doesn't mean I will slack off."

Nina rolls her eyes. "All right."

Jason and Chris started talking about sports. I tune them out and share the latest update about my favorite show- Stranger Things with the girls.

"Vecna is so hot," Mia gushes, and I choke on my coffee.

Brielle laughs. "Are you serious?"

"You mean Jamie Campbell Bower is hot, right?" I ask as I recover from her statement.

She shakes her head. "I am talking about the red villain. He is so sexy."

The other female team member speaks, "I agree. I want him so bad." She fans herself.

I wrinkle my nose. "You guys are sick."

"I second that." Brielle and Nina say in unison.

The two fangirls of Vecna stare at us. "Have you heard his voice?"

I open my mouth and then close it. Well, he indeed has a deep sexy voice.

Mia shoots me a triumphant smile. "I can see it on your face. Admit it that he is hot."

"Who's hot?" Chris interrupts our debate and scowls at Mia.

"N-nobody." She stutters.

They start bickering and we watch with amusement.

Brielle turns her head when we hear the sound of footsteps approaching. She gazes at something over my shoulder. Her face lights up.

"Good morning, Archer!" Brielle beams at him.

My movements halt. The cup in my hand is suspended in the air, inches away from my lips when she says his name.

Not one minute ago she was complaining about being tired and look at her now, all chirpy when her boss arrives.

Nina who's often grumpy, smiles. Chris and Mia are silent, their argument forgotten.

Another live example that he is so revered by his employees.

Giving into the temptation, I turn to face him. As soon as I do, my brows pull together.

Archer marches forward with Hannah and Raleigh trailing behind him.

The trio is awfully quiet. Raleigh's signature smirk is missing in action. Hannah's face looks more serious than usual.

Archer's stance is stiff and his aura is... unwelcoming. Like a dark cloud is looming over him. His face is scarily blank which makes my stomach sink.

I try to catch his eye but he acts like I am invisible.

He barely acknowledges Brielle or any of us as he strides past us in the direction of the meeting room.

Hannah glances at me and offers me a small quick smile before walking away briskly.

Brielle clears her throat. "All right, guys. I need to get back to work." She tries to shoo us away.

Nina gives her a troubled look but walks back to her cubicle.

Grabbing a chair, I sit down. "What was that, Brielle?"

She ignores my eyes and focuses on her computer. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. What was that?"

She turns her wheeled chair to face mine. "It was really nothing."

"I don't think so. Yes, Archer can be rude sometimes, but I have never seen him this cold. It's like he is here but not really here. Something is very wrong. I can feel it."

"It slipped my mind. It's his birthday today."

"What?"

She bobs her head. “Yeah.”

“But what does that have anything to do with his somber mood?”

“I don’t know much about it. But Raleigh does as he’s worked here longer than any of us. He noticed the pattern.” Brielle watches the direction they disappeared to with sadness.

“Pattern?”

“Every year on this particular day, he shuts down. Becomes colder. Harsher. Unapproachable. Even to his star employees.”

I watch the empty hallway too with a frown. “Why?”

“Beats me.”

I look back at her when she speaks again. “It sucks you know. That man goes all out to celebrate our birthdays, anniversaries, or victory parties. He arranges everything for us but never lets us do the same for him.”

“Did he ever attend those birthday parties?”

She shakes her head slowly.

There’s a terrible gnawing feeling in my gut.

Why do you always run away from happiness, Archer?

He spends his nights working late here and comes home only to sleep. Whenever we encountered one another, I either saw him leaving for work or getting back from work.

The other day when I assumed that he might have gone on a date? He was meeting Hannah for dinner. She told me, that’s when he decided to hire me.

I shouldn’t be, but I am worried for him. I don’t like the way he is living his life.

It’s like he is just existing. Not really *living*.

“Do yourself a favor and stay away from him if you can. He can be dismissive.” She hints at what happened a few moments ago.

“Hmm,” I murmur noncommittally as I get to my feet and leave for my meeting, knowing that the sinking feeling would

haunt me throughout the day.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Archer

I crush the cigarette in the ashtray and retrieve the pack for another as I review one of the contracts of a client.

It's 9:30 p.m. Two and a half hours more until the day ends. I should go over the new marketing strategies I was working on.

My phone rings. I pause with the unlit cigarette hanging from my lips and lean forward to read the name of the caller.

Eomma.

I let it ring as I search for my zippo lighter around my messy desk.

Why can't she understand one simple text? I told her that I am not going to come to the "birthday party" she was throwing.

The ringing finally stops. But only for a minute before it starts again.

With a growl, I stand and shove my hands in my pockets to search for the damn lighter.

"Thank fuck." I murmur as my fingers pull it out. Bringing it to the cigarette, I light it.

My eyes shut as I take a drag, releasing the white smoke through my nostrils and mouth.

I could've switched off my phone but I have promised her I wouldn't do that. She panics when she can't reach me. And that

dangerously lowers her blood pressure. Which results a visit to the ER.

So instead of switching it off, I put it on silent mode.

Feeling restless, I decide to head to the seventh floor. I need a stiff drink.

That floor was designed for my employees but I have a secret room made specifically for me. It's where I stash my alcohol. I don't drink often ever since... I shake my head. I don't want to think about my past.

I avoid drinking heavily and indulge in alcohol occasionally but tonight I seriously need it.

There's no way I am going home tonight. There's nothing to do there except live the nightmare I had last night over and over.

I still have that lingering dread I felt when I woke up covered in sweat. Then I remembered it's my birthday today.

I always get those kinds of vivid dreams around my birthday. Because birthdays serve as a reminder. A reminder that I am still alive and she isn't.

I take another urgent drag and fill my lungs with nicotine.

Stabbing the remaining cigarette in the ashtray, I stride out of the office.

I don't bother taking my phone with me. I want some fucking peace and quiet.

As soon as I set foot out, the floor goes dark.

I look over my shoulder and frown when I see my office lights are out too.

That's not possible. I spent a fortune on building a network that would prevent power outage.

Our work entirely relies on electricity as most of the aspects of our work is virtual. We can't risk power failure.

This can't do. I want to keep my mind off things. For that I need to work. How the hell am I supposed to work without electricity?

I reach inside the pocket for my phone then remember I left it inside the office.

All of this is awfully similar to the nightmare I had last night.

Dragging in a sharp intake of air, I force myself to calm down.

When I hear a shuffling of footsteps, it becomes hard to differentiate between the nightmare and reality.

This can't be happening.

It is purgatory, living the terrors of losing Amy again and again.

This is my imagination. It's all in my head. There's no one in the building except me.

I am about to go back to my office to get my phone when I hear the thudding of the footsteps.

I snap my head in that direction and find a figure clad in white turning a hallway.

For a moment, I stand there, unmoving. Disbelief makes me blink twice to ensure my mind isn't playing tricks on me.

Like the nightmare, my feet begin to carry me forward, willing me to follow the figure I just saw.

I manage to continue walking without stumbling in the darkness.

When I reach the cubicles, the lights come back on, making me grimace at the sudden brightness.

"Hello?" I call out. The lights that were back on a second ago are gone again.

Out of my peripheral vision, I see someone running but when I turn to look, there's no one.

I am about to check that way when there's a tap on my shoulder. I spin on my heel and find myself alone.

I take a few steps back, my fingers massaging my temples. What is happening?

Am I dreaming again? Have I gone crazy?

I've never had such experience in waking life. This was an unknown territory.

Maybe this is the conclusion I deserve. If I am losing my mind, then this might be the chosen end of my miserable existence.

If this is a penance for my deeds, I will gladly accept.

Closing my eyes, I exhale. "I'm sorry."

Amy's lifeless eyes flash before my eyes. I'm reliving the pain again, and like always, I'm sickened by being in my own skin.

Once the image starts projecting in my head, it doesn't stop. It forces me to go through the agony again, amplifying the guilt that is eating me alive.

I bury my head in my hands. They tremble. Breathing hard, I curl them into fists.

The lights come back on again. Then goes out before it starts flickering. I stare around in bafflement.

A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead.

A hand lands on my back. This time, I whirl around abruptly and come face to face with a Ghostface Mask.

My blood runs cold, launching me into action. Working on impulse, I grab their upper arms and flung them around as I slam them against the wall, hard.

I dig my fingers into their skin, adrenaline pumping.

"Archer..." A startled gasp of pain fills the air. "It's m-me..."

That exact moment, the flickering of the lights halt. The electricity is back. I snatch the mask off them. "Summer?"

"Hey," she tries to smile but winces, probably hurt from the force I slammed her against the wall.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing?" I roar and she flinches.

"Surprise!"

I twist my head and find Hannah carrying a cake alongside Raleigh. The entire creative team comes out of their hiding spots wearing party hats.

But the smile on their faces is wiped out.

“What’s going on?” Hannah asks.

“That should be my question, don’t you think?” I ask, grinding my teeth.

Raleigh steps forward, a frown marring his forehead. “We’re here for you, man. It’s your birthday.”

“You know I don’t like all this.”

“I know. We always wanted to do this for you but today when Summer came up with a plan—”

“So it was Summer’s plan.” I face her. “Did you enjoy pranking me? Did you record it?”

Her face becomes red, hurt shining in her eyes. “I was just trying to—”

“You were trying to what?” I bark.

“I wanted to make you smile.” Her chin trembles.

“By pulling a cheap stunt like that? When will you fucking grow up, Summer?”

Hannah steps in between us. She pushes me away not so gently and wraps an arm around Summer. “This is not fair, Archer. She did this to lighten you up.”

Brielle walks over to them. “You know she canceled her meeting and a paid photoshoot for this. She got your favorite—”

“Did I ask her to do it?” I ask sardonically.

Summer’s head jerks up. Unshed tears fill her eyes, her nose red. “He’s right.” She glances at Brielle than Hannah. “I shouldn’t have done this. I overstepped my boundaries.” Her voice cracks but she forces a smile.

“I am sorry.” She sniffles then turns around and runs.

Silence lasts for about a minute before Raleigh stalks to me, his jaw clenched. “What the fuck is wrong with you? That girl is

still technically broke but didn't think twice before cancelling her shoot—which may affect her career by the way—for *you* and you treated her like shit.”

Jason clutches his shoulder. “Raleigh, don't.”

Raleigh shrugs off his hand. “If I stop today, I won't be able to say this again.”

Chris tries to usher him away but he pushes him aside. “You know she had to bring her dog here because her dog sitter wasn't available. She had to leave Goldie with the guard downstairs so she could prepare all this.”

Chris speaks. “Raleigh.”

“Her prank may be childish but her intentions were pure.” He shakes his head. “You are my idol, dude. But you disappointed me today.”

He moves past me, grabs Hannah's hand and leaves.

One by one, everyone trickles out, leaving without any word but disapproval in their eyes.

Lifting my fist, I rear it back before punching the wall.

Anguish strikes my heart, as if something is being torn inside me. I've felt this anguish before, only difference is this time, I am feeling this way because I made Summer cry.

I pull my bloodied knuckle back and punch the wall over and over again.

“I am sorry,” I mutter an apology for the second time tonight. But it's not for Amy. It's for the girl whose heart I broke ruthlessly.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Summer

I slip into the oversized pink hello kitty t-shirt and pull on the panties.

Too tired to dry my hair, I walk out of the bathroom and look for Goldie.

He is not in the bedroom nor in the living room.

Frowning, I check the other spare rooms.

My heartbeat steadies when I find him in one of the rooms, curled up in the bed. He is fast asleep. His favorite ball lies beside him.

I lean down and kiss his head. His peaceful face makes me smile but it wobbles.

He was tired when I picked him from the guard. Goldie isn't trained so he was scared to be with the unknown man and caused trouble.

The guard had locked him in a room. I didn't like it but I said nothing because it was my fault. I shouldn't have left him.

So I just freed my baby and wasted no time in leaving.

I cover him with a comforter before exiting the room, pulling the door ajar.

I carry my own comforter from my bedroom and wrap it around me. Settling onto the couch in the living room, I try to distract myself by watching a rom-com movie.

My soul is overflowing with hurt and humiliation. So much so that in the middle of a funny scene, a sob escapes me, tears spilling from my eyes.

I curl into the corner of the couch and lay my head on the armrest as more sobs wrack my body.

The hatred in Archer's voice keeps ringing in my ears. His cold, almost unrecognizable features when he looked at me bring fresh tears to my eyes, slicing my heart open.

I don't remember how long I cried. I was so tired, emotionally exhausted that I fell asleep on the couch, clinging to the comforter.

"Summer, I saw that." Mom calls out. And I quickly wipe my hands and face.

I crunch the sugar with my teeth, loving the sweetness that explodes in my mouth.

Today's my daddy's birthday. And I am sitting on the kitchen barstool, my legs dangling, excited to help Mommy bake a cake for him.

She says I am old enough to help her. I agree. I turned six last month. So I am here to bake the best cake in the world for daddy so he won't get angry tonight.

He gets really scary when he's angry. Last night he hurt mommy because the food was not hot enough for him when he returned from work.

Whenever he comes home, mommy locks me in my room. I hate it when mommy does that. I want to protect her. But she thinks I can't do that. She thinks I am not strong enough. But I am going to prove her that I am.

Maybe after today, she will believe it. I am serious about the cake. She will learn today that I don't need to be locked up from today onwards.

She enters the kitchen and puts her hands on her hips. "What did I tell you about eating sugar?"

"I didn't..."

*“Now you are lying, too?” She frowns at me and I look down.
“Sorry, mommy.”*

She reaches for me and picks me up. I wrap my legs around her middle and hug her closely, burying my head in the crook of her neck. This is a trick that always works.

No matter what I do, when I hug her, she forgets about it and melts. Just like that.

As expected, she relaxes and strokes my back. “Don’t think I am unaware of your tactics, monkey.”

I pull back to stare at her and find her smiling. “You can be a great actress when you grow up, my drama queen.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I don’t know about that, mommy, but I want to grow up really, really fast.”

She quirks a brow. “Why is that?”

“So that I can save you.” I kiss her nose. When I lean back, her smile is gone.

She clears her throat, then puts me back on the stool. “Shall we begin?” She smiles but her eyes sparkle less.

“Yes.” I nod vehemently.

That night we waited for daddy to surprise him. We turned off all the lights of our house and hid in the kitchen.

The front door opens. I squeal in excitement.

“Shh...” Mommy puts a finger on her lips.

I nod and remain quiet.

He calls out our names but we stay hidden for a few minutes. Then Mommy lights up a candle on the cake and walks out of the kitchen with me in tow.

He turns when we begin singing happy birthday. I run off the side and hit the lights, a grin splitting my face in two.

I am still grinning as I turn. “What the hell is this?” He shouts, making me and mommy flinch.

She smiles but it trembles. “Happy birthday.”

“I was banging on the door for ten minutes like a lunatic. I had to use my damn key to get in and find that you were home.” He takes a step toward her.

“Look, we made a cake for you—” Before mommy could finish, daddy pushes her and the cake goes flying in the air before dropping to the floor.

I shudder as I watch the destroyed cake, my cheeks getting wet with tears. Shaking myself, I run toward mommy when he advances forward.

She clutches me and dashes for my room.

“Don’t lock me in, mommy! I am a grown-up! I don’t wanna leave you! Mommy, no!” She drops me on the bed and leaves. I scramble off the bed but it’s too late. The door is locked.

I bang my palms on the door until they are aching and red. “Mommy, open the door, please! Mommy!”

The knock on the door jolts me awake. I sit straight, still shivering from the nightmare.

Wiping my eyes, I shrug off the comforter and pad to the door.

What time is it?

I open the door and my breath hitches. Archer stands with his hands propped on either side of my door’s frame. I am about to slam the door in his face when I look at him. Really look at him.

His head is bent. His white button-down shirt is wrinkled and his hair is messy. I grip the door tighter, my traitorous heart worrying for him again.

“What are you doing here?” I ask grimly.

He lifts his head, his eyes colliding with mine. I almost lose my footing because of the bolt of current that shoots through me. I cease breathing.

His penetrating gaze shows a hint of regret. Maybe my mind is exhausted and is trying to see things it wants to. But the icy demeanor from earlier is missing. Instead, he looks drained.

From the close proximity, I can feel the tension emanating from him.

He doesn't look like the owner of a prestigious advertising agency. He looks like a man who's tired of battling with his demons.

He showed me his cold-hearted side tonight. And his temper triggered a dark part of my past. I didn't need that. If I am smart, I should stay away from him. Far, far away.

When he doesn't say anything, I start to push the door close. He stops it with his hand and pushes it wider. Stepping forward, his fingers lift my chin.

"Have you been crying?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business." I push his hand away but frown when I feel something wet and sticky. I stare down and gasp. Dried blood. His knuckles are busted, swollen.

"What happened to your hand?" I try to grab it.

He lets me but uses the grip to jerk me closer. He leans down and studies my face. "Were you crying because of me?"

"You answer my question first! What did you do?"

"Doesn't fucking matter. Tell me, Summer. Were you crying because of me?"

Mom told me to always smile when your heart is feeling sad. And right now, it feels like my heart is being stretched by two sides. I am scared if I keep talking to him, it might give and break in two.

I curl my lips. "Nope. I was watching *The Notebook*."

He gets inside the apartment and shuts the door behind him. "You're lying."

I chuckle sadly and begin moving backward. "I guess that's your hint that you're not supposed to be here."

He shocks me by eating the space between us. He takes my face in his hands. "I was mean to you. You didn't deserve it. Forgive me, Summer."

My nose tingles, my lower lip quivers. But I force a smile. "It's not a big deal, really." I feign nonchalance. "If you are worried that you hurt my feelings, trust me. You didn't. Everything's cool." I grip his wrists, attempting to pull it off my

face, but he doesn't budge. One of his hands slides down and curls around my nape.

"You're lying again." He rasps.

"Then why aren't you angry? You hate liars. You hate me."

He shakes his head. "I don't hate you, Summer. Far from it."

His words hit me hard. This time, I push him, turn away and take a few steps away from him. "Don't say things you don't mean, Archer."

I draw in a shaky breath. His words affected me more than it should have. That shows how much I cared about what he thinks of me.

I always thought he didn't like me. He was physically drawn to me. I knew that. We want each other but apart from that, it always pricked my heart to think that he held disapproval in regards of me.

I lie a lot and it's something I don't think would ever go. And he hates liars, doesn't he? So how can he say that he doesn't hate me.

I've seen Hannah and Raleigh grovel for his forgiveness after they deceived him about the whole fake engagement thing.

So how do I believe that he doesn't hate me?

My thoughts scatter when I hear him approaching me.

I feel him behind me before his arms wrap around my waist. My breath gets caught in my throat when he pulls me back against him. Then he buries his face in the side of my neck.

Something stirs inside me. Something that's beyond my understanding.

My eyes fall shut as he drags his lips along my neck. He trails up until his warm breath tickles the shell of my ear. "I meant it. You are all I think about."

My breathing becomes uneven when he brushes his lips against my ear. "I'm sorry."

I lean the side of my head to his. "You hurt me."

He tightens his arms around me. "I know."

“You were mean.”

He kisses my temple in a silent apology.

“I hate you,” I say but my hands cover his forearms around my waist.

“You don’t. You wish you did.” He murmurs against my temple.

It’s true. And I am mad at him for knowing this. My skin feels hot by just being held by him like this.

The intimacy between us is new. He’s never been this expressive. This tender. Having him so close feels good. Too good.

This newness is a bit intimidating. Because if he continued to make me feel this way, I know I will get addicted.

Up until now he was this untouchable, silent, brooding man whom I hated and wanted at the same time.

But now, if he is this gentle with me, I am afraid I’ll get used to it. I can’t let it happen. Because if I don’t stop myself now, I’ll get attached to him.

And if he leaves me like Mom did.... no. I can’t go through that again.

I turn in his arms and put my hands on his chest. “I think you should go.”

Not capable of looking at him, I train my gaze on the third button of his shirt that’s undone. I feel him staring at me.

His fingers grip my chin. He lifts it so he could meet my eyes. His other hand is still locked around my waist. “Look me in the eye and say that again. I will leave right this second.”

I do as he says, I lock my eyes with his. Open my lips... but nothing comes out.

It’s easy, Summer. Just tell him to leave. And he will.

I’ve walked on this path before. I’ve pushed men away if I got signs that they wanted more.

This is no different. Archer being here doesn’t prove that he wants more or that he has feelings for me.

So I shouldn't find this path daunting if I've experienced this before, right? It shouldn't be this hard asking him to leave while staring into those dark eyes.

There are endless reasons why we can't happen. And yet, my tongue doesn't work to express them to him.

He leans in and presses his forehead to mine. "I'm done denying this, baby."

Flurry of butterflies goes wild in my stomach. That word, that small little word hit me with full force, filling my chest with pleasure.

"Don't call me that." I blush hard.

He cracks a small smile. "What, baby?"

"That!" I bunch his shirt in my hands. "Don't."

"Why?"

"Because we are still enemies."

I am lying again. Because if we are ever supposed to do this, whatever this is, I need to pretend that it's nothing more than that.

His mouth flattens into a line. Like he is displeased by my lie. But also somewhat relieved. As if like me, even he doesn't want to figure out what's going on between us.

"All right, little liar. I will allow you to believe that but you will quit running from me."

I squint at him. "I never ran from you."

"That day you ran out of my office like your ass was on fire."

My mouth falls open. "That's because you were staring at me funny! What was I supposed to do? Stand there and wait for your instructions?"

With a hand around my nape, he tugs me flush against him. "You asked me to *forget* about it and act like professionals." He hisses.

"Well, I thought of having "the talk" before you did."

He cocks a brow. "The talk?"

“You know... the whole “it was a mistake and it’s not going to happen again” talk.”

“Hmm. So you don’t regret what happened between us.”

I shake my head swiftly. “Not in the least. I wanted it just as much... why are you smiling like that?” I smack his chest.

He sobers up. “I don’t regret it either.”

“You mean that?” I ask with so much hope that it makes my heart beat a little faster.

He nods solemnly. “I have many regrets that keep me up at night, Summer. But being with you is not one of them.”

I squeeze my eyes when he touches his forehead with mine. I liked hearing that a lot. And that itself is a red flag. But I am so far gone for him that it’s impossible to turn around now.

I am like this train with failed breaks who’s barreling toward its end, knowing it is fatal but can’t do anything to stop.

When I pull back to just stare at his handsome face, his big hand curves around my jaw gently. The tender touch makes me giddy. So much so that I am certain it is written all over my face.

Cheeks flaming, I look down and remember something important. “Are you going to tell me what happened to your hand now?”

When he simply stares at me with that soft yet hungry look in his eyes, I clear my throat. “If we are to do this, you have to start answering my questions. No more silent treatment.”

“Do what?” He asks in a husky tone. And I swallow thickly.

“You know...” We are certainly not in a relationship now just because we subtly expressed how we feel for each other. But we are also stepping past the business/neighbor relationship.

“Do I?” His gaze falls to my lips, the hand that’s still cupping my jaw is grazing my skin erotically. His other hand glides up and curls around on my bare upper arm, squeezing lightly.

His touch sears my skin, sending shiver down my spine. Can’t able to control, I rub my palms up and down his chest

slowly, trying to feel his hard muscles and make him focus on me at the same time.

It works. Because his gaze slides up and holds mine. “I punched a wall.”

I gasp. “Why?”

“I made you cry.”

My chest heaves from my uneven breathing. “Archer...”

“You did all that for me and I acted like an asshole.” His grip on my arm flexes.

I cup his face. “Hey, you apologized. It’s okay.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not. And you’re too sweet to forgive me so easily.”

I open my mouth to speak but he shakes his head again, silencing me. His fingers slide into my hair. “But I am going to take it. I am going to snatch the forgiveness you are so generously granting me because I can’t stay away from you anymore.”

I stop breathing at his admission.

“Summer,” his low, thick voice forces me to breathe again. “I won’t tell you why I behaved like that. I can’t, even if I tried. It’s just the way I am.”

I understand. Even if he doesn’t explain it to me. The pain shadowing his face? I have seen it before. In the mirror.

We are two people who are different by lots of elements but connect with just one. Pain.

I won’t ask him questions because I myself wouldn’t want him to poke me with his.

To survive, I had to haul my grief that was spread all around me into the confines of a dark room. A room I created with giant doors inside of me and locked it so I could forget about it.

Even then, it manages to get out of its confinement sometimes. Those days are the hardest to cope.

And I guess, Archer has done the same with his grief. And today was one of those awful days where it reared its ugly head.

That's why it made him so cold.

Watching him struggle tears at my insides.

Tugging his head down, I kiss his forehead. "I get it." At my whispered words, he shudders and takes me in his arms. He hugs me tightly, as if he understood that I really know what he is going through.

I hug him back fiercely. Because like him, I need this badly.

After what feels like forever, he pulls back. His features aren't tensed like they were before.

Overpowered by emotions, I stand on my tiptoes, take his face in my hands and kiss the tip of his nose. Then both his eyelids, silently giving him comfort I know he needs.

When I land back down, his eyes are heated. Reaching out, he grips my chin in a possessive hold. Bending his head, he asks, "May I kiss you, Summer?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Summer

The question slays me. Forget the butterflies, my stomach has turned into a zoo. And my heart does a somersault.

There's something unusually hot about Archer asking for permission to kiss me.

I don't want him to just kiss me. I want him to devour me until there's nothing left behind. I want him to claim my lips and show me how much he desires me.

Heat is engulfing my core at the mere thought of his mouth on me. And there's no greater pleasure than seeing the exact same emotion I am going through flash in his eyes.

My brain fails to formulate any words so I nod shyly, giving him my consent.

His arm snakes around waist, pulling me to him. I thought he would be all over me the moment I expressed my assent. But he takes his sweet time roaming his gaze all over my face.

Then he finally closes the gap between our lips. But stops an inch away, his mouth hovering over mine in a wordless promise of rapture.

His warm, teasing breath against my lips makes my eyes flutter close. Just when I think I'll combust, he takes mercy and presses his lips to mine.

I part my lips and moan at the first caress of his tongue against mine.

My hands fist his shirt. His lips are soft. Just like I remembered from last time.

I never thought I'd get to experience this again. I dreamt about his kisses every night. But my imaginations and dreams fall short in front of the real thing.

Unlike last time, he is taking his time tasting me. His lips molding against mine so perfectly like they were made specifically for me.

My heart is racing. I am vibrating with tension that's coiling inside of me tightly.

I can feel his hard length against me. I want to touch it. I want to roam my hands all over him. I want to savor his body that's pressed against me. But all I can do is hold on to him while he kisses me so sensually.

A thrill shoots through me when he cups my ass and lifts me off the floor. My legs wrap around his waist instantly.

When he boosts me up a little, my damp panties rub against him, sending a bolt of current through my body. I break the kiss on a gasp.

My cheeks burn when he meets my eyes, very aware of how my oversized t-shirt is bunched around my middle. And his palms are splayed on my ass cheeks.

“Where's your bedroom?” He asks hoarsely.

The lust fogging my brain takes some time to clear. Archer doesn't mind my dazedness because he dips his head, kissing my neck. My eyes roll back in my head as my fingers dive in his hair, holding him there.

“Baby,” he sinks his teeth in my skin, lighting every single nerve ending in my body. It's enough to make me focus on the question he asked. The bedroom.

I point in the direction of my bedroom and he begins walking with me still very much wrapped around him.

I drop open-mouthed kisses on his throat, enjoying when his fingers dig in my skin.

He pushes the door and strides inside. I am nipping his earlobe when he slams the door close behind us. I manage to stop the door from slamming at the last second and close it gently.

When I struggle to get down, he frowns but sets me down. I glare at him. “Are you crazy? Goldie is sleeping—” He cuts me off by yanking me and crushing his lips against mine.

It’s seriously worrisome how quickly my annoyance melts away and I find myself kissing him back. A low growl from him proves that he likes that I am so responsive.

In the next moment, he is maneuvering us backward until the back of my knees hit the bed. He breaks the kiss. “Get on the bed.”

“You are so bossy,” I breathe, my chest heaving.

His lips lift up the slightest bit as he grazes my lower lip with his thumb. “You like it.”

“That’s a little presumptuous.”

He says nothing just slides his eyes down to my chest. I look down and find my nipples poking through the thin fabric of the t-shirt.

I open my mouth but he growls. “Baby, my patience is wearing thin. Get on the bed so I can taste you.”

My knees go weak. Literally. I wobble and Archer steadies me. Not only that, he picks me up and lays me on the bed.

He doesn’t join me. He makes me squirm in anticipation as he begins unbuttoning his shirt.

The entire time, he watches me. From head to my pink socks with pink hearts.

I gulp audibly and sit up when he shrugs off his shirt. The rippling muscles of his arms flex when he does that.

My fingers itch to touch his broad muscled chest. God took his time sculpting this man. The chiseled washboard abs make me want to glide my finger over them to trace the sexy ridges.

I sink my teeth in my lower lip when I stare down... down at his lower abdomen and take in the V shape grooves that leads to

the tent in his pants. I flush.

Pure masculinity is radiating off him in waves and turning me on more than I already am. It makes me redder. But it still doesn't stop me from ogling him.

I drink in the view as if I was parched for centuries.

His eyes have become hooded as he impales me with an intense look. "Take off your shirt."

My heart stalls, then starts hammering in my chest. He is indeed bossy. Even in the bedroom. But he is also not wrong in his assessment that I like it when he is bossy with me.

A part of me is ready to obey. But the other part of me... the sane part which is aware that he has a lot of power over me wants to defy him. I don't want to give him instant gratification.

He takes a few unhurried steps over until he is standing next to the bed. Directly in front of me as he unbuckles his belt. "Don't make me do it, baby because I'll rip that thing off you."

My stomach quivers at that word again. Baby. I asked him not to call me that because I like it too much. He knows that. And he is calling me that on purpose, isn't he? He knows it affects me.

With a scowl, I reach for the hem of my t-shirt. I am only doing this because I don't want him to ruin my cute t-shirt. Because I know he will. He is Mr. Honest. He does what he says. I am not stupid to take his words lightly.

I pull the t-shirt up until my stomach is exposed. His eyes darken. When the cloth inches up and reveals a sliver of my breasts, I hear him inhale sharply.

And just to pester him, I turn away from him at the last moment and pull it up and over my head.

I am not wearing a bra, so my full breasts spring free. My breath hitches when the bed dips.

I feel his warm breath tickling my nape before his lips press against it. My eyes fall shut. His hands cover mine that were lying on the bed on either side of me, his fingers intertwining with mine.

He drags his lips to my neck, dropping soft kisses.

I let out a surprise gasp when he bites me. Goosebumps cover my skin.

My breasts feel achy and heavy and neglected. The idea of hiding them from him to work him up backfires because he is content with just kissing and nipping along my neck.

“Archer...” I finally say when minutes pass, the torture becoming unbearable.

“Mmm.” He moves closer and buries his face in the crook of my neck, his bare chest pressing to my bare back.

I try to move my hands from under his so I could guide his touch where I want it most. But he doesn't ease up his grip, making me groan.

“Archer,” I squirm against him.

“Yes, baby,” He kisses the shell of my ear.

“Stop tormenting me,” I mumble.

He leaves my hand to cup my chin. Turning my head to the side, he kisses the corner of my mouth. “I am tormenting you?”

I nod. And he simply kisses the other corner of my mouth. “But we've just begun.” He says softly, shocking me.

Before I know it, he is claiming my lips and kissing me thoroughly. One of his hands leave mine and move to my breast and tweaks my nipple. I cry out against his lips. And he groans. “So sensitive.”

He breaks the kiss and watches me with heated eyes. He rolls my nipple between his thumb and index finger, making me jerk.

“Do you like that?”

I groan and he pinches it. “Tell me, baby. Do you like me playing with your nipple?”

“I-I do,” I blush as I admit, panting and almost begging silently for him to kiss me so I could hide from his intense stare.

I suck in a breath when I am grabbed and moved suddenly so that I am lying on my back and he is hovering over me.

He draws in a sharp breath through his nose when he finally sees my hard, pink nipples. My breasts are big and I know men like it. But watching his reaction is everything.

His pupils dilate when he runs his gaze over my chest. He definitely likes what he sees. I bite my lip as I wait, anticipating his next move.

My nipples get harder under his watch. His eyes flare, noticing it. He grazes one with the back of his knuckles. I gasp at the sensation. "Does this make you wet?"

Not giving me the chance to response, he bends his head and takes the nipple he was teasing into his mouth.

"Ahh," The word is half gasp half moan as he begins to suck, making my toes curl. His mouth is hot and wet, his tongue swirling around the tightened bud.

Releasing it, he moves to the other. I clutch his head to me by sinking my fingers in his hair as he makes me cry out with his mouth.

He sucks and licks and bites down on them. One minute I am moaning, the other I am crying out loud because of his bites. The hurt is so sweet, it's making my pussy clench.

I look down and almost come when I see his cheeks hollowing out as he sucks harder.

I writhe beneath him as he alternates between the two nipples.

My clit is throbbing. The need to come making me delirious.

If I thought him kissing my neck for minutes on end was torture, I was mistaken. Because *this*... this is real torture.

Just when I thought I might pass out from the tension brewing in me, Archer delves his hand inside my soaked panties.

His thick finger thrusts inside me while his hot mouth latches on my nipple.

My back arches as his thumb presses against my clit. "Oh, God," I moan loudly, my eyes screwing shut.

I think I am going to... I come, my heart beating wildly.

He releases my nipple. "Look at me."

With effort, I crack my lids open.

“I want to watch you come again.” He says as he starts fucking me with two fingers. All the while increasing the pressure on my swollen bundle of nerves.

On a choked scream, I tip over the edge and come hard for the second time. I can feel my pulse beating wildly as I ride the wave, my eyes locked on him.

Pure satisfaction is etched on his face while he witnesses me coming undone around his fingers.

I am shivering from the aftershocks when he leans down and takes my mouth, his tongue tangling with mine.

My pussy quivers when he still continues to caress my folds.

“You are so beautiful when you come.” He kisses my forehead.

I could’ve run away and hid if I had the energy. He makes me shy.

“I want to watch you drown in pleasure once again.”

My eyes widen when he slides down and plants himself between my legs. He spreads me wide and pushes my panties to the side. I quiver when I feel his breath on my wet pussy.

Unable to watch him stare at my intimate part like that, I cover my face with my arm.

I jolt when I feel his tongue run up my slit. When he sucks my clit, my body jerks as if struck by lightning.

My feet dig into the mattress and my hips rise. With one hand, he pins me down and sucks hard, bringing me to the edge again.

My hands fly to his head as he eats me out with vigor. He groans loudly like he is enjoying this more than me.

I cry out when he pushes his tongue inside me. My muscles lock as I come hard, clenching around his tongue. His grip tightens on me as I keep coming.

When my breathing steadies, he crawls up and settles over me.

His cock nudges between my legs and I realize that he has taken off his pants sometime when I was out of it.

I've never come thrice in a day. That too simultaneously. Archer definitely knows what he's doing. And even though he has given me two mind-blowing orgasms, I want him inside me. Even on the verge of passing out, I want to feel him stretching me.

He holds up a condom. "I want to take you hard. I might not hold back. Today's been..." He shakes his head. "But I'll understand if you don't want to do this."

He is giving me a choice. It makes my heart melt. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I gaze up at him. "I want you." I lift my head and kiss him softly when I see hesitance on his face. "Fuck me."

That works because, with a clenched jaw, he thrusts inside me, burying himself to the hilt.

His balls slaps against my ass as he sets a punishing rhythm. My breasts jiggle, my entire body rocks with the intensity of his thrusts.

Sweat trickles down his face. His breathing shallow as he powers into me, his eyes not straying from mine.

The look on his face is of pure possession. Like he wants to own me body and soul. The intensity of it makes me breathless. This feels personal. Too personal.

I don't want any emotional ties with anyone and being connected to him like this and having him watch me while he drives inside me is too much to bear.

So I shut down my mind for a moment and just feel.

I squeeze my thighs around his waist, willing him to take me harder. I don't want to ruin this by my overthinking.

Archer somehow realizes that I am having a conflict with my emotions because he ups his game.

"You with me, baby?"

I lick my lips before nodding. "Yeah."

“Good. Because I want your focus on me. Just me and what I am doing to you. Can you do that, baby?”

I nod again winding my arms around his neck, I pull him down so I can kiss him.

There’s no talking after that. He fucks me until I am screaming his name over and over again. He fucks me until my vision turns hazy.

He controls my thoughts that were all over the place and makes me focus on him. On us.

He wedges one arm underneath me and hugs me to his chest as he pistons his hips.

I wrap my arms around his sides and embrace the sensations that take over me as we move together.

Each merciless thrust takes me one step closer to my climax. His pelvis slams against mine over and over, grinding against my clit in the most delicious way.

My throat is hoarse from all the screaming and my heart is hammering in my chest. I am so close. He realizes that and pulls back to watch me come again.

His eyes are molten lava as they roam over my features.

The heat in his eyes intensifies when the third orgasm hits me and my walls contract around him. This one is so potent that tears leak from the corner of my eyes, my breathing ragged.

Archer comes a minute later, his body tightening. The veins in his neck protruding as he throws his head back and groans.

He collapses on top of me, burying his head in the crook of my neck. Then rolls to his side, holding me close to his side as we catch our breaths.

The room is silent except for our ragged breathing.

The sweat glistens on our skin but neither of us seems to care.

The cuddling lasts for only a minute or two because Archer draws back and pulls out of me. I wince a little.

He disappears into the ensuite bathroom while I lie on the bed fully drained.

When he is back, he slides beside me and pulls me in his arms. “Are you all right, Summer?”

Oh, I am Summer now?

My eyebrows bunch together but I am glad that it’s dark in here and he can’t see it.

“Yeah, I am fine.” I pull away and sit up. “I’ll go clean up,” I mumble and climb off the bed, rushing to the bathroom on shaky legs.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Summer

I was terrified. Of myself. Of the deep disappointment I felt that almost killed the afterglow of my orgasm.

I try to block out the voices whispering in my ears and push the door behind me distractedly.

The oddest sensation in my chest lingers. Him calling me by my name was like coming back to reality. A reality where I was just a model his agency is representing who also lives right next door to him.

Maybe I am overthinking again. Because when he returned to bed, he did pull me closer and asked if I was all right. So he wasn't exactly shutting me out. Right? So why am I hung up on him not calling me baby and instead switching back to Summer.

Taking my socks off, I move to step inside the shower. Sighing when the warm water hits me.

Now that he is done, he is free to leave. I don't want him to but I am not going to stop him should he choose to.

If he left now, it would maybe save us both from the awkwardness later.

I mentally scold myself when the pang of emptiness hits at the thought of him leaving.

We know each other physically and know how we sound like when we are in the throes of passion. But it's also true that emotionally we are still strangers.

Then why was I feeling so freaking emotional over this?

It takes all my remaining energy to reach for the shower gel. I should've opted for a bath instead.

"There you are." The gruff voice startles me and I whirl around, the shower gel bottle slipping from my fingers.

It lands at Archer's feet, missing him by an inch.

My eyes immediately latches on to his semi-hard cock and widens when it grows harder under my watch.

He bends down to lift it and enters the stall and closes the glass door behind him. I blink several times, finding it hard to believe that he's here instead of leaving.

I am so distracted by the water sluicing over his skin that I don't notice him stalking forward until he has my back against the tiled wall.

Bracing his hand on the wall beside my head, he leans closer. "What were you doing?"

"Taking a shower?" I answer lamely.

"Why?"

"Because..." We had some seriously hot sex and it made us both sweaty and dirty. And also, I was stalling to face you because I didn't want you to feel that I am the kind of girl that gets clingy after sex.

Of course, my tongue decides to quit working and makes me look like a complete idiot.

With his free hand, he pushes the wet strands that were covering his forehead back. The move was so hot that I want to reach up and ruffle his hair just so he could do it again.

He grips my wrists and starts dragging me out of the shower. I pull my hand away or try to because he doesn't release me. "What are you doing?"

"There's no need to shower."

"But I am dirty!" I groan and he pulls me to him, my nipples rubbing against his chest. "Not dirty enough."

"What?"

“I am not done with you yet.”

“You’re not?” I ask, stupefied.

“Not by a long shot. I’ve wanted you for so long.” He kisses my lips softly.

“But we just had sex.”

He presses another kiss. “You think having you just one time would quench my thirst for you?”

My eyes widen when he picks me up, my legs wrapping around his waist. “It’s fine by me if you want to get fucked here.”

I am shocked by the turn of events but not enough to complain. I wanted him near me. I have him exactly where I want him.

Reaching between us, his fingers move to my aching core which is already wet.

I hold on to him as he parts my folds and circles my swollen clit. “Oh fuck,” I cry out.

His mouth drags along my neck and finds my pulse and kisses it ravenously as he keeps touching me, driving me absolutely crazy. I feel the tension building in me.

My whole body vibrates as I chase after my climax. And before I could finish the race, Archer removes his fingers.

“What the hell—” He thrusts inside me and with a choked gasp I come. I was already stimulated and on his first thrust, I go off like a bomb.

He fucks me through the ripples of my orgasm, cupping my skull when it bangs against the tile.

“You okay?” He asks as he moves inside me. He is so deep, I feel full. So full and stretched.

This feels so much more than sex when he is looking at me like that. With so much intensity, asking questions like that and making sure I don’t get hurt.

I nod, unable to speak.

“Good,” He says picking up his pace, fucking me with powerful strokes.

Another orgasm creeps up on me out of nowhere and I shatter around him with a sob.

He is right there with me, hammering into me ruthlessly. With one last deep thrust, he stills inside me. His face contorts, his eyes falling shut as he comes.

I can feel his cock pulsing as he empties deep inside me.

His forehead drops on my shoulder and I run my fingers in his hair lazily. My eyes are droopy.

I’ve come so many times I have lost count. My body feels used in the best way possible and my limbs feel like jelly.

He sets me on my legs but still holds me close. I smile and tighten my arms around him.

I frown when I feel the wetness between my legs. My stomach sinks. His body turns rigid at the same time.

Pulling back, we both look at each other, horrified as the realization hits us like a ton of bricks.

We forgot the condom.



“I’m sorry, Summer. That was very irresponsible of me.” Archer says as he wraps a towel around his waist.

I tie the belt of my pink robe and face him. “It’s not just your fault. I should’ve reminded you.” I never had unprotected sex. And judging by his strained expression neither did he.

“I never lost control like that before.” He shakes his head.

“Me neither,” I confess. Then, “I’m on the pill. And I am clean.”

“So am I.” He rubs the back of his neck. “It’s just... when it comes to you, I forget all about my rules.”

I lean against the sink, looking down. “And that’s a bad thing,” I say faintly.

“It is.” He agrees and my heart sinks.

Sometimes his honesty hurts. Can't he soften the blow with sweet talking? But then, that's not how he rolls.

Is he regretting what we did? I know we fucked up but I still can't find the anger I should be feeling. Toward him. Toward me.

I let out a startled gasp when he swings me into his arms. “What are you doing?”

“I told you I am not done with you yet.”

My mouth falls open. “Again?”

“Yes.” He says as he carries me out of the bathroom.

“What if I am sore?” I ask as he puts me down on the bed.

“Are you?”

“A little.” I am not lying. He fucked me really hard both times.

Shucking the towel, he climbs on the bed. “Then I'll give you an hour or so to recover.”

He spoons me from behind and covers our bodies with the comforter.

“You are obnoxious when you're bossy.”

“And you are adorable when you lie.” We both freeze at his compliment. How can he say that when he hates being lied to? Does that mean he's bending his rules for me involuntarily?

He is awfully quiet. To lighten up the mood, I speak, “Are you addicted to sex?”

He chuckles and I suppress the urge to spring up and watch his face. His smiles and laughs are rare.

“No. I'm not.”

“Hmm.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because we already had sex twice and you want to do it again.” I hope he doesn't detect the smile in my voice. Hell, even I can hear it.

“I can’t get enough of you.”

My heart flutters, warmth spreading all over my body.

“What are we doing?” I can’t help but ask.

“I don’t know.” He answers sincerely. “But I don’t want to stop whatever this is.”

“Me neither,” I whisper. Then, “Does that make us friends with benefits?”

“Am I your friend?” His tone is amused.

“No. You are my grumpy neighbor and boss. Definitely not a friend.”

He snorts. And it pleases me that I can lighten him up. I crack another silly joke when he tightens his arms around me. “Sleep now, baby. You won’t get any tonight.”

And just like that, he unleashes a swarm of butterflies in my belly.

True to his word, Archer really kept me up all night. After I fell asleep last night, he woke me up by sliding into me from behind.

Then when I was fully awake, he turned me on my stomach and fucked me until I was sobbing for release.

I’m surprised I can walk.

Last night still feels like a dream. I was slightly disappointed when he wasn’t there when I woke up this morning. He did leave a note behind informing me that he had to go to work for a meeting.

But I wasn’t alone in bed. Goldie had taken Archer’s place. His eyes were filled with accusation because he didn’t get to sleep in my bed like he usually does. After all, my bedroom was locked.

He quickly got over it when I suggested going out. Yes, I take my workout seriously now that I am a model. And going on a run with Goldie is fun. He enjoys it a lot. Though this morning, I opted for walking. *Slow walking*. Because I was sore.

After that, I came home, showered, had a smoothie for a post-workout snack, then waited for my dog sitter before leaving for work.

As I don't have a manager yet, I deal with the companies hiring me directly or through a KIM Advertising associate. This time, I contacted them directly.

They emailed the location and other details last night. All I needed was to get a taxi and reach there on time.

I was surprised when I found a car and a driver waiting for me outside my apartment building.

Only Archer knew about my car situation. His message confirmed my assumption.

Felix will be driving you to and from work until your new car arrives.

And although warmth filled my heart at his gesture, I was confused at the last bit of the sentence. A new car?

So I sent him a text asking about the same. He didn't respond until I climbed inside the car and Felix started driving.

Expect the delivery in two days.

But I have a car. I texted back.

He was getting on my nerves by taking forever to reply. I remember jerking up when my phone pinged.

Not anymore. But you will in two days as I mentioned in my text earlier.

When I sent him a paragraph-long message demanding him to explain himself, he had the audacity to tell me, *I'm busy. We'll discuss this tonight.*

Heat flooded my cheeks as I read his message. It meant that he would see me tonight. As in after work hours.

I was excited and pissed and confused. So I decided not to think about Archer and our text conversation and focus on work.

The next few hours flew by. The shoot went well. When I walked out of the studio, I found Felix waiting for me already.

I was summoned by the dark lord. I also received an email from Archer's assistant, Chad informing that I had to attend this impromptu meeting.

So instead of heading home, I was here, in his lair.

Only last night, I all but ran down this very hallway with tears streaming down my face. The need to escape Archer's contemptuous eyes was the only thing that helped quicken my pace. Or else I would've stumbled and fallen to my knees with how shaky my legs were.

And now I am walking this same passage with a different attitude. Albeit being pissed at him, I can't help the grin that's splitting my face in two. Or the bounce in my step.

I am wearing a cute full-sleeve red satin corset top with a square neckline and a pair of white flare pants. My red beret matches my top, lipstick, sunglasses, and Mary Jane pumps.

Though the pumps are mismatched. My left heel is white and the right one is red. I love it.

I even chose a red flap bag to go with my look.

No one could make out by looking at me that I am functioning on only a couple hours of sleep. I am that excited. And it has nothing to do with my cute little outfit.

Everyone knows how much I love colors. I get giddy every time I get to dress in them. But this morning is different. Because it's not about the colors this time. It's about the man who didn't let me sleep last night.

He was unsatiable. Memories of our time together flood me.

Heat rushes up my neck. I stop when I find myself hiding my smile with a hand like a teenager. If someone were to watch me, they'd think I've lost my freaking mind. Because only a loon would grin to herself. A lovesick loon.

Wait, no.

That's so not the case with me. Right?

I watch my reflection in the glass across me. I am dressed in red. Red is the color of love or revenge. After he apologized last night, I forgave him. That means revenge is out of the question.

That leaves only one possible conclusion.

Love.

I gasp. Will he think I chose the color red on purpose?

He will think I am a clingy woman who is dropping hints after sleeping with him once! Well, it wasn't one time. I don't even remember how many times Archer fucked me.

Was it seven? Eight? Anyway, that's not my concern! It all happened in one night. He must think I fell in love with him in just one night!

"Nope," I say aloud. "I need to get the hell out of here before someone spots me. I have to change out of this color. Stat!"

If I hurry, I can make it on time for the meeting. Hopefully.

Taking off my sunglasses, I thrust it into my purse not so gently and spin on my heels and run head first into a solid chest.

"Sorry," I mumble, rearranging my beret which slid off my head and blinded me for a second. Then sidestep the person.

A big hand grabs my elbow, halting me with little effort. See? I should have eaten something. That smoothie has already made me weak! I make a mental note of stopping at KFC on my way home.

"Meeting room is that way."

My head snaps up at that all too familiar voice. Archer's gaze travels over my face then slowly down my body.

"You weren't supposed to see me like this," I mutter under my breath, grimacing.

"What was that?" he asks, pushing his hands in his pockets.

"I said I want KFC!" I wince internally. That's not technically a lie.

"You didn't have lunch?" He frowns.

I shake my head and push my lower lip out. Again, not a lie. I did come here directly after my shoot. So I didn't get to eat anything. "I will be super quick. Promise."

But he's already seen your *love* outfit. Well, now that I said I want KFC, I have to stick to it.

"Let's get you something better than that." He presses a hand to my lower back, sending a bolt of shiver down my spine.

He begins ushering me toward the elevator.

"Where are we going?" I ask, trying and failing to stop him.

"You're hungry, aren't you?"

Well, I am always hungry. "Yes..."

"So I am going to feed you."

"But why?"

"Because you are hungry." He looks at me as if I am dense.

"I meant why are *you* coming with me? I mean you are a busy man..." And you're making my heart race.

"I can make time for you."

The corners of my mouth tug up, my finger twirling my long strand as I peer up at him. "You'd do that?"

"Yeah."

I duck my head down, one foot locked behind the other, still smiling. Then I stop the movements, realizing he is watching me act weird around him. I clear my throat. "Thanks, but I guess we don't have enough time to go out for lunch."

He just simply resumes whisking me away. "Did you not hear me? Besides..." I lean closer. "That would feel like a date. And we're not dating!"

He glances down at me with impatience. "Noted. Let's go."

"Archer!"

"Summer."

"I told you I am not going on a lunch date with you!" I whisper shout.

"And I said I'm going to feed you." He holds up a finger when I open my mouth. "Before you start throwing tantrums, I am not taking you out."

“O-kay. Then where are we going?”

“To the seventh floor. We have excellent cuisine to choose from. And it’s healthier than KFC.”

I dig my heels in, forcing him to stop as well. “Well, what if I’m in the mood for greasy non-healthy food?”

“You will change your mind after trying out the food here.”

“What if I still want KFC?”

He sighs. “Then I’ll get you KFC.”

I grin up at him. “Really?”

“Really.” Amusement glints in his eyes when he catches my stupid grin.

A clearing of the throat startles us. I totally missed his assistant, Chad standing beside him. And Archer did too because he seems just as surprised.

“The meeting is about to start, Archer.”

“Send an email that the meeting is delayed for an hour.”

“An hour?” I squeak. Then shake my head frantically. “I can eat after the meeting.”

He ignores me and glances at Chad. “Do it.”

Chad nods as he types on his iPad. “On it.”

“B-but...” My voice trails as I am hauled from the hallway to the elevator.

Chapter Thirty

Summer

I went from planning to disappear before Archer could see me to being the center of his focus.

It was getting more and more difficult not to reach him and wind my arms around his neck and kiss him. It was a weird urge, one I never had for any man before.

At the same time, I wanted to hide away from his probing eyes. He was just sitting across from me, watching, occasionally sipping his espresso.

The soreness between my legs intensifies, making me aware of the fact that he is the one who caused it.

The food was a distraction I happily indulged in.

Though we talked—sort of—that we were going to explore whatever was between us, I was ninety-nine percent certain he would go back to ignoring me in public. But he shocked me today.

Having him all to myself in broad daylight would take some getting used to.

“Why are you avoiding my eyes?”

I choke on the morsel I swallowed, launching into a fit of coughing.

Archer is out of his seat in a flash, dragging his chair beside mine. He strokes my back with one hand and brings a glass of

water to my lips with the other.

I take a tentative sip. So much for keeping my distance from him.

“Are you okay?” He keeps stroking my back.

Well, I just had a flash of what your fingers feel like on my bare skin. You think I can be okay?

“Fine,” I mumble as I take another sip.

“You didn’t like the cobb salad.” He states, resting the glass back on the table.

“N-no. It’s not that.”

He gets to his feet and offers me his hand.

I stare at it then look up at him.

“We are going to KFC.” He finally states when I don’t move.

My eyes go big. I shake my head. “What? No. Seriously, I am really enjoying this.” I grab my fork and stuff my face. Chewing with enthusiasm, I grin. “See,” I speak with a mouthful. It really is delicious.

I just don’t want him to feel weird around me. I am trying to seem nonchalant.

He studies me for a moment then sits down beside me. When I am almost finished, he speaks again.

From the corner of my eye, I see him rubbing his lower lip in contemplation. “Is this about last night?”

“No!” I blurt out then squeeze my eyes shut.

He turns his body toward me more, putting one elbow on the table. “I know you’re lying.” Disappointment rings in his voice.

“I mean it’s not completely about last night.” I turn to him.

He grips my chin gently. “What is it, Summer?”

I push his hand away subtly. “People are looking.”

“And?”

“And they’d think something is going on between us, you know.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No. But I’m sure you won’t like people talking about us.”

“My employees know better than that. You don’t have to worry about them.”

“All right.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“Why are you acting so strange?” He places a hand on my thigh. His touch burns me, making me squirm.

“Because I want to kiss you so bad it hurts.” I slap a hand on my mouth. I did not just say that.

My stomach flutters when his eyes darken. When he goes to speak, I cut him off. “Please don’t say anything.” I clasp my palms in a praying gesture.

“You asked why I am acting strange? This is it. Your closeness is driving me mad. I dolled up for you but then realized I don’t want to come across as a clingy girl who’s trying too hard to get your attention, so I wanted to go home to change but you caught me and all but dragged me here and now I can’t stop talking!”

My chest is rising and falling fast when I finish. His lips turn up at the corners and my face heats up. “You are laughing at me!”

That makes him chuckle. And everything in me stops. Then my heart jumps. A suffocating emotion grabs me in a chokehold as I stare at him. A feeling I can’t quite name stirs in me the longer I watch him.

I didn’t know how much I craved his smiles until now. They’re so rare. One that reaches his eyes, like right now. He looks like a man much younger than his age.

Then all of a sudden, the smile is gone. A look I can’t decipher crosses his face.

“I’ll get a chocolate milkshake for you.” He stands.

“How do you know I love chocolate milkshakes?”

He doesn't reply, just looks at me for a few seconds, then his hand comes down on the crown of my head. "Be good." He turns and walks away, leaving me baffled.

Why did he practically run from me when he caught himself smiling? And did he just pet me like those Korean dramas' male leads do?

I don't get my answers because when he's back with my shake, I sense a wall between us carefully erected.



Archer excused himself to attend a phone call and asked me to wait in the meeting room with others.

Ignoring the tightness in my chest at his aloof behavior, I enter the meeting room with a broad smile. "Hey, guys!"

I am met with tense silence. I look around the room. The creative team is here but none of them greets me. "Is everything okay?"

Brielle and Mia are beside me in an instant, squeezing me between them. "You are so strong, Summer."

"I am?" I ask, confused.

They nod. Nina comes forward. "You showing up today proves your strength."

"It does?"

Chris. "The way Archer humiliated you last night." He shakes his head. "I would've left the country. And even changed my name."

Jason puts his hand on Chris's shoulder. "We have to motivate her. You reminding her of last night is not helping, dude."

"But it's true. She should've taken a day off. It's too soon to face the man who insulted you in front of everyone."

"I am standing right here, guys," I grumble.

Hannah walks to me, ignoring the four people who are whispering encouraging words to me.

Clasping my upper arm gently, she asks, "How are you?"

I cover her hand with mine. “I am *fine*.”

“I know you might hate Archer after what happened last night. And rightfully so. But believe me, Summer. He is not like that. He is not a bad person.”

I give her a soft smile. “I know. I believe you.”

“I understand but—” she frowns. “Wait, you do?”

“Yes.”

I always knew deep down that he is not a bad person. He is guarded but a bad person he never was.

“You have a kind soul, Summer.” She smiles at me softly. She cares for Archer deeply. Just like I do for Raleigh. They share a bond similar to ours.

And I like that even after seeing him at his worst, Hannah hasn’t given up on him. She still believes there’s good in him which is sometimes overshadowed by the dark side.

“You’re giving me too much credit.” I look around. “You all are. I was devastated last night. And I might’ve taken a day off to wallow if it weren’t for Archer.”

Everyone looks stunned. “We are neighbors as you all know. Well, last night he came over to my place to apologize.”

“He did what?” Brielle shrieks.

“He apologized. Earnestly. As soon as he realized his mistake, he spent no time and came to me immediately and asked for my forgiveness. And in my eyes that counts.”

“I am so glad that he did.” Mia counters.

“Me too,” Nina says.

I nod. “Apologizing takes courage. It takes guts to admit that you are wrong. He could’ve let his pride be bigger than everything else. But he chose to do the right thing. He was having a hard day. We all know that. And though we are unaware of his reasons, I am happy that he kept it aside to solve our conflict. That move makes *him* strong.”

“But forgiving someone makes you the stronger one.” We all turn to Raleigh who was perched on a table at the corner all this

time. Ah, my best friend is still pissed.

He is very protective of me. And it shows by the way his body is tensed. How am I going to convince him?

Archer and I are more than okay now. But how am I going to make *him* believe that fact?

Jumping down, he strides toward me. "I called you twenty times last night, Summer."

I snort. "Okay, now you're exaggerating. You only called seventeen times."

"It's not funny." He snaps.

Hannah comes to his side and rubs his arm. "Deep breaths." She encourages him. Hannah is the best thing that ever happened to him.

She not only understands him but also accepts my bond with her fiancé. I am sure many wouldn't tolerate this. But she knows he loves me more than he would his real sister.

"I'll have to agree with Raleigh on this, Summer." Hannah looks at me. "Even I tried to reach you and you never returned the calls. We were worried."

"I know. I'm sorry I just didn't feel like talking to anyone." I bow my head. It's a half lie. I was emotionally drained. But that changed when Archer came over.

I am certainly not going to tell them that I was busy getting fucked by their boss.

"Don't ignore my calls again." He pokes my shoulder a little too hard. I gasp then hit his bicep.

He pulls my hair strand and I yelp. "You ass!" I run after him and he dodges me and hides behind Hannah.

"Sometimes I think I am dealing with two kids, I swear!" Hannah throws her hands up, making us laugh.

Sobering up, I glance at Raleigh. "Don't hold a grudge against Archer."

He sighs. "I won't. I worry about him, though. He is too comfortable being alone that he gets upset if someone tries to

disrupt the lifestyle he has created.”

“I get it. But please don’t force him into changing overnight. I was wrong. I shouldn’t have pranked him like that. He wasn’t ready. Keep in mind, that we are dealing with the *lifestyle* he chose for himself and has been comfortable in for years. It won’t miraculously change. It takes time. So please let it go. It will break my heart if you guys start resenting him because of me. Remember he is a good man. He didn’t mean—”

I stop when all of them look at me funny. Raleigh and Hannah gawk at me then slowly look at each other. Then back to me.

“No way.” Raleigh shakes his head.

“Way.” Brielle grins.

Hannah smirks. Jason and Chris share a knowing smile.

Mia frowns. “Can anyone tell me what’s going on?”

“Same,” I remark.

“Summer likes Archer!” Brielle laughs.

“What?” I shout at the same time, Mia says, “We all do, so what?” and everyone looks at her with a “seriously?” face.

“I’ve never seen you talk so passionately about anyone,” Raleigh says. Then, “Well, except Goldie.”

“You are delusional,” I growl.

“Am I?” He smirks. And I remember having the exact same conversation with him when he was confused about his feelings for Hannah.

“Yes. Because you misinterpreted my respect for him for liking. I appreciate the fact that he made an effort to make things okay between us, that’s all.”

“Sure.” Hannah grins.

“You too? Seriously?”

She shrugs. “Having a crush on someone is perfectly normal.”

My face burns. “I do *not* have a crush on him!”

It's the dress, right? I am not going to wear red ever again! Okay... that was a little extreme. Maybe I will avoid the color for a week.

"Why are you getting so worked up then?" Raleigh tilts his head.

"Well, because you all have lost your minds! I don't have a crush on him. I don't even see him like that." When they still appear smug as hell, I bluff, "I actually prefer Freddie over Archer."

"Is that so?"

I spin around, my mouth opening in a shocked gasp. Archer.

His eyebrow rises as he waits for my response. Despite myself, I can't tear my gaze from him.

He has shed his jacket. The tie is loosened to half-mast. The sleeves of his white shirt are rolled up to his elbows. One of his hands is casually tucked into his pocket.

My body hums with awareness.

He closes the gap between us and leans down. "For your sake, I am hoping that was a lie, baby." My mouth goes dry as he steps back and asks everyone to settle down.

Archer stands taller while we are seated. "First and foremost, let's clear the air, shall we?"

Everyone speaks at once.

"No need!"

"Everything is cool, boss."

"What for?"

There's a hint of a smile on his lips. "I am sorry."

Another round of protests echoes in the air and Archer silences them with a palm. "I shouldn't have hurt your feelings like that."

Hannah shakes her head. "We understand, Archer. And besides, Summer told us that you personally apologized to her."

His gaze drifts to me. His distant demeanor has vanished. Now he is looking at me with something close to tenderness. The kind that tells me I am going to get hurt in the end. My stomach aches with the knowledge.

“She did?” He asks her all the while looking at me.

“Yes. And she gave a little speech on how we shouldn’t give you grief for your ill behavior.”

“Did it work?” He finally moves his eyes from me and stares at Raleigh.

He rolls his eyes. “Of course, it worked. It’s not every day our boss apologizes to us. I wanted to make you sweat some more.”

I smile when Archer walks to him and extends a hand. Raleigh stands, grabs it and they both share a quick hug which leads to a group hug when everyone abandons their seats and join them.

I stay put because it would be odd if I go over there and expect them to include me. So I just sit there and smile lovingly at the best team and their mentor having a sweet moment.

“All right. I have good news.” Archer announces after a few minutes.

“Are we getting a raise?” Brielle jokes and the room breaks into laughter. Archer looks amused too.

“Not really as I just gave y’all a raise not two months ago.” He says good-naturedly.

“Ignore her, boss,” Chris says and Jason nods eagerly. “Please continue.”

“Remember the consumer goods company I asked you to pitch?” He asks his star employees.

They nod. “But we are yet to hear from them,” Hannah says.

When Archer leans against the wall and crosses his arms over his chest, Hannah’s eyes widen. “Did we land the deal?”

He merely gives us the small smile, his expression proud. “We did.”

“Yes.” Raleigh does a fist pump.

The team gets excited, throwing ideas around already.

“I’m not finished yet,” Archer says, silencing the room again. He pushes off the wall and comes straight to me. “I’ve decided that Summer will be the face of our campaign.”

Loud bangs, whistles, and claps fill the air, making me laugh. I stare at him inquisitively through the excitement.

“Why?” I mouth at him.

“Why not?” He whispers.

We stare at each other for a second or two before Hannah interrupts. “You have to give me credit for finding her.”

“You are my star employee for a reason.” He says, making her grin.

“Let’s make this campaign a big success,” Raleigh calls out by extending an arm forward palm down. Everyone gathers in a circle. One by one everyone stacks their palm on the other.

I stare at them, smiling. I startle when Archer’s hand closes on my wrist. With a tilt of his chin, he motions me to join in. My smile widens. I place my hand atop theirs. And at the end, Archer puts his on mine.

“Teamwork makes the dream work,” Raleigh shouts, and we cheer on as we throw our arms in the air.

Chapter Thirty-One

Summer

My new car arrived two days later as Archer mentioned. I was about to pass right by it if it weren't for Felix standing beside it.

I was so pissed at myself. Because since the past two days—nights to be specific—Archer had been coming over to my place and I failed to ask him about the “new” car.

During the day, I was busy with shoots so I couldn't make time to discuss it with him. And although we met during the nights, they were spent wordlessly.

The late hours were filled with endless orgasms which resulted in me passing out.

Archer never stayed the night. Because sometime during the second night of our hookup, I woke up and reached for him. Only to find the other side of the bed empty.

So it slipped my mind to talk to him about the car. Then I realized, that Archer purposely did this.

Each night, he pounced on me the minute I opened the door. Earlier, I thought it was because he was jealous. After all, he heard me saying I prefer Freddie over him.

Archer has a high sex drive. I knew this since our first night together. But the past two days, he didn't go easy on me.

I thought he was punishing me in the best way.

That was not the case. Now I know why.

He didn't spare me a single second to think. He was distracting me this whole time with hot sex and I let him like a dumb cow.

I was overwhelmed by the sight of the Mercedes Maybach S.

The rubellite red car was stylish, intimidatingly luxurious and so out of my budget, that I feared I had to sell my organs on the dark web to pay for it.

I was going to buy a car, true. But I would choose a cheaper one that wouldn't cost me my kidneys.

What boggles me is, that I never told him that I was thinking of getting a new car.

And even if I did, how can he buy me a car? That too an expensive one.

This was wrong on so many levels. I was fuming.

When Felix asked if I'd like to test-drive it, I declined. That wasn't my car to test-drive it. No matter how beautiful the car was. I wasn't accepting it.

I had two shoots today. One was for a sunscreen product and the other was for the new campaign of KIM Advertising which was scheduled at noon.

But I asked Felix to take me to KIM Advertising now because I wanted to have a conversation with Archer before heading to Will Rogers State beach for my sunscreen shoot.

This couldn't wait. And besides, I have a habit to leave for shoots an hour prior. Which meant I had time to stop by the agency and confront him.

Begrudgingly, I tried to forget about Archer and focused on the interior of the car.

The beige leather business class-like reclining seats in the back were stunning. It felt like I was in a private jet instead of a car. Not that I was ever in a private jet but I have seen plenty in TV series and movies.

I'm surprised when he pulls up in front of the building. The ride was so smooth. It was over way too fast. I shake my head.

Focus, Summer. Don't forget why you are here.

Before Felix could open the door for me, I was out and already heading inside.

Striding past my large portrait on the wall, I get on the elevator. The entire time, I rehearse the points I am going to discuss with him.

No. I won't discuss it. Just like he didn't think of discussing it with me before buying me a freaking Mercedes.

On a whim, I google the price of the model of the car. Horrified, I screech, making the other two suits in the elevator jump.

I mutter an apology as I slip the phone inside the pocket of my plaid overall dress.

Once out, I roll the sleeves of my high-neck white t-shirt. My footsteps echo in the long hallway as I stride toward his office.

Chad looks up as I approach his desk.

"Hey, Summer." Chad smiles at me. "You're early."

"Hey. Yeah, I know. I'm here to see Archer."

"Oh? Do you have an appointment?"

"Um, no. But I'll be done real quick. I only need a couple minutes to talk to him."

I know Archer is a busy man. He is always in meetings. Either here or outdoors. Every minute of his time is planned and scheduled.

Only Hannah and Raleigh are allowed to see him without any appointments. I should've called before dropping by unannounced.

"I understand, but he is preparing for his next meeting. If you'd like, you can leave a message for him and I'll pass it to him."

"Oh, okay."

"So you want to leave a message for him?"

I was going to say no but his landline rings, interrupting us. He answers it and listens for a few seconds before hanging up.

“You can go in. Archer is expecting you.”

“What?” I ask, bemused. How does he know I am here? Oh. Felix. Right. He must’ve informed Archer that he drove me here.

“Yes. You can go in.” He motions to the door.

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself and open the door.

Archer is sitting behind his desk, typing something on his laptop. His jacket draped over the back of his chair. The navy silk tie is loose around his neck. The sleeves rolled up like usual. I sigh. It’s my favorite look.

He looks up when I walk toward him, my black and white mismatched heeled boots clicking on the floor.

Shutting down the lid of his laptop, he rises and rounds the desk. I stop dead in my tracks when he surveys my body with that look. The look that says he is picturing me naked and writhing beneath him.

He stirs up so many emotions in me. He fires up my nerve endings, making it impossible to breathe by just one look. Especially when we are alone.

Ignoring the dull throbbing between my legs, I focus on my mission.

“Come here.”

I shake my head. “I’m good.”

When he takes a step toward me, I raise my palms. “Stop where you are.”

“You are upset.”

“What a great discovery,” I say sardonically.

“Drop that attitude.” Warning rings in his voice as he leans against the front of his desk. Crossing his arms, he regards me.

I am so stunned that I remain mute for a solid minute. He takes my silence for compliance because he fires off next question. “Tell me what’s bothering you?”

“You!” Marching to him, I poke my index finger into his chest. “You are bothering me.”

In a blink, his hands are on my hips, tugging me to his body. He takes advantage of my shock by leaning down to drop a hard kiss on my parted lips.

My eyes fall shut and I cling on to his shoulders. I kiss him back. His arm slides up my waist and pulls me closer while his other hand moves up to cup my jaw.

Adrenaline and desire run in my veins. He doesn't break the kiss as he walks me backward until the backs of my legs hit the leather couch.

Finally, he breaks the kiss and before I could gather my wits to yell at him, he sits on the couch and pulls my arm, I fall on his lap. He arranges me so that I am straddling him.

I struggle again and he subdues me with another brutal kiss. My body comes to life when I feel his hardness against my core.

My hands sink into his hair as I grind on his length. A moan escapes me when he grips my ass and thrusts up.

Just when the fun began, he slows the movement.

“What did I do?” He asks after breaking the kiss.

“What?” I snap. I was so close. He is so frustrating!

“What did I do to make you upset?” He brushes hair behind my ear.

“The list is long.” I push his chest so I could get off him. He doesn't budge.

“I have time.”

“You do?” I arch a brow.

“Yes.” He turns his head and presses his nose in my hair, inhaling.

“What about your meeting?” My tone is breathy. Why does he affect me so much?

“Let me worry about that.” He says, making my heart flutter. “Now tell me. What's wrong?”

“You bought a car and registered it under my name.”

“Did you like it?” He moves down and kisses my throat, distracting me. I pull back.

“I can’t keep it.”

His brows pull together. “We can exchange the model if you don’t like it.”

“It’s not about the model, Archer and you know it. The car is beautiful.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The fact that *you* bought it.”

“I am still missing your point here.”

I push off him and he lets me. Taking a few steps back. I hug my middle and ask the question I have been dreading to voice. “Did you buy it because you are sleeping with me?”

He is on his feet in an instant, his eyes narrowing. “What did you say?”

One glance at his face told me not to speak further. A chill runs down my spine. He strides to me and grabs my chin. Tipping my head back, he pins me with a hard stare. “How dare you degrade yourself by asking that question?”

“I—”

“I am not going to tolerate you disrespecting what we have, understand me?”

“We are not in a relationship, Archer.”

“Of course we are.” He says and my heart thuds in my chest, my breathing quickens. Then, “We are in a mutually beneficial relationship where we get what we want without any complications.”

My face falls. But I try to school my features. Brushing his hand off my face, I say, “I know. But that doesn’t entitle you to buy me expensive gifts.”

“Why not?”

“Do you often gift Mercedes to your employees?”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Exactly. Of course I would think the worst.”

He sighs. “But you need a car.”

“I do. But not a luxurious one. I can’t afford it. I am still new in the modeling career. I am saving money for now. I don’t want to spend it on unnecessary things.”

“That car is a safe choice, not to mention it’s comfortable for long-distance travelling. You are a model. I chose this one specifically for you because your profession involves driving a lot as the locations for the outdoor shoots are often far.”

“I know but I am not driving that car if I am not paying for it.”

He tries to convince me but I hold a palm up. “I am an independent girl, Archer. I’ve been looking after myself since I was a kid. I am pretty sure I can survive a few more days until I can buy a car that’s under my budget.”

He studies me for a moment. “All right.”

I smile, grateful that he understood where I was coming from.

“How about this. You keep that car and pay me monthly installments.”

“As I said, I can’t afford it.”

“The amount would be small which won’t put a dent on your income.”

“How small?”

“One thousand dollars a month.”

I do the math quickly and gasp. “It would take approximately 16 years for me to pay off the amount!”

“You could start paying more if your income doubles in future which it would given on your increasing popularity.”

Can I do this? Can I dream of driving a luxurious car? I never thought I could ever get to own a car like that in my life.

Then I frown. “The interest would be too high.”

“I am not going to charge you any interest.”

“But—”

“Enough is enough, Summer. KIM Advertising isn’t the only source of my income. I have numerous investments in every sector you could imagine. Stocks, hedge funds, real estate.” He takes a breath, Then, “I am not bragging. The reason I’m telling you this is to make you understand that I have immense wealth. I am only allowing you to pay me back because I see that you’re uncomfortable with it. I don’t need your money but I’ll accept it if it ends your inner struggle. But I sure as fuck am not going to charge you any interest. And you are going to agree.”

He cups my face. “I am bending for you, baby. Can’t you do the same for me?”

How could I refuse him anything if he expressed how much my safety affects him?

“All right, Mr. Kim. You’ve got a deal.” I go on my tiptoes and kiss his lips.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Archer

With hands pushed in the pockets of my trousers, I watch her.

Her pale skin glows in a blue dress that hugs her body. The front section of her hair is secured with a roller.

Her mismatched eyes glimmer under the vanity mirror lights. I feel an unfamiliar emotion seeping in my chest.

A stylist hovers over Summer as she applies finishing touches to her makeup.

Her lips moves as she says something to the stylist and the small group of females surrounding her. They burst into laughter. Summer's lips curl into a smirk as she sees them laughing.

She cracked one of her silly jokes, didn't she?

People around Summer always have a smile on their faces. That's the way she is.

A ray of sunshine who wants to spread her warmth everywhere. But sometimes I can't help but see her as an illusion. A mere reflection of light from a mirror instead of sunshine.

It feels like under all her quirkiness and beautiful smiles lies a little flower who is in need of the sunlight herself.

It caught me off guard for a second when Felix told me that Summer was on her way to see me.

He also mentioned her reluctance when he offered her the car keys for a test drive.

I had my doubts about her protesting about the car. But I wasn't aware just how much it affected her.

The flames in her luminescent eyes this morning told me more than her lips could.

I recalled the day when we met in that interview where she lied to get the job. I remembered with crystal clarity how she refused the money I offered.

That day was the first time I noticed it. Her pretty eyes had flared. Like the idea of taking money from someone repulsed her.

Then it happened again when she lost her job because of me and I made a suggestion of supporting her financially. Because I was guilty and wanted to help her.

But she concluded that I saw her as a charity case when it was certainly not the case.

And now the car thing.

My little liar is scared. She is afraid of depending on someone for anything. She doesn't like to ask for support even when she is suffering.

Why is that?

I think her fear of dependency doesn't end on financial support. She hates trusting someone emotionally as well.

The way she was reluctant in admitting her attraction to me told me plenty. I saw desperation in her eyes when she urged me to agree that we are still enemies. That facing our feelings for each other doesn't mean anything.

And although her demand matched my dilemma, it still felt like a dagger stabbing into my chest.

So when I realized she wasn't going to accept the car, I came up with a tactic she couldn't refuse.

I told her that she can pay me one grand every month. She wasn't far off when she said it would take her sixteen years to pay me back.

I was happy that despite her suspicion, she didn't argue much after that.

She knows I am a man of my word. I never lie.

If I said I will deduct money from her income, I will. Only difference is, I am going to use that money into making investments in her name.

I never mentioned what I would do with that money. And she didn't bother asking. And besides once the money starts coming in, it would be mine to do with as I please.

If I want to buy stocks with that money in her name, then I will.

Summer stands from her chair. The roller is out of her hair, the long tresses falling over her shoulders in a wave and reaching down to her ass.

Brunette Rapunzel. It defines her well.

A beautiful young woman who is locked in a tower. The only difference is, she is trapped in there willingly. She doesn't want to escape it.

When Summer throws her head back in laughter. My chest expands with a breath.

In a distant corner of my mind, a voice echoes, reminding me that I don't deserve any of this. That I don't deserve to bask in her beauty. Nor do I deserve to hear her angelic laugh.

But for the first time in years, I tune out.

I become selfish for a moment and watch her. I ignore the blade of guilt slashing my guts.

As if she could sense my eyes on her, she lifts her soulful eyes and meets mine. She holds my gaze, a blush creeping up her cheeks.

"She is beautiful." A female voice says softly.

"Yes." I swallow thickly, my raspy voice isn't quite sounding like mine. Then I blink out of my haze and turn my head.

Hannah smiles at me knowingly. "You've guys came a long way."

I avert my eyes and pretend to scan the surroundings. “What do you mean?”

“When I first saw Summer in Hawaii, she was in your face, screaming.” She chuckles. “Her face was red while you looked like you were on the verge of having an aneurysm. And now look at you... can’t take your eyes off her even for a second.”

I realize too late that while looking around, my eyes ended up on Summer again. Clearing my throat, I pull out my phone to appear nonchalant.

“Sometimes I love it that you are Mr. Honest.” She smirks. “You just confirmed it by not denying. Because denying is lying.”

I keep my mouth shut. That’s when Raleigh decides to stroll over. He wraps an arm around Hannah’s neck and pull her against his side. Kissing her temple, he asks, “What did I miss?”

“I saw Archer checking her out.” She motions toward Summer who’s now taking her position beside other female models.

She gives them an easy smile and starts chatting with them. Some of the models don’t reciprocate her friendliness and treat her coolly.

But Summer doesn’t notice it. She is too damn bright to perceive the jealousy oozing off the women around her.

“He’s doing it again.” At Hannah’s astonished tone, I snap my head toward them.

Raleigh watches me with a frown. “Dude. You too?”

I stiffen at the question. “What do you mean?”

Is there someone else who’s after my Summer? I hope it’s not Freddie. I might not hesitate to ruin him if need be. She is *mine*.

“First, Summer was defending you like she was your devotee and now I see you looking at her like that. What’s going on, man?”

He just put me on the spot with that question. Hannah’s gray eyes gleam because she knows I won’t lie.

I can almost hear the seconds ticking in my ears as they wait for my answer.

Two pairs of eyes are examining me with interest. These two are the closest to me. They can sense if there's even a simple change in my demeanor.

I shouldn't have come here. I don't have to be here. These things are operated by the duo who is currently probing me with their gazes.

I never come to the studio to watch the shoots. Numerous photoshoots take place in this studio on a daily basis. I don't have the time nor do I have the patience to watch the whole process.

My role is to go through the end results of the said shoots.

So obviously, I raised eyebrows by coming here.

I specifically cancelled two meetings just so I could watch her. I am so addicted to her. If I can't touch her, I want to see her.

Work is everything to me. My number one priority. So my actions are concerning. And even if I am aware of that, I am not doing anything to rectify it.

And these two have noticed this.

“RJ! Hannah! We need you here.” Brielle calls out, saving me from an unwanted and uncomfortable conversation.

Hannah and Raleigh being the passionate workaholics, immediately forget all about their interrogation and leave me alone.

An intern carries a chair for me to sit. As soon as I sit down, the other gets me a cup of coffee.

Leaning back in the seat, I sip the bitter coffee and watch my sweet little liar.



I ask one of the interns to grab another chair as the photographer takes a break.

Summer looks at me and grins. She is pleased to see that I am still here. A corner of my mouth lifts up.

She takes an excited step in my direction but is stopped by Mason. She glances back at me hesitantly and I wave at her, telling her silently that I'll be here.

The smile she shoots me is breathtaking.

Then hesitantly she takes her eyes off me and turns to Mason. They lean over the monitor, probably to check the pictures.

I am typing out an email on my phone when a shadow falls over me. I look up.

One of the female models wearing a similar dress like Summer's is smiling down at me. "Is this seat taken?"

"Yes."

"You're funny." She laughs and settles into the chair, scooting it closer to mine. "I'm Molly by the way."

I frown internally. I wasn't joking. That seat was reserved for Summer and now she has acquired it. I don't like it but I remain silent.

"Archer Kim."

"I know who you are. I am a huge fan."

I lift a brow.

"The moment I first saw the Forbes under 30 magazine cover featuring you, I knew I had to see you. I worked hard to become a model and here I am!" She smiles.

"I hope that you love what you do and are not doing this merely because of me."

"Oh, no. I love my job. It pays well and I am quite popular on social media."

"Good to know."

"Can I get a picture with you?"

"Would you share it on your social media?"

"Duh. Of course."

"Then I'll have to decline."

“Why?”

Because my lawyers are against it. They don't want unnecessary media attention that I would surely get once I am pictured with a woman.

Ever since I was featured in the list of the most eligible bachelors in the world, I avoid getting photographed with women. Because the paparazzi would be all in my business, trying to dig deeper about the woman I was with.

I certainly don't want the headache.

“Personal reasons.” I offer gently.

She pouts. “All right. But can I have your number?”

“You have the agency's contact information, no?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then you don't need my number.” I rise to my feet. She follows suit.

“Wait,” She grabs my forearm, rubbing her thumb across my skin in a seductive way. She steps closer and peers at me through her lashes, a flirtatious smile teasing her lips. “I wanted your number so we could meet up, you know. To hangout or something like that.”

Molly is a beautiful young woman with olive skin and hazel eyes. She is also confident and direct. But she is not the one who is on my mind 24/7.

She doesn't make my cock hard. She certainly doesn't drive me crazy by her scent.

Because Molly is not my Summer.

“I got the hint, Molly but I'm not interested.” I grab her hand and take it off mine.

“I know you're not into dating. We can still do *things* without dating. More like you can do things to me.” She giggles.

My phone vibrates in my hand. I check it and find a message waiting for me. A message from Summer.

Without reading it, my head lifts and my eyes travels across the room and meet hers.

Summer's face is flushed red, her chest heaving as she glares daggers at me.

I am not sure why she looks angry but a chuckle leaves me. Her mouth falls open, her fingers curling into fists at her sides. Despite the fact that her body language is stiff, she looks ridiculously adorable.

Before I could go to her, she is striding straight at me with pure determination. Her long hair fluttering around her as if they're her wings.

But instead of stopping when she reaches me, she steps between me and Molly, making her stumble a bit. Molly glares at her but Summer doesn't stop, she breezes past us with a defiant tilt to her chin, her lips pressed in a hard line.

I turn to see her advance to the exit of the studio.

My lips twitch when she almost stumbles over a bunch of wires lying on the floor.

My little liar saw the little interaction I had with Molly.

"Ugh! What a bi—" I snap my head to her, daring her to finish the sentence.

She realizes the shift in my mood because she shuts her mouth.

"You are good at modeling, Molly," I tell her to which she starts smiling.

"You think so?"

"We wouldn't have hired you if you weren't. But don't think that you are irreplaceable." Her jaw drops and I continue. "Instead of cursing at someone or coming onto me, I'd suggest you to focus on your job."

She clears her throat. "Right. Sorry."

Without bothering to address her apology, I walk out of the studio, following my little liar.

When I am out, I finally read her message.

Meet me in your office. RIGHT NOW!

Oh, so she is giving me orders now?

All right, Miss Donovan. I am coming.

Pocketing my phone, I stalk toward my office.

Chad stands as he sees me approaching. I motion for him to sit and head straight inside my office.

I didn't like that Summer was told to leave a message instead of informing me that she came to see me this morning. Yes, this is the regular protocol my assistants follow but I instructed Chad to never keep her waiting. Even in my absence, she can wait inside my office.

That's why she is already inside rather than waiting outside.

Opening the door, I enter and lock it behind me. Leaning against it, I silently admire her.

She is facing the floor to ceiling window, her hands folded across her chest and one foot tapping on the floor restlessly. The muscles in her delicate shoulders looks tensed as she stares out the window.

"Hey, baby."



Summer

"Hey, baby." I whirl around at his voice. I swallow thickly when I see him leaning against the office door. His stance so relaxed unlike mine.

"I thought you'd never come." I taunt, hating that I sound insecure rather than confident.

“I’m here.” His gaze trails over me before fixing on my face. “You look beautiful.”

“Molly was wearing the same dress. Did you find her beautiful, too?”

“That compliment wasn’t for the dress, baby. It was for you.”

When I don’t move. He walks toward me. I look up at him when he’s inches away from me.

Before he could touch me, I turn away from him and face the window. I can’t have him see the emotions reflecting on my face. I am not sure I can act to conceal it right now.

I want him to explain. I want him to tell me everything they talked about. Why was she touching him like that? How did he feel when she touched his skin?

A wave of fury grips me when I think about her hand on him. I don’t like the way I am feeling right now. When I saw him on a date with Meagan, I was irritated, but it doesn’t come close to the emotion I am feeling right now.

The anxiety closing around my chest, this struggle is different. It runs deeper.

We are not in a relationship. Or maybe we are. What did Archer say? A mutually beneficial relationship with no strings.

That leaves me with no right to question him. Ever since I saw him talking to Molly, I can’t help but think if he is seeing other women while sleeping with me.

I haven’t been with anyone since months prior to him. And I have never been with anyone but him since we started this arrangement.

We never talked about exclusivity.

A new pain twists my insides. I inhale. Then exhale, my lungs burning with difficulty in drawing every breath.

His arms fold around me from behind, pulling me against his hard body. “You’re angry with me.” He whispers, running his nose along the line of my neck.

Goosebumps springs up all over my skin. I keep my mouth shut. I don’t want to lie. He’ll know that I’m lying.

When he turns me, I don't put up a fight and face him. He spears his fingers through my locks, cradling my head. "You're jealous." He says softly.

He doesn't seem the least bit bothered by it. In fact, deep satisfaction bleeds into his eyes.

I shake my head. He leans down and brushes his lips with mine. "Yes, you are."

My eyes fall shut when his mouth skims along my jaw and down my throat. His touch is my weakness. His warm breath against my skin is my undoing.

This man is my damnation. I shouldn't feel at ease in his arms when I am hurting inside.

I am indeed jealous. It alarms me how affected I am by the mere interaction between Molly and him.

I was so jealous of watching them together that I wanted to throw up. I was burning up. Like someone has doused me in gasoline and has lit the match and didn't think twice before setting my whole body on fire.

I have to remind myself that what we have is purely physical. Because I am slowly forgetting it. I am so consumed by him that I am feeling emotions I shouldn't.

The right thing would be to stop right now before I sink deeper into the quicksand.

But I can't let go of him. I just can't. I just have to keep my feelings from getting tangled with sex. It shouldn't be hard. I can do it. I can if I try harder.

Because I really don't think I can stay away from him. Just thinking about never feeling his warm touch on my skin makes me panicky.

I am not ready to leave him. Not yet.

Digging my hands into his shirt, I pull him up so I can claim his lips. Archer discerns my urgency and kisses me back with abandon.

With a hand at the nape of my neck, he forces my head back. His tongue thrusts past my lips. He pushes my legs open so he

could step between my thighs.

He breaks the kiss and looks at me. “I only want you.”

The meaning behind his words shakes me to my core. I love it. I hate it. I don’t know what to feel.

“What you saw down there—” I kiss him, putting a stop to whatever explanation he was about to give me. Because I changed my mind.

I wanted him to explain few moments ago. But not anymore. I am beginning to act like a possessive girlfriend. Which I am not.

Archer and I are nothing more than fuck buddies. And I have to get that fact through my head. And for that I need shut down the voices that are whispering things I don’t want to hear. Like I am in too deep.

I reach for his belt, fumbling with the buckle.

“Wait.” He pulls back. “I think we should talk.”

“I need you.” My voice is a desperate plea. Please don’t stop. I am scared if we do, I might have to face my inner voice. I might have to address the feelings I have for you. And I am not ready for that yet.

Understanding shines on his face and instead of confronting me for my cowardice, he lifts me up and gives me what I want.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Summer

I cry out as pleasure radiates through me. Panting, I collapse on Archer. His fingers clamp down on my hips as he slams into me from below, riding me through my orgasm.

With one last thrust, he tenses then releases deep inside me and groans.

We stay like this for a few beats before Archer rolls us to the side. He slips out of me.

My eyes are closed when I feel him climbing off the bed.

After our quickie in his office a week ago, everything was back to normal. Archer didn't try talking to me and I was grateful for it.

He came to my place every night. We still fuck like we can't get enough of each other. In a nutshell, we were okay.

I jerk when he grips my knee with one hand and parts me. Then he runs a warm cloth between my legs. We've stopped using condoms now. Every night, Archer cleans me before leaving. But tonight, it makes me frown.

Normally, he fucks me at least three times a night. But today, he came over earlier than his usual time and we had sex only once.

And judging by the way he's collecting his clothes, he doesn't plan to stay for the second and third round.

“You’re leaving?” The words are out of my mouth before I could stop them.

He nods. “Business dinner.”

“Oh,” I sit up and pull the bed sheet over my naked body. “With Hannah and Raleigh?” I ask because they often go out for dinner once in a while.

“No,” he says, not elaborating further as he pulls up his boxers and turns to look for his shirt.

I gasp loudly and reach for the bedside lamp to turn it on. I gape at his muscled back.

I am not shocked by the sexy grooves or those dimples on his lower back. I am shocked because every inch of his exposed skin is covered in... *tattoos*.

The tattoos are a stark contrast to Archer’s personality. He is the epitome of sophistication who dresses in custom made suits. But beneath those powerful suits is a secret.

His back is peppered with various small pieces of tattoos but in the dead center is the tattoo of a massive dragon breathing fire. The dark ink speaks for itself. It oozes bad boy energy.

The intimidating details leave me absolutely speechless. It looks so real. The black shadings and the small curved shapes really bring the dragon to life.

I never imagined him to have a tattoo much less a whole freaking canvas of a back.

And what boggles me is the fact that I am just now seeing this. How the hell is that possible?

I rub my eyes with my knuckles just to be sure that I am not dreaming. It’s still there. “Holy fuck.”

He turns to me. “What?”

“You have tattoos,” I whisper as if I’m telling him a secret.

Something on Archer’s face shifts, something unfamiliar shadowing his eyes. Without another word, he starts shrugging on his shirt.

The atmosphere in the room is tensed when he is fully dressed.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” He says over his shoulder as he walks away, leaving me baffled.



“Did you record it?” I ask with a grin.

Raleigh rolls his eyes. “I don’t want to waste my phone storage.”

I gasp. “You dick!”

I aim the dry roasted peanut at him but decide against throwing it and pop it in my mouth. Why should I *waste* the tasty little thing on him?

“I can record you.” The shy intern with glasses speaks. He’s in his late teens and is super cute in a nerdy kind of way. I smile at him.

It’s just another fun day at KIM Advertising. We are chilling in the cafeteria as we got a thirty-minute break. I was eating roasted peanuts and randomly threw one in the air and caught it in my mouth.

I wanted to do it again but on camera. Because you know... it’s a talent I just developed and I want a video proof of it so I could show it to Goldie later.

But my best friend aka the jerk, Raleigh didn’t record it.

“Take notes, Raleigh.” I poke my tongue at him and pass my phone to the cute intern.

I throw the peanut in the air and catch it in my mouth. The team begins clapping and I bow my head. Then, “Did you record it?”

“Yes.” He says timidly.

“Oh! Thank you!” I grin at him then glare at Raleigh. “I think it’s about time I replace Raleigh as my best friend with someone more deserving.”

He rests his chin on Hannah's shoulder and regards me with a bored expression. "Your loss."

I glance at Hannah. "Did you see how ruthless he is?"

"Don't involve me in this. You guys fight then make up right after. I am staying out of it."

"All right." I scan the team gathered around me. "Guys! Who's more fun to work with? Me or Raleigh?"

"Summer." Almost all of them choose me.

Raleigh straightens in his seat. "Don't forget I'm your boss." He shoots a dirty look to his team.

"Truth hurts, bro." I laugh.

"Don't worry. I chose you." Hannah kisses his stubble.

He gives her a heart-stopping grin before going in for a kiss.

"Gross!" I shout but only to rile him up. The group laughs and tease them by shouting "get a room" as they begin making out.

Standing, I walk over to the intern. "Hey, let's see the video, shall we?"

He doesn't give me my phone when I extend my hand.

"Actually..." He hesitates.

"What happened?"

"I forgot to press the record button."

Everyone burst out laughing.

"I-I'm sorry."

I smile and shake my head. "It's all right. And don't worry about them. They are probably laughing at me." He gives me a small smile.

"What the fuck?" Brielle stands, surprising all of us. Mia jumps up and leans over her shoulder to peer at the phone. She gasps out loud.

Raleigh pulls back from Hannah long enough to ask, "What's up?"

Brielle stares at her phone screen wide-eyed. “See for yourself.” She passes her phone to him.

As soon as he sees it, his eyes flies to me, his face grim. Hannah takes the phone from his hand. She does the same. The moment she glances at whatever is on the phone, she frowns then glances at me.

“What is it?” I ask, getting a bit nervous by the way they both are looking at me. With... pity.

Maybe there’s another article about my life. Ever since I’ve gone viral, the journalists have taken great interest in my life. Especially my past.

Couple days ago, I read an online article that stated things about me that I wasn’t sure people wanted to know. Like the name of my school. And that I didn’t go to college.

It was kind of humiliating. But I got over it. With fame, you get unwanted attention.

They also somehow found out that I am Raleigh’s foster sister. I don’t get it. How do they dig so deep in someone’s past? Why do they do that? Is it that entertaining?

It’s scary to even think the resources they own to investigate about someone. And just for entertainment.

My whole body freezes. Did they find out about my life *before* entering the system?

They can’t find out about my parents. Right?

“Why are you both looking at me like that?” I ask with a trembling smile. My hands turn clammy.

“It’s nothing.” Hannah waves it off.

Through mastering the art of lying, I began developing another skill. A skill to detect when someone’s hiding the truth. It’s in the subtle movements and gestures of the person.

And my knowledge tells me, that Hannah is lying. It’s definitely not nothing.

Raleigh is awfully quiet. And when he’s quiet, there’s something really very wrong.

Only he knows how I ended up in foster system. And his unreadable expression is making my heart pound in my chest.

Wiping my palm on my jeans, I extend it. “Can I see?” The pounding of my heart leaps into a gallop as I wait. When she hesitates, I add, “Please?”

Worrying her lower lip, Hannah yields and passes the phone to me.

My panic lasts for about five seconds before my eyes fall on the phone screen.

I almost collapse with relief when I see the picture of a random couple dining.

I am so stupid, my brain just played thousands of scenarios. All bad ones. It’s not about my past. It’s about—

My brows snap together when I look down at the picture again.

This is not a random couple at all.

It’s him.

Archer.

His side profile is captured in the picture but there’s no denying that it’s him.

He’s sitting at a table by the window in what looks like an expensive restaurant. A petite brunette clad in a black off-the-shoulder dress sits across him.

My heart sinks. I stand there like a statue, staring at the phone in my hand.

Numbly, I scroll down. There are several pictures of them smiling and talking as they eat.

It looks intimate. It feels wrong to watch them. Like I am prying on their private time.

The article says that Archer Kim has been spotted having a cozy dinner with a beautiful mystery woman.

I grip the phone tighter as something breaks inside me.

He left me last night to go to her. He said it was a business dinner. But it doesn't look like it.

I don't know what's worse. The fact that he might have lied to me, or him making a woman smile that isn't me.

Is he on a date with this woman? Did Archer's mother set him up with her?

We are not exclusive. But don't I deserve to know that he's seeing someone else?

And why is it hurting so bad? I never wanted to grow attached to anyone. Then why did it happen anyway?

My heart is aching. As if my worst nightmare has come true. A fear of losing someone I care about. It's similar to the pain when I lost my mom.

Mommy?

Why isn't she waking up? I cough. It's so hard to breathe. The black smoke clogs my nostrils, my eyes watering. Orange flames are licking at the curtains of the living room window. It's spreading around slowly, swallowing our home. We need to get out.

Sweat trickles down my forehead and neck as I try to shake mommy awake. "Mommy, please wake up! Don't leave me!"

She lays unmoving. Her eyes staring at nothing.

I pull my favorite pink handkerchief and wipe the blood off her forehead with trembling fingers. "Mommy, wake up. I am so scared."

After a few minutes, I feel my eyes drooping. My head feels hazy with the lack of oxygen. With effort, I move and lie down next to her. Resting my head on her chest, I curl my arm around her waist.

"It's okay if you want to sleep, Mommy." I cough faintly. "I'll sleep with you too."

I don't know how long I lie there, but a loud bang wakes me up. Through the black smoke, I see men coming in. One man dressed in a uniform grabs me.

“No! Leave me. I want to stay with mommy!” I struggle in his hold but my energy gives out.

When he picks me up and begins walking toward the door. I can't help the scream that leaves me. “I want to stay with my mommy! She's hurt! Please!”

“Mommy help me! He is taking me away from you!” I try to bite him. I twist my body to look at her. “Mommy...” my lips tremble, my eyes closing. Don't leave me.

I don't realize how much my fingers are trembling until a hand closes on mine.

I lift my head and find Hannah peering at me with concerned eyes as she squeezes my hand.

A lump in my throat preventing me from speaking.

Raleigh's arm curl around me. I hear him ask me if I was okay.

I don't answer. I don't want to be here. I want to leave. I want to hide where no one can find me.

But they won't leave me until they know I am okay.

Steeling myself against the searing pain in my heart. I curl my lips in a smile. “I am okay. I feel lightheaded because I didn't eat anything.”

Everyone knows I am lying. But no one says a word. I take a step back. Then another. “I need to go.”

I whirl and run.

What did you do, you stupid girl? Why did you fall in love with him?

Chapter Thirty-Four

Summer

The ache in my chest didn't lessen when I returned to the shoot.

It took one photograph of him with another woman to make me realize that I had fallen in love with Archer.

It was cruel, really. The way I found out about my feelings for him. And it's devastating to think that I can't do anything about it.

I couldn't just go and demand him to stop seeing other women. I can't tell him that I love him when I was the one who was reluctant to even try something with him.

When he said he only wants me, I believed him. Even now, I can't bring myself to believe the photographs or the article fully.

There's a small part in me that still thinks Archer wouldn't betray me like that.

From the start, he has been nothing but honest with me. He never once lied. And sometimes, pictures can lie too. I don't know what really happened.

But that doesn't mean I wasn't hurt. I was. Deeply. It felt like someone has stabbed me in the heart and the only way to survive is to leave the knife there so I wouldn't bleed to death.

That's what it felt like when I returned after having a good cry in the bathroom.

I completed the shoot successfully but the feeling of the knife digging into my chest was there the entire time.

When Raleigh and others offered to go out clubbing after the shoot wrapped up, I denied.

I was so emotionally numb that I didn't even ask Raleigh or Hannah if they knew about my affair with Archer.

They must have found out some way or the other because they kept glancing at me throughout the shoot like I was going to burst into tears any minute.

I have no idea when or how Archer invaded my lonely heart and owned it. But now that he has, there's no going back.

I couldn't quite place this new feeling at first. The feeling of being in love. But it also doesn't seem *new* new. It's like this emotion was already there but it was dormant.

For instance, when I got jealous by watching him with Molly. I knew then that something was happening to me.

That day I got frightened and panicked because for the very first time, I felt my heart beating for someone else. For *him*.

And now even after seeing those photos, my heart wants to chase after him. It wants me to clear the misunderstanding. It wants to fight for what it wants. Because my heart wants Archer Kim.

The courage of my heart astounded me. Because after going through the loss of the person who was my whole world, I swore to never love again.

The ugliness of the world helped keeping the promise but then I met Archer.

I loved the small things he did for me. Like the other day when I was perched on the chair while the makeup artist was doing my makeup.

I was uncomfortable, my back was hurting from sitting on the wooden chair. It wasn't cushiony like the ones I usually sit on while the stylists get me ready for the shoot.

My makeup had to be redone but instead of moving me to the makeup corner, they decided to do it while I was still sitting on

the chair where I had spent one hour posing.

Anyway, there I was, squirming to find a comfortable spot when an intern approached me with a throw pillow.

He passed it to me and I tucked it behind my back. When I looked up to thank him, he was already gone. I scanned the room to find him standing next to Archer.

I knew then that he was the one who sent the pillow. I mouthed him *Thank you*. He didn't say anything, but I saw him typing something on his phone.

A second later, my phone buzzed in my hand. I unlocked it to find his message.

You're welcome, baby. Just one more hour. Then we'll head to my place and I'll give you a body massage.

And he did deliver on his promise. And it didn't turn into anything sexual. That's the thing I love about him. He understands me. That night we didn't fuck, we just hung out. Ate take out and talked about random things... and then he left.

He always left. That was him setting up his boundaries. He may care for me. But I don't think he could ever love me.

And it was okay. I guess. After all, love doesn't promise anything. If you love someone, you can't expect them to love you back. That, itself is the sweetest tragedy.

My phone pings. It's a message from him.

Archer: I'm almost done at work and will be at your place in about thirty minutes. And this time I am hoping you'll answer your damn door.

I don't reply. I have been ignoring his calls and messages since yesterday. When he knocked on my door last night, I didn't open it.

He tried again this morning. He tried talking to me through the door but I ignored him by blasting the music in full volume. He got the hint because after fifteen minutes of knocking and asking me to open the door, he left.

I know this is not the way to handle situations like these. But then I was never good at letting people go.

When Damian, my other foster brother—whom Raleigh and I both saw as our protector and hero—was adopted, I was devastated.

Raleigh and Damian were the two pillars of my life. The pillars who never let me crumble. Damian always protected us from the bullies and taught us to fight back.

And when he left, I experienced the pain of losing someone all over again.

He promised to keep in touch. He vowed he would write to us and that he will come for us one day.

We never received any letters. Years went by and we realized that Damian lied. He was never going to come back for us. That incident taught me to never ever trust anyone. To never rely on anyone. And to never love anyone. Because people always leave at the end. Always.

That's why I chose a lonely life. But my current circumstances are different.

Archer didn't really leave. I am the one to take a step back. I am going to protect my heart from getting crushed.

How long would we keep this arrangement going? He'd get bored of me someday. And while I would never be ready to give him up, I have to. And it needs to happen now. I can't continue sleeping with him and act as if everything is normal. Because nothing is normal about us anymore. Nothing is casual. And to do it, I'll have to face him one last time.

By the time he'll be here, I'll be ready.

Fifteen minutes later, my doorbell rings. I frown. He's early.

Goldie runs to the door and barks. Smiling, I pad over to him. He's grown so much. In the past, he used to get scared whenever there was a knock on the door. Nowadays, he runs to the door before me and stands guard.

Archer has been training him and the results are incredible. I sigh. Why does my thoughts always revolve around him?

"My brave boy." I bend to pet his head before reaching the knob. My fingers are trembling. I can't stall it anymore. Time to rip the band-aid off.

With one long breath, I open the door and am pushed aside as two figures brush past me and enter my apartment.

Frowning, I turn to face them. “What are you two doing here?” I ask as Hannah bends down and picks up Goldie while Raleigh throws his weight on the couch.

“We’re here to pick you up,” Raleigh says as he tames his wild hair with his fingers.

“Pick me up?”

Hannah nuzzles Goldie and laughs when he licks her cheek. She looks at me, smiling. “Yep. We’re going out.”

“What?” I glance at Raleigh in confusion. “What are you guys talking about?”

“You are coming with us to Freddie’s house party.”

“Party?”

“Party on a weekday?”

“It’s Valentine’s Day.” Hannah sits beside Raleigh.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So let’s go party. Everyone’s going to be there.” Raleigh says as he rubs Goldie’s head.

I had my suspicion but now it’s painfully clear that they know about me and Archer. And they are trying to cheer me up. They are here when they could spend this special day somewhere alone.

I am torn between squeezing them and reprimanding them.

“Why would I party when I’m single?” I force a laugh. “You guys carry on. I’m going to snuggle Goldie and binge watch a Netflix series.”

“Freddie is single too. He’s still throwing the party, isn’t he?” Hannah points out. “And besides, you don’t need a reason to party in L.A.”

“Yeah, but I don’t feel like going out.” And Archer will be here any minute.

Raleigh gets up and stalks to me. Grabbing my shoulders, he squints at me. “Summer, you have two options. Come with us to this party and dance the night away or we could sit down right now and have a talk about what happened yesterday. You’ll have to tell us everything because we are not blind. We saw how your face fell when you saw that picture.”

I open my mouth but he cuts me off. “I know you don’t like to talk about personal stuff. But we are your friends. We care for you. Do you think we can enjoy when our friend is hurting?”

I avert my eyes, my nose stinging. Hannah comes to my side and brushes the tendrils off my face. “We are a family, Summer. And we won’t ever force you to speak about things you want to keep secret. Tell us when you are ready and in the meantime be happy. Be you. The real you who finds happiness in everything.”

A tear rolls over my cheek. Raleigh catches it with his thumb and wipes it away. “Come with us. Forget about everything for tonight and just *live*.”

I give them a watery smile. “That was quite the speech.” Both of them chuckle at that.

Sniffing, I look down when I feel Goldie nudging his head to my leg. “What about Goldie? I can’t leave him alone.”

“What about the dog sitter?”

“Look at the time, it’s almost ten p.m. And I doubt she’ll come as it’s Valentine’s Day.”

“Well, look what I found.” Hannah taps away at her phone before holding it up for us to see.

A 24/7 dog daycare. And it’s located near my apartment building.

I bite my lip. “Well, what if he gets anxious? He’s not used to new places. Remember that day when I had to bring him to KIM Advertising building?” The poor baby was frightened and exhausted by all the barking.

“They are professionals and have been running the daycare for the past twenty years. I’m sure he’ll be fine. You can pick

him up first thing in the morning.” Hannah says as she is viewing their website.

“But—”

“No buts. You are coming with us and that’s final.” Raleigh starts pushing me toward my bedroom. “Go get ready. You have ten minutes.”



“One more round!” Mia shouts over the music as she leans against Chris. She is definitely drunk. Chris doesn’t mind though, because he is smiling down at her.

When she thrusts the drink my way, I shake my head. “Oh, no, I’m good.”

“Is that a diet coke?” Brielle asks as she sways her hips, feeling the music.

“Yeah,” I admit with a sheepish smile.

“Oh, hell no. You need alcohol.” Brielle announces.

“What she said.” Mia high-fives Brielle.

“And stop peeking at your phone every five seconds,” Hannah says from beside me.

We are waiting by the bar in Freddie’s mega-mansion. Yeah, a mansion. That guy is filthy rich. When Raleigh said it was a house party, I imagined red cups and beer and a suffocating crowd.

Though the crowd size is big, it’s not at all suffocating. Because the house is massive and I am not exaggerating.

Raleigh told me that Freddie is the son of a business tycoon but instead of joining his family business, he pursued his career in modeling. And he loves partying with his friends whenever the mood strikes him. Because he can obviously afford it.

I was stunned to see that he even has a basketball court on the property.

It felt as if I have entered a resort rather than someone’s house.

I am glad that I came. I am enjoying with my friends but I can't help checking my phone.

It has been fifteen minutes since we arrived. Almost twenty minutes since I texted Archer about the change in plans. I kept the message short, not informing him about the party. I just told him that I will meet him tomorrow because something came up.

I thought he would ask questions. You know, like where I was going and something like that. But he didn't. Not a single reply. Not even a simple "okay" text.

He left me on Read.

Still, I was checking my phone every so often in the hopes of reading his name. But all I could see were notifications of emails and messages from an advertising agency called Genesis Media.

They've been hounding me since a couple of weeks now. They want to sign me as their model. They expressed interest in representing me when it was public knowledge that I was signed with KIM Advertising.

At first, I thought they would stop contacting if I just ignored them. But they began calling on my personal number. When I finally caved and emailed them to stop contacting me, they tried to tempt me by offering me twice the sum KIM Advertising was paying me.

I might be a liar but I am not selfish. I will never leave my friends and the agency I've come to love so much for money. I am loyal at heart. Once I am attached, there's no going back.

And KIM Advertising is not just an agency to me now. The creative team members are not just people who work with me. They are my family. Why would I leave them and go somewhere else?

Financially, the offer may be great, but I am not lacking in terms of money now. I am doing fine. There's sufficient money in my bank account. And I have food on the table and a roof over my head and such great friends. I couldn't have asked for more.

Moving their email address to spam, I put my phone in my purse. Time to have some fun. Even when I am not feeling it, I have to give it a try.

“Here you go, ladies.” The bartender slides the drinks over to us.

Hannah hands me one of the glasses with a grin. “Bottoms up.” She shouts over the booming music and we knock back the shots.

Raleigh who was snatched by a group of friends earlier returns and snags Hannah’s hand. “I’m here to steal my princess.”

The girls start to groan when he starts dragging her to the dance floor. “Sorry not sorry.” He throws the words over his shoulders, laughing.

When I catch the girls staring longingly at the dance floor, I realize that they are keeping me company instead of enjoying the night with their partners.

I practically push them away and threaten to leave if they don’t quit acting like my babysitters.

When they’re gone, I find myself reaching for my flap bag. Then stop. No. I will not check my phone again for the rest of the night.

To distract myself, I watch them dance. A smile lifts the corner of my lips. Shaking my head when Mia stumbles again and almost topples over Chris. He then runs into Raleigh’s side.

I am still laughing when someone slides right beside me. I turn my head to the side and find Freddie leaning toward me. His eyes slide down my body, taking in my shimmery pink sequin tube top and black mini skirt.

When he is done checking me out, I narrow my eyes at him. “Were you just checking me out?”

He flashes me an impish grin. “I guess I was.”

“You have no shame.” I roll my eyes.

“You are the most beautiful girl in this room. Can you blame me?”

I chuckle. He grins and then lowers his head to my ear. "I'm so glad you came."

I shift to the side and give him a small smile. "Raleigh and Hannah literally forced me to tag along. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have known you were throwing a party."

"You always turned down my invites if I'm not mistaken. And I sent you a text earlier this week about the party."

"You did?"

"Mm-hmm." He sips a drink he was nursing in his hand. "You didn't even bother reading my text, did you?"

"I-I..." Well, he was right. His unread messages are collecting dust in my phone.

He downs his drink and rests the glass on the bar counter. "Dance with me."

"What?"

"Come on, Summer. You've just been caught ghosting me. Don't I deserve one dance with you?" He pushes his lower lip out, making me laugh.

"You're a dork," I murmur as I take his offered hand.

"The most handsome dork." He smirks and I shake my head, smiling. He leads me into the middle of the dance floor.

"Stay here." He smiles at me and then goes to the DJ. The dance number which was playing is paused abruptly, earning groans of protest from the crowd. Then a slow song pours from the speakers

The crowd immediately scatters, reaching for their partners. Freddie saunters my way and wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me in. I rest my palms on his shoulders and we sway to the slow rhythm.

"You look different today." He says as he twirls me around. When I face him again, I ask, "Different how?"

"I don't know, you seem less... colorful."

I let out a shaky laugh. "What made you say that? I thought you liked my outfit."

“I did. But other than the colors that you love to wear, your energetic aura is missing. You are awfully quiet.”

“I’m talking, aren’t I?” I cock a brow.

“Not like your usual self.”

I can’t help the painful way my chest constricts. Even Freddie can sense it.

Thank God, I didn’t see Archer tonight, he would’ve figured everything out in a heartbeat.

He would’ve figured out that I want more. More than sex. The realization was a hard pill to swallow.

I want Archer to want me too. I want him to love me. But he doesn’t do romance. He said so himself. He doesn’t date either. His priority is his work. And that’s that.

And no matter how many times I tell myself that my decision to stay away from him is for the best, it doesn’t make me feel any better.

Before him, I had this hollowness inside of me. When he came, it was like he was filling in the void in my chest. I felt complete. That’s probably ridiculous and corny, but I did.

Every day, I used to be happy to return to my home because I knew I’d see him. I thought of him as *my* person. My own custom-made human being. Who makes me happy by simply showing up every night.

The emptiness in me was being filled up by his presence. But before that hole could close, my bubble was burst by reality.

And now that I am letting him go, the hollowness inside me has grown into a gaping hole. A dark pit where nothing exists.

I can’t even fake happiness. The colors are missing from my outfit because I don’t feel like wearing them. Nothing feels good anymore.

“Earth to Summer?” Freddie waves a hand in front of my face, bringing me back to the present. I note that the slow song has ended and an upbeat song is playing. “Where’d you go?”

Before I could respond, Hannah is pushing to my side, making me go flush against Freddie. He steadies me with an

arm around me.

“Smile!” Hannah says before clicking a selfie of the three of us.

She taps a few times on the phone with a sly smile then looks up. “Thanks.”

Why is she thanking me for a picture?

“Why are you smiling like that?”

She schools her expression and stares at me. “Like what?”

“OMG!” Brielle rushes to us with a phone in her hand. “You look so cute together.”

Freddie smirks and wraps an arm around my waist. “Thanks.”

I squirm out of his hold and grab Brielle’s phone. Then glance at Hannah, bewildered. “Why did you share our picture in the work group chat?”

“Some of the team members couldn’t attend the party so I thought I’ll send pictures.” She smirks.

“Yeah, I don’t buy it.”

Mia jumps in out of nowhere, scaring the bejesus out of me. “Summer, it’s Cardi B. Let’s dance.”

Hannah smartly escapes and starts dancing as if her action wasn’t suspicious.

When Mia tugs at my arm, I decide to stop overthinking and have fun.



Head tilting back, I throw my arms up and shimmy my hips. I shouldn’t have worn the deadly high heels. In mere fifteen minutes of dancing, my feet are killing me.

I am going to regret not stopping tomorrow but right now, I don’t care. I want to dance despite the hurt. I want to keep dancing until the ache in my soul eases.

My bag is at the bar and my heart is begging me to go get it.

It wants me to check my phone again.

Too bad, heart. I am not going to.

Closing my eyes, I feel the thumping of the music in my chest as I let go. Reaching up, I run my fingers through my hair as I move my body.

“Damn, Summer,” Freddie murmurs. He’s close. Too close for my liking. I can feel his breath on my face.

I open my eyes and put my hands on his chest, intent on pushing him. He misinterprets my action and curls his arms around my waist.

“Let go of me.” I squirm but he acts as if he didn’t hear me. I try to shout this time. “Can you—” My words halt when a shadow appears behind Freddie and a second later, he’s ripped away from me.

I gasp. “Archer.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Summer

Freddie staggers to the side, losing his balance and falling to the floor.

The entire house goes quiet. The music is cut off. Everyone stops dancing around us.

“What the fuck?” Freddie yells as his friends help him up. He turns, stares at the man who grabbed him by the neck and wrenched him away from me. “Archer?” His shocked voice echoes around the room.

“Boss?” Brielle pushes past people and comes forward.

“Archer at a party?” Chris gawks at him while Nina mutters, “No fucking way.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Hannah fist-bumping Raleigh.

I, on the other hand, am frozen because Archer’s staring straight at me. Dead on. The dark brown orbs are blazing with wrath, sending a chill down my spine.

There’s a war raging inside of me. My heart is elated by seeing him here. But my brain? It’s befuddled. Why is he here? *How* is he here?

For a moment, I think maybe I’m imagining it all. That he’s not real. That he did not just shove Freddie out of the way so he could glare at me.

My heart beats faster, thinking that he is here for me.

I wonder if he could see my pain.

I wonder if he can sense how hurt I am and how much I missed him.

Can he?

He holds his hand out, still drilling holes in my face with his intense gaze, his jaw set.

My jaw drops to the freaking floor when he holds out his hand for me in front of everyone. He is really here for me.

But what is he doing?

His employees are gaping at him but he pays them no attention.

His brow dips when I don't move, eyes darkening. "Baby." My heart skips a beat when he says that in his deep voice. Shivers overtake me by that single word which is uttered with barely controlled fury.

My pussy begins to throb. It's infuriating how my body reacts when he's around. It doesn't matter that he's furious, the ache between my legs is proof of my insatiable need for him.

Someone slings my bag over my shoulder as I take a shaky step forward and place my hand in his. My breath hitches when he closes his fingers around me firmly and then drags me out of the mansion, leaving everyone around us in stunned silence.

"Can you please slow down?" I wince as I try to keep up with his brisk stride.

The rubbing of my heels against my irritated skin is absolutely awful but I don't stop because he has my wrist in a death grip. And every time I slow down, he tightens it.

When I wince again, he stops and then turns. He says nothing, just bends and lifts me over his shoulder, making me yelp.

"Archer! Put me down!" I gasp, my hair almost touching the ground. What is wrong with him?

He keeps walking, ignoring my protests. He's giving me the silent treatment again!

He stops when he gets to his Jaguar. I say nothing when he opens the passenger door of his car and puts me inside gently and fastens my seatbelt. His actions are a contrast to the rage I feel emanating from him.

I love that he's so gentle with me regardless of his temper. He makes me believe that he is not like other men. Men like my father.

I reach up and cup his tensed jaw. "Archer."

His eyes fall shut. My heart melts when he leans into my touch ever so slightly, the little frown between his brows appearing. I bring my free hand up and touch the crease, attempting to erase his frown.

That breaks the moment because Archer pulls away and shuts the door. My heart drops. I pinch my eyes close, the hurt spreading.

Why does he retreat back to his shell whenever he catches himself being vulnerable?

I sit motionless as he rounds the car and slides into the driver's seat.

The entire ride is spent in silence. I didn't attempt to talk and Archer didn't bother as usual.

I face the window, still raw by the way he pulled back from my touch.

When the car halts, I waste no time in getting out and striding inside the building.

I all but run across the lobby with Archer hot on my heels. When I find the waiting elevator, I rush to step in but he catches me by the waist and pulls me toward him in one swift move.

My back crashes against his chest. He bends his head, his lips brushing against my ear. "You think I'll let you slip away that easy?"

His low, deep tenor makes me shudder, then blush. But it also angers me.

"Let go of me."

"Never."

I grit my teeth. My resolve is hanging by a thread. I can't melt for him. I just can't. Not looking at him, I say, "Look, I'm tired right now. I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

He releases me and my stomach sinks. See? Letting go is only hard for me. Not him.

I startle when he clasps my hand and steps inside the elevator, dragging me with him.

He presses the button to our floor and doesn't spare me a single glance while my hand is still secured in his.

And although it feels absolutely heaven holding his hand, I don't want to complicate our situation by giving him the wrong idea.

He must've misconceived my leaving with him. I still plan to end our arrangement. And letting him grab my hand with such possessiveness is screaming otherwise.

When I try to pull my hand free, he only tightens his hold. But other than that, he ignores me. He is wearing a black shirt which is a bit wrinkled and black pants. The crooked tie dangling from his neck tells me that he left the office and drove straight to Freddie's.

But how did he know I was there? I want to ask him but the elevator door slides open and he exits, tugging me with him.

When he drags me in the direction of his apartment, I dig my heels on the floor. "No. No way! I'm *not* going to your place."

Archer spins around and claims my lips in a ruthless kiss. He swallows my gasp, his tongue diving in. His kiss is quick but thorough which makes me dizzy with need.

He pulls back, a wild look in his eyes. "The next time you'll open that smart mouth of yours, it will be for telling me why you've been ignoring me."

Anger bubbles in my veins. "You can't tell me what to do!"

"Try again." He steps closer. My tongue doesn't work when he lowers his head to stare into my eyes. Satisfied, he unlocks his door, And with a hand on my lower back, ushers me inside.

It's not the first time I've been here but I'm hit with that same gloomy vibe I get whenever I am over.

His apartment although similar to mine architectural wise, it lacks life. Sparse with expensive furniture. Dull gray walls. And somber-looking paintings all over the place.

This place doesn't feel like home. It doesn't—

I yelp when I'm swept off my feet. Clutching his neck. I stare at Archer wide-eyed. "What are you doing?"

He carries me in his arms and puts me on his living room couch. Kneeling before me, he removes my heels one by one. Then inspects the angry red skin of my feet.

His thumb strokes the blisters and my heart skips several beats. He shouldn't be touching me right now. I open my mouth to say that exact thought. "Um, you... it's... t-that—"

He gets up suddenly and then disappears from the living room.

"You shouldn't touch me like that," I mumble out loud when I am left alone. Glad to see that my tongue works perfectly fine. It's him that turns it useless.

He is back within seconds with a glass, hand towel, and an ointment in his hand. He is back on his knees again and reaches inside the glass for an ice cube.

Cradling my foot in his hand, he brushes the ice on the blister lightly. The sensation makes me gasp. His head lifts and our eyes lock.

"Okay?"

I nod. And he does it again, making me squirm on the leather couch when he rubs it against my skin in slow circles.

One of the most powerful men in the world is kneeling in front of me and tending to my blisters. This is the same man who used to hate me with everything in him to the point where he hurt me time and again. And now, this same man can't *see* me hurt.

Once he's done rubbing the ice cubes over my feet, he wipes it with the towel and then applies the ointment to the affected

areas.

“Thank you.” My voice comes out a bit hoarse. The last time someone cared for me like this was my mom. I never let anyone—not even Raleigh or Damian—tend to the wounds I used to get from my foster parents and their son.

But tonight, I let Archer take care of me. He makes me want to want his care. Something I never craved before. I don’t hate being vulnerable before him now. I don’t hate showing him my wounds. And I don’t know why exactly.

He gets to his feet, then pets the crown of my head in response before taking a seat across from me on a lounge chair. “Now we talk.”

It’s better to do it now rather than stalling. “Okay.”

“Let’s start with that *boy*, shall we?”

“Boy?”

“Yes. The one you were dancing with.”

“Freddie.” I purse my lips.

His jaw clenches. “Yes. What were you thinking, Summer?”

“What do you mean by that? I was just having fun.” Until it wasn’t fun anymore because Freddie started being obnoxious and I was seconds away from slapping him. But I am not going to tell him that, because Archer has that wild look again. Something tells me it won’t end well for Freddie if I ratted him out.

“Do you like him?” The question startles me.

“What? No!” I jump up.

He stands too. And in a flash, he’s towering over me. “Then tell me, Summer. Why would you let another male touch what’s mine?”

“I’m not—” His hand snakes around my nape. Fisting my hair, he makes my head tilt back.

“Lie to me again and there will be consequences.” His eyes rake over my face.

“W-what consequences?”

“I’ll fuck you hard. I’ll pound into your tight pussy and won’t stop until you are sobbing. But I still won’t stop until you fucking admit it.”

My heartbeat skyrockets. He is so crude. My panties are ruined by his dirty mouth. “Admit what?” I ask breathily.

“The truth. That you are fucking mine.” My pulse quickens when he descends, his gaze locked on my lips. Before he could kiss me, I push his chest to stop him. I have made my decision and I am not going to give in to the temptation.

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t?”

Taking a few steps back, I put some distance between us. “I texted you earlier to talk because...” I wring my hands as I avert my eyes. “...because I wanted to tell you in person that it’s over.”

He is silent for a while. I don’t look at him. I can’t. So I continue. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Look at me.” He says softly and my chin trembles. I shake my head.

If I do look at him, I might not be able to do what I must. I want my colors so bad. I need strength to do this. God, it hurts.

Hands cup my face. Archer turns my eyes to him. “You don’t want me anymore?”

“I do.” I bite my trembling lip. “I’ll always do.”

“Then what is this about?”

I remove his hands and finally break. “You lied to me, Archer.”

“I never lie, Summer and you know it.”

“Do I?” I give him a humorless smile. “Then why did you lie about a business dinner when you were meeting a woman? There are pictures of you two circulating the internet.”

When he goes to speak, I cut him off. “You know I used to think that I can do the whole casual sex thing. But I can’t just

stomach you seeing other women. I—” He presses a finger to my lips.

“I’m sorry.” He starts and I screw my eyes shut. I feel my heart breaking apart. He is apologizing because he admits he was seeing that woman, isn’t he? “I’m sorry for making you suffer.”

A sob breaks free. I feel his fingers wiping my tears as they slide down my cheeks.

“Look at me, Summer.” I shake my head as my fists hit his chest. He takes my hit silently. I crumble before him. He watches me fall apart. Then his arms wrap around my shoulder, pulling me to him.

“Shh...” He rocks me in his embrace. When I realize that I am taking solace from the man who hurt me, I struggle to be released. He tightens his hold and brings his mouth to my ear. “You’re the only one I want, baby.”

I push him with all my might this time. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not. I am speaking the truth like I did that day. That was in fact a business dinner.” He takes his phone out, taps a few times then holds it for me to take.

When I don’t take it, he takes my hand and closes my fingers around it. Wiping the tears, I reluctantly glance at the screen. Then frown. I lift it to get a closer look.

It’s a group picture. The woman from the article is present alongside three more people who are captured with Archer.

“They are the founding members of a dating app. The name isn’t finalized because the app’s still in its initial stage. They wanted to hire KIM Advertising.” He pushes a hand in his pocket. “You must be thinking why I personally met them when I could’ve sent Hannah or Raleigh.”

He is spot on. I nod slowly.

“I went because they’re my college friends. Over the years, I never attended a single reunion party. Half of them are already married and I didn’t go to their weddings. But when they mentioned they needed my help in their business, I decided to

go.” He stares at me then. “So you see, Summer. It was merely a business dinner.”

“Why did the gossip columns post only your pictures with her?”

“Because she was the first one to show up among the group and the paparazzi captured that moment and presented those pictures like we were on a date.”

I sniffle. “Then why did you apologize?” His apology made me think the worse.

“I apologized because my actions somehow hinted that I was seeing other women when I am not.”

“You’re not?” A tear rolls down as I look up at him.

He closes the distance between us and wipes the tear with the pad of his thumb. “Remember the interview when you lied about us being childhood sweethearts?”

My cheeks heat. “How can I forget?”

“Since that day, you imprinted yourself on my mind. I was so occupied by your thoughts that there was no place for any other woman.”

My mouth falls open. Does he mean, like me, he hasn’t been with anyone else since our very first meeting?

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

Flushing red, I say, “I wasn’t supposed to say it out loud.”

“But you did.” The corner of his mouth tilts up and I find myself falling in love with him all over again. Archer and his small smiles. I can never get enough of them.

He sobers up then. “I’m not going to see other women. And you won’t see other men. And that includes dancing. If I catch someone touching what’s mine, there’ll be hell to pay.”

Stroking his chest, I try to calm him down but he jerks me to him. “Now that we cleared your misunderstanding, I want to hear you say it.”

“Say what?”

“That you are mine.”

“I’m yours.” This time when he kisses me, I close my eyes and allow myself to live in the moment. Because I have a new hope. A hope which makes me believe that maybe just maybe I can make Archer fall in love with me. And that little hope trumps the despair I was feeling at the thought of losing him.

In the end, my heart finally wins and my brain loses the tug-of-war of love.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Summer

I turn and lie on my side. Using my hand as a pillow, I stare at Archer in the darkness of his bedroom.

He is stretched out on his back with one arm above his head. The covers are bunched up at his waist, revealing his washboard abs he sleeps peacefully.

We had sex three times. Well, four if I count the shower sex.

Like usual, I started getting dressed because I know we never spend the night together. So imagine my shock when he picked me up and tossed me on his bed.

He removed the panties and bra I had on and pulled me to his chest, cocooning me. “Go to sleep.” He said simply and I couldn’t keep the smile off my face for a solid minute before drifting to sleep.

I woke up a while ago, startled when his leg brushed against mine.

This is my first time sleeping next to someone. It’s different but in a good way.

The contentment I feel watching him sleep is something I have never known.

It’s like filling my lungs with the air of freedom after being trapped for years in my very own prison I had built a long time ago. A place with walls so strong, so impenetrable, no one had access to it.

But then Archer came. And willed me to take a chance.

So I did. By releasing myself from me, I have taken a great risk. A risk that could destroy me but can also give me him. His love.

It's a very scary state to be in. But also stirring.

Is my act of bravery a foolish mistake? Only time will tell. Right now, I just want to live in the moment.

He shifts in his sleep, his brows creasing. I scoot closer and reach him with my index finger to erase his frown gently.

I still when he stirs again and opens his eyes.

"Sorry," I whisper and go to snatch my hand away but he grabs it.

He brushes his lips over my knuckles and my heart pitter-patters in my chest. "What time is it?" He rasps, his voice all rough from sleep.

He is so sexy without even trying.

"Around four in the morning." My breath hitches when he kisses my knuckles distractedly.

"Hmm." He appears deep in thought.

"What?"

"I slept for three hours straight."

"You have insomnia?"

"Something like that." He rubs his eyes.

"Go back to sleep. I won't bother you now." When I try to free my hand, he tightens his grip.

"Why are you up?"

I shrug. "I woke up a while ago and couldn't fall asleep again."

"Come here." He stretches his arm beneath my head and I happily move closer, nuzzling his bare chest.

He runs his hand over my naked back. My nipples tighten in response, grazing his hot skin.

I shiver but it has nothing to do with the temperature of the room. I want him again. My body hums at his mere touch.

“Cold?” He draws me flush against him, rubbing my back.

I shake my head but continue to tremble in his arms. He rolls us over so that I’m lying on my back. He props himself on his elbow. He is fully woken up now and focused on me.

His gaze roves over my face, searching. Then the gaze turns intense. “You want me.”

I turn my head to the side, my cheeks burning. Gosh. He’s seen me naked so many times. Has kissed and licked and tasted every possible inch of my body and yet I feel shy.

“Look at me.”

I obey albeit reluctantly. He brushes his thumb over my still-hot cheek. When my lids flutter close, he stops me again. “Let me.” He rasps. “Let me see the unbridled want for me in your beautiful eyes.”

“Archer...” I inhale deeply.

He pulls the sheet down. Cool air hits my nipples and stomach. A small gasp escapes my lips when his fingertips skim over one hard nipple. I feel the heat blooming over my chest, traveling up my neck.

“So beautiful.” He murmurs and drops his head to kiss the swell of my breast. “So pink.” He kisses his way down to a nipple. Instead of doing what I want him to, he changes course and kisses the underside of my breast.

“Archer,” I moan when he nips at my skin.

“Hmm.” He continues to torture me by peppering open-mouthed kisses all over my chest except for my aching nipples.

“I need...” I arch my back when he gets closer to one nipple.

He stops and looks at me. “What do you need, baby?”

“You know what I need.” I dig my nails into his shoulder.

“Yes, I guess I do.” He smirks. I would’ve swooned if he weren’t torturing me.

“Then stop—” I gasp when his mouth latches on my nipple.

Holding my gaze, he flicks his tongue over the nub before sucking on it hard. My back arches off the bed on a soft cry.

He nips and licks the nipple before repeating it over and over again.

He sucks one relentlessly as his hand pinches and twists the other, alternating between the two, making me incoherent.

Without warning, his hand slips between my legs. He cups my heated core possessively in his palm. "You're soaked." He whispers in my ear and I jerk in his hold, pressing myself against his hand.

"You are everything I want and more." He bites the shell of my ear.

I look at him through hooded eyes, panting. "You mean that?"

He kisses my jaw, then the corner of my mouth before murmuring against my lips. "Yes."

Then he's kissing me.

He pushes a finger inside me, making me gasp in his mouth. There's no talking after that. The only sounds in the room are my panting and his finger slipping in and out of me.

My body buzzes with the need to come. I grip his wrist, breaking the kiss as I feel myself getting close.

His lips trail to my neck, finding the pulse point. He sucks on it as he thrusts another finger inside me.

My body locks when the wave of blinding pleasure hits me. I jerk in his hold, my walls contracting against his digits as I keep coming.

He kisses the side of my face. I'm shaking by the time it ends, feeling his eyes on me.

Lowering his head, he takes my lips in a soft kiss before gripping my legs, spreading them apart.

He lines his cock with my entrance and drives inside me in one go. Groaning, he rests his head on my collarbone. "You make me feel alive."

My arms close around him. He draws back a little and stares at me. “Dig your nails in my back, baby. Make me *feel*.”

I do as he says, I dig my nails in his skin, mark him, and make him feel as he begins moving.

My ability to breathe is wrenched from me by his powerful thrusts. He works me hard, and I love it.

He sucks my nipple, fists my hair, and fucks me like I’m his.

I *am* his.

I writhe beneath him and the tension in my belly intensifies when I feel his finger sliding between my legs. My eyes drift shut.

“Open your eyes.”

I try but fail to do so.

“Summer.”

I open it and a ghost of a smile touches his lips. “Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.”

“Your orgasms are mine.”

“Yes.” I cup his face. Then, “But are you mine?”

That’s when my second orgasm creeps up on me, leaving me a shaking mess. Tears leak from my eyes, the climax turning me boneless.

That night he fucks me one more time before going back to sleep. And as I lay in his arms, awake, I try not to think how he never answered my question.



The next morning, I wake up to the sound of barking. I chalk it up to a dream but when something jumps on me, my eyes fly open.

“Goldie?” I stare at the shocking sight of him walking all over Archer’s bed.

I find a robe draped on the chair beside the bed. I reach it and quickly put it on. It is so big, my frame is drowning in it.

When I turn, I find him rolling over the mattress, shedding his golden hair all over Archer's dark sheets.

Climbing on the bed, I take him on my lap. "You can't do that, Goldie."

He licks my chin.

"You missed me?" I kiss his head. When he licks my face again, I squeeze him in a hug. "Aww, I missed you too, bud." I am in the middle of nuzzling him when I freeze.

Pulling back, I stare at him. "How did you get here?"

Putting him back on the bed, I fetch my phone from the nightstand. There is a text from Archer.

Archer: I went to pick up your dog from the daycare when they'd called your phone this morning. You were sleeping so peacefully, I didn't want to wake you.

Oh, there's another one.

Archer: I'm volunteering at the dog shelter right now and will go to work directly. I've left your breakfast in the oven.

I'm smiling wide by the time I get to the third and final text from him he sent little over an hour ago.

Archer: I forgot to mention that I bought dog food earlier when I was driving Goldie home. I left it by the foyer table.

Hugging the phone to my chest, I fall back on the bed, giggling.

I twist to the side and find Goldie regarding me with a tilted head. Sitting up, I clear my throat.

I brush the hair from my face and tuck it behind my ears. "Pretend you did not see that."

He literally squints his eyes at me. I'm not even exaggerating. I gape at him. "Mommy is happy, okay? Don't burst my bubble just yet."

When he still sends judgy looks my way, I say, "You hungry, baby boy?"

The change in him is instant. His enthusiastic bark makes me laugh.

After we finish eating, I gather my hair and secure it in a messy bun on top of my head. "Time to clean up," I announce, locking eyes with Goldie.

I start with Archer's bedroom, sweeping off any hair Goldie shed on the sheets, then make his bed. After that, I clean the table I ate at and at last wash the dishes.

"Phew." I wipe my forehead. "Mission successful."

Scanning the surroundings, I notice something is missing.

"Goldie!" I run toward the door and release a long breath when I see the door is locked.

I call out his name two more times before he waltzes out of a hallway. I gasp out loud when I see what he's carrying in his mouth.

"Goldie!" I dash toward him and sink to my knees, color draining from my face. "Where did you get that?" I scold him as I try to remove Archer's leather shoe from his mouth.

"Don't tell me you were in his walk-in closet!" I yell and tug but he doesn't budge.

"Bad boy, Goldie! Give it to me!" I try to ease my grip because first, I don't want to harm my baby's teeth, and second, I don't want to ruin Archer's shoe.

A light bulb goes off in my head. "Goldie, let's go out!" I cry out and he releases the shoe, making me collapse on my back.

He jumps over me and takes off toward the door, while I lie panting on Archer's living room floor. "N-no treat for you for a month," I say between breaths.

I swallow, licking my lips. Just when my heartbeats return to normal, the doorbell rings. My eyes widen.

It can't be Archer as he's probably at work. And even if he did change his plan and decided to come here, he sure as hell wouldn't ring the bell.

I scramble off the ground unceremoniously and dart to the door.

Archer will be furious if I answered the door without checking who's on the other side. He is awfully strict about my safety. He has lectured me countless times about the same.

"It's non-negotiable for me." He had said one night when I answered the door in seconds after hearing him knock. I remember the burn on my behind from his palm after I argued with him about it. He had spanked me until I agreed to be careful.

I peer through the peephole and find a woman with salt and pepper hair. She is facing away from the door so I can't see her face.

Quickly wiping the perspiration off my face, I open the door. "Hello!"

She gives a start and whirls around. We both stare at each other with shock.

"This is Archer's apartment, no?" She asks in a soft accented voice.

"It is." I finally speak, flustered. Scratching my hair, I speak, "I'm Summer, his neighbor." I don't know what else to say. Then, "And you are?" I ask even though I know the answer.

"I'm Archer's mother."



Archer definitely got his silky straight hair from his mother. I knew Asians look a lot younger than their age and the proof is standing in front of me.

Dressed in a full sleeve navy dress, she doesn't look a day more than forty. Her chin length hair is parted at the side, showcasing her diamond studs. She is slim and shorter than me by few inches.

"*Omo*," Her eyes go big when Goldie sprints toward her.

"Goldie, no!" I catch him before he could get any closer and lift him in my arms.

"I'm so sorry." My cheeks warm with embarrassment.

Jesus H. Christ.

I am in Archer's robe, my face flushed and a dog in my arms. My messy bun is messier and I am sweating even when the climate is chilly.

Nobody should see me like this, least of all the mother of the man I love. She must think I am a homeless person squatting in her son's apartment.

She puts the bags on the floor she was carrying and smiles at us. "*Gwiyeowo.*"

"I'm sorry?"

"Sorry." She holds out her palms, chuckling softly. "Sometimes, I forget to switch in English. I said you both are cute."

"Ohh," I release a breath. "Thank you so much." I walk backward. "Please have a seat. Would you like a drink? Water? Coffee? Tea? Beer?" I cringe at the end.

Her shoulders shake with silent laughter. "I'm good. Thank you for asking, dear. Let me put these in the pantry. I'll be back."

"Just a minute, Mrs. Kim. I'll help you." I bend and set Goldie down.

"No, no. I've got it. You sit here, I'll join you in a few minutes." She smiles.

I can only nod as she sets to work.

I should change but the clothes from last night's party isn't that better from this robe. The mini skirt is too short and the top is too revealing. At least this big robe covers most of my body.

Mrs. Kim joins me when she's done and sits on the sofa chair beside the couch.

"This is for you." She gives me a container.

"What is it?"

"Kimchi. I got it for Archer because he loves it." Then, "It's a Korean—"

"Oh, I know Kimchi! I've seen it in lots of Korean dramas but never tried it. Thank you so much!" Then my smile

vanishes. “But you brought it for him.” I attempt to give it back but she stops me by placing her hands on mine.

“I packed plenty. You take this.”

“Okay,” I say and keep it on the table.

She says something in Korean again before standing. At my puzzled expression, she says, “I made tea for us and forgot to bring it.”

“Oh, I’ll come with you.” I jump up before she can say no and follow her to the kitchen.

After we’re back in the living room, she pets Goldie who’s sitting by her chair.

I’m sipping my tea when she asks abruptly, “Are you my son’s girlfriend?”

I choke on the hot liquid, coughing, tears stinging my eyes.

She is beside me in a blink. Taking the cup from my hand, she rests it on the table before patting my back gently.

“*Gwenchanayo?* Are you okay, dear?”

I nod frantically even though it takes a solid minute to stop coughing. “I-I’m okay.”

“I’ll get you some water.” The kind woman starts to stand but I stop her.

“I’m okay, Mrs. Kim, really.” She sits back down albeit reluctantly.

“Did my question startle you?” She asks in that cute accent.

“A little.” I blush, looking down at my lap.

“If you are not, I want you to be his girlfriend.” She says and my head snaps up. She is grinning. “You are very beautiful. Especially your eyes.”

“Thank you but I’m not—”

“It’s your personal matter. I shouldn’t interfere.” Then, “But I am happy he’s seeing someone.”

“I should call him and let him know you’re here.”

“Oh, no. Don’t do that. He would get angry.” Her smile turns sad. “He doesn’t like me dropping by unannounced. But I missed him.”

“He was volunteering at the dog shelter this morning, that’s why he left early,” I tell her to distract her because I don’t like the sorrow in her voice.

It kind of works. She begins telling me about the shelters he supports and the work he does by taking time out of his busy schedule. Her eyes shine with pride as she talks about her son.

I also learn about the properties he owns in Malibu. She and Archer’s father reside in the mansion there. Archer purposely moved here because he wanted solitude. She gets that somber look again.

“That’s why I come by sometimes, especially on weekdays so I can catch him for a few minutes.”

“I’m sure he wants to see you just as much but due to his hectic schedule he barely gets free time,” I say a white lie.

A genuine smile blooms on her face at that. When she reaches up and strokes my hair, my throat goes tight. Her tender touch reminds me of Mom.

We talk some more and an hour flies by. “I must leave now. His Abeoji might be wondering where I am.”

When she stands, I follow suit. “It was lovely meeting you, Mrs. Kim. Despite all this.” I motion at my robe, giving her a sheepish smile.

“Best things happen unexpectedly.” She grins.

“It sure does.”

“You eat the Kimchi and let me know how it is.” She reaches inside her purse and gives me a card. “This is my personal number.”

I take it and smile. “All right.”

“You said you watch Korean dramas, maybe we can talk about dramas over the phone.” She suggests and I can’t help my grin.

“Oh, really? I love talking about dramas! It’s my favorite pastime.”

We spend another few minutes chatting about the dramas we are currently watching.

We are at the door and I am sad that she has to go. She might be feeling the same because she turns to me and says, “We should do dinner.”

“Yes, please.” My response is swift. We grin at each other like two new besties.

“Are you free this weekend?” She asks, her voice hopeful.

I am booked throughout the weekend for shoots but I’ll make time. Because it feels like getting a second chance with my mother. I nod frantically. “I am.”

“Great. I’ll plan a day out on Sunday for the two of us.”

“Perfect.” I smile. She surprises me by hugging me. My nose tingles as I hug her back.

I can’t wait for Sunday.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Summer

Mia comes running toward me as soon as she spots me getting off the elevator.

“Hey,” I grin at her. I am in a great mood ever since I made plans with Mrs. Kim this morning. I’m on cloud nine.

“Hey!” She breathes harshly. Then as a total Mia move, gets distracted and says, “Cute outfit.”

I glance down at my neon form-fitted top, plum shorts, and bright blue top coat. “Thank you!” Then I look back up. “Why were you running, though?”

“Oh, yes! I forgot.” She shakes her head then clutches my arm. “Come with me.” She practically drags me through the long hallways to the cubicles where Brielle, Nina, Jason, Chris and just about everyone are sitting around a figure perched on a chair.

Heads turn our way as we come to a stop. Except for the one in the chair which is facing away. Slowly, it turns, revealing none other than Hannah.

Raleigh picks that moment to make an entry with hands full of snacks. He drags one chair next to Hannah’s and flops down. “Did I miss anything?”

“No. You’re on time.” Hannah replies, watching me.

“Uh... what’s going on?” I glance around.

Mia ushers me forward. Someone takes my backpack off my shoulder. Then a second later, I'm being hauled to the empty chair at the dead center of the small crowd which faces the two Creative Directors of KIM Advertising—Hannah and Raleigh.

I reach up and touch my neon bucket hat nervously. “Why are y'all acting so weird?”

No response. A sudden sound pierces the awkward silence and I jump and my head snaps at Raleigh who just tore a bag of chips. He stuffs his face with handfuls of chips then passes it to Hannah. She takes one and gracefully takes a small bite, all while staring at me.

The others start munching on snacks Raleigh brought. The air fills with delicious smell and I swallow hard. I stare longingly at them as they eat. Nobody offers me anything. This feels like a punishment.

“What's happening?”

“You tell me.” Hannah's lips twitches.

“What? I am so confused right now.” My gaze strays to Raleigh as he devours the chips. I gulp again.

Sighing, Raleigh wheels his chair closer to me and holds out a crispy potato chip, I waste no time into opening my mouth and taking the whole thing inside.

Everyone groans in protests. “Raleigh!”

He throws his hands up. “What? I can't sit here and watch her staring at us while we eat. It's not fair.”

I smile internally. He and I know what's it like to sleep on an empty stomach. The pangs of hunger. The never-ending cramps when you could smell food but could never get to eat it.

Raleigh gives me the entire bag of chips along with my favorite chocolate milkshake and wheels his chair back.

Hannah pulls his cheek, smiling. “So sweet.”

He scowls. “I'm not sweet.”

Hannah just laughs softly.

“Can someone tell me what’s going on?” I slurp the shake, my feet swinging back and forth happily. I’ll have to spend extra time on the treadmill tonight to burn the calories but this sweetness galore is so worth it.

Brielle shoots me a sheepish look. “Well, we kind of wanted to bribe you with your favorite snacks in exchange of information.”

Nina chuckles. “That was your idea, babe.”

“Fine. Yeah, it was.” Brielle grumbles. Then, “But can you blame me?”

I frown. “What are you talking about? Information about what?”

“About you and Archer,” Hannah says, making me topple over. I right myself and clear my throat.

Raleigh narrows his blue eyes. “Don’t even bother lying, Summer. We were there at Freddie’s last night. We saw how Archer whisked you off to God knows where.”

“He was seconds away from crushing Freddie’s pretty face underneath his expensive shoe.” Brielle giggles.

“And the way he looked at you? Swoon!” Mia fans herself.

My face is beet red as they continue. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a group of interns giving me a stink eye.

Brielle wheels her chair next to mine, startling me. “Give us the deets, biatch!”

I stare at Hannah, my gaze imploring.

“Do tell. Even I want to know.” Hannah smirks, making me gasp.

In the excitement of meeting Archer’s mother, it slipped my mind what happened last night. How am I going to salvage this? Will Archer be pissed if I confirm their speculations?

Well, they are not speculating. Judging by their questions and comments, they are sure that there’s something going on between the bossman and me.

“It’s fairly new,” I mumble and the room breaks out in audible gasps and excited chatter.

Raleigh jumps up. “How can you hide it from me?”

“I-I...”

“Forget about ever driving my Harley.”

I stand and squint at him. “No effing way.”

“For a year.”

I gasp. “Are you kidding me?”

“I’m dead serious.”

“You hide things from me, too!”

“You were the first one I confessed to about having feelings for Hannah!”

“Because I kind of helped you into realizing the said feelings, dickhead!”

“Semantics.”

“Harley stays out of this.” I point a finger at him.

“I don’t think so.” He smirks. “You think Archer would let you ride a Harley if he got wind about your thing for speed?”

I gape at him. The asshole grins at my stunned face. He got me there. Archer is very particular about my safety and he would totally have a fit if he knew I sometimes borrow Raleigh’s bike for fun.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I definitely would.”

“Keep Archer out of it.” I glower at him.

“Keep me out of what?” The group fall quiet as I feel him at my back.

“Nothing.” I squeak and try to escape but stumble. Archer clutches my upper arms.

The teasing “oohs” and “aahs” from the group make me blush hard.

“Boss!” Brielle grins as she looks over my shoulder at Archer. “Are you guys dating?”

He pulls me at his side. “What do you think?”

My head whips up and I find him already staring at me.

The entire floor goes crazy after that. Am I dreaming? Did Archer subtly claim me as his in front of his employees? Damn.

I thought he’d be angry at the rumors about us. I never imagined him to be so cool about it.

“All right, enough. Get to work.” He orders. Then leave but not before giving my arm one last squeeze.



“How does it feel?” I ask Archer the following night as I work on a knot in his shoulders.

He makes a sound that tells me he likes what I am doing. It’s strange that I understand his moods based on the sounds he makes.

Archer is not talkative like me but he is an expert in expressing himself through a single arch of his eyebrow or a simple *hmm*. Like now.

We are at his place. We had sex a while ago and are hanging out.

He is shirtless and currently sitting on the rug with his back pressed against the side of the bed, working on his laptop. And I am perched on the bed Indian style, massaging his neck and shoulders.

I love this. Us. He likes to spend time with me outside of sex.

We fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. He is silence to my loquacious. Peace to my chaos. Ying to my yang.

He listens to me going on and on without any complains. And I don’t get pissed at his silent treatment anymore. I find it comforting.

Goldie emerges from his walk-in closet with his gray tie in his mouth. “You should lock your closet when we are around,” I

grumble and move to get the tie from him but Archer grabs my hand.

I watch with round eyes as Goldie walks over him and flops down beside Archer.

Without taking his eyes off the laptop screen, he holds out a hand, Goldie drops the chewed wet tie on his palm. As a reward, Archer pets him, scratching at his favorite spots. Goldie revels under his attentions, his ears bending backwards.

Leaning down, I wrap my arms around his neck and press a kiss to his temple.

“My baby likes you a great deal.”

“Yeah?” he stops typing and turns his head to look at me.

“Mm-hmm.” I kiss his nose.

“What about his mama?”

“Oh, she’s still on the fence about it.”

He raises a brow. “Is that right?”

“Yeah.” My heart does that free fall again when he smiles at me.

Kissing my lips softly, he returns to his work.

I still can’t believe this man made our relationship official this morning.

Without any words, he reassured me. Proved to me that my decision of staying with him was not wrong.

I listened to my heart and didn’t end our arrangement nor did I force him into acknowledging that what we have is more than just sex. And my patience paid off.

Archer accepting our relationship in public was a big step. He wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t value us.

While I am still unsure about how deep his feelings are for me, I am happy that he wants more too.

Because why else would he make it official?

It warms my heart that Archer accepts me for who I am.

In the past, it used to hurt thinking I am completely opposite of his ideal type. But Archer isn't ashamed of me. He likes me and my colors. I see it in his eyes.

When he says that he wants me and only me, it makes me fall for him harder.

Snuggling him, I ask, "What are you working on?"

"A new concept for our on-going project."

"The one I am the lead model of? But Raleigh and Hannah already have one ready, no?"

"Yes, and yes. But I like to have plan B in spare just in case."

"Okay." I kiss his light stubble before returning to massaging him. My eyes fall on his back tattoos and I pause.

"Archer..."

"Hmm."

"When did you get these?" I trace the outline of one small tattoo of a leafless tree.

His typing stops, his muscles tensing under my touch.

I shake my head internally. Me and my big mouth. I shouldn't have brought it up.

I am about to change the topic when he says, "It was a long time ago."

"Do they have a meaning?"

He shakes his head and lets out a humorless chuckle. "My *life* didn't have much meaning back then."

"Why would you say that?"

Shutting his laptop, he hangs his head.

Scrambling off the bed, I move down and sit on the other side of Archer.

"I wasn't always the Archer Kim everyone knows now."

I take his hand in mine and interlink our fingers.

He looks at me slowly. Then raises our joined hands up and presses a kiss on my fingers. He then looks at Goldie who has

his paws resting on his thigh. “I don’t deserve this.”

“Please don’t say that,” I whisper.

“I wasn’t a good person, Summer.” He says in a hoarse, raw voice, making my heart shrink.

“I don’t believe that.”

He gives me a sad smile before getting to his feet. I know what he’s doing. He’s shutting me out again. He is retreating back. I can’t let that happen.

When he turns to leave, I wrap my arms around him from behind.

“I lost my mother in fire when I was six.” He tries to turn but I hold tight, not quite ready to face him.

The sorrow I feel at uttering those words out loud almost bring me to my knees.

A shudder runs down my spine as that dreadful night flashes in front of my eyes. Tears burn my eyes.

I don’t know why I’m doing this but the words tumble out of me. “My mom was only sixteen when she met my dad. He was eighteen then and belonged to a powerful family in the county. Though they started dating when my mom turned eighteen, she was in love with him for years. Because it was love at first sight for her.”

“I don’t want to hear the duck’s story!” I pout, sitting up.

Mommy sighs and closes the storybook. “All right, then how about—”

“I wanna hear your story.”

“My story?”

I nod, hugging my doll. “Tell me how you fell in love with Daddy.”

She gives me one of her soft smiles and recites her love story for the umpteenth time.

I smile through tears as I recall persuading mom into telling me her story again and again. I never understood my fascination

then but as I grew up, realization dawned on me that the younger version of me wasn't really different from me.

I latched on to the love story of my parents because it was my escape. By listening to Mom reminiscing the good days I used to pretend that everything is well between them. Before I was born.

“My father’s family had big plans for him. His future was planned for him. But one news ruined those plans. The news of my mother’s pregnancy.”

For a moment, Goldie’s breathing is the only sound filling the silence of the room.

My mother always used to tell me a sugarcoated version of her story. But one day, when she was having a really bad day, her dam broke and she told me everything.

She had no one to talk to. So she unveiled her darkest secrets to a six-year child who couldn’t understand much then but her words came to haunt her later in life.

Archer’s hands cover mine and squeeze. I draw in strength from his touch.

“My father was sensible enough to man up and take responsibility. He married her and in return was disowned by his family. With no college degree, Dad had to resort to odd jobs to make a living. But still they were happy together. In love. But that love began fading away soon after my birth. As mom was a housewife, Dad felt pressured because he was the sole earner.”

Archer remains still, his hands gripping mine.

“They began fighting when he started drinking. It became worse as years went by. And as his drinking got worse, his verbal outburst turned to slaps. And then those slaps turned to fists.” My lip tremble and I stop for a moment.

“Baby...”

“No. I want to do this.” I murmur then continue, “She always used to lock me in my bedroom. To protect me from his wrath. Never let him lay a finger on me. The constant living in fear pushed her into depression. She was on medications. There were times when she confessed on giving up on life but she kept

fighting for me. Then one day Dad broke her completely. He hit me.” I pinch my eyes shut.

My palms are sweaty, my legs shaking.

“You have one fucking responsibility, Chelsea. One. And that’s to look after our daughter and you suck at that too.”

“I-I...”

He grabs her jaw, squeezing hard. “She is falling behind in school because of you.”

Fisting my fingers, I run to him and bump my head on his thigh as hard as possible. Then I pound my fists into his leg and push my way between them. “Stay away from her.”

Mom gasps and tries to pull me back but I don’t stop. I keep hitting the man who is nothing less of a monster.

He draws back his hand and slaps me hard across the face, making me fall on the floor.

Mom screams and starts toward me but Dad pulls her back with a hand in her hair. With blurred vision, I see him slapping her then everything goes black.

A guttural sob tears through my throat.

“Shh...” Archer holds me tight in his arms. I don’t know when he turned and how we both ended up on the floor with me on his lap but all I know is that he is here. I can do this. I can be brave.

“When I regained consciousness, our house was on fire and she was lying on the floor, her eyes unseeing. He’d killed my mother, Archer. She could’ve been alive if it weren’t for me. I was the only one thing that shackled her with that man. She was in that abusive marriage only because of me. She died because of me.”

“No, no. Don’t say that.” His face contorts in pain. With a hand to the back of my head, he hugs me to his chest. “It’s not your fault.”

I let it all out, my breath-robbing sobs muffled as I break in his arms.

That day my own father had left me and my mom to die. He didn't bother checking if we were alive and set the house on fire so he could blame our death to fire.

With my mom's death, I was truly an orphan. That murderer was nothing to me. My mom was my everything. She was my dad, my mom, my friend, my sister. My whole world.

I had spent some days hating her because she left me alone in this world where only bad people exists.

When I was placed in the foster home, I cried and begged God to take me to my mom. But all I got was agony. Both mentally and physically.

After a certain period of time, the beatings I received from the Samsons started feeling child's play in front of the pain I was carrying in my heart. So much pain.

I was naïve to think that suffering from this much pain could end my existence but God wasn't that merciful.

Then Raleigh and Damian entered my life and gave me a reason to live.

There will always be hollowness within me. My life will always be incomplete without my mother but I will keep on living a happy life. Because she sacrificed hers for mine.

I'll keep on wearing bright colors because that's her legacy. Something which gave her happiness. And in turn, made me happy.

When my sobs subside, I speak in a dead voice. "My father was arrested that same day. And a few years later, he took his life in prison."

Pulling back, I take his face in my hands. "The only reason I told you this is so you can see how I have learned to forgive myself. I don't know what happened with you, but if I can deserve all this, so can you." I murmur then kiss his forehead as fresh tears stream down my face. He crushes me in his arms.

We stay like this for a long time before he gets up and carries me to the bathroom. He runs me a bath and looks after me like an attentive partner.

Later, he makes love to me. Slow and sensual like never before and helps me forget my sorrows.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Summer

“Well?” Archer asks as I chew thoughtfully.

Swallowing, I lean against the seat while he continues to wait for my answer. I make a show of taking a long breath then releasing it, looking here and there. Then finally at him.

“I love it.” I grin.

He releases a breath then rolls his eyes. “Brat.”

“I heard that!” I pout, folding my arms over my chest.

We are in a Korean BBQ restaurant—Quarters—in Koreatown. This is my first time here.

Archer frequents this place with his star employees. It feels good to be a part of his inner circle.

“Eat.” He places a piece of meat on my plate with his chopsticks.

I try to hide my shock. In Korean dramas, I have seen numerous scenes where the hero always shares his food with the heroine. It’s a way of showing affection to your significant other in their culture. And seeing Archer doing that with me makes me giddy! Happy! Over the moon happy!

Suppressing my smile, I begin eating.

“This feels like a date.”

“It’s not.” He answers and my face falls.

“Right.” I look down.

“I’ll take you out on a proper date this weekend.”

My head snaps up so fast, I almost had a whiplash. “You will?”

He takes my hand in his and lifts it to his lips. Brushing a soft kiss on my knuckles, he says, “Yeah.”

“But you’re so busy with our on-going project.”

“Never too busy for you.” He says and my insides turn all mushy.

“But you have to help me out if I fuck up. I’m new to this. I’ve never dated.” He grimaces.

“Ever?” My mouth agape.

When he confirms, I giggle.

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“No,” I shake my head. “It’s just... I wouldn’t know if you did fuck up because I’ve never dated either.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to rely on google.” He says with a hint of humor.

“I guess we’ll be all right but just don’t pick any extravagant place for the date.”

“Why not?”

“Well, those places have dress codes and I don’t usually fit in those.” I motion to myself, specifically my outfit—a cute vintage dress with orange pantyhose and black high heeled boots.

“Then I’ll simply book the entire place for you.” He says, pinning me with his gaze, making me blush like a teenager.

My heart beats a bit louder and I can’t help the smile on my lips, feeling giddy as I gaze across the table at the man I love.

I never thought I could have a love story of my own much less one with a happy ending. He makes me believe that an orphan like me could dream of a happy ending too.

Then a thought assaults me, wiping the smile off my face. “Or we could just stay at home and order in. The tabloids are keeping tabs on you, Archer. We dodged the paparazzi on our way here but we can’t get lucky every day. Did you forget the recent articles about you? if they spot you with me—a model with questionable fashion sense—just after your alleged date with the mystery girl, they’ll have a field day. They won’t hesitate ruining your image.” I shake my head. “I think we should avoid going out for the time being.”

“If I want to take you out on a date, I will take you out on a date. I don’t give two fucks about what others think of me or your fashion sense for that matter. You shouldn’t either. Nobody can pull off the looks you create, Summer. Your style is unique and it suits you. Fuck what people think.”

“You’re missing the point here. It’s not about me. It’s about you and your reputation. The character assassination is not worth it.”

“Let me be the judge of that.” He says with a growl.

“Archer—”

“Food’s getting cold.” He dismisses the topic and I shake my head. He can be insufferable sometimes. There’s no way I can win when it comes to him. Be it an argument or love. I lost my heart to him a long time ago, the argument is nothing in front of it.

But then I remember something important. “Oh, I forgot to mention. I have plans this weekend. Sunday to be precise.”

His chopsticks halt mid-air. “Yeah? Work?”

“Nope.”

“Another party with the creative team?”

“Not really.”

He places the chopsticks down and watches me with the intensity of a predator. “Explain, baby before my patience runs out.”

My body reacts to the low threat along with that heated look.

I'm helpless when it comes to his voice. Because it sounds more deeper when he is all worked up.

Letting out a sigh, I shoot him a mock scowl. "I can't even tease you without you throwing a fit about it."

"Throwing a fit?" He lowers his brows and I gulp.

"Well, you know..."

"I don't, baby. Tell me."

"You're incorrigible."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Now tell me about your *plans*."

Too excited to tell him, I yield. "I'm meeting your mother for dinner on Sunday!"

"What?"

"I forgot to tell you. Your mom came by yesterday when you weren't home. She is such a sweetheart. We quickly bonded over tea and talked about k-dramas. And when she suggested dinner on Sunday, I agreed." I grin, then grab my phone from the table, about to show him my fun text conversation with her when he abruptly says, "Cancel it."

I look up. "What?"

"Cancel it. You don't have to meet her."

My face falls. "But I want to. We... clicked." She makes my heart warm.

"All the more reason to avoid meeting her."

"But why? I am really looking forward to—"

"You don't understand, Summer. If you go to meet her, she'll want to meet you again and again."

"What's wrong in that?" I ask in a small voice.

"She'll start imagining our future together, wedding and kids and all that bullshit."

Bullshit? I would've used that same word to describe those things in the past.

But now, building a life together with Archer doesn't sound like bullshit. It sounds wonderful.

I yearned for the familial love all my life. But never dared to obtain it. Never let anyone close. But with Archer? I want it all. I am willing to hope again. I am willing to dream again. A dream of having a family who loves me. A family I would belong to.

"I don't think that's bullshit, Archer." I peer at him nervously, my heart thudding in my chest.

He stills, a shadow of something close to grief crosses his eyes. And in a blink, it's gone. "You'll not meet Eomma. Trust me, it's for the best."

"Can I meet her once? Just this one time?" I ask hopefully.

He shakes his head. "It's not a good idea, Summer."

I remain quiet. It's strange how the thought of not meeting Mrs. Kim could stir such emotional turmoil in me.

Maybe he is right. I was being too greedy. I should stay away and cancel the plan as he asked. It's the right thing to do. Then why does it feel so wrong? Why is it hurting so bad?

It sucks, you know. Just a minute ago, I was happy and now, the high is ripped from me.

"What am I going to tell her?" My voice is weak.

"I'm sure you'll come up with something believable as you're good at lying." I flinch as if he slapped me across the face.

He said it casually but those words drive straight into my heart like little daggers.



It has been two days since that lunch. And I'm trying. I really am. I have been trying really hard to forget his words but they somehow snake inside my mind without any warning.

I'm sure you'll come up with something believable as you're good at lying.

He is right. I *am* good at it. But it has been pricking me like a thorn in my side. I tried reasoning with myself. That he didn't mean it to come out as a taunt.

In the past, I never used to let other's opinion or taunts get the better of me. I never let it bother me.

But it's different with Archer. Every glance, word and action of his affects me greatly. Because of my feelings for him.

Now his little acts of tenderness make my heart soar and at the same time his bluntness cuts me deep. Deeper than it's supposed to. Because I love him.

My inner voice is urging me to confess my love but I silence it every time.

Though I am brave enough to start loving someone, I am still not ready for the rejection.

I love him but I am too scared of him not loving me back.

That's why without any more arguments, I did as he told. I lied to his mother and I did it with trembling fingers and brimming eyes.

It kind of hurt that he doesn't understand me.

I stripped bare and showed him the wounds on my heart by telling him about my mother. He should've known that this was important for me. I practically begged him for letting me meet Mrs. Kim.

But I am trying to understand. It must be hard for him. All the change. Letting someone in. Because he *is* changing for me albeit slowly. And it matters.

I just hope he talks to me. He rejected my bonding with his mother but didn't bother explaining why. He just said it's for the best. He takes away my right to decide by deciding things on my behalf.

I am not an expert on how relationships work but I think communication is the basic element of every relationship. And Archer just doesn't communicate with me.

Maybe with time, he will change that aspect too. Maybe he'll let me in someday like I did. Maybe he'll decide to be brave for

us. A girl can dream.

“What should we do tonight?” I ask Goldie as we chill on the living room floor of Archer’s apartment.

He is happily chewing on his new toy Archer bought while I am braiding my hair.

It’s almost nine p.m. He should’ve been home by now. Home. I am now referring his place as home. It feels like Goldie and I have moved in with Archer.

We even have a spare key to each other’s apartment but I mostly spend my nights here.

Archer doesn’t say it, but he likes having us here. He gets this soft look in his eyes whenever I open the door for him.

His place doesn’t look lifeless anymore because now it has colors. My colors.

Little by little, I have decorated his place with my touch. Like the rug I’m sitting on for instance. It’s multicolored. I bought it and replaced it when he wasn’t around.

All he did was stare at it for a few seconds then moved on. Without making a fuss about it. I was waiting for him to scold me or something but he didn’t. So, yeah. He is definitely changing. Except for his working hours.

He said he’ll try coming home earlier than ten but he’s still not here.

And when I am all alone, I start overthinking like I was doing moments ago.

Lying down next to Goldie, I stare blankly at the ceiling. “I don’t like this feeling.” I touch my stomach.

Goldie drops his ball and scoots closer to me. Resting his cute little face on my chest, he watches me. “We should do something to distract ourselves.”

He mews and I stroke his back. Then I sit up suddenly, startling him. “I have an idea.” I grin.



I am just setting the dining table when the doorbell rings. Goldie and I look at each other. “Daddy’s home.” I grin and he lets out a bark and takes off.

Wiping my hands on the apron, I cross the living room and reach the door. I tuck a few strands that escaped my braid before opening the door.

“Hey!” I breathe.

He is standing a few feet away but I can still smell the faint hint of his cologne.

His Armani suit jacket was hanging from his forearm, while the tie is pulled loose, the top buttons of his shirt undone. His hair is slightly messy giving him a sexy look. My heart thumps in my chest.

He comes to me in one long step and captures my lips in a long warm kiss that leaves me short of breath. “Hey.” He says against my lips and then draws back.

Goldie jumps on Archer’s leg, demanding his attention. He reaches down and pets him.

Brushing his fingers across my cheek, he pulls it back. “What were you doing, baby?” He asks eyeing his flour covered fingers.

I step back and run to the nearest mirror and peer at my reflection.

My temple and nose are covered in flour. Shit. I rub it off my face.

Even my hello kitty oversized t-shirt is covered in it.

Archer comes into view as he stops behind me. Wrapping his arms around me, he kisses my temple.

“Don’t. I’m all dirty.”

He gives me a look that says I don’t care and presses another kiss in my hair. “You’ve been busy.”

“Oh, yes!” I turn in his arms and grin at him. “I made dinner.”

“You did?” He strokes a thumb over my chin, probably to wipe the flour.

“Mm-hmm. Homemade pasta.” I tell him eagerly. Then, “Oh, I forgot you take a shower first. Lemme put it in the oven. It’ll get cold!” I move to turn but he doesn’t release me.

“Let’s eat. I’ll shower later.”

“But—” He releases me and slaps my ass.

“Feed me, woman.” He says and I bounce to the dining table where the pasta, meatballs and several other dishes are placed.

Pulling a chair, I say, “Your table, sir.”

He takes off his tie as he approaches the table, a rare smile grazing his lips. Ruffling my hair, he sits down.

Goldie stands beside me with a red scarf around his neck. I make a mental note of buying a chef outfit for him later.

After filling Archer’s plate with little bit of everything, I stand to his side.

He looks up. “You’re not going to join me?”

“I will. After you taste it.” I clasp my hands eagerly, grinning. Tipping my chin, I waggle my brows. “Go ahead. Try it.”

When he picks up his fork, I jerk. “Stop!”

“What happened?”

“I forgot something. I’ll be back.” I dash toward his kitchen and grab a bottle of red wine from the huge built-in wine cabinet then sprint back out.

“Shit, I forgot the glass!” I make a U-turn.

I’m panting by the time I’m pouring the wine in the glass.

He gently grabs my hand, takes the bottle and rests it on the table. Getting up, he pulls the chair beside him. “Sit.”

“But—”

His lips thin in a line as he stares at me blankly.

“Fine,” I grumble as I take a seat. Then I watch him uncuffing his shirt sleeves and rolling them up before fixing me a plate. Then finally, he sits back down.

I push his plate toward him and watch with bated breath as he takes his first bite. He chews it slowly before swallowing hard,

his face blank.

“The pasta is a bit overcooked but it’s my first try, so…” I motion him to try the other dish.

He does the same. Takes a bite then chews it slowly before swallowing it.

“You know I am a natural. All it took was a bunch of YouTube videos to figure out how to cook.”

On his third bite, he stops mid-air. “This was your first attempt?”

“Crazy, right? I didn’t know I could cook. I mean I used to experiment with ramen now and again but didn’t know I could cook an actual meal up until now.” I give him a surprised smile.

He drinks his wine then continues eating.

“How is it?”

“Hmm.” Is all he says before swallowing another bite.

I roll my eyes and pick up my fork. “Fine, don’t tell me. I’ll taste it myself.” My fork is wrenched from my fingers before I can blink.

“What the hell?”

The realization comes slow and late but clearer. “Pass me the bottle of water.” I motion to his side. As soon as he turns, I snatch the fork and taste the pasta.

“Summer!” Archer tries to stop me but it’s too late.

“Ohgof,” I choke and grab few tissues and spit. Too much salt, too much garlic, too much everything! God, how did he eat this crap?

Archer sighs, unscrews the bottle of water and hands it to me.

I gulp down half the content. “Those YouTube chefs are scammers!”

He laughs. Archer Kim laughs. And it’s not a chuckle or a snort of amusement. It’s a full-blown laughter. It’s long and loud, his shoulders shaking.

For a moment, I am too stunned to do anything. Afraid the moment would be over if I so much as breathed wrong.

My heart takes it all in, my eyes taking a video, filing it in my memories so I could replay it over and over later.

Then his laughter dies down slowly, he looks down, the smile completely wiped off his face now. He gets up. “Order whatever you want. I’m going to take a shower.”

My appetite vanishes. I grab his hand before he could shut me out completely. “Archer...”

He doesn’t even look at me. As if he doesn’t even want to give me a glimpse of his feelings that might be reflecting in his eyes.

“Summer, don’t.” His voice isn’t hard. It’s brimming with sadness.

I want to take him in my arms and beg him to open up to me. I don’t care about my self-esteem at this point. I want him to stop feeling that he doesn’t deserve happiness. I want to ask him why he feels this way.

I desperately cling to his hand, telling him without words that I am here for him and that he doesn’t have to run from me. That he can trust me and let me in.

“Please.” He says hoarsely and my grip loosens. I let him go and watch as he walks away from me.



That night sleep didn’t come. I lay awake next to Archer, the scene from the dinner playing on loop in my mind. My heart is still aching from the way he pulled away from me.

One moment he was behaving like a perfect boyfriend and the other, he made me feel like an outsider. A stranger who isn’t allowed to peek inside him.

Will it always be like this between us?

He may be sleeping next to me but it feels like we are miles apart.

Closing my eyes, I will myself to fall asleep. But the thoughts keep running in my head, loud and screeching.

I twist and turn, changing sides to find a comfortable position to sleep. But nothing helps.

When almost an hour passes, I give up. The gloominess won't go unless I distract myself. I should listen to music. It always helps.

Nodding to myself, I reach for my phone. I'm looking for my AirPods when Archer shifts. My hands halt, grimacing. Did I wake him?

I stay frozen for a few beats. Then resume searching after making sure he is still asleep. I'm sifting through the drawer's content when he moves again. This time with a pained groan.

I twist around to face him. There's a frown marring his forehead. I scoot closer and stroke his chest over his white t-shirt. It's a little damp, his body tense.

Reaching up, I caress the skin between his brows, trying to ease his frown. I lower my head and press my lips to his forehead. "Go to sleep," I murmur against his skin and feel his facial muscle relaxing.

I kiss his temple, running my fingers in his hair. When his breathing evens out, I lay one last kiss on his brow and start pulling back.

I gasp when his hand closes on my wrist.

He mumbles something in his sleep, his eyes still shut. He speaks again but I can't quite make out his words.

I reach out and am about to stroke his cheek when he says, "Amy." My hand freezes in the air.

At first, I think I heard it wrong but when he says that name again, my heart falls.

My hand falls limp at my side.

For a second, I watch him suffer in his nightmare with a lump in my throat.

Then slowly, I shake myself out of the stupor and resume soothing him once again. Kissing his temple, caressing his

chest, I help him relax.

When he is sound asleep, I detach my body from his, face away from him and weep softly into my pillow.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Summer

“Good morning,” Archer rasps in my ear as he wraps his arms around me from behind.

“Morning,” I untangle from him and turn around. He is still in the white t-shirt and sweatpants he went to bed last night. His hair is hanging over his forehead, giving him a boyish look. The sight makes my chest hurt.

“Going somewhere?” He asks as his gaze slides from my hot pink bucket hat to my neon green dungaree shorts outfit and mismatched colorful sneakers.

I shake my head. Reaching up, I touch the colorful scarf around my neck and take a long breath. “We need to talk.”

It’s time I ask the questions that have been troubling me. Last night was the last straw that pushed me to my limits. I can’t silence the questions arousing in me anymore. I can’t suppress it because doing so has been killing me slowly.

Being patient isn’t working. He uttered another woman’s name in his sleep. And while it hurt a lot, I still won’t jump to a conclusion without giving him a chance to explain.

“Talk about what?”

“Let’s sit first.” I brush past him and settle on the couch. Crossing my feet, I focus on the bright colors of my sneakers. He comes into view when he crosses the floor and sits on the

armchair opposite me. “Tell me, Summer. What do you want to talk about?”

Goldie walks up to me and settles down on the rug at my feet. I graze his back, then his head, prolonging the talk for some reason.

I can feel him watching me patiently. He doesn’t say anything. Just waits for me to answer him.

Touching the scarf one more time, I finally do. “Us. I want to talk about us.”

“What about us?”

“What am I to you?” I look up. “Am I your girlfriend? Your partner—”

“Mine. You’re just mine.” He says it like it’s so simple.

My shoulders sag, my head lowering. “You have to give me more than that.”

“You need a label?”

“What if I do?” I ask faintly.

“Then yes. You are my girlfriend. My woman and every other term that could describe you as mine.”

My heart smiles through the ache and that, right there is my bitter truth. I can be easily swayed by his words. The words that I know is nothing but the truth. Because he never lies.

But I can’t let myself melt by his words. I fight against the hold of them. I fight hard but Archer has other plans. Because somehow, he senses it and gets up from his seat and is coming to me.

He sits beside me and takes my cold hand between his warm ones and gently rubs it, giving me his warmth.

“My answer may not be something that you were expecting,” He stares in my eyes. “But it’s the truth, Summer. You make me feel things I’ve never felt before. You make me feel *alive*. I wasn’t living, not really. Until you.” He wipes under my eye. “Why are you crying, baby?”

He takes me in his arms and I squeeze my eyes shut. His admission has left me feeling raw.

I am not prepared for this conversation but there's no other alternative. Because staying in the dark would only worsen the pain inside of me. I have to do this. He's stroking my back and that makes me cry that much harder. But I control my emotions. "Who's Amy?"

His hand stills on my back, his body stiffening. Silence stretches through the apartment. Even Goldie is quiet.

I draw back. His eyes give nothing away. His expression is unreadable. His posture is too guarded as he sits motionless beside me.

"Who is she, Archer?"

"Did my mother tell you about her?"

My heart falls to the bottom of my stomach. This woman named Amy is acquainted with Mrs. Kim as well. If she has met his family that means she is important.

I wonder if he stopped her from meeting his mom too or was the restrictions only for me?

My throat works as I attempt to swallow past the lump in my throat. "No."

"Then how did you know that name?" He demands, his voice frigid. I tense.

"Last night you were mumbling something in your sleep, your fists were curled tight, it looked like you were trapped in a nightmare. So I tried to calm you down and..." I pause because it is difficult to say it. Taking a breath, I continue, "you thought I was Amy. Because you said her name in your sleep."

A shadow creeps over his face. Then he gets to his feet. "It was nothing."

I stand and grab his arm before he can go anywhere. "That's it? That's your explanation?"

He faces me. "Yes. What else do you want me to say?" It's like a punch in the gut. The pain is excruciating. So he doesn't even think I deserve an explanation?

“I just want to know who she is to you,” I say in a trembling voice.

He watches me wordlessly for a beat then turns and starts to walk away. Like he always does. I won't allow it. Not today.

I follow him, striding and stand in front of him. “Is she the reason you are so detached with everyone?” He averts his eyes but I don't let him avoid me. I move to the side to stand in the line of his vision. “You said you weren't living until me. Was it because of her? Who is this woman? Answer me, Archer!”

“It's none of your business!” He roars, making me flinch hard.

For several seconds, I don't react. Just stare at him as hot tears slip down my face. The world crashes down around me and all I can do is stare at the person I loved more than life itself. The man who just broke my heart with one sentence.

I wrap my arms around my middle. “I thought I meant something to you.”

I'm suddenly this six-year-old little girl who's experiencing losing the person she loves all over again. And it almost brings me to my knees.

Sweat breaks out on my skin, my body trembling. Maybe he doesn't mean what he said. He is just lashing out because I reminded him of his painful past. What if he lost her like I lost mom...

“What happened to her?”

He holds out a hand, his chest rising and falling fast. “Stop. Stop right there. Don't say another word.”

“I'm just trying to understand you.”

“Don't.” He says curtly.

“I wish I knew how.” I bite my trembling lip. “I want you to be happy, Archer. I want to help you. Is that so bad?”

He clutches my upper arm in a vice grip. “Why? Did I ask for your help? I didn't. Then why, goddammit?”

“Because I love you.” I cry out softly.

There's a long pause. Then, "But I didn't ask for your love either." He chokes out.

I smile through the tears. "I know. But I couldn't help it."

His eyes glisten, his jaw set. I cup his face. "Let me in, Archer. Please. Don't suffer alone. It's killing me."

I am begging him. I know how it feels to exist in pain alone. I don't want to leave him alone. Even when he is pushing me away. I can't let him go back to how his life was before me.

If he doesn't love me, it's okay. I have enough love for the both of us. I'll stay if it means I can end his sufferings. But only if he'll let me. Only if he still wants me. Even just a little bit.

He shakes his head. "When I said I don't deserve any of it, I meant it." He releases me. Then turns away from me. "This was a mistake."

I blow out a pained breath when his words slam into me. He trampled on the pieces of my heart that he just broke.

And now that my heart is dead, there's nothing left inside of me. The fight finally left my body.

Nodding, I take a step back. Then another before grabbing my backpack and running to the door.

Throwing it open, I leave.

I hit the call button for the elevator. A bark makes me halt. I turn and find Goldie sprinting toward me. He leaps in the air and I open my arms, catching him. Hugging him to my chest, I step inside the elevator. I notice that Archer never came out to stop me.

When I exit the building, I stare up at the sky. "Mom," My chin trembles. I hoist Goldie up, my legs shaking. "It seems my love story will never a happy ending."



I miss swimming. I miss the peace and quiet I used to feel when I was in the water. When I could just float and be this different individual. When my thoughts weren't blaring at me.

My current profession doesn't allow me to do mermaid gigs anymore. I can't see the smiles of the children that used to bring me happiness. I need it so badly right now.

I didn't go to the mall like I used to whenever sorrow took over because Goldie is with me. So I wander the streets of my neighborhood for an hour or so.

People passing by gave me weird looks because I was crying the entire time.

When Goldie was tired and refused to walk any further, I carried him for a while. Then got a cab and came to the park I go to running often.

We spent the entire afternoon doing absolutely nothing. My phone is switched off because I don't want anyone to reach me.

I wonder if Archer called. His name brings fresh tears to my eyes. I use the long sleeve of my t-shirt to wipe my nose.

Enough. No more crying, Summer. You were a mistake in his life. Remember that if you ever feel like going back to him, I tell myself.

I shouldn't think about him because he would never call me after today. It's a gut feeling. And even if he did, would I answer his call? Would I be able to talk after what he's done?

He hurt me so much I don't know if I can forgive him.

For the first time in life, I followed my heart and inflicted more pain on my soul than I already had.

But regardless of his actions, I can't unlove him. My heart clenches anew with a myriad of emotions. Tears swim in my eyes once more.

"Stop crying." I rasp out to myself, coughing.

I fish the water bottle I bought on the way here out of my backpack and unscrew the lid.

I lift it, about to take a sip when I find Goldie staring at me. "You thirsty, bud?"

He barks and I hold out my hand, pour the water on my curled palm for him to drink. The water is finished and I swallow the dryness of my throat.

I only had a pack of biscuit which I fed to Goldie a couple hours ago. I feel dehydrated and close to fainting since I haven't eaten all day.

“Sorry for not feeding you a proper meal.” I stare at him tiredly. “Why did you follow me, hmm?” I nuzzle his fur.

“Archer wouldn't have kicked you out, you know. He's not that heartless.” He whines and squirm out of my hold. I look up at him, the corner of my mouth curling in a sad smile. “You mad at him because of me?”

He barks and I crack another smile, sniffing. “You are a loyal son.” Then, “It's getting dark. We should go.”

I push to my feet but stagger back down. Goldie yelps then pushes his nose at my side, then neck, probably asking if I am okay. “I should eat something before I pass out.”

I lick my dry lips before trying to move again. This time, I don't stumble but my legs feel wobbly.

“Will you walk, baby boy? I don't think I can carry you.” I sway a little.

He jumps down from the bench and picks up his leash in his mouth and begins walking himself. He stops a few steps ahead and barks. “Coming.” I heave out and follow my boy.

After dragging myself out of the park, I hail a taxi and give the driver directions of a dog friendly restaurant.

As soon as we get a table at the front patio of the restaurant, I waste no time ordering food and water for us.

First, I gulp down half the bottle of water. After my thirst is quenched, I focus on the food.

Lifting the huge burger, I take a bite and close my eyes, shuddering as the salty taste burst on my tongue.

I am chewing and savoring the taste when a shadow falls over me.

I lift my head and find a white woman with a low bun dressed in a pantsuit smiling at me. “Is this seat taken?”

Chapter Forty

Summer

One week later...

Archer didn't call the entire week. Not even a single text. I am back in that familiar yet unfamiliar state. The time where life was lonely before him. I'm back to where I was.

I have great friends, true. But it's not the same. Archer was *my* person. At least I thought he was. The person I was dreaming to build a life with. Then reality woke me from that dream.

I still go to KIM Advertising for the shoots because I am the face of their on-going campaign. But I never get to see Archer. He has isolated himself. Raleigh's words.

He is continuously working and barely spares time for anyone. Not even for Raleigh and Hannah. And when he is not working at the office, he's out. He is handling outdoor meetings himself even though there's a team dedicated for it.

"It's like he is purposely avoiding everyone," Raleigh said with a frown yesterday. "Did something happen between you two?"

I kept my face neutral. "No. And besides, you really think he would let our relationship affect his work?"

He just shook his head.

"What?"

“You have no idea, do you?”

When I kept staring at him cluelessly, he said, “The moment you started working here, you changed him. Of course, it didn’t happen overnight. It happened gradually. Slowly. But we saw it all. His frustration with you, then his obsession when he couldn’t keep his eyes off you. He was friendly with us but also distant in a way. That had changed. He softened. Became more... human instead of the work machine he was. And it didn’t take us long to figure out who was the reason behind this change.” He bumped his shoulder into mine playfully.

It took too much strength to keep my tears at bay after listening to him.

I saw that too. I saw the change in Archer like them. And wanted to hold on. To hang in there until he embraced this new version of him. But he pushed me away.

I was falling apart and each day felt like a war but I kept showing up because this project is important to him.

My days were flying by because of work but my nights were empty and miserable.

Not even a second passes by where I don’t think of him. Has he eaten yet? Is he still having trouble sleeping? Is he overworking himself?

Many times, I caught myself lurking in the hallway.

Being the best liar that I am, I lied to myself that I was just walking in the hallway night after night because walking after dinner is good for your body. But my heart knew the truth. It knew that I was out there waiting so I could catch sight of him. To know that he’s okay.

People might think I am a masochist. That I don’t have a backbone because I still worry for him after what he’s done. I am not a masochist. Because I know what I saw in his eyes when he looked at me.

He is not the villain he portrayed himself to be. He has feelings for me. I am not blind. He is just afraid of accepting it. And sadly, only he could fight his demons and set himself free.

I tried doing it and he refused my help. And while I know Archer has feelings for me, I will not go to him. Because he has to take the leap of faith. He has to meet me halfway.

I don't know if he will ever do it though. All I know is, I could never love any other man again. And to be honest, I don't want to. It's kind of peaceful being alone. Better than what I am feeling right now at least.

Because everything freaking hurts. It doesn't help that I am a model of KIM Advertising because every inch of the place reminds me of him.

It hurts to breathe knowing he might be somewhere around here. Nevertheless, I show up every day with the same radiant smile. Acting like everything is okay.

I drop my sunglasses in my backpack when the elevator stops at the fifth floor of KIM Advertising.

When the door slides open, I step out, my mask perfectly in place.

But as soon as I look around, my smile falls.

There are people everywhere. The creative floor is always crowded and buzzing with energy. But this time, the crowd seems bigger and the air around me is tensed.

Someone jogs past me. A distant sound of a landline ringing reaches me, followed by shuffled footsteps to my right. Voices speaking impulsively.

The usual laughter I used to hear around here is missing. I spot the intern who used to always ride the hallways with his skateboard is walking with a frown and bunch of files in his hands.

A door closes somewhere down the hall and more footsteps follows.

“What the hell is happening?” I muse to myself as I quicken my pace. When I reach the cubicles, I see the creative team with grim faces as they bustle around with stiff postures and tense silence.

“What are the updates from the damage control team?” Hannah's hard voice makes me turn my head in her direction.

She is wearing a white pantsuit, her hands jammed in her pockets as she stares at Brielle.

“No updates for now.” Brielle’s lips are set in a line as she stares at her computer.

Raleigh comes to view when he strides toward Hannah and stands beside her. He pulls off his leather jacket aggressively before throwing it on an empty chair. “Nobody will fucking leave this building until we get to the bottom of this, am I clear?”

They all murmur in agreement. I have never seen him this furious. And Hannah, who’s usually the calmer one among the two is barking out orders to a group of interns.

They file out one by one as she finishes with them and turn, her eyes falling on me. I hold my hand up in a small awkward wave. She starts toward me.

“Hey,” she says with a strained smile. “All the shoots for the day are delayed. Sorry, I forgot to inform you.”

“What happened?” I ask, concerned.

“Our competitor released their latest campaign for the hair product and it is awfully similar to our on-going one.”

“What?” I gasp.

“Similar?” Raleigh snarls as he reaches us. “They fucking plagiarized the whole fucking concept.”

Hannah nods solemnly. “All the essential components of the campaign, like the tone, the appearances of the models and also the color schemes they used are exactly the same to ours.”

Raleigh grinds his jaw. “They’ve been subtle in mimicking our style in the past. But now they’ve outright copy-pasted our work which hasn’t even been released yet.”

“Even the phrases we were going to use for the video advertisements are copied,” Hannah adds.

“Can they get away with it just like that?”

“No. We are going to fucking sue them.” Raleigh hisses. Then, “I’m going to find the motherfucker who leaked our project and tear them limb from limb.”

“You think someone leaked it? As in an employee of KIM Advertising?” I ask, my mouth falling open.

“No.” Hannah shakes her head. “The employees would never do such a thing. No one could betray Archer and his agency like that. But the freelancers we hired? The stylists? The models? Yeah, there’s a possibility that they could be working for our rivals.”

“Don’t call them our rivals.” Raleigh spits out. “They don’t deserve the title. They fucking planted a spy here so they could copy our hard work. They are fucking losers and certainly not our rivals.”

Hannah reaches out and interlaces her fingers with his. Their eyes lock and she nods her head and he releases a long breath. She gives him a smile that’s reserved only for him.

With her other hand, she clutches his arm and presses her forehead against his. “I’m sorry for raising my voice.” He sighs.

“It’s okay.” She kisses his jaw. Then, “You’re going to do the dishes for the rest of the week.”

Raleigh cracks a smile at that. “Fair enough.”

Hannah inhales deeply then says, “We are going to get through this.” She squeezes his hand before looking around. “You hear me?”

Everyone looks up from their computer screens. “Let’s show them who we are!”

Raleigh nods. “They are going to regret this.”

“They are!” Brielle slaps her desk, making me jump. Nina cracks her fists. “They messed with the wrong team.”

“Fuck yeah.” The entire floor roars with furious words and renewed energy.

“What’s done is done. We can’t change it.” Hannah speaks. “But what we do now matters the most.”

Raleigh takes a slow turn, looking at the team. “Our concept may be all over the internet right now. They may be enjoying the rave reviews but it won’t last long. Let them enjoy the 2

minutes of fame. Because we are going to take what's rightfully ours."

Everyone starts clapping and slapping their desks. It's truly inspiring. Their spirit.

They are facing a crisis. Somebody stole their work which they spent countless hours on. And still, they're pumped up with energy instead of feeling depressed.

The credit goes to Hannah and Raleigh. They really are the best Creative Directors and leaders the team could ever ask for.

Just minutes ago, the faces that were grim and somber now lightened up because of the motivation they received from their leaders.

"I'm stunned." I shake my head. "Who would risk legal consequences for a mere ad campaign? What is the agency's name?"

"Genesis Media."

My body goes still at that voice. I turn to face Archer who's standing a few feet away from me. The first thought that comes to mind is that he's here. And he is staring straight at me.

He is not avoiding me anymore.

But then I notice something else. The warm look that used to shine in his eyes whenever he saw me is missing. The way his face used to soften subtly is missing.

The man in front of me feels like a stranger who resembles my Archer. His features are hard like granite, his stance oozing indifference.

Looking at him reminds me of the day we first met. The day when he kicked me out of the building without a second thought.

When my lungs burn from the lack of oxygen, I realize I had stopped breathing.

I suck in a breath and just stare at him because of how utterly beautiful he is. Even when he is looking at me as if I am a nobody, I can't stop staring at him.

But then someone walks to him, standing too close for my liking. And my eyes stray to his side.

Molly.

She smiles at me, a glint of triumph lighting her gaze. A look I don't quite understand.

"Genesis Media." He repeats again. "Does it ring a bell, Ms. Donovan?" Archer asks. And I freeze.

"Your expression says it all." He states calmly. Breaking the eye contact, he puts his hand in his pocket. "Could you please tell us what they offered you exactly? You know, to betray us." Then he lifts his head and looks me dead in the eye.

My mind struggles with processing his words because of the empty look in his gaze.

"Archer," Hannah gasps.

"What did you say?" Raleigh steps to my side, his voice low and firm.

"I merely asked the price your friend agreed to for selling us out," Archer says nonchalantly. His words strike me like a whip.

This time, I fail to rationalize his inexplicable behavior. I can't come up with reasons to justify his actions anymore.

The voice inside of me pities me. It tells me that I can't keep lying to myself anymore.

"Are you listening to yourself?" Raleigh raises his voice. "You are accusing Summer of leaking our concept? Take a second and think, Archer. This is Summer. Your girlfriend. This is how you treat your woman? By disrespecting her in front of everyone. This is the second time—"

"Ask her where she was one week ago." Archer cuts him off.

"What?"

"Go on. Ask her. The day when she canceled all her shoots. Nobody could get to her that day. Ask her where she was. Or better yet who she was with."

Raleigh widens his stance. "I don't have to ask her shit." His voice has an edgier note to it. "I've known her my whole

fucking life. I know she would never betray us like that. Summer is loyal by default. She would jeopardize her career for the ones she cares about. She would never do something like this to us.”

A tear escapes my eye. “Do you really think I could do it?” I stare at Archer, trying and failing to keep the pain from my voice.

I search his face for any trace of the caring man I fell in love with. When I don’t find it, I wonder if he ever was that man. The one who called me just to check if I reached home safely after a shoot. Is he the same man who ate my disastrous cooked dinner without a word to not hurt my feelings? Is he the man who held me in his arms throughout the time I was talking about my dead mother?

He doesn’t say anything. And I get my answer. A broken sob constricts my throat, cutting off the thoughts I couldn’t bring myself to voice anyway.

Hannah strokes my back. “I don’t know why you’re being like this, Archer. What’s wrong with you?”

“Something must’ve been wrong with me because I trusted a liar.” He could barely meet my eyes, he was that disgusted. The tiny hope I was clinging to all this time has shriveled up and died inside of me.

The tears flow down my face and I let them. I let everyone see me in my most vulnerable state. Something I hated. But now I have no fight left to hide behind a mask. Because that mask of a happy-go-lucky girl I used to wear has shattered and fallen off my face, revealing my true broken self.

He truly broke me this time.

“Do you have any evidence to support your allegation?” Cold disapproval rings in Hannah’s voice.

“Molly saw her having dinner with the CEO of Genesis Media, Lorna Garson a week ago when she went MIA.”

“So you’re telling me you chose to believe her over Summer?”

Instead of responding, Archer merely holds out his hand to the side. Molly fishes out her phone and puts it on his waiting palm.

He then passes the phone to Hannah. My eyes fall to the screen and find a picture of me and Lorna Garson with Goldie perched on a stool by my side as we eat at the patio of the restaurant in North Hollywood.

Hannah slowly lifts her head and stares at me wordlessly.

Is this seat taken?" The woman dressed in a pantsuit asks.

Before I could chew and swallow the mouthful, she was sitting across from me. "That's the cutest dog you got there."

I swallow the food and turn to stare at my son, Goldie. He is indeed the cutest fur ball ever. I thank God every day for his presence in my life. "Thanks," I tell her, smiling.

"Do I know you?" I ask as I slurp on my chocolate milkshake.

"Yes and no. We've been in touch through emails but we are meeting for the first time. I'm Lorna Garson, CEO of Genesis Media."

The straw slips out of my mouth. I sit straighter. "So you didn't coincidentally stumble upon me."

Her agency has been literally harassing me through emails. I thought blocking their numbers and the email address would be the end of it. I thought wrong. "Are you guys following me?" I gasp.

Her face doesn't lose her smile. "Only so we could have a chat."

I can't believe this lady. She admitted that her people are following me. But why?

"I'm sure you might have questions as to why I approached you like this. But we didn't have any other option after our emails kept getting failed to deliver."

"It's because I blocked it," I tell her straight up. "Why are you guys chasing me after I refused your offer multiple times? This is stalking, you know."

“I understand that you’re upset. But we wanted to personally explain to you the benefits of joining our agency.” She begins to pull out an iPad from her handbag.

I hold a hand up. “I appreciate your efforts. I’m truly flattered.” I am not. This is freaking harassment. I was here to eat with Goldie in peace. My heart is hurting.

I chose this restaurant specifically to avoid running into people that would recognize me. It has been happening a lot. People stop me whenever they see me for a selfie or a picture together.

I can’t believe I have fans now. It’s surreal.

Anyway, Lorna’s actions are not professional at all. “But I can’t accept your offer as I am already signed with KIM Advertising.”

She doesn’t miss a beat. “You could terminate it before the period is up. Just tell them that you’re not satisfied with their agency.”

“But I am satisfied. They are the best and treat me like family.”

Her smile falters. But she quickly recovers. “Well, that might be the case but you have to think about your future. We are offering you double the pay they are offering you.”

I frown. How does she know what they are paying me? Isn’t that stuff confidential? Come to think of it, how the hell did they get my personal information like where I live, my number, and my schedule?

I jerk up. “Let me tell you what you’re doing right now is illegal. Stop following me. And stop trying to convince me into joining your agency. You are only wasting your resources and breath. Because I won’t.” I sling my backpack over my shoulder and lift my half-eaten burger. Why should I give up my food because of her?

Goldie jumps down from the stool. He finished his food before me. Good boy. I pat his head. Then I look up at the woman. “If I ever catch you lurking around me or feel like I am being followed, I’ll think it’s your people and will not hesitate to call

the cops on you. So I suggest you stop having me followed right this instant."

She glares at me. Jumping to her feet, she grits out, "You are making a mistake."

Goldie growls at her, causing her to take a step back. I give her a fake smile and take a big bite of my burger before turning away and leaving.

"Summer," Raleigh's voice brings me back to the present. "There must be more to it than this picture. Because one photo can't prove that you're the culprit. Tell us what happened that day, Summer."

My chin trembles. My best friend is still by my side. Despite the evidence he's seen, he still believes in me. I've always loved him but today he proved that he'll always be there for me no matter what. Even if he has to go against his very own boss.

I'm numb and I don't care about anyone's opinion of me anymore. If they believe I leaked it, then they were never my friends. And I shouldn't waste my energy on proving my innocence. Not even to Archer. But I do recite everything that went down that day.

Not because I want them to know the truth. But because Raleigh is insisting. Because I respect his unwavering belief in me.

And for that alone, I tell everyone about my interaction with Lorna a week ago.

"And then I left." I finish.

"I don't believe you. For all I know you could be lying yet again." Archer hisses and I close my eyes. And all the happy moments I spent with him begin to play in front of my eyes. But then those moments fade away, leaving behind a mere echo of his harsh words and taunts in my ears.

I open my eyes. "I don't care."

He narrows his eyes.

"You heard me. I don't care if you believe me or not. I'm not going to defend myself anymore." I smile at him sadly. "There's really no point, is there?"

He assesses me but doesn't speak. As usual.

“You won, Mr. Archer Kim. Congratulations.” A hot tear makes its way down my cheek. Archer's gaze follows it, his jaw clenching.

“This leak was the perfect excuse, wasn't it? An excuse to push me away for good. Because this way you'd get what you want. To be alone forever. The truth is, Archer Kim that you are afraid of love. That's why you pushed away everyone you care about, didn't you?” I snifle, shaking my head. “I can't continue living my life in a limbo. Congratulations. You've succeeded into pushing me far, far away. I quit. This job. The battle to attain your love. Everything.”

Murmurs arises among the crowd. “You can file a police report against me. I'll fully co-operate.”

Unable to stand a second longer, I flee the place so I could lick my wounds in the sanctuary of my apartment.

Chapter Forty-One

Archer

I watch Summer as she struggles to keep her emotions under control.

“You can file a police report against me. I’ll fully co-operate.” Her chin trembles. And she bows her head when another tear falls, hiding her flushed face.

It almost becomes impossible not to give in and comfort her. I clench my fists. Her tears. Her damn tears always had the power to bring me to my knees. It almost makes me forget about what she did.

She turns on her heels and leaves.

I watch her with tensed jaw as she runs away from me until she disappears.

Summer is so transparent. I could see every emotion she was going through and it made my chest ache.

She looked so weak and fragile. And she was hurting. Watching her made me want to break things.

Without another word, I whirl around and walk out of the scene.

With heavy steps, I enter my office and shut the door behind me. Leaning against it, I close my eyes.

“Do you really think I could do it?”

My eyes snap open. Tearing the jacket off me, I pull on the knot of my tie next as I stride to my desk.

Bracing my hands on the desk, I bend my head, trying to block her trembling voice that's still echoing in my ears.

"You won, Archer Kim. Congratulations."

With a roar, I sweep the contents off my desk, sending them crashing on the floor. The glass figurine shatters as soon as it lands, splintering into pieces.

Breathing hard, I sink down to my knees and lift one piece of glass and curl my fingers around it, feeling its sharp edges digging in my skin.

"You've succeeded into pushing me far, far away. I quit. This job. The battle to attain your love. Everything."

I tighten my grip and feel the edges slicing the skin.

Crimson drops begin to fall on the floor and I watch it numbly. The deeper the glass pierces, the emptier I feel.

The bite of the piece is nothing compared to the claws of regret that's ripping my soul.

I shake my head humorlessly. Do I even have a soul?

Summer was right. I am a coward. I am scared of love. Her love. Because she makes me want to take what she is offering. Her heart.

And I don't deserve it. *She* doesn't deserve this. She deserves the best and I am far from it.

She wasn't wrong when she said I knew she wouldn't do it. Despite the proof, deep down I knew she could never betray me or her friends.

But I had to do this. Now she hates me. I made her give up on me. Because I can't give her things she deserves. My love. My heart. Both of those things that I don't possess in me. Because I'm dead inside and merely existing on surface.

Dropping the glass, I shift on the floor until my back is leaning against the desk. With my bloodied hand, I pull out my phone from my pocket.

The screen lights up, displaying my wallpaper. It's a picture of Summer as she sleeps peacefully in my bed cuddling Goldie.

I trace her face with a finger.

"You'll forget about me in no time, baby." I smile faintly.

It might be difficult in the beginning but she *will* forget me. Because she will have others fighting for my spot.

Summer is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. It physically hurt to see her soulful eyes swimming with tears. She will soon get a man who would make her smile. Who would help her move on. Who would wipe her tears when she cries and comfort her. Unlike me.

A man who would love her. Who would put her first. Who would hold her and kiss her. The man who would get her smiles and laughter.

It's odd how the thought of her with another man is killing me when my soul is already dead.

My hand presses against my chest and I feel the air seizing in my lungs.

I screw my eyes shut as I feel the beginning of a panic attack. Sweat is beading on my brow. I mop it away with the back of my hand.

She gave my life a new beginning. I don't know when or how but Summer became the reason for my existence. And now I have to learn to live without her.

Drawing one knee up. I brace my uninjured hand and rest my forehead against it.

I wish I could be brave like you, Summer. The way you opened your heart even after what happened to you is admirable. Not everyone can do it. Not me.

I broke my own rule today. I lied to her to make her believe that all that I felt for her was disdain. It was the only way she could truly stop loving me.

My breathing becomes shallow and irregular as another picture of Summer's desperate eyes flashes in my mind. She

looked so heartbroken, defenseless as she ducked her head and hid her pain before leaving.

Even if she moves on in the future, would I ever be able to forgive myself?

Someone places a hand on my forearm, startling me. My head snaps up and I find Raleigh frowning at me.

“You okay?” He asks gruffly. I shrug him off and pick myself off the floor on a grunt, feeling ridiculously vulnerable.

“You’re bleeding.” He says, his voice emotionless. But his eyes still had the remnants of burning anger he felt toward me.

Good. His anger is better than concern. Because that concern would give birth to questions that I won’t answer.

I’ve always been good at shutting people out. And while Raleigh and Hannah used to attempt finding ways to make me talk, I think today I made them give up on me as well.

This is good. I don’t bother responding to his observation. “Why are you here?” I ask as I round my desk, making a mess on the floor with my blood. I face away from him purposely as I bend to grab the box of tissues that was lying on the floor.

“I’m here to tell you that this is not over.”

Raleigh expected my silence because he doesn’t wait more than two seconds before continuing, “I am going to find out who leaked our campaign and I am going to prove it to you that Summer is innocent.”

His voice is filled with contempt and muted fury. It pleases me to think that Summer would always have a friend like Raleigh in her life. Today he proved how great a friend he is.

“Mark my words. I will prove that you did the biggest mistake of your life by hurting that poor girl over a crime she didn’t even commit. Sooner rather than later, I’ll prove in front of each and every one that she did not betray us.” There’s a sound of footsteps as he shuffles closer. “And when that day comes, you better be ready to apologize to her in public the same way you humiliated her today.”

With that, Raleigh spins and leaves.



Three days. Three days has passed since Summer announced she was quitting her job. Three days since Genesis Media plagiarized our campaign.

It was a good thing I had a backup plan. I forwarded the new concept I was working on to the creative team. Raleigh and his team are working on it relentlessly while still investigating about the leak on the side.

I know this because Raleigh has been in touch with my lawyers. He's been doing everything possible to salvage the contract because the client which this campaign belonged to had seen the ideas and progress of it. So handling them had been another headache.

I on the other hand had been watching helplessly as they worked nonstop. Burying myself under the workload is not helping anymore because I can't concentrate. I spend more hours than I usually do at the office but all I can think of is Summer. And she is MIA.

She is not home. I know it because the day she quit; I went to her apartment. To talk about her car. Because before leaving the building three days ago, she handed over her car keys to the receptionist.

So I went to talk to her. There was no way I was going to let her return the car.

But she wasn't home. I waited for her and when she didn't come home that night, I thought she was spending the night at Hannah's.

But she didn't return the next day. Or today for that matter.

This morning when I tried to approach Hannah, she gave me the cold shoulder. I receive the same treatment from pretty much everyone. They entertained me as long as my questions were work related. The moment I tried to hint at Summer, they shut me down hard.

Their behavior is understandable. I deserve it. But I'm dying with worry. I need to know if Summer is okay. But no one is

ready to talk to me.

The terror that rips through me at the thought of anything happening to her doesn't let me function properly. I can't sleep. I can't eat. I can't fucking work.

Where is she? Is she alone out there? Is she safe? These kind of questions are driving me crazy.

I am the reason behind her not coming back to her apartment and I'll happily carry the blame and the hate from everyone as long as someone tells me that she's okay.

Picking up my phone, I call Chad to summon Hannah to my office.

Five minutes later, Hannah is knocking at my door before stepping inside.

"You asked for me?" She keeps standing. So I get up and walk around until I am standing in front of my desk.

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"You know who." I thrust my twitching hands in my pockets.

"I do?" She asks with a blank face.

My jaw locks. "Where is Summer?"

"I don't think the whereabouts of the agency's former model is any of your concern." She sniffs.

When I don't say anything, she says, "Was that all?"

Hannah is about to turn to leave when I blurt, "Is she okay?"

"I don't know, Archer. Do you think she would be after what you did?"

I flinch.

She turns on her heels.

And suddenly gruesome images of Summer getting tortured and killed flashes in front of my eyes.

I stagger when she is almost at the door. "Please," I choke out.

She stops. Then faces me.

“Please, Hannah.” I swallow thickly. “Give me something. Please. I just need to know if she’s safe.”

Her brow’s draw together as she stares at me. Then she walks to me and grasps my bicep. “Yes, Archer. She’s safe.” Hannah says softly.

I release a broken breath and close my eyes, nodding. “Thank you.”

That’s all I wanted to know. She’s safe. That’s all that matters. As long as she is okay, I can bear living without her.

I am tempted to ask her where she is so I can go see her. Even if from afar but I stop myself.

Hannah’s face tells me that she wants to talk but I take a step back. “Thanks again. You may go now.”

A week passes.

The nightmares are getting worse. Because this time, it’s not Amy I see. It’s Summer. I hardly slept for more than couple hours in a week.

And above all, I miss her like crazy. My life is falling apart without her. It’s worse than the week following the morning she confronted me about Amy.

This ache in my chest is insufferable. I still wait by the hallway for hours on end to see if she’d return. She never does. And I am miserable. I even miss Goldie who loved ruining my ties.

I thought knowing that she is someplace safe would be enough. It isn’t. I’ve never felt this lonely in my life. And it’s ironic considering I have spent years living alone and preferred it.

These past days, I had a lot of time to think. About my choices and actions. Each day brought me closer and closer to the realization that I fucked up my only chance at happiness.

I let the woman go who taught me how to live again.

Many a times, I picked up my phone with every intention of calling Ettinger. He would track her and send me her location in

less than an hour. But every time, I curbed that urge.

I am so exhausted that I leave work early which I never do and go home. Which isn't a home anymore. Not without her.

The colorful stuff she left behind seems lifeless because she was the one that made this place lively.

I go through my routine. I take a shower, then change into sweats and a t-shirt. But the restlessness doesn't go.

When I feel like the walls are closing in on me, I grab my jacket then my car keys and leave.

I drive aimlessly for a couple hours before finally driving back home. When I climb out of the car, I find myself standing in front of my parents' house in Malibu.

I push the hair off my forehead and pace anxiously. Just as I am about to get back inside and drive off, a figure walks out of the house. "Archer? Is that you?" She calls out in Korean.

Eomma steps forward slowly. And I swallow thickly.

She is wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt and a pair of black trousers. Her entire face lights up when she sees me. Shivering, she rushes to me.

I take off my jacket and drape it over her shoulders. "Why are you wandering out at the dead of the night? And where's your jacket?" I chide her softly in Korean.

She looks up at me with glistening eyes. When she stays mute for a solid minute, I shake her gently. "Eomma?"

She blinks back her tears and smiles at me. "I heard the sound of a car and came out to check."

I make a sound of protest. "It's not safe—"

She cups my stubbled cheek in her small hand. "I know, I know. You can lecture me later. First let me take a good look at my handsome and busy son."

Guilt creeps into me. Putting my hand on top of hers, I lean into her touch and close my eyes.

"You don't look so good, son. What is wrong?"

I open my eyes, chuckling. “Thanks, Eomma,” I say dryly then avert my gaze when she continues to study me with a frown.

I clear my throat. “What’s Abeoji doing? How is he?”

“He’s fine and right now he’s fast asleep.” She turns my face with a grip on my face. “Archer, something is wrong. I can feel it. Tell me, son.”

I shake my head but she begins pulling me toward the private garden. She leads me to the bench and sits down on it. She motions for me to sit by patting at the space beside her.

Sighing, I sit down. She takes my hand between her fragile ones. Patting it gently, she asks, “What is it, son? Tell Eomma.”

I shake my head. “How can you be so nice to me?” I rasp.

“What do you mean?”

“I avoid you both. I am a terrible son. I don’t call. I don’t visit. Still you welcome me with open arms. Why?” I stare at her, my throat tight. “Why can’t you hate me too, Eomma?”

She just smiles and cups my jaw. “A mother can never hate her child.”

A lump rises in my throat, my chest squeezing. I turn my face in her palm.

“Come here,” she says, opening her arms. I, a grown man, crumble down and shatter as she hugs me.

“I’m sorry, Eomma. I’ve been so cruel to you.” I say hoarsely.

She tightens her arms around me. One of her hands reaches up and strokes my head. “Shh...”

The woman who’s half my size rocks me in her arms as if I am still a kid instead of a thirty-two-year-old man.

“What is bothering you? There must be something or else you wouldn’t have ended up here.”

I pull back. “I didn’t realize I was here until I got out of the car.”

She just smiles sadly. “I know.”

And that breaks my dead heart. The knowledge that she knew I would never intentionally come here doesn't sit right with me.

"So?" She prompts.

"It's about a girl. Summer. You've met her." I swallow hard before telling her everything.

She rubs my arm throughout the time, silently giving me strength as I speak. I tell her how I asked her to stop talking to you even when she always yearned for mother's love all her life.

I tell her all the harsh words I used to make Summer hate me. I told her that I threw her love at her face when she confessed her love to me.

"I don't deserve her but I don't know how to live without her, Eomma." I look down. Then up at the inky black sky before looking at my mother. "Everything hurts and I don't know what to do to make it stop."

"You said you don't deserve her or her love. Why's that?"

"Didn't you hear me? I humiliated her in front of everyone."

She nods. "You told me you refused her love because you don't deserve her. I am asking why do you feel that way?"

"Because... because..."

"Because of Amy?" Her voice is small.

I avert my gaze and stare ahead. Blowing out a harsh breath, I try to control my emotions. My hands begin to tremble at the mention of her name. Eomma squeezes my hands and asks me to look at her.

"Archer, son..." Her voice breaks. "Look at me." She asks for the third time and I do, watching her through blurred vision.

"Do you love Summer?"

I nod and bow my head. I do. I love her. So much that it makes me want to be selfish.

She grabs my chin and lifts my head. "Then you need to let go." She touches my chest then. "The guilt that's been eating at you for years. Let that go, son. It wasn't your fault Amy died." Her lip trembles.

My tears fall and I shake my head vehemently, unable to say anything.

She cradles my face. “No!” She stares at me hard through tears of her own. “It wasn’t your fault. Stop blaming yourself. I won’t allow you to live like this. I won’t let you ruin your happiness with your own hands, you hear me?”

I try to break away but she tightens her grip. “You need to hear this, Archer. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Stop! Please!” I shake my head.

“No, you stop. Stop punishing yourself.”

I shut my eyes.

“You are punishing us too. Because all those years ago, we didn’t just lose Amy. We lost you too, Archer.”

I bite on my lip hard until I taste metal. “Give me my son back. Please.”

I open my eyes and find her sobbing with her hands clasped in front of her as she begs.

“Please release my son of the years of guilt. I beg you.” She crushes her joined hands to her lips and sobs.

I make a guttural sound and take her in my arms.

We needed this. After Amy died, I shut down everyone. I never discussed her with my parents ever. Because it hurt too much.

And now while it hurts just the same, I also feel free. I feel like I could breathe again. The restlessness gone as I let out all the grief.

For the first time in years, I feel ready to consider forgiving myself. It won’t be happening overnight. But it’s a start. I am willing to try. For my parents. For Summer. For Hannah and Raleigh and each person that cares for me. And last but not least, for myself.

It’s a long journey. Of letting go and self-forgiveness. But I’m willing to commit. Because I can’t let Summer go. I need her too much. I want to be the man that would love her. Cherish her. Kiss her. Hold her when she’s down. Smile with her when she’s

happy. I want to be one of the colors she loves so much. And this time, I'm ready to fight for it.

Chapter Forty-Two

Summer

“Smile!” I snap a picture of me and Goldie with the cute pink polaroid camera I bought a few days ago. Removing the ejected film from the slot, I wait for it to develop.

When the picture appears, I smile and hold it up so Goldie could see too. “Not bad. It’s a bit time consuming but these photos are super cute! Aren’t they?” I waggle my eyebrows at him.

He looks so adorable in his winter booties and red scarf around his neck that I ignore his judgy stare. But when he keeps staring at me like that, I break. “Don’t look at me like that!” I pout. “All right. It was pretty irresponsible of me to forget my phone back in the chalet but you were in such a hurry to go out.”

As soon as he hears the words “go out” he takes off.

We are in Zermatt, Switzerland. It’s the beginning of spring but the mountain is so high up, that we could still experience snow.

The scenery is so beautiful, it made me fall in love with white which I hardly recognized as a color by the way.

The scenic vision of the snow-covered mountains coerced me to change my mind about the color white. Also, this is my first time experiencing snow so I reserve the right to be mesmerized.

“Wait for me!” I run after Goldie, laughing.

I gave up on skiing in mere one hour into trying it. After falling down face first into the snow twenty or so times, I admitted defeat.

So I am just here to enjoy some quality time with Goldie who is totally whipped for the snow. And he is ignoring me, happily digging his head into the heap of snow.

Squinting my eyes at him, I cook up a plan. “Aaahhh!” I dramatically collapse on the ground, shivering when the snow grazes the side of my face. A small prize I’m willing to pay to snag his attention.

I play dead but Goldie is busy burying his body inside the pit he just dug.

Lifting my head up, I cough loudly and lie back fast, closing my eyes. After a few seconds, I crack open one eye and find him still at it.

I gasp in disbelief. *You love snow more than mommy?*

Fine then.

“Goldie!” I shout at the top of my lungs and his head whips in my direction. Abruptly, I lay my head back down and screw my eyes shut but not before catching the sight of him sprinting toward me. *Good boy.*

I sense him hovering over me, his warm breath over my cheek. He barks again then licks my face. I let him panic for about two more seconds before bursting out laughing. “Gotcha!”

He goes crazy then. Launching himself on me, wiggling his tail with his ears turned back. He licks my chin. “I’m okay, I’m okay,” I tell him, still laughing. Then all of a sudden, a pain stabs my chest, wiping the smile off my face.

“When would it hurt less?” I ask faintly as I rub my heart over my jacket.

It has been eleven days since I walked out of KIM Advertising after I was accused of leaking their ad campaign.

Eleven days. Eleven long days since I last saw *him*. Archer. My chest feels tight as I let out a breath.

Each day I have felt the longing in every cell of my body for him despite what he did.

Even thousands of miles couldn't keep him away from invading my thoughts.

He didn't break my heart. Not really. I did it myself. I loved him so much that's why it hurt so much. I broke my own heart by holding on, thinking he would choose me over his past. The past he was so defensive about that he was ready to drop me in a heartbeat rather than opening up.

And still, this stupid heart beats for him and only him. That's why I left. I needed space. I couldn't stay near him. It hurt too much and I wanted to get away from him.

The opportunity presented itself when I received a call from Mrs. Kim that night when I reached home.

She and I have gotten close with time. I received a call from her the night when I discovered I was being followed by the people of Genesis Media.

That night, I was feeling awfully vulnerable and alone, so I didn't think twice before answering her call. Archer had restricted to contact her but that became invalid the minute he called our relationship a mistake.

So I answered her call. I remember bursting into tears when she asked, "What's wrong, dear?"

I didn't really tell her what happened between Archer and me but she understood. The next day, we met. The entire week before the leak of the campaign, Mrs. Kim and I started meeting every other day.

She never pried about my relationship with her son during those lunches and dinners and for that I was utterly grateful.

Mrs. Kim Ha-Ri and I developed a bond that was strong and special. That's why I called her that day. The day when I was humiliated and accused by the man I loved.

Again, I kept the details to myself. I didn't tell her why I was sobbing over the phone. I just said that I was having a bad day and wanted to hear her voice. Which was partially true. I really wanted to hear her sweet voice. Because apart from mom, she

was the only woman I came to care about. She wasn't just Mrs. Kim. She was now a mother figure in my life who listened to my silence and understood what I was feeling.

That's what happened. She somehow sensed that I needed her company, so I went to see her.

"I'm leaving," I told her after I was done crying on her shoulder.

"Leaving?" She asks, a frown marring her forehead.

I nod, sniffing. "I can't go back to my apartment. I ne-need to get away." My voice cracks.

Her hand stokes my hair. "Where would you go, honey?"

I look at her with tears in my eyes. "I don't know," I whisper. When the tears fall, I swipe at them and say, "A hotel perhaps."

"So you could spend all day and night crying in the hotel room?" She shakes her head. "No. I won't let you go to a hotel."

"But Ma,"

"No buts." She holds up a hand. "You told me not to ask any questions and I respect your wishes even though it's tearing me apart watching you in pain." Her lip trembles.

When her eyes glisten, I release a pained sound and hug her. She strokes my back. "You can come to live with us." I have met Mr. Kim as well. It felt like I knew him since forever. His warm welcome brought tears to my eyes because I never knew a father figure could be this loving. That was also the day they insisted I call them Ma and Pa.

And while the invitation meant everything, I needed to be alone. I draw back. "I can't, Ma. I need to spend some time alone."

She understood and suggested I come here, in Switzerland where they had a Chalet. "If you need to be alone, you might as well spend that time somewhere beautiful. We have a property there. A chalet. I'll make it ready for your stay."

"Ma—"

She cuts me off. "No. It's either that or our place. I won't let you isolate yourself in a hotel."

She didn't let me pay a penny and arranged everything. "You're my daughter." That's all she said and I couldn't argue to that.

And here I am. Though I have been here for about a week, this is only the second day of my sight-seeing.

I did exactly what Ma dreaded. Crying all day and night. Got out only to walk Goldie then I was back to my room.

Raleigh, Hannah, Ma, Brielle pretty much everyone forced me to get out of the bed by relentlessly calling my phone every minute.

So I caved and went out yesterday. The experience was wonderful. So much so that I decided to do it again. Because it helped me forget the pain. At least for a little while.

The day was going well until the pain sneaked up on me, making me miss Archer.

Goldie makes a high -pitched sound and bumps his nose into the side of my face. Fighting tears, I press a kiss on his furry head. Smiling at my travel partner, I say, "Let's build a snow man."

After building a snow man which didn't really look like a snow man, we took several photos with the polaroid camera. Then we spend the noon wandering the town, stopping by a small dog-friendly restaurant to eat.

When Goldie throws a tantrum and lies down in the middle of the road, refusing to walk, I carry him in the red dog carrier backpack. I knew he would get tired that's why I came prepared.

It was tiring to carry him as he was getting bigger but we were having a great time and I didn't want to return back to the chalet just yet. I needed a few more hours drowning my mind in the beautiful distraction of Zermatt.



After showering, I trudge back to my room, staring outside the glass window as I pass by it. It's already dark.

Shivering, I climb into my bed and finally pick the phone off the night stand. I purposely avoided checking it until now because I knew there would be messages and calls from Raleigh and others threatening to send pictures to prove that I did go out instead of lying.

But as soon as I unlock it, I frown. Aside from Raleigh's and Hannah's there are several missed calls from Mrs. Kim. I immediately call her.

"Ma? Is everything okay? I just saw your missed calls—"

"Honey, I'm so sorry." She starts in a hurry. "I told him." Her voice gets distorted and I pull the phone away and frown. It has service. I put it back to my ear.

"Hello, Ma? Can you hear me? Okay, good. Calm down and speak slowly. What's wrong? You told what?"

I shiver again. Damn. I should've worn something over the thermal wear. But my toxic trait is thinking I could handle the chill just fine.

I contemplate walking out of the room for better service when she says, "...Archer."

The temperature drops lower than it was at the mention of his name. I tug at the comforter, startling Goldie who was lying on it and pull it over me. I make room for him and we both huddle under it.

"Can you hear me?" She asks.

"Yes," I murmur. Then, "What were you saying about him?"

Her voice breaks again. "Hello?"

"He..." Some more distortion, "land."

"What?" I ask. "Hello? I can't hear you."

A knock on the door interrupts us. "Hold on. There's someone at the door." I get off the bed, the phone still glued to my ear. Maybe it's Franziska, the cook who comes by to prepare meals.

Goldie jumps down too. And dashes to the door before me. My eyebrows go up. Usually, he is not this enthusiastic when he is tired. Strange.

“Summer, are you there?”

“Yes, just a moment.” I make a beeline to the front door, my socks clad feet thudding on the wooden floor.

When I reach it, Goldie begins to snake around my legs, almost tripping me. What got him so excited?

“Goldie! Stop it.” I am looking down at him as I reach for the door handle and twist it open.

“He is in Switzerland.” Ma blurts out.

I pull the door open as I ask her, “Who’s in Switzerland?”

“Me.”

I stop. Then look up.

Archer.

My heart flips and my mouth falls open.

Briefly, I close my eyes then open them. He’s still here.

Dressed in a crème color polo t-shirt, denim jacket and dark wash jeans, Archer is standing in front of me with his eyes trained on me.

He looks devastatingly handsome despite his red-rimmed, tired eyes and a thick stubble and tousled hair. It looks like he hasn’t slept in days. He looks nothing like the polished man who owns one of the leading advertising agencies in the world.

What’s he doing here?

“I came for you.” He says and I realize I said that out loud.

I close my eyes at his deep voice. I missed it. I missed him. When I crack them open, our gazes lock.

He takes a step forward but stills when I hold my hand up.

“Hello? Summer?” Ma’s voice fills the silence between us.

“I have to go. I’ll talk to you later.” I hang up.

“Was that my mother?”

I don’t answer. I just stare at him. “What are you doing here, Archer?”

“I told you—”

“Why?”

“Because I want you back.”

Goldie barks and jumps on him. Archer bends and picks him up in his arms.

Goldie completely loses it then. He squirms and licks his face, wiggling his tail violently.

Archer scratches his fur, pets his head all while staring at me.

“I missed you both.” He says quietly.

I flinch. It hurts too much. I can’t do this. He can’t just waltz in here declaring that he misses us and wants me back.

Stepping closer, I take the still enthusiastic Goldie from his arms. “I’m not doing this. You need to go.”

“Baby,” he reaches for me and I take a step back.

“No.” I swallow thickly, moisture gathering in my eyes. With great effort, I wrench my eyes away from him and shut door in his face.



After coming face to face with the man who ripped my heart out not long ago, I slid down the same door I slammed in his face and cried.

He never once called me throughout the time I was away. He didn’t bother checking up on me. And now he claims that he misses me?

I can’t fall for his words again. Because I will if I talk to him again. That is the reason I don’t really blame him for my heartbreak. It’s on me. I read too much into his gestures and little words.

And now I’m learning from my mistakes.

After collecting myself off the floor, I called Ma. I wanted to know how he knew I was here. It can’t be Raleigh or Hannah because they were still upset with him.

That only left Ma. Not to mention she called to warn me about his arrival.

So I dialed her and got straight to the point.

“What was he doing here, Ma?” I whisper in the phone, my throat still tight.

“Were you crying?”

When I sniffle. She says, “I shouldn’t have told him where you were without telling you. I’m sorry.” Regret rings in her voice.

I clutch the phone tighter with both hands, not liking her small voice. But I also want to know the reason why she did it. “Why?”

“Because he was heartbroken, Summer. And you were miserable too.” She breathes out. There’s a brief pause before she starts. “He told me everything.”

“And you still told him where I was?” I can’t help the sadness lacing my tone.

“Summer... honey. You wouldn’t understand why I did that without talking to him. I am not asking you to give him a chance. Just hear him out. There are things you don’t know. Things you should know. Only then the pieces of this puzzle would fall into place.”

“I tried, Ma. I did. He was not ready.” A tear slides down my cheek. “He hurt me.”

“I know.” Her voice shakes. “I want you both to be happy.”

“I’m not sure if I am strong enough to face him again.”

“You are the strongest girl I know, Summer. You remind me of someone who was just like you. Fierce and brave.” Her voice trembles. Then, “Please talk to him. You’ll get your answers.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Summer

The next morning, I wake up with a nasty headache. My eyes are swollen from all the crying and my body aches like it's been hit by a truck. In a nutshell, I feel like shit.

I throw the covers off me and drag myself to the bathroom. Even a warm bath doesn't help. Changing into fresh clothes, I feed Goldie. Then traipse over to the kitchen. Heating up the leftovers, I eat in silence.

I had no appetite but forced the food down my throat for energy because I feel drained.

I still haven't made up my mind about Archer yet. So I am going to spend the entire day out. If he shows up here again, he'll find the chalet empty.

And to spend the day out, I need to eat. Even when I feel miserable.

After eating, I get ready, covering myself with thick layers of colorful clothing. Then help Goldie into his jacket and booties before leaving.

Throughout the day, I feel eyes on me. As if someone is following me.

Genesis Media comes to mind but I don't think they would bother following me all the way to Switzerland. They must be too busy cooking another strategy to spy on KIM Advertising.

Notwithstanding the plagiarism, Raleigh and the team successfully launched a brand-new campaign a few days ago. It was the back up plan Archer was working on.

They thrived despite the drawbacks. And while the agency's reputation was intact, Raleigh was still investigating the leak and was gathering evidence against them.

Anyway, the feeling of being followed didn't go away as the day progressed.

Many times, I stopped abruptly and looked over my shoulder in order to catch my stalker off guard. But in the crowd, I couldn't spot anyone who appeared suspicious.

I shrugged it off and began shopping for my friends, Ma and Pa.

Ma called me an hour ago, sounding guilty. I reassured her that I wasn't angry.

I'm not mad at her for telling Archer where I was. I understood where she was coming from. She was torn between me and him.

She wanted to help me in some way. Because she saw how broken I was. So how could I stay mad at her?

She apologized regardless. To lighten up the mood, I told her that she could make it up to me with homemade delicious Korean food for a whole week once I return.

Ma wholeheartedly agreed saying, "Forget the week. I'll cook for you every day!"

She further talked about her love for cooking and how she longed for a big family so she could feed them.

We chatted for some more before hanging up. Then, I continued shopping. The feeling of being watched still bugged me.

It was not until the evening that I came face to face with my stalker.

I was struggling with carrying Goldie over my back in the dog carrier alongside the shopping bags in my hands.

Sight-seeing is fun, no doubt. But the exhaustion you feel after is something else.

I am dragging myself toward the chalet when I miss a step. I tip forward, my bags falling. Just when I think I am going to lose a tooth or two by crashing face first on the ground a hand clutches my elbow, breaking my fall.

I swallow hard. “Thank you so—” I turn my head and freeze.

Archer. My pulse jumps.

“So you were the one following me all day?” I purse my lips.

He remains silent and bends to get my bags.

“I can get those.” I try to take them from him but he simply moves the hand clasp my bags out of my reach. Then he proceeds to remove my dog carrier backpack.

I push his hand away. He ignores my failing attempts of getting away and removes the backpack. Goldie watches our struggle raptly, his head moving back and forth between us. The traitor doesn’t make a fuss when Archer hoists the backpack over his shoulders.

I glare at him when he begins walking, expecting me to follow.

And while I am dying to act stubborn, I can’t let him get away with my son.

I fall into step beside him with my arms crossed. “You didn’t answer my question. Were you following me all day?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“For your safety and...”

“And?”

He stops. Then looks at me. “And to see you smile, happy from afar.”

My lips part. He leans closer and strokes my lower lip with his thumb. “I missed your smiles.” His low, rich voice vibrates through me, causing goosebumps to erupt on my skin.

I stop when I catch myself leaning into his touch. Taking a step back, I resume walking.

This happens again the next day. Then the next day. And the day after that. He follows me around. Then walks me to the house I am staying in. Every night he attempted to talk but I shot him down.

It hurt to ignore him. It truly did. It took every ounce of strength to close the door every night as he stood outside, his eyes begging me to give him a chance.

My heart begged me too, convincing me to give him one chance and listen to what he has to say. But my brain said that I deserved better. That I deserved to be happy and respected. It wanted me to keep punishing him for his actions.

I was getting torn apart from the constant tug of war between my heart and my brain.

I hated watching him night after night struggling to get five minutes of my time.

In the end, my brain lost the war.

Tonight, when we reach the chalet, I silently unlock the front door quickly. He sets Goldie down along with my shopping bags.

“Summer—”

“What are you doing, Archer?” I ask as I face him.

When he frowns, I motion to him. “What are you doing?”

“Dropping you off.”

When I let out a frustrated breath, his shoulders sag. “I’m waiting.”

“For what?”

“For a chance to talk. I am ready to tell you everything, Summer.” He steps closer and cups my face. “You deserve to know.”

“Why?” I stare up at him. “Remember what you said when I begged you for answers? You said it was none of my business.”

He flinches. “I was wrong. And I am so fucking sorry.”

I shake my head and push his hand away, tears brimming in my eyes. “You said being with me was a mistake.”

“I wanted to drive you away.”

“Why?” I tremble as I hit his chest. Over and over.

He merely stands there, allowing me to let out my frustration on him. “Why? Tell me why did you push me away? Why did you hurt me so much? Why?”

“Because I love you.”

My movements still. I peer at him through my wet lashes. “You don’t! Take it back! Take it back, right now!” I sob and he wraps his arms around me.

“I love you.” He says and I struggle against him.

“You don’t. Take it back!”

“I do and I won’t.” He tightens his grip, stilling my struggling body. “I’ll keep saying those words until you believe me.” He lifts my chin with two fingers. “I love you. I love you and only you. Being with you was the best decision of my life and hurting you was the absolute worst. And I am here to make everything right. I am here to fight for you. For us.” He stares deep into my eyes. “Because I love you.”

He wipes my tears with his thumbs and nods. “I do. At first, the realization made me hate myself. Because at that time I thought I wasn’t worthy of your love.”

“Because of Amy,” I whisper.

He nods solemnly and something inside me breaks. This woman, I don’t know who she is but it seems like she still holds immense power over him.

And if I gave him a second chance, I’ll have to spend my life competing with this woman. I’ll have to live in a constant state of anxiety where my soul would slowly deteriorate until I am nothing but a shell of a person.

If I ever decide to go back to him, it would be at the cost of my mental peace.

Decision made; I take a step back. Then another. “I love you too, Archer. And I will love you and only you for the rest of my

life but I can't settle for anything lesser than what I deserve. I don't just want your love, but also your heart and soul. I don't just want to occupy your house or your life, I want to be the only one who rules your thoughts. I don't want you thinking about another woman. Or dreaming about her. Because that just means you are not over her. And I deserve better than that. I am not down to share you with another woman. Because thinking about someone else while I sleep in your bed is still cheating. And I won't tolerate that. I might appear selfish but I think it's about time I be one because sometimes love is not enough for a relationship."

I whirl around before I break down in front of him. I am about to step inside when his voice stops me in my track. "Amy is my sister."

Chapter Forty-Four

Archer

Fourteen Years Ago

It felt like someone was pounding my skull with a hammer. The sound of the hits ringing in my ears. I groan, opening my eyes. Someone was banging on the door.

“Fuck off.” Squeezing my eyes shut, I roll over to my side. My bare chest pressing against a naked body.

I don’t remember shit that happened last night and whom I ended up in bed with. But I am not one to complain. I cup her breast in my palm and nuzzle her neck. Instantly regretting it as her strong perfume assail my nostrils.

The banging doesn’t stop as I untangle myself from her. I roll to the other side and feel another naked body in my bed. She moans in her sleep, throwing a leg over my waist.

Before I could indulge in her, I hear loud voices outside my bedroom. Probably the two assholes I share the house with. They make me regret living off campus sometimes.

My eyes pop open. Throwing the covers to the side, I jump off the bed.

It takes a solid minute for my eyes to focus long enough to find my boxers from the clothes lying on the floor. Pulling it on, I stride to the door and throw it open.

“You have a death wish?” I glare at my roommates, Choi Jin-woo and Rick.

“That’s how you talk to your best friend? I’m hurt, bro.” Rick mocks.

“Fuck off.” I go to shut the door but he stops it with a hand.

“All right, all right. Don’t act like a bitch now.” He rolls his eyes. I open the door wide and punch him in the face.

“Fuck!” Rick screeches, making Jin-woo laugh. “What was that for?”

“For calling me a bitch. For waking me up. Take your pick.” I saunter back inside to grab my black undershirt and pull it over my head.

“Archer,” The brunette purrs, making me glance at the bed. “Come to bed.” She shoots me a lazy grin as her hands clutch the sheet over her naked body.

The other one sits up, uncaring of her nakedness. Wordlessly trying to tempt me. I would’ve rolled my eyes but I was too busy remembering their names. All I know is they showed up at our house party last night in fuck me dresses and killer heels.

Maybe I didn’t bother asking their names. I do remember asking their age, though. They both are nineteen. Older than me by a year. I don’t give a fuck about their age. They just have to be legal and I am down to fuck.

It’s a wonder I remember anything from last night given how I spent each minute of the party drinking as if my life depended on it.

What can I say? I am addicted to it. I had my first beer when I was about thirteen. And I fucking loved the state of drunkenness so much that I chased after that feeling.

Over the years, I was kind of addicted to drinking. Okay, I was fully consumed by it. So. Fucking. What?

I love alcohol. Love how it numbs my senses, especially when I am getting inked. My tattoo artist always disapproves of me showing up drunk. Says it’s risky to get a tattoo while being intoxicated. Because alcohol thins blood or some shit like that.

I simply throw money at his face and that shuts his mouth pretty quickly.

My family thinks I am depressed. That's why I drink so much. I've explained countless times that I just loved drinking. That's all. I don't need a fucking reason to drink.

That had upset Abeoji and he threw me out of his house.

"If you want to live with us, you have to quit drinking." He threatened me in Korean about a month ago.

I tilted my head to the side. "And if I don't?"

"Then you are free to move out. I don't want a careless brat living under my roof. If you want to destroy your life, do it somewhere else."

Eomma was heartbroken. But noona—my older sister, Amy—was hell-bent on "changing me."

Older by seven years, Amy was an ideal daughter. My whole life I was told to be like her. An exceptional student. An overachiever. A social worker.

At twenty-five, she runs numerous NGOs for women and animals and is planning to start her new venture. An advertising agency.

It was her dream to work in the advertising industry but she put that on hold to help others.

Now that she has a big team who looks after those NGOs, she can finally utilize her free time into something she wanted to do for a long time. To pursue her dreams.

While her achievements are admirable, I can't help but resent her a little for being so perfect.

I love her. I do. I care about her more than my parents or anything in this world. But that won't change the fact that she has unknowingly put a lot of pressure on me growing up.

She is a perfect daughter. A perfect older sister who actually signed the lease for the house I am living in. Ever since Abeoji disowned me, she's been taking care of my expenses too. Because she is generous like that.

Sometimes I wish she wasn't so good to me. All I do is mooch off her unapologetically and she lets me. I don't answer her calls often. And she still attempts to reach out in the hopes of reuniting me with Abeoji.

I don't have any grudges against my old man and I can consider going back to them. If only they give up asking me to stop drinking.

I turn to find my roommates eye-fucking the girls. This time I do roll my eyes.

I clap my hands, making all four heads turn my way. "You two," I point toward the girls. "Get out."

Ignoring their gasps, I look over to my stupid friends. "Start talking."

If they didn't give me a valid reason for disrupting my sleep, I am going to fucking lose it.

"Your sister is here," Jin-wo says barely looking away from the girl's tits.

"What?" I snap, making his head turn my way.

"Yeah, man. She's waiting in the living room for twenty minutes now."

"Fuck." I bend to get my jeans. "And you are telling me this now?"

"We called you, dude. Several times. But as usual, you didn't pick up. We figured you were still sleeping. It took good fifteen minutes of banging at your door to wake you."

I throw on the jeans and a shrug on a shirt, not bothering to button it up as I am wearing an undershirt and charge out of the room.

Descending the stairs, I enter the living area and find Amy standing near the glass window facing away from me.

She is wearing a white full-sleeved white dress and her dark straight hair cascades down her shoulders.

As soon as she hears my footsteps, she turns to face me. She beams at my sight, her face brightening as she starts toward me.

When she stumbles over an empty beer bottle, I am there in a blink, gripping her upper arms.

She looks up, giving me her sweet smile. Despite the mess she sees around here, she never judges me. My sister is built different, I swear. No matter how clear my flaws are to her, she turns a blind eye. That's how much she loves me.

"You okay?" I ask in Korean.

She nods, still smiling. Straightening, she cups my face, her dark eyes mirroring mine goes all soft. "How's my baby brother?"

"How do I look?" I mock. I probably smell like women's perfume and whiskey. My hair is a mess, my clothes all rumpled. I look like I usually do. A careless, unfeeling bastard.

She knows I just burned through the money she wired in my account a couple of days ago. Sometimes, I overdo things in the hopes of making her reach her limits. So that she would give up on her younger brother who's good for nothing except for being infamous for his player persona on campus.

Her smile doesn't waver. "You look like the most handsome brother ever."

Maybe she is faking her smile to hide her disgust. But she proves me wrong when her arms wrap around me. She lays her head on my chest. Releasing a long breath, she says, "I missed you, Archer."

I swallow thickly before hugging her back. Pressing a kiss on the crown of her head, I draw back. The smile she shoots me is blinding. I am not an affectionate person, she knows that.

So she doesn't take my hugs or kisses for granted.

Reaching up, she ruffles my hair. "I brought you breakfast." She motions to the coffee table where two bags are resting alongside two paper coffee cups.

She hurries over and lifts one and brings it to me. I usually start my day with a beer but I take the coffee from her. Just for the happiness that reflects on her face.

"Let's sit."

After finishing the breakfast, I lean back against the sofa. “So what do you want, Amy? Why are you really here?”

“Can’t I come over to meet my brother? And by the way, how many time do I have to tell you to call me noona?”

I roll my eyes. Noona means older sister in Korean.

“Yes, you can, but I know you, *Amy*.” I goad her just to annoy her. It doesn’t work and I sigh. Then, “There’s something more to it today. I can sense it. So out with it.” I push the hair hanging over my forehead back.

“Well,” She wrings her fingers. This girl can never hide a thing. She is that transparent. “I am having a small get together to celebrate landing my very first client.”

“You started your advertising agency already?” I frown. That’s news to me.

She nods, biting her smile. Grabbing her handbag, she fishes out a card and hands it to me.

“KIM Advertising.” I read out loud. Then I look at her, feeling so damn happy for her. “Congratulations, Amy. I am so proud of you.” I say softly.

“Thank you, Archer. So... you’ll come?”

I smile. “I will.”

“You promise?” She holds out her pinky and I chuckle. I hook mine with hers and we touch our thumbs, sealing the promise.

“I promise.”

“Would you pick me up? I had to get a cab to come over. My car is still at the garage.” I vaguely remember reading her text a couple days ago complaining about her car breaking down in the middle of the road. I had to go pick her up.

“No problem. I’ll be there. Just text me the time for a reminder.”

“You better not forget.” She gets up, ready to leave. “You promised me after all.”

“Are they going to be there?” I ask quietly. She knows I am referring to our parents.

“Yes. But you will come, right?” She looks at me with unsure eyes. This is the first time she has asked something from me. I am not going to deny her this. If I have to endure my father’s disapproval to make Amy happy, I’ll do it.

“I will,” I reassure her and pinch her cheek.

She waves at me then someone over my back before leaving. I turn to find my roommates staring after my sister.

“She is so beautiful.” Jin-wo breathes, clutching his heart.

“Like a little butterfly,” Rick murmurs.

Clenching my jaw, I sneak up behind them while they’re still staring out the window and grip their necks in a chokehold. “Erase her from your fucking memory. That’s my sister, assholes.”

They grunt and attempt to twist around but I tighten my grip. “All right, man! I’m sorry.” Rick manages to speak.

“Yeah, sorry, bro.” Jin-wo coughs.

I make them suffer for a couple more minutes before pushing them away.



“I need to go,” I shout over the music.

“What?” Rick asks.

“I have to pick Amy up.” I begin to push to my feet when a hand lands on my shoulder.

I look up and find Anderson. Captain of the football team. Famous, rich and a spoiled brat. Oh and he also hates my guts. Because I fucked her long-term girlfriend a month ago and personally told him about it.

Hey, it wasn’t my fault she couldn’t resist the temptation. She came on to me. I did what any hot-blooded man in his teens would. I fucked her. And thought it was my responsibility to let her boyfriend know he is dating a cheater. I call it social service.

Anderson’s blond hair is cropped in a buzz cut and he is wearing a black t-shirt and dark wash jeans. He smiles coldly at

me.

“Leaving already?”

“I am.” I shove his hand off my shoulder and get up.

“I challenge you for a keg stand. Whoever wins would get to bang her.” He motions to the redhead who appears to be in her mid-twenties. The woman grins, winking our way.

I shouldn't have come to this fucking party. But Rick was whining like a little bitch, promising it would be just for a couple of hours at Todd's. Now I am fucking late and slightly buzzed because of the beers I drank.

Any other time, I would've taken him on his challenge, but not today. Amy must be waiting for me.

“No can do, brother.” I mock the last word and turn.

“Is Archer Kim not man enough to accept the challenge?” He speaks out loud, making a scene. The music cuts off. Everybody stops dancing.

I face him, my jaw set. “You trying to piss me off on purpose?”

He throws his hands up. “Hey, it's a harmless drinking game, buddy. I thought you'd be down for it considering your love for alcohol.”

I stare at him hard and he merely smiles. “It's free alcohol, bro. Todd wouldn't mind if you steal the limelight of his party. Would you, Todd?” He looks at Todd.

Todd shrugs his shoulders. Anderson looks back at me. “We all know you love having things that aren't yours.” He grinds out, hinting that he's still not over his girlfriend thing.

“Look—”

“Come on, man. You scared of losing to me?” He grins and I find myself saying, “Fine. Let's do it.”

Everyone is hollering, and cheering us up as we get ready for the match. I take out my phone and find Amy's message.

Amy: Where are you?

I text her back.

I'm on my way. I'll be there in a few.

I lie and pocket my phone.



Present

I am sitting on a couch next to Summer. My hands curled into tight fists, nails digging in my palm.

Summer senses that what I am about to say is hard because she scoots closer and covers my hands with hers.

“I lied.” I grit out. “I lied to her. It came so easily because I used to make excuses all the time if I wanted to ignore my family.” I look at her. “That one lie cost me everything. I thought I would be able to reach her in time if I drove above the speed limit.” I shake my head. “That night, one thing led to another and before I knew it, I was drunk out of my mind. So drunk that I forgot that she was waiting for me.”

I woke up the next afternoon with a sick feeling that had nothing to do with the alcohol I had consumed the night before.

The first thing I did was check my phone, finding several missed calls and voice messages.



Past

Something wakes me up. A sinking feeling in my stomach. My back hurts as I move. The hard surface underneath my body tells me I crashed on the fucking floor last night.

Cursing under my breath, I sit up and look around. Shit. I am still at Todd's place. How much did I drink last night? I remember doing a keg stand and winning the challenge. Then the butt hurt Anderson challenged me again in some stupid drinking game. I won that too. After that everything seems to be a blur.

Something vibrates against my thigh and I realize it's my phone. I take it out.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I curse as I go through the notifications. Several missed calls, voice messages and texts are waiting for me. All from Amy. But as I scroll through them, I notice that the recent ones are from Eomma.

I fucked up. This time to the point of no return. I broke her fucking heart.

She'll never forgive me for not showing up. Even Eomma is calling to give me an earful.

Getting up from the floor, I look around and find people passed out all over the place.

I step over the bodies and get out of the house. Trailing into his backyard, I call Amy.

She doesn't answer. Amy is not the one to ignore phone calls. Especially mine. She is just not the person who would take her anger out on people by ignoring them. Instead, she would force you to face her. She'll sit with you and talk until the issue is resolved.

So when my third call goes unanswered, my heart begins pounding hard.

Stabbing my fingers in my hair, I try again. "Pick up, pick up, pick up." I chant as I pace.

When she doesn't answer, I contemplate calling Eomma but stop and decide against it. I shouldn't worry her.

So I go through her messages which mostly contain questions asking where I was.

Then I move to the voice messages.

I listen to the first one.

"Hey, are you okay? You are not responding to my messages and calls. It made me worry. I should be pissed, you know. You made me wait for an hour outside my apartment." She breathes. "But I am not mad. I am just... worried. Please call me."

The next one.

"Okay, now I am officially late to my own party and I don't care about it. I am heading to your place."

I move to the next voice message.

“I am so tired right now. My feet are killing me and my cab just canceled on me. I might have to walk a little bit to get a taxi. Don’t worry, I’ll be there soon. I hope you are okay.”

Coldness drips down my spine as I listen to her.

I move to the next.

She breathes hard as if she’s been running. “Archer.... I t-think someone’s following me. I saw a homeless man when I turned a corner ten minutes ago. I think I dodged him. Also, I think I am lost. Please call me if you get this. I-I’m scared, Archer. Please... come get me.”

My blood runs cold. Gripping my hair, I try to calm my racing heart.

That was her last voice message. With trembling fingers, I scroll frantically, trying to find another voice message in case I missed it. I didn’t.

I call Eomma.

She is deathly silent. Just rats out the hospital’s name and hangs up.

I run. One of my shoes slides off my feet but I don’t stop. I get behind my wheel and drive like a maniac.

“No, no, no.” I shake my head frantically. Not allowing a single bad thought to take root in my brain.

“She’s okay.” I feel tremors running through me as I climb out and dash inside the hospital.

“Amy Kim,” I shout at the receptionist.

When she asks who am I to her, I swallow and taste salt. “I’m her brother.”

She gives me a sympathetic look and I hate it. I want to shout in her face to make her stop looking at me like that.

When she tells me the floor number, I sprint down the hallways and choose stairs instead of waiting for an elevator.

When I reach the floor, I find Abeoji holding a crying Eomma to his chest.

With heavy steps, I approach them.

“Eomma?”

She lifts her head and looks at me with so much pain that it makes me stagger back.

“Where is Amy?” I ask hoarsely.

Her face crumbles. Sobbing, she shakes her head.

I stride to her and clutch her upper arms. “Where is Amy? What happened?” I shout.

She trembles in my hold, tears flowing down her cheeks, guttural sobs tearing through her throat. “Tell me! What happened to her? Where is she?” I shake her, uncaring that she was hurting. “Talk to me! What happened to Amy?”

“She is dead,” Abeoji says in an emotionless voice.

I stagger back. My chest tightens and I feel as if someone just stabbed me in the heart with a knife. Then tugged it out only to stab me again. Over and over.

No.

No, no, no.

I fall to my knees and let out a wail of helplessness and rage laced with self-loathing.

Chapter Forty-Five

Summer

I take him in my arms as he breaks in front of me. His shoulders shake as he cries softly. I tighten my arms around him, tears streaming down my face.

I can't stomach my unrelenting guilt. This whole time I was thinking Amy was his girlfriend whom he can't forget.

That night when he uttered her name, he was calling out to his dead sister.

He spent fourteen long years blaming himself for her death. Now I know why he hated liars. Because he was one. And that caused him irreparable damage. Left him with scars that never healed.

That's why he's been living a lonely life because he hates himself.

He draws back. Shifting, he stares ahead. "She was brutally raped and then beaten to death by a forty-seven-year-old homeless man."

I cover my mouth and cry softly.

"All because I lied and made her wait alone for a stupid fucking drinking game."

"Archer, I can't imagine what you went through, but I hope you realize that it wasn't your fault."

He closes his eyes briefly. Then, “After that day in the hospital, I stopped talking. The guilt was too much. I just wanted to die. So I tried killing myself.”

My heart stops.

“If it weren’t for my parents, I would be dead. They walked in on me when I was trying to hang myself. After that, I moved back in with them. I began drinking more than ever. This time, even my father didn’t stop me.” He lets out a humorless chuckle. “It took my sister’s death for me to reunite with Abeoji.”

“Please don’t say that,” I whisper.

I always found sadness in Ma and Pa’s eyes. Which mirrored mine. Like they lost someone. Now I know. They lost their daughter. And just like I longed for parents, they longed for the daughter they lost. And we found what we yearned for in each other.

“One month later, when I was going through my stuff, I found Amy’s business card. And that devastated me. Her dreams and hopes were crushed. KIM Advertising had shut down before it could flourish. The NGOs and animal shelters were all in a mess. That’s when I decided I was going to end my life. But not by committing suicide. By erasing every trace of who I was and re-building myself into a new person. A person who is sober. A person who never lies. A person who would help Amy live her dreams through me.”

He bows his head. I squeeze his shoulder.

“With the help of my parents, I checked myself in a rehab. I purposely chose a six-month program. And when I was out, I was a new man. I was no longer the careless teen who took everything for granted. Abeoji was proud of me but I didn’t change for him. I did it for her. My sister.” He takes a stuttering breath. “I worked hard and built KIM Advertising from scratch. Bigger and better. I began volunteering in shelters, picked up her incomplete mission of helping others. But no matter what I did, it wasn’t enough to fill the hollowness inside me. I stopped celebrating birthdays, parties because it was a reminder that my life was going forward and Amy’s wasn’t. Because it was ended by that motherfucker.”

“Was he arrested?”

He nods. “He was killed in the cell five years later. I may or may not have a hand in his death.”

I gasp.

He looks at me then. “I don’t regret it. I shoved money down some people’s throats and told them to make that bastard suffer. Thinking that his death would finally bring peace. That I would finally be able to sleep at night. I was wrong. All it did was made me hate myself even more.” He looks at me then. “Then you came into my life and filled it with colors.”

I bite my trembling lip. He cradles my face. “You made me feel again, Summer.” He touches his forehead to mine. “When you told me about your mom, I wanted to open up too. I wanted to tell you everything but I couldn’t. I wasn’t ready to go through that again. So I chose the easy way out. I let you go.”

He pulls back and stares at me, his eyes glistening. “I am sorry for hurting you, Summer. I really am. I am willing to spend the rest of my life making it up to you if you’d let me. I don’t care if you don’t want me back now. I will wait for you until my last breath. But please don’t say that it’s too late, baby. I can’t live without you. I don’t *want* to live without—”

I kiss him. I feel the tears coursing down my face but I’m not sure who’s tears are those. Mine or his.

Breaking the kiss, I cry softly. “I love you.”

He clutches my face tightly. “I love you.”

“I can’t live without you either, Archer. These past days have been hell. I don’t want to feel that again. Please don’t let me go again.”

He shakes his head reverently. “I won’t.” Then, “You really forgive me?”

I nod, smiling through my tears. “You are my whole life, Archer.”

“And you are mine.” He presses his lips to mine.

Terrible grief grips me when I think of our pasts. He lost his sister. I lost my mother. We both went through so much pain and

when we found each other, we became each other's strength.

All this time, he was carrying a missing piece of my soul and I was carrying his and tonight, we are finally whole.

We were able to find each other because of the loss. And while we would never completely move on from that, I am content that we are now less hollow than before.

"I hope you know I didn't leak the ad campaign," I say after breaking the kiss.

Archer breathes and then nods, his face full of misery. "I know. Despite the proofs pointing at you, I knew you wouldn't betray us. But I had to do something to drive you to your limits. I had to make sure you hated me. So you could give—"

"So I could give up on you?" I sniffle.

He nods, anguish filling his eyes. "Oh, Archer." I move to straddle him and grab his face.

"If I had known... I never would have let you push me away. I would've fought harder."

"But you didn't know." He smooths a strand off my face.

"No more secrets from now on, Archer."

"No more secrets." He agrees.

We sit there for a moment, staring at each other. He cups my head and brings my lips to his. I press my body closer to his as his tongue enters my mouth.

After a minute, our kiss turns frantic. And before we know it, we are tearing each other clothes off, our actions desperate and fingers fumbling. God, I've missed this. So much. I've missed being with him. Missed being consumed by him.

Archer pulls my thermal top over my head. I do the same, yanking his sweater off him. I run my hands over the grooves of his abs. Pressing my face in his neck, I kiss his skin as my hand works his belt.

When I fail to unbuckle him, he helps me with it.

His hardened cock is hot in my palm. I squeeze him hard and am graced by his low groan.

Grabbing my face, he tilts it and begins devouring my mouth. But the kiss ends soon because our need for each other is too much for wasting time on foreplay. This clawing need for him makes me ache all over. I just want him inside me.

It seems that he feels the same way because he pushes to his feet with me in his arms and takes me to the bedroom. Once we are inside, we strip the rest of our clothes.

The moment we are skin to skin, we both let out a contented sigh. Our movements transform into gentle touches and the kisses grow slower.

When he is finally inside me, I wrap my legs around him, trembling from so many emotions going through me. A tear escapes my eye as he makes love to me.

Archer kisses the tear away and loves me just the way I've always wanted. I feel cherished. And loved.

When we come together, it's just perfect. So much so that it makes me emotional.

"I love you." He kisses my forehead as we lay there afterward.

"And I love you." I look up and kiss his chin. I intertwine my fingers with his.

He looks at our joined hands. "I never thought I could ever have this." Then he stares at me. "Do you think I am a monster for planning the demise of Amy's murderer?"

I shake my head. "No. What you did might be immoral for some people but for me, I think you did the right thing. For me, the world has always been a dark place where bad people exist. Like him and my father. They are real monsters because they took the lives of innocent people without remorse. What you did to him was his own karma. The universe found a way to punish him through you. So no, Archer. I don't think that you are a monster."

He holds me tighter in his arms. "Thank you."

"What for?"

"For understanding me. For not hating me for my past mistakes."

“I could never hate you, Archer,” I say when I pull back.

He gives me one of his rare smiles before kissing me softly.

Archer’s phone that was lying on the floor rings and lights up. We ignore it and continue making out. The call ends but it starts ringing again.

He groans. “Just a minute.”

He gets off the bed and reaches for it. Then he’s back by my side.

He stares at the screen with a frown. I scoot closer to peer over his shoulder.

Raleigh’s name is flashing on the screen. “I thought he was mad at you.”

“He is,” Archer tells me before answering the phone. “Hello?”

“Put him on speaker.” I mouth and he does.

“I got it.” Raleigh’s tone is joyous as he says that. “I finally found the culprit who leaked our ad campaign.”

Archer sits straighter. “Who is it?”

“A hacker Genesis Media hired to attack and hack into our system. He managed to invade our system and gained access to our data from our server.”

Archer and I stare at each other. He squeezes my hand in a silent apology. I press a kiss on his shoulder, accepting it.

“Good work, Raleigh.”

“I did it for my best friend.” He says coldly. “I hope you are ready for apologizing to Summer in front of everyone.”

My brows snap together. What is he talking about?

Archer agrees and then Raleigh talks about sending them a legal notice. “I plan to destroy Genesis Media.”

“Do it,” Archer says simply.

“What?” Raleigh asks, disbelief ringing in his voice. “You’re not afraid of the scandal?”

“I don’t care about it. Make sure Genesis Media never recovers from our blow.”

“Say no more.” I can hear the smile in his voice. There’s a pause before he continues, “I told you she was innocent, big brother. You shouldn’t have hurt her like that—”

I take the phone from Archer’s hand. “I had no idea my friend is so sentimental.”

“Wait, what? Summer, is that you?”

“Duh! You think Archer could mimic my sweet voice?” I grin at Archer and he tugs a lock of my hair playfully.

“When did you get back?” He asks but a second later says, “Don’t tell me Archer flew to Switzerland to see you.”

“He did.” I lay my head on his shoulder. “And he apologized.”

There’s a brief pause before he says, “Good. And judging by your playful voice you guys are back together, right?”

“Yes, we are,” Archer replies.

“Wait, am I on speaker right now?”

“Yeah,” I confirm and chuckle when he grumbles about it.

He sobers up then. “You better not make her cry again, Archer.”

“I won’t.” He wraps an arm around me. “She is the love of my life. And even if I did unintentionally hurt her, I would make it up to her.”

I stare up at him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“How would you make it up to me?”

Archer lowers his head to whisper in my ear. I let out a giggle.

Raleigh makes a gagging sound. “Okay, that was gross. I’m hanging up.” He says before the line goes dead, making me laugh.

I trail my finger down his chest and take him in my hand.
“Can we do it again?”

“Fuck yes.” He says and pounces on me, making me squeal.

Epilogue

Archer

Five years later

I notice Summer the moment she walks into the house. It's like every cell in my body becomes hyperaware of her presence.

It's incredible how one person could change your whole life so drastically.

We began from being enemies who couldn't stand each other to being neighbors and then became life partners.

I had given up on happiness but my wife came into my life and made me realize that there was still hope. She helped me see that I deserved a second chance at life.

We both went through traumas that haunted us our entire lives. It still does. But the only difference is, we don't suffer alone. We seek each other out and grieve together.

I don't shut her down when things become too much. Instead, we sit and talk it out. She listens to me patiently and holds me in her arms when I need healing.

The same goes for her. When she is having one of those gloomy days, I give her strength.

Living with her makes living life so much easier and lighter. She made my journey of self-forgiveness easy. I still don't lie. But I am not that strict with people who lie anymore. All because of my little liar.

After Raleigh and I literally destroyed Genesis Media's reputation by exposing their wrongdoings against us, they had to shut down their agency.

We are now dubbed as the Ruthless Men of the advertising industry. Our wives love to tease us about it.

Summer and I got married soon after Raleigh and Hannah. Because we didn't want to wait.

We purchased a mansion in Malibu soon after our wedding. When Summer expressed her wish of living with Eomma and Abeoji, I was uncertain about the whole idea of living together. Not because I didn't want to.

It was because I wasn't sure they would want that. To live with a son who grew distant after Amy. But I was surprised when they agreed. Like Summer and I, they've suffered too. And they yearned for a family.

Abeoji and I finally did what we should have done a long time ago. Grieve. We embraced each and shed tears, finally acknowledging our loss. That day when the light breeze caressed my face, I immediately sensed it was Amy. She was happy seeing us together at last.

My two-year-old daughter squirms in my arms as soon as she spots her mother. "Mommy—" I put a hand over Amy's mouth, silencing her.

"We talked about this, Amy." I chide her gently then lower my hand.

"Sorry, Daddy." She grins, her dark brown eyes glimmering which tells me she's not really sorry.

We are currently hiding in the darkened hallway of our mansion while my four-year-old son, Aiden is hiding behind the gigantic sofa in the living room.

"Archer? Is anybody home?" Summer calls out.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Harper toddling toward me. Harper is my three-year-old adopted daughter. "Daddy!" She squeals as soon as she reaches me, her mocha skin glowing in the sparkly princess dress she is wearing.

Summer turns in our direction and I hurry to her and crouch down to pick her up. I left her with Raleigh for two minutes and she managed to escape him.

This is so not going as planned.

Today is a big day for Summer. She just opened her third NGO called the Sunshine Project. It's for the children who are treated poorly in the foster system. The project provides educational assistance as well as focuses on improving every aspect of children's lives mainly health and social needs.

Summer and Raleigh suffered a lot in their childhood. And she always had this drive to do something for underprivileged kids. Because nobody did that for her.

I am so damn proud of her. After giving birth to Aiden, she continued modeling for a while then opened her very own clothing line. She funded the venture with the money she earned through modeling.

She worked hard on creating something unique by collaborating with designers and stylists. They came up with outfits inspired by Summer's quirky fashion sense and it paid off. Because it quickly set the trend and her clothing line became one of the most successful brands in L.A.

I finally told her about the investment I had made in her name using the money she was paying me every month for her car. She was upset that I didn't tell her about it but got over it and used the return on that investment for social causes.

Aiden was one year old when we adopted the twins—Harper and Gordon. We met them through the NGO Summer was volunteering at. As soon as she held them in her arms, she decided she was adopting them.

And a year later, we had Amy, our youngest. She was a surprise. And we couldn't be happier to welcome her to our big family.

When Eomma held her for the first, she burst into tears because she looked exactly like Amy when she was an infant.

She strongly believed that Amy was reincarnated. Because she also shared a birthmark on her neck similar to my sister's.

Naming her Amy felt right.

I can't say I fully believe in my mother's theory but sometimes, when she looks at me with her soft eyes, it feels like it really is Amy.

"Where's Gordon?" I whisper the question as Summer calls out my name again.

"Me want mommy!" Amy squirms in my hold, demanding to be set down. Knowing she would take off toward her mother, I don't listen to her.

"Gordon is napping." Harper giggles. I don't know why she finds it funny but apparently, everything is funny to kids.

Balancing them both on either of my hips, I pull out my phone. I somehow manage to call Hannah.

"Would you hold the phone to Daddy's ear?" I ask Harper and she smiles, nodding.

She does as she's told. "Hello?" Hannah answers.

"Where is your husband?" I hiss.

"He might be... somewhere."

"Are you serious? He was supposed to hit the lights like two minutes ago. You know nobody would move until the lights are on, right?"

I had planned this evening for Summer. For her efforts and hard work she put into changing many lives.

Because of her, I began coming to parties and also celebrating the birthdays of my loved ones. But today, I had *planned* a party.

The original idea was that as soon as Summer walked in, Raleigh would hit the lights, bathing the entire place in multi-color string lights. Her favorite. Then Hannah, Brielle, Nina, and Mia would jump out of their hiding places with confetti cannons. River was supposed to be here too but she's out of the country.

Anyway, after the confetti cannons are popped, Goldie would make his grand entry wearing a tux.

At the same time, Chris and Jason would release the string attached to the ceiling that would give way for hundreds of colorful balloons.

And in the end, Eomma and Abeoji would wheel the three-layer cake out.

All of this should be happening right now. But it's not. Because of Raleigh.

“Find him—”

The girls in my arms begin to babble loudly, talking to each other in a language unknown. Harper says something in Korean which is so adorably mispronounced that I can't help but laugh. I kiss her cheek.

“Daddy, me too!” Amy pouts. I go to kiss her cheek but the phone falls from Harper's hand, startling the girls.

“Archer?” Summer calls out.

I bend, setting them down to get the phone. The moment they are down, they sprint out.

“Amy! Harper!” I whisper-shout.

“Mommy! Mommy!” They hug each of Summer's legs and I sigh.

I bring the phone to my ear but stop when Aiden springs up from his hiding place. He jumps up and over the couch and practically pushes his sisters aside to hug his mother.

His spiderman costume is matching with Summer's red vintage dress. She kneels and hugs the trio, laughing when they almost tackle her down to the floor.

“Mama.” Gordon finally shows up alongside Goldie who's in a tux that's all crumpled. Did they nap together again?

Rubbing his eyes, he strolls over to the group with Goldie in tow.

“Come here, honey.” She coos. Tucking Gordon at her side, she grins at Goldie before pressing a kiss on his head. “You look so handsome in a tux, baby boy!” Then, “Who dressed him up like that?” She asks the kids.

“Daddy!” The four kids answer in unison and I sigh in defeat.

Raleigh finally switches on the light. And before Hannah and the girls could come out with the confetti cannons, the balloons are released. Summer and the kids gasp then laugh as they look around, grinning.

The confetti cannon pops and it startles Amy. She burst into tears.

Summer picks her up, rocking her as she glances around, taking in the decoration with wonder.

Raleigh descends carrying his daughter, Brooke. Chris and Jason are right behind.

As soon as Aiden sees Brooke, he darts toward them.

“Uncle Raleigh, can I carry her?” He asks while staring at Brooke.

Raleigh chuckles. “You do realize she is older than you, right?”

Aiden frowns. “By a month.”

“I mean you can’t carry her. You’re too small, buddy.”

Aiden juts his chin out. “Try me.”

Brooke soon begins squirming and Raleigh sets her down on her feet.

The moment she is down, Aiden snatches her hand and whisks her away, leaving Raleigh baffled.

I chuckle, shaking my head.

“Where’s Archer?” I hear Summer ask. And I am about to go to her when Eomma and Abeoji are coming out with the cake.

With a sigh, I join them.

Summer hands Amy to Hannah when she sees me coming.

I wrap my arms around her and kiss her on the lips.

“Hi.” She smiles at me.

“Hi.” I give her a tired smile.

“You did all this.” She motions to the surroundings.

I nod, sighing. “It didn’t exactly go according to the plan, though.”

She rubs my chest with her palms. “I loved it nonetheless. My family and friends are here. This feels like a fairy tale.”

“It’s much better than a fairy tale because it’s real.”

“It is.” She buries her face in my neck and I hug her to my chest tightly.

“There are no candles on the cake!” Harper exclaims.

“Me want bite.” I hear Amy mumbling through sniffles.

“I’ll get you the biggest slice.” My naughty son, Aiden promises, most probably to Brooke.

Reluctantly, I let my wife go. Abeoji comes to my side. And Eomma squeezes herself next to Summer and passes the knife to cut the cake. They both start chatting.

I look around and smile internally, my once dead heart feeling so full of love and happiness and life.

“Come on, man. Cut the damn cake. I’m hungry.” Raleigh calls out as he stands in front of us with a camera. I glare at him. He knows Amy is notorious for picking up bad words pretty quickly.

“Me want to taste the damn cake!” Amy shouts and Hannah glares at her husband when all the kids begin chanting the word.

Raleigh gives us a sheepish smile and I shake my head.

Summer takes my hand in hers. And we bend to cut the cake. Just as we are about to do so, Gordon’s hand lashes out and lands on the cake. Everyone gasps as he takes a chunk out and begins nibbling on it.

Summer and I slowly turn our heads and stare at each other then burst out laughing.

The End

Curious about Raleigh and Hannah? You can read their story by clicking [here](#).

Hey, there!

Thank you so much for reading Archer and Summer's love story. If you enjoyed it, please leave a review. Spread the word around and share this book with your reader friends! It would mean a lot.

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About the Authors



Sanjana and Nidhi are two sisters who share a passion for reading and writing everything romance.

They love their heroes alpha and loyal at heart.

Being hopeless romantics themselves, their books promise to have no cheating and a fulfilling HEA!

When they are not writing, the duo can be found painting and sketching or swooning over Asian dramas / Netflix shows.

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