

*Off-Limits*

# BABY DADDY

· A I M E E B R O N S O N

*Off-Limits Baby Daddy*

A BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND BILLIONAIRE  
ROMANCE

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AIMEE BRONSON



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# *Chapter One*

## SAFFRON

**T**he crystal glass clinked and sparkled under the light of the chandelier as we toasted my return back home.

My dad's laughter boomed off the walls of the dining room as Ashton joked about something while passing around dishes of food I missed this when I was gone. My dad's great sense of humor. And while my mom's cooking wasn't the best I'd ever tasted, it was made with love—that's what mattered.

The house had been redecorated in the years I had been gone. In Chestnut Bay. For years, my mom had fought to keep up with modern tastes and trends that didn't always fit in the old, rambling colonial estate in Maryland. She seemed to have taken more of an authentic angle with her redesign, restoring the rooms with character. Even if the character was brand new and very expensive.

But the softer cream colors on the wall and natural wood paneling throughout actually made the expansive house feel warmer and homier. The dining room now featured a massive oak table that felt organic and natural. A few plants were placed near the tall bank of windows on one wall—br

life into the space. The chandelier was dimmed and a couple of lamps lit the large buffet on the side wall. The effect was much like a warm blanket on a cold day.

Or that could have been the wine talking.

Still, I had missed it here when I was in England.

“I haven’t told you yet how much I love what you did with the place,” I said to Mom, as I looked around. She beamed at me, clearly pleased with my effort and that I had noticed.

“We practically had to fight her away from redecorating your room,” my dad said, laughing as he dished some rice onto his plate next to the chandelier and pepper.

“We all know what happened the last time Mom tried so much as she changed the window curtains when you were thirteen. You practically burned down the house. I had a rebellion,” Ashton added.

“It’s true,” my mom said, rolling her eyes at my dad as she speared some more of zucchini from her plate. “Your father convinced me that you were a rebel.”

Direction posters needed to be preserved forever. Heirlooms, as they are, were not to be thrown away. Ashton snorted and covered his mouth with his napkin as he took a sip of his wine and I chuckled. My dad pointed his fork at my mom, but the playful and warm smile diminished any threat in the gesture.

“Well,” I said as we all recovered. “I’m sure she would have done the job.” I reached over and squeezed my mom’s hand. We didn’t always get along perfectly, but I knew how much care she put into our home.

“And in fairness about the curtain thing,” I continued. “You’ll remember. She was going through a very difficult break-up with Sean—”

“A break-up? You were thirteen!” My dad’s eyes were wild as if all his good senses were offended.

flanked “Shh, yes, yes, Dad,” I said, waving off his concern. “Anyway, I had dug on somewhere that yellow is a color for happiness and I was desperate to be happy again. So when Mom took down the yellow curtains I went a little bonkers.”

“Well, even with your questionable taste—which you certainly didn’t notice,” I said, “I’m glad to be home,” my mom looked pointedly at my dad, “we’re so glad to have you back home for good, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’m glad to be back.”

“I smiled and took a sip of wine, realizing it was true. I had such a good experience getting a master’s degree in business from Oxford University as much as I loved England and my friends there, it wasn’t like being back to hang in Chestnut Bay.

“So what did I miss? Catch me up on all the hot gossip,” I said, leaning into the bland, overcooked meat of the stuffed peppers my mom served. “Ashton might be getting engaged soon,” my mom said. I glanced at Ashton who returned my look, a little more shyly than usual.

“Way to go big brother!” I grinned at him. “So, it turns out Christina is about to get a sip of one? It’s about time. But I was right about her, you know. Out of the many, many, many, *many* girls you’ve dated, she’s definitely my favorite.”

“I just tolerated the rest. For a great sake, I mean.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and he laughed, tossing a black olive at me. My mom chided him.

“It’s about time,” Dad said. “I don’t know why your generation likes to take their sweet time settling down. By forty, we were married with almost grown kid and a baby.”

“Dad, things have changed in the hundred years since you were

ad read There's plenty of time to settle down and have a family. And, gasp, e to besometimes want to start their career *before* having babies. If they de little...have babies at all."

I could feel my mom tense up and I knew I was playing with fire. In't getalong for the most part, but there were some very important things ave youdidn't not agree on.

"I know women poison themselves with this narrative that worki chasing a career is fulfilling. But that only seems to lead to unhappin a greatexhaustion. You know what's truly fulfilling? This," she said as she g sity andaround the room. "Settling down. Having a family. Building a g homeNurturing is what is fulfilling in this life."

I wholeheartedly disagreed with her. I was only twenty-five and I diggingrest of my life ahead of me. The last thing I wanted right now was a h l. and babies. But tonight wasn't about fighting. It was about reconnced atBesides, I wasn't going to change my mother's mind.

"I know, Mom," I said, forcing my tone to be as neutral as possi ie is thegiving her a small smile. "Anyway, any exciting projects at e many,Development these days?"

orite," I I hadn't expected the brief, tense silence that filled the room. Ash or yourmy dad shared a look and my stomach dropped. I wanted to be a par business so badly. Was something wrong?

it me as "Things haven't been great lately," Ashton finally said, his words sc a little cautious.

likes to "Ashton, there's no need to be dramatic," Dad interrupted.

ith one "Saffron's not a kid anymore. If anything, she might be useful to has her MBA now and she could offer a fresh perspective," Ashton young.straightened up a little in my chair, proud to hear how my brother de



women me. Despite our fifteen year age difference and my being away from home for the last few years, we had managed to develop a close relationship.

He had said plenty of nice things to me over the years, but it made me feel good. We got well to hear him consider my strengths for Triton.

But still, I knew my parents would prefer I be locking down one of the decent eligible bachelors—meaning wealthy, educated, and well-connected. In their eyes, I should be trying on wedding gowns, not power suits.

Dad sighed heavily and finally looked at me. I could see the wrinkles around his blue eyes were just a little deeper and his blonde hair had turned a little more gray. Charles Lavette was still a force to be reckoned with, but I could see the passage of time.

“Saff just got home,” he finally said. “Can she at least settle in before I start throwing the long list of Triton problems her way?”

It sounded like a reasonable request, but I knew the truth was he didn't want me being a part of what he considered to be "Men's Business".

“I don't mind talking about business at all, Dad,” I said eagerly, hoping Triton could capitalize on the momentum. “I'd love to hear how things have been going.”

I popped a forkful of rice in my mouth, carefully trying to act casual. I didn't want to push things too far. I had a strategy here, and if I came out of the hot, I knew it wouldn't work.

“Everything is great, honey.” I could tell that Dad was trying to convince himself as much as me.

“We've had some tough competition from Perseus Development,” he supplied as Dad shot a warning glare at him. He continued on about us. She “They've become a regional fan favorite with their latest technology.” He said. “Sustainability practices.”

“If you ask me, that damned Ethan has some sleazy tricks up his

n home No one becomes a billionaire overnight like he has,” my dad added with surprising bitterness in his voice.

y heart “Ethan? Baker?”

“Yep, Ethan Baker. And Dad’s wrong,” Ashton said, piercing my darkest with the iciest tone of his blue eyes. We all shared the exact same eyes and he basically acted as mood rings. “Ethan isn’t sleazy. He works hard and is innovative. He deserves all the success that’s coming his way. We can’t honestly take a page from his book and think about how Triton could have turned things differently.”

h, but I Ethan and Ashton had always been best friends and I was relieved to see Ashton still standing up for him. I didn’t know Ethan all that well, but the knowledge of him was great. He was from a humble family and his father had been our driver for many years. Mr. Baker-David, had been a friend and colleague of my dad’s and so I was surprised to hear Dad talk poorly of Ethan.

Although, every now and again I could see how my parents acted, trying to appear more superior to the Baker family. My mom would sometimes make “offensive” comments about Ethan and Ashton’s friendship that left me uncomfortable. I had always known the Bakers to be more than decent people in themselves and enjoyed them more than some of my parents’ elitist friends.

“Good for him, seriously. He always seemed to be really good and I’d like to know more. What’s his story? Is he married now?”

The question slipped past my lips before my brain could save me and Ashton started talking. I regretted immediately, especially when I saw my mom perk up anyway. “Nope,” Ashton said around a bite of rice. “Just like yours truly, I’m not really interested in settling down right now.”

I knew he was trying to ruffle feathers at the table.

sleeve. “It’s ridiculous,” Mom said. “Two grown men so insistent on holding

and without getting married. At one point, I even thought the two of you were to  
But we all know you're way out of his league."

I flinched at the words, but Ashton took it in stride.  
and with "Actually, he's the billionaire now, so I think he's the one out  
and they league. I think I could make a good trophy husband though."  
and he's I burst out laughing as Ashton smiled, but a tense silence st  
e could between our parents. They had their minds made up that we were stil  
ould do than the driver's son.

After a beat of incredibly awkward silence, I decided to just dive rig  
l to see the deep end.

at what I "Anyway," I said, hesitating just a moment. "I was hoping to j  
ad been company in some capacity now that I'm back. Like Ashton said, I ha  
nfidant to offer and would love to get some experience."

"Definitely, that can be arranged," Ashton said, eager to have me or  
ed a bit "Let's slow down. Today isn't about business. Let's pick this conve  
s; makeup another time after Saffron has time to settle in," Dad said.

feeling Ashton looked at me and shrugged. We knew we couldn't fight his  
human and we'd just have to wait him out. I wasn't going to give up finding  
.

at Triton's table, but I knew I'd have to pick up the battle another day.  
d kind. The rest of dinner was pleasant. Before he went home, Ashton pron  
talk to Dad some more about me joining Triton.

and stop I trudged upstairs and closed the door to my room behind me. I  
up. spun around taking in the dark pink walls, boy band posters, and p  
ie's not with friends crammed on every surface. It really was a time capsule an

strange to be back here. Sure, I had visited since leaving for colle  
living here again—at least for now—was weird. I told myself I would  
ling off

together. My mom tomorrow about redecorating here. I needed the room to reveal who grown-up Saffron really was.

I sat down at the same desk where I spent years doing my homework. I opened my laptop. I knew I would be bored out of my mind when I got so I had already dove into a volunteer project—organizing a clean up of a large park by the waterfront. It was a popular park with a lot of visitors, town events, and litter and broken benches, tables, and other things were a big problem. The clean-up was in a few days and as head of the committee I had a lot of details like signage, materials, and light catering for volunteers to finalize. I responded to a few emails and sent out a couple of messages confirming some items on my checklist. Satisfied that I was at least prepared as I could be for the day, I closed the laptop and sat silently, at the dark window.

board. How was I going to convince my dad that I could benefit Triton? I was frustrated that he was refusing to even give me a chance to prove myself. He could tell that I was still just a flighty, flaky, teenage girl to him. But my verdict was grown. I had changed. I was responsible and capable.

Sighing, I stretched my arms above my head and gently moved my neck, feeling it crack. I stood up and walked to the attached bathroom, prepared to give my dad next time it came up as I scrubbed my makeup off for the day away.

I turned off the light and walked back to my room. The mention of pictures had also thrown me for a loop. I was so happy for him that he'd achieved success and was suddenly very curious about him—not because of his age, but because of how he got there. It would have taken a lot of clawing and hard work to get to the echelons of society that my parents belonged to. It was impressive that Ethan had that fight in him.

I was still feeling wired when I climbed into bed, so I decided to do some social media scrolling. I opened Instagram and scrolled to Ashton's profile and clicked to see who he was following. Sure enough, there was @ethanbakerperseus and I clicked into the feed.

"Oh, hello, there," I purred into the silence in my room. How did I grow into this gorgeous man? He was all tanned skin, dark hair, dark eyes, and delicious lean muscles. Lots of muscles. All the muscles, really. I saw several photos posted from beach days and some from a very large and expensive boat. I was disappointed to see a lot of model-worthy women with his arm in several photos. But the same woman never appeared twice. I was clearly not settling down, as Ashton mentioned.

I quickly clicked out of the app before I did something stupid like accidentally like a photo from two years ago, and turned off the lamp. I was so happy, happily distracted from my woes with the family business. I wondered if I could somehow schedule a chance encounter with Ethan through the app this summer. I knew it was highly unlikely that Ethan would ever see anything other than his best friend's baby sister, but it wouldn't hurt to try. I fell asleep dreaming of dark eyes and being lost at sea on a yacht with Ethan and his washboard abs to keep me company.

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I was still feeling wired when I climbed into bed, so I decided to do a little social media scrolling. I opened Instagram and scrolled to Ashton's feed and clicked to see who he was following. Sure enough, there was one @ethanbakerperseus and I clicked into the feed.

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I quickly clicked out of the app before I did something stupid, like accidentally like a photo from two years ago, and turned off the lamp by my bed, happily distracted from my woes with the family business. I wondered if I could somehow schedule a chance encounter with Ethan through Ashton this summer. I knew it was highly unlikely that Ethan would ever see me as anything other than his best friend's baby sister, but it wouldn't hurt to find out.

I fell asleep dreaming of dark eyes and being lost at sea on a yacht with no one but Ethan and his washboard abs to keep me company.

## *Chapter Two*

### ETHAN

I hated these events. It was just a way for rich people to pretend to care about shit about anything other than themselves or their money. They could care less like they cared about the environment or whatever the cool cause to be that week happened to be that week.

But this was my world, too, now. I was now forced to do these things like all the other rich assholes.

I could have skipped it and written a check instead, but the Lavette family was like family and I felt obligated to support anything that had to do with them. Ashton had personally invited me and told me his little sister had organized this thing, so here I was, supporting my best friend. He was the one who stuck by me through thick and thin, so I showed up for him.

Besides, picking up trash in a park reminded me that I had not been born into this world. Now that I had all the money I could ever want, everything was available to me at the snap of the finger, I had to be brought back down to earth every once in a while and remind myself where I came from—nothing.

I scanned the surprisingly large crowd, looking for Ashton, but m

was a million miles away. I felt badly that my heart wasn't exactly prepared for this park clean-up event. But I was feeling a little itchy. Most of my life had been dedicated to building myself and creating an empire, but now that I was here, I still felt a little unfulfilled. Lately, it had been hard for me to be present in any moment of my life.

Ashton claimed I just needed a woman. But it was surprisingly hard to find a real, genuine partner. Chestnut Bay had no shortage of beautiful women, and hook-ups and flings were easy, but actual dating was way more complicated now that I had this status. But I couldn't help being underwhelmed by the options.

My phone buzzed and I looked at the screen. Ashton was running late. I'd have to give a damn if he showed up. Great, I was stuck here all alone.

I scanned the crowd again, contemplating just slipping away. There were enough support people here that no one would notice.

My brain caught on a burst of laughter coming from a woman a few dozen feet in front of me. She was standing with a small group of other women, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. The smile she had on her face was blinding and lit up her entire face. Her hair was a pixie cut that glowed in the late morning summer sun. I was too far away to see her eyes, but my gaze traveled down her tanned skin and took in every detail.

A simple, tight-fitting white tank top she wore that stopped just above the waistband of her black shorts, exposing a tantalizing inch of skin. She seemed about average height, but my mouth watered at her mile-long legs that ended in white sneakers. A pair of diamond stud earrings glittered in the sun, and even from here I could tell they were real. The simple balance of her casual outfit with the expensive, understated jewelry intrigued me. So many women in Chestnut Bay were all too eager to flash whatever money—on their

mindcard limit—they had available. But not her.



esent in I suddenly needed to know more about this woman.

life had The group she was standing with slowly dispersed and I knew I  
at I wasmake my move. She stood rooted to her spot, looking seriously at th  
to feelin her hand. I slowly started to move in her direction and she didn  
notice me walking up to her. It gave me a second to take in her blue e  
l to findflawless skin. From this close, she was much younger than I tho  
womenestimated she was probably in her mid-twenties. Probably too youn  
lifficultdating me. I hesitated briefly, wondering if I should talk to h  
it all. something about her felt so familiar and I was drawn into her.

ng late. I was just a few feet away from her now and she glanced up,  
registering my presence. After a second she looked up again, recognit  
re weresurprise written on her gorgeous face. Her mouth turned into the sexi  
“o” and before I could stop myself, I wondered how those lips would  
about amy skin.

roup of “Ethan?” she asked as she stared right at me. Her blue eyes spark  
beamed suddenly I realized why she felt familiar. She *was* familiar.

blonde Saffron.

o make I was suddenly desperate to take back the fantasy about her lips, bu  
t in thetoo late. The idea was planted in my mind and I couldn't stop myse  
ove thenoticing my best friend's little sister's curves and how her breasts  
in. Sheagainst her tank top.

ng legs Shit. And I realized I hadn't responded to her yet.

d in the “Saffron, hey,” I said, mustering up all my energy to sound unaffe  
e of hershe pulled me into a friendly hug. Her skin was warm and she smel  
o manythe flowers on the beach in the middle of summer.

r credit “How does it feel to be back in town?” I asked her as she steppe  
from me. If I wasn't mistaken, I caught her eyes making an appreciati

down my body as well. There went the guilt of noticing how sexy she had grown up to be, because she was just that, a grown woman.

Her gaze made its way back to my eyes and she smiled at me with the warmth and sincerity in the world.

“It’s good,” she said, quickly looking down to her buzzing phone. “I know why I got myself into this whole thing,” she gestured to the egg to her thought I would be more bored than I actually have been and need something to keep me busy.”

I chuckled. From what I remembered of Saffron, she always had barely energy, flitting from one thing to the next. Always surrounded by people and “But I’m really glad you’re here,” she continued. “We could use just a little help we can get. Is Ashton here with you? I haven’t seen him yet.”

“He texted me and said he was running late, but should be here soon,” she said, still taking her in. She looked at me for a moment.

“You’ve changed so much from the last time I saw you,” she finally said. “I don’t just mean you’ve grown up. You have a whole different vibe.” She gestured up and down my body and I felt the blood beneath my skin react to her attention.

“Different good? Or different bad?” I didn’t even feel myself move until she pressed realized I was a few steps closer to her. Did she move closer?

Her eyes roamed my body again and I held my breath.

“Good,” she said slowly, her voice sounding just a little breathless as “Really, really good.”

The morning had felt a little cool, but suddenly the air between us was warm and thick like the hottest summer day. And it was not my imagination that Saffron took a step closer to me.

“Well, I can say the same for you. The years have definitely been

she had you, Saffron.”

It was true. She was always pretty, but now she glowed like the way all other life had polished her into smooth perfection.

Color rose into her cheeks and I was so tempted to reach out and stroke her soft, pink skin. I wondered what she felt like. We stood there, just staring at each other, the tension between us rising and rising until a voice cut between us.

“Saffron!” someone yelled from behind her. “Can you come over a lot of when you have a second?”

I saw her flinch and grimace quickly at the voice. I wanted nothing more than to just have a few more minutes with her.

“I should go make sure they have what they need,” she said, glancing behind her.

“Of course, no worries.”

I said. “I’ll see you around?” She smiled at me and my heart kicked into overdrive. She’d definitely see me around.

“You bet,” I said, returning her smile.

Saffron hesitated for just a second before turning around and waving away. When she was out of sight, I let out a deep breath and scrubbed my hand over my face.

Fuck, what the hell was that?

I never felt anything like that before. Sure women threw themselves at me all the time, but I never felt so much...wanting and needing. I was used to women who had barely talked to me for a few minutes. But I knew one thing for sure: Saffron wanted me, too.

I turned around, decided that I needed to hightail it out of there when I saw Ashton strolling toward me. I groaned but kept the smile plastered

face. I didn't need him knowing that I was picturing his little sister  
aves of We'd cross that bridge if and when we got there.

"Hey man," Ashton said, clapping my back in a hug. "Sorry I'm  
oke the late."

aring at "No problem. Everything okay?"

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"Sounds like fun," I muttered.

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My body responded at the mention of Saffron and it took every o  
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"Figured she'd be busy. Oh well, I guess we'd better get started."

We strolled over to the volunteer tent and got our orders and m  
walking before spending the next hour picking up trash from the edges of th  
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face. I didn't need him knowing that I was picturing his little sister naked. We'd cross that bridge if and when we got there.

"Hey man," Ashton said, clapping my back in a hug. "Sorry I'm running late."

"No problem. Everything okay?"

"Everything's great," he said with a smirk. "Christine just had a surprise for me this morning."

A pang of something—jealousy?—stabbed at me when Ashton mentioned his girlfriend. I'd always had him in my no-commitment corner, but it seemed like that was ending.

"Sounds like fun," I muttered.

"Have you seen my sister around?"

My body responded at the mention of Saffron and it took every ounce of concentration to play it cool.

"I did actually, briefly, before she got pulled away."

"Figured she'd be busy. Oh well, I guess we'd better get started."

We strolled over to the volunteer tent and got our orders and materials before spending the next hour picking up trash from the edges of the small beach area. Ashton was talking the whole time, but I barely heard a word he said.

I couldn't stop thinking about Saffron and her blue eyes and flirty smile. I knew I needed to see her again.

## *Chapter Three*

### SAFFRON

**I**t had been a couple of weeks since I had seen Ethan, but I couldn't forget his dark, mysterious eyes, and the flash of desire I swore I saw, out of the corner of my eye. There was something about those eyes that made me want to know more about him.

I thought about asking Ashton, but I wasn't too sure how he would react. He was curious about his best friend. Ashton was always supportive of my interests, but there was a good chance he wouldn't support any sort of interest in Ethan. In all likelihood, his best friend was off-limits.

Should I have been fantasizing about him? Probably not. He was older than me and, maybe most importantly, somewhat of a business man now. Ethan's age certainly didn't bother me—he really was like a firecracker and sexy as hell. I could also feel my rebellious streak rising to the surface. I realized there was something attractive about him being so unavailable to me. He was like a delicious forbidden fruit.

"I'm heading out to lunch," said Sandy, startling me out of my daydream. Sandy was Triton's long-time office manager. She was probably in her late 30s and had a couple of kids around my age. Sandy had always been so wa-

friendly toward me growing up and now I was here shadowing her managed a lot of the behind-the-scenes action with terrifying efficiency.

Ashton and I had convinced my dad that I could maybe be useful company, and he started me here with Sandy, saying that I could learn most from her about how the company operated. I was just excited to get my foot in the door and knew I couldn't afford to screw the opportunity. Ashton had gone the extra mile to advocate on my behalf. Which led to my problem—was lusting after his best friend an act of betrayal?

I shook the thoughts away from my head as I waved to the older woman.

“Make sure you take a break, too,” she said, as she hiked her hand to her forehead. Her hair was pulled up and over her shoulder, sweeping her shoulder-length brown hair out of the way. Her hair of my dad's always seemed glamorous to me growing up, more effortless and effortless than my mom's friends. She always glowed even with no makeup, but precise make-up.

“I'll be off soon,” I promised her while pretending to be very interested in the file on the laptop that sat in front of me on the desk.

Sandy disappeared, leaving me alone in the small office that had been set aside for me. I spun in my chair to look out the window. Triton's office is a lot located in the center of Chestnut Bay, its small main street bustling with shops and restaurants. There was a ton of old character in town—the wine money—which kept it vibrant and busy. From here on the fifth floor, I could see the water of the bay beyond the buildings across the street. The sun glinted off the gentle waves, lulling me into some calm.

But I realized that my thoughts took me away from work and, realizing I needed a reboot, I decided to get ready to head out for lunch.

My mood dipped when I thought about the first few days at Triton. My first week hadn't been going all that well—my first meeting on Monday had

as she disaster. I asked all the wrong questions and knew I looked like I didn't know anything. They were just humoring the owner's daughter. I was so nervous that the father was ready to cut me loose and suggest that I was better suited to learn the from my mom how to be a woman of society.

To get a job I was desperate for a miracle.

My only hope was to get my feet on a firm surface. No, what I was really desperate for was a lunch date with my friend who could vent and distract myself from my need to prove myself worthy to everyone.

My only hope was to get my feet on a firm surface. I sighed as I walked down the long hallway to the bank of elevators. Nobody really talked to me or even looked at me. I could feel their eyes on me. Radiating, they knew I wouldn't last. And who could blame them? I didn't even know what my role would be at the company, or if I would even have a title.

I pushed the down button, silently praying the elevator was just waiting for me.

No luck.

My only hope was to get my feet on a firm surface. I tried to smile as a tall, slim woman rushed by me, heels clicking on the white tile floor, her head buried in her phone. Was she ignoring me?

My only hope was to get my feet on a firm surface. What I really wanted more than anything was respect. I wanted my friends to recognize that I had something to offer this world.

I could have stayed in the lobby on the first floor. The receptionist, Brenda, was the only one to speak to me.

I was about to go over to chat, when my eyes stopped on a familiar face. Broad shoulders in an impeccably tailored suit.

Ethan.

My only hope was to get my feet on a firm surface. He looked so good. Somehow, he looked even better than the other day. When he had been at the park clean-up, he was all casual with shorts and sunglasses, but



I didn't know this was Ethan the boss. I couldn't help but feel his magnetic energy pulse across the room. His thick dark hair was neatly styled and my heart twitched with wanting.

As he turned around, he noticed me and a smile spread across his face. I saw the same flash of desire in his eyes and felt the sparks sizzle between us so I despite the expanse of the foyer.

Worthy to "Saffron," he said, his voice low with just a touch of gravel, hitting the core as warmth spread through my body. How was it that two syllables from his lips could land such a punch? I willed the color away from my cheeks as I walked the few steps over toward him, trying to look as calm as I didn't possible.

I have a "What are you doing here?" My voice was a little shakier than I wanted. But he chuckled in response.

Waiting for "I feel like you don't realize that this is a small world for you and me." I couldn't take my eyes off his full lips and the white teeth of his smile.

"Of course it is," I said, rolling my eyes and forcing myself to sound calm. My chest wasn't just about to explode. I needed a change of topic, and quick. "Ashton is Ashton? You'd probably know better, since he's been avoiding me all week. He claimed he doesn't want to give me any special favors. But I know he really just feels a little threatened by how easily I'm killing it at this level." To my utter shock and delight, Ethan laughed at my joke, the muscles of his neck jumping, making me wonder how my tongue would feel tracing its path from his set of collarbone to where his jaw hit his neck then...I coughed quickly to break myself from my daydream that suddenly became all too real. I shifted my weight to loosen the tension deep in my body and smiled back at him. I realized I probably looked totally awkward. Ugh! Pull it together.

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ly from Ethan laugh was a victory. He didn't seem like he laughed all that often. "Ashton should definitely feel threatened by you."

"Oh yeah?" I said, preening under the glow of his compliment and his face. I to hear more. "Why's that?"

Even us Ethan hesitated for barely a second before flashing another grin.

"Join me for lunch and I'll tell you."

g me in God, he was so slick and he knew it. Ethan oozed a confidence and assuredness that other people would pay to possess.

om my I gave him a flirty smile and pretended to think about it for a moment. usual as there was nothing to think about. I was going to have lunch with Ethan.

didn't know why, but he made me feel things I hadn't felt before. It was wanted. than a little intriguing.

"Okay, I'll have lunch with you, Ethan."

e." "Great, my driver is outside."

ile. He motioned for me to lead the way outside. Before stepping past the door I looked up and his eyes were very serious now. Gone was any of his usual playfulness. My body lit on fire as my bare arm brushed against his. me all Just the fleeting moment of contact made me crave more.

I think I held my breath for a beat, before continuing in front of him. He followed me outside into the warm air and led me to a black car parked on the street. I climbed in first and despite the air conditioning, the temperature was rising. his thousand degrees when he slid into the seat next to me.

o break His large frame filled the space in the backseat and his knee pressed against mine, the fabric of his pants sliding against my skin. The tightness of his dress I wore had moved up my thighs just a little bit and my breath was held when I saw his eyes trained on the exposed skin.

uy like His hand rested casually on the seat between us, but I saw his pinky

n. twitch, like he wanted to reach over and touch me.

I wished he would.

needing Ethan cleared his throat and I thought he was going to say something, but he turned to look out the window instead. He glanced back at me, his hands roaming my body and landing back on my thighs. His knee bumped against my leg again, and he kept it there, sending sparks buzzing through my veins.

The rest of the ride was quiet, but thankfully quick. I slid out of the car. I took a deep breath of the fresh, salty air. My brain was a jumble of thoughts about Ethan. I was clouded with lust, as Ethan led me through the restaurant and to the terrace as more the deck.

The haze started to clear from my brain as I took in my surroundings. We were at Monte's, a restaurant I knew well. It was expensive, like all the things in Chestnut Bay, and made for the people in the higher ranks of the society. The deck was gorgeous, overlooking a perfectly manicured garden of flowers with bright, colorful flowers and the water just beyond. It was like someone's hand out of a postcard.

The square table was shaded with an umbrella and the dark wood was polished to a gleam.

I smiled at Ethan, suddenly feeling awkward out in public with him. I knew about a gossip mill here worked fast, and I didn't think I wanted anything to come back to Ashton.

I was about to start rambling when a server came to the table, saving me from myself. Her smile and high energy were infectious and I felt my heart caught in her long brown ponytail swung. Even though her gaze did linger on

Ethan a bit too long. Emily, according to her name tag, looked about my age.

which surprisingly made me feel better about the difference in age between me and Ethan.

ing, but “I’ll have the garden salad with smoked salmon,” Ethan said when his eyes asked for our order.

ped up “I’ll get the same,” I said, not being able to read a thing on the menu though my think clearly.

The server took our menus and walked away.

car and I grabbed for my glass of water and took a gulp, relief flooding through my mess, with the shock of icy liquid.

able on “How has working at Triton been going?” Ethan asked, studying me carefully.

ings. We Not really what I wanted to be talking about right now.

a lot of I hesitated, then decided on honesty.

ings of “I thought it would be easier,” I confessed. “Everyone thinks I’m the golden child because I’m the CEO’s daughter. And that’s probably true. But I wish nothing could see my merits and give me a chance to show how capable I am.

they see is a kid with a free pass to a job because of her family. That’s the good part? My dad is one of those people. He doesn’t think I can contribute anything.”

m. The “But you are capable. You’ve got the certificate on the wall. Now you’re getting to have to prove yourself.”

“Well, I definitely don’t want to rest on that either. I have the education but I want to put it into practice. The difference is that my brother never had to prove himself. It was always a given that he’d work at Triton and I’d be on him involved in projects from his day one.”

ny age, “Yeah, I’ve definitely learned that the world isn’t fair.”

Pain flashed behind Ethan’s eyes and I wanted to unpack this story

between with him, but it didn't seem like the time.

"I guess it's not," I mumbled instead. "But if I were a man, I can't imagine Emily that my dad wouldn't hesitate before giving me some big fancy Triton."

"That's probably true," Ethan said, surprising me.

"My parents think I should be more focused on finding a husband and a career."

"Does that mean you aren't interested in settling down and starting a family?" Ethan asked carefully.

I thought for a moment.

"No, I want all that—a husband, family, stability. But I don't want to be bullied into it; I want to do it when I'm ready. I'm only twenty-five and I want to be young and build a life that makes me happy first."

Ethan cocked his head slightly and looked at me curiously, like they were trying to solve a puzzle. He had taken off his jacket in the heat and rolled up his shirt sleeves, exposing tan forearms corded with muscle. He looked like he was stalling, choosing his words carefully.

"Maybe what your parents mean is that you can have what you want and also have a stable relationship. Are you in a relationship at all?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I've been more focused on getting my degree and now getting my career started. I'm not sure that I have a relationship right now. Like I said, I want to understand myself better before I ever had my main goal at the moment."

Ethan continued to look at me and I would have given anything to know what he was really thinking, but he was clearly playing his cards close to his chest. His gorgeous, wide, chiselled, ...

"I think that makes sense," he finally said, breaking me out of my

cloud. “There’s more to life than relationships.”

I bet you I really wanted to change the subject. I felt like we were circling some job that was important, but something I wasn’t sure I was ready to talk about.

“Anyway,” I said, taking another sip of water. “That’s enough about me. I’m so impressed with the company you’ve built. You’ve done so well that I can’t even begin to describe it.” Ethan smiled faintly, shaking his head slightly.

“Thank you. I probably couldn’t have done it without Ashton. He’s been providing me with a great help and has really motivated me every step of the way in building Perseus. I owe him a lot.”

“I’ve always admired the friendship you two have.” Ethan smiled a real smile this time.

“I just want to be like him.” “I’m grateful to have a friend like him.”

The server came by with our food and Ethan stared at me, and I felt goosebumps across my skin despite the heat. There was something about the way he looked at me now that felt like he was seeing me for the first time.

He said, “If I’m honest,” he continued, “you’re a lot like him.”

I smiled at the compliment as I dropped my napkin on my lap and took a small bite of salmon with my fork.

“I know Ashton’s been supportive, but all of your success is because of you. It’s really motivating and I just hope I can do the same.”

“I’m open to teaching you as much as I can,” Ethan said, taking a bite. “That’s what I want.” “You mean, like as a mentor?”

“Something like that.”

I don’t know what there was something in his voice that sent a caution light to my brain. From the moment we started spending time together, I knew exactly where things were going to go. But I couldn’t help myself, because I really wanted to go there. I closed my eyes and fantasized about my future with Ethan—truly alone—with Ethan.

“Mentored by a billionaire? Sign me up!”

nothing I laughed, but the sound was off to my ears. Too high pitched, too b

“How about we have our first meeting on Saturday? I’ll cook dinne  
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“Mentored by a billionaire? Sign me up!”

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“How about we have our first meeting on Saturday? I’ll cook dinner at my place and we can talk.”

I sucked in a breath as our eyes met. He was completely still, like he was holding his breath, waiting for my answer.

“I think that sounds like a great idea,” I finally said, knowing that it was likely not a very great idea at all.



## *Chapter Four*

### ETHAN

Saffron turned me into the gentleman that I had never been. I was myself so eager to impress her. Even though I was worth more than the whole family now, there was something about her and the Lavettes that intimidated me.

But she was so easy to talk to—she was carefree and fun. I needed something like that in my life.

And despite how her family made her feel, Saffron was someone who I knew it figured out. She knew what she wanted and that confidence was what I needed. I knew she was young—probably too young for me—but she seemed so mature and carried herself differently than other women her age.

In the back of my mind, though, I thought about Ashton. I meant to have said to Saffron the other day about how much I owed Ashton. He had helped me focus and pull my plan off to become who I was today. He was especially overprotective of Saffron, but they were close, and I was worried about how he'd feel about me hitting on her. I had good intentions, but unfortunately Ashton knew me in my wilder days when I didn't always make the smartest choices.

Anyway, Saffron said she didn't want a relationship right now. Which was okay since then I didn't have to worry about her finding someone else who could take our time getting to know each other.

I washed and dried my hands, getting ready to fry the crab cakes. I was standing at the time on the stove and realized Saffron would be here any minute. Before finishing dinner, I scanned the open living space. Everything was supposed to be in place—I knew it would be, I hired a housekeeper to keep everything clean and tidy. The table was set and the sun was setting, bathing the space in the perfect, golden light. I walked over and opened one of the large glass doors that led to the rooftop terrace, filled with plants, greenery, and a small pool. There was another outdoor space on the ground level for the use of the residents. But this area was all mine.

That still felt like a luxury. Some people probably thought it was an odd choice, a billionaire living in a condo. But the DeVore building was one of the first I had designed. Most of Chestnut Bay didn't have much by way of multi-unit living, preferring single-family homes of suburbia, but I knew that had to shift so I started with a luxury condo building. The penthouse of this building, though, I designed specifically for myself. For now, I loved the idea of living in a community which a condo building provided. I was sure that would change if a wife and family ever entered the picture, but right now this was perfect. It wasn't a small apartment. It had four massive bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a really sunny, open living space and kitchen. There was a second floor, too, which wasn't had an office, workout room, and media room.

I wasn't sure. Walking back into the kitchen, I heard the buzz from the security cameras in the lobby.

It was make Saffron was here.

I quickly put the gorgeous salad that my housekeeper had assembled

ich wastable and turned to the stove. I was just flipping the crab cakes when  
lse. Wethe elevator open and I rushed over to let Saffron inside.

“Wow, I suddenly feel underdressed,” I said as I opened the door.  
glancedlooked stunning in a pink floral sundress. It hugged her curves and th  
minute.flash of cleavage made my mouth water. Her mile long legs were ever  
seemedin a pair of heels and I ached to skim the flesh of her calf. My gaze t  
rythingup to her sexy hair, it was mussed, reminding me of what she would lc  
pace inafter spending some time in my bed.

sliding “You look great,” she said with a chuckle, her eyes roaming my b  
7, and aalways overdress wherever I go. A habit from my family, I suppose.”  
the rest I invited her inside and she walked with me to the kitchen, sitting on  
the stools at the bar while I got her a glass of wine.

iving in I turned back to the stove, finishing the crabcakes.

signed. “Wait, did you *actually* cook?” Saffron said incredulously. I couldn  
ing thethe frown off my face.

ed with “Yes, I said I’d make dinner tonight.”

esigned “I just assumed making dinner meant you would have a fancy chef  
munity,for you,” she said, sweeping a hand around the space, highlighting the

partner “Nah,” I said chuckling. “I had help with the salad, but I actually  
And itcook. There were many years where I wasn’t in personal chef status, s  
ns, andto learn how to feed myself.”

oo, that I winked at her and she gave me a strange look, like she didn’t quit  
what to think of me. I plated dinner and took off my apron, storing i  
desk inwalk-in pantry.

“It’s all ready,” I said. “So let’s sit.”

We walked over to the table and I refilled Saffron’s wine glass and  
l on thesome for myself.

I heard “This looks incredible, Ethan,” she said, taking it all in. “Thank you

“It was a pleasure,” I said, handing her the dish of crabcakes. My Saffron brushed hers lightly and I wanted to let them sit on hers just a second. It was like a power surge in a lightning storm and all my senses heightened. I no longer could smell her subtle floral perfume, and it went straight to my groin.

“You really have an incredible home,” Saffron said after a few minutes. “Ashton mentioned you designed this building.”

“Yep. This was my first solo project, actually. One of my passions is sustainability in planning and design. A great way to plan more sustainably is through higher density living, like condos and apartments. I knew it would be a tough sell to the good folks of Chestnut Bay—after all, who doesn’t want a massive house with a massive lawn? But I thought if I made it luxurious it would be more accepted. So far, so good. The building is at almost a full occupancy and I was able to create a couple of more similar unit developments in town that, I’m proud to say, have been successful.”

“Wow, Ethan,” Saffron said, with her mouth open. “What you have made is truly incredible.”

“Well, I’ve got a great team. Some of the best and brightest who share my vision for buildings of the future. After dinner, I’ll show you the green house I had.”

We spent the rest of dinner making small talk. Saffron told me about her life in England and how she missed Maryland and its beaches. We discussed a little bit about business and I told her the full story of how I’d worked in the way through college and basically had thrown myself into every business-related activity and group I could find. I shared all the funny and awkward stories I had during the first few weeks of my first public speaking class. I poured then how it turned out to be the most valuable class I took, until the final exam—a ten-minute Ted talk style presentation.

.” “You didn’t!” she exclaimed, eyes watering with laughter. “You t  
fingersOver your own damned feet?”

longer. “Best part, it was a theater style room, so the aisle was a ramp. A  
tened. Itea kettle and I skidded part way to the bottom.”

Saffron snorted with laughter and I couldn’t help but grin, even th  
minutes.was at my expense.

“But seriously, I don’t think I could have handled myself in boardro  
sions isthose early days if it hadn’t been for that class—and even that exper  
nably islearned not to be embarrassed and to keep talking. People rarely li  
ould bewhat you’re actually saying as long as you sound confident enoug  
t love awould probably be my mentor advice for the day: Take a public sp  
ious, itclass, if you can.”

undred “Such a wise mentor, I’m glad I chose you.” Saffron’s blue eyes s  
r multi-with mischief over her wine glass.

too.” After dinner, we wandered outside and I showed her the roof and t  
done islittle bit about how it worked. As the sun began to fully set and the bug  
out, we went back inside.

are my “How about a movie?” I asked, hopefully, not wanting this night to  
roof.” “That sounds fun!” Saffron exclaimed, much more excitedly than I  
out hershe would.

d talk a “Do you want to change into something more comfortable?”

ked my Saffron looked unsure for a moment, and I realized how that q  
usiness-sounded. Shit, she probably just thought I was trying to get her into be

awkward “You can wear a pair of my shorts and a T-shirt. As great as tha  
ass, butlooks on you, it doesn’t look comfortable for lounging.”

ne final She worried her bottom lip, something she did when she was ner  
had noticed. But finally a smile spread across her face.

ripped? “Yes, please,” she said finally.

I led her back to my bedroom and watched her as she took in the space. An oversized wooden live-edge king-size bed dominated the room, flanked by two matching nightstands. The walls were painted a soft mid-tone blue and large framed white photographs of nature—the woods, sea, everything I could find—covered the walls. There was a large sliding glass door that led out to a rooftop, landscaped to offer privacy.

I opened the double doors that led to the closet and found shorts and a shirt for her. She was still looking around when I handed them over.

“You’re welcome to change in the bathroom,” I said, gesturing to the door peaking next to the closet.

“This is a little embarrassing, but would you help me with my zipper?” she asked, sounding a little nervous, turning her back toward me.

Hell yes, I’d help her with her zipper.

I moved closer and swept my eyes over the back of her dress. It was a rare opportunity to touch the soft skin just above her dress. Saffron was so

Gently, I eased the zipper down, exposing more of her skin. I couldn’t help but notice she didn’t wear a bra and I caught a flash of lacy red underwear where the zipper stopped.

Saffron held the dress tight to her chest so it wouldn’t fall down as my hands dropped. But god, I didn’t want to drop them. I wanted to run my hands over her body and it was torture knowing she was this close. I felt myself getting hard in my shorts.

“Thank you,” she said, turning her head toward me. I wanted to pull her back into me and kiss her. But I let her go.

This was supposed to be an innocent movie night.

Saffron disappeared into the bathroom and I left to give her privacy.

up the media room. I grabbed some blankets and a few extra pillows  
pace. A large L-shaped couch. I was scrolling through the movie options  
y a pairstreaming service when Saffron walked into the room.

e black I had to force myself not to lunge for her. Something about how she  
d find—looked in my simple white T-shirt and black shorts brought the cover  
t to the of me. They were way too big for her, but I noticed she had rolled them  
at her waist, hiking them up her smooth, tanned legs, begging me to  
nd a T-her skin. I watched as the muscles in her thighs flexed as she walked  
the room. The remote nearly fell out of my hand as she perched on the  
he door What the hell was I doing?

I played the first movie I saw, completely unable to concentrate  
r?” she television when this beautiful woman was getting cozy in the black  
refilled our wine glasses from the bottle on the wet bar in the corner  
walked over. She happily accepted hers and took a big sip. Her cheeks  
ook the little flushed, and I was pretty certain it had nothing to do with  
warm temperature of the room or the wine she had already drunk.

It help I sat back, trying to project a casual image, and took a sip of  
lerwear relishing as the cool liquid slid down my throat and tried to douse the  
inside me. But then she snuggled closer, not quite touching, but within  
nd I let breath's distance, and the fire roared back to life. Everywhere my skin  
am her too warm and the blood pumped through my veins.

growing Again, what the hell was I doing?

“This is an extremely comfortable sofa,” Saffron suddenly said.

pull her “Mmm,” was all I could contribute to the conversation. How the fuck  
supposed to talk about interior decorating with her looking at me that way?

I took a sip of wine, trying to calm down the hormones raging through  
and set body. I was forty-fucking-years-old, I should have been able to con-

for the impulses by now.

But it didn't work.

Saffron's arm brushed against mine and I felt it all the way to the sexy she parts of my body. I was used to women throwing themselves at me, but not different with Saffron. I wasn't even sure if she was intending to be flirtatious. The movie was some sort of action film starring a jacked ex-wrestler-turned-movie-star and a barely dressed starlet running around a city in high-heeled boots trying to escape. The plot didn't hold my attention but the adrenaline pumping from the scenes seemed to work its way into my body, making me even more agitated and aroused than I had been.

I glanced at Saffron through my peripheral vision and she seemed to be feeling it, too. Her hand was on her chest as if she needed help breathing. And when she squirmed, I felt the hot skin of her thighs press up against mine. "I love this actor," Saffron said and I looked at the screen. I couldn't remember what his name was.

"Yeah, he's great," I muttered in agreement.

Saffron scooped a little closer. Okay, that was a deliberate move. And then she dropped her head on my shoulder and my senses were within a hair's breadth of Saffron. Her surprisingly soft hair tickled my chin. The sweet floral smell of her perfume drifted in the air. A breathy sigh rang out in my ears as loud as thunder.

I wasn't going to be able to hold on to my control for much longer. If she gave any indication that she wanted to be with me, I was going to let her know it.

Just then, she tipped her head up, her gaze trained on my lips.

"This doesn't have to mean anything. I've probably just had a little too much wine," she said before she closed her eyes and softly pressed her



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I was powerless against kissing her back.

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I was powerless against kissing her back.

## *Chapter Five*

### SAFFRON

Ethan's tongue swept gently into my mouth, teasing me, catching a contented sigh. This was hands-down the best idea I ever had in my entire life. His lips were soft, but firm, and he kissed me like he knew exactly what he was doing.

And, boy, did he know what he was doing.

His hand was cupping the back of my neck, pulling me closer and I couldn't resist at all. I would take as much of Ethan as he was willing to give. He gently tugged me above him, so I was straddling his lap on the couch.

"Just so we're clear," he said, breaking the kiss with a gasp. "That's why I invited you here tonight."

His lips crashed against mine again and I was lost. Ethan's hands fit snugly around my hips and I could feel the searing heat from his grip through the fabric. He broke from my lips and started planting kisses in the trail to my neck. I moaned when he found the sweet spot right below my ear.

I slowly rolled my hips into him and earned a growl from Ethan. Hearing such a primal and guttural sound, it ratcheted up the heat by an impressive degree.

He reached around and slipped his hands under the hem of the shirt and lightly slid his hands up my bare back, leaving a trail of sparks sensitive skin of my spine. I sighed into the touch as his lips continued assault on the other side of my neck, gently biting and licking, careful to leave any marks.

Neither of us wore heavy clothes and I could feel every delicious inch of him beneath me. His chest was hard and sculpted and the r jumped as I swept my thumb over one nipple through his T-shirt. I need feel skin, though. I grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it up. I was more than happy to oblige and finished the job, tossing it aside before doing a quick work of my own shirt.

I pressed my soft breasts against his hard chest and moaned at the pressure and the heat of his skin. His hands were everywhere, turning every part of me into one erogenous zone. Sweeping up my arms, circling my waist and dipping lower to grab my ass. I cursed the fact we were both still wearing I didn't shorts.

As soon as I was going to suggest we lose the bottoms, his head tilted down and his delicious lips and hot mouth found one nipple. I cried out as he isn't lightly nipped the tight bud—the pleasure and sting of pain was the perfect balance. He continued to give my nipple plenty of attention, lapping and sucking the flat of his tongue and popping it back into his mouth. His hand found the other nipple and he started to tease me with his fingers, rolling it and sending the hottest stars through my body.

I raked my fingers through his hair, pulling tightly and relishing the way it was pulled from his lips.

Suddenly, he was picking me up and we were off the ground. He laid me down on the huge square ottoman and towered over me.

I wore “You are so beautiful,” he said as he reached for the waistband on the borrowed shorts. I lifted my hips so he could slide them down along with their underwear in one smooth motion. They joined the pile of clothes on the floor. I not to as he knelt between my legs. “So beautiful,” he muttered again, almost wasn’t meant to hear.

is, hard His thumbs traced a tortuous line up the inside of my thighs, stopping muscles before he got to the point where I wanted him to touch me the most needed to desperate for any kind of friction.

He was He lowered his head and as I took a quick breath, his mouth nipping making hollow of one thigh and he pressed in hungrily. My knee instinctively came up and he lay there, so close to my wettest and warmest part. He increased pressure with the other thumb up, millimeters from where I needed. I whimpered and he moved an inch of the other thigh, moving his thumb and sweeping it along my core. Mistakenly, I bucked involuntarily off the cushion.

wearing “You’re so wet for me,” he muttered, sweeping his thumb again. “I want to taste you.”

dipped His thumb was replaced by his tongue and I cried out, Ethan’s name on my lips.

perfect He growled in response.

it with “That was hot. I’m going to make you scream my name a few more times tonight.” His words sounded like the most delicious threat in the world.

sending As his tongue continued its torture, he slipped one finger inside, testing me before slipping another in, slowly pumping. My mind was racing and the only thing my body could do was feel all of the sensations.

His other hand reached up and teased one nipple again. My body was a gently bundle of want and need, desperate for release. Ethan lightly sucked and the orgasm slammed into me, catching me off guard and stealing my breath.

of the breath. The waves seemed to go on endlessly as he continued licking with my sucking, pulling every drop of pleasure from my body.

the floor I was boneless beneath him, completely spent as he knelt over me as if I covered my mouth with a deep, relentless kiss. I could taste my arousal on his tongue and I could feel his arousal heavy on my leg. He stood up. Coming just was tall.

me. I was “I’m not done with you yet, Saff,” he said as he slid his shorts down. My eyes widen as I took all of him in. He was big. He held himself and pumped the one long, lazy stroke, eyes molten as they seared into mine.

he drew He walked away, leaving me confused, but before I could do anything he was back with a foil packet in his hand. Another languid stroke and he nipped the packet open, rolling the condom onto his impressive length.

My hips “You said this doesn’t have to mean anything,” he growled as he moved above me and notched himself against my opening. “But I’m going to prove I can’t sure you never forget tonight.” He spread my legs wide with a big hand on each thigh and pushed his way into me in one, long stroke. My body tensed on my the invasion, but relaxed into it as he started to move in smooth, deep strokes.

I felt my body fill with his cock and empty when he pulled out. He finished fully and I couldn't remember when I had felt someone so deeply or for so many times. Using his elbow to keep my legs wide, he moved his thumb to stroke my clit in rhythm with his cock moving in my body. The tension in my body of me, started building impossibly quickly as Ethan continued his assault with blank growling dirty words of everything he wanted to do to me. His words were making me flush with excitement.

is just a Ethan liked to talk and I could get used to hearing his filthy mouth.

my clit A wave of pleasure started at my core and moved swiftly out the top of my head. My entire body blasted apart as I came, shaking. But Ethan didn't

ing and he didn't let up the pace or the pressure and I was shocked at how quick  
next orgasm ripped through me. Suddenly, he flipped me over so I was  
me and hands and knees on the ottoman, Ethan behind me. He easily slid back  
I on his started a relentless pace.

God, he "Say my name," he growled as he lightly pulled my hair.

"Ethan." It came out somewhere between a sigh and a prayer  
n. I felt continued to move inside of me.

I pulled I knew I couldn't come again, so I helped Ethan pick up the pace,  
my back and moving my hips back to meet his. He came on a lov  
hing he groan, stilling himself and squeezing my hips. I felt his body shake an  
: ripped out a low guttural noise. He stood still for a moment and as I turned to  
him, he covered my mouth with a deep, hungry, loving kiss.

ie knelt "You are amazing," he said as he lightly slapped my ass. He slipped  
o make me, brought me a blanket and walked toward the bathroom. I yelped  
and on strangely empty, collapsing onto the ottoman. Every drop of energy ha  
nsed at released.

strokes. I stayed there, snuggling in the blanket for a moment, not trusting  
lled me to move. He came back from the bathroom, picked up his shorts and  
lly. my shoulder. I took my turn in the bathroom and when I came back,  
oke my lounging on the sofa, watching the movie with just his shorts on and h  
y body bare. I grabbed the T-shirt and my underwear and slipped them on  
t while snuggling against his chest. I hadn't even had time to notice the sligh  
ls were hair that brushed his skin.

"That was," I paused, searching for the right word and coming up fa  
"amazing."

o of my Ethan chuckled, his voice low and raspy.

i't stop, "I agree," he said, kissing the top of my head.

ckly the “I should probably head home,” I said, getting up to go. I knew en  
s on my know how these things went and I wanted to leave before it got awkwa  
k in and “What? No, you should stay,” Ethan said, tugging me back down  
me a few minutes and a glass of water and I’ll be ready for round two.”

I quirked my eyebrow at him.

as he “Oh, come on, I’m not *that* much of an old man. I can keep up.” He  
while giving me puppy dog eyes. “I have an extra toothbrush.”

arching I laughed and settled into his chest.

w, long “Stay the night. Please.”

d he let His quiet whisper did me in.

look at “Okay,” I whispered in the near dark. “I should let my parents kn  
I’m not coming home.”

d out of I cringed. “Sorry, that made me sound like I’m sixteen years old. I  
and felt I’m staying with them right now and my mom worries if I’m not on  
ad beenthey won’t care or anything and I won’t tell them I’m with you...”

Ethan picked up my hand, dropping a kiss on my fingers.

myself “I get it. It’s nice that you have people who worry about you. Te  
l kissedyou’re safe but you won’t be home. I’m going to go get that glass of  
he wasHe gave me a sexy wink.

is chest Ethan walked downstairs toward the kitchen and I grabbed my pho  
beforemy bag that I had brought up here with me.

it, crisp [Saffron 9:35 PM]

Decided to go to Quinn’s for a drink and movie night. I’m just g  
r short,crash here. I’ll be back home after brunch.

Three dots appeared almost immediately. My mom was always or  
things.

[Mom 9:36 PM]



ough to OK. Thanks for letting me know. See you tomorrow.

rd. After letting Quinn know she was my alibi, and promising to fill her in . “Give the details at lunch tomorrow—we weren’t waking up in time for brunch.” people—I sighed and dropped my phone in my bag. What was I going to do? I thought, as I scrubbed my hand over my face.

paused I talked a big game, saying that sex didn’t have to mean anything, but just happened sure as hell didn’t mean nothing.

Ethan walked back into the room with two large glasses of water and a bag of pretzels. He handed me a glass as he sat down. I took a big drink and glanced at him, trying to read his mind, but his face was frustratingly blank. Now that He wrapped his arm around my back, though, which I took as a good sign.

“Everything all good?” I didn’t know if he meant the text to my roommate or if it was just how I felt about what just happened. If it was the latter, no, everything wasn’t...certainly not all good. I was a jumbled mess.

Sex had always been fun for me. I never took it too seriously. I had had all that many partners, but there had been enough that I knew more or less what to expect.

water.” But it had never been that...intense. This thing with Ethan was a different animal altogether and all my past flings and hook-ups paled in comparison to what just happened. He was right about one thing: I was never going to do that again tonight.

I simply nodded in response to his question. He took my glass of water and set it on the table next to the sofa.

“Good,” he said, grinning as he turned back to me. “I think we have a lot to do tonight.”

The kiss started sweet and light before turning passionate and intense. Before I knew it, I was off the ground and he carried me off to his bedroom.

My last thought before he dropped me on the bed was that I was in

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room.

My last thought before he dropped me on the bed was that I was in trouble.

## Chapter Six

### ETHAN

Saffron was making me want to chase her—something I hadn't done with any woman in a very long time.

I couldn't stop thinking about her. My dreams were haunted by bright eyes and her throaty laugh. I couldn't stop thinking about the time we spent together on Saturday, and not just in bed. Yes, I loved how he responded to every touch, every taste, and everything else I did to her. She also loved the conversation we shared. She was funny, smart, and attractive. And foolishly, I had hoped she'd be so impressed she'd be running back for more.

But she didn't even bother reaching out to me since she left my place on Sunday after a very enjoyable, leisurely morning spent in bed. I felt like a teenager in desperate need of attention from his crush.

Deep down, I knew part of me was impressed with how she was so hard to get. Going about her days as normal, as if it meant nothing to her, was intriguing and I was sold. I wanted more of her. I needed more of her.

*Pull yourself together, Ethan.*

I was pulled out of my thoughts by a knock on the door. Nia, r

project manager, walked in. She was all smiles and clearly bursting with some good news.

“Are you ready to hit our biggest jackpot this quarter?” she said in a preamble as I gestured to one of the chairs in front of my desk.

“Morning, Nia. What’ve you got for me?”

She handed me her tablet and I started to read. It looked like the council had issued a call for proposals for a multi-million dollar project to revitalize the downtown core. It was a lot of millions. This project was good and would do good for our portfolio given that we were still relatively new in this space.

“This is why I love you, Nia,” I said, smiling at her. “Have you and your team put together a proposal we can submit?”

“Already on it. I’ll have Tessa email it to you and we can sit down to meet first thing tomorrow morning to talk strategy,” Nia said, getting up from the chair and walking out the door.

I was never more satisfied with my decision to hire her as a project manager. She was efficient and always on the ball.

I had never dreamt of the day that Perseus would be ahead of the development titans, like Triton. I knew that Charles Lavette likely displaced me to some degree for bumping his company from the top of the list to second place. It came to development in the Chestnut Bay area, but I couldn’t let that stop me from pushing for success, from developing my company to what it was today. It was a miracle Ashton and I remained friends.

My mind drifted back to Saffron. My friendship with Ashton may have weathered professional challenges—overcome by a truce and agreement to let business get in the way—but I still wasn’t sure how he would feel about my best friend Saffron and that question tortured me.

ing with I wasn't sure if Saffron even wanted a real relationship with me, but I was willing to give it a try. I sure as hell wasn't interested in just screwing her without tossing her to the curb. Part of me was fairly certain Ashton knew that was my style. Sure, I had plenty of hook-ups and flings, but they were never casual and I wasn't cruel to the women I dated.

the city I knew I had other problems, though. Besides Ashton, I knew for a project to parents wouldn't approve of me. Her dad saw me as a threat and he as huge still looked at me like the poor kid in town. Despite my current net worth, new in always made me feel that I would never be worthy of her son's friend. I could actually see her losing her shit if she found out what I had done with the daughter the other night.

The odds were stacked against us, to be sure, but that seemed to only make me want to pursue her even more. We shouldn't be together and I was acting up enough of a caveman that it only made the situation hotter.

Before talking myself out of it, I pulled out my phone and brought up my text messages.

[Ethan 11:34 AM]

of the Coffee tomorrow?

I immediately hit send and stared at the screen, willing a response to come when it did. A coffee date seemed non-threatening. I hoped the invitation would stop me from actually wanting to spend time with her outside of bed.

But no message appeared.

I turned my attention back to my computer. Tessa had emailed me a proposal draft and I started to review it, willing myself to stay focused and not check my phone every three seconds. It was surprisingly easy to get lost in the details of the proposal and I felt myself getting excited about the project. We could do a lot of good for Chestnut Bay and really make

it I was example of sustainable city planning. And we had a plan here to do it her and responsible way that wouldn't drive up property costs.

wasn't Despite the obvious wealth that poured over Chestnut Bay, I was mutually aware that not everyone was dripping in money. My goal for any large planning and development in the city was to keep affordability in check. I was deep in the trenches looking at the numbers, when I heard my phone buzz on the large desktop made of reclaimed wood, slamming me back to reality, she pining over Saffron. My hand was grabbing for the phone before my mind could catch up and make me stop. When I saw Saffron's name pop up on my phone, I took a deep breath as I opened the message.

[Saffron 1:05 PM]

make I can't do coffee. But happy hour drinks?

I was I smiled. She was into this; she just didn't want to make it so obvious which I respected. But if I did everything she asked, I'd also be making myself too available and I wanted her to chase a little, too. Just to keep things balanced.

I hesitated, my thumbs hovering over the keyboard on my phone. I responded now, that would seem too eager, right?

come. *What the hell is wrong with you, Ethan?*

convey Right, it was time to stop overthinking this. I really was too old for swooning or playing games with a woman. I was Ethan fucking *not* the owner of a successful development firm and a goddamned billionaire.

me the Saffron a lot, but it was time to take back some control in this situation.

sed and [Ethan 1:07 PM]

get lost Dinner, tomorrow. 8 p.m. I'll send a car to pick you up at your house.

out the Balance restored, I set down my phone, determined to finish reviewing the proposal and not thinking about Saffron right now. I could continue

all in thoughts and my actions. That was exactly how I got to where I was to

I felt the phone buzz again and I shoved it in the drawer as I finished all to reading. Confident that I had given the proposal my full attention, I e-scale Tessa and Nia my changes and asked them to set a meeting as soon k. possible the next day. Proposals were due to the city in a week, so we / phone push to make sure ours was perfect.

k to my Satisfied with my work, I stretched my arms above me in my chair y brain getting up and turning to the window. I had headquartered Perseus i ), I held was once a somewhat nondescript office park that we turned into an office had been important to me that our building speak to our mission, so when an existing building I found on the outskirts of town that fit our needs not only used the space to create our office, but developed a lot of obvious, space. On the edge of Chestnut Bay, the land stretched for many acres making included walking and biking paths, a playground for public use, and ) things that featured only native plants and grasses. We also test drove a lot latest developments in materials and technology, so we employed a ne. If llarger on-site full-time staff than other development companies.

I looked out at the garden from my second floor office. Some days I couldn't believe I had actually done it—I had actually built Perseus. I d to bed dream come true. A dream that took a shit ton of hard work and dedication Adams—but here I was, living my dream.

I liked I smiled to myself and then remembered that I likely had a text t. Saffron. I turned back to my desk and pulled my phone from the drawer

[Saffron 1:08 PM]

e. Not the house. I'll meet you at your place at 8 p.m. tomorrow.

ing this [Ethan 3:17 PM]

rol my OK.



day. I could understand why she wouldn't want a car sent to her house. Finished questions would be asked. But at least I was going to see her again.

I sent Saffron might not have known it yet, but she would be mine.

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I could understand why she wouldn't want a car sent to her house. A lot of questions would be asked. But at least I was going to see her again.

Saffron might not have known it yet, but she would be mine.

## *Chapter Seven*

### SAFFRON

I tried to focus on the meeting with Triton's project managers, but the irritation I felt made me fidgety. Ashton had invited me to the meeting, not my dad. He was clearly just indulging me, allowing me to be here because I was frustrated that I only had an office at Triton. No title, no idea of what my description was, nothing. In theory, I was still shadowing Sandy, but the manager had little practical use for me. She had a well-oiled operation with a couple of coordinators already.

I mostly booked meetings, took calls, and planned for upcoming projects. But even those were pity projects from Sandy.

Nobody needed me. And no one valued my Oxford Masters degree. Unbelievable.

I had a plan, though. I just hoped it was a good plan. I was aware of a call for proposals issued by the city council. After spending all day yesterday on research, I knew how we could win the bid and I was determined to be a part of the leadership on the project. I already had time set on my calendar later today to discuss it—even if he didn't actually know that we were discussing.

The meeting wrapped and my dad immediately left the room with much as sparing me a glance. He rarely acknowledged me at work, and at home it was as if everything was normal. It was really starting to get nerves.

I sullenly walked back to my small, empty, meaningless office, down in the squeaky chair—clearly a cast-off from someone more serious spun in a slow circle. My heart jumped when I saw my phone light up nearly empty desk.

*Ethan.*

I quickly grabbed the phone and felt guilty that I felt disappointed but then saw Quinn's name.

Meeting, [Quinn 11:05 AM]

2. I was Lunch today?

of a job I set the phone down and let my mind drift to Ethan. We had a conference officetonight and there was something about how in control he had been and setting the details that was incredibly sexy and had me squeezing my together. It was clear that he would give up as much control as he decided events.give up. He wouldn't be pushed or manipulated. He was strong will confident.

degree. But somehow he balanced that with some kindness and a great sense humor. An alpha with a heart.

2 of the God, I really did need to talk to my best friend. I had no one else to yesterday about Ethan.

to be a [Saffron 11:07 AM]

Shannon's Just tell me where and when and I'm there!

's what We decided to meet at a Mexican restaurant down the street in an hour. I briefly wondered if ordering a margarita would be inappropriate. Probably

hout so No, definitely inappropriate. Besides, I needed to be as clear headed then possible for my meeting with Ashton later.

t on my I made a few meaningless phone calls and set up a couple of meetings. I still left me plenty of time to spin around in my chair aimlessly and sitting my pitch for Ashton. I was confident I would nail it, I just hoped he'd be interested. It would cost him a lot of capital with Dad to let me be a part of this project. I grabbed my bag from the hook on the back of the door and replaced it with the blazer I was forced to wear in concession to the freezing office air conditioner. I threw my phone inside my bag, and pulled my sunglasses. It was only a few blocks to the restaurant and it was a gorgeous day outside, so I decided to walk.

The warm breeze floated over my skin and through my hair as I stepped out the front door. I stopped and let myself feel the heat of the sun. Summer was my favorite season. I turned to walk down the block and smiled at a man walking the opposite direction. When I arrived at the restaurant, Quinn was already there and I was happy to see she snagged a table for me. I sat down and she came over to greet me.

led and She jumped up and pulled me into a hug.

“Okay, I have waited patiently for *days*,” she said, excitedly, pulling me down into my seat. “Why the hell did you need an alibi? You have to be here right now.”

“First of all, hi,” I said, sarcastically. “Second of all, it’s been like three days, so chill. Third of all, stop drinking so much caffeine. You’re going to have a heart attack before you’re thirty.”

She waved away my concern.

our and “I repeat: Tell. Me. Everything.”

bably? I sighed. I wasn’t getting out of this, and I didn’t want to avoid it.

aded as question. I wanted to spill the details.

“I was with Ethan Adams.”

ings. It Quinn’s jaw dropped.

perfect “Ethan the-fucking-billionaire Adams?” she asked in disbelief. “Wa  
l agree.he like best friends with your brother?”

oject. Our server came by and dropped off a basket of warm tortilla  
laced it promising to come back for our orders in a minute. I snagged a cl  
cold air chewed thoughtfully, suddenly unsure of how to continue with the stor  
ses out. “Never in my wildest dreams did I ever picture you being in a relat  
outside, with the hottest billionaire in the world,” she continued before I could

“So, we’re not a couple. We just hooked up. That’s all.”

stepped “Did you sleep over?”

ummer I felt my face heat. Why? I never got shy talking about guys?

at a few “Maybe,” I hedged.

taurant, “If I’m being honest, I don’t think guys like Ethan let just randon  
on the ups spend the night. They call for a car and pack you away to your o  
in your own house. If he lets you spend the night, then he likes you. I  
the law of hooking up.”

ling me I burst out laughing. I loved talking to Quinn. She helped  
tell meeverything in a better light.

“So, was it good?” she asked, wiggly her eyebrows and looking cree  
like two The server picked that moment to come back. It didn’t matter, we  
going to ordered the same thing: Taco salad in the big tortilla shell. It was ou  
pleasure. I got Diet Coke, too. I’d need the caffeine rush to make it t  
the rest of the day.

“It was...,” I started, struggling for the right words. “Magical?”

oid the Quinn made a gagging motion and I laughed.

“Seriously! It was. Ethan is amazing. And not just the sex part. All that was...again, magical. But I really liked hanging out with him. I really got to know him before but he’s so smart, and passionate. I mean, he really cares about what he’s doing in life. It’s fucking hot.”

“Aww, Saffron has a crush!”

“Stop,” I said, seriously. “I really don’t think I want a relationship and working so hard to try and prove myself at Triton and I think that has to be my focus right now. If I start dating Ethan, my dad will have even less of a reason to trust me or take me seriously.”

“Girl, he’s a gorgeous billionaire who is apparently dishing out a lot of sex. Not all of us can get that lucky. Lock. Him. Down.” Quinn pounded the table for emphasis.

I laughed as she looked at me square in the eyes.

“I don’t know about all that. Besides, we all know he’s a bit of a playboy hook—even if there’s no hard proof. I’m probably just one of many to him and he’ll lose interest quickly.”

Quinn’s expression softened immediately and she grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly.

“You’re an amazing, badass woman, Saffron. Don’t let anyone try to take you down like anything less.”

I blinked against the prickles of tears behind my eyes. Quinn always says the exact right thing to say. I squeezed her hand back and she let go, leaning back in her chair and taking a long sip of Diet Coke.

“Okay, so now that we’ve made a decision about Ethan—which, to be clear, is that you will continue to have magical sex with him—let’s deal with it. Dad and brother.”

I coughed up soda.

Although “Can you please not put all of those things in the same sentence I never again?”

Like, he Quinn wiggled her eyebrows again and we both burst out laughing.

“But seriously, what’s your plan about work?”

I practiced my pitch with Quinn and we spent the rest of the hour laughing. I’m talking about the horror stories of her being a bridesmaid in her cousin’s upcoming wedding. It was the exact break I needed and I felt a sense of pounds lighter, and a thousand degrees more confident, walking back to my office. I had about thirty minutes to make final preparations for Ashton’s meeting. Everything was ready.

Lightly When it was time, I pulled my blazer back on and smoothed a hand over my white cotton blouse. I made sure it was still neatly tucked into the waistband of my navy blue pants and walked upstairs to Ashton’s office. At the precise time of our meeting, I knocked on Ashton’s office door and he yelled for me to come inside.

“Hey, Saff,” he said, smiling. “I was happy to see this meeting in your hand, calendar. I’ve been wanting to check in with you and see how things have been going.”

He gestured to the couple of chairs by the massive window in his office and we each sat in one. I would have felt more comfortable if we were sitting at his desk. This arrangement made me feel like he wasn’t taking me seriously. “It’s been going well, but I’m ready to contribute more. I wanted to talk about the city council proposal.”

No better way, than to just dive right in, I always thought.

But Ashton shifted in his seat and glanced out the window. I could tell he didn’t see this coming. I was sure he thought this was just a nice sibling

“Okay,” he said, finally collecting himself. “What’s up?”



ce ever “I’d like to be a part of the team drafting the proposal and if we bid, I want to be a part of that team.”

Ashton shifted again and looked down.

“It’s a big project, Saff. Even drafting the proposal...this is kind of a roughing or break for the company.”

ousin’s “I know. I understand the stakes. But I think I know how we can win. I think I, specifically, can be an asset. Here is what I would focus on in my proposal. Triton has been at the core of Chestnut Bay for decades. We know this city, we know the history. We also know the potential and the challenges.

That makes us uniquely positioned to move the city forward.”

Ashton nodded, “Of course, those are great points and definitely we’ll focus on in the proposal.”

“Where I come in,” I said, ignoring his brush off, “is in relation to building. Mom never let me work, so I volunteered. Everywhere. I know a lot of people here, personally. I can be a bridge and help people understand that we’re not just trying to come in and take over.”

Ashton looked out the window again, but he was less fidgety. His voice was speaking volumes and I wasn't liking what I was hearing in my head. “I’m just asking for a chance here, Ashton. Believe me, winning this is as important to me as it is to Triton.”

He was quiet for a moment before turning his gaze toward me.

“Okay,” he finally said. “But I can’t make you a lead. Please understand that has nothing to do with how capable I think you are, but you don’t have the experience. But I can make you a project coordinator, with a special focus on community outreach. Becca Andrews is taking the lead on the proposal project team. I’ll send an introductory email connecting the two of you and you all can go from there.”

win the I breathed a sigh of relief. I was finally getting a chance.

“Do you have to get approval from Dad, first?”

Ashton gave me a hard look, “Dad’s not the only one with authority a makehave control and say too, especially in personnel decisions.”

“Thank you, Ashton.”

in. And “This is your chance, Saff. I’m excited to see you succeed.”

1 in the His confidence gave me a lift and a grin spread across my face.

e know “So when are you going to have Christine over for dinner? An llenges.importantly, when are you proposing?”

Ashton laughed but the way his face had lit up at the mention of he y whatmade something in my heart twist. Would anyone look like that wh thought about me? Would Ethan ever think about me like that?

ionship “I don’t know how you love Christine so much, you’ve met h ow a lottwice.”

nd that “It’s just a feeling. Plus we’ve stayed in touch via social media. that’s a foreign concept to you, though, old man.”

silence He just shook his head at me, smiling.

ad. “I have it all planned out, and you better not spoil anything. I’ll his is aspissed if you do.”

I mimed zipping my lips and throwing away the key.

stand itIt’s just been hard to find time lately.”

ave the “I understand that.”

ocus in “What about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

sal and “Ew, no. I don’t talk about boys with you, Ashton.”

ou and He burst out laughing.

“I’m your older brother. It’s my job to look out for you. If you’re

someone, let me know. I can help you avoid any wasting of your time letting you know whether or not he's a keeper."

here. I "Uh-huh, sure. I'll keep that in mind," I said, getting up from my chair.

"I've always got your back, Saff. You're my little sister and the pride of our family." He did a mock bow. I have to admit it was very impressive.

I felt badly lying to him. He truly did have the best of intentions, but I wasn't so sure he'd respect my decision to explore...things...with my friend. It was unlikely he'd be so encouraging if I told him I was just looking for great sex.

"Thanks, Ashton. You really are the best."

I gave him a hug as I left his office and headed back toward my own new sense of purpose.

But now that I had made some progress at Triton, my mind shifted toward Ethan and our date tonight. I had no idea what he had planned, but a swarm of butterflies set off in my stomach and I realized it would be an agonizing wait until tonight.

I be so

n soon.

seeing

someone, let me know. I can help you avoid any wasting of your time by just letting you know whether or not he's a keeper."

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## *Chapter Eight*

ETHAN

**M**y breath caught when I saw Saffron standing just outside the l  
my building. Her light blue dress swung around her legs in th  
summer breeze, and her head was tipped toward the quickly setting s  
she was trying to soak up every last gasp of the light.

I stood and watched her for a moment. She was beautiful.

She looked up and her pretty red lips turned up in a wide grin wl  
saw me watching her.

“Hey, there,” she said sweetly. Her smile tempted me, asking me t  
the distance and feel how her lips would be on mine.

So I did.

A small gasp escaped from the back of Saffron’s throat before she  
into the kiss. Too soon, she took a step back and looked around nervou

“Sorry,” I said. “You just looked so beautiful.”

She smiled, tucking a short strand of hair into place behind her ear.

“So where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see. It’s a surprise.”

I gestured toward the waiting black car and she slid in the door. I fo

behind her and relished the close, quiet space where we could be together. Her light perfume filled the space and I inhaled deeply, something inside me settle.

I shook away the thoughts, not wanting to get ahead of myself. We were just going to enjoy a fun night. A really fun night if all went to plan. I had spent a lot of time—too much time—researching and finding out exactly what she enjoyed. I just wanted to plan something special for her.

Chestnut Bay zoomed past us as we made our way through town. She looked at me curiously when we pulled up in front of Monte's. It had to feel like our place after our lunch here not all that long ago. So I was a little nervous about bringing her back for our first real date, but make it...more.

The warm I silently took her hand as we both slid out of the car and made our way into the restaurant.

"Are you sure they're even open?" she asked, as we walked in through the dining room was empty.

When she "Oh, they're open," I said, leading her through the space and outside onto a large deck. Twinkle lights filled the plants surrounding the railing and the tables had been moved out, except for one. It held a large arrangement of beautiful flowers and a few candles in a bowl. So the guitarist played an acoustic arrangement of one of her favorite Taylor Swift songs—that had taken a lot of digging in Spotify to find her and her playlist.

I watched as Saffron's eyes lit up while she slowly spun around, taking in the scene. Soft lights glowed on the water beyond the deck.

"Did you—" she started, and cleared her throat, which sounded suspiciously thick with emotion. "Did you do this for me?"

I watched for a moment longer before answering her question.

I followed "I just thought some privacy would be nice, so I rented the place

e alone evening.”

feeling I thought for sure she would have been accustomed to gestures li

Surely one of her past rich boyfriends had done something ridic  
/e were extravagant like pay thousands of dollars for a single dinner date,  
spent a Saffron definitely deserved it.

Saffron “Wow. That was a lot of trouble for just a dinner date,” she said,  
eyes shone brightly with a hint of tears.

vn. She “It wasn’t much trouble. I just wanted to be alone with you.”

started I led her to our table and pulled out a chair, indicating for her  
anted to Saffron took a seat and I sat opposite her. I signaled the waitress a  
brought the bottle of white wine I had chosen ahead of time to the table  
way to “You have to try this wine,” I said, as the waitress poured some i  
glasses.

ie door, “Is it special or something?”

“Yes, it’s one of the best from Napa Valley. I asked for it and I gue  
e to the have to order it. It’s apparently not easy to come by on the East Coast.  
d all of Saffron savored the taste with her eyes closed and she kept the glas  
ge, low to her nostrils as she took in its scent. I did the same and felt the coo  
oftly, a slide down my throat.

or Swift “Oh my God,” she said excitedly. “This is probably the best wine I’  
ylists. tasted, and I’ve spent a lot of time in France. It tastes like the grap  
king in grown in heaven.”

I laughed at her assessment. My heart lurched at the thought of  
ciously Saffron this happy.

“Are you a wine enthusiast or something?” she asked.

“A little bit,” I confessed. “I get obsessed with the whole pro  
for the making wine and different varieties of grapes. Fun fact, I’m actually a

sommelier.”

ke this. Her jaw dropped at my confession.

ulously “I worked as a waiter to get through college,” I added. “I learned  
, right?quickly that you get better tips if you know how to provide good wine.

“Wow, that’s impressive, Ethan. Tell me more about this wine.”

, as her “It’s grown in Napa Valley, as I mentioned, and the vineyard uses t  
sustainability practices for growing and harvesting the grapes—not to r  
in the actual production of the wine. It’s really quite fascinating an  
’ to sit.rooted in how they rotate—”

and she I stopped, realizing I was probably talking too much about grapes.

e. “Sorry,” I said. “That was headed into way too long of a story to s  
nto ourthe wine is really good.”

“It’s sexy that you know so much about wine,” she said, winking

“Maybe you should have your own vineyard.”

ess they “I’ve definitely thought about it. But that’s not a problem for right n

” I got up from my seat and extended my hand to her and she  
ss closeimmediately.

l liquid “What are we doing?” she asked.

“Dancing,” I insisted, pulling her closer.

ve ever “No, I don’t dance,” she responded with a giggle.

es were “With me you’ll have to,” I said and pulled her even closer.

I lifted her chin and she looked at me with her beautiful blue eyes. (C  
makingmet in a soft kiss and I pulled her even closer to me.

She broke the kiss and looked around anxiously.

“Don’t worry,” I murmured in her ear. “I’ve tipped them well t  
cess ofthemselves scarce.”

trained Before I could say anything else she pulled me close and our li



again. Her arms circled my neck and mine found her hips.

“I’ll be honest, I rented this place out because I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you,” I whispered to her and she smiled at me.

“You rented out an entire restaurant just to have sex with me?” she asked and I wasn’t sure if it was a joke or a trick question. I stammered as I searched for the best response and she broke out laughing.

“I’m just kidding. But you should see your face,” she said and we both broke into laughter.

I lifted her up and Saffron wrapped her legs around my waist. I carried her to the railing and set her down gently as we kissed each other hungrily. Saffron couldn’t wait any longer, she just wanted to skip to the good part.

Eagerly she began to undo my belt as she leaned back on the railing. She lifted up her dress and slipped off her underwear. She easily opened her legs to accommodate me. I quickly pulled down my pants before positioning myself.

Saffron pulled me into another kiss and I deepened it, our tongues tangled around each other, Saffron’s mouth tasting faintly of the sweet wine. Her hardness was waiting to enter here but I was getting impatient. So delicious. I reached between her legs and found her wet, aching for me. I groaned, wanting her so badly I didn’t have time for teasing. Saffron nodded to agree as she moaned and pulled me closer, urging me on. Not so good. Our lips slipped inside of her. Saffron gasped into my shoulder and I kissed her to stifle my own groan.

I moved slowly until we found our rhythm and the pace quickened. She held me close, pressing her mouth to my shoulder as she tried to stay focused.

We moved in unison and every inch of my body felt alive. The things we did with our lips met

just to have her were nothing beyond the limits of my determination to be able to her. I hoped this would never end but if it did, I knew she'd never forgive me.

Her hands sunk into my hair as she ran her fingers through it. Every time she asked me to make her feel like I was the only one who could please her and the more she looked at me, the more it felt like a plea for me to move faster and deeper.

As we both moved faster, deeper, reaching between us and finding her tight but pliant nerves, pulling another soft moan from her lips.

When she cried her name, I was confident I could do this all night. Saffron made me feel like a conqueror. Being with her brought out a strength and power in me that I hadn't felt in a while.

Smiling, I said, "Right there," she moaned, throwing her head back with her eyes closed, gasping for air, encouraging me. I maintained exactly what I was doing, powerfully thrusting into her over and over. Soon after, I felt her body tremble beneath me as her hands clutched at my jacket and her internal organs twisting around me. I was right behind her, emptying myself into her. She sighed with pleasure.

She was still. We stayed right there for a long moment. I made small, gentle movements for her. I aligned with our slowing heartbeats.

She seemed surprised. "I thought you were crazy," she said with a giggle as she planted a kiss gently on my face. "But now renting this place out seems like the best idea you've ever had."

I kissed her lips once more before we straightened up and made ourselves presentable. We sat down and a few minutes later the waitress came over quietly with the food I had already arranged. She seemed to have a knowing glint in her eye, but I couldn't find myself to be embarrassed or sheepish. I liked

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Saffron

and I didn't really care who knew it—even if it was a little more complicated for her.

## Chapter Nine

### SAFFRON

I tried to push away thoughts about my date with Ethan. There were many things I liked about him—beyond the great sex. His woody scent from his cologne that mixed perfectly with his body to create a fragrance unique to him. And when we were wrapped up in each other, as his breathing would increase, the exertion would deepen the effect of the cologne on my senses. It was *that* smell that was the one seared in my memory.

OK, OK, it definitely wasn't all about the 'magical' sex, but we had that 'magical' sex was devastatingly good. But even outside of those moments, our conversations were engaging and thought provoking. There was something deeper between us and in my weaker moments, I thought a relationship wouldn't be such a bad idea after all.

But then I remembered who he was and who I was and it was all just so complicated. I needed my focus to be on my career and growing at T&E. I couldn't afford to be sidetracked by a guy right now. I was more than just up-for-some-no-strings-attached fun, but it seemed like Ethan was something more.

I forced myself to focus on the numbers I was gathering for the prop

was due tomorrow and the team was all hands on deck getting it finish the first time since starting at Triton, I actually felt like I was contributing something. Now I was just praying we were successful so I could prove to my dad that I was useful.

“Hey, Saffron,” Becca, the project manager and team lead for the project, poked her head in my office. “We’re going to meet in the big conference room in fifteen minutes to go through the last minute details for the project. Okay?”

“Absolutely!” I said brightly, excited to be included in the meeting. “I’ll just finish pulling these numbers together.”

“Thanks, so much, Saffron. You have no idea how much I appreciate your outdoor help. See you in fifteen!” Becca said, waving as she rushed away. I was always amazed how fast she moved—she was short, but a ball of energy. Her long, dark brown hair was always flowing behind her, trying to keep up and fill with her pace.

I chuckled to myself and dug in, happy to see that I had finished the work, then giving everything a last glance when Quinn dropped in the chair in front of me. I looked around, confused at how she even got here.

“I ran into Ashton in the lobby and he sent me up,” she said in explanation. “Oh, cool.”

“How about ‘Hi, Quinn. How are you doing? What was so important that you needed to stop by my place of business?’”

I winced, realizing I did seem a little self-absorbed.

“Of course, I’m sorry. I’m just swamped, I have a meeting in fifteen minutes, and was just surprised. What’s up?”

“Is everything okay?” She looked worried.

“Oh, it’s fine. It’s just work. It’s been a little stressful, but in a good way.”

ed. For actually.”

contributing “I was going to say, you don’t look stressed. You’re glowing. You  
rove to like someone who had a billion dollar...spa treatment.” She was  
referencing my time with Ethan.

proposal, I couldn’t help myself. Despite knowing that nothing could really  
ference with him, I was bursting to talk about Ethan.

proposal, “Well, I did have a date with Ethan a couple of nights ago.”

“Oh really? Do tell.” Quinn leaned in as if we were sharing a secret.  
ing. “I’ll chuckle.”

“He rented Monte’s. Like the *whole* restaurant, just for us.”

ite your Quinn’s eyes went wide.

. I was “We had sex on the deck railing,” I continued, unable to contain  
rgy and excitement.

keep up “Excuse me, what? I’m sure I misheard you. You had sex in public?”

I shushed her, “Quinn, keep it down. This is my job. And it wasn’t r  
l. I was public. Again, we were mostly alone.”

front of “Mostly?” Quinn burst out laughing. “Dating a billionaire sure has p

“We’re not dating,” I protested, but the words sounded hollow in my  
mation. “Girl, he is renting out expensive restaurants just to have dinner a  
with you. You’re in denial. I hate to break it to you, but you are one h  
ant you percent dating Ethan Adams.”

“I don’t know about that. We haven’t even talked about that, a  
We’re just having fun.”

fifteen Weren’t we? Ethan had hinted that he is interested in exploring w  
had between us.

I wanted to be with him but I wasn’t sure how it would affect  
od way, prospects at Triton let alone my relationship with Ashton. I knew my

wouldn't approve. Perseus was now a huge competitor for Triton and you look didn't seem too pleased about that. My mom clearly thought Ethan winked, worth my time.

Most importantly, though, I was only twenty five and still trying to happen out my life. Ethan was forty, established in his career, and had more experiences. What would he even want with me?

I just didn't think I was brave enough to stand against those odds.

at and I "Well," said Quinn, breaking my train of thought. "Maybe it's about you have a little chat and figure things out. At the very least, set expectations. You need to define the relationship, whether it's just a hookup or the you are exclusive, you need to put all your cards on the table."

ain my Her advice made sense, but I wasn't sure I was ready to talk about this with Ethan. If we didn't talk about it, I wouldn't have to make decisions. Based on how hard it was to push away thoughts of him really in pretty sure my heart would at least be a little broken if things didn't work.

But if it wasn't a real relationship, we didn't have to go public with any jerks." "I hear you, Quinn. But right now I just want to have fun and stay young. I don't want to complicate things. My parents already have a relationship and sex with him and I'm not sure if Ashton would appreciate me seeing him as a friend. So there's not a whole lot to talk about."

I stood up from my desk, gathering my laptop and getting ready to go to my meeting. Quinn stood up too and gave me a silent hug.

"Besides, the current issue at hand is that Triton isn't doing too well. We have to help Ashton and my dad secure this big project. That's what we're concerned about. Nothing else."

my job "That's understandable," Quinn said, shrugging. "Concentrate on your job and the rest will figure itself out. Let me know if you need anything."



my dad anything. I'll talk to you later."

wasn't "Thanks, Quinn. I really appreciate you."

She grabbed my hand and squeezed it as she walked out. I took a deep breath and emptied my lungs before walking down the hall to the conference room. Before stepping inside, I shook away my thoughts and put on my usual face. I could knock this out of the park.

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A short while later, I was still riding a high from a successful meeting

actually seemed to appreciate my input and I felt like I'd made a lot of

contributions for the proposal. The writer was finalizing the draft for

approval tonight before submitting it tomorrow. I couldn't believe that

first project proposal was almost out the door.

I opened my office door and quickly shut it, pressing my back against

wood, eyes closed, reveling in the feeling of small victory.

"Someone looks happy," a husky voice said. Ethan's voice.

My eyes snapped open. He was leaning against the side wall, lurking

on the

you need

“What are you doing here?” I stammered, shocked to see him. Why here? More importantly: Did anyone see him come in here? I had a deep how I would explain that to Ashton.

“Is this a bad time?” he asked, a look of annoyance flashing across his face.

“Um, no. I was just surprised.” My voice was unsteady and I couldn’t catch my breath.

“I was here to see Ashton and I just thought I’d drop by and see you’re doing,” he said, moving closer to me, but not touching. “I hadn’t seen you since our date the other night.”

“Oh, sure. I’m good. I’ve been meaning to text you, but I’ve been slammed here,” I said, gesturing to the empty space.

He raised one eyebrow and looked annoyed again.

“But everything's okay,” I added quickly.

“Okay, great,” he said slowly.

“How have you been? Busy, I’m sure.”

“Yes, I’m always busy. I’m a very busy man, Saffron. I don’t have a lot of time to deal with a lot of bullshit.”

His gaze was hard. He looked angry now.

“Really, I’ve just been busy,” I said, smiling nervously.

He sighed heavily.

“Look, you’re not comfortable having me here so I’ll leave.” His tone was very polite, which made my heart sink. I missed the Ethan that I had known over our last few times together.

“I’m sorry. I’m just so preoccupied with trying to prove myself to you and also trying to get things on track. Between you and me, the company is struggling—I’m sure Ashton has told you. I want to be useful, but I don’t know how.”

was he constantly worried that I'm promising more than I can deliver. I can't  
no idea any missteps here."

"Saffron," he said, catching my hand. "You just need to relax."  
cross his I pulled my hand away from him and raised an eyebrow. No one  
hearing that phrase, but especially me. Never, in the history of the world  
t like that ever been helpful advice.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snapped.  
see how "I just mean whatever it is that you're worried about will work out  
't heard don't you take a break for a bit and we grab some drinks or something.

"I can't grab drinks today. I have a lot going on here. Maybe I  
n pretty much ambush you in your office at some random time and tell you to relax  
have a drink. Sounds good?"

Anger replaced annoyance in his eyes. Good. He was irritated. Well  
hell was he thinking with all this stupidity? I couldn't believe he was  
dismissing my concerns about my life.

He started to leave.  
time to "Okay, Saffron. You aren't comfortable with me coming to  
workplace or being seen in public with me. Which I totally understand  
you be," he said and left.

I sank back into the chair, both relieved and sad that he was gone.

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constantly worried that I'm promising more than I can deliver. I can't afford any missteps here."

"Saffron," he said, catching my hand. "You just need to relax."

I pulled my hand away from him and raised an eyebrow. No one liked hearing that phrase, but especially me. Never, in the history of the world, has that ever been helpful advice.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snapped.

"I just mean whatever it is that you're worried about will work out. Why don't you take a break for a bit and we grab some drinks or something."

"I can't grab drinks today. I have a lot going on here. Maybe I'll just ambush you in your office at some random time and tell you to relax and go have a drink. Sounds good?"

Anger replaced annoyance in his eyes. Good. He was irritated. What the hell was he thinking with all this stupidity? I couldn't believe he was just dismissing my concerns about my life.

He started to leave.

"Okay, Saffron. You aren't comfortable with me coming to your workplace or being seen in public with me. Which I totally understand. I'll let you be," he said and left.

I sank back into the chair, both relieved and sad that he was gone.

## *Chapter Ten*

### ETHAN

**W**hat the hell was that? I understood that Saffron might be uncomfortable with me being here, but she practically threw me out of her office. I'm sure she had a few guys back in college going crazy for her just to get her attention, but this wasn't college and I wasn't one of those guys.

Pissed off, I huffed up to Ashton's office. I needed to calm down and although I couldn't share details with him, I thought he could maybe help with something else, I needed a drink and Ashton was usually good for that.

"Hey, man," I said, just walking into his office. Ashton looked at me and smiled.

"Ethan, buddy, what's up?"

"I was in the neighborhood and hoped I could convince you to join me for happy hour."

Ashton looked at his computer, probably checking his messages quietly.

"Yeah, I could probably cut out for a while," he finally said. "Donny's here."

I nodded and we headed out immediately, walking the few blocks to the bar.

Donny's was a favorite dive bar of ours. It was where we went to bask in some steam. There were peanuts on the sticky floor and the space was dimly lit, almost pitch dark. But the chairs were comfortable and the beer was cold. I grabbed a booth while Ashton got us a couple of beers.

Ashton launched into a recent story about Christine. I was so happy to hear from a friend, but it was a little painful to hear about his relationship in the context of everything going on with Saffron.

"We're going away for the weekend next month, and I think that's why I'll pop the question. You should see the ring, man. I have to show it to you, it's gorgeous."

Ashton said, "That's awesome, brother. I'm really happy for you."

I felt how tight my smile was and saw in Ashton's eyes that it was a little zy overnormal. He fiddled with his half empty glass before looking back up at me. "Have you been seeing anyone?"

I should have seen this question coming.

"No, not at the moment. I've been busy," I lied to him. If only he could help. If that I was in a situation-ship with his little sister he'd punch me in the

"I can have Christine hook you up with one of her friends. She has a lot of friends, man. A few of them are smart and even have their shit together. I'll be there for you, he said, almost as if he pitied me.

"Ashton, when did you become this guy who is so into relationships? I mean, it's great for you and I'm happy for you, but it's not mandatory for all of us to get into serious relationships just because you're in one," I said quickly. Ashton said with a chuckle. He laughed, too, and looked back down at his pint glass. "I know, I know, you're right," Ashton said, holding up his pint glass.

Ashton said, "It's just that I've found something so beautiful and I can't help but want to share that feeling."

low off It was kind of him, but I didn't want any of Christine's friends. If I is just anyone, I wanted Saffron.

er was "I think right now, I have a big opportunity in front of me and I ju to focus on that," I said, trying to steer the conversation away for my relationships and dating.

light of "Oh yeah? That sounds interesting. What kind of opportunity?"

I was relieved that he took the bait and we could talk about something when now.

ay, it's "So there's the downtown revitalization project going on and Pers submitted our bid today. I really think we're going to get the contract, just trying to get my house in order, because when it comes in, it will wasn't of my time and focus."

me. I really was excited about the project. I knew we nailed our proposal was confident we were the best company to bring Chestnut Bay for had so many good ideas for the city and I was ready for an opportunity e knew them in action.

face. I glanced up at Ashton, who looked a little stricken and the color has drained from his face. It was not an expression I was used to seeing or, too," face. He swallowed hard, clearly thinking through his next words carefully.

"Shit, man. Triton is submitting a proposal, too. Our team is final ships? I and sending it off as we speak."

that we Suddenly, I wished I never brought the stupid project up. Ashton and to him an unspoken rule about not really talking about work. It was how we s.

friends. There were multiple times our companies bid on the same projects. Even though we both had a regional focus beyond just Chestnut Bay, it didn't help that our world of development on our scale was small.

I scrubbed my hand over my face and tipped back the last of my beer.

wanted “Dammit. I didn’t think you were going to submit anything. Looking at the scope of the project, I assumed that Triton couldn’t take that on at this moment. I really thought you were going to let this one go.”

My words felt harsh, but it was the truth. Triton did have the knowledge and experience but their resources and technology were far limited compared to Perseus.

Ashton shook his head.

“Listen, it’s just a project. We’re both adults that can separate friendship from business. We’ve been doing it for more than a decade, we can do so I’m doing that now.”

Ashton had always been mature about these things. Unlike his father, he didn’t feel threatened by me and my success. I used to feel like I was a pariah in the Lavette family, but once I dared to build something great in a spare room, I was considered to be theirs, I was nothing to them. Worthless.

There had been times in the past I would let projects go for the sake of my best friend. But I couldn’t do that now. This was a stepping stone to larger projects and it would be an amazing addition to our portfolio.

“I know my proposal is probably going to cause problems, and I am really sorry for that,” I said, genuinely feeling bad. Charles was a little bit angry with Ashton for keeping our friendship after I started Perseus. He assumed I had his son’s best interests at heart and only saw him as a professional competitor.

“Well, he doesn’t need to know that for now,” Ashton said after a moment. “I’m sure not telling him, or anyone else, a thing about this. They’ll find out on their own.”

“Thanks, man. I need another one,” I said, gesturing with my glass. “Another round?”



g at the Ashton nodded and I went up to the bar to get our drinks. I tho  
at the Saffron.

If whatever we had seemed doomed before, it was a certainty now. I  
wledged sucked that the first woman who actually held my interest for a ve  
ited a time was so out of bounds for me for so many reasons.

I grabbed our fresh beers and headed back to the table. After passing  
Ashton, he held it up.

endship “A toast,” he said. “To friendship.”

in keep Our glasses clinked. We talked about everything other than work an  
like old times. The laughs came easy and when our glasses were em  
ier who walked out of the bar and into the still bright sunlight.

t of the “Thanks for forcing me to do this,” Ashton said. “I needed some bro  
ce they “Me too. I’ll see you later, yeah?”

I gave him as loving a shoulder slap as I could and we parted  
e of my messaged my driver to pick me up so I could head home to finish thi  
o other, the day. It was closer than going back to the office and I wasn’t really  
mood to talk to anyone else tonight.

n really After the car dropped me off, I stomped upstairs to my offic  
ard on lightness I felt with Ashton was gone and my stomach felt like a rock.  
I didn’t me felt badly about the project, but I knew I couldn’t back out. Perseus  
ssional be a better fit than Triton and I couldn’t pull our proposal. I was just g  
have to find a way through this with Ashton...and maybe Saffron.

moment. I checked my messages and saw my human resources manager sche  
ind out meeting for tomorrow with me and a few other people about a posit  
were filling. I groaned as I accepted the invitation.

“Want My mind snapped away from my tasks at hand when a text n  
buzzed on my phone.

ught of [Saffron 7:35 PM]

I'm sorry for my reaction earlier today. I was surprised to see you. It really could have handled things better. I'm just in a difficult situation with my long and you complicate things.

My heart twisted when I read Saffron's words. I didn't want to confess one thing for her, but I couldn't lie and say I was surprised she felt that way. I definitely were a complication and I appreciated her honesty about that.

[Ethan 7:37 PM]

It felt like I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have dismissed your feelings and told you to relax. I know that wasn't helpful.

There, I could own my shit, too. Like I told Saffron, I was too busy with bullshit. I was also too old. I'd had enough experiences in life to know that things went the most wrong when you weren't honest and account for your actions.

[Saffron 7:38 PM]

ings for Kiss and make up?

I laughed out loud at her message. I very much wanted to kiss and nuzzle with Saffron. Who cared if we didn't have a future? We could have fun now and let the rest of the pieces fall where they would.

Part of [Ethan 7:40 PM]

s would My place. Saturday. 8 pm. Clothing optional.

going to We were both adults, and if we continued to be honest, there was no way we couldn't keep seeing each other. If Saffron didn't want Ashton to be a part of that was fine. I didn't love lying to my best friend—I really hated it, but I also knew this wouldn't last forever. Either we would end or we would try to have a real relationship. But we could stay in this middle ground for a while.

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## *Chapter Eleven*

### SAFFRON

I woke up late Saturday morning and stretched deeply in my bed. It had been an amazing week at work. It was stressful and crazy but also rewarding. When we submitted the proposal, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement. If we won the contract, life would get even busier, but I was prepared and welcomed the pace.

And tonight, I was going to see Ethan. I planned to clear the air with him and make sure he knew I wasn't looking for a relationship right now. I had decided that wasn't right for me at the moment and I had bigger priorities. But I still wanted to see him, if he was open to the arrangement.

I heard the doorbell ring and I knew I was home alone. I pulled on a sweatshirt over my pajama top and trudged downstairs. When I opened the door, I found a large bouquet of flowers being thrust toward me.

"Um, hi?" I said to the delivery person.

"Saffron Lavette?"

"That's me," I said, taking the flowers and looking for a card.

"Have a nice day."

I smiled as I closed the door and set them on the table in the en-

digging for a card.

The flowers were gorgeous—I noticed the bright hue of the saffron and a few other exotic and rare flowers. This was an expensive bouquet and I had a feeling of who it was from. I found the card tucked among them and opened the envelope hastily, trying not to tear the note inside.

*Saffron,*

*A bouquet of rare flowers for a rare woman.*

*I look forward to seeing you tonight.*

*—E*

Part of me was annoyed that he sent this to my house. What if someone had answered the door? I'd have to do a lot more explaining. But a bigger part of me was incredibly flattered that he went through the trouble. My heart began to beat fast with excitement, even though I was sure things between us would never work.

I smiled to myself as I felt the color rise to my cheeks. I read the note with him and over again dissecting every piece of it with a warm fuzzy heart. I knew how to say all the right things.

"Who has you blushing like that this morning?" my mom asked, smiling at me as she walked in from the kitchen.

"Mom. Hi. I thought you were at yoga." I knew I was only adding to her suspicion with my reaction.

"I just got back." She looked pointedly at the massive bouquet.

"Um, it's just Quinn being Quinn. We got into a stupid argument about something and she went over the top with an apology."

I hated lying to my mom, but I really didn't feel like explaining any more. I didn't want my mom knowing that it was from someone she despised. I didn't want to ruin this special moment for myself.

“Oh, interesting,” she said slowly. My mom’s voice was thick with suspicion. “That looks like quite the expensive bouquet of flowers. Especially for someone like Quinn.”

“Oh, you know Quinn. She has connections all around town. I’m sure I got this at a huge discount for some reason.”

“It seems like an awful lot of effort to apologize for an argument with a great friend.”

It was clear my mom was not buying what I was selling. I needed to change the subject. Fast.

“Anyway, now that things are good between us,” I gestured toward the flowers, “we’re going to hang out tonight. I’ll probably just spend the night at her place since she’s closer to town.”

I picked up the flowers and headed toward the kitchen to put fresh water in the vase.

“Sure,” she said, and I felt her eyes trained on my back. “Well, I’m just going to head up and take a shower and then I’m meeting Mellie for lunch.

See you later. By the way, Ashton came in at the same time as me. He’s in the kitchen. Don’t get so startled you drop the beautiful flowers.”

I turned to watch my mom walk up the stairs and I sighed in relief. I’d almost lived when I turned around to see Ashton staring at me from the kitchen.

“You totally lied to Mom,” he said with a chuckle.

“What are you even doing here?,” I asked, deflecting the question.

“Shouldn’t you and Christine be having a romantic walk on the beach? Picnic or something?” I teased him, trying to distract him from the subject and my own love life.

“If you must know, I came to give Dad some papers to look through.”

ask with the weekend. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation with  
specially Those do look like expensive flowers. Speaking of which, are those  
from Quinn?"

sure she The difference between Ashton and my mom was that Ashton knew  
too well and would call me out. I had to give him a bit of truth, but  
What a whole truth. I wasn't ready to tell him about the mystery man.

"Okay fine, you got me. These aren't from Quinn. They're from  
I had to have been seeing. Very casually."

The half-truth was good enough for now.

ward the "Is it someone I know?"

night at "No. He's an accountant at some firm. I don't remember the name  
haven't known each other for very long. He's just trying to impress me

water in "What's his name?"

"Brian Smith," I blurted out the name from the top of my head  
I'm going thinking it through. What a terrible name.

I'll see Ashton barked out a laugh.

s in the "That's the most made-up name I've ever heard."

I winced as I turned my back to him.

. It was "Well, I don't know what to tell you. That really is his name."

om the "So, this...Brian Smith...can afford these flowers on an accountant  
salary? I've bought Christine enough flowers to know how expensive  
can get. He must be well-paid," Ashton teased me, taking the bouquet  
question. me so that he could check it out.

ch or a "His family is rich," I lied again and he looked at me with a  
flowerseyebrow.

"You really suck at lying. If you have to hide someone, that might  
be a good first sign they're not the right person for you."

Mom. He was right, of course, but Ethan was harmless and there simply wasn't really anything worth telling anyway. We were just going to have some fun.

"I'm not hiding anyone. I just want to see how things go before I show the guy around and open things up for comments."

I shrugged as Ashton studied me carefully.

"So you're not going out with Quinn tonight, huh?"

"No, I have a date that might turn into a sleepover. I don't want you to know because you know how she has no boundaries."

"Just be safe," he said with a warm smile and a kiss on the cheek. "If you have any problems, tonight or ever, don't hesitate to call me. I promise. We won't ever judge or give you a hard time."

I appreciated his concern and gave him a hug before he walked back door.

Checking the clock, I realized the day had really gotten away from me. I had a few things I wanted to do before I got ready for my date with Quinn. Starting with a run. It always made me feel powerful and confident. I needed that for today. I ran upstairs to get ready, pulling on some shorts and a sports bra. As my feet hit the pavement, I felt all the concerns I had pushed away—no Ethan, no Triton—it was just me and the road. The quicker I ran, the more I appreciated the instant's steady pace of my breath to guide me.

I got home, took a shower and read a book until it was time to get ready for my date. I tried hard to distract myself from thinking and obsessing over Ethan too much.

Before I knew it, I was standing in the elevator of his building. I caught my reflection in the shiny walls, and liked the overall look I had chosen. It was so much more casual than the first time I came over here—when it was under the pretense of him mentoring me. We had dropped that act long ago.



wasn't chosen a simple flowy, cotton black T-shirt dress along with sandal cardigan in case I got cold. There was no question about what would parade tonight, and I figured I should be comfortable. I also had a small leather bag that had a few overnight essentials tucked inside.

I got to his door and rang the bell. The door swung open and Ethan stood in front of me dressed in slim dark jeans, a bright blue T-shirt, and a beautiful flower. He was really going all out with his gestures and I was impressed. He looked handsome and his ebony black hair was well trimmed and his beard, well shaved, he looked like a million bucks and I shoved him aside and closed the door behind with the heel of my sandal. Dropping my bag on the floor, I kissed him passionately as he quickly deepened the kiss. "I missed you," he murmured in my ear.

I dragged my fingers through his hair and pulled him closer to me. In response. It was minutes or hours before our bodies separated, both of us breathing heavy. The delicious smell finally registered in my brain.

"Your place smells amazing."

"I may have hired a chef for the evening. I wanted to cook for you and melt things got a little busy."

"I don't care as long as I get to eat what smells so good. And, by the way, thank you for the flowers. They're amazing." I pecked him on the cheek and we walked through the corridor towards his living room.

"You're very welcome and I'm happy to hear that you came with an appetite." Ethan chuckled. "I think Chef Troy is just finishing up. Would you like to go outside on the balcony, if that's okay?"

"That sounds great."

Ethan picked up my bag and brought it to his bedroom. I pulled out my sweater and wandered outside to see a beautiful table set. Twinkling

s and asparkled everywhere on the rooftop and a candle stood in the center  
happentable.

her tote “Chef says it’ll be about five minutes,” Ethan said, joining me outside.

I smiled and turned back to the view. Boat lights dotted the black v  
n stoodthe marina.

lding a “I have something for you,” Ethan said, handing me a small b  
l I waslooked like it held something expensive.

rimmed I opened the box and my suspicions were confirmed when I s  
m backgorgeous diamond necklace. Multiple diamonds were set in a st  
r bag topattern on a thin chain. The center diamond must have been a cara  
own nevermind the smaller diamonds extending in every direction.

“Ethan,” I gasped. “I can’t take this. This is way too much.” I finge  
me inbrilliant diamonds.

h of us “Of course you can take it,” he said, gently taking the box from  
removing the necklace. He spun me around and clasped it behind m

“When I saw this, I immediately thought of you. I know we haven’t  
ou, butabout what we are, but when I first saw you, it was like the sun rose  
first time. You have been a burst of light in my life, Saffron.”

ne way, I felt tears prickle in the back of my eyes. This was the sweetes  
heek asthoughtful gesture a man–no a person–had ever done for me. It was  
some generic piece of jewelry, this had thought behind it.

with an Chef Troy walked out just then to serve us dinner. It was th  
We’re delicious steak and fingerling potatoes I had ever tasted. The salad wa  
and fresh, too, along with a homemade dressing. It was a simple yet ex  
meal. And sitting underneath the twinkle lights with Ethan was magic.

on my “I know we haven’t really talked about things,” Ethan said, picking  
e lightshand after dinner as we lingered outside. “But I really missed you th

of the few days. I want to give this—us—a real try. We don't have to tell anything yet, we can see where things go. But I do want to see where we go. I really like you, Saffron."

I hadn't expected this conversation tonight. I thought this was a booty call. I also thought I had made up my mind about a relationship. When I heard Ethan say the words—say that he wanted to try with me—I realized I did want that and maybe there was a way I could have it all. It would take a lot of hard work, but I had proven to myself that I was capable of hard work. Could we really do this?

Was it worth it to at least try?

"I really thought I didn't want a relationship," I started to say and watched Ethan's face fall, but I pressed forward. "But sitting here with you, when you say these things, I think I was wrong. Ethan, I'm a private person and don't want my parents getting themselves involved in my love life. I know they're difficult. I just want to enjoy the early stages of our relationship. Let's talk in peace so we can really get to know each other and see where this goes for the without people's opinions."

Ethan lifted my hand and softly kissed it.

"I can agree to that," he said.

He pulled me out of my chair and toward him, urging me to straddle his lap. His mouth was everywhere on my lips, neck, and pulling down the neckline of my dress along with my bra to find my breasts. His hands brushed up my bare legs and brushed me through the fabric of my underwear. In an exquisite move, he lifted me and didn't set me down until we were in his room. He laid me down on his bed. Sweetly, and tenderly, we were lost in each other, a chorus of moans and sighs, desperate to get our fill of one another's bodies. It was an impossible goal, but we gave it an honest try. As the

anyone wave of bliss crashed through my body, I felt my heart being pulled up  
e things well. I was completely lost in Ethan. And I completely loved every se  
it.

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wave of bliss crashed through my body, I felt my heart being pulled under as well. I was completely lost in Ethan. And I completely loved every second of it.

## *Chapter Twelve*

### ETHAN

I was glad that Saffron and I had finally talked about what we were. I was way too old to be living in uncertainty with a woman. It was understandable that she wasn't eager for people to know about us. Perhaps I didn't give a shit what anyone thought, but I knew we were mostly concerned about her family's opinions and that was obviously a harder pill for me to swallow. It seemed clear that Saffron needed to feel comfortable and to let herself explore our relationship. If we needed to keep it quiet, we could do that, I was fine.

When did I become such a sucker?

When Saffron took a shower, I set up the media room for us to watch television and cuddle. Dinner had long been cleaned up by my housekeeper and Chef Troy left some delicious looking pastries for dessert.

I was throwing the extra blankets and pillows on the couch when she walked in and I had déjà vu. It was like the first night she was here. This time she wore her own pajamas and there was something so intimate about seeing her sexy little plaid sleep shorts and her cropped

T-shirt. She also wore fuzzy socks and I found that adorable. This was Saffron I was eager to get to know.

“This looks cozy,” she said, dropping onto the couch and wrapping in a blanket. One of the things I loved about Saffron was that she touched with her inner child. Something that brought out my adventurous side.

“I want you to be comfortable,” I said, joining her. I had also changed into lounge clothes, but I wore long jogger pants and really wished I had shorts so I could feel her skin on mine.

Saffron grabbed the remote and started flipping through the options. She then dropped her head on my chest. There was a brief silence between us as we were both doing. We were both lost in thought.

It was “What’s on your mind?” she asked.

Personally, I had a lot on my mind.

While talking, I thought, “Would her parents cause us a lot of pain, would Ashton still be my friend if she found out about my relationship with his beloved sister? Could our relationship survive the competition between my company and her company? So we had so many things on my mind and I wanted to push them to the back of my mind, but I knew it was best to address it now.

“Well, I’ve been trying to understand why you’re so desperate to keep this a secret,” I responded, stroking her hair. “I get that you’re concerned about your parents’ opinions, but don’t you think they’ll eventually understand?”

Saffron sighed with frustration; I was frustrated too.

When she said, “It’s complicated Ethan,” she responded, looking up at me briefly.

Except “Well, help me understand,” I insisted.

Unbelievably “My dad thinks you have it out for his company,” she started to cry. “He doesn’t even approve of your friendship with Ashton. He thinks

s a sideused him to get Perseus off the ground and he still thinks that you'r  
him," she continued to explain.

herself It wasn't news to me. At one point, he even confronted me asking  
was instay away from Ashton.

s side. "Now can you imagine what would happen if he discovered that  
ged intoseeing his daughter who is almost young enough to be your daughter?"  
chosen Well, shit. That added some perspective.

"He'd think that you're using me too and I just don't want to deal v  
s as shedrama. At least not yet," she said. She was making sense.

as if we "Do you think I used Ashton or that I'm using you or taking advan  
you?" I asked her.

"No. I don't think you're capable of using anyone Ethan. You  
honest," she responded, looking up at me with a warm smile.

riend if "Great answer," I replied and kissed her temple.

uld our "My mom on the other hand still looks at you and sees, well, the he  
lad's? Isaid.

κ of my I chuckled but I found it rather offensive.

"What do you see when you look at me?" I asked her.

rep us a "I see my brother's best friend and an amazing man," she res  
l aboutsincerely. "I just worry about the fact that our companies have to c  
nd?" with each other," she added.

"Can't you separate business from pleasure?" I asked.

Saffron seemed to be still immature on that aspect. To a certain ext  
was ambitious and competitive like her dad. It was both a good thing;  
explain.bad thing and I could tell that we were most likely to run into some pr  
iks youin the future if we couldn't get past this issue.

"I can try. For us I can try," she assured me. But I wasn't sure si



...e usable to follow through with her promise.

“Ashton and I have managed to stay friends throughout the years by  
g me to just that,” I said and there was a brief silence.

What was she thinking?

you’re She sat up straight and looked at me. Saffron lowered her face and  
, her lips gently against mine. She began to deepen our kiss and I held h  
closer to mine. Her hands reached for my semi stiff cock and she str  
with the She wanted to go again and so did I.

“I don’t know if your friendship with Ashton will be the same a  
stage of discovers that you and I are together.”

“I guess we’re going to have to take things one day at a time,”  
,re to pulling her back into a kiss.

I flipped her over gently so that she could lie on her back. I looked i  
eyes and there was so much hope in them. Perhaps we were both bein  
lp,” she about our relationship but I was willing to give it a try and see where  
us. As I moved inside of her, I could see myself falling in love with  
other woman had made me feel the way she did. I didn’t want to let  
She cared about what people would say, but I didn’t. I wanted every  
ponded know that she was mine and I was hers.

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I said,

Going to work on Monday after two amazing days with Saffron  
into her struggle that required two huge cups of coffee.

g naïve I groaned when I saw that first up was a meeting with Jamie from  
it took resources to talk about the architect position. Why did he want to talk  
her. No about it? I expected him in my office any minute, so I quickly skim  
her go. emails and messages, making sure I hadn't missed anything critical  
yone to reading the last email when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said, straightening up the few physical items on my de

“Hey Ethan,” Jamie said. “Thanks for meeting with me.”

“No problem. I am a little confused why you wanted to meet about  
decision.”

“This should be quick,” he said, sitting down in one of the chair  
have a really strong candidate. He's the best in Chestnut Bay, really  
whole region but I think it's going to take more than the approved s  
get him here. He's been with his current firm for a long time and is re  
happy, but casually looking for a switch.”

“Were there any other candidates that matched his experience or skills?”

“Not really,” Jamie said, swiping through pages on his table. “I narrowed it down to five who we interviewed. Three of them we liked enough, but this guy was far and away the best.”

“Can you send me some new salary estimates?”

“I just emailed them to you based on the market research I did. He has more experience than we had currently factored, combined with the cost of having to woo him.”

I scanned the email that came through from Jamie.

“This is all fine,” I said, knowing our numbers well. “I can approve him an offer at the top of this new range.”

was a “Great, thanks, boss. I’ll call him this morning with the offer and locked down. I’ll loop you back in if I need to, but otherwise consider it human-handled.”

ok to me “Thanks, Jamie.”

needed my Jamie got up and strode out of my office, leaving me in some peaceful . I was quiet. I had a few minutes before my next meeting and looked at my schedule for the day before texting Saffron. I needed to see her again today.

sk. [Ethan 9:17 AM]

Morning, beautiful. Lunch today at Monte’s?

a hiring [Saffron 9:18 AM]

Sure. Noon?

s. “We [Ethan 9:19 AM]

7 in the Can’t wait.

salary to I glanced back at my schedule and saw that I had a meeting a relatively Before I could think too much about it, I clicked the cancel button could reschedule. I had bigger priorities.

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We had  
ed well

He has  
element

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t noon.

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## *Chapter Thirteen*

### SAFFRON

I intended to spend just one night with Ethan but I ended up spending the whole weekend at his place. I didn't regret it at all. I couldn't help but smile to myself whenever I thought of all the things we did together. I had to spend the whole weekend indoors and even though he didn't like that, he ended up having the time of his life. Chestnut Bay was not a big place and I was afraid that we'd bump into someone we knew if we went out.

I felt bad that Ethan thought I was trying to hide him when in reality I was trying to protect our newly found happiness. I wanted nothing more than to be with him but I felt like our relationship needed time to breathe. All the people who had messed things up for us.

He was much braver than me, he didn't care about what people had to say but I was different. I cared about my family's opinion because I loved them too. My thoughts were interrupted as Ashton walked into my office looking a little too tired for even a Monday morning.

"You look like crap," I teased him as he took a seat.

"Thanks, sis. I actually managed to have a great weekend, but then I woke up and hopped right into a shit show this morning," he responded with a

sigh.

“What’s wrong?” It was a little unlike Ashton to be so blunt, even when I was venting. “Is Dad giving you a hard time again?”

Since working here, I realized I wasn’t the only one who Dad was hard on. Ashton got a lot of crap from him, too.

“Yes, he is. But I guess it’s because he’s anxious. Things are about to get bad,” he responded, driving his fingers through his blonde hair.

“What do you mean?” I asked, sitting up straighter in my seat.

“We lost Frank the architect. He quit this morning and he was the best person in the whole area. He obviously got an offer at another company and he’s leaving the area,” explained Ashton. That wasn’t what I was expecting to hear. I’d been told that Monday morning blues were a thing, but Mondays always had a way of bringing me down from the weekend high.

“We can’t have that! Not right now,” I exclaimed with concern.

“I guess this will be your first real challenge. If we do get that contract, we’ll have to make a plan to make it work. Dad says maybe this is your chance to prove yourself.”

*This* is what Dad lays on me? Something totally out of my realm? It seems unfair for him to expect me to find someone to top Frank. I wasn’t even working in human resources.

“But recruiting isn’t my job,” I said, annoyed at the situation.

“Well, it’s everyone’s job at the moment. We need everyone looking for a good architect and we need one before we get the project. If we don’t find out that Frank quit, I don’t think the council will accept our proposal. I could sense the hopelessness in Ashton’s tone. I was starting to feel like I was coming too.

“Maybe Ethan could help?” I asked out of desperation. Ashton looked

me, surprised by my question.

When he said, “Well, that’s weird that you’d immediately think of him. What exactly do you think Ethan can do for us?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

I tried to act as naturally as possible not to give myself up.

“Well, he’s your best friend and he obviously is good at whatever he’s doing with his company or else he wouldn’t be a billionaire,” I explained with reasoning and as far as I was concerned, I was making sense. “I probably know a lot of great architects.”

Ashton shrugged with something on his mind.

“You’ve got a point but Triton is doing just fine,” said Ashton. I knew it was his ego talking.

“You really are going to compare a few hundred million dollars to a billion dollars? All I’m saying is, we’ve been doing a lot of losing and it would hurt to ask him to give us a hand. Maybe even collaborate on a project to boost our portfolio. I know he won’t say no to you.”

“First of all, give us some credit. We’re worth a *lot*. It might not be a billion dollars anymore, but it’s still mighty darn respectable. And I don’t have an issue with collaborating or reaching out for help, but you know Dad is. He’d rather die than ask for any help from Ethan. So that is a no for now,” he responded.

Ashton had a point. My truth was also more complicated. I was hoping Triton could work with Perseus and it would somehow help Ethan work on my dad. But I was being naïve.

“You weren’t home all weekend. Mom called me to tell me about the meeting and she completely changed the subject to one I didn’t even expect her to bring up. She was curious and wondered if I knew anything more. She said she knew you were lying about staying at Quinn’s.”

“I’m a grown woman. I can be gone for the weekend if I want to,” I said, annoyed again. I needed Ashton to go away. “I’m seeing someone else.”

I looked back to my computer screen, hoping Ashton would get the message and leave. I also didn’t want him reading too much into my facial expressions.

“I know, but I didn’t tell her that. I just thought it’s not my place to tell her whenever you’re ready,” said Ashton. I appreciated the gesture but wondered when it would be a good time to come clean about seeing her. I knew it was a friend.

“I just hope he’s treating you well and you’re happy. That’s all,” I said, getting up from his seat. I wanted to tell him that his best friend was the man I’d ever met, but instead I just smiled at him and watched him walk out of my office.

The less I said, the better.

The morning flew by and I rushed into Monte’s a few minutes later. I don’t know how many minutes. Service was surprisingly quick, a perk of being with Ethan. As a no-go supposed, and I had my chef salad in front of me in no time. But I didn’t have much of an appetite after the events of the morning and mostly just ate the lettuce around.

“Hey, babe, is everything okay?”

It was a shock to hear him call me babe.

I smiled at him, but it felt tight and unnatural. I wasn’t sure I wanted to discuss my morning, though. We were trying to separate work after all.

“Things aren’t going well at work,” I said after a few seconds of debate. “I’m worried there isn’t much I can do to help either.”



' I said, Ethan sat a little straighter and I saw him tense just a little bit.

. I told "What exactly isn't working out?"

"You're our direct competitor. Should I be telling you these k  
he hintthings?" I asked. "I thought we agreed that we would leave business  
· facialour relationship?"

"I can try to help. But I definitely can't help if you don't share,'  
d you'llsaid, looking at me, his blue eyes full of sincerity. "Also, there are mc  
re and I enough projects to go around and I've expanded out of Chestnut Ba  
his bestmeans I will be saving more jobs for smaller companies."

I bristled at the insinuation that Triton was a small company. I mu  
he said,made a face because he added with a shrug, "You know what I mean."  
he best "I know what you mean. It's just that we recently lost our top archi  
walk outwe're pretty much fucked. He was the best in the area and now we dor  
him on our team anymore."

Ethan's face went tight and his eyes flashed with concern.

. Ethan "Well, hire another architect. You can find someone who is ever  
1 a fewthan the person who left."

dams, I "It's a lot easier said than done, Ethan."

r't have I sighed. I was frustrated already and this conversation was frustra  
pushedeven more. Ethan just didn't understand where I was coming from.

"Look, I know that business can be stressful," Ethan said, and I felt  
get angry from his brush off. "But why don't you just take the time t  
this lovely meal and then you can think about the issue when you get  
nted tothe office. If there is anything that I've learned from leading a billion  
. company, it's that each day has its own challenges. You can't let tha  
internalyou down or stop you from having a good time when you can."

I mentally applauded myself for not throwing my fork in h

Sometimes Ethan just really didn't get me. But I took a few deep breaths and tried to tell myself that he didn't mean to blow off my concerns. I've found letting all of this get to me too much.

“You know what I need right now? I need a vacation. I need to get away for a bit and refresh my mind,” I finally said.

“Okay, done,” Ethan said. “I'll take you away. Where do you want to go?”

“Well, I'm not exactly flush with extra cash in my budget right now. But somewhere not too expensive,” I said. I had plenty of money, but I was trying to save up for my future goals. Sometimes I tried to do the responsible thing and actually stick to a budget.

“Nope, you're not paying. I'll take care of everything. Just tell me where you want to go, and I'll organize everything. If you can't think of where, I'm happy to give you some suggestions.”

Was he for real? Could I just accept an all-expense paid vacation? It was something I would just have to get used to?

I felt my face relax as I thought about lounging on a beach somewhere warm. Which was ridiculous, because it was summer and warm here, and there was a beach down the street.

“Are you sure?” I asked, trying to decide if this was all too much.

“One hundred percent. Really, I want to do this with you. I think a little time away could be good for us, too. It can give us a chance to act normal and enjoy a few days without sneaking around.”

“How long would you want to go for?”

“I can only be away for a week because of work. I mean, I'll have to be available for a few meetings, but I think I can swing it. I've got a great schedule and they'll understand if I have to be away. In fact, they probably enjoy it.”

“I'm out of their hair.”

ths and I thought for a moment, wanting to go somewhere adventurous and  
was just but still close enough to maximize our time together.

“How about the Virgin Islands? Maybe Saint John? I’ve never been  
at away pictures I’ve seen look gorgeous and I could use some beach time.”

“I think that sounds like a great idea and I would love to go there with  
to go?” I’ll tell my pilot to get the jet ready and we’ll go this weekend.”

Now, so I gaped at him.

As I was trying “You have a private jet?”

One thing Ethan burst out laughing. I supposed I should have known he’d  
private jet.

Where I couldn’t wait for the weekend so I could spend a lot of uninterrupted  
to offer with Ethan.

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re to be It was just a few days later when the jet landed at Cyril E. King Airport  
at team Thomas and a car picked us up from the airport to take us to the ferry  
y it as I we would go to St. John to spend the week. The landscape was lush

remote, salt air was stronger than in Maryland. It was warm, sunny, and p  
humid. It made me want to jump in the sparkling waters of the ocean.  
een but I felt Ethan's eyes on me as I looked around the place drinking  
beautiful sight. He took my hand into his and kissed it and I shif  
ith you. attention on to him.

"This place is beautiful," I said to him, looking into his eyes. He  
warmly at me and looked out the window. I drew closer to him and he  
arm around me.

have a The car pulled over at a beach house that was a work of art. I ga  
admiration and immediately got out of the car. The place wasn't a r  
ed time mansion but it was spacious enough. It looked modern and almost new  
had been recently built.

"This is gorgeous. I thought we were just staying at a resort or some  
I said, turning to Ethan as he joined me by my side.

"Let's just say I have a friend and this is his holiday home. He's le  
stay and use his staff while we're here. He's owes me a favor, so I t  
why not?" he said, dangling a set of keys in my face.

"What?" I exclaimed, grabbing the keys from him. I rushed up th  
that was overlooking the ocean and opened the entrance while  
followed behind me. "That's amazing! He's so nice!"

The house was like a dream, I rushed further into the house as the  
took our bags inside. "I can't believe you have a friend who has a p  
this random location I chose," I said going into the kitchen. It was we  
t on St. and its colors were neutral but still beautifully blended into shades o  
/ where The design was modern with a few cultural ornaments decorating the s  
and the and the kitchen window overlooking the ocean. It was a view to di  
rushed into the living room which was bright and colorful.

perfectly I wanted to see more of the house but the ocean was calling for me. I ran past the patio, pool, and backyard and out to the beach. Ethan was in there calmly walking around, laughing at my child-like wonder.

I began to take off my clothes, leaving them behind as I drew closer to the ocean. Ethan followed behind me taking off his clothes, too. He smiled; he was much calmer than I was. I met the waves on the sandy beach and put his hands on my hips. As the depth rose to my waist, I dove into the water. Ethan caught up with me and slick skin slid against skin.

"This is beautiful," I said for the millionth time, looking into his dark eyes that were full of longing. I wanted him too. I wrapped my legs around his waist and felt him hard and ready for me. Ethan's lips violently collided with mine in a brutal kiss.

"I raked my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer to me. His hands swept over my entire body. I didn't care who may have been watching; it was all right. This was a private beach and we could do whatever we wanted.

Ethan held my waist tightly as he kissed my neck. Everything about the way he touched and caressed my skin with his soft hands felt right. The way he touched and caressed my skin with his soft hands felt like a dream come true. The way my body responded to him made me think that he was the one. I couldn't imagine any other man touching me the way he did or kissing me the way he did.

"I think I'm falling for you," I whispered and he pushed his face against mine. I was a little surprised.

I wasn't sure if I had said the right thing. Was he recoiling at my statement or did he want me to say more? He pulled me back into a kiss, his lips responding and even though his kiss was passionate, I wanted him to say it for me. He was falling for me too. I wanted to hear it.

After a while, Ethan broke the kiss. He held me for a while as we floated

ie and Ithe ocean. It was peaceful and quiet and he didn't say a word.  
was just Was I wrong to say that I was falling for him?

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the ocean. It was peaceful and quiet and he didn't say a word.

Was I wrong to say that I was falling for him?

## *Chapter Fourteen*

ETHAN

Saffron said she was falling for me, which is what I wanted to hear, but I don't know why I couldn't say it back.

I wasn't falling for her. I was in love with her.

Why couldn't I tell her that I was in love with her? Why was I afraid?

The chef had prepared dinner for us. He set it up beautifully on the porch overlooking the ocean so that we could eat and enjoy the view. The lights all over the front yard that lit up the place and we could see everything clearly. The night was star-studded and clearer than the sky in Chestnut Hill. I decided that I was going to tell her during dinner that I loved her.

I sipped my wine as I waited for Saffron to join me on the porch. She was still freshening up and I was famished, ready to dig into the gorgeous meal that was before me. Saffron showed up in the doorway dressed in a seafoam purple sundress that flowed as she moved.

Her blonde pixie cut was still damp from her shower. She was wearing a necklace I had bought her and it looked beautiful sitting at the top of her cleavage. One of the things I loved about Saffron was that she was a beautiful beauty.



“Wow, you look gorgeous” I said and she giggled.

“I thought this dress would look beautiful on an island,” she said and twirled.

“You look beautiful in it. It’s perfect,” I said, getting up from my seat and broke a flower from the bunch of flowers that were in the vase on the table and walked up to her. I fitted it carefully into her hair and she smiled at me as I towered over her.

“There, now your island outfit is complete,” I joked and we both laughed. I drew a chair for her and she took a seat at the table. When she was comfortable, I dramatically lifted up the stainless steel covers on the dining table to reveal what had been prepared for us.

“I’m starving and this looks delicious,” Saffron said as she looked at the dishes of fish and spiced rice, drinking in the aroma.

Saffron threw her head back as she moaned with satisfaction, giving me a very dirty thought.

“This is absolutely amazing,” she said.

I had to agree, the chef had outdone himself. Every bite was bursting with flavor and seasoning in a way that I hadn’t tasted before in my life. We sat in silence, starving from the long day at the beach and traveling.

Saffron suddenly burst out laughing.

“We look like two people who haven’t eaten a decent meal in weeks,” we both laughed too.

“Can you blame us? This food is just way too good.”

“No, I definitely can’t blame us,” she said. The silence that stretched between us turned tight and a little more awkward.

I wondered what was on her mind. I was thinking about what she had said to me while we were making out in the ocean. I couldn’t stand the fact

had left her hanging. I had to say something to her.

aid and “Listen Saffron,” I began and she looked up at me. “What you said out there in the ocean. I didn’t mean to ignore you. I just wasn’t expecting you to say that.”

ie table “Look, I was just caught up in the heat of the moment. You don’t need to apologize about it. I know that it’s way too soon for me to be saying something like that,” she excused herself and it stung a little that she couldn’t stand by her word.

he was “It’s not too soon for you to be saying that and I’m not judging you for what you said. I just wanted you to know that I’m in love with you,” I said and she looked at me surprised.

l at the I got up from my seat and went to her side. I extended my hand to her and she took it. Saffron stood looking up at me with the soft music playing in the background.

“I love you, too, Ethan,” she said and I pulled her closer. We began to sway to the music allowing our bodies to be carried by the rhythm.

ng with “You shouldn’t care too much about what people have to say about you,” she said and she looked up at me.

“Ethan, they’re my family. I’m always going to care what they say about me,” she responded with a heavy sigh.

æks.” I She didn’t want to talk about it so I decided that it was best for me to let it go. Saffron still had some growing up to do and I was willing to grow with her. After all, that is what you do when you love someone.

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her and Waking up the next morning in our sun-drenched bedroom with Saffron in my arms was a dream. For once, we had nowhere to be and could spend the entire morning kissing, cuddling, talking, and having sex.

egan to We shared stories about our childhoods, since I barely knew her when she was younger. I loved hearing more about her life in England.

it us," I What struck me as something new was that I considered Saffron a friend and not just a lover. I could actually talk to her. And while we were dancing around some important topics, like our careers, it was work now. I felt like I understood more about where she was coming from with her parents. I still didn't want to hide our relationship, but I was willing to let it go at Saffron's pace.

ow with I knew I was lucky. My parents still loved each other like crazy and have always been supportive of me and my dreams. I didn't truly know what it was like to be in Saffron's shoes—always having to explain herself or defend herself. And I couldn't pretend her family didn't hurt me. Our father

always been close, but once I started to find success, that was the end of the relationship. Dad just stepped into the shadows and quietly retired.

All I know is that I'm eternally thankful for my parents and although I didn't have a lot when I was growing up, they gave me a solid foundation of unconditional love.

I smiled to myself, thinking about my parents and, after all has been said and done, realizing that I had a pretty great childhood.

Saffron and I lay in bed far too long. Eventually, we were starving and Saffron made us a simple breakfast of eggs, bacon, and toast. I had thought the chef we wouldn't need him in the mornings. I really didn't want to see him at the house when we were mostly likely going to be in bed, still eating together from in each other.

end the “I didn’t think you could cook,” I said, surprised when she walked into my bedroom with the tray of food.

hen she “Like I’ve mentioned, my mom is very old-fashioned. If there is one thing she wants me to be, it’s a homemaker. So I’ve had to learn how to be a friend, a housewife, which includes cooking.”

vaguely “For the record,” I said. “I’m not interested in whether or not a woman can cook. I just want to be with someone who makes me happy. If you are going to be up together in the end, I don’t expect you to break your back trying to take it good old fashioned housewife. I want you to do things that make you and things that make our relationship happy,” I said, taking a sip of coffee.

and had “I will surely take you up on that offer because I hate cooking and cleaning,” she responded, relief etched on her face.

to prove “You don’t have to do all that with me,” I said with a wink.

ers had We finished the rest of our breakfast, bonding some more and planning for the day. I was having the time of my life.

of that Saffron and I spent the rest of the day going around the island and souvenirs for her family and friends back in Chestnut Bay. The island was rich with culture and our tour guide took us to all the fun spots. There was much to do since it was a small island but being with Saffron was enough. There was never a dull moment with her, especially when she said the way down here without a single care who was seeing us together. Saffron was a free spirit dying to be set free and this island gave her much-needed experience.

We returned to our home and sat on the porch to watch the sunset. I had a glass of wine and listening to music. It felt like we were just a couple watching the days pass by. I had many stories to share with her about my adventures and I loved hearing her laugh. She had the most beautiful laugh I had ever heard and I found myself wanting to draw out that more and more.

"It's so beautiful here, I don't want to go back home," she said with a good chuckle. Saffron was just enjoying the vacation side of things.

She had no idea what life here was really like for the locals.

"Honey, we have a great life in Chestnut Bay, but if you'd like us to live here, just say the word," I responded and she looked at me.

"You'd actually live with me?" she asked.

I guess she had misunderstood me but I didn't mind moving in with her. That is what she wanted.

"Don't you think it's a little early to be moving in together, especially because your family has no idea that we're together?" I asked her.

Saffron rolled her eyes with annoyance.

"Not this again, Ethan. Okay fine, I will tell my parents and Ashtorah as soon as we get back home or the next time I speak to them. *A*

buying happy now?" she asked with an irritated tone.

and was "I'd be happy if you didn't have to hide me. How would you feel wasn't you from the important people in my life?" I asked her and she was quiet.

was all "Do your parents know that you and I are together?" she asked. She r. Deep idea how I really functioned.

I was a "I told my parents about you the first day I saw you at the clean up knew right there and then that I liked you and I wanted to be with it while responded and her facial expression changed from annoyance to guilt.

at an old "My parents want to see you but we can't do that because you insist about we keep this a secret, so I'm following your lead as per your request beautiful added and then took a sip of my wine to calm myself down.

it sound "Okay, I'm ready. Let's go public if that is what you want," she said in a low voice. It's not what I wanted. I wanted her to want the same for us I and I "What's the point if I'm the only one who wants to be public? Don't do it for me. You'll have to figure out what you want, Saffron," I responded now getting annoyed with her childish behavior.

to move Her phone rang, interrupting our conversation and I was glad that we both get a chance to cool off.

"It's my mom, I have to take this," she said, getting up from her seat and walking into the house.

She didn't go far. I could hear her conversation with her mom. I tried especially to listen because I knew that she was probably going to have to lie and I couldn't help myself. I eavesdropped anyway. Saffron told her mom that she was on a girl's trip with her best friend Quinn, even after she said that she would come clean. I knew I had to give her time but my patience was running out. After a few minutes she joined me back on the porch and the

silence between us. I wasn't going to say anything about what I had heard but she knew I had heard everything.

briefly “That was my mom just checking on me. I had to tell her that I was with Quinn, but I promise I will tell her about us as soon as we get back.” I had no quickly explained.

“You don't need to tell your family about us, Saffron. I just don't want to be sneaking around with you like I have things to hide. You may have to hide but I don't. I've been nothing but an open book with you and it's only fair that you return the favor,” I told her calmly.

Saffron walked up to me and extended her hand and I took it.

“I will do anything you want me to. I want this to work more than anything else,” she said, pulling me up. I pulled her into an embrace.

There was a truce between us at that moment but I knew we still had a long way to go till she was comfortable with people knowing about us. We didn't do it in each other's arms as we watched the last streaks of the sunset.

“I love you,” she said softly and I kissed the top of her head.

“I love you too, Saffron,” I responded and then there was silence between us. Each of us lost in thought.

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silence between us. I wasn't going to say anything about what I had just heard but she knew I had heard everything.

"That was my mom just checking on me. I had to tell her that I was with Quinn, but I promise I will tell her about us as soon as we get back," she quickly explained.

"You don't need to tell your family about us, Saffron. I just don't want to be sneaking around with you like I have things to hide. You may have things to hide but I don't. I've been nothing but an open book with you and I think it's only fair that you return the favor," I told her calmly.

Saffron walked up to me and extended her hand and I took it.

"I will do anything you want me to. I want this to work more than anything else," she said, pulling me up. I pulled her into an embrace.

There was truce between us at that moment but I knew we still had a long way to go till she was comfortable with people knowing about us. We stood in each other's arms as we watched the last streaks of the sunset.

"I love you," she said softly and I kissed the top of her head.

"I love you too, Saffron," I responded and then there was silence between us. Each of us lost in thought.



## *Chapter Fifteen*

### SAFFRON

**A**lthough we were having a good time being around each other, I couldn't help but notice that there was a bit of tension building, not the sexy kind.

I know we were both battling our own thoughts about what we were doing and it was starting to overshadow everything.

One evening after dinner, we decided to have some drinks at a local bar so we could experience more of the local culture. This particular bar had just the right amount of volume when it came to the music. There was a lot of chatter and people watching football on the bar television. It was mostly locals, but I didn't feel intimidated since the locals were lovely and friendly people.

Ethan and I were trying too hard to have a good time. It was almost as if we were both trying to impress each other. He was still attentive and caring but I could feel that he was off. Maybe I was a little off too and he was thinking the same.

"I really wish we could stay longer. I love it here," I tried to keep the conversation desperately.

"I wish we could stay longer too. I'm having a good time with you," he responded, stroking my hair as I sat beside him. There was another

silence between us.

“Do you want to go outside maybe? It’s a little noisy in here,” he said. I preferred staying in the bar. The chatter in the back and the people watching soccer made our silence a little less awkward.

Outside on the veranda, we would have to try harder to make conversation and I didn’t want that, but he seemed to really want to go.

“Sure, let’s do that,” I agreed.

Ethan got up and extended his hand to help me up. He continued to hold my hand as he led me out of the bar onto the veranda. As the door closed, most of the noise faded along with it. We both continued to sip our beer together. I we stared at the starry night.

I sighed—and “I’m really dreading going back to work with all that’s going on,” I said and Ethan looked in my direction.

“What’s going on at work?” Ethan asked.

“Remember I told you about the architect leaving?” I reminded him. “Triton submitted this really big proposal and I know it would really make a big difference for us if we got the contract. We’ve been losing contracts a lot of projects for a while now and if it continues, we might struggle to stay afloat very soon,” I confided in him.

Ethan had a look of remorse in his eyes. He felt sorry for me.

“I’m sorry that you’re going through what you’re going through. What was the project you submitted for?” he asked with a worried look on his face.

“It’s a downtown revitalization project,” I responded and he sighed. I wanted to tell that he had something on his mind.

“What?” I asked him curiously.

“I didn’t know how to tell you at first because I didn’t want things to change,” he began to explain himself.

“Don’t tell me that you bid on the project,” I responded, raising my eyebrow. I knew that was probably the case and I was naïve to think that Triton would somehow consider that Triton needed the tender more.

“It’s a big project, Saffron.. Every development company in Chestnut Bay applied for it,” he defended himself.

“There are only four development companies in Chestnut Bay, with Triton being the biggest threat to Triton. You can’t make it seem like there are a million companies applying and it’s really the luckiest that will get the closed contract. Your business is great without this bid. You have to withdraw your bid,” he said, and he looked at me with surprise.

“I’m sorry Saffron but my company needs the project too. I have a lot of employees to think about. Besides, it’s not like Perseus has already won the bid. Triton could be the best company for the job,” he responded thinly.

“We can’t be the best company for the job competing against you, Perseus,” I said. “Don’t downplay the influence that your company has had on the city over the past few years. You’re a fan favorite,” I pleaded.

“Saffron, competition is healthy in business. Necessary, even,” he said with a chuckle.

Did he find this funny? It wasn’t funny to me.

“This isn’t about competition. It’s about the livelihood of my family. If you love me like you say you do, you’ll pull out your application. I know you could see that?”

“Are you serious?” he asked with a scoff.

“I’m dead serious. My dad would never forgive you if you took this job from us.”

“Took it from you?” he asked with another scoff. “Saffron, this job belongs to Triton. The world doesn’t revolve around you. You have to t

sing another people besides yourself. You want me to give up hundreds of that hedollars just to score brownie points with your dad when you aren't even on being open with your family that we're together? It doesn't work like that BaySaffron. This is business and normal, typical competition. You're making it personal and being selfish and unfair," he said, breaking my heart.

th your "I can't believe that you would say that to me. I'm not selfish because I'm looking out for my family," I responded with a trembling voice as I felt the bile rise from the pits of my belly.

raw," I "Again, this is business, Saffron. You can't do business with emotions. You always have to be logical and out-think your competitors. I have Perseus didn't make it this far by me being emotional. I had to be more strategic and tactical. I have lost out on contracts and have learned a lot from them. How do you think Ashton and I have managed to stay friends despite our companies being each other's competition? We win and lose again and again but we council other all the time." I realized that Ashton knew about it all along.

"Did Ashton know about this?" I asked him.

he said "I told him, we talked about it and he's okay with us being in competition with each other. It's just business, Saffron, and we happen to be in the same industry," he responded.

nily. If I felt betrayed by Ashton, too.

." How I just couldn't look at Ethan right now. I walked away from him without our place. I couldn't stand him.

"Saffron, you can't just leave!" he called out, but it still didn't stop me from leaving.

project "Well, I'm leaving," I shouted back at him.

"It's dark. It's not safe for you to be alone!"

doesn't "I'll be just fine. I'm a big girl and I can take care of myself," I said without thinking of without turning back to look at him.

million “You’re so difficult and impossible to keep up with sometimes, even know that?” he said angrily but this time I didn’t reply.

like that I took my phone out of my pocket and called for a car as I walked away. This part of me was hurt that he didn’t run after me.

The last two days of our vacation were not good. We were cordoned off if I slept in the other room, away from Ethan. I was so angry and felt so belittled by Ethan. How could he not see how important this project was to Triton was Chestnut Bay.

his your I spent two days crying and wondering how I had fallen so hard for competition so quickly.

logical, For his part, Ethan didn’t force me to talk or engage with him. He gave me my space.

pite our Finally, it was time to go home. I sat in the row behind Ethan, facing each other opposite way. Shortly after take-off, I felt someone drop in the seat next to me. I looked up from the phone my face was buried in and saw Ethan looking at me.

petition “Hey Saff, can we talk?” His voice was quiet and pleading. “We need to talk about what’s going on. The silent treatment isn’t healthy for either of us.”

I looked at him as my tears brimmed and threatened to fall.

back to “What else is there to say?” I said, shrugging. I really didn’t see how there was a way through this situation.

me. “We love each other,” he said, grabbing my hand, his eyes searching as if looking for confirmation that I couldn’t give him. Of course I loved him but saying it out loud wasn’t an option right now. “We can work through this.” I said There isn’t a relationship without its challenges, and we can find a solution.

Ethan squeezed my hand, urging on a response. I thought for a moment

do you and tried to run through some scenarios in my head. But they all ended in the same place.

way. A “The only way to work this out is if you pull Perseus’ proposal,” I said honestly. “Give Triton a chance to survive. I don’t know if we’ll be able to survive without this project.”

betrayed Ethan’s head dropped, he brought my hand to his forehead.

Triton? “Saffron,” he said quietly but sternly, barely above a whisper. He looked up and his eyes were bright. “I can’t do that. I have people counting on me, and my company feeds their families. I have employees and a company to look after, and that would be bad for my company’s reputation and its relationship with the bank. I gave my council for me to just pull out. I can’t be that careless.”

“Triton also has people counting on us,” I said, frustrated that he wouldn’t understand the difference. I could hear the hardness in my voice. “But my company is worth billions and we’re struggling to stay afloat. We’re going to have to let some people go, maybe a lot of people. We need this money. Perseus. Your company has plenty of project opportunities—especially in Chestnut Bay. I mean, you’re a big shot now. But I guess you’re a billionaire, just like the rest.”

“I’m not selfish, Saff.” Ethan dropped my hand and looked at me with a flash of anger in his eyes. “I’m just trying to be practical and logical about the situation. I guess there’s no other option. We just have to let things play out.”

I nodded. That was all we could do.

“That sounds like a good plan,” I said. “But I need to wait to see how things play out alone. I have to prioritize Triton and my own interests now. It’s clear that’s what you have to do to be successful.”

“I’ll do it.” Ethan looked at me for a long moment.

“So, that’s it? You’re breaking up with me?”

d in the “I can’t break up with you, Ethan,” I said, looking at his cold, hard eyes.  
“We didn’t really start anything to begin with.”

’ I said He sat there looking a little bewildered and at a loss for words. He slowly nodded and got up to move back to his seat. We didn’t talk again as the plane landed and we went our separate ways.

I allowed myself to break down when I got home. I had a good, long cry, I looked over Ethan, had a long talk with Quinn about everything, and mourned the relationship. The relationship that never was.

too. It But when I woke up Monday morning and got ready to go to work, Ethan’s face pushed him out of my mind.

It wasn’t my fault that this happened. Ethan made choices, too, and he didn’t see beyond his own interests. I couldn’t understand why he couldn’t be a little bit more considerate with everything that Triton was going through. The ache in my heart was surprising, though. How was it possible for a relationship for such a short while and have them affect so much of your outside life?

My selfish thoughts turned to Ashton as I drove to the office. Ashton knew we were going against Perseus and he didn’t bother to say anything, anger anyone. Whose side was he even on? I wanted to confront him but I didn’t know how to tell him how I found out about the whole thing.

“I wasn’t completely surprised to see Ashton walk through my office that afternoon.”

“Hey sis, how was St. John? Did you and Quinn have fun?”

“It was great. Did you know that Perseus also sent in a proposal for downtown revitalization?” I had meant to find a smoother, more tactful way to bring it up, but I was out of ways to care.

“Yes, I did,” he responded without hesitation. It seemed like he

rd face. bothered by the fact at all.

“Doesn’t that bother you? You know they are our biggest competitor, so how and we might not even stand a chance against them. They’d crush us.” I said and Ashton chuckled, making me even more upset.

“Saffron, we can’t control or stop other companies from bidding on cryprojects. We just have to step up our game and prove that we’re the best company for the job,” he responded. He didn’t seem to be affected by it.

work, I “You can talk to your best friend and convince him to withdraw his bid. I know we need this more than he does.” My voice sounded a little shaky. It wasn’t even in my ears, but I couldn’t help the feeling of betrayal.

It’s not be a “Saffron, it doesn’t work like that. I can’t ask Ethan to sabotage his business for our sake. That’s ludicrous. If I were to demand that, it’d be inhuman a little selfish, and honestly, I want to build the business the right way. Not by asking competitors to back down.” Ashton was shaking his head.

“Besides, how did you even find out Perseus had applied for the tender?” I asked. “Chestnut Bay is a very small-town town, people talk,” I lied to him.

“I feel like if this is the news of the street, we could use a few more scandals in Chestnut Bay,” he said, chuckling. “But come to think of it, I know about a scandal brewing. When you were with Quinn in St. Louis, she actually bumped into Quinn at the farmers’ market with some guy. How is that possible she was in two places at once?”

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“I know about a scandal brewing. When you were with Quinn in St. Louis, she actually bumped into Quinn at the farmers’ market with some guy. How is that possible she was in two places at once?”

Crap. I was screwed. Why did I think that plan was going to work? I couldn’t hide for a week!

“You were away for a week and then coincidentally, Ethan was also away for a week. And you’ve been talking about a mystery guy that you just didn’t know about?”

wasn’t



reveal. So, is the mystery guy Ethan? That is the only way you could  
or rightfound out about Perseus,” he asked and I tried to maintain my composit  
h us,” I “So, you think that Ethan is my mystery guy because we were out  
at the same time? Like you said, it’s a coincidence,” I defended mys  
ing forreturned my attention back to my laptop. My heart was beating fast a  
he bestAshton carefully studying me.

r any of “Is there anything else I can help you with?” I asked him, eager to  
out of my office before he started asking more questions that I c  
w. Youanswer.

childish “Just a piece of advice,” he said, getting up to leave. He leaned o  
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ht way.was just waiting for me to slip up.

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reveal. So, is the mystery guy Ethan? That is the only way you could have found out about Perseus,” he asked and I tried to maintain my composure.

“So, you think that Ethan is my mystery guy because we were out of town at the same time? Like you said, it’s a coincidence,” I defended myself and returned my attention back to my laptop. My heart was beating fast as I felt Ashton carefully studying me.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” I asked him, eager to get him out of my office before he started asking more questions that I couldn’t answer.

“Just a piece of advice,” he said, getting up to leave. He leaned over my desk. “You need to leave your personal life and emotions out of business. Decisions like these need to be made with your brain instead of your heart.”

Ashton clearly knew something was going between me and Ethan and he was just waiting for me to slip up.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

### ETHAN

I needed to stay in the office today and catch up on a lot of work. My day away resulted in a mile-long to do list that was impossible to catch

But I couldn't stop thinking about Saffron and how things went so far. It had been more than a week since I'd last talked to her and I missed her so much. I missed the way she laughed, I missed the way she moaned when she touched her and I just missed her company.

I wasn't sure how we could move forward at this point, and I was giving her the space she asked for, it was the least I could do. That was why I was shocked to see her in the doorway of my office.

"Saffron," I said, as she just stared at me, looking gorgeous in black cut slacks and a neon pink blouse. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you," she said. "I realize that I'm the one who asked for space therefore I should be the one to initiate a conversation."

I didn't breathe or speak, waiting for her to continue. She quietly stepped out the door and turned back toward me, walking to the chair.

"I'm not quite sure what to say," she said. "I just knew I wanted to talk to you."

She took a deep breath before continuing.

“I was desperate to prove that my presence at Triton would make a difference for the company but everything has been going to shit ever since you came into the picture,” she said finally. Not what I was expecting to hear. “Whether you went after the same project or not, things have been at a stalemate, and I shouldn’t have blamed you for everything.”

“I totally understand and for whatever it’s worth, I don’t think that Triton are falling apart because of you and honestly, it’s not fair for me to blame yourself for that. It’s just a bad phase, every business goes through that,” I tried to comfort her. “I’m sorry that I can’t do what you want right now. My time would if I could but this is about more than just you and me.”

She smiled weakly at me and I thought we were about to call a truce when there was a knock on my door and Jamie walked in. That’s right, he had her some calendar right now.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t know you had another meeting,” he said. I glanced at Saffron who shrugged.

“It’s okay,” I said, as Saffron got up to leave.

“This should be quick,” Jamie said. “I just wanted to introduce you to a new architect who started today.”

“Absolutely,” I said at the same time Saffron said, “Are you kidding me?”

I looked at her and the new architect, confused. Poor Jamie looked shocked and horrified. The older guy he was with looked surprised but shut the sheepish.

“What the hell is going on here?” I finally asked.

“Frank?” Saffron practically yelled. “You fucking hired Frank?”

She turned to the guy, who I assumed was Frank, and similarly

“How could you leave us for Perseus?”

Frank opened his mouth and then closed it.

“It really wasn’t personal, Saffron,” he finally said, but she was shaking her head, texting furiously on her phone. I would probably hear from Ashton soon.

She turned back to me, fire in her eyes.

“Go to hell,” she bit out before spinning and storming out of the room. It took everyone a moment to collect themselves from the outburst through were all silent.

“So, you’re Frank, I assume,” I finally said, gesturing toward her. Jamie to sit.

“This isn’t the best first impression,” he said, but I waved him off.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “There’s a lot going on. I hold that against you. I hear you’re the best there is. Tell me about your recent project.”

We chatted for about a half an hour and I really got to like Frank why he was so valuable to Triton. He had a lot of great ideas, but he had to be looking for a change. He wanted to work with a company that was more forward thinking. Somewhere that wanted to try new things.

I was zero percent surprised when I saw Ashton’s name light up my phone an hour later. This whole thing was turning into a mess. Deciding to get it over with, I answered the call.

“Tell me it’s not true,” he bit out without even a greeting. He was pissed.

“What isn’t true?” I asked, pretending not to know what he was about.

“Saffron told me about Frank,” he said. “We’ll get into why she was

there later. But first, tell me why you stole Frank from us.”

“I didn’t steal Frank,” I said, sighing.

already “Then how is he working there? How did he even get the job?”

ably be I really was innocent, if I had known he was coming from T probably would have suggested we go to the next candidate. It wasn’t all of this. But my management usually took care of these things, it was my job after all.

and we “Look,” I said into the phone. “You know better than anyone that position, I don’t get into these details. Human resources and hiring management take care of reviewing and hiring candidates. I really had no idea. I was keeping tabs. My HR manager did tell me about the top candidate and he approved a larger budget, but I didn’t know his name or his background.”

none of “You can’t keep Frank,” he said. I expected this from Saffron but not from my favorite Ashton. He knew better. He knew how these things worked. For that time, I wondered if the problems at Triton weren’t overblown. We were in trouble. I saw really in that much trouble? Ashton sounded desperate.

had been “What are you even talking about?” I said in surprise.

a little “You have to let him go. If you don’t, my dad will come after you and he doesn’t want to be a part of that,” he said. I laughed silently to myself.

on my It was funny how he thought that his dad could still harm me in any way. It seemed like they were in denial that I was now the powerful one. I didn’t need much to crush them but for the sake of my friendships with Ashton, I always acted like I was the one on the receiving end even when the tables had turned.

talking “I’m afraid I can’t let go of Frank. He’s a person who makes choices for himself, and you know that. He’s already here. It’s pointless anyway, but I’ll try to get him out of here as even

interested in working with Triton. He wants a change. It's only fair that him be where he wants to be."

I heard Ashton sigh over the line. We had already agreed that business with Triton, Ibusiness and this was no exception. Besides, he knew I was right.

It was worth "And what's with you and Saffron?" Ashton bit out. "I've had her as their suspicions and now I know that you've been her mystery guy all along. I also know you fucking broke her heart. What the hell, man?"

"I didn't break Saffron's heart. She broke up with me. I still love her, in my anagerssister very much and I want to be with her but I can't sabotage my company. I wasn't to protect you or her feelings. If you were in my shoes, I'm sure you could do the same thing too," I responded, spinning around in my chair to look out the window.

"That's the funny thing, Ethan," Ashton said after a long beat of silence. "The first would've never done you like that. My friendship with you actually means something to me. Which is why I didn't come after your company when your dad told me to. I could've destroyed your business before it even lifted off the ground but I cared about our friendship. I cared about you. I knew that you and I day you'd be bigger than us and I trusted that you'd always do the right thing. But now I can see that you've turned into just another rich asshole."

His reminder stung. Had I suddenly become something that I despised myself for? Entitled and selfish. Ashton was different from his dad and other people among the affluent. He definitely deserved better from me.

We agreed to sit on it and talk later. We both needed to cool down and clear our heads.

After the wild morning, I needed to take a walk so I left the building and went outside to the walking trails on the grounds. Nothing like fresh air and nature to try to regain some clarity.

Everything with both Lavettes had gotten so messy and distorted, I didn't even know what was actually my fault anymore. Clearly things weren't as bad at Triton. How was I going to move forward? I didn't want to lose Ashton or Saffron, but I was on the verge of losing them both, if I had lost someone already.

But I just couldn't justify tanking my own business for them. There was also still a chance that the council would choose their proposal. I wished either of them would consider that option. We didn't even know how the company was all going to pan out yet. For the first time in a long time, I was desperate for the decision to be made on a project. I could usually take the wins and losses, but I felt like the city council's decision was going to have an even bigger impact on my life than just deciding my next project. I didn't even know what I wanted anymore.

Apparently I didn't suck in enough fresh air because I got back to normal when I was just as confused and mixed up as I had been when I left. I felt too old to feel off the feeling this way. At forty, you're supposed to know what you want and what your principles are. Why was everything getting so jumbled?

I forced myself back into my work, I needed to at least keep moving forward.

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I forced myself back into my work, I needed to at least keep moving forward.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

### SAFFRON

I was sitting by the pool, deep in thought and alternating between missing Ethan and being so mad at him, when my mom walked up.

She took off her coverup, revealing her bikini which looked divine. Her body still looked amazing for a woman in her sixties. She did get work done from time to time but she still looked very much natural and was my blueprint for aging.

“Hi honey,” she said, taking a seat on the sun lounger next to me.

“Hey mom,” I greeted her enthusiastically but that wasn’t what I was feeling at all. I just wanted to be alone so that I could pout and swoon.

“I saw you out here and just thought that you and I haven’t hung out since you came back. I feel bad that I’ve been so preoccupied with my work I didn’t even make time for my baby girl,” she said as she applied sunscreen.

I loved my mom but the last thing I wanted was to hang out with her. She always acted like we were best friends who should tell each other everything or rather, she acted like I should tell her everything that was going on in my life. Not to mention how obsessed she was with my love life. She c

wait for me to settle down and give her grandkids and I wasn't in a p  
to do that just yet. I only hoped that Ashton and Christine would hurry  
get married to take away some of the attention on me.

"I know, we've both been busy. Triton has been keeping me bu  
really enjoying work," I responded putting my phone away. Even tho  
last thing I wanted was to spend time with her, she was still my mom.  
deserved undivided attention.

"Is Triton the reason you've been glowing lately?" she asked  
playful smile.

"It feels good to get out of the house and work mom," I lied to h  
missingreal reason I was glowing had been Ethan but that wasn't an admiss  
was ready for just yet, especially now that it was over.

on her. "A mother knows these things Saff. Someone definitely has you gl  
at someshe said with a chuckle.

nd was "Well yes, there was someone I was seeing but it's probably ov  
focused on my career right now." I knew that wasn't what she wa  
hear.

t I was "C'mon honey, I'm your mom. If you don't tell me, who else a  
going to tell," she tried to make me spill the beans.

it much "Anyone else but you. It's awkward talking to you about those k  
charitythings," I responded shyly but honestly.

nd some "Nonsense, I can be a cool mom, you know," she said, sounding off

"Mom, you haven't even asked me about my job. That's what's im  
ier. Sheto me right now," I said, begging for her to understand me.

anything, "I know, honey, but when you're old and on your deathbed, you w  
1 in mysaying, I wish I had worked more. It's nice to have someone to lc  
ouldn'tcome home to every day. You, your brother, and your father have b

position greatest joys,” she said with beaming eyes. I know that my mom loved me as a mother and wife, but I hated that she wanted me to be just like her.

“I just don’t see myself there yet, Mom. This guy was special but I’m not ready yet. I think I’m in the position to be settling down and having kids yet. I still want to live my life and achieve things that I want to achieve,” I said, and she looked disappointed.

“I don’t know what it is about your generation and this huge push with settling down. Having a family is best when you’re young and full of energy. The sooner you’re done with it, the more you get to live your life. They’re older,” she responded. She was right to a certain extent, but I had a different sentiment.

“Anyway, tell me about this mystery guy. You don’t have to reveal everything,” she said, just some information to put me at ease,” she requested.

I wasn’t prepared for this conversation. “Like I said, it’s all but over. But, what do you want to know?” I asked, crossing my legs.

“At this point, I will take anything,” she said. The housekeeper came to the pool side with some cocktails I had ordered and I wanted to just hug her. I didn’t want to have this conversation with my mom stone-cold sober. I took my fruity drink and downed half of it.

“He is a wonderful guy. You would have loved him. He has his own business which is doing really well. He’s kind, charming, sweet, and thoughtful. He’s everything that I would want in a man and I was in love with him,” I responded and realized.

“So, what happened?” asked my mom with a chuckle. “I thought you were in love and it’s nothing serious. Saying that you love someone is pretty serious. I had just dug my own grave and she was going to bury me in it.”

d being “What I meant was, we were crazy about each other. It was too soon to be in love,” I quickly back tracked.

I don’t “Honey, there's nothing wrong with being in love, it’s a beautiful thing,” she said. I wasn’t ashamed I had been in love with Ethan. I just didn’t want her to make a big deal out of what we were talking about.

“I know, Mom, but it wasn’t like that with him. I do like him a lot but it’s a pretty strong word to use for what we had,” I responded.

energy. “Well, I wish I got to meet him,” she said.

when “Next guy, maybe.”

I had a “Oh my gosh, you sound just like your father. You’re a lot like him,” she said, rolling her eyes.

who he “Well, I’m his daughter so it’s expected I’d be a little like him,” I said with a chuckle and took a sip of my drink.

“Look at it this way, if we get to meet your boyfriends, we would all be able to ask, weigh in on him. That way you’d know if he’s really worth it or not,” she said to my mom.

“That’s the thing too, Mom, I wouldn’t want to put anyone in a position where they have to know you and Dad. You can be pretty hard core,” I responded down to my mom with a rest of my drink.

“Oh, c’mon we don’t bite,” she teased me and laughed.

his own “If things ever get serious with someone, I will invite him for dinner,” she said. “I’m ready,” I said, hoping she would drop the topic.

There was a moment of silence and I preferred to have it that way.

“You know your father doesn’t tell me anything about what happened with your business,” she said. I was glad that she dropped the last topic but I didn’t want to play her little spy either. “Things don’t seem really great. Can you tell me what is going on?” she asked.

n for us I knew my dad had his reasons for keeping things about Triton away from my mom. I wasn't going to be the one to break things down to her and I didn't want to say anything," I said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said.

I didn't want to say anything," I said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said.

But you work there. You'd have an idea what has been going on," she said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said.

"I think maybe you two should talk. This is a rather awkward situation," she said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said.

My mom looked at me disappointed. I felt a little bad but this was my battle to fight and I wasn't going to get involved.

"I understand. I just feel so isolated in this family you know. It's like you and three of you are on one team and I'm an island, all alone," she said with a sad smile. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said.

"Mom, you're not an island and we're definitely not teaming up against you or anything like that," I quickly shut her down before she started crying. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said. "I've been keeping things out of her, but I didn't want to let anything slip," I said.

"Are you happy working at Triton?" she asked. My mom was disappointed over being left out but the truth was, I was happy.

"Yes. I can look at the big picture and see the battles I'm fighting and I'm winning," I said.

"You're a smart young woman. You're focused and driven and I'm proud of you," she said.

I couldn't deny that it felt good to hear her say that. My mom barely

ay from appreciated anything and when she did, she meant it.

l let the At that moment I felt like I could confide in her about everything t  
going on. I knew that she loved me and cared about me but maintainin  
't a lie, in my family was much more important.

“Thank you, Mom. It means a lot.”

n,” she For the first time in a long time it felt like we had a moment of conr  
It was actually really nice and I appreciated her efforts.

ituation But when she left, I couldn't help but think about what she said ab  
dad leaving her out of the business and not telling her anything abo  
sn't my was going on. It must have been so frustrating, to only see the money  
bank account but not being given any information or say into how  
like the there. It must have been lonely, to not be treated as anything close to a  
th a sad partner. I loved my dad, but I saw how he tended to brush off my  
she was contributions around the house.

I realized I didn't want that. I wanted a partner. That was what up  
against most about the Ethan situation. He *knew* what was going on and he  
ted the would hurt me. I'll admit that I likely overreacted about Frank,  
almost deliberately hid the fact that both companies were competing for th  
o think project. But, if I had known from the beginning, would it have felt

Maybe, maybe not, but to be blindsided down the line felt terrible. T  
erate to he told Ashton, but not me, felt terrible.

I didn't really know what to do with this revelation, but I knew that  
ow will use it as a starting point to talk to Ethan. I could talk to him about  
didn't want to separate our relationship—if there would be one—with b  
n proud They needed to be mixed. Business was too big of a part of either  
lives, for better or for worse.

ly ever Would this be enough to salvage our relationship? I had no idea, bu

worth trying.

hat was I reached for my phone on the towel next to me and pulled up r  
g peacemessages, typing and then deleting several times, before deciding to ju  
it to the point.

[Saffron 2:43 PM]

rection. Meet me at Monte's tomorrow morning for coffee?

I watched the three dots appear for a few seconds and then disappea  
out myappeared again, before going away. I turned off my phone and put it  
ut whatand laid my head back down. A minute later, my phone buzzed  
y in theimmediately grabbed it.

✓ it got [Ethan 2:45 PM]

n equal Ok. See you at 8?

mom's I sent off a quick confirmation and gathered my towel and things  
back inside. I had a lot to prepare before tomorrow morning.

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worth trying.

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[Saffron 2:43 PM]

Meet me at Monte's tomorrow morning for coffee?

I watched the three dots appear for a few seconds and then disappear. They appeared again, before going away. I turned off my phone and put it down, and laid my head back down. A minute later, my phone buzzed and I immediately grabbed it.

[Ethan 2:45 PM]

Ok. See you at 8?

I sent off a quick confirmation and gathered my towel and things to head back inside. I had a lot to prepare before tomorrow morning.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

### ETHAN

I showed up at Monte's a few minutes early and got our usual table deck. I was anxious to hear what Saffron had to say, but if it was a plea for me to withdraw our bid, I knew I had to draw the line and jump out.

The decision was supposed to be made this week anyway, he was bringing some sort of resolution to this whole situation.

I looked up just in time to see Saffron walk in, wearing a pair of shorts and a dark pink T-shirt. My heart tried to leap out of my chest and reach out to her. I was still so in love with her. More than anything, I could give her what she asked. I would have given her anything else in the world.

"Hi," she said quietly, slipping her bag on the seat next to her.

"It's good to see you." It took all of my focus to keep my voice neutral. I had no idea what to expect.

"Thank you for meeting me," she said as a server came up and we ordered just a coffee. My appetite had disappeared the day Saffron said goodbye, stirring up anger and sadness in my system.

“What’s up?” I asked, trying to find a way to get her to the point.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about us.”

My heart and stomach were in a free fall now. Those words could go any way.

“I realized why I was so upset, and I thought it was worth talking to you,” she continued. “More than anything, I was hurt that you kept the secret from me. I want to have a true partner in life. We can’t keep secrets separate—it’s too much a part of both of us. You’re right that competition can be healthy, and believe me, I have ideas about bringing Triton up a notch. We have to talk. We can’t keep stuff like this from each other.”

I thought about that for a long moment. It made a lot of sense and I could see another myself in her shoes, I could see that I would probably be angry, too.

“I also want to apologize for getting so upset about Frank. I know it wasn’t your fault, I was really upset and I jumped to conclusions. I’m sorry,” she continued.

“Saffron,” I began, clearing the emotion from my voice. “I can completely understand why you would have felt that way. No one likes to feel out of the loop and I’m sorry. I should have told you when I found out you submitted a proposal.”

I stopped and took a sip of my coffee before I continued.

“But, it’s critical that we be able to talk about these things in the moment or at least shortly after. If we’re together, we can’t keep breaking up neutral. It’s assumptions, misunderstandings, and a lack of communication.”

Saffron nodded.

“I see that now.” She paused as her shoulders softened and she looked towards me. “But God, I’ve missed you, Ethan. I’ve really missed you.”

I'm so sorry that I just shut down instead of trying to talk about these things. I know it's something I can work on."

These moments really highlighted the age difference. Another thing she hadn't talked about, but I was pretty sure this was her first real relationship. She certainly acted that way at least. But if she was willing, I was willing.

"So what do we do now?" I asked her, forcing her to talk.

"I really love you, Ethan. Even when I was pissed, I still wanted to be with you. It was hard to force myself to stay away. I'm all in on this. I mean, like, come to my house for dinner next weekend all in."

I quietly sucked in a breath.

"Ashton already knows," I said.

"I know. I don't really know how he feels about it, but that probably means he's sorry," I said. "I hope that he might eventually be okay with everything. He typically knows when he's mad."

I leaned forward and took her hand. "I love you, Saffron. I'm all in, and I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I'm sorry, but I'm all in on this. I mean, like, come to my house for dinner next weekend all in."

She squealed and before I could gather myself she was leaping into my arms and kissing me. I couldn't help the laugh that escaped my lips.

"I love you, Ethan. I don't care who knows it."

"Let's re-start our relationship properly, not just with coffee at Monte's. Plan to come out with me tonight. I'll text you the details a little later. I might be late to work tomorrow."

"Okay then, I'll make arrangements to be late." She winked at me. "Everything in the world felt right."

After leaving Monte's, I did a lot of research to find out what Saffron's favorite band was because I wanted to do something different for her. Something special that she'd never forget.

things. I It was a flurry of making plans and confirming details, but I pulled i  
“Don’t peek,” I said as I carefully led her from the car to the front d  
ing we “What is this? Where are we?” she asked giggling with excitement  
l, adulther into the empty theater.

illing, I “Be patient, love, we’re almost there.”

I held both her hands as I guided her to a seat in the front row.

“Are you comfortable?” I asked her and she nodded, positioning he  
be withthe chair. “Are you ready to see your surprise?”

n *all* in. She nodded again enthusiastically. Slowly, I removed the blind fold  
she opened her eyes, her jaw dropped in awe. Her favorite band, The S  
was set up for a private concert in the Chestnut Bay Theater, which I  
out for the night.

y gives “Get out. This can’t be real!” she exclaimed, getting up from the sea  
ally lets “It’s real. The Strikers are here to perform just for you,” I responc  
she jumped into my arms screaming.

too.” “I can’t believe that you did all this for me!” she said, still hanging  
my lapon to me.

“Anything for you,” I responded as she let go of me and turned to th  
She turned back toward me and caught me off guard with a passionate  
fonte’s. The band started playing a few chords and Saffron broke the kiss.

er. You “Oh my God, this is my absolute favorite song,” she squealed  
started swaying to the beat. I laughed and pulled her in front of me, i  
me andbehind her.

As the song came to an end, the lead singer asked Saffron for any r  
affron’sand she screamed out a track title. I watched Saffron enjoy herself as tl  
or her.serenaded her with her favorite melody. She looked beautiful wh  
beamed with excitement and it warmed my heart to see her happy. I

t off. Her to be happy more than anything else and I was willing to spend a  
oor. just to buy her happiness.

as I led “This is the most incredible gift anyone has ever given to me,” she  
turning to me with dreamy eyes. Everything that was happening in front of  
her was unreal.

“I’m glad you love it,” I responded and she kissed me passionately.  
herself in “I will remember this forever. Thank you for doing this for me,” she  
turning to me as she danced. Saffron put her arms around my neck  
and pulled her closer into my arms and held her waist. We continued to dance  
and strikers, we looked into each other’s eyes. I had never felt this way about anyone  
before. Saffron was making me think of things that I had never thought about  
before. I wanted to settle down with her and have kids with her.

it. “When do you want to get married?” I asked her and her eyes opened  
and with surprise.

“Are you asking me to marry you?” she asked with a chuckle.  
tightly “No, but I want to talk about the future with you. I want to know  
entails for you and me,” I responded.

the band. Saffron turned a light shade of red and smiled shyly.

kiss. “I’ve never really thought about when exactly I would want to settle  
I mean, does anyone ever really think about that? I guess for me,  
as she happens when it happens. I don’t want to obsess about time line  
moving responded. I liked her answer and her outlook on life. I liked that it  
the room open for me to propose whenever I was ready.

requests “When do you want to get married?” she asked, looking into my eyes

the band “I guess you and I look at things the same way. I think when it happens  
when she happens but I feel like for me it might be soon,” I said and winked at her

wanted “Why? Have you found someone?” she asked jokingly.

fortune “I’d like to think so. I don’t know, I guess I’ll have to see,” I responded  
we both laughed.

he said, After two hours of jamming to The Strikers, it was time to leave. I led  
front of Saffron back to my place and as much as I wanted to lock her in my bed  
and never let her leave again, we spent the rest of the night cuddling  
talking. I wanted to prove to her it was about more than missing sex.

he said, I missed her and I would never let her go again.

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“I’d like to think so. I don’t know, I guess I’ll have to see,” I responded and we both laughed.

After two hours of jamming to The Strikers, it was time to leave. I brought Saffron back to my place and as much as I wanted to lock her in my bedroom and never let her leave again, we spent the rest of the night cuddling and talking. I wanted to prove to her it was about more than missing sex.

I missed her and I would never let her go again.



## *Chapter Nineteen*

### SAFFRON

**E**than's promise that I would be late for work the next morning was true. After a very enjoyable early morning wake up, it was tough to get out of his bed. I finally strolled into the office an hour late.

I was sitting at my desk when my stomach all of a sudden turned and I grabbed for the trash can.

Weird. I figured I should lay off the coffee. I had been drinking a lot of coffee to get through the days, lately.

Despite coming in late, I needed to get lunch with Quinn. I was determined to tell her about Ethan and was getting prepared to announce it to my family at dinner tomorrow, before Ethan showed up for dinner on Saturday. It was a big week.

I walked into our usual Mexican restaurant and Quinn was already sitting at a table in a booth.

"Hey, stranger," she said, getting up and pulling me into a hug. "You look a little different. What's going on?"

"Well," I said with no preamble. "Ethan and I are officially together now. I love him. He spoiled me with a private concert last night and we had amazing sex."

this morning before work.”

“That explains the glow,” she said.

“Why does everyone say I’m fucking glowing? I’m just trying to s  
It’s probably sweat from all the stress in my life.”

Quinn burst out laughing.

“Whatever it is, it’s working for you. Anyway, I’m glad to see you  
acting like a spoiled brat anymore. Girl, you can’t ask someone to s  
their own company just to save yours. That’s unfair. What if he give  
those millions and the advantages that project comes with and the two  
don’t work out in the end? You were being a bit unreasonable,” sh  
g camegrabbing a tortilla chip. I regretted calling her after the trip and spill  
h to getheart out. The last thing I wanted was a lecture this morning.

I went to grab a tortilla chip too, but my stomach suddenly turned ag  
d and I “Are you okay?” Quinn asked. “You really do look a little sweaty n  
“I’m fine. I must have eaten something funky.”

lot of it “Okay,” she said carefully. “You’re not pregnant, are you?”

I paused, my glass of water halfway to my lips.

ying to “No,” I said after hesitating.

imily at “Saffron,” Quinn scolded. “You’ve been using protection, right?”

t was a “Yes,” I said immediately. “Most of the time. Sometimes.”

“When did you get your period last?”

settled I looked at my calendar.

“Umm...”

ou look “Jesus Christ, Saffron. You need to take a pregnancy test.”

“I mean, I guess I can.”

r and in “No, you definitely can. Do you need me to drive you to the sto  
ing sexthis?”

I looked around as another wave of nausea rolled through me.

“I don’t even think I can eat here right now.”

survive. Quinn started getting her phone and bag together.

“Okay, come on, we’re going to the store. You don’t have to alone.”

I aren’t Ten minutes later, we were in the bathroom at Triton. Quinn was abotagesingle-occupancy bathroom with me as we waited for the test results to s up allIt was only supposed to be a few minutes but they proved to be ag of youminutes.

ie said, “Distract me, Quinn.”

ing my “What are you going to do if it’s positive?”

“That’s not distracting me, Quinn.”

gain. “It’s going to be fine. Ethan seems great and I’m sure everything i ow.” to work out well.”

“Still not doing the best job here.”

“Sorry,” she muttered. “Okay, it’s time. Do you want me to look?”

I nodded my head and Quinn took a deep breath.

“Well, I guess I get to be an aunt,” she finally said and my stomach How did this happen? Ethan and I had just fixed things. He said he kids, but he didn’t say he wanted kids right this fucking second.

And I was only twenty five. I had so much I wanted to do in my before I focused on kids. I was scared, confused and panicking but I p brave face.

“Sometimes these things are wrong,” Quinn said quickly. “You definitely make an appointment with your doctor.”

re after I nodded again as we walked out of the bathroom.

“Of course, I’ll do that now.”

“Do you want me to stay or do you want to be alone? I want whatever you need.”

“Thanks, Quinn. You can go. I’m going to schedule a doctor’s appointment this and then get some work done. Hopefully the doctor can see me soon.”

Quinn gave me a hug.

“Call me if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Quinn.”

I quickly called the doctor and was happy that they could get me this week.

Now I just had to figure out how to tell Ethan. With the contract announced this week, the outcome wasn’t going to be the only bad news he was going to get.

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“Do you want me to stay or do you want to be alone? I want to do whatever you need.”

“Thanks, Quinn. You can go. I’m going to schedule a doctor's appointment and then get some work done. Hopefully the doctor can see me soon.”

Quinn gave me a hug.

“Call me if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Quinn.”

I quickly called the doctor and was happy that they could get me in later this week.

Now I just had to figure out how to tell Ethan. With the contract being announced this week, the outcome wasn't going to be the only bombshell news he was going to get.

## *Chapter Twenty*

### ETHAN

I had asked Saffron if I could be the one to confirm our relationship with Ashton. I felt like I owed it to him after our decades of friendship. I was planning to tell her parents tonight at dinner, so I figured I would tell Ashton in the evening to tell Ashton. We had planned to get after work drinks, but the timing seemed like the best timing.

“You seem a little tense today. What's going on with you?” he asked, patting my back.

“You’re acting weird,” I responded, wondering what was going on with him.

“Is there something you want to tell me buddy?” he asked with a smile on his face. I had a feeling that he knew about me and Saffron, but I wasn’t just going to go straight into confessing.

“Something like what?” I asked with a confused look on his face.

“Something like you and my sister are seeing each other?” he asked. He wasn’t sure. “You should see the look on your face.” Ashton cracked up laughing. I’m glad one of us thought it was funny.

“Look, obviously I knew something was going on before. Saffron had

in a suspiciously good mood the last few days, so I figured you two  
your shit out and are now officially together. I assume Saffron is tell  
parents tonight? Is that why she was so formal in inviting my dad to  
and making sure he would be home?"

"You're not angry?"

"I mean, it's a little weird, but I don't see the point in getting angry  
it. I'd be the one to lose a best friend and a sister if I took that path. So  
nothing changes between us because you're with my little sister-  
several years younger than you by the way. We're still cool."

"Does the age gap bother you?" I asked. We had to unpack this is-  
ship to resolve it today and what better way than over a couple of beers.

ip. She "A little, I mean, she's always been my baby sister and I'm alm  
use the enough to be her father, and so are you. Remember we used to be  
and it teenagers driving off in our sportscar and there was Saffie, waving at  
the window? She must have been 2 then." He paused. "Don't get me  
asked, you are as old as you are and nothing can change that, clearly. You ev  
look really good for your age, if I say so myself. My only worry  
on with Saffron might not be, well, mature enough to understand certain th  
don't want you to rush her to settle down before she's ready,"

a warm responded and took a sip of his beer.

m but I I could understand where he was coming from. It was natural for hi  
worried about the age gap. Most men would take advantage of a wom  
was much younger than them but I'd never do that to Saffron. I loved  
ed as if I only wanted what was best for her. Even if what was best for her me  
ked up leaving her alone, I would.

"I love Saffron, Ash. I'd never take advantage of her or force he  
as been anything that she doesn't want to do," I responded, looking at him sinc

worked. “I know she’s safe with you buddy. I just want you to know that I’m trusting you with my little sister and please don’t break her heart,” he said before heading to dinner with me.

I had no intention of breaking Saffron’s heart ever but relationships sometimes could be complicated and I knew making that promise was a good idea.

“Relax, promise me you won’t break her heart,” he asked again for assurance. “Ash, I can’t promise you that, but what I can promise you is that I’ll always look out for what is best for Saffron and I promise that I’ll love her to the best of my ability,” I responded. I felt like it was much more realistic to say that since I didn’t know what the future held for me and Saffron. She was volatile and I couldn’t guarantee that one day it wouldn’t affect my relationship or affect any of the decisions I made.

“I guess I can accept that,” said Ashton with a sigh. He wasn’t as angry as I had hoped he would be.

“My dad is definitely not going to be pleased about Saff choosing this as her boyfriend,” he said with a chuckle. I knew that. In fact, I was surprised that he was okay with me and Saffron seeing each other.

“To be honest, I didn’t think that you’d be so cool about it. I thought you’d punch me,” I responded with a laugh. Ashton joined me in my laughter. “I did think about it, I won’t lie, but at the end of the day, I realized that you’re a good guy and if Saffron is happy, who am I to stand in her way? She’s old enough to make choices for herself,” he responded.

I commended Ashton for his maturity. I doubted that his dad would give me the same grace to me when he finally found out I was the guy dating his precious princess.

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## *Chapter Twenty-One*

### SAFFRON

**M**y dad had needed to skip family dinner last night to deal with an emergency, so I had the good luck of postponing it to the next day. Unfortunately, that meant Ashton decided to join for the show. I knew Ethan would talk to Ethan and it had gone surprisingly well, so I hoped he would be on my side.

Before dinner, Ashton pulled me aside in the living room, out of earshot from my parents.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked.

“I should be mad at you for choosing to mess around with my best friend because I was hoping to give your boyfriend a tough time when I introduce us. But I can’t be Mr. Tough Guy with my best friend, he would take me seriously,” Ashton joked, and I realized that he wasn’t that serious about it.

“I was going to tell you about him. I just didn’t want to be the reason you lose your best friend,” I explained honestly.

“You could never come between me and Ethan. As long as he treats you right and you’re happy, I have no problem with the two of you being together.”

together,” he answered with a warm smile on his face. “From what I’ve already told you, he makes you so happy.”

“I never thought you’d be this cool about this. I thought that you’d be out about our age gap and a lot of other things,” I said with a chuckle.

“I won’t lie—at first, I was a little worried about the age gap but I know you’re a great guy so I let it go. Why do you think he and I have been best friends these years? You just need to be ready for Mom and Dad to freak out when you tell them. If they don’t like me being friends with him, they definitely won’t approve of you two as a couple. But, that isn’t anything to worry about. Just be happy,” he parted with some wise words. I was lucky to have a workbrother like him.

The next day. It had been a while since my family had sat at the dinner table and had a new, good time. We all had things going on, especially the eagerness of Ethan and I about the city project and how the proposal would turn out and who would get it.

My dad had expressed on several occasions that he didn’t mind if Ethan didn’t get the contract, as long as Perseus didn’t get it either.

I noticed Ashton shoot a look toward me every time our dad said something degrading about Perseus or Ethan. He looked at me with a friendly knowing that I must’ve been hurting hearing my parents speak ill of the man I love. From time to time, he would try to defend Ethan but there was nothing he could say that would change their mind. It made me feel hopeless. I knew that if it upset them that he was the man I loved, it would just make things worse.

“Honey, your mom tells me there is a fine young gentleman in you,” my dad said, turning to me. I wanted to roll my eyes, pissed at my mom for spilling the beans when I had confided in her. That is exactly why I never told her anything about my private life. She would just run off and tell everyone since she was so desperate for him to confide in her about his work situation.

it I can  
Reminder to self: don't be fooled by moments of connection with Mom  
don't exist.

d freak “I thought that Mom and I were sharing things in confidence,”  
shooting a look of disapproval in her direction.

ow he's “Oh honey, this is wonderful news. There's nothing wrong with yo  
ends allknowing about it,” she defended herself and I tried not to raise my  
it whenagainst her for breaking my trust.

initely “Mom, you can’t just go around telling people’s business. Saffro  
/ about.right to tell people about things when she's ready,” Ashton came  
have adefense. I was lucky to have an older brother like him.

He also knew that the man I was seeing wasn’t their cup of tea and  
d had ahe was trying to drive them away from that topic.

ow the “Nonsense, she’s our little girl. We need to know who's trying to  
the bid.heart,” said my dad excitedly, hoping that I would tell him more ab  
Tritonmystery guy.

“I thought Mom shared everything with you,” I responded hoping  
ad saidwouldn’t have to rehash things that I didn’t remember.

ith pity “Well, she just told me you were seeing someone. That’s all. I want  
he mantell me more about him. What’s his name, where's he from and what  
nothingdo? I want to know information about his family. People’s famil  
If I toldwhere they come from says a lot about who they are,” he probed.

When he said that people’s families and where they come from sa  
ar life,”about who they are, he was pretty much trying to ask me if he came f  
iom foraffluent family that would boost our net worth.

I never It was typical of my parents to look at relationships as a business d  
tell dadif they had it their way they would choose a husband for me.

tuation. “He doesn’t come from a rich family but he’s done really well for h

n. TheyHe has a successful company of his own and it looks like he has  
together,” I responded. I could tell that my dad was not too impressed  
I said, fact that the man I was seeing didn’t come from a wealthy family.

“Well, what does his company do, dear?” he asked for more information.  
our Dadwas like my boyfriend was auditioning for approval and I hated it  
y voicecouldn’t they just be happy that I was happy?

I realized I was chickening out. I had been determined to tell them  
n has aEthan. But I felt the lie slipping out of my mouth before I could stop it  
to my “It’s a recycling company,” I lied, and my mom looked at me con-  
tried not to panic since I didn’t remember what lie I had told her about  
I knewmystery guy’s occupation.

“Well, that’s weird. I could have sworn you said he had a tech company  
win hershe said looking at me confused.

out my “His company makes tech for recycling companies,” Ashton interje-  
he noticed me panicking a little. I looked in his direction and smiled saying  
g that Igrateful that he had come to my rescue.

“That’s pretty impressive. He’s making this world a better place and  
t you tothat. Ashton, you seem to know this guy,” said my dad, turning  
does hebrother.

ies and “Well, I’ve bumped into them together once or twice. He’s a very  
guy. I like him,” said Ashton, still looking out for me.

id a lot “I was telling Saff that I think she should invite him over for dinner  
from anmom continued to make the situation worse for me.

“I think that is a brilliant idea,” my dad agreed with my mom and  
deal andwanted to die.

“Well, he is a very busy man. I will invite him over when he has time  
himself.said with a fake smile on my face. I just wanted them to drop the :

his actLying was very exhausting.

l by the “I look forward to having a beer with him,” said my father as he took  
of his wine. I was planning to go away with Ethan to the Outer Bar  
ation. Itweekend. I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to tell them that I was  
t. Whyaway with my boyfriend. It would just make them even more curious  
him. The best that I could do was speak about him less and less.  
n about Maybe they’d just forget about him if I didn’t speak about him c  
. like he was still in my life.

fused. I I glanced at Ashton and he just nodded, indicating he had my back.  
out theEthan would be pissed and hurt that I didn’t tell my parents like  
planned, but everything tonight just steamrolled all over me a  
pany,”intentions.

And now the added complication of my pregnancy. Oh god, could  
ected asany worse? I decided I would wait until my appointment in a couple  
slightly,before moving forward with telling anyone. Might as well be sure. A  
my nausea and full boobs already told me the truth.

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subject.

Lying was very exhausting.

“I look forward to having a beer with him,” said my father as he took a sip of his wine. I was planning to go away with Ethan to the Outer Banks that weekend. I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to tell them that I was going away with my boyfriend. It would just make them even more curious about him. The best that I could do was speak about him less and less.

Maybe they’d just forget about him if I didn’t speak about him or acted like he was still in my life.

I glanced at Ashton and he just nodded, indicating he had my back. I knew Ethan would be pissed and hurt that I didn’t tell my parents like we had planned, but everything tonight just steamrolled all over me and my intentions.

And now the added complication of my pregnancy. Oh god, could this get any worse? I decided I would wait until my appointment in a couple of days before moving forward with telling anyone. Might as well be sure. Although my nausea and full boobs already told me the truth.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

### ETHAN

I loved taking Saffron places. I knew that most of these luxurious were nothing new to her but I loved that she appreciated everything for her and admired all the things I showed her. Of course, some of the she had never experienced and she was honest about it.

I wasn't the biggest fan of her parents but they had raised her well. I loved that she didn't act like a spoiled brat wherever we went. It had been a few hours since we had arrived on the island. Saffron was building a sandcastle on the beach when I caught up with her. I loved it when she was afraid to show me her inner child. It was refreshing and it also made her carefree and adventurous.

I could tell that although she was trying very hard to act like there was nothing bothering her, I could tell that something was on her mind and she needed to talk.

"What's up, Saff? You seem a million miles away." She looked at me and set out a few towels on the sand.

"It's nothing," she responded, shaking her head, but I could tell it wasn't nothing. Something was definitely weighing her down.



“You know you can talk to me about anything, right?” I asked her, she nodded. There was a brief silence between us and I let it be. I didn’t force her to say anything that she wasn’t ready to talk about.

“I know that you wanted us to go public about our relationship...”

“No, I just didn’t want to be secretive about it,” I quickly corrected. “It’s not like we need to release a press statement to alert the masses we’re together,” I added and she laughed. I was glad to see her light up a little.

“Ashton knows about us and he is oddly a big fan of our relationship,” she said, looking at me. I watched her as the wind danced with the strands of her hair. The things bobbed and the afternoon sun gave her a beautiful glow. I could look at her all day long just playing in the sand with her delicate fingers.

“We were scared about him finding out and look how it turned out. You need to give your parents a chance to process this for themselves.”

She looked off into the distance, lost in thought. I knew there was a lot on her mind. Hell, there was a lot on mine and my parents weren’t bringing it down my neck.

“How about I go get us a drink?” I started to get up to head toward the house.

That seemed to shake her out of her dream-state.

“No, no. I’m ok. I’m just loving us being together on the beach. We don’t care here and not care about who sees us and what other people might think.”

She looked up at me with her beautiful eyes and I noticed she started checking me out, as I had removed my shirt to enjoy the sun a little myself.

“Come here,” she said to me, her eyes starting to sparkle.

I could tell what was on her mind and I had to admit, I was starting to feel the same way as I watched how perfectly she filled out her bikini.

and she “Just how private is this beach?” she asked with a naughty smile playing over her face. “It’s very private. The chef will be coming in a bit to make dinner,” I responded as Saffron crawled towards me, like a cat on the prowl for prey.

She kissed her. “Then that means you and I can make some memories right here,” she said as she sat beside me and gently pulled my face closer to hers.

She picked me up and said “You and I can do whatever we want,” I whispered as her lips brushed against mine. She teased me one more time and I couldn’t help myself. I pulled her into a kiss and kissed her passionately. Slowly I bit at the strings of her bikini top and then I pulled it off her throwing it to the side. Her warm breasts pressed against my chest and we enjoyed the sun bearing down on us.

Maybe “I can never get enough of you,” I said with a whisper, and she kissed me. Saffron pulled me back into a kiss and I took off my swimming trunks. She effortlessly drew the strings of her bikini bottom. We continued to feast on each other’s mouths, while our naked bodies baked in the scorching sun without a care if anyone saw us. I flipped Saffron on to her back and tucked her under me without burdening her with my weight. My knees parted her legs. For a moment we looked into each other’s eyes lovingly and then we giggled with happiness.

It can be I loved it when she did that.

“k.” She For some reason it aroused me even more. My hand found her middle and gently parted her folds, giving myself access to her wet center. She moaned as my fingers played with her. After a short while I searched for her clit and began to play with it. I watched her as she moaned, closed her eyes and thought she was going to think she was going to come. I felt her body come alive beneath me and when I least expected it, I slipped inside her. She opened her eyes, surprised

lastered then she smiled before she let out the sexiest moan I'd ever heard. I b later to move in and out of her slowly and sensually taking in the feeling of n prowlfriiction between us and the warmth inside her. Saffron dug her nails i back and arched her back allowing me to have even more access she said middle. She met my thrusts half-way as she lifted her hips in response.

My thrusting increased with pressure and speed until we were bot s softly with exertion. Saffron shook violently beneath me and not so long i't helpshook too; letting out all the desire that was locked within me.

egan to We spent the rest of the afternoon on the beach, our naked bodies e it to the the warm summer sun.

the sun After an afternoon of sand and surf, we decided to make dinner tog

called the chef to drop off the food, but informed him that we woul smiled. ourselves. I did love to cook and as Saffron chopped, I threw chick s as she veggies in a pan and made up the stir fry from the ingredients we were devour "You're a great cook." Her hand was on my shoulder as she watc ng sun, finish the stir-fry. "How did you learn?"

owered "I always cooked with my grandmother. She taught me. I learned al willing recipes and still have her recipe book at home. Cooking with her was l nen she loved spending time together. Even now, when I cook, I can feel my g smile down on me." She pecked my cheek.

"That's so sweet that you had such a special relationship wit le and I grandmother." I smiled to myself as memories of my grandmother fil noaned mind.

clitoris We chatted more as we set the table. I offered Saffron a glass of w res, and she refused. She looked like she had something weighing on her min hen she was trying not to pry, but I really wanted to know.

ed, and "Is everything okay?"

egan to Saffron hesitated for a moment.

the wet “I do have something to tell you. I was hoping to time it a little better into my this, but maybe it’s a good time.”

to her “Okay,” I said slowly, my eyes fixed on the pan on the stove.

I heard her take a deep breath.

h spent “I’m pregnant.”

after I I stilled, before slowly turning toward her.

“What?” I must have heard wrong.

njoying “I’m pregnant. I went to the doctor the other day and had it confirmed. I was just waiting for the right time to tell you.”

gether. I Pregnant?

ld cook It was really soon in our relationship for this to happen. But how did it happen and I was excited.

given. I looked at her and saw she had tears brimming in her eyes.

hed me “I hope those are tears of joy because a baby is nothing to be sad about. I assured her and hugged her tightly. I felt my heart fill with joy. I was glad

I of her to be a dad and I wanted to share that with no one else but Saffron.

now we “I didn’t want you to think that I planned it or anything like that. I was so care-  
randmawas careless and I’m sorry for getting us into this situation,” she apologized as I kissed her tenderly.

h your “Hey, we were both there. You *will* allow me to take equal responsibility for this, right? I’m not mad. If anything, I’m overjoyed. I want this baby. I want you, too. It might not be planned timing but there’s nothing to be done about,” I said, looking into her teary eyes. She smiled nervously and I giggled.

“I was scared you’d think that I did this on purpose,” she said with a chuckle.

“Even if you had done this on purpose, I don’t care. I want you to care for the children. I wouldn’t want it to be anyone else,” I said, tilting her chin so she could look deep into her eyes.

“Children?” she asked with her eyes wide open.

“Yes, this isn’t the only one we’re going to have. I was thinking two or three more? I’ve always wanted a big family,” I responded.

“I think I want a big family, too,” she said and we kissed again. “I just see how this one goes first.” She giggled her adorable giggle.

Our hearts were beating in unison with the joy of the life we had created.

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“Even if you had done this on purpose, I don’t care. I want you to carry my children. I wouldn't want it to be anyone else,” I said, tilting her chin so that I could look deep into her eyes.

“Children?” she asked with her eyes wide open.

“Yes, this isn’t the only one we’re going to have. I was thinking maybe two or three more? I’ve always wanted a big family,” I responded.

“I think I want a big family, too,” she said and we kissed again. "But let's just see how this one goes first." She giggled her adorable giggle.

Our hearts were beating in unison with the joy of the life we had created.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

### SAFFRON

I had so much to tell Quinn about my weekend getaway with Ethan. I was starry eyed and excited about where our relationship was headed. Our lives were going great and I felt like nothing could go wrong. I was over the

“I can’t believe he just whisked you away,” said Quinn as she looked through the photos I had taken over the weekend.

“Ethan has been so good to me. I just wish my parents saw the good in him. He really is amazing,” I responded with a tone of sadness. I wanted to tell them the truth about the man I was in love with, but they wouldn’t understand him. The thought made me feel hopeless. How could I be with a man whose parents didn’t like?

“You’re going to have to tell them. I mean, you’re...pregnant,” Quinn whispered. “I’m so happy that Ethan was so excited and took the news so well.”

“I know, he’s great,” I sighed. “I want to tell them and I would love to see them. I wouldn’t keep bothering me about meeting 'my man'. I lied that he is a tech guy. Well, he does tech for recycling companies. Something along those lines,” I explained to Quinn and she burst out laughing.

“How did you even come up with that?” she asked, still cracking up.

“It was kind of a mistake on my part. I told my mom something and she told her something else. Ashton helped connect my lies. All I know is I suck at lying!” We both laughed our lungs out.

We were still laughing about all the stupid things I had done to keep a secret when suddenly my office door flung open and my dad marched together with Ashton.

“Dad, calm down,” Ashton called out, trying to hold him back, but he was barging forward. I wondered what was going on and what had made me so angry.

1. I was     Had he found out about my relationship with Ethan?

Things     “Saff, I’ll call you,” said Quinn as she hastily picked her bag up, decided to leave my office. She didn’t want to get caught up in my family drama which I understood. Quinn didn’t take long to disappear from my office so I shut the door behind herself so that we could have some privacy to talk about whatever was bothering my dad.

wanted to     “Dad, that’s embarrassing. You can’t just barge into my office like that. People don’t need to know when we have differences,” I called him out. That my Ashton signaled me to stop with my whining, but I was upset too.

              care what his problem was. He had no right to just push me around without it,” she said.

views so     “You have the nerve to speak to me like that,” he exclaimed as he turned red with anger.

if they     “What are you even talking about?” I was confused and angry too.

his tech     “You know your mom told me you’d be better off getting married. She spent tens of thousands of dollars putting you through school and I even gave you a chance with you when it came to the family business but all of



amounted to nothing,” he continued to insult me and I was even then confused.

“Dad, if you aren’t going to tell me what your problem is and you’re going to stand there and make me feel like crap, maybe you should leave Ethan’s office,” I demanded getting up from my seat. There was no way I would have let him get away with it. I refused to let him get away with it. I refused to let him disrespect me the way he was.

“Maybe we should all calm down,” said Ashton, holding Dad back. “What’s going on, Ashton?” I asked my brother who seemed more serious than my dad.

“We got some feelers at the council and it turns out that Perseus might get the project after all,” he announced and I felt my heart sink. This was a separate good, but it still didn’t excuse my dad from speaking to me in a dramatic, derogatory manner.

“Well, that doesn’t mean that they’re getting the contract, does it? It might be Perseus *might* be getting it. He didn’t say it’s definite,” I defended myself. “Besides, how am *I* the problem?” I asked disappointed in my dad. “You said you could turn this company around. I thought that maybe your school would finally pay off,” he said angrily, but it didn’t make any sense to me. He was just taking out his frustration on me.

“That isn’t fair dad. You can’t expect me to fix this company single-handedly. You’ve hardly given me anything of substance to work on. I was supposed to get on this project and I’m just a minion like everyone else,” I argued with him.

“Saff is right, Dad,” said Ashton, coming to my rescue as always. “I can’t blame her for this. We need to figure out how we can swap out the decision, if that is the case. Why don’t you let me handle this?” said Ashton. Dad got up from his seat ready to storm out.

no more “I told you that son of bitch isn’t a true friend of yours,” he said pointing his finger at Ashton.

“I’ll fix it, Dad,” Ashton said calmly.

I admired Ashton for his level of maturity and patience. He seemed to be the voice of reason for the family and I wished that Dad would just let him lead the company. Dad stormed out of my office, banging the door behind him. As soon as he was out of sight, I couldn’t help myself. I broke down into tears. Ashton rushed to my side and held me in his arms.

“Dad’s just upset, Saff, don’t take things too personally. You know how old-fashioned he is, but even I didn’t expect this reaction. You have to deal with this and just remember that. We’re a team and we will ride through this together on everything,” he tried to make me feel better. “For now, you and Ethan need to lay low because I don’t think Dad will be pleased to hear that you and him are together,” he advised as I wiped my tears.

Ashton was right. Ethan and I needed to lay low.

I just wasn’t sure Ethan would appreciate us having to sneak around behind his back after we had made so much progress.

I left work and immediately went to Ethan’s office. When he saw me, he canceled all of his afternoon meetings and ordered lunch.

“I don’t get why you would want to have lunch in my boring office when I could have gone out and grabbed a bite somewhere much cozier,” he said. I opened the container with my burger and fries. I was comfortable eating for the first time in a long while.

“I don’t feel like going anywhere. Actually, I’m lazy. I might just stay here the rest of the day in your office if you don’t mind,” I smirked in response. He looked like he minded by the way he glanced at what was sure to be a packed calendar, but he didn’t kick me out.

“Are you sure you’re... okay?” he asked me again with concern.

inting a “I just don’t want to be at work today.”

“Why? Did something happen?”

“I had a fight with my dad. He said a few hurtful things to me because he doesn’t feel like I’m really helping out at Triton. He even said that he let him tens of thousands of dollars sending me to school and he should have let me go behind me off instead,” I said, my voice thick with unshed tears. I just couldn’t understand why someone would say that to their own child. But my dad was a different kind of parent. He could be mean when he wanted to be. I knew how his own flesh and blood.

nothing “I’m sorry to hear that Saffron,” Ethan apologized and I accepted his apology. I could tell he didn’t want to say anything else or it would be disrespectful to you and really appreciated his sympathetic but non-response to my crazy rant earlier that drama.

“We don’t have to stick around here you know? We could go somewhere else for more fun to take your mind off things,” he suggested.

and again “Don’t you have work to do? I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your work,” he asked.

me, he “Nope, I canceled my meetings. I’m all yours this afternoon. What do you want to do?” he asked with such sincerity, I couldn’t help but smile.

ice. We “I appreciate you dropping everything to comfort me.” I felt that relief as I was welling up again, these damned hormones.

or two. “You need me, I’m here. I’m always here for you, Saffron,” he said. I spent pulling me in for a hug. “What do you want to do?”

nse. “I don’t know,” I said, my mind suddenly going blank, before insisting to be struck. “I know! It sounds weird, but let’s go bowling. It’s been forever since I’ve been. When was the last time you went bowling?”

My face split in a smile, thinking about doing something as normal.

bowling with Ethan. His face twisted in thought.

“I’m not sure, it’s been a while. I think the last time I went bowling was around fourteen and I went with my family and Ashton. It was fun but for some reason, we never went again. Yeah, why not? Let’s go.”

We finished lunch and headed to the bowling alley. We had been there for barely five minutes when Ashton called me, and despite my better instincts I answered the phone.

“You should get back to the office,” Ashton said immediately.

“I don’t want to see Dad—”

“It’s not about Dad. A decision on the contract has come in and we need to have an all-hands-on-deck meeting in thirty minutes.”

I told Ashton I would be there and disconnected the call. I looked over my shoulder and saw Ethan also talking on the phone.

“I have to get back to the office,” I said.

“Me too.”

We drove back in silence and he dropped me off outside the building. I kissed him deeply before getting out of the car. I looked up at the building, straightened out my suit, took a deep breath and walked toward the entrance.

I rushed up to the conference room where everyone was already gathered. My dad stood at the head of the table, looking pissed off as usual.

“Thank you all for gathering in such short notice. Let me cut to the chase.”

The idiots of City Council decided it was better to split up the project. I’ll be coordinating with Perseus Development to complete this. I’m excited about this, but we’ll make it work. I expect the highest quality from this team.”

I caught Ashton’s gaze across the conference table and he gave me

nod. This wasn't going to be easy for me—juggling a relationship with  
g I was and working with Ethan, all while my Dad was like a bomb ready to go  
but, for any moment, but I was determined to find a way through.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

ETHAN

“**W**hat do you mean it’s a shared contract?” I asked Nia, the manager.

“They awarded the contract to both Perseus and Triton, so we’ll collaborate with them. The reasoning was that we have the technology focus on sustainability and Triton has the historical knowledge. So we’ll work with them on the design and construction. The contract leaves it up to each company to decide how responsibilities are divided.”

I took this information in and wasn’t sure how the people at Triton were absorbing it all. I could see the benefit in this arrangement, we definitely had a lot of gaps that Triton could help us fill.

“I assume Triton was already notified today as well?”

“Yes, I would assume we’ll be hearing from their leadership soon. On the scale and timeline, we should definitely start a planning process as soon as possible rather than later.”

That must have been the phone call Saffron got at the bowling alley.

“Okay, thanks, Nia. Given the situation, I’ll reach out to Triton and get the ball rolling. We’ll assign roles and responsibilities from there.”

[Ethan 2:41 PM]

I'm assuming you heard the news.

[Saffron 2:41 PM]

Yes, Dad isn't all that happy but we'll work through it.

That wasn't surprising. I knew this wasn't going to help my car. Saffron, although we needed a plan to tell her parents soon about us pregnancy.

Ashton texted me and asked to meet for happy hour. I assumed he to talk this out before any formal meetings started.

When I arrived after work, he was already there, two beers sitting on the table in front of him.

"Hey, man, I guess we'll be seeing a lot more of each other," he said, slapping his back and sitting on the stool as he slid the second pint of beer to me.

"Looks like it."

We clinked our glasses and took a long drink.

"How pissed off is your dad?"

Ashton winced.

"On a scale of one to ten? About a five hundred. I tried to convince you that this was still good for all of us, because it is good. I had been waiting to pitch the idea of our teams collaborating for a while, but you know what? Based on Triton is at the top, according to him, even if that's far from the truth. Meeting days."

I nodded. I understood that line of thinking. Who didn't want to be the best at their company was the best?

"So are we going to be okay?"

"Absolutely. I'm excited, man. Like I said, I've been thinking about it for a while."



for a while and I think we can do a lot of good together. The client is going to be super pleased with the strengths both of our companies provide. Don't worry, we'll show my dad."

"I'm going to schedule a meeting with the three of us to get things rolling. Feel free to involve whoever you need to from your team," I said, and Ashton nodded. "My assistant likely already has the invitation sent."

I hesitated before my next question.

wanted "How involved will Saffron be and will that be an issue?"

Ashton looked thoughtfully for a moment.

in front "She'll definitely be very involved, but I don't think that will be a problem.

Depending on if you two make it a problem, of course. But if you're all good,

I said, and things go smoothly, it'll be fine. I would assume you won't be involved

toward in all of the day to day details, anyway, and that's more where Saffron

is focused. For high-level strategy, you'll be working with me and our

manager Becca. My dad will be involved in the initial conversation,

but he probably drop out soon after that and I'll just give him regular updates

on the project. I nodded again, it all sounded like standard operating procedure,

and that made me feel more confident that this would work.

ice him "Should we tell your dad about our relationship or not?"

Ashton hesitated.

w him. "It could go either way. In some ways, tell him and let him get all

the anger out at once. I don't know when—or if—he'll cool down from his

rage. It might be the entire length of the project, which, as you know,

could be a year or more."

"I would feel better if we told him and had everything out in the open, but I just don't know if Saffron is up to that."

out this "Yeah, I don't know, man. I know she chickened out last time—when

going to fair based on how they were talking to her. The thing with Saffron is, sometimes she needs to be forced into things. I'm not trying to go behind her back or anything, but it would be a little easier if the pressure ball was taken off of her to tell them. I think she wants it to be this perfect marriage and but she'll never get that. Again, not scheming here, but maybe just come to the house this weekend. The plan will be for us to hang out at the party and just see what happens. They might pick up on something, or Saffron might burst and finally tell them."

I thought about it, I didn't like doing this behind Saffron's back. Problem. "I'm at least going to tell her ahead of time that I'm coming over," I said. "That's probably a good idea." "I'll be good." "I texted her right then and she said it was fine. She didn't seem to have any issues with the plan and I hoped that it would help move things forward on the project. "It might also be a good ice breaker with my dad." "I'm fine, but I cringed at that thought and Ashton cracked up laughing." "You know what the best part of this is?" Ashton grinned, "We're not paying Frank, which Frank's talents but you have to pay his salary." With that, he was practically rolling on the floor. I'm glad Ashton could keep his sense of humor in difficult situations. I gave him my best eye roll but deep inside, I was starting to feel really optimistic about this project.

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said.

I found myself driving up to the Lavette estate a few days later. I  
Ashton and couldn't disagree with his theory. Saffron was surprised  
told her I was coming over, but seemed to be okay with the idea. I jus  
it didn't blow up in my face.

I rang the doorbell and Ashton swung the heavy front door open,  
dressed in his swim trunks.

"Glad you came. Everyone is out by the pool," he said, gesturing to  
him.

I walked with him out the sliding glass door and saw Saffron on a  
chair dressed in a navy blue bikini. My mouth watered at the sight of h  
I also saw Charles and Audrey.

Saffron dipped her sunglasses down and she looked at me over the  
I winked her way and she smiled.

Off to a good start. I wandered over toward her and took the chair  
her while Ashton sat on my other side.

“I know what you two are doing,” she said, not bothering to look at me. “I don’t think it will work though. Our parents are way too self-involved to give us any notice if Ethan and I look a little too cozy.”

God, this woman was smarter than anyone gave her credit for.

“Just trying to help you out, Saff,” Ashton said. “I know you want to tell them, but I know but it’s scary to tell them.”

“By the way,” Ashton continued, looking my way. “Dad isn’t pissed anymore about the project. He’s come around to seeing that riding Perseus’ coattails could only help Triton. I was surprised how quickly he came around to the idea, but there’s hope.” He looked at me hopefully. “Maybe he was saying there was hope for him accepting me in general. I trusted maybe he would think I was worthy of Saffron.”

when I “Ethan,” a voice sounded from the other side of the pool. I saw that I hoped Lavette making her way toward me. “It’s so great to see you. I almost recognize you, it’s been so long.”

already Saffron visibly cringed at her mom.

“How are your parents?” she asked. “Not struggling too much with retirement. I guess he’s probably thrilled you got so lucky with your job.” Saffron scoffed.

lounge “Ethan,” Charles’ voice boomed. “I don’t know how you did it and I hope your project away from Triton, but I guess you’ll be with us on the project. I already got some plans together and know how we can use your people’s frames.” Saffron sighed heavily.

next to “It’s interesting that the council chose you to do a small part of the project,” Audrey said. “I thought they would want to invest in something that was more than just a trend.”

“Shut the hell up,” Saffron said from her chair. Her parents cleared their throats.

it us. “Iforgotten she was even there and looked at her. “What is your pr  
lved toEthan is hardworking, kind, generous, and, I might as well tell you  
he's the father of your first grandchild.”

You could hear a pin drop in the next town the yard went so quiet.  
them toknow this was how we were going to share the news, but there it was.

“Excuse me?” Audrey finally asked.

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ling onbe thrilled that I’m pregnant. Also, I love Ethan. And he’s the myste  
ckly heI’ve been talking about all along.”

intedly. Ashton kept looking between us.

al. And “Pregnant?” he finally exclaimed. “I didn’t know that part.”

“You knew Saffron was...with the help.”

Audrey “Jesus, Mom, Ethan is not the help,” Ashton said.

t didn’t “Okay, I’m out. Just thought I’d share the news,” Saffron said, gett  
stuff and striding toward the door.

Charles and Audrey glared at me.

uch in “I’m just gonna go check on Saffron,” I said weakly.

b.” Ashton ran after me.

“It looks bleak now, but it’ll be okay. And congratulations, man.”

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“Excuse me?” Audrey finally asked.

“You wanted nothing more than for me to end up with babies, so you must be thrilled that I'm pregnant. Also, I love Ethan. And he's the mystery guy I've been talking about all along.”

Ashton kept looking between us.

“Pregnant?” he finally exclaimed. “I didn't know that part.”

“You knew Saffron was...with the help.”

“Jesus, Mom, Ethan is not the help,” Ashton said.

“Okay, I'm out. Just thought I'd share the news,” Saffron said, getting her stuff and striding toward the door.

Charles and Audrey glared at me.

“I'm just gonna go check on Saffron,” I said weakly.

Ashton ran after me.

“It looks bleak now, but it'll be okay. And congratulations, man.”

He surprised me with a hug and told me where Saffron's room was.

I was too stunned by the last few minutes to respond and walked numbly to find Saffron.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

### SAFFRON

**I**n retrospect, that felt like a little bit of an irrational reaction and more of an angry blurt-out than a well-executed and calm announcement. They drove me to it with their asinine comments. Anyway, I also felt so much better with everything out in the open.

I was afraid of the damage, though.

A light knock on the door got my attention and Ethan poked his head in.

“So, that happened,” he said.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. But I knew part of you was going to do something like that to happen,” she said. “They were just piling on you and you couldn’t take it anymore.”

“It’s okay,” I said, pulling her into my arms. “I’m just glad everyone knows now.”

“Is Ashton pissed?”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

“Okay, good,” I felt relieved about that. I felt bad that he hadn’t said anything until right now.

“We should probably go back down there and face the music a

point,” Ethan said. I knew he was right.

I was also still mad at my dad for all the mean things he said to never acknowledged that or apologized.

“You can escape if you want, I can deal with the fallout,” I said.

“Nope, we’re in this together,” he said.

“Well then, let’s get this over with,” I said heading for the door.

Everyone was still outside, like they hadn't moved a muscle. I turned to look at us as we approached.

“I want to apologize for my outburst,” I said. “The content was all the delivery was extremely poor.”

My mom came and gave me a hug.

“For a lot of reasons, I can’t pretend that I’m thrilled about much relationship, but I am thrilled about this baby, so that is what we’ll focus on.”

Mom said.

Dad gave me a hug and Ethan a handshake but said nothing more walking back inside.

“Ethan,” Ashton said, pulling him in for a hug. “Welcome to the wantedhouse. I can’t believe you knocked up my baby sister, but I’m thrilled about both of you.”

My mom made an awkward exit mumbling about finding a cocktail everyone stayed out with Ashton.

“Where’s Christine?” I asked.

“She should be here soon, actually. She’s going to be so pissed that she missed the show.”

We talked for a few more minutes before Christine showed up and filled her in. She was doubled over in laughter picturing the scene. We spent the rest of the afternoon in the sun and then made dinner on the outside.



It was really nice hanging out as a foursome. I loved Christine and c me. Hewait for her to be officially in the family.

I ended up leaving with Ethan and there was some relief just tellin where I was really going.

When we got to his house, the sex was hot and free, there was sor about not hiding anything that made it easier to let even more loose. hey all The best part was waking up with Ethan the next morning and kissi goodbye before work.

He lived within walking distance to Triton which helped me arrive c I walked in the door and barely two minutes later, my dad was comi my office.

I wanted an apology. But he had always been too proud to apolog us on,”he had awkward ways of showing that he was sorry. Like when he gav gift card to a high-end jewelry store in town when I was just sev beforebecause, despite many promises, he missed my big year-end production. I tried to refuse it, but then I realized that was how he apol e crazyAt least I got my first expensive watch from it that I still had today.

“Hey sweetheart,” he greeted me, taking a seat in the chair opposit rubbed the watch on my wrist to remind myself that no matter wha ail. Wecome out of his mouth, I should remember what it really meant.

“Hi Dad, I see you have no words for me today,” I said, teasing h his facial expression showed regret for the things he had said to me.

“Are you ever going to let this go?” he asked.

“Not any time soon. I want more than just a gift card from Francis F and weI responded, spinning in my chair. I had learned from the best e spentnegotiate and I intended to use it well.

He chuckled as he watched me. I could tell he was impressed.

couldn't "Thinking like a typical Lavette? I see," he said, studying me.

I was sure he hoped I would feel intimidated but I wasn't.

g Mom "So, what do you want?" he asked the question I wanted him to ask. "I'm trying to accept you and Ethan. Isn't that enough?"

nothing "I want to take the lead in this project," I requested and I could tell from the look on his face that he wasn't going to give in to my request. He didn't have any faith in me. My own father didn't think that I could handle the project. I didn't blame him; my dad couldn't think any differently from me.

on time. he was raised. He didn't think a woman could handle things like a man. I walked into "Honey, I would love it if you did, but right now is not a wise time to be experimenting," he responded with a smile as if he was telling me something pleasant. My dad didn't think I could do it and he was just trying to sugar coat it for me.

venteen "Why don't you get some experience with this project and I'll let you handle the next one," he responded. "I actually wanted to tell you that you have a great opportunity as the assistant project manager for the Triton team. That way you will get first hand experience on what you will need to do on the upcoming projects. Trust me, after we work with Perseus, we'll have a whole lot more projects lined up for next year."

My dad was a typical business man. He knew how to convince someone to go along with his idea. I just agreed to what he was saying but I knew I was several projects away from taking the lead.

In the meantime, I couldn't get it off my mind that I had to work with Rowel," Ethan. I didn't know how often we'd come into contact professionally but it was all really exciting. I looked forward to seeing him in action.

My dad stood up and kissed the top of my head. That was the best I was going to get.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

ETHAN

**I**t was our first day on site, both teams-Triton and Perseus-and though I had other places to be, I wouldn't miss it for the world. I had to see Saffron. I made an excuse in my head that I needed to know what things were on the ground, which was reasonable. I was the lead man for a billion-dollar company and it was imperative that I help kick-off a project of this magnitude. Optically, it made sense too.

From a distance, I watched Saffron do her thing with the joint tea. She looked cool in her work suit and helmet which she had customized into a bright pink color. It was laughable but also cute. I liked how she stood out in a crowd of people that were all dressed in the typical dark business colors. She had on a bright red suit with a thin line of gold edging running down the edges of the pants. I loved that she was helping shake up Triton's traditional attitude in her own unique way.

She had no plans of doing things by the book and while her dad thought that it would get the project off-track, I could see that she would rather be smart than hard and I liked that about her. Saffron was smart and she was proving it.

“Are you just going to sit here and stare at her like a fan?” said Ashton as he sat next to me for the short break.

“Yep, your dad's here and I'm still a little scared. We seem to have a tentative truce and I don't need to push my luck by actually talking to her in front of him,” I said while Ashton laughed.

“Just go and talk to her, buddy. I'll protect you from my dad,” Ashton made some ninja movements while I chuckled.

“It's okay, I'll see her later tonight. Besides, I like seeing this side of her too. I never get to see her at work; it's a unique perspective. She's going to do a lot with Triton once your dad loosens the reins.”

Ashton and I even sounded like two teenagers who had just discovered females and wanted to be hilarious.

How awkward was that? “Are you nervous about working with Saffron?” he asked. I knew he was teasing me but I was never going to admit that I was nervous to work with her here. I looked at him and laughed and he joined me in my laughter.

“Nope, I'm too strategic to be nervous. I've thought this all through.” She responded, but the truth was that I was terrified.

How awkward was that? “Sure, buddy,” Ashton said sarcastically. “So you're not scared that your dad is going to catch you chatting up his little girl and bust your ass?” He asked, making me even more nervous.

Of course, I was afraid but we were supposed to work on this project together, therefore it was important for everyone to get along. Everyone

Saffron and I were in this for the long haul, and I couldn't spend the rest of my life scared of Charles Lavette.

“Nope. He might want to make me into mashed potato because of my personal life, but on the project floor, I'm still CEO of Perseus.” I had to admit I didn't see right through my bravado.

Ashton handed me a bottle of water and for a moment we sat in silence. I think both of us were thinking about the worst that could possibly happen. Charles saw me talking to his little girl.

Ashton was summoned by one of his teammates and left me contentedly all alone. I appreciated the solitude until I saw Saffron walking my way. Ashton “Hey,” Saffron called out to me and I looked in her direction precisely like I hadn’t seen her.

“Hey Saff,” I called out back to her. “You good?” I asked and she slowly really drawing closer.

“Not so great, and you?” she responded, drawing even closer. “Do you mind if I wake up in the morning and think to myself ‘What can I do to drive Charles crazy today?’ I just heard about all the changes you authorized. Xeriscaping that he Really? That adds so much more work and money than the original plan talk to was agreed upon by the *entire* team.”

“First of all, it doesn’t. I know we talked about artificial grass, but tough,” I was to save on maintenance costs. Xeriscaping does that in a more efficient way. It costs a little more up front, sure, but it’s more than worth it in the long run.”

She folded her arms in front of her chest and cocked her head to the side. “Second of all, my decision and Charles’ decision overrules even my project decision. I’m sorry about that, but it’s the way hierarchy works.”

Besides, Her eyes turned hard, glaring into mine.

“Third of all, and perhaps most importantly, I do wake up every night thinking about ways to drive Saffron crazy. But not in the way that you’re thinking.” I winked at her and watched as the blush crept up from her neck to her cheeks. I loved getting her riled up but I appreciated how she was learning to pull back and not just lash out.

lence. I I looked around to make sure no one was paying attention to I  
ppen ifplanted a quick kiss on her lips.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked. “It’s pretty warm out here and I  
iplatingcan make you blush, but your cheeks are a little redder than my  
y. usually makes them.”

tending “I’m okay for the most part,” she said. “I can’t wait until the n  
sickness is done. That hasn’t been too pleasant.”

started “Why are you here anyway?” she asked. “Don’t you just push pape  
office or something? I thought that’s what the boss did all day.”

you just “I’m a hands-on kind of guy, Saff,” I teased, clutching her hips and  
Saffronher around the corner of a big machine. “I don’t just sit in the office a  
capping?myself a big shot. I want to be involved in the process. I want to und  
lan thatthings. I don’t mind getting down and dirty.”

I pressed my lips gently to hers. Making out with a woman v  
he goalsomething I typically did on a job site, but I was powerless in r  
naturalSaffron.

t in the “Oh yeah, I know how you like to get down and dirty,” she said  
kissed me back, deeply, and I felt a stirring in my pants that I didn’t  
side. have at work. She suddenly took a big step away from me.

ryone’s “Well, congrats on being the boss of the year,” she said. “But you’r  
to mess things up for all of us if you keep overriding decisions we’ve  
on as the project management team.”

orning She swatted my ass and walked away. I swallowed hard as I watc  
you’re away of her hips.

er chest “Hey, Ashton,” I called over. He looked up and started walking my

he was “What’s up?”

“Could you do me a favor? Could you find a time for me, you, an

ier andparents to sit down and talk? Sooner rather than later.”

“Sure,” he looked at me suspiciously. “You have plans don’t you?”

know I “Sure do, buddy.”

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parents to sit down and talk? Sooner rather than later.”

“Sure,” he looked at me suspiciously. “You have plans don’t you?”

“Sure do, buddy.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

### SAFFRON

**I**t was late and I was still finishing some paperwork at Triton. I was thinking about doing it from home, but I wasn't quite sure where home was anymore. I lived half the time at my parents' house and half the time at Ethan's. I was hoping he'd just ask me to move in with him, since he was having his baby and all, but he hadn't.

The laptop screen glowed in front of me as my eyes blurred. It was supposed to be done for the day. I hadn't heard from Ethan, so I figured I'd just go home to the big house.

As if my imagination had brought him to reality, he walked into the conference room I was camped out in.

"Hey," he said, leaning on the door frame. God. Those smirking eyes.

"Hi." I smiled back at him.

"I'm surprised to see you here still."

"I had some stuff to do but I'm finished now. I was just going home packing up to leave."

"Okay, I'm heading out too. We can go home together."

"It seems out of your way to drive me."

He stared at me for a moment.

“We would be going to the same place.”

Well, this was a good time for this conversation.

“Your home isn’t my home.”

He looked at me thoughtfully, like he was searching for an answer.

“Would you like it to be?”

I shrugged, deciding to tease him a bit. I looked back at my screen doesn’t feel like a sincere question or invitation.”

He stepped into the room and bracketed my body with his hands on side of the table. His lips dipped close to my ears as he whispered.

thought “Saffron, I would love nothing more than to come home to you every ne wasand wake up with you every morning. I want to share my entire life wi time atPlease, move in with me.”

2 I was All of the breath left my body. I hadn’t expected *that* kind of invitati

“Okay,” was all I could manage while trying to manage all the time tocoursing through my body.

30 back “Great. So you’ll come with me now and we’ll officially move you get your things this weekend, okay?”

nto the “Uh – ok. That sounds like a plan...?”

"Let's go."

45. I packed up my things as we left the conference room. He reached hand, which I gladly accepted. We quietly walked toward the elevator the doors opened, we stepped in and Ethan immediately grabbed me, to startthe fabric of my dress around my hips and pushing me against th kissing me deeply.

“You are even sexier now, Saffron. I didn’t think that was possible. keep my hands off of you. And when I can’t touch you, I think

touching you.”

The door opened in the lobby and we quickly rushed out, making a dash for Ethan’s car to get home. When we finally got into his condo, we found a scattering of briefcases, files and clothes. He pressed me against the wall in his entryway, and we gave into our cravings for each other. The intense physical need to be together was so great, we could barely breathe.

“That’s all I want,” he said, kissing me hungrily and I let him devour my mouth as I kissed back, our tongues stroking each other. The movement of those little ripples in either making our heart rates spike. He pushed my suit jacket off my shoulder and it fell to the ground and then he clumsily reached around to find my bra. “You’re beautiful,” he said, kissing my neck. “I’ve missed you so much.” Once that was undone, my dress fell to the floor, leaving me only in my bra and panties.

“God, you’re beautiful. I can’t get enough. I’m sorry to say this but I want to fuck you until you say stop.” His dirty talk was driving me wild. “Go ahead and make my day,” I said even though our mouths were pressed against each other.

He lifted me up and took me to the bedroom. Now, it was *our* bedroom. He threw me on the bed as he started taking off his dress shirt. Despite it being a beautiful, crisp, tailored shirt, it suffered the same fate as all of our clothes and was thrown onto a heap on the floor. His bare chest and broad shoulders put me in a daze. He started to undo his belt and pants. Keeping his underwear on, he crawled on top of me and resumed kissing me, even more hungrily than before. “I’ve missed you so much,” he said, kissing my neck. “I’ve missed you so much.” I grabbed his shoulders and pulled him down and pushed him to the wall, he was lying on his back. I was also really hungry for him and I wanted to give him the pleasure he deserved. He looked at me with some surprise. “I can’t also settled in, seeing the look in my eye and being up for what he wanted about them. He lay back as I caressed his chest, gently following my hands v

mouth, kissing and nibbling as I went along. I ran my fingers along the beeline ripple after ripple, going lower and taking my time.

were a He let out a moan, as if he couldn't take much more of this teasing. My fingers lifted up the elastic of his underwear and I ran my fingers around the front to the sides, kissing and rubbing his throbbing hardness with my

and face. My fingers pulled down his underwear and his large cock spread him attention, happy to be released from its confines. I couldn't wait to have my muscles inside me, but first things first.

ers and I held him in my hand and slowly moved up and down his shaft, the zipper up at his face as he allowed himself to get lost in my touch.

my bra "Saff..." he moaned.

I bent over and took him in my mouth but he was so big that I licked it. I just sucked the smooth skin of the head while rubbing the rest of his shaft with my hand. I found a rhythm and I could tell it was driving him wild. He still groaned a deep guttural groan and bucked his hips up. I let him drive himself deep into my mouth, watching him lose his control even more.

om. He With a growl of half-frustration and half-desire, he sat up and said, "Alright, missy. This isn't going to end like this. My turn." He flipped his clothes; that I was lying on my back. "You're gonna get it now," he said with a devilish grin. The heat between my legs went up a thousand notches. I touched him talk to me like that.

He hovered over me, leaning on his forearms and knees. He spread his legs on either side with his knees. "I hope you don't mind if I play for a bit first."

nted to He nipped at my neck and gave me a deep kiss in the bend just under my jawline. I squirmed with ecstasy, holding his shoulders tightly. He moved his mouth down to my chest where he sucked and cuddled my full breasts with my

his abs, trailed his hands down my sides and moved his body downwards while  
lifting my legs and rested my knees on his shoulders.

ng. My "Baby, you're so wet," he murmured before he licked at my folds and  
und the dove in, sucking and licking my clit as if I was a juicy, ripe fruit. I threw  
cheeks my head and arched my back. I wasn't sure how long I could take till  
rung to tongue darted in and out of me, making the heat in my core burn even  
ive him I felt my limbs go numb.

"Ethan..."

looking He pulled back and came up to kiss me and I tasted my longing for  
his tongue. I gasped when he entered me, the first time was always a  
shock because he was so big, but I loved the full feeling he gave me  
ked and like he was stroking every nerve of pleasure I had in my body. I  
aft with slowly, as if to ease me into his rhythm, we both groaned and he still  
ild. He increase his tempo to where he was thrusting hard into me. We both  
his cock control, crying out at each thrust until we reached the apex. With  
internal shudder, we both came.

d said, Breathing heavily, Ethan lay on me and gently kissed my face as I  
l me so catch my breath.

with a "That was fucking hot. I don't mind doing that for the rest of my  
hearing life."

Amen.

my legs We lay there for a while, recovering from the exertion, talking about  
nothings and lightly roaming each other's bodies with our fingertips.

der my "We should decide which room will be the nursery," Ethan said  
ved his long silence. "I mean, if you want to live here. Or we can start looking  
ists. He house."

I thought about that for a minute. I actually really liked it here, and

here he was a surprising amount of green space available and we were really close to the beach.

and then “I think we should stay here, at least at first. Let’s see how it goes with the location.”

his. His “Okay,” he said. “So I’m thinking the room right next to ours should be a hotter nursery?”

“That makes sense.”

“Let’s go take a look at it and start making some plans. We can hire an interior designer if you want.”

bit of a “I’d actually like to design it myself, if you don’t mind.”

. It was “Of course not,” he said, kissing my head. “I just want you and the house. Moving have everything you want.”

started to We walked to the room and started making a plan for what pieces of furniture we wanted to start looking for. Ethan also made a plan to clear out a deep closet space for me and we needed to get some things for our bedroom.

“I’m serious when I say I want this whole place to feel like yours,” I tried to “I know I’ve been a bachelor for a long time. But the offer for a divorce stands, just say the word. I’ll even just give you the card of the one I’ve been fucking you can just call her whenever you want. Anything and everything is on my mind.”

I appreciated the gesture, and how much he wanted me to feel comfortable here. Even just the thought of it went a long way toward making it feel like my home, too.

“Thank you Ethan,” I said, stretching to kiss him. “For everything. I know you and a baby are both so lucky to have you.”

ing for a He gently touched my stomach as he kissed me softly.

“I’m the lucky one,” he said.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

### ETHAN

**A**shton was able to set up a meeting with his parents surprisingly quickly. I figured it would take weeks, but a few days after him, I was sitting in their living room. Ashton sat on a chair next to Charles and Audrey sat on the sofa in front of me, staring.

“Thank you both for taking the time to talk with me today,” I started.

“Of course, Ashton said it was important,” Charles said. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was enthusiastic about my relationship with Saffron, but he was warming up to me. We talked a lot more now that we were working together and he was softening. Audrey was a little harder to crack and she still made a lot of inappropriate comments, but Saffron was in the habit of calling me every time, so she was getting better. It helped that Saffron was giving me a grandchild, it seemed to be the one thing she wanted in life.

“It is,” I agreed, and looked at my hands folded in front of me as I spoke forward. “I’m just going to come right out with it, I want to ask for your blessing—from all three of you—because I want to ask Saffron to marry me. I want to be clear that I’m not asking your permission, because Saffron is capable and independent and she can make up her own mind. But I w

lying if I told you I didn't want your blessing. You're all extremely important to Saffron and therefore, you're all extremely important to me."

Charles leaned back on the sofa, looking at me with judging eyes. Audrey clasped her hands in front of her mouth. Ashton just beamed. He was in wedding mode, too, now that he officially proposed to C and she actually said yes. I felt like I could see the wheels spinning about a double wedding—I'd have to shut that down.

"I love Saffron so much," I continued. "I would—and will—do anything for her. I'm looking forward to building a life with her and a baby. I know family means a lot to her, and I hope that we can all come together as one family."

asking Everyone was silent for a minute.

me and "Ethan," Charles began. "I'm not going to pretend this has been an easy accept. Between our history and the fact you're significantly older than Saffron...it's been a lot. But I can't deny that you've made her very happy. I say thank you when I see that, who am I not to give you my blessing?"

slowly "Thank you, Charles. I really appreciate it." I paused. I needed to get it together, this here and now. "About our history, Charles. That's been something I've always wanted to talk to you about. I know me developing Perseus has been hard on you, but I want you to know that it's because of you that I'm able to get her to the success I have today. Who am I but your driver's son? Who am I but your son's playmate that lived in the employee housing on your estate?"

leaned Charles and Audrey were silent but I could see tears brimming in Audrey's eyes.

y me. I "I remember when you used to take me and Ashton to your job site. Saffron shared your knowledge with those two little rambunctious boys and as a result, you inspired me to build Perseus into what it is today. I've tal

importantly different direction, but it was you who planted the seed. I've thanked you adequately. Thank you for your years of generosity and kindness and for showing me what was possible."

look at me. Now it was Charles who had tears brimming. He coughed the edge of Christine's side. "Well, Ethan. What can I say? Thank you for saying that. I've always been thinking meaning to get straight with you too." He cleared his throat again. "It is...I've acted poorly over the years. Where I should have been proud of you and far you've come, I know I've been, well, jealous. I may have planted the seed and our but I'm also extremely proud of how you've grown it." Charles looked directly in the eye, and it was a moment I will never forget. He coughed again.

"You've built Perseus into what it is today and I couldn't have done it without you've done. The city and the region has progressed because of your innovative thinking. We are proud, but your parents must be so proud of you more than too."

happy, "They are. Thank you," I said. We were all silent for a moment, appreciating the feeling that was now between us. It was a moment of understanding and mutual respect.

ing I've Audrey cleared her throat. "I just want to thank you for being a friend as been friend to Ashton all these years. You come from very different backgrounds but you grew up practically like brothers. Maybe even better than brothers but your We never saw you argue and I did think you were the sweetest boy. I hope you can be sure to give me more sweet boys and girls that can call me Audrey's you'll definitely have my blessing."

"Hell yeah, you get to actually be my brother now," Ashton chimed in. You laughed with him.

id, as a "Thank you all so much. I know Saffron and I are forming our own family unit, but we want to include you all in our lives and especially

the neverlife of the baby, when he or she arrives."

kindness To my surprise, Charles stood up and extended his hand. I stood up  
my arm out to grab his hand but instead of shaking my hand like I ex  
motionCharles pulled me in for a big hug.

so been "Welcome to the family, Ethan. It will be good to have another  
The factbother." He winked in Ashton's direction.

at how Audrey stood up for a hug as well. "Yes, dear. Welcome to the fam  
ie seed,are so happy for our dear Saffron and happy for you as well."

ked me Ashton walked me out, hitting me a few times on the arm and bac  
tinued,job well done. We both knew that both our business and family li  
ie whatgoing to be much improved with the reception I just got. We did a bro  
of yourI got in the car. Seriously, what would I have done without Ashton in  
of youall these years?

I was in ecstasy leaving the Lavettes—which wasn't a feeling I  
moment,attributed to a visit with that family. But with that good outcome, the  
a deepmy plan could be kicked into gear and why not tonight? I had eve  
planned already, I even had the ring bought and tucked in my dr  
lovelyhome. I was ready to ask Saffron to be my wife and as I drove h  
rounds,thought about what the future was going to look like, and it looke  
rothers.perfect to me.

Now, if Saffron looked beautiful in her loose-fitting short blue dress. She  
e Nana,showing yet but she looked a little different, she was radiant and she  
flushed most of the time. The past few weeks felt like a dream.

ed in. I We had the second ultrasound earlier in the week and seeing the  
heartbeat brought out a side of me that I never knew I had. I felt pro  
vn littleand eager to start this new journey with the woman I loved. I loved c  
y in thefor her and giving her what she wanted to eat. Saffron was the most b

pregnant woman I had ever seen. Sometimes she felt like she was getting put but her figure was still slender and people could hardly tell that she was expecting.

“You’ve been weird these past few days,” she said, jolting me back to reality when I got home. I had been quiet since I started putting my plans into action. My meeting with the Lavettes this afternoon increased my feelings—and the pressure.

She had no idea how nervous I was to take the next step for a relationship. I was afraid that she’d think I was only asking her to marry her because she was pregnant but I know I still would’ve asked her. Baby hug as baby. I spent days thinking of how to make the proposal special and my life planned something that she’d never forget. I knew she was probably going to cry since she had been so emotional and hormonal lately.

usually “What do you mean I’ve been weird?” I asked.

rest of “I don’t know. You seem a little distracted,” she responded as I led her to the kitchen to make a snack.

answer at “I’ve just got so much going on at work right now it’s making me preoccupied. Nothing to worry about,” I responded and planted a kiss on her pretty forehead. I helped Saffron take a seat on the kitchen stool and she laughed.

“Ethan, I’m pregnant, not disabled,” she said laughing at me. She wasn’t from being heavily pregnant but I couldn’t help myself. I felt the need to look after her with everything including the small tasks. I’d carry her around if I needed to.

“I know you’re not disabled and that you’re independent but I just want to take care of you and make sure that you’re always comfortable. I want to protect you and make the most beautiful baby ever,” I responded and she was laughing.

beautiful “I love it when you take care of me the way you do,” she said as I kissed her.

ting fata few healthy snacks from the pantry and made her a fruit mocktail. He was opposite her and watched her eat and she laughed at how I was gawking at her as if it was the first time seeing her.

back to “I might just choke if you keep looking at me like that,” she joked and she smiled at her.

used the “When you’re done eating, I have a surprise for you,” I notified her.

“Ethan, there you go again with your surprises. You don’t need to spend millions to make me happy,” she responded with a full mouth. It was funny how she ate her food. I could tell she was famished from all the work we had done earlier.

and I had “I love to spend millions on you. Our baby will be spoiled just like you,” I joked and she looked at me lovingly.

“That’s sweet but I’m not looking to raise a spoiled brat. I want our children to be well-rounded and I want them to understand the importance of hard work. They won’t learn that if everything is just handed to them on a silver platter,” she disagreed with me. I loved that about Saffron. Despite being raised in a wealthy family she still knew the importance of working hard to make a name for oneself. She was doing the same and I admired it. On the other hand, I didn’t have plenty growing up and oftentimes my father couldn’t afford to buy me the things I wanted. That’s why I worked so hard to help wanted my children to have all the nice, luxurious things they wanted. “Anyway, I’m done. I’m ready for my surprise,” she said, dusting her hands on a napkin.

“Close your eyes,” I said as I took her hand and led her to the sliding glass door. We stepped outside and I flipped a switch, bathing the area in soft lights. I turned on the playlist I made from my phone and it played quietly. I grabbed

il. I sat the speakers around the space. In the middle of the terrace was a small  
'king at battery-operated candles and I led her to the center.

I dropped down to one knee and asked her to open her eyes.

d and I “Ethan,” she gasped.

“Saffron. These last months with you have been the most magical I’  
had. We’ve stepped up to challenges and have learned to be s  
o spend together. I want to continue to grow and to build a life with you. Will  
as cute me the absolute greatest honor in the world, and accept me as yours? S  
walking will you marry me?”

Tears streamed down her cheeks and she clasped my hand as she  
ke their nodding. I opened the small box and presented her with the large, sp  
diamond that drew another gasp from her lips.

ur baby “Ethan, I would be so incredibly happy to marry you. I love you s  
of hard and I love the family we’re building. I can’t wait to see what else the  
a silver holds for us.”

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the speakers around the space. In the middle of the terrace was a small ring of battery-operated candles and I led her to the center.

I dropped down to one knee and asked her to open her eyes.

“Ethan,” she gasped.

“Saffron. These last months with you have been the most magical I’ve ever had. We’ve stepped up to challenges and have learned to be stronger together. I want to continue to grow and to build a life with you. Will you do me the absolute greatest honor in the world, and accept me as yours? Saffron, will you marry me?”

Tears streamed down her cheeks and she clasped my hand as she started nodding. I opened the small box and presented her with the large, sparkling diamond that drew another gasp from her lips.

“Ethan, I would be so incredibly happy to marry you. I love you so much and I love the family we’re building. I can’t wait to see what else the future holds for us.”



*Epilogue*

SEVEN MONTHS LATER

*Epilogue*

SEVEN MONTHS LATER

## Saffron

“Saffron, I need one more big push,” the doctor urged me. I was exhausted and physically spent, but somehow I found myself to push. In a whirl of movement and emotions, our perfect, beautiful, screaming baby girl was resting on my chest.

Tears streamed down my cheeks and I didn't care how sweaty or disheveled I looked. I looked at Ethan, his eyes glued on this perfect human being he had created and I saw the tears threatening to escape his eyes.

“She's perfect,” he whispered, gently stroking her hand.

“I agree,” I whispered back.

We both just stared at her and time passed in a blur. After she was laid down, she was taken away to be cleaned up and swaddled. The nurse placed her in the small hospital bassinet, where we continued to stare. We had told our families we didn't want visitors at the hospital and I had never been more grateful for that decision. It felt like such a special moment for us as we bonded with our newborn.

We named her Lily Adams and a name never fit another human being perfectly. She was a scrunched up ball of sweetness.

The next day we were sent home, where we were met by all of our family as well as Ashton and Christine. There was so much love and joy at home, I couldn't stop crying.

When I placed Lily in the crib in her room, my heart swelled. I had spent months creating this space myself. The walls were painted a soft teal color and colorful artwork covered the walls. Lily's crib was white and simple. A soft glider chair filled one corner. There was a bookshelf mounted

wall that was already full of books that were gifted to her. The space was filled with toys already. Ethan kept his promise of spoiling her.

I was She whimpered when I set her down, so I stroked her cheek. She tucked her head a few times, before finding a comfortable position. I still couldn't believe she was mine. Ours.

Satisfied that she was comfortable and down to nap for a while, I went into our bathroom to take a shower. The hot water felt luxurious and I stayed under the spray for an extra long time.

Ethan offered to hire a nanny right away, but I wanted to do things my own way for a while first. I was on maternity leave for a few months, but I had to hire a nanny when I started work again. But I was exhausted. Lily slept peacefully during the day and partied at night and my life felt like a constant rotation of team changes and learning how to breastfeed (both her and I), but I wouldn't have had it any other way. Ethan helped where he could, often bringing her to bed in the middle of the night and then going to grab me a glass of water to replenish my fluids. We were in a wonderful bubble of three.

Finally, I emerged from the shower, feeling clean and brand new. That clean feeling was definitely something I will never again take for granted.

Lily was still asleep so I used the time to slather on lotion and slip on a clean pair of leggings and a T-shirt. Quinn was going to stop by soon in our first time meeting Lily, and I was excited to have some best friend time. My home was rarely empty, but it was always family and that wasn't quite the same.

She texted me instead of ringing the bell when she arrived, and I couldn't have loved her more in that moment. Until I opened the door and she showed up with a full bag of fast food in her hand.

"Give me that burger," I practically growled as she laughed. We were

we had at the kitchen and didn't bother with plates, sitting on the counter eating  
and fries.

He turned "So, how is motherhood? I have to say that it looks wonderful on you  
I wouldn't honestly ever see you looking so happy. Don't get me wrong, you're  
tired, too, but there's just something about you that looks right."

She padded "I'm exhausted, but it does feel right, so I guess that's what you're  
[stayed] Everything is going well. It's hard, but I love Lily so much and it's  
amazing with her, too."

She was on my "I was swooning and knew most of it was still the hormones coming  
agreed through my body, but I didn't care. I felt very blissful these days even  
during exhaustion.

He [diaper] "Well good, I'm glad," Quinn said around a French fry. "Have the  
I don't have any other wedding plans?"

He turned to me "I haven't even thought about that," I admitted.

She water to "July is going to be here before we know it," she reminded me.

"I know, at least we have the big things set, like the location and  
wedding. That would you go dress shopping with me? I surprisingly think I would feel  
granted. I know I'm kind of the wrong shape right now but I just want  
to go into a looking."

She turned on, her "Oh my God, I thought you would never ask. Do you want to  
go on our weekend? I think we should roadtrip up to Washington D.C. and check  
out quite a few of the fancy boutiques. Unless you don't want to be away from Lily  
you could bring her! It'd only be a day."

I wouldn't "Sure, she's been really good lately so I'm sure I can just drag her and  
we had a car seat and feed her when she needs it. Or maybe my mom will  
come along and help watch her, if you're ok with that. Let's do it. I just want  
to get out and, well, just get out!"

burgers I was excited to have real plans with Quinn and to move forward with  
wedding. I couldn't wait to marry Ethan and wished we hadn't decided  
to. I've waited until after Lily was born.

you look But I only had to wait a few more months, and there was a lot to do  
then.

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I was excited to have real plans with Quinn and to move forward with the wedding. I couldn't wait to marry Ethan and wished we hadn't decided to wait until after Lily was born.

But I only had to wait a few more months, and there was a lot to do until then.

# Ethan

*Four months later*

Saffron looked gorgeous as I spun her around on the dance floor. It wasn't just the dress—although that was certainly a knockout. It was a little different than I thought she'd go for—strapless with a deep dip in the front, exposing a hint of cleavage, it was tight through the body and then flowed out. She wasn't complaining at all. But there was just something about *her*. My love was just the fact that we were now officially husband and wife.

The day had been everything we'd hoped for. The weather was perfect, all our favorite people were all able to attend and as we danced under the stars on the deck at Monte's, I couldn't help but think about all the things that led us here. I had known about Saffron this whole time, but it took a city cleanup to bring us together.

The wedding was relatively small, we just wanted family and close friends. As perfect as it was, the evening was drawing to a close and I couldn't get Saffron alone. Since we had Lily, we weren't taking a formal honeymoon right now and figured we'd hold off until we were more comfortable traveling with her. But my parents were going to stay with her tonight so we stayed at the most luxurious penthouse suite hotel room in Chestnut Hill.

"I can't wait to slip this dress off of you," I whispered into Saffron's ear as we swayed on the dance floor. It was the last dance and everyone had gathered around us, cheering.

She looked at me with lust-filled eyes.

"I know the sex—sorry, lovemaking—on wedding night is supposed to be soft and romantic, but I want you to take me on every surface in the house."



tonight.”

I growled in her ear.

“That is a promise I’m willing to make, my lovely wife,” I said, and I wasn’t her ear lobe.

The song wrapped up and everyone clapped as we made our exit. A taxi was waiting outside and the driver took us to the room, where our limo was already waiting.

We were barely in the room when I pushed Saffron against the wall and I roamed everywhere with my lips.

“I am so glad you’re mine,” I said, nipping her collarbone.

I helped her out of her dress like she was a beautifully wrapped gift. She stood in front of me in just her white lace underwear and bra, I growled.

“I promise I’ll take my time on round two,” I roughly whispered in her ear.

“But you are so incredibly sexy, Saffron. I can’t wait.”

She wrapped her legs around me and moaned into my neck as I went inside of her, setting her on the edge of the desk. It was a frenzy of skin, hands skimming each other’s bodies as we lost ourselves in each other. After, I gathered her up and walked her to the bed, where she curled up against my chest. She was a perfect fit.

“Today was perfect,” she said, sighing contentedly and I smiled in her ear in the dark room.

“It really was,” I agreed.

“I know life won’t always be perfect, but I’m so incredibly grateful to go through it with you. I know we can face anything together because we’re stronger together.”

I kissed her head, unable to find better words than hers.

“I agree completely,” I finally said. “I love you and Lily more than anything.”

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I kissed her lightly, and then more deeply.

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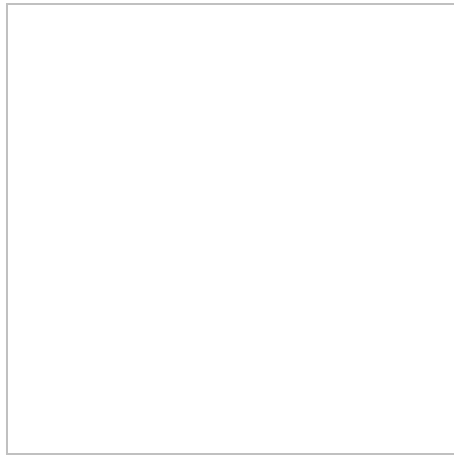
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*The End*

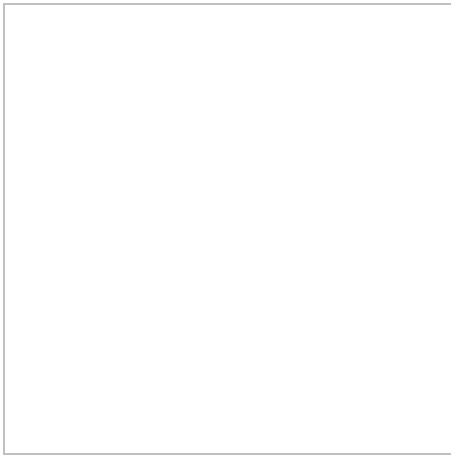
If you loved Off-Limits Baby Daddy, you'll love Aimee's City S Series. Read Chapter 1 of the first book, Fake Enemy Fiancé now!



*Fake Enemy Fiancé, by Aimee Brons*

*The End*

If you loved *Off-Limits Baby Daddy*, you'll love Aimee's City Slicker's Series. Read Chapter 1 of the first book, *Fake Enemy Fiancé* now!



*Fake Enemy Fiancé*, by Aimee Bronson

## FAKE ENEMY FIANCÉ

**He's a son of a b...*illionaire* and now he's my fake fiancé.**

It's not like I have a choice.

Dad was desperate to save our empire and hide his sins.

Too bad I'm the one who has to pretend to be engaged.

There's fire in my eyes when Dad tells me the plan.

Living and working with this spoiled playboy is not my idea of f

His cocky attitude and mischievous eyes tease me to the point  
distraction.

But glimpses of his defined muscles make me want to act the p:

Little did I know the fire in my eyes,

Would turn to fire between the sheets.

**Will our burning desire secure our empire, or will it destroy us**

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**Will our burning desire secure our empire, or will it destroy us first?**

# **Chapter 1**



# **Chapter 1**

## Alexa

“How can you just throw everything away like that?”

I could feel my chest heaving as I yelled at my father first time ever. That his face was a mirror of resignation and def nothing to curb my anger. His shoulders were slumped in his brown chair; he looked like a man who had given up and I hated it. I didn't k man staring back at me. The man I knew as my father was a strong, r man who had built Cresswell Limited from a mere mom and pop st rundown street in Seattle to a big food and agricultural warehousin with subsidiaries across fifteen cities in four states. All this while rais by himself after the death of my mom during childbirth and I remembered him missing a career day in school. But it really wasn seemed. He had always taught me to not be a quitter. So, why? How c just let it all go like that? I just couldn't understand it.

“You have to understand, Lexa.” He blurted out with a half : resignation. “I don't want to file for bankruptcy, and this is the only wa walk away with my dignity without all our employees losing their j this point, nothing we try would work.”

“You can't give up! We can get through this. Every company goes t a rough patch. We'll move past it as others have. This isn't the first tin can't give up. I believe in you.” I pleaded desperately.

“Dad,” I called when he refused to meet my gaze.

“It's all my fault, Lexa. I'm sorry.”

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## Dawson

The click-clack of my shoes against the tiles of the hospital was painfully loud as they echoed in the empty hallway that led to the ICU... where my father was. I opened the door to his room, interrupting two men in a serious tone discussion with him.

“You called for me, Father?” I said, as I entered the room, interrupting and studying the other two men to avoid looking at my father too long.

I could never get used to the aloof, barrel-chested man of few words who was the Jonathan Rhodes I’d grown up knowing, looking so frail, thin, and dependent on life support in the hospital. He looked like he was only a few number of days away from the cold hands of death.

I greeted the two men with a nod; the first was his long-time friend, Dr. Cresswell, and the second, his lawyer, George. I wondered what he was up to, what else he had to worry about while fighting for his life.

“You should be resting,” I said as he reached for the button to raise the hospital bed. He beckoned to me and motioned toward his oxygen mask; I helped him take it off and reduce the flow.

“Dawson,” he said, trying to smile but it looked more like a grimace.  
“Father.”

Like the man I’d always known him to be, he went straight to the point without mincing words. “Hank has been having some difficulties with his company lately, so I bought it, but with some conditions.”

“What conditions?” I asked like I knew he expected me to.

“I don’t have long to live. It is a condition for Hank and my last wish is for you. I want you to become engaged to his daughter, Alexa.”

“What?”

“For six months.”

I was dumbfounded. The last thing I was expecting was my father to interfere with my love life. As I finally got over my shock and opened my mouth to argue, he burst into a coughing fit. After he’d calmed down and an oxygen mask was back on, he motioned toward his lawyer who started to speak quickly.

“The purchase will avoid Cresswell Limited having to file for bankruptcy, and there is some anxiety among the board, and the engagement will help to ease the tension and increase confidence in the merger of these two former companies. According to the contract, Cresswell Limited will be a subsidiary of Rhodes Inc. It will not be dismantled for at least two years, all employees will be retained, and their operations are not to be tampered with for that period,” he droned on. “For the six months of your engagement, Ms. Cresswell, you have to live together to keep up appearances and I will work with you as an advisor, fully involved with the integration of Cresswell Limited into Rhodes Inc. You don’t have to worry about her experience. She has all the necessary expertise and skills, which she gained while working as the head of multiple Cresswell branches.”

My face clouded over and my hands clenched tighter with every word as his lawyer spoke. The old bastard was not even going to give me a chance to refuse.

“If the engagement lasts for the entire six months, the compensation for Ms. Cresswell’s time will be the position of CEO of Cresswell, its largest subsidiary. She is, however, not to be told this until the six months are

wish for “How will you convince her to be engaged to me?” I asked hoping to see a way out.

“I’ll be talking to her as well and explaining the situation,” Hank continued, almost forgetting he was in the room. “I’m confident she’ll want to do what’s in the best interest of Cresswell and our employees.”

“I suppose I have no choice then,” I said, keeping my eyes on Hank. His words and his might have influenced my father into making this decision that was so important to him. It only made sense as he would benefit the most from the arrangement.

His company gets bought and avoids bankruptcy, but he still gets to live. He becomes a hero for keeping his people employed. If it goes well, he becomes a partner in the law to the heir of the richest man in the city. If it doesn’t, his daughter gets to be the CEO of his company. A win-win. And he had already decided he couldn’t even be bothered to confront him with my suspicions. At the moment, nothing would change.

I was shaken out of my thoughts as the nurse came into the room to tell me that visiting hours were over and we had to leave. I nodded in the direction she was pointing and walked out without saying another word.

These appeared to be my father's last wishes. How could I refuse?

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“How will you convince her to be engaged to me?” I asked hopefully, seeing a way out.

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## Alexa

Everything was already final. He told me all about it on the phone and as much as I wanted to face him and express my feelings, I was grateful I hadn't dared. I was enraged. Dammit. I had to put aside my feelings and focus on about the situation. That was the only way I knew I could even try to talk to him clearly.

Due to my dad's irresponsible borrowing and mismanagement, the company was in serious trouble. The company was neck-deep in debt and drowning fast. It was going to be owned completely by Jonathan Rhodes, a billionaire who my dad insisted was a friend. I preferred to think of them as acquaintances. In my opinion, Rhodes had swooped in like a hawk, from afar, to prey on his helpless "friend". The billionaire came and completed the acquisition in record time — paying off the debts and taking over Cresswell Limited, a subsidiary of Rhodes Inc. But the most ridiculous part was some terms and conditions that my dad had agreed to — all of which involved me.

"You will work under Rhodes as a Corporate Advisor as part of the team for the acquisition," he had added, after filling me in on the details of the handover.

"Under Jonathan Rhodes? Why?" I asked, confused. I wondered how he would want that. It was a role I was qualified enough for, but it was suspicious.

"Not Jonathan... it would be for Dawson Rhodes. His son."

That was even more strange.

*Why would he want that?*



“I don't understand. His son needs an advisor?”

“Uhhh...Jonathan is on leave and his son, Dawson, is the acting CEO and even Jonathan would like you to help out during this transition. Besides, Letitia and I know this business inside and out.”

I thought that explained nothing and I was still so confused about the arrangements.

“...and you'll also be engaged to him for the next six months.”

I immediately saw red and was suddenly speechless by the bombshell announcement, the dad just casually dropped.

“I didn't quite catch that, Dad.”

*I must have heard him wrong.*

Nope. My father repeated the news in exactly the same way. The fact that Jonathan Rhodes to think he could control people's lives from his mindlessly pushing them around like pieces on a chessboard.

Everybody knew his son, Dawson Rhodes, was an eligible bachelor, a billionaire playboy who didn't seem all that interested in settling down with one woman.

But the most twisted part was the last girl he had on his arm, was my college roommate. Every gossip column was always looking for something about them, speculating on when they would make things permanent.

What kind of games were father and son playing? Did they get a kick out of kicking those already on the ground? Or was it so important to my friend to prove that he's in control now?

I was so angry I couldn't see or hear properly. The world was wrapped in cotton and my heart was racing. I wasn't ready for whatever wimpy excuse he planned to feed me this time, so I hung up the phone.

My head was throbbing. I wanted to scream into my pillow so I could feel the hurt. I always felt better even though my dad said it was a bad habit.

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I knew my father had no choice in the matter. I also knew I would help him.

## Dawson

It was finally signing day. I studied Cresswell's group as they looked at the contract, wondering again how he could have run such a promising company to the ground. Not that I cared.

"How is your father? Any improvements?" Hank Cresswell was still looking at me, expecting an answer.

The contract was no longer in his hands, but in the smooth hands of the woman he had arrived with. His daughter, Alexa. My fiancée?

Her eyes were dark and stormy and her full lips were pulled into a frown. Her eyes furiously scanned the paper she was holding. She must have been informed of the arrangement. The feeling of dread was clearly mutual. If either of them thought they could use me as a springboard to dive themselves into a billionaire's family, they were dead wrong.

"He is where he is," I replied and forced my face to remain neutral.

Shock flashed briefly on their faces before Hank offered a sympathetic half-smile. It had come as a shock to even me that the once overbearing and confident Jonathan Rhodes was now on his deathbed, waiting to cross into the great beyond. After a lifetime of being in control and now he was unable to do anything but wait as his body failed him until the end. Ironic.

Alexa's death stare brought me back to reality. A fire burned in her chocolatey brown eyes even as her face remained stoic. Unfortunately for her, I wasn't backing down for anybody. I stared back without flinching.

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## Alexa

I heard his voice say my name as everyone left the board room where the signing took place. His voice was low and it resonated, not unpleasant to my ears.

*Do not!* I scolded myself for getting mesmerized by the deep tone of the man who had just stolen my father's place.

I slowly stood up and turned to face the tall, sleek man and met his gaze with the sweetest smile I could fake. I wanted my feelings toward him to be crystal clear. The handover was done, and if he decided he no longer wanted the engagement, it would be my pleasure to let him off the hook. I caught his eyes burning into my skin as I walked up to him. I was tempted to engage in another staring contest but I stuck to a pleasant smile.

*Calm down Lexa.*

He was seated in my dad's chair, at the head of the long table, looking comfortable. I hated that he felt like he belonged there. He would be there for the next six months. And my fiancé too. My smile faltered at that thought.

"What can I do for you, *sir*?" I was being a brat. But I couldn't help myself.

He looked bemused as he gave me a once-over, obviously trying not to intimidate me. I saw that glint in his eyes. But I matched it. I would make him feel like he could look down on me, even if he had all the money in the world. This was the first time we had ever spoken, even though our families claimed to be friends. I couldn't help wondering what he wanted. I was holding my breath until his words came.

"So, when are you moving in?"

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