

The  
LEGENDS

A man and a woman are shown in a close embrace against a solid purple background. The man is shirtless, wearing light blue athletic pants with a white drawstring. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a dark blue, distressed denim top with large holes at the knees. She is leaning in and kissing the man on the cheek. Her hands are resting on his chest and shoulder.

Playing  
THE  
PLAYER

New York Times Bestselling Author

ERIN MCCARTHY



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# Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Also by Erin McCarthy](#)

[About the Author](#)

## Chapter One

### *Mia*

Getting stood up sucked. I stared at my empty martini glass and felt sorry for my broke and lonely self, fishing the olive out to eat it as the crowded bar and restaurant around me hummed with happy vacationers and upbeat Christmas music.

I was starving. Absolutely starving. I looked longingly at a server delivering something that smelled like happiness and holidays on a plate to the table next to me. My stomach churned angrily and my mouth watered at the sight of all that steaming hot food. I didn't want to order an expensive dinner to sit there and eat it alone when I could fry up a toasted cheese at home, but that seemed like the very definition of sadness. It was also tempting to order another martini but then I would have to take a car service back to my apartment and spend more money I didn't really have in my so-tight-it-squeals budget.

Did I mention being broke sucked? Even more than being stood up by a man I'd never met.

That thought was super annoying, so I tried to get my server to cash out on my lone drink, which hadn't even gotten me buzzed. At twenty dollars a

martini, it should at least have given me a buzz and told me my outfit looked cute. The server was younger than me, and kept giving me ticked-off glances that I was hogging a table and not ordering. She might have even been more annoyed than me that I had been stood up by my co-worker's brother in-law's cousin, Kyle. I pulled my enormous handbag off the back of the chair and prepared to leave in defeat. My whole life was in that bag because I only went home to sleep at night, bouncing most days between one of my three jobs.

I hauled up Mississippi, my handbag. Named by my grandmother, because she said like the river, a little of everything had been tossed into that bag, most of which would never be found again. Only thing missing was a dead body. But if you, me, or a random stranger in the ladies' room needed anything, I probably had it in that bag.

The server had ignored my last three attempts to make eye contact, so I decided to just pull out some cash and leave it for my drink. The night was a bust, I was tired, and I needed some hot cheese like the desert needs the rain. Standing up, I grabbed my bag, swung it over my shoulder, and turned to get the hell out of there.

Only when I turned, both me and my bag collided with a solid wall of man muscle. Completely caught off guard, I stumbled in the heels I never wear—because Las Vegas hotel housekeeping staff have very little need for sexy footwear—and grabbed on to the random man's arm.

“Are you okay?” a deep, smooth voice asked me.

After feeling a momentary regret that it wasn't the snotty server Mississippi had nailed, I released my grip a little on his suit jacket, and looked up. Way, way up. He was tall. And broad-shouldered. With short caramel-colored hair, a strong jawline, dark green eyes, and a somehow charming jagged little scar along his temple.

He looked concerned.

And he should be, because something very strange was happening. I

couldn't speak. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth, my mind was a complete and total blank, and it felt like I had swallowed nine hundred olives instead of one. I had a lump in my throat, a knot in my gut, and a warm, liquid sensation deep in the heart of Trixie, my vag.

I name everything, I can't help it. It's called a quirk.

He was hot as hell and I was incapable of speech.

"You're standing on my foot," he said.

I looked down at the floor.

Yep. Definitely standing on his foot. There was one heel digging into one very expensive-looking black leather shoe.

That startled me into action.

"Oh, sorry!" I jumped backward, knocking my ass into the table I had just abandoned. The table shook, water splashing out of a glass, cutlery clinking, people turning to stare.

I felt my cheeks burn, which flustered me even more. I have so much pride it's a personality flaw, and I never blush. Embarrassed that I was embarrassed, it was time to exit less-than-gracefully. I yanked my bag back onto my shoulder and shifted right, trying to find a way around the massive attractive man who was making me feel like a middle school girl. Only trying to maneuver around him in a restaurant filled with tables was like trying to skirt Texas on a road trip. You can't just go around it. It's too damn big.

It was also then that I realized he had a wet spot on the front of his shirt and an empty glass in his hand. He had been carrying a drink when I slammed into him. I groaned. "Did I do that?" I attempted to wipe it away with my hand, which was absurd. It was an amber-colored splotch on his crisp white shirt. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," he said. "It's just a shirt."

"Come here," I said, gesturing toward the bar. "We need to get some cold water on that."

For a second, he looked like he was going to brush me off.



“I can save it if you get moving,” I said. “Time is critical in stain management. I work in housekeeping, so trust me on this.”

“You seem very confident about it.”

That made me feel better. “I am.” I needed to fix this because it wasn’t like I could fix anything else in my life. But stain removal was a skill I had perfected.

“Then I’d be stupid to turn you down.”

He followed me and I ordered an ice water from the bartender.

“Can you sit on the stool?” I asked the man. “You’re kind of tall for me to reach.”

He obediently sat and set his empty glass on the bartop. “You work in housekeeping?” he asked.

I nodded. “For Caesars. This isn’t an oil-based stain, so it will come out. If it was lipstick, we would be screwed.”

“If it was lipstick, I wouldn’t be sitting at the bar by myself,” he said, the corner of his mouth turning up.

I paused. Was that... flirtatious? It had been so long since I’d dated, I honestly wasn’t sure. I glanced at his hand. No ring. Well, not a wedding ring, anyway. He was wearing some gaudy class ring but nothing else.

“Then you’re really not having a good night,” I said, trying to sound light and flirty.

I must have succeeded because he said, “It’s turning around.”

He had green eyes with flecks of gold in them and he smelled like expensive cologne. I suddenly and inexplicably wanted to sit on his lap.

The bartender plunked a water down on the countertop in front of me. Hard. She brought the water faster than I would have expected, and the sharp movement startled me out of my gazing into the eyes of the random hot guy. She also smiled at me, which never happened when I ordered a water. But then I realized she wasn’t being helpful on my account. The smile was for the random hot guy.

Of course. She either thought he was hot, because he was, or she recognized he was more likely to be profitable for her than me. Which he also was. He looked like he had about two bazillion more dollars than I did.

“Can I get you another bourbon?” the bartender asked him, leaning forward to give him a view of her cleavage.

I rolled my eyes. Unfortunately, she saw me and gave me a disdainful sniff.

“I would love another bourbon. And whatever the lady would like,” he said, gesturing to me.

“Oh, no,” I said. “I’m fine, I don’t need a drink. And I’ll pay for your drink. It’s my fault.”

“You’re not paying for my drink. I was in your way.”

I dug in my bag, trying to find the credit card I kept in the zippered interior pocket for absolute financial emergencies. I shoved it at the server.

“Stop,” he said, reaching to grab my wrist. “You don’t have to pay.”

“It’s a three-hundred-dollar bourbon,” the server said.

I dropped my credit card and stared at her. “A bottle?”

“A glass.” She shot me a gleeful look, taking in my dress, which was from a discount store. Cute as hell, thank you very much, but not designer and not expensive.

I had made thrifting and bargain hunting something of an art form. It might even be called a hobby. To think that the little splash of liquor in that glass cost more than I’d spent on my wardrobe all year was mind-boggling.

I cleared my throat, my palms starting to sweat. That bourbon better taste like liquid gold and give him a hand job for that kind of money. “That’s fine,” I said, trying to sound casual. Like it was no big deal and not actually have the potential to give me a heart attack.

But the man was already retrieving my credit card from the counter. “No, it’s not. Put it on my tab.” He looked at her name tag. “Tiffany. Thank you.”

Tiffany looked disappointed that he was rescuing me from my faux pas

but she nodded. “Of course, Mr. Beckett.”

When she moved away I took a deep breath, hoping there was a polite way to ask for my credit card back, which he was still holding. I picked up a napkin and dunked it in the water. I liberally blotted the wet bourbon spot on his shirt, trying not to think about how muscular he seemed to be under that fabric and how long it had been since I’d had a man in my bed.

“What makes a bourbon that expensive?” I couldn’t resist the question because that seemed like a lot of money for about two fingers of booze.

“It’s rare. They only made like nine hundred bottles of it thirty years ago.” He shrugged. “A buddy of mine started his own distillery and was telling me about it. I was curious to taste it.”

“And what does it taste like?”

“Bourbon.”

That made me laugh. “I should hope so.”

He smiled. “I don’t think I’m sophisticated enough to know the difference. I do *not* have a refined palate. Though I think there is a vanilla hint.”

“I’m not even sure I have a palate.” I reached into my bag and rooted around until I found a stain stick. I pulled the cap off. Quickly, I rolled it over his shirt, not wanting to linger.

“I find that hard to believe, Mia,” he said. “You seem like a woman with a lot of layers.”

“How do you know my name?” I capped the stick and met his gaze, my heart starting to pound a little faster than it should.

“It’s on your credit card.” He held it up between his thumb and forefinger. “Mia Abernathy.”

“Oh.” Duh. I reached out for it. He shifted it away from me. I was more amused than I was nervous. It wasn’t like he could rack up a bill on that card. I had about two hundred dollars’ worth of available credit, not even enough to buy his bourbon shot. “Stalker,” I said, impressed with my flirtation skills

despite their lack of use.

He laughed. “Says the woman who has been all over me for the last five minutes.”

The bartender silently slid his bourbon over to him and he lifted it to his lips for a sip.

I raised my eyebrows. “I wiped a stain. That’s all over you? That seems like a stretch. I was just trying to be helpful. I’m like that. Super helpful.” I dropped the stain stick back into my bag. “Toss your shirt if you want—fill in the blank with your name here.”

“It’s JJ.”

“JJ Beckett, enjoy your bourbon,” I said, gripping the end of my credit card and tugging it, trying to extract it from his large hand. He didn’t release it. “Now give me my card back.”

“Only if you agree to have a drink with me.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m not a fan of blackmail.”

He released my credit card. “Then have a drink with me because you spilled bourbon on my shirt.”

I tucked the card away in my bag, more entertained than I wanted to admit. “I don’t like guilt either.”

“How about because you find me sexy and charming and intriguing in a James Bond kind of way? My real name is actually James. Feel free to use it.”

For a second, I hesitated, then I thought I would have to be an idiot to say no. I’d been willing to meet up with Kyle, a total stranger. Why not spend ten minutes talking to this guy? It was my night off, which didn’t happen that often, and I liked my outfit, personally. The short velvet dress with the empire waist made me aware of how long it had been since I’d put much attention into my appearance. This was the first time in months I’d even bothered to do my hair and makeup. Did I really want to go home and put on pajama pants again? No. No, I did not.

He was sexy.

I slipped onto the stool next to him.

“I can work with that, James,” I said.



## Chapter Two

*JJ*

A boring night had just gotten way more interesting. Thank God. I'd been on the verge of falling asleep sitting at the bar, bored with my routine, craving excitement, and disappointed my buddy had cancelled on me at the last minute, even though he had a good reason.

Mia, from housekeeping apparently, plunked her giant handbag on the bartop. It was the size of carry-on luggage and beat to hell and back. It looked like she had dragged it through a river and ran it over with her car. The fabric was undetermined but could best be described as carpet. It was as quirky and offbeat as she seemed to be.

I had actually been on the way to talk to her when she had popped out of her chair unexpectedly and plowed into me with that giant bag. For the twenty minutes prior I had been watching her and it was obvious she had been stood up. She kept checking her phone, glancing toward the door, waving off the server, and growing more and more irritated looking as she slowly sipped her one martini. Bored with my own company, and hating that she had that self-conscious expression on her face, I had intended to offer for her to join me.

Instead, she'd smacked into me, and then had proceeded to tend to me like it was of the utmost importance that she save the life of my Hugo Boss dress shirt. I didn't care about the shirt. I had a dozen more at home.

What I did care about was the fact that Mia didn't seem to have a clue who I was.

Not to be an asshole about it, but when you play pro football, sometimes people know who you are. At six foot five I tended to stand out in an average crowd anyway. Ninety percent of the time, I enjoyed the attention. Who wouldn't love the admiration of little kids playing peewee football? But sometimes, with women, it got old, the fakeness of it all.

I raised my hand for the bartender, who I knew would come over immediately. She'd seen my own credit card with my name on it and had commented about the postseason prospects. She knew I was a pro football player with a fat bank account and she wanted a great tip and maybe something more. She'd been flirting with me all night, but I wasn't interested, not because she wasn't attractive, but because I knew she just wanted to wake up in bed with a player and go home and brag to her friends. It was just... played out. Been there, done that. Or more like been there, done a different version of her.

On the other hand, I had given my name to Mia, curious if she would react or call me out on it. She hadn't, despite hearing my last name from the bartender. She also had clearly been intending to walk away and not pursue further interaction with me. I was glad she had decided to stay.

"What are you drinking?" I asked Mia.

"A vodka martini."

I ordered one from the bartender, whose smile had stiffened a little, and then studied Mia.

She was average height, curvy, with lush lips that were tempting me to taste them. Her nose was straight and strong, her cheekbones high, and her auburn hair was wavy and thick. Her dress wasn't showing a lot of cleavage,

but she had an enticing hourglass shape in a green velvet dress, and overall she was sexy and gorgeous and didn't deserve to be stood up.

"What do you do for a living, James?" she asked, resting her feet on the bar on the stool, her hemline shifting up higher from the movement.

I forced myself to lift my eyes from her legs and that shadow it created right over her knees. It was the perfect hole to slide my hand into and touch her creamy thigh. I cleared my throat, cock starting to harden at the thought.

It was also making me hot to hear her call me James. No one called me that. Not my mother, not my friends, not Sunday announcers during games. It made me feel like a businessman. Like she was taking me seriously.

She was waiting for my answer.

Was that a trick question? Did she actually know who I was? But she just looked mildly curious, nothing more. It seemed to be a polite question, not anything leading.

I opened my mouth and did something I never do.

I lied.

I wasn't even sure why. But it was interesting that she had no preconceived notion about me, because to her I was just another guy alone at a bar in Las Vegas. A businessman in town for work who bought bourbon he probably couldn't afford. It was odd but liberating. Like whatever she said to me would be honest, natural, not tainted with any sort of agenda tied to money or fame.

"I'm a luxury boat salesman."

Why the fuck I said that, I had no idea, other than I'd met a guy the week before at my buddy's cocktail party who had been in town visiting him and he was a boat salesman. He sold yachts worth millions of dollars.

"That sounds interesting." Mia didn't look like she thought it was interesting at all. "Is there a big market for that?"

"You'd be surprised."

"In Vegas?" She shrugged. "Though I guess rich people do things that

don't make sense."

"I live in Miami."

It came out of my mouth before I could even think about it. Because it would be stupid to be a luxury boat salesman in Vegas, she was right. So I covered my lie with another lie. Which wasn't a total lie. I did have a condo in Miami Beach that I went to in the summer when Vegas was hot as fuck and sadly lacking in giant bodies of water.

"What brings you to Vegas?"

Good question. "A conference."

Now I was officially catfishing her. James, the boat salesman, in town for a conference. I almost rolled my eyes at myself.

*Way to go, Beckett.*

Then because I didn't want to further discuss the career that I didn't actually have, I said, "Did you have a friend bail on you tonight?"

Her head tilted and she ran the tip of her tongue over her lip as she watched me. "You *are* a stalker. You were watching me."

"Guilty. I couldn't help but notice you, a beautiful woman sitting by herself."

"I didn't notice you at all."

That made me laugh. "Clearly. You ran straight into me with your big-ass bag. What the hell is in that?"

"Everything," she said, cheerfully. She took a sip from her martini.

"It looks like those dumpster bags people fill up with construction debris."

"That's not completely inaccurate. There probably is debris in here." She patted it with great affection. "It's saved me more than once."

"From what? Did you hide in it from a serial killer? Use it as a gravitational pull to the earth during a tornado?"

Mia shot me a look of amusement. "No, though thank you for the great ideas. I'll have to remember them. I have everything I need in here."

“You did have a stain stick. That’s impressive.” I glanced down at my shirt. The stain did seem to be disappearing.

“That’s just the beginning. I can feed your dog, floss your teeth, and fix your leaking toilet with what I have in here.”

I eyed her, a little dubious. “Fix a toilet? Come on. My father is a plumber. I call bullshit.”

With a certain amount of ceremony, she yanked open the bag. It was like the gaping mouth of a whale shark. “Look for yourself.”

“You’re going to let me look in your purse?”

“Sure, why not? I want to see the expression on your face. This will be more entertaining than going home alone to eat a toasted cheese, because yes, I was stood up by a man I’ve never met. Kyle. Do you know him?” she asked.

I grinned. “Yes, and he’s a real asshole. Parks in two spots and stiff service professionals.”

“He’s dead to me, then.”

“I was stood up too by my friend. He thought it was more important to be present at the birth of his child.”

“Wow, that is so selfish. You need better friends.”

I liked that she appreciated my sense of humor. I lifted my bourbon glass. “To new friends.”

“To new and better friends.” She clinked my glass with hers.

While she took another delicate sip, I touched the side of her purse, a little afraid to see what the hell she had in there. It was a place of wonderment. Mary Poppins-level shit. Just the top layer contained a sweater, a hairbrush, a spoon, and a phone charger. “Why do you have a spoon in your purse?”

“To eat cereal on the bus.”

That sounded horrifying, so I decided not to press her on it. “How many layers are beneath this one?”



“Dig around.” She shoved the sweater aside. “See? A wrench and a screw driver. Duct tape. A toothbrush. Sunscreen. Nail polish. A sewing kit.” As she spoke she touched and shifted objects around. “You give it a try. Dig in and see what you come up with.”

“This is like that game as a kid where you’d close your eyes and have to eat something and guess what it was. I hated getting mini marshmallows. They were so disgusting.”

“What kind of a game is that?” she asked. “Games in my childhood were more along the lines of run around the woods and leave the adults alone.”

“Where did you grow up? There aren’t a lot of woods in Vegas.”

“Georgia. Are you a native Floridian?”

For a second I wondered what would make her think I had grown up in Florida, then I remembered I was supposed to live in Miami full-time. “No. I grew up in Texas and went to college in Baton Rouge.” Stick to the truth as much as possible.

“You look like a college boy.” She made it sound like something of an insult, but before I could comment, she patted her bag. “Come on, play the game. Close your eyes if you want to be reminded of your childhood.”

“Oh, hell, no,” I said. “I am not closing my eyes.” I wasn’t even sold on the concept of rooting around in her purse, but I was willing to roll with it. “Okay, let’s see what you’ve got.” I peered into the bag and shifted around the sweater and the hairbrush. I spotted something intriguing. “What is this?” I pulled the jar out and read the label. “Hot sauce. Why do you carry around hot sauce?”

“I put that shit on everything.”

That made me laugh. “Fair enough. But what about this?” I lifted a slim candle and shook it. “Are you anticipating a power outage or a sudden need for a prayer circle?”

“I read that melted wax can unstick a zipper.”

“How often in one lifetime does anyone experience a stuck zipper?”

“I’m going to guess on average nine times.”

“Nine?” I scoffed, amused. “That’s excessive. You’re either buying cheap handbags or you don’t know how to zip your jeans. I think you’re overpreparing.”

“I do buy cheap handbags.” She took the candle from my hand and tossed it back into the abyss. “Next item.”

“A candy cane. That’s appropriate for the time of year.” I dropped it, then picked up a slim cylindrical item. “A lipstick.” The pink case started vibrating in my hand. I stared at it, then her. It was a pocket-size vibrator.

Mia was already grabbing for it, her eyes wide. “Put that down. I didn’t know that was in there.”

Now I was thoroughly intrigued. “Is this for emergency orgasms?”

Her cheeks were slightly flushed with color but she didn’t bluster and deny. She just snatched it out of my hand and shrugged. “Something like that.”

That was a visual. I pictured her in her car on her daily commute, vibe resting snug against her clit, teasing at her while she drove. In the ladies’ room at work, giving herself a quick stress-buster orgasm. It made my cock harden. It wasn’t a stretch to imagine her as someone who gave in freely to her sexual desire. She seemed like a very confident woman and I wanted to watch her pleasing the hell out of herself with that little vibe.

“It’s good to be prepared.” My voice sounded thick and raw.

“I thought you said I was overpreparing.” She showed me a pack of golf tees. “See? I don’t even golf. These got left in a hotel room, so I took them.”

“Does that mean you’re saying you don’t have orgasms?”

Her head tilted and she ran her tongue across her bottom lip. “I don’t know that I should discuss my orgasms with a strange man at the bar.”

“I don’t know that I should be sticking my hand in your bag either but here we are.”

She laughed. “When you put it like that...”

If she knew who I was and was eager to hook up with a pro ball player, I would have suggested we go to my place, right then and there. But she didn't and I had the feeling that if I moved too fast, she would turn me down flat.

But I also realized that I was enjoying talking to her, getting to know her. She was entertaining and quirky and pretty damn cool. And I had already decided that my night was ending with Mia in my bed. The mini vibrator had clinched it. Any woman who had to have her vibe within reach was bound to be a good time.

"You can dig in my pocket if you want to make it fair." I gave her a long look. "You might find something interesting."

She gave me a look, though I could tell she was fighting a smile. "You might have to go back to blackmail if that's your best approach." She sipped her drink.

"Hey. I'm serious. Pocket for purse."

"No! I'm not putting my hand in your pants."

"My pocket was all I suggested, but I'm down for your hand in my pants if you are."

Mia laughed. "Pants *pocket*. No. If you want to show me what's in there, you'll have to pull it out for me."

She was doing that word play on purpose and I found it both hot and amusing. "I'm getting really mixed messages from you."

Her voice lowered a little. "No, you're not. Show me what's in your pockets, James."

That sounded very much like a green light to me.

I stood up to make retrieval easier.

"Dang, you really are a very tall man." She was staring at my chest. "And big."

What guy didn't want to hear that? "It has its advantages."

"Selling boats?"

I'd forgotten that part. I shook my head. "No. Not particularly." I pulled

my phone and set it down on the bartop. “Just other... advantages.” My wallet followed. “That’s it. That’s all I have in my pockets. You had nothing to be afraid of.”

She looked dubious. Like no one would walk around with so little on their person. “What’s in your wallet? There has to be something odd in there or I don’t understand you at all.”

“I don’t think there is.” I flipped it open. “Here, look for yourself, since you let me in your purse.”

Her eyebrows rose and she shook her head as she smiled. “James. Order me another drink.”

Oh, hell, yeah. I raised my hand for the bartender.

I had thought she might demure at going into my wallet, but she didn’t. She flipped it open and studied my driver’s license. “You look mean in this photo.”

“They told me not to show my teeth. Without a smile, I look mean. It’s not my fault.” It might also be the result of a decade trying to look badass in team photos.

“This is a Nevada driver’s license.”

So I was no fucking James Bond, what can I say? “I got my condo in Miami Beach two years ago.” Truth.

“Hmm.” She flicked through my credit cards. “James Beckett Junior has a black card and a platinum card. Even I know those are the real deal. And holy shit, why do you carry so much cash?” She gave me an appalled look after thumbing through the bills in my wallet. “You could get mugged so easily!”

“How much is in there?” I asked, curious. I didn’t usually carry obscene amounts of money.

“It’s like three grand!” she said, her voice an urgent whisper. “Are you a drug dealer? Oh my God. Am I going to get caught in a raid?”

That made me laugh. “No. I am not a drug dealer.”

“You wouldn’t tell me if you were, would you? You probably think I’m a

cop. Narcotics detective.”

I eyed her from head to waist. If she was a detective, I was a preacher.  
“No. I do not think that. How would you even know I was going to be here?”

“I could have your phone tapped.”

“But I’m not a drug dealer, so why would you tap my phone?”

“I’m getting confused.”

“That makes two of us.”

Mia stared at me, like I was in tight with the cartel and just bullshitting her. “So you’re not a drug dealer.”

She was very cute when she was being suspicious.

“I am not a drug dealer. I promise. Other people besides drug dealers carry cash. It’s Vegas.”

“I’m very disappointed in your lack of wallet intrigue other than your giant wad of cash.” She slapped it closed and handed it back to me. “Stay in well-lit areas at all times.”

“Why, are you going to rob me?”

She snorted. Actually snorted. “Do I look like a thief?”

I shook my head. “You look like a lot of things, but not a thief. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, I am actually. I’m starving. Why?”

“Then let’s order you something to eat.” I wanted to know she was sober when she agreed to go home with me, because I liked Mia. This was the first woman in forever whose number I wanted. I could see myself actually going out on a date with her.

*After I got her naked tonight.*

Because damn, I couldn’t wait to see what she could do to me in bed.

Mia eyed me. “I should say no.”

“Why? Who refuses food when they’re hungry?”

“A woman who should be playing hard to get.”

“Are you? Playing hard to get?” She hadn’t walked away yet. That was



all I cared about.

“Not as well as I should be.”

“Who says you should be playing anything?” I put my hand on the back of her chair so that I was in her space, but not touching her. “It’s the holidays. We’re both alone in a bar. We’re just talking, no big deal.”

She nodded. “You’re right. We’re just talking.”

For now.

I was going to take Mia home and peel back all her layers.

## Chapter Three

### *Mia*

One entree, two drinks, three venue changes, and four hours later, we weren't just talking.

Nope. We were in the back of a car headed to where James was staying, and his enormous hand was on my knee stroking the bare skin. That hand was gradually making inroads on my thigh, giving me goosebumps and a pit of arousal deep in my core, as James basically eye-fucked me. He kept giving me smoldering intense looks that made me wish like hell we were alone. It was a good eye-fuck. I could have come from it if I had tried, which said fantastic things about where the night was headed.

It was possibly the longest ride in the history of Uber, even if it was only about two miles.

We hadn't even kissed yet because I wasn't going to make out in a bar or two feet away from a driver and now I was absolutely impatient for him to kiss me. Yearning to have him lean over and take my mouth with his, hard. There had been an almost-kiss while standing on the sidewalk outside the casino, where we had been waiting for our ride, but we'd been interrupted by a laughing group of friends stumbling outside.

Earlier, James had talked me onto the Ferris wheel and to see the Bellagio fountains, which I had never really paused to watch because I was perpetually rushing around from job to job. He casually spent some of that three grand in his wallet on my food and drinks, opened doors and pulled out chairs, and acted like I was the most interesting thing to happen to him in Vegas. I was flattered and flirty and now I wanted him to tear my dress off and really make me forget the real world and all of my pressing responsibilities like my mother's lingering medical bills from her diabetes and heart attack scare.

I'd had a great time and had felt more free of stress and worry than I had in a year, all the while knowing that James didn't live in Vegas. This was just one night. One unexpected, entertaining, arousing night of laughter and sex before I went back to being regular Mia, the maid and dog walker and barista. Mia of the three jobs. Broke Mia who took care of her mother. Mia whose rent was a tiny bit late every month.

Not this Mia. The Mia who was wined and dined by a large man with expensive taste and a jagged little scar that should have all been intimidating but was somehow cute. The man who sold rich shit to rich people and bought rare rich-ass bourbon. This was a once-in-a-lifetime-Mia moment and I was going to enjoy the hell out of James Beckett Junior, the luxury boat salesman.

The second the car pulled up in front of the condo James was staying at, he opened his door and jumped out with a word of thanks to the driver. He went around and opened my door and offered me a hand. Not with a smile, but with a look that made my nipples hard. I slipped my hand into his and stood up, hauling Mississippi along with me. That did make him grin as he glanced at my bag.

Once I was standing, he shut the car door, and leaned down to murmur in my ear. "Please tell me you have condoms in that thing and not just your personal massager."

His breath tickled my flesh. "You're just asking me that now?" I asked him. "Good thing I'm prepared for anything, because yes, I do have

condoms.” A whole box that had never been opened. I didn’t have time to have a relationship, to date, or even to have sex.

“You’re amazing, Mia.”

It was going to happen. The kiss. He had *that* look. The hooded eyes, the tilt of the head. I might be out of the game, but I could read his intention. I put my palms on his chest, wanting to explore more of that hard chest I’d gotten a feel of when blotting his shirt with ice water.

Then his lips were on mine, and in the cold December air, under the bright lights of a high-rise building on the strip, I lost myself in James’ kiss.

He was smooth and skilled and knew how to sell more than boats as his hands threaded through my hair and his mouth caressed mine.

I didn’t think there was a woman alive who would turn down a night in his bed after experiencing what he could do with his tongue.

After getting swept away thoroughly to the point of heavy breathing and wrapping my ankle around his so I could be closer, James broke away.

“Kyle is a fucking idiot,” he said.

That made me laugh softly. “I’ll tell him you said so if he ever resurfaces.”

“His loss is my gain,” he said, running the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip.

“I highly doubt I was going to sleep with Kyle,” I said, giving him a sly smile.

His eyes darkened. “*Damn*. Come on.” He led me through the front doors.

The condo was all glass and leather furniture in the lobby. James was greeted by both the doorman and the concierge as “Mr. Beckett,” which indicated to me this was a swanky-ass place if they even knew guests by their name. Neither man seemed to find it strange James was practically dragging a redhead with a giant handbag to the elevators. I didn’t care enough to worry about it. All I cared about was getting upstairs as fast as possible, and the nagging reminder in the back of my brain that I had to be at work at six in the

morning and it was getting later and later.

Fortunately, he was good at making me forget that fact.

James eased me against him in the elevator, one arm around my waist, the other pulling my hair out to study it. “Is this your natural hair color? It’s beautiful. It’s like a fall sunset.”

He was either drunk or well, drunk. My hair was nothing to wax poetic about. It was brown with an infusion of orange. Like the crayon, burnt sienna. “It’s my natural color.”

Letting the strands of my hair fall away from his fingers, he cupped my cheek. “Kiss me, Mia.”

He didn’t close the distance between us. He wanted me to do it, for whatever reason. But there was something hot about it, the way he confidently waited, knowing I would. I felt flirty and attractive, fully in the moment. So I didn’t hesitate to go up on my tiptoes and wrap my fingers around the fabric of his shirt for balance. I kissed him, and it was a deep, sensual kiss that would have been perfect except for one thing. I pulled back.

“James?” I whispered, staring into his eyes. We were so close our breath was intermingling.

“Yes, Mia?”

“I have a leg cramp. You’re very tall.” I was trying to ignore it, but my left calf was screaming.

He laughed softly. “My apologies.”

“I don’t stretch or get enough exercise,” I admitted. “I work too much.”

The elevator door opened and he bent a little and shocked the hell out of me by picking me up under the ass with one arm. One arm. Like it was no big deal. Holy hotness.

“Hold on,” he said, and put his arm in front of the door so it wouldn’t close.

My leg cramp was forgotten. I obeyed, wrapping my hands around his neck and my legs around his thighs. He pulled me up higher, snugly sitting

me on his waist like I belonged there. Then he moved out of the elevator and down the hall while he kissed me with hard, questing kisses. The man could multitask like nobody's business. It was impressive.

I didn't even see the hallway or which door he went to. My hair was falling forward, enveloping us, as a door slammed open into a wall. James walked me into the apartment, without getting even remotely winded, and into a bedroom. Just like that. Straight into the bedroom. He wasn't messing around and I appreciated that.

Of course, you could argue our whole night to this point was one giant flirtation, so we were clearly both ready for satisfaction.

He leaned me against a wall, still entangled around him. He tugged my bag down off of my shoulder. "Condoms?" he asked, urgently, his expression dark with need.

Somewhere in the recesses of the room there was a nightlight or something sending off a feeble glow, and while I could see his face up close, there was something sexy and urgent about being in a dark room with him. We'd spent the night under the bright lights of the city, and this felt like the perfect intimate ending.

"They're in there somewhere," I said, pressing my pussy against the front of his pants, causing us both to sharply inhale. "Just dump the whole thing out, I don't care. I want you now."

That wasn't something I would normally say, but then again, I didn't normally go home with a stranger. But there was something about James that had me turned on from the second I'd looked up into his eyes. Besides, there was something about just letting go of all my responsibilities and enjoying myself that had me hurtling toward the waterfall. I wanted to go over the edge. Now.

His one hand was holding my ass tightly, aiding in grinding us together like a couple of thirsty teenagers. His other hand upended my bag all over the chest of drawers we were next to. Everything went in all directions in the

dark with various sounds of shuffling, plinking, soft thumps, and one bang that was probably my wrench.

His phone light came on and I watched in amusement as he tossed items around under the illumination of the screen propped against the wall. He was very good with one hand. Great hand-eye coordination.

“Ha! Got ’em.” He lifted the box and shook it in triumph. Then he turned back to me and kissed me, hard. “Are you wearing panties?” he murmured, easing up the bottom of my dress.

Unfortunately. “Yes.”

“I have to put you down for one second.” James shifted my legs off of him and set my feet on the ground.

He opened the condoms while I ran my hands over his firm chest, wanting to both feel all that hardness and to regain my balance on my heels. Then I realized I could speed things up if I took my panties off myself, so I did that while he took down his zipper. I shimmied out of the panties and stepped out so I didn’t trip on them. That was all the time that he needed.

James ran a finger across my bottom lip as he hauled me up again, settling my legs over his hips, pressing my back against the wall.

His cock was nudged against me and I gave a soft moan. “You’re a very big man.”

“You’re a very wet woman.”

He was right. I barely had time to marvel at that.

Then he was inside of me and I forgot to think or speak or do anything but cling to James as he wall-banged me to within an inch of my life. His lips were buried in my hair as he thrust over and over. It created mind-blowing ecstasy.

To my complete surprise, I came hard, almost immediately. That tight coiling need that had been building all night inside me just exploded in a beautiful burst of hot pleasure. I might have cried out. I might have said his name. I definitely squeezed my inner walls on that thick, hard cock and

reveled in the sound when he swore, and followed me right over the edge.

Then he stopped moving, breathing hard, as we stared at each other. “Fuck,” he said. “That was...”

“Efficient,” I said without thinking, becoming gradually aware of how limp my body felt. Thank goodness he had some serious thigh strength or I’d be on the floor.

“*Efficient?*” He looked like I’d given him the world’s biggest insult. “Are you kidding me? That is *not* a compliment. Fuck, Mia.”

Okay, so I was out of practice with all of this. That probably wasn’t the best thing to say, truth or not. To me, efficient was a compliment. I lived my whole life rushing around trying to accomplish things as quickly as possible. But I had spoken without thinking. It sounded completely wrong.

I groaned when he pulled out and set me carefully down on the floor. My legs were wobbly and I held on to him. “No, honestly, that’s not a bad thing. We’ve been flirting all night. Fast and furious was exactly what I needed.” I was very pleased with the way things had turned out. “I’m as happy as a hog eating slop. Honestly.”

I wrinkled my nose as I heard the words come out of my mouth. *Way* out of practice. That hadn’t sounded sexy at all. I felt flustered and then annoyed with myself for feeling flustered.

He frowned. “I don’t know if that’s a compliment either. That is not the impression I wanted to give. I’m going to spend the rest of the night making you forget the word efficient. Fuck efficient.”

He had a lot of feelings about this. I laughed softly, pleased with the outcome whether he believed me or not, and pleased that he wasn’t going to just suggest I go home. That would have been an abrupt ending to a wonderful night. “James. Stop.”

“You’re going to be screaming *don’t* stop in about five minutes.” James emptied his pocket onto the mess on his dresser with a hard slap and tugged off his ring. Then he took my hand and led me to the bed. He turned me



around gently, his touch at odds with the fierce expression on his face. As he kissed the nape of my neck, he undid the zipper of my dress and eased it down until it was resting on my hips.

I shivered as he dragged his knuckles over my shoulder and down my arm. “I love your skin,” he murmured, his lips following the trail his fingers had taken. “So soft.”

His touch had me sighing, goosebumps rising. He undid my bra and turned me around again.

“On the bed, Mia.” James pushed me down, with the confidence of a man used to commanding.

He turned on a lamp, the soft glow allowing me to see his intense expression as he undid his shirt. When he tossed it on the floor, I was impressed by the hard muscles in clear view. He had a drool-worthy chest.

One of my shoes fell off as I fell back onto the mattress. He took the other one off and threw it. Like legitimately tossed it over his head. I was glad they weren’t expensive because that was some rough treatment toward a shoe that had done him no wrong. “What did that shoe do to you?” I asked, amused.

“Distracted me. It deserves to be punished for that.”

Then he was buried between my thighs and distracting *me*. He was all fingers and tongue and teasing and massaging. My eyes drifted partially closed as I instantly got swept away from his skill and possession.

“Oh, God, James, don’t stop...” I said, without thinking.

Then I realized I had played right into what he had wanted and I didn’t even care. I’d stroke his ego all damn night if he kept stroking me like this.

MY RESPONSE WAS to shift my hands under her ass and lift her closer up into my touch. I could taste her pussy all night. I loved hearing her soft cries of pleasure. Loved knowing that she was making those sounds for me. Just me.

I'm a competitive guy. Always have been. It makes me successful on the football field. So there was no fucking way I was going to let the night end on a word like efficient. Hell, no. I got what she was saying, and she'd had an orgasm, so it wasn't like she hadn't enjoyed herself, but it wasn't good enough for me. I wanted her boneless and begging.

Just when she was really starting to get going, her fingers tugging at my hair, her cries growing louder, I sucked on the taut bud of her clit. She gave a cry, coming hard. Oh, yeah. I loved the feel and sound of that. I teased my lips over her inner thighs, then moved up the length of her body. I loved how she had hips a man could grab on to and a narrow waist. Her skin was ivory, the complexion that would never tan.

Leisurely, I tugged first one nipple, then the other into my mouth. I lost track of time, but waited until again I heard the desperate hitch in her voice, then really focused, sucking her nipples while I stroked her pussy, dipping first one, then two fingers inside.

“Yes,” she murmured. “That. It’s perfect.”

I'd take that. She came again, softly this time, turning her head.

I moved on again, brushing my lips north over her chest and shoulders. I took a brief pause to ditch my pants, before returning to her soft skin.

She had freckles and it became very important to me to kiss each and every one.

“What are you doing?” she whispered. “You’re driving me crazy, James.”

“I’m kissing your freckles because they’re adorable.”

“We’ll be here all night if you try to hit every single one. I have like two hundred.”

“We have all night.” I moved up her neck and shifted over her. I stared

into her eyes, shocked by what I felt. By how fascinated I was by her. We might have all night, but I suddenly knew that wouldn't be enough.

I was tired of the same old, same old.

Mia was something entirely different and she had me wanting more. Wanting *her*.

A little amazed that she had just slammed into me with her purse and now mere hours later had me feeling like a fucking sap, I murmured, "I'm going to fuck you now."

Her eyes widened. "You have the very best ideas."

I gripped her hip and thrust into her, thoroughly enjoying the way she gasped, her eyes rolling back in her head. I moved slowly, taking my time, driving us both to the edge over and over. Her breathing changed, grew frantic. Her chest rose up and down, her head tilted back, eyes drifting closed.

She was gorgeous.

It was also becoming obvious that I was so fucking turned on by both the way she looked and the way it felt to have her pussy gripping my cock, that my goal of teasing her endlessly was backfiring. I was barely holding on. So I yanked her knees up further so I could bury myself balls deep inside her. Mia gave a low moan, and then cried out, her nails digging deep into the flesh of my back.

"That's it," I told her. "Come for me."

"So good," she said, her eyes rolling back.

I didn't bother to hold back anymore. I let go, pounding her hard, enjoying the release, the way she whispered my name.

"*James.*"

It was hot as hell and I just stayed there for a few seconds, the last few shudders rolling through both of us. Finally, I collapsed beside her on my bed, breathing hard.

"Wow. That's the happiest Trixie has been in ages." Mia lay on her back, her hands up over her hair, breathing heavily.

“Trixie?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

“My vagina.”

“You named your pussy?” I asked, amused.

“I name everything. My bag is Mississippi. Vagina is Trixie. I name my houseplants, my apartment, which is Casa de Broke Bitches, and my mother.”

Of course she would. That seemed appropriate for a woman who carried half of her apartment in her purse. “Doesn’t your mother already have a name? Like, Mom?”

Not that I wanted to talk about her mother right now, but I was amused by Mia’s easy chatter as I removed the condom and ditched it on the nightstand.

“Yes, but her name is Margaret and she’s just not a Margaret. Mama alone doesn’t really hit on her personality, so I call her Hot Mama. She loves it. I also have nicknames for my co-workers and my work shoes.”

Her work shoes? Okay. All of that was damn fascinating, but could we get back to how she felt post my dick inside her? “If Trixie is happy, does that mean I’ve redeemed myself?”

“You never needed to redeem yourself, but yes, that was very satisfying.”

I gave her a kiss. “Did you come enough? I aim to be a good host.”

“I came like six times,” she said, wryly. “If you hosted me any better, I’d pass out.”

“It was only three times. I can go again if you want.” I ran my eyes over her breasts. “I can’t get enough of you.”

“Again? As amazing as that sounds, I need to work tomorrow. I need to be able to walk.”

I teased a finger over her nipple. “Are you sure? I could at least go down on you again. I love the way you taste.”

“I’ve figured out how to totally manipulate you. All I have to do is say you’re efficient and you’re instantly competitive AF. Next time I’ll lead with that again.”

She wasn’t wrong. But I raised my eyebrows, intrigued by her wording.

“Oh, yeah? Next time?”

“Oh, God, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that or imply anything.” She pushed her hair back and turned on her side to face me. “That just came out, I don’t know why.”

I studied her. She looked more amused than embarrassed. “No, it’s cool. I’d like to see you again, Mia.” I meant that. She was interesting and intelligent and funny. Not to mention she had a body that wouldn’t quit. It also made me feel intense satisfaction that she sensed something between us too. Something hot, something... *right*.

Mia groaned. “Don’t do that. Tell me what you think I want to hear.”

“I’m not. I want to see you again.” I wanted to spend an entire weekend in bed with her. I wanted to take her to Miami and out dancing in a club. I wanted to buy her jewelry and fuck her on a private jet.

I was feeling things I never felt this fast after meeting a woman. But there was something special about Mia. “I need to see you again.”

She shoved at my chest and gave me a smile. “Get on your side of the bed and go to sleep, James.”

I obeyed but then immediately I hated it. “My side is lonely.” I reached out and hauled her closer to me.

She gave a cry of protest. “So much manhandling.”

“You weren’t complaining a minute ago.” I settled her into the little spoon position and sighed, feeling thoroughly relaxed and satisfied.

“No. I definitely wasn’t.”

Resting my palm on her hip, I tried to do what she asked and fall asleep. But having her juicy ass tucked up against my cock was not conducive to sleep, and when she shifted, it only made the situation worse. My dick swelled.

“Are you getting a hard-on?” she asked, sounding incredulous.

“Yes. I can’t help it. Your body is perfect.” I was also almost certain that she was moving her ass like that on purpose. She was wiggling again and no

one had that much trouble getting comfortable. “I suppose you can’t help that either.”

“Help what?” she asked and her tone made it clear that she knew exactly what she was doing.

“Rolling your hips and bumping your curves into my cock. I’m starting to get the impression you want me inside your ass. Either that or you want me to spank it.”

“I think you’re reading too much into it,” she said, her voice a little husky. “You’re the one who pulled me over here.”

Shifting my hand around to her pussy, I teased her clit, before easing a finger inside her. She moaned softly.

“You’re still wet, Mia... just one minute. I want my cock inside you for one minute, then I’ll let you go to sleep.”

I was already reaching for the condoms and tearing one open.

Mia stayed on her side but she glanced back at me. Her eyes were slumberish but filled with desire. “Not the back door. Not this time, anyway.”

Damn. “Yes, ma’am. Whatever you say. Your wish is my command.”

The corner of her mouth tilted up. “I almost believe you.”

“What does that mean?” I scissored her legs and eased my cock right into the welcoming heat of her pussy.

Her breath hitched. “I mean I feel like you can talk me into anything. You’re absurdly hard to resist.”

“Does that mean I get more than one minute?” I teased at her nipple, moving slowly inside her.

“Yes, I think it does, James.”

I smiled.

She couldn’t see me, but she said, “I can hear you smiling.”

That made me laugh, even as I stroked inside her. “That’s impossible.” I eased out of her and rolled onto my back. I pulled her onto my thighs and chest, enjoying the full weight of her draped across me. The new position

woke her up a little. Mia shifted, restlessly rocking her hips against me. I shifted my cock inside her and watched her push off of my chest, her hair spilling forward, breasts high.

Mia gave me a whole lot more than one minute.

She gave me another forty-five in three different positions and a blow job that I'd be thinking about for weeks.

We finally both passed out in an exhausted tangle of limbs.

Now that was how you turned a lousy night around and made it one for the record books.

Mia was one hell of a woman.

## Chapter Four

### *Mia*

*Y*ears of living under the fear of being fired and subsequently evicted had my body finely tuned to what time it was, no matter what I had done the night before.

So in the morning, after being thoroughly banged by James, I jerked awake, half sitting up with a heart-pounding gasp. What the hell time was it? The room was still dark, but that didn't mean anything. James had room-darkening blinds. A glance to my left showed him sleeping on his stomach, one hand dangling off the bed. Geez, that looked uncomfortable. His face was buried in his pillow.

My mouth was dry and I had the throb in my head from both alcohol and lack of sleep. My phone was in my bag, so after looking around for a clock to appear and concluding no such item existed in this minimalist bedroom, I eased out of bed naked, trying not to disturb James. I tiptoed across the carpet to the chest of drawers where we had dumped out my bag looking for the condoms. Items from Mississippi were scattered everywhere across its surface and on the floor. My phone was always in the interior pocket that zipped closed, and when I pulled it out, I almost had a heart attack.



It was five forty and I had to be at work in twenty minutes.

“Shit,” I whispered to my phone screen, as if swearing would alter the time. “Shit, shit.”

I dropped to the carpet and started tossing items back into my bag frantically. I couldn't be late. My boss, Dawn, was a power-thirsty Gen X tyrant who held female employees to a higher standard than the men. She would love the opportunity to write me up, or worse, fire me, and being at a busy coffee shop in a casino provided good tips that I couldn't afford to lose given my mom's recent medical expenses.

Grabbing my dress off the floor I stood up and used my arm to sweep everything off the dresser into Mississippi. I got it all with one motion, all of my various items tumbling into the bag. I shook it so the heavier items would fall to the bottom, giving the bag balance, and looked around for my bra and panties and shoes. I found the bra on the floor. No panties anywhere in sight, but I had a spare pair in Mississippi in a plastic bag, because you never know when you'll need clean undies. I spotted one of my heels, but not the other.

After crawling around naked on the floor for a solid two minutes trying to find the matching shoe in the dark, I decided to abandon the search. I was burning precious time. The shoe would have to be a sacrifice to the hookup gods. *Thanks for the bone, here's a nude cage heel.*

Tossing the one heel I did have in my bag, I moved into the living room, still naked, so that I could get dressed without risking waking James up. My bra went on along with the panties from my bag, then I dragged my dress on over my head. I figured the rest could wait. My work uniform was in my bag, along with sneakers, but I didn't have time to put them on. I could shove my feet in the shoes in the Uber, and change at work, teasing from my co-workers be damned.

Five forty-six.

Damn it. I glanced back at the bedroom, cheeks feeling flushed from waking up so quickly and rushing around. I didn't want to leave without

saying goodbye.

But what difference did it make?

James lived in Miami.

It was a one-night stand.

I couldn't manage a relationship in person in Vegas, given my schedule. I definitely couldn't handle one long-distance.

Which was absurd anyway. Just because James and I had clicked and had a great time, didn't mean he wanted anything more than what he had gotten. Which, let's be honest, was a lot. He had pleased me for *hours*. In many different ways. At one point my orgasm had been so cataclysmic it felt like I'd broken the sound barrier.

That kind of chemistry didn't deserve to be forced into a long-distance relationship doomed to fail. It was a one and done.

I had accidentally mentioned a next time. It had slipped out before I'd even considered my words, just because being with James was easy and fun. He'd agreed there would be a next time, but the man had me naked in his bed and wanted more, what the hell else was he going to say?

There was no point in worrying about any of it. He would go home to Miami and I would go back to cleaning hotel rooms and making lattes.

I left, making sure his front door didn't slam behind me, but softly clicked in place.

Barefoot and grateful that no one looked twice at anyone's morning-after outfit in Vegas, I jogged down the hallway and slapped the elevator button. Bouncing on the balls of my feet, I kept glancing back at the apartment door. I was worried James would open it and ask why I was leaving without saying a word and hold me up with exchanging numbers or murmuring platitudes about having had a nice time.

It did go against the rules of politeness I had been raised with by my grandmother to just roll out without any sort of explanation or at least a thank-you note for the orgasms. Well, not that my grandmother would have

suggested compliments for the orgasms. But you get the point. Everyone deserved the courtesy of a goodbye, especially a man whose tongue had been buried deep in your pussy.

But there was no time for manners when paychecks were at stake.

The elevator opened and I lurched inside, dropping my bag so I could dig out my jeans and drag them on under my dress the second the elevator door slid closed.

Back to reality.

My broke, boring, cock-free reality.

I sighed as I jumped up and down to get my jeans in place, while ordering a car on my phone.

No use in lamenting. It had been a great night and I had the sore body to prove it.

When the elevator opened I dashed out and gave the concierge a frantic wave as I blew past the front desk to the doors. I knew what I looked like. I had a dress on over my jeans and no shoes. God only knew what state my hair and makeup were in.

“Do you need a taxi?” the doorman asked as he opened the door for me and cold air blasted me.

“No, I called a car, but thank you. Have a great day!” I scanned for my ride and spotted it. I cried out as my bare feet made contact with the cold pavement. “Crap, it’s cold out here,” I said, stating the total obvious, as I bounced up and down.

“You have a great day as well, Miss Mia,” the doorman said with a smile and a nod.

I ran across the circular-entry drive and jumped into the waiting car.

It took me an entire rushed shift of steaming lattes and ignoring Dawn’s snarky comments to wonder how in the hell the doorman at a condo building James didn’t live in knew my name.

ROLLING over I reached for Mia's warm and naked body, wanting to spoon her.

I found nothing but net.

Mia wasn't in my bed. Popping my eyes open, I glanced around my bedroom, looking for her. I had no idea what time it was, so I felt around on my nightstand for my phone, knocking the box of condoms on the floor. It was barely after seven. I didn't even know what had woken me up given how little sleep I had gotten. It had to have been after three when Mia and I had finally stopped giving each other orgasms and given in to sleep.

But there was definitely no Mia in the room now.

Not only did I not see her, her bag and all the stuff she'd dumped out of it the night before were conspicuously missing. Listening, I didn't hear any sound coming from my bathroom. No shower or sink running, no toilet flushing.

Mia must have left.

Not going to lie, I was shocked.

Yes, that made me sound like an arrogant asshole, but I didn't have women leave without saying a word. It just didn't happen because of the whole pro athlete, I'm-rich thing. And I knew for a fact I was a pretty good fuck. Most wanted to draw out our night together, and all of them wanted my number. A few of my past hookups had had somewhere to be and would shake me awake to give me a little send-off sex.

But no woman, except for the one woman I wanted to see again, rolled out without so much as a fuck you.

I got out of bed just to make sure. But a look around my entire apartment confirmed Mia was gone.

There was no note on any visible surface.

I felt annoyed and more than a little disappointed.

What, she hadn't had a good time? Those orgasms were faked?

Bullshit. I didn't believe that for a split second. No one could fake that much wetness. I climbed back into bed and punched a pillow. The movement made her scent waft up from the sheets and I breathed in deeply, instantly getting hard.

Then I groaned. "What the hell?" I asked myself in my empty bedroom. "What the actual hell is wrong with you, Beckett?"

I stared at the ceiling, going through the whole night in my head. There was no indication that Mia hadn't had a good time. We'd hung out together for hours before heading back to my place, so she'd had multiple opportunities to pull the plug. Not only had she come home with me, she'd been a very enthusiastic and generous partner. Talking her into more sex after she'd indicated she wanted to sleep hadn't really taken that much effort.

She'd been into it. Into me.

There had to be a note, then. I rolled toward the side and let my hands dangle over the bed, feeling around on the carpet. Maybe it had floated underneath the bed. I didn't feel any paper. Instead I came up with a heel. I pulled it up and held it in front of me. Definitely Mia's shoe she'd been wearing the night before. It had really gotten tossed a distance, damn. The memory made me groan out loud again.

Using my hands to walk myself out and halfway off the bed in a partial plank position, I bent my head down to look under the bed for the other heel. Nothing. Collapsing back onto my mattress, I plunked the heel down on my nightstand and stared at it. That was some Cinderella shit right there. The hotel maid ran out before dawn and left a shoe.

It would be entertaining if it wasn't so annoying.

I had decided the night before it was no one-night stand. It seemed Mia had different ideas about us. I wasn't prepared to accept that.

Grabbing my phone off my nightstand, I punched her full name into various social media outlets. My thought was to reach out to her, convince her to see me again. I found her easily, but she didn't post often. The pictures of herself were minimal, the normal type of musings that people posted non-existent. Most of the posts were when someone tagged her.

Including one of her at the stadium, wearing a team jersey.

What the hell.

I sat upright, blowing the image up bigger. It was our quarterback's jersey, but still, she was there. At a game. I checked the date in October and knew for a fact I had been playing that day. I had only missed one game in the last three seasons and that was for concussion protocol.

Some guy had his arm around her. Was that her ex-boyfriend?

Did it matter?

She had lied to me. She had to have known who I was, which upset me. I had wanted her to like me for the guy that I was, *not* the player.

Of course, that made me swear out loud. I had lied to her. So what, I wanted her to like James the boat salesman? Who didn't exist? I had really botched this one.

I had exactly zero right to be annoyed with her.

That didn't change the fact that she'd left without a word though. There had to be an explanation for that.

I called the building valet.

"Good morning, Mr. Beckett," the voice said. "This is Randy, how can I help you?"

"Hey, Randy. Can you tell me if my guest found a cab okay?"

"Yes, sir. She ordered a car. I saw her get into it."

"And what time was that?"

"Just before six. I think she was late for something because she wasn't wearing shoes and she was running."

I glanced over at the heel on my nightstand. She must have been in a big-

ass hurry to leave if she rolled out barefoot in December. Or anytime, for that matter. I wouldn't want my bare feet in a stranger's car. "Thanks, Randy."

"You're welcome, sir. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, I'm good, have a great day."

"You, too, sir."

I tossed my phone down on my bed beside me. Then I immediately picked it up again, found her image, and stared at her. God, she was gorgeous. "What is your deal, Mia?" I murmured, as I scrolled through her pictures and found a different one of her winking at the camera. It felt like she was mocking me directly. What had she known about me and what had she wanted?

Not that it mattered. Not really. I still wanted her.

Getting out of bed, I decided it was time for a shower.

It was on my way past the dresser that I realized that everything was gone from the surface of the dresser, not just Mia's stuff.

Both my wallet and my championship ring were gone.

I definitely remembered setting them both down there when Mia and I had been tearing each other's clothes off.

I looked around on the floor and found nothing. I stood there, still scanning the empty carpet, astonished.

What do you know?

The player had been played.

Not only did she know exactly who I was, she had robbed me blind while I slept off the sex and bourbon.

Served me right for trying to bullshit her.

JJ Beckett was usually pretty savvy but apparently James, the boat salesman, was a fucking idiot.

I didn't care about the wallet. The credit cards could be blocked and I was fortunate enough not to miss a couple grand.

But the championship ring was irreplaceable. I had scored a touchdown in

the fourth quarter to clinch the win after a rocky start to our season my rookie year in the league when I was playing back east.

I had asked her if she was going to rob me. I had thought it was a joke. She had stared me in the face and asked if she looked like a thief. Wow, I was a total dumbass. The purse had probably been a ruse to get me to empty my pockets. I had played right into her quest for information. She'd seen my black card and a bunch of cash and I'd been the perfect mark.

Worst of all, I had liked her. I'd enjoyed her company, pictured a second date. She'd even been the first to mention a next time.

She was committed to her trade, I'd give her that. Not only had she faked me out entirely that she was interested in me, she'd ridden me like a champ.

I stared at Mia's high heel on my nightstand, my shock spinning into anger that I'd been so careless. My nostrils flared, my fists clenched. My championship ring was gone. *Fuck.*

Finally, with a growl of frustration, I grabbed the sexy little thief's heel and hurled it at the wall.

Which only resulted in me putting a hole in my bedroom wall.

That was winning right there.



## Chapter Five

*Five months later*

*Mia*

“*I*’m so tired I couldn’t whip a gnat,” I said to my co-worker and friend Christina. I sat down on the bench at the foot of the bed in one of the bedrooms of one of the hotel’s most exclusive suites and sighed.

It was a combination of mental stress and physical exhaustion. Since Mama’s stroke a month earlier, I’d been a constant ball of worry. Even now that she was totally on the mend and safe in a rehab transitional facility, I still worried about her. I also always had the weight of financial pressure sitting on my shoulders, threatening to crush me. I’d been working nonstop and I still only had eleven bucks left in my bank account after paying my monthly bills. I was worn out. Busted. Done up.

“I have no freaking clue what that expression actually means, but I can tell you’re tired. You’ve been walking semi-hunched over for the last two hours.” Christina picked up her caddy filled with cleaning supplies and gave me a look of concern. “You can sit this one out, I don’t mind. It’s the last room of the day.”

That had me standing up guiltily, though it took just about everything I

had left inside me. “No, this suite is huge. You can’t do it yourself.” I eyed the unmade bed with naked longing. “I wish I could take a ten-minute power nap. That would help me so much. I’ve been working for twenty hours straight.”

I always worked two jobs in one day, but usually clocked in around fourteen hours. This particular day the scheduling had just worked out that I’d worked at the coffee shop, then had said yes to a double shift overnight at the hotel. I had thought I could handle it, but what I was learning was that I could not, in fact, handle it.

“Go for it,” Christina said, heading toward the bedroom door to the living room. “I’m starting with the wet bar, so I’ll be right by the front door. I can warn you if anyone comes in, but a group of guys are staying here for a bachelor weekend and I heard them saying they were going golfing. You know whacking balls takes all day. They won’t be back for hours.”

“Are you serious? Do you think I should?” I asked, both appalled and thrilled at the idea of closing my eyes even for a few minutes. I had to go straight back to the coffee shop after my shift here was done. “I would totally get fired if anyone found out.”

“Who is going to find out? This suite takes two hours. How will anyone know if you take a power nap? Close the door to this room and I’ll text you if someone comes in, but I don’t think they will. Golfing takes forever and they just left when I came out of 2204 next door.” She gave me a grin. Christina wasn’t exactly a rule follower. She fudged minibar numbers on occasion and stole snacks and tiny booze bottles when it looked like a guest wouldn’t notice, and she vaped while cleaning. “It’s five rich and totally hot guys staying here. What are the odds all five would be hot? But they are. It’s like a suite of sexiness. I feel turned on just from walking among their dirty towels and expensive shit. Becca was considering pretending to be a stripper for a chance to meet them but then remembered she can’t dance.”

“I don’t care who they are, I’m just glad they’re gone.” I wanted that bed

like nobody's business. So much that it made me physically ache to think about being denied falling facedown onto that soft mattress with its high thread count sheets. The bed looked tantalizing and inviting. A fluffy white cloud that would envelop me and spirit me off to dreamland, where it would be transformed into a delicious pile of whipped cream I would eat by the handful and gain no weight. Not to be too specific or anything.

That bed had recently seen a totally strange and unknown-to-me male sleeping on its sheets and I was so damn tired I didn't even care. That's when you know you're exhausted beyond reason. I would just sleep on the top sheet and hope he wasn't a heavy sweater. "Though I guess it's less weird to crash in a hot guy's bed than a creeper's, right?"

"For sure. Pretend like you're his lover taking an afternoon nap while he golfs. Maybe he's out buying you jewelry before you go out tonight and drink Cristal and party in the VIP section."

"You've really thought this through, haven't you?"

"I don't get out much," she said. "You know that. But I have a healthy fantasy life." She gave me a grin.

Christina was a thin blonde who had once upon a time had aspirations of a singing career, but then had gotten pregnant by a nasty piece of work who was currently in prison. His "associates" had stolen everything Christina had and she was currently living with me with her adorable two-old-son. Together, with our combined five jobs, we could almost afford the rent. It was touch and go from month to month.

Plus it did not leave time for either of us to have a social life.

"Give me fifteen minutes," I told Christina. "Then wake me up."

I would set my alarm but I needed a backup plan or I might fall too deep into sleep and wind up groggy as hell instead of refreshed.

"Got it. I'll just be in the wet bar cleaning like a good little maid and stealing vodka, if there is any left."

"You can't steal vodka. This suite has full-size bottles. That will not go

unnoticed.”

She pouted. “Fine. I’ll just daydream about being rich. Maybe if I rub their suitcases, luck will wear off on me.”

“You can’t fondle guests’ luggage either. Actually, you can probably do that if you stick to the outside.” I toed my sneakers off. “I wish I could take my uniform off but that might be pushing my luck.”

“I would totally do it.”

She would. But I wasn’t that much of a risk taker. “I don’t want to be caught in my underwear by a stranger.”

“I’m your lookout. That’s not going to happen. Honestly, you should, or it’s going to be super wrinkled. And you know how that gets Cindy’s panties in a wad.”

She had a point. Our head of housekeeping was a stickler for a pressed uniform. Which was grossly impractical, by the way. Who can clean at their best efficiency in a dress? It was a change that was about three decades past due.

Maybe I was delirious from lack of sleep, but I unzipped my dress. “I’m only doing this to make the most of this power nap. I would never do this if I wasn’t so damn tired.”

“Totally. Keep your phone right by you. I’ll text if someone comes in, which they won’t.” She gave me a grin and pulled the door partially shut. She stuck her head through the gap. “Sweet dreams, Mia. Roll all over that guy’s sheets for me.”

“Don’t ruin this for me.” I peeled my uniform dress off and draped it over the bench at the foot of the bed as Christina pulled the door completely closed. Then I slid between the duvet and the top sheet, the cool linens caressing my bare skin. “Oh my God,” I murmured out loud. “This is heaven.”

For a brief second when I laid my head on the pillow, I had a scent memory, but it disappeared so quickly I thought I imagined it.

After setting my alarm and putting my phone right next to me, I barely had time to appreciate being horizontal before I was asleep.

*JJ*

I SHOULDN'T HAVE TOLD the guys about Mia. In a moment of impulse at the driving range, I confessed everything about my false identity as a boat salesman and the results. Well, not all the results. Some of the results. They didn't even know the worst of it and they'd still been confused as to why I hadn't called the cops on her, and hell, I couldn't blame them. I should have. She'd stolen a few grand in cash and a ring worth twenty-five times that.

But I couldn't explain it. I didn't want to see her thrown in jail. I just wanted my ring back. I wanted her back. So I could confront her, get the truth. Even if the truth was that she had just straight-up played me, I wanted to hear it from her own sexy lips.

After sitting on the stupid story for five whole months, I had confessed to my friends I tried to pull off a fake identity, and now I regretted it. My buddies were all in town for Train's bachelor party and part of me was jealous that he and Dak had both found women they wanted to marry. I'd never even come close to that kind of commitment.

For a minute, at two in the morning, warm in my bed with Mia, I'd thought maybe I'd found something with her. Instead, she'd robbed me, and I had become obsessed with her in the last five months. Completely and totally obsessed.

It felt like all my friends were all looking at me like I was an idiot, which I was. At least Miles and Cash were still single and would party with me later, because I needed to party. It was the best distraction for my constantly

churning thoughts. I took a swing and the ball went wide. It was when my arm was still in the air that I noticed how bare it was.

“Hey, did I leave my watch upstairs?” I felt my empty wrist, then my pocket. “Shit. Shit. I have to go get it.”

“Why? It’s not like you don’t know what time it is,” Train said.

“It’s a Richard Mille watch and it cost almost two hundred grand. I can’t just leave it lying around.”

“Why the fuck do you have a watch that costs that much?” he asked me.

“Because he’s a tool,” Cash said.

“Bingo.”

“Suck my dick. I’ll be back. I think I left it on the nightstand and I haven’t gotten insurance on it yet.” I wasn’t even sure why I hadn’t done it. But lately, I’d been having trouble doing much more than drinking too heavily and hooking up with random and willing women. I’d been on kind of a spiral since fucking a con woman.

“Well, that’s just dumb,” Dak said.

Seriously? I wasn’t having fun. At all. They all acted like they had all their shit figured out and I was the only fuckup. I threw my club down in irritation. It bounced up and hit me in the leg.

My buddies started laughing, which really pissed me off.

“I bet a boat salesman would have insurance,” Miles said.

That comment didn’t help either. “Fuck all of you.”

They just laughed harder.

Without another word, I left the range and made my way out of there. I was fuming. And I was actually worried about the watch. It would be just my recent luck to lose that too or have it stolen.

I called my assistant, Ji-Ho, who kept my life organized, and who loved a good suit as much as I did. “Hey, I need you to get insurance on the Richard Mille watch I bought.”

“Of course. I’ll take care of that right away. Greg said he’s been trying to

get in touch with you and you haven't responded. He has concerns you might be gambling too much."

"What are you talking about? I barely gamble at all." Greg was my financial advisor. I smiled back at an attractive woman who was eyeing me as I walked toward the hotel.

The hotel that Mia the thief worked at and that I had suggested to Train was a great spot for his bachelor party in the hopes of catching a glimpse of her working.

"You've spent five nights at Caesars in the last five months."

I had. It had become a once-a-month habit to just check in to the hotel, order a bunch of supplies from housekeeping multiple times during the stay there, and wait for Mia to show up. She hadn't yet. It had been a revolving door of different housekeeping staff, but never her.

Sure, I could have contacted her on social media, found out a phone number for her. But she would never respond, given she had stolen from me. I wanted to catch her completely off guard.

It was a little obsessive, I could admit it. But I had the money, it was off-season, and I wanted to find her. "So? I think I spent a few hundred bucks each time. That's not exactly a gambling problem." Nor the purpose of my visits.

"He wants to know why you were there."

"It's none of his business."

"You pay him to make it his business."

Ji-Ho didn't necessarily sound like he cared one way or the other, but was just doing his job. He was right. I did pay Greg to keep vigil over my spending. "That's when the exterminator comes to my apartment every month. I don't like the smell."

There was the slightest hesitation, then Ji-Ho just said, "I'll let him know. But you might consider returning his call on Monday."

"Fine. I'll talk to you later."

When I got to our suite, the housekeeping sign was on the door and the supply cart was parked in the hallway. Maybe this time, finally, it would be Mia. As soon as I stepped inside though, I saw a blonde in her mid-twenties dusting in the living room, a half-eaten cookie dangling from her lips. Her mouth opened and the cookie fell out onto the floor. Her eyes widened.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she said, sounding horrified. “Oh, my God, I’m so sorry, we’ll be done soon.”

I held my hand up. “It’s fine. Don’t rush. I just need to grab something from my room.”

Her eyes darted to the bedrooms. My gaze followed hers. The door to my room was closed. I didn’t remember closing it. Maybe the other maid was vacuuming behind the door or something. As I started in that direction, the blonde was tapping on her cell phone.

“Sir!” she said, startling me.

I stopped and turned back. “Yes?”

“Would you like turndown service this evening?”

For half a second, I thought she was propositioning me. Like turndown service would be her pulling my sheets back and getting in with me naked. But she looked more nervous than flirtatious. “Sure.” I nodded. “Thanks.”

I started walking again.

“Sir!”

What the hell? At the door to my room, I took a deep breath and tried not to be a dick. “Yes?” I was less polite and more impatient this time.

“Would you like extra towels?”

I stared at her. “No.”

Opening the door to my room, I shook my head. That had been weird. I moved across the room quickly, relieved to see my watch still on the nightstand. The maid hadn’t even been in my room from the looks of it. My bed was lumpy, the covers pulled up over my pillows.

Wait a minute.



I had left the covers down.

I retrieved my watch and paused at the nightstand, studying the room. It didn't feel like I was alone. Easing the watch over my wrist, I noticed that the covers seemed to shift a little. Definitely not alone. I swore I heard breathing too.

What the hell was going on?

Without hesitation I jerked back the duvet on the bed.

What I found beneath it shocked me speechless.

It was the maid. In her bra and panties.

And it was Mia Abernathy, stain-remover extraordinaire and lying little thief.

She screamed and scrambled further down under the covers, pulling a pillow over her semi-nakedness.

As if I hadn't seen and touched every single inch of her curvy, wet, and willing body.

Here I'd been hoping to catch her off guard, and instead she had me completely astonished.

"What the hell are you doing?" I demanded. "Why are you in my bed?"

Another cry of shock came from the doorway behind me. The blonde was wringing her hands. "Oh my God! I tried to warn you, but he didn't want extra towels."

"*James?*" Mia asked, pausing in her quest to cover herself and staring up at me in shock. "What are *you* doing here?" She had gone completely pale, a light dusting of freckles visible on her cheeks.

I hadn't seen the freckles on her cheeks before because she'd been wearing makeup the night we met. But I had seen the ones scattered above her breasts. Her high, luscious, and sensitive breasts. My cock started to harden with the memory and from being so close to her again.

That annoyed me and I laughed roughly. "Right. Like you don't know. Like you just had no fucking clue that I was staying here with my friends and

you had no intention of robbing me again.”

“What? Why would I rob you?”

“Drop the bullshit, Mia,” I said, pissed that she sounded so convincingly confused. She was a hell of an actress and that made me feel even more like a total idiot.

“How does he know your name?” the blonde asked.

I turned and glared at her. “Because she told me her real name, which seems stupid when you’re stealing from someone, but hell, I’m not the criminal mastermind here.”

“I’m not either!” Mia said, scrambling to sit up. “I didn’t steal from you or anyone else. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No? So you come back to my place, fuck me, then disappear before I wake up. And somehow my wallet and ring go missing with just the two of us in my apartment, but that wasn’t you?”

“Damn,” the blonde said. “You hooked up this guy, Mia? Don’t keep a secret like that, girl. Tell everyone. I would. He’s rich and hot.”

“Thank you,” I told her, giving her a wink just to piss Mia off and because I wanted to retain some kind of dignity. I didn’t think this could get worse, but it did.

Mia said, “It was just one night. It wasn’t a big deal.”

Yeah. Dignity fucking gone. Tossed right out the window.

I’d only been thinking about that night for the last five months but she dismissed it as no big deal. Awesome.

“Why are you in my bed?” I asked. I yanked the duvet completely off the mattress and dropped it at the foot of the bed. Her maid’s uniform was laid out there on the bench. “Let me rephrase that. Why are you in my bed in your bra and panties? Were you going to distract me so your friend could steal my watch?”

I hated to admit it, but she *was* distracting me. God, that was a lot of bare skin peeking out around that pillow she was clutching...

“Leave me out of this!” the blonde said, grabbing my attention. I turned to see her shaking her head rapidly. “I didn’t have sex with anyone or steal anything.” Then she wrinkled her nose. “Okay, I stole those cookies from your minibar. And I took a sip of Grey Goose. But it was just a sip.”

This was insane. I turned back to Mia.

She swallowed hard. “I just wanted to take a nap, I swear to you, James. I didn’t know this was your room.” She shifted on the bed and reached out for her uniform.

I got it first, swiping it off the bench and holding it up over my head. “Do you want this? Is this what you want?”

Her green eyes widened. “Yes. Give it to me. I can’t lose my job.”

“You should have thought of that before you took it off. Give me my ring back and I’ll give you your uniform.”

“What ring? I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She dropped the pillow she was clutching to her chest and held her hand out again. “Please? James, seriously. Please.”

Her tone had turned slightly seductive. My mouth went dry at the sight of her in a plain ivory lace bra and matching panties. Her tits were enticingly close to me, her hourglass shape making my mouth water. I remembered very well what it had felt like to be buried inside her heat while she made those soft sounds of encouragement. She had banging curves, and I had held on to those hips while pumping into her, hard.

I swore and lowered the dress.

She reached for it again.

I’d be damned if I let my dick do the decision making for me this time.

Turning on my heel, I kept the uniform firmly out of her reach. “I don’t think so. Just hang out here until your memory is jogged as to where my ring is.”

With that I left them both in the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind me.

Tossing her dress over my shoulder, I went to the wet bar and poured myself a giant glass of bourbon.

Mia the thief was my maid.

I'd wanted to see her again, hear her tell the truth.

But she wasn't admitting shit and she was in her underwear and I had a hard-on.

She'd tricked me, ripped me off, humiliated me, and I still wanted to fuck her six ways to Sunday and eat breakfast in bed with her.

This was officially a complete and total fuck-all disaster.

## Chapter Six

*Mia*

*I* stared at the closed door in complete shock.

“What the hell is happening?” Christina asked.

I had been sleeping in James’ bed and he had caught me, that’s what was happening.

I wasn’t sure what was more shocking—seeing him again after all these months or hearing him accuse me of stealing from him.

“He took my uniform,” I said, dumbly, on my knees on the bed in nothing but my bra and panties. He had slept in this bed. I had slept on the bed where he had slept. It wasn’t a creeper’s bed. It was the man who had shown me the best time I’d had in years, both in clothes and out.

The man who lived in Miami and I’d had to bolt out on because of work.

“That does pose a problem. He’s still in the other room, right? I didn’t hear the front door close. Maybe he’s just messing with you and he’ll give you your uniform right back.” Christina stuck her hands in her pockets and started pacing. “How do you know this guy anyway?”

“I met him at a bar in December and we hooked up.” I ran my fingers through my hair, swallowing hard. “I can’t believe I did this. I can’t believe I

got caught.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stall him any longer.” Christina bit her fingernail. “Should I go out there and try to talk him down? Why does he think you stole his ring?”

“I have no idea.” My brain was still foggy from both being ripped out of sleep and the shock of seeing James. An angry James.

My alarm had just gone off when Christina had frantically texted me a guy was coming into the room. I had thought my best bet was to hide under the covers until he left, but in hindsight that was a bad idea. Possibly my worst yet, after taking off my damn uniform and sliding into a guest’s bed in my underwear.

“Oh my God, why am I so screwed?” I moaned, standing up so that I could appropriately pace back and forth dramatically. “How did this even happen?”

“You had sex with a rich guy and didn’t tell me. I’m still stuck on that. Get me up to speed.”

“I ran into him, literally, with my bag, and we hung out and then went to the apartment he was staying at. He’s a luxury boat salesman from Miami.” With a great smile, a generous spirit both financially and sexually, and big... hands. “I woke up, I was late for work, I had to leave without saying anything or leaving my number.”

“You left like a dude?” Christina looked impressed. “Damn. I wish I could do that, just once. But you know me. I sleep with a guy once and I let him move in with me.”

“I know,” I said, dryly. “And I really wish you’d stop doing that. But I’m telling you, Chrissy, I have no idea what he’s talking about. He was wearing some big-ass ring but he took it off at some point. It probably fell behind the nightstand. But I didn’t steal it, you know that.”

“Of course I know that. If either of us were going to steal shit, we wouldn’t be working seventeen jobs and living in a tiny box of an apartment

with neighbors who probably cook meth.”

There was a couple next door to us that was highly sketchy. “Exactly. So I’ll just calmly go out there and explain to James that this is all a big mistake. I’ll just be firm and polite and professional.”

“Professional? Girl, you’re in your underwear.”

Fair enough. “Go finish cleaning the room before Cindy wonders where the hell we are. I need a towel.” I went into the bathroom attached to his room and yanked a bath towel down off the shelf and firmly wrapped it around me. James was very tidy. He had his toiletries lined up left to right in what might be the order of use. But there was definitely some kind of pattern to it. No dirty towels on the floor or the countertop.

When I went back into the room, I flipped open the lid of his suitcase sitting on the valet rack. No clothes. When I dropped the lid back down, I saw the suitcase had the signature logo for Gucci. Even I knew that iconic symbol. This suitcase had to set him back a pretty penny. The closet revealed suits and shirts and pants all neatly hung up. Shoes were lined across the floor, and damn, the man had a lot of shoes. Sneakers, dress shoes, hiking boots. Curious now, I opened a dresser drawer and found shorts and T-shirts, folded like a display counter at the mall. Another drawer contained folded underwear and socks. Then finally there was a whole drawer of accessories. Cuff links, a money clip, four ties, a gold chain, and a pocket square.

So basically all I could conclude was he was a psychopath.

No one was that neat on vacation, were they? It wasn’t like I had a ton of experience jetting off for fabulous vacay weekends with friends. Maybe I would be like this too. Then I thought about my room at home. About Mississippi, my bag. And the state of my work locker downstairs and realized I was probably, by definition, a dirty girl.

But that was also in part because I worked *all the time*. When I wasn’t working, I was visiting my mother at the assisted-living facility, Oak Harbor, or sleeping. I didn’t have time to hang my clothes, let alone fold underwear.

Underwear doesn't need to be folded. It goes on your butt. It's a service garment that no one sees, for the most part. Throw those undies in a drawer and move on with your life.

The process of invading his privacy made me feel more stabilized. It wasn't hard to imagine that a guy who unpacked like this would have a hard time processing the fact that he'd lost his ring. Which he obviously had, since I didn't steal it. He must not be able to comprehend that he had misplaced anything, given the psycho orderliness of his life. I took a deep breath, checked the knot on my towel, and opened the door to confront the man who had given me a year's worth of orgasms in one night.

Christina was arguing with James. "I can't do that. I can't just not clean all these rooms when it's a five-bedroom suite. If one of the other guests is upset the room isn't cleaned, it's on me. I'll get in trouble."

James was leaning against the wet bar, a drink in his hand. He was dressed in a sweater and golf pants, both expensive looking. My uniform was over his shoulder. "Does that mean you're actually in housekeeping?" he asked Christina. "Or is this all a ruse to steal from guests?"

Christina's cheeks turned red. "If this was a ruse, trust me, I would not be standing here talking to you. Some of us have people counting on us. I can't lose this job."

James' jaw worked. "I will tell whoever needs to be told that I didn't want the room cleaned. Just leave me alone with Mia."

"Why, so you can 'teach her a lesson'?" Christina's shoulders went up and her fists clenched.

"What?" James looked startled and horrified. "No! Of course not. Jesus. No. I would never physically harm a woman." He looked nauseated by the thought.

I didn't know James well, but nothing I had seen from him the nine hours we'd spent together had given me any indication he was that kind of guy. But Christina knew enough shitty men to fill the Bellagio fountains, so she wasn't



sold that easily.

“I’m not leaving,” Christina told him, firmly. “Girl code. Never leave your bestie alone with a douchebag.”

“Why am I a douchebag?” he protested. “I haven’t done anything.”

Feeling like Christina had regained the upper hand for me, I stepped up to the bar. “I don’t know, those pants are kind of tight. That’s a little douchey.”

Unfortunately, it sounded more flirtatious than I intended. It didn’t have the right effect.

“At least I’m wearing pants,” he said, his eyes sweeping over my bare legs to settle on my pussy briefly before rising to meet mine. “How’s Trix?”

Heat pooled between my thighs. God, I regretted telling him my nickname for my vagina. But I had been firmly in the afterglow of my nine millionth orgasm when I had, so I’d had no control over myself.

“Oh, damn,” Christina said.

“You’re the one who stole my uniform!” I said.

“You’re the one who got naked and crawled into my bed.”

“I was not naked,” was my only leg to stand on.

“Take off your towel and remind me,” he said.

We stared each other down. Memories flooded my mind, all involving his very large body over me, under me, in me. My mouth went dry. I was speechless.

It was at that moment the door to the suite flew open and to my complete and utter horror, two men strolled in. One was a big, hulking man, the other was a thinner, but equally fit, guy.

I didn’t wait for anyone to react or notice me. I was back in that bedroom so fast the Flash had nothing on me. My heart was pounding with a rapidity that couldn’t be healthy, but holy crap, I had almost gotten caught in a towel by guests. Guests that I hadn’t slept with. I cracked the door open slightly and listened.

“You could have sent us a text, you asshole,” the one man said. “We were

waiting for you.” Then he turned to Christina. “Is he giving you a hard time? Just say the word and I’ll punch him.”

“Leave her alone,” James said. “She’s the maid. She’s just trying to do her job.”

At least he believed Christina wasn’t in on some elaborate scheme with me. I would hate myself if she got in trouble, or worse, fired, because I’d let down my hair (and taken off my dress) one night in a thousand.

“Like... the maid maid or the stripper maid?” the other guy asked.

“The maid maid,” Christina said. “If I was the stripper maid, I would have better nails.” She held up her hand with her short clear nails as proof. “Now, just to be totally clear, should I clean this suite or not?”

“Why do you have a maid’s uniform on your shoulder, JJ?” the first man asked. “And who was that woman who ran into the bedroom in a towel? Was she a maid too?”

“Will you just mind your own business?” he told his friend. He turned to Christina. “We don’t need the suite cleaned,” he said firmly.

She looked at the other two men. “Would either of you like your room cleaned?”

“I feel really confused,” the one said. “Like I’m not sure what is happening here and if this is all about fresh towels or something else so I’m just going to say no.”

“I’m fine, too,” the other one said. Then he spotted me in the doorway. “Hi, I’m Cash. Is JJ doing all right by you?”

“Shut up, Young,” James said. “She can take care of herself.”

At the moment, I wasn’t sure that was true. I had no clue what I was supposed to do now. The only thing I could think to do was to close the door on them. I didn’t like that look on James’ face. He looked both angry and hurt and I still had zero clue why he would have thought I’d stolen from him. I just knew I wanted to get out of this suite with my panties and my job intact.

Not that he looked like he wanted to have sex with me.

But I didn't trust myself not to if he turned on the charm. Our night together had provided the fuel for many a solo session fantasy.

A second later, the knob turned and the door opened.

James filled the space with his big masculine frame. My heart started to race.

"What am I going to do with you?" he asked, shutting the door behind him, leaving us alone, standing very close to each other.

"Let me go back to housekeeping?" I asked, hopefully. When had I ever been eager to clean? But right now I'd trade scrubbing a toilet for this weird tension in one second flat.

He shook his head. "Not until I have some answers."

Yep. We were going in circles. "I don't have any answers."

James leaned against the door, blocking my exit. "Then I guess we'll be in here until I do."

*JJ*

"YOU CAN'T KEEP me hostage here all night," Mia said, her chin going up.

"Try me." I was furious and I needed to hear the truth, from her pretty, lying little mouth, that she had used me.

"This is ridiculous," she said. "I have a job. I need to get back to work or I'm going to get fired. Plus, I need to get to my second job in less than two hours."

"Then talk fast." I crossed my arms over my chest, and my ankles, as I leaned on the door.

She made a sound of exasperation. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

“You have a lot of confidence for a woman in a towel,” I said. Her uniform was still over my shoulder. “The ring, Mia. Where is the ring?”

“What ring? Oh my God!” She threw her arms up in the air, which almost made her towel slip off. I waited to see if it would fall, but she caught it. She carefully redid the knot.

“I was wearing it the night we met. Then I took it off because I was worried it would scratch your bare skin.” I watched for her reaction. “Because I’m a nice guy,” I added, feeling determined to drive that home.

Not everyone might agree with that. Some might even call me a player, but I wasn’t a liar and I was generous. It wasn’t my fault that most women wanted more than I was willing to give them.

Apparently, this woman just figured that my reputation meant she could steal from me.

Mia stared at me. “That class ring you had on? That’s what this is about? Why would I steal *that*?”

I frowned. She was a very convincing liar. I was starting to doubt myself. “Because it’s worth a lot of money. Like my watch that was next to you on the nightstand when I came into here.”

“I never saw your watch. I just wanted to sleep for ten freaking minutes. I’ve been working for twenty hours straight. Besides, how much could a watch be worth?”

Was this a trick? A way for her to gauge value? Fine. I’d tell her. It would prove her motives if she tried to steal it from me. Good luck getting it off my wrist. She’d have to kill me to get it away from me. Not even twelve straight hours of sex could talk me into removing it from my person. “A hundred and eighty thousand dollars.”

Her jaw dropped. “A hundred and eighty grand for a watch! How is that even possible? Is it a Tardis so you can time travel with it? Does it give you a blowjob while you’re time traveling inside it? And good grief, how can you afford that? Are you the Jeff Bezos of boat salesmen? You sell a boat every

minute?”

I stared at her. She really thought I was a boat salesman? Now I was one hundred percent confused. I had no idea what the fuck was actually going on here.

“I like nice things,” I said, because I wasn’t sure what the hell else to say. I’d seen her at the stadium on her social media page. It seemed unlikely that she didn’t know who I actually was.

She snorted. “There is nice, and then there is absurd. That kind of money for a watch is completely and utterly absurd. I could buy a house for that kind of cash.”

“I don’t need your opinion on my lifestyle. I spread my wealth around. I’m not a greedy man.”

That didn’t seem to soften her. She just rolled her eyes. “Great. Good for you. You’re awesome, James, congratulations.”

My jaw twitched. Why was she getting under my skin so damn bad? Because she was. Normally, opinions about my free-spending lifestyle just made me laugh. I had a ton of money and I spent some of it. You only live once. I wasn’t hoarding it in a bank somewhere. I was stimulating the economy, and donating quite a bit to various charities, and I never felt like I had to justify or explain any of that.

Just to Mia.

Maybe she thought I was overextending myself. Or stealing from the boat dealership. But she couldn’t really think I was a boat salesman, could she? I decided I had to feel it out.

“Do you like football?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Pro football. I saw you wearing a team jersey at the stadium on your social media.”

“You stalked me on social media?” She looked outraged at the very idea.

“I wouldn’t call it that. You left without a word and stole my wallet and

my ring. I was trying to see if you'd given me a real name."

"I didn't steal your stuff! Get that through your stupid thick head!"

"You didn't have an issue with my thick head in December."

"That's disgusting."

I actually laughed at that. She couldn't pretend to be modest after I'd heard her beg for more. "Anyway. Do you like football?"

"I don't know anything about football. And clearly I know nothing about you because you did not seem like the type of man to keep me trapped in his hotel suite in my underwear." Her nostrils flared a little as she used her hands to punctuate each word. "I'm going to get fired."

There was no way I could actually keep her there. That was, in fact, kidnapping and I was pretty sure the league would frown on that. But I wasn't quite ready to let her walk out of here. She hadn't admitted to anything. "Relax. I'll talk to your boss, tell her we needed extra attention in our suite."

She wrinkled her nose. "That makes me sound like a sex worker. And with all due respect to sex workers, I don't think the hotel is going to cosign on that kind of thing. Besides, I have a second job I have to get to."

"What, counting cards in the casino?"

"You're hilarious. I didn't notice that the first night we met. I guess you were hiding certain parts of your personality from me."

"Oh, that's ironic coming from you. I admire the way you got me to whip out my wallet so you could count my cash."

"I didn't get you to whip out anything!" she said, her voice shrill.

I raised my eyebrows at her. "Not true. You got me to whip out several things. And you were very *efficient*, I might add." That word was burned in my memory banks. She'd said it casually, maybe even teasingly, but it was like taking a punch to the nuts. That word could suck my dick. I hated it now. It pissed me off in all the ways a man could be pissed off.

There was a knock on the door. "Hey, Beckett, we need to talk." It was

Miles.

I opened the door about a foot.

What I wasn't prepared for was for Mia to use the opportunity to jump on my back like a spider monkey, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I demanded, stumbling an inch forward before regaining my balance. I was used to taking hits designed to knock me off my feet. A woman with no experience on the field and about half my weight wasn't going to be able to take me down. But what I didn't understand was what she was trying to accomplish.

"Let me go!" she yelled.

Miles' jaw had dropped and his eyebrows were damn near the suite ceiling. I imagined that was probably what my own face looked like.

"You're the one hanging on me!" I said, unable to believe what was actually happening. But it was. And I could feel the soft press of Mia's tits against my back and the warm heat of her pussy even through my golf shirt.

Her towel must have fallen off in her leap onto me.

I tried to turn but I couldn't see her. I just succeeded in accidentally knocking her into the doorframe. "Sorry," I said, automatically. Because she might be a thief, but I didn't want to hurt her.

"You all need Jesus," Miles said. "That's all I'm going to say. That, and Train and Sydney are getting married. Beckett, you need to put on a suit and be respectable for thirty minutes."

That was definitely news. "Damn. They moved fast. Yeah, tell Train I'll be there. No worries." I choked a little when Mia's arm tightened around my neck. She was sliding down my back and using my throat to hang on so she didn't fall off. I used my right arm to give her ass an adjustment so she was further up my back. "Miles, this is Mia, the woman I told you about. Mia, this is my buddy, Miles."

"Sure." He looked like I had lost my damn mind, which maybe I had.

"I met her in December when I was in town for the boat convention,

remember?”

Now the corner of his mouth turned up. “Right. Of course. Makes perfect sense. Nice to meet you, Mia.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” she said, and slid all the way down off of my back. “Got it.”

“Got what?” I turned and realized what her plan had been. She’d gone for her uniform over my shoulder and it was now in her kleptomaniac hands.

She quickly shoved it behind her back so I couldn’t take it away from her. Her cheeks were flushed from the exertion and her freckles were visible again. I was instantly aware that if I moved too much to the right or left, Williams would see her in her bra and panties and I did not want that. I frowned at her and stepped forward out of the room, closing the door behind me.

“You didn’t see anything, did you?” I asked him.

“I saw more nonsense than I wanted to, I can tell you that. What the hell is going on? Keep your kink in your own room.”

“No, I mean, you didn’t see her, see her, did you?” That was very important to me. I didn’t want my taking her uniform to result in her feeling exposed in front of strangers.

I wasn’t a stranger. She could be in her underwear all day long with me, as far as I was concerned. She seemed to feel the same way. She didn’t appear overly concerned with my seeing her half-naked. That ship had clearly sailed.

“No, I didn’t see her. Why does it matter, Beckett? What is with you and this woman?”

I had no clue what it was. But it was something. I had to assume Mia was listening at the door, so I just shook my head. “I’m just trying to get my ring back, that’s all.”

“I don’t have your stupid ring!” Mia yelled from behind the closed door.

That made me grin. Yep. She was a thief *and* an eavesdropper.



God, she was hot and I was one fucked-up guy to think so.

## Chapter Seven

### *Oleksander*

Sydney wanted to marry me and I wanted to marry her before she changed her mind. I burst into the suite, prepared to crack heads to get the guys on track for the ceremony.

Miles and JJ were standing outside of JJ's room, and he had his hand on the knob of the closed door. "What are you doing?" Downstairs, Miles had mentioned something about a stripper maid and JJ acting strange. Whatever. I wanted no information and no drama on my wedding day. "Beckett, give the stripper a big tip and send her home early. You have to get ready for my wedding."

The door rattled. "Let me out, James," a woman demanded.

I raised my eyebrows. "*James?*" I asked JJ, amused. "How very official. And let the woman out, for fuck's sake."

"Shut up," he said. "I was going to." He released the doorknob.

The door jerked open and a redhead in a maid's uniform was standing there. "Where's Chrissy?" she demanded, attempting to look around us.

"She left," Miles said.

The woman looked flustered and she glanced down at her phone. "Oh,

she texted me.” But then she shoved the phone in her pocket. She reached behind her head with both hands. “I can’t get my uniform zipped up all the way. This day is just stupid.”

“I can zip it up,” JJ said.

But she just gave him a glare. “No, thank you. I’ll just cover the gap with my hair.”

Damn, what had he done? Or not done?

As entertaining as this whole exchange was, my phone was ringing and it was Syd. “Hey, baby, what’s up?”

“My dress doesn’t fit! Well, it fits, but my big belly split a seam on the side.”

“Just buy a new dress, then. I’ll bring you my credit card.”

“There isn’t time, Olek. I’m freaking out. Maybe I can just pin it closed.”

“I can fix her dress,” the stripper maid said.

“What?” I had Sydney moaning in my ear, and not in the way I enjoyed, and the redhead talking at the same time. “Hang on, Syd, give me one second.” I looked at the woman. “You can fix her dress?”

“Yes, I heard what she said. She sounds upset. I can fix a ripped seam in less than five minutes. I just need to grab my bag.”

I was all for problem solving in whatever form it arrived. I wanted Sydney relaxed and enjoying our wedding day. And night. “Great, thank you. I’m Train, by the way.” I stuck my hand out.

“Mia.” She shook my hand.

“Baby, I’ll be there with help in less than ten minutes. JJ’s friend can sew the seam back together.”

“Oh, okay, great, thanks, honey. But who is JJ’s friend?” She sounded bewildered by that.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

I ended the call and asked Mia, “You can go now, right?”

She nodded. “I have about an hour and a half before my next job.”

“That’s fantastic, thank you, I appreciate it. We’re getting married in two hours. My fiancée is pregnant and I guess the fit is a little tight.”

“Congratulations, that’s so exciting.” She gave me what appeared to be a genuine smile.

“Thanks.” I may have puffed out a little like I was the first guy to knock up his woman, but I couldn’t help myself. I was excited about the future and making Syd mine. “Okay, Williams and Beckett, you need to get ready while I deal with this dress crisis.”

“I’m going with you,” JJ said.

“Why?” I stared at him blankly. “I don’t think the girls want you in there while they’re getting ready.”

“Because I still need to talk to Mia.”

“No. You don’t,” Mia said. She was still fussing with the back of her dress, trying to get the zipper up.

JJ reached out in total exasperation and jerked it up.

“Don’t touch me,” she said.

“It’s a little late for that.”

Mia was giving JJ straight-up stink eye and I grinned. “Sounds like she’s figured out what an asshole you are, Beckett.”

“Fuck off.”

“Come on, let’s go, then. Come if you want, I don’t care. I just want to make Sydney happy.”

“You don’t want her to change her mind,” Miles said.

“Damn straight.”

*Mia*

I WAS COMPLETELY IRRITATED that James had insisted on accompanying me to the bride's room. The crisis had seemed like the perfect opportunity to get away from him. I also genuinely wanted to help. Fixing a seam was something I could do in my sleep and a bride has enough to deal with on her wedding day. I could alleviate a bit of her stress.

But James, who no one else seemed to call James, was walking way too close to me for comfort. I didn't know what to do with my feelings for him. My brain was saying something was off about him and he was trouble. Trixie had other opinions on him, all of them positive and involving orgasms.

While I'd gotten my uniform back, jumping on his back had made my body very much aware of how it had felt like to be in bed with him. How amazingly satisfied he had made me.

Even now, my nipples were tingling because his arm kept brushing mine. "Can you stop bumping into me?" I said. "I'm not supposed to be with a guest in the hallway like this. I don't want anyone to see us together." Of course, there were cameras literally everywhere, but if he would get off of me maybe no one would think anything of it.

His friend, Train, had gone straight to his fiancée's room, but James had insisted on escorting me to my locker to grab my bag and clock out for the day. It was obvious he thought I was just going to bolt. Which was super insulting. I had said I would fix the dress. I would never ditch out on something like that.

But, in spite of having touched every inch of the other person's body, it wasn't like we actually knew each other. Clearly.

"If we see anyone, just say you're getting me extra towels." He sounded confident that nothing would be an issue.

Which was easy for him to say. He was the one with the stupidly expensive watch and apparently a valuable ring. Not me, the one with bills piled up like the Luxor hotel. A pyramid of bills demanding money I didn't have. James was the kind of man who said things like that because for him, it

always worked out in his favor. I knew not everything would go my way. Life had proven that multiple times. And it was cool, because hey, that was life. Can't let it get you down. But that didn't mean I wanted Mr. Money telling me something was okay when he had no fucking clue that it actually was okay.

"You don't know my boss. She doesn't allow fraternization between staff and guests."

"Too late for that," he said, sounding downright cheerful about the fact.

I wanted to take a towel and wipe that smirk off of his ridiculously good-looking face. Then kiss him. I sighed.

"All the hotels in Vegas and you had to stay at this one?" I asked. The irony wasn't lost on me.

"I didn't pick the hotel. Train did. It's his weekend."

"Why do you call him Train?" I asked, curious in spite of myself.

"The Ukraine Train. It's a nickname."

One that sounded vaguely familiar, though I had no idea why. We were approaching an area that was off-limits to guests. "You need to hang back. Look at your phone and pretend like you're lost or something. You can't go in the back of house with me. This is staff only."

"Got it. But don't disappear and never come back."

I gave him a hard look. "I wouldn't do that to Sydney. I said I would fix her dress."

He held his hands up. "Okay. I believe you. It's just that you clearly want to get away from me."

"Do you blame me?" I asked him, dryly.

James laughed but he also shook his head. "I don't even understand why you're mad at me, to be honest. I didn't do anything wrong."

"You just accused me of stealing and then you stole my uniform." I felt myself getting hot all over again. "Never mind. Just behave yourself. Please. I'll be right back. Or better yet, go up to the room and I'll meet you there."

“I can behave myself when it’s necessary. I’ll wait here.”

“Of course you will.” Because why would he make this easier for me?

I went in the staff area, used my ID card to clock out, then went straight to my locker and changed into jeans and a T-shirt. I grabbed Mississippi and texted Christina back who kept urgently asking if I was okay. I wasn’t thrilled she had left me alone in that suite, but I realized she hadn’t had much choice. She’d needed to cover our asses with Cindy. I wasn’t supposed to wander the hotel in street clothes unless I was in the casino or had rented a room, so I felt very conspicuous as I went back to where I had left James standing.

Without a word, I walked right past him and straight to the elevator bank. I knew he would follow me.

Once the elevator doors closed behind us, he ran his eyes over me. “You look really sexy, Mia.”

“I’m wearing jeans and a plain blue T-shirt,” I said, scoffing, even as I was secretly pleased.

“Your curves…” His eyes had darkened and his gaze dropped to my ass.

Uh-oh. My nipples were tightening and I sucked in a breath. Time to get the hell out of there. I practically ran off the elevator. “Which room?”

“Huh?” He followed me, his hands in his pockets.

A glance at those tight pants showed he had a massive erection. I sank my teeth into my bottom lip. I didn’t mean to, I just did because I was remembering how that cock felt inside of me. But he saw the gesture and gave a low growl.

“I shouldn’t want you, but I do,” he said.

That snapped me out of it. I was the one who shouldn’t want *him*, not the other way around. “Oh? Well, I don’t want you. Just so you know.”

“Liar.”

“Just tell me the room number,” I said through gritted teeth.

After a pause, he did and I stomped off down the hallway, knocking

harder on the door than was strictly necessary.

A woman with glasses and wearing a cat sweater opened the door. “Oh, hi, JJ.” Then she smiled at me. “Are you here to save the day? Oleksander said you can fix Sydney’s dress?”

I nodded. “I work in housekeeping and I am a seamstress as well.”

“Thank goodness. Come in, please, and thank you. I’m Eloise, Sydney’s cousin.” She gave a pointed look at JJ when he started to enter the room behind me. “Did you need something else, JJ?”

“I don’t think he does,” I said, answering for him. I glanced back at him with a grin. “I’ll see you later, buddy.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Yeah. For sure. One hundred percent, *pal*.”

But then he just stood there.

“JJ?” Eloise prompted. “We’re changing in here. You have to leave.”

“Right. Sorry.” James turned, then hesitated. He opened his mouth. Closed it. Shook his head. Then left.

When the door shut behind him, I sighed in relief. I didn’t trust myself around him. I couldn’t risk my job and he made me both insane and aroused. “Okay, so where is the bride?” I asked, hoisting Mississippi up further on my shoulder.

Eloise smiled. “This way. So... how do you know JJ?” she asked. The question was deceptively casual. But she couldn’t mask her curiosity.

“Bourbon was spilled on his shirt and I helped him get the stain out.” That was the only truth I was willing to admit to among strangers.

She didn’t have an opportunity to respond because the bride rushed over to us and showed me the split on the side of her dress. “Thank you so much for helping! Look at this. I’m literally bursting at the seams. This is all Olek’s fault for getting me pregnant.”

“Seams are the easiest to fix,” I assured her, reaching out and assessing the damage. “If it’s okay, I’ll just sew you into the dress so it’s definitely secure. It might tear again when you take it off later, but it will hold until



then. Does that sound good?”

“It sounds fine. It’s not like I need it again after tonight. Besides, Olek would love a green light to rip it off of me.” She smiled. “I’m Sydney, by the way. I’m not usually this much of a mess.”

She seemed more excited than anything else to me. “I’m Mia. And you’re not a mess. You should see some of the brides that come through this hotel. Total bridezillas. We see a lot on staff.”

“I bet. Stress makes people crazy.”

I set my bag down and reached inside for my sewing kit. It took me a second to find it, but then I had it and clicked it open to root through. “I’ve never been married, so I can’t exactly judge. Maybe I’ll be the ultimate bridezilla someday.” If I ever had time to properly date and find a mate, which seemed unlikely.

The third woman in the room, a tall blonde, was lounging on the bed, scrolling through her phone. “I was probably too casual about the whole thing, to be honest. I relied on my friend who loves weddings to do the heavy lifting. Fortunately, my husband wasn’t too worried about it. This was his second marriage.”

“That’s Dakota,” Sydney said. “She’s a newlywed but her husband is in Scotland playing golf right now. Sydney’s wedding was a little spontaneous.”

That was a lifestyle I knew nothing about. Just winging off to Scotland for golf. Nor did I ever see myself spontaneously getting married.

I threaded my needle and bent over. “Let me know if I accidentally prick you. I’m usually pretty good but I haven’t had much sleep in the last few days.” Or really, at all. I think I’d gotten seven minutes of shut-eye before James had interrupted me.

“You’re fine. And I don’t know how I can ever repay you for doing this especially since you’re clearly not on the clock right now.”

“I’m happy to help,” I said, carefully stitching the fabric together as tightly and neatly as possible.

“Let me at least pay you something for your time.”

“No, that’s totally unnecessary.” I meant that. Did I need the money? Sure. But I hadn’t offered to help hoping to get something out of it. I’d offered to help because I could alleviate wedding-day stress in one small way for her. “I’m already almost done. It’s not a big deal. I had some time before I go downstairs for my shift at the coffee shop.”

“You work at the coffee shop too?” Eloise asked. “Wow. You’re on your feet all day. I work at a desk, so I have the opposite problem. I’m a slug after a nine-hour work day.”

“What do you do?” I asked Eloise as I stepped back to check my work. A desk job sounded amazing right about now. My feet were killing me and I wasn’t sure I knew how to straighten my back to a proper posture position anymore. This was gearing up to be the longest day of my entire life.

“I’m in social media for a professional football team. Sydney, that reminds me, we need to get ahead of this wedding on social platforms. We need to release photos ourselves, not allow them to leak.”

That was interesting. So someone was famous or an influencer.

“Whatever you think, El. I trust you entirely.”

I made another adjustment to the dress. “How does that feel? Does it feel secure?”

Sydney glanced down and smoothed down the fabric. “It feels great. Thank you so much, Mia. Please, let me do something for you. You saved me from wearing jeans and a stretchy top at my wedding.”

Waving my hands, I protested. “No big deal.” Then I had a thought. “Uh, but there is one thing you can do. Don’t tell Mr. Beckett I work at the coffee shop downstairs. Please.”

All three women stared at me in surprise.

“Mr. Beckett?” Dakota asked. “Who is that?”

Eloise laughed. “It’s JJ, Dakota.”

“Oh, duh.” She laughed. “I’ve just never heard anyone call him mister

anything.”

“We will definitely respect your wishes, Mia. But is there a particular reason you don’t want him to know where you work?”

I nodded. “Yes. I don’t want to see him ever again.” My feelings for him were complicated and ridiculous. He infuriated me with his insistence that I had stolen from him, and yet at the same time, I was still attracted to him. Which was stupid and I didn’t have time for that kind of nonsense in my life.

Tucking my sewing kit back into my bag, I straightened up. “I’ll be right downstairs at the coffee shop if you need anything else. Just pop in and find me and I can do a quick fix if the seam starts to go anywhere else.” Though I was seriously contemplating begging one of my co-workers to switch shifts with me, because I was starting to feel like I couldn’t stand without swaying. I also felt a little lightheaded.

“Thank you.” Sydney looked like she wanted to give me a hug, but at the same time like the very thought made her feel awkward.

I backed up to save her the decision. “You’re welcome.”

No one seemed inclined to talk me out of my vow to never see James again, so what did that tell me? They must think that was the smart choice to be making. Or maybe they were just minding their own business.

Whatever the case, this was it. I was going back to my ordinary dull-as-dry-toast life.

I waved and opened the door to exit into the hallway.

And ran smack into James.

## Chapter Eight

*JJ*

*I* grabbed Mia's arms when she plowed straight into me and prevented her from stumbling. "We have to stop meeting like this," I said.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked, jerking away from my touch.

"I was waiting for you."

"Why?" she asked in exasperation. "We're done here, James." She started down the hallway at a fast clip.

She had a great question. Why was I waiting for her? I didn't even know exactly. "I want to hear the truth."

Hearing my own words out loud, I knew what it was I wanted. I wanted the truth to not be the truth if the truth was she had targeted me as a mark, and hooked up with me for the sole purpose of robbing me. Because I just couldn't wrap my head around the idea that she was that good of a con woman to have faked everything.

Orgasms included.

"What truth? Because you think I'm lying and I *know* you're lying."

That caught me off guard. "I don't know what you're talking about. What am I lying about?" Besides everything.

Mia slapped the elevator button. “Bullshit. What is the real situation here? One, no one calls you James. They’re *all* calling you JJ. Two, the bride’s cousin said something about getting ahead of the social media on the wedding, which means the bride and/or groom are famous in some capacity. Three, you have a ton of money. None of it adds up.”

I cleared my throat and held the door open for her when it opened.

“You’re either a drug dealer as originally suspected or you’re some kind of trust fund baby due to inherit a major corporation.”

Both of those offended me. “Neither of those are the truth.” I watched her slap the button for the lobby level and cross her arms over her chest. “I’m a professional football player.”

She dropped her arms and stared at me. “What?”

“I’m a wide receiver. I went to LSU with the guys I’m here with this weekend. Dak North, Oleksander Volkova, also known as the Ukraine Train, Miles Williams, and Cash Young.”

Understanding dawned on her face. “I thought the nickname the Ukraine Train was vaguely familiar. Football. Wow.” Then she looked up at me. “Well. I feel incredibly stupid. I actually believed you were a luxury boat salesman.”

That made me feel like a total dick. “Don’t feel stupid. I shouldn’t have lied. It was wrong. But I don’t know. I just liked that you didn’t know who I was, that you were talking to me as me. As James. Not as the player you would want to be seen with. Does that make sense?”

“I don’t know,” she said, sounding completely grumpy. “Whatever, it doesn’t matter. It was just a one-night stand.”

At the time, it really hadn’t felt that way. But I guess she was right. “A very hot one-night stand.”

The doors opened. She turned to me with a smirk that both made my dick hard and gave me a warning she was about to say something I was going to hate.

“It was very efficient,” she said.

Yep. I hated that.

But it was also so well-timed and so completely savage, that I was even more hot for her, and more determined than ever to see her again.

And with that, she stormed off, disappearing into a crowd of fifty Japanese tourists checking into the hotel.

## HER COMMENT WRECKED MY NIGHT.

Sure, I was happy for Train and Sydney. They looked very much in love, Train continually putting his hand on Sydney’s baby bump as they smiled at each other. Dak and Eloise spent the night ogling each other and making out. Dakota Macnamara kept mentioning how much she missed her husband.

Was I jealous? A little. I couldn’t remember the last time a woman in my life had genuinely loved me. And was that my fault because I had partied too hard and played the field? Probably. At the time, when my bed was filled with beautiful women, sometimes in multiples, it had been a hell of a time. Didn’t mean it didn’t suck now though. If I were being brutally honest, it hadn’t always been fun either. Not every time, not every woman. Sometimes there had been awkward moments in the morning and angry moments of expectation from women who wanted more. Sometimes the sex hadn’t even been that great. Vanilla sex. Going-through-the-motions sex. Masturbating-with-another-person sex.

It’s hard to have a meaningful connection with a woman who you just met.

I’d had the connection with Mia. It had felt very, very real to me.

Now I felt fucked over and pissed off and had to keep retreating to my room in the suite to pace back and forth and check and recheck my valuables. I had left Mia in there alone for at least five minutes on two separate occasions but nothing seemed to be missing.

Miles wanted to go out and party after the impromptu wedding reception ended, and Cash said he was up for some blackjack. It was either that or spend the night wide awake in my room cursing a certain redhead and wondering what the hell it was about her that had her still taking up space in my head. For five months I had been churning over what had gone down between us, and now it was worse. Because now she'd looked me in the eye and denied stealing anything, and fuck it all, I wanted to believe her.

I wanted to find her. Talk to her. Kiss her.

Instead, I went out with Miles and Cash and got loaded and lost a bunch of money.

Because that would teach her a lesson, damn it.

"I'm out," Cash told me, pushing his chair back. "I'm about even, so I'm calling it a night."

"It's five in the morning," Miles said, after gesturing to the dealer to deal him a card. "I don't think that's calling it a night."

"It's five?" I asked, shocked. "Damn. Time flies when you're drunk and losing money. I'm down like two grand. I'm going to get a coffee and come back." I was about ninety percent sober. The coffee would get me back to right.

"I'll be here," Miles said. "This table is hot right now. Get me a coffee."

"What kind?"

"A coffee. Black. None of that fancy shit you drink."

I laughed. "Got it."

Cash walked across the casino with me in the general direction of the lobby. He headed toward the elevators with a wave and I continued to the coffee shop. Even at the early hour, or late, however you chose to look at it, there was a line. Everyone needed their caffeine fix. I got in line and studied the snacks lined up alongside the queue. Nothing looked appealing. A burger sounded better than a granola bar.

"Hi, what can I get you?"

My head snapped up.

I knew that voice.

The last time I had heard it it had been tossing a snide remark at me.

A certain redhead was behind the counter, her hair piled high on her head in a messy bun. Her face was drawn, her freckles bright spots on the pale backdrop of her skin. Her eyes widened when she saw me. “James.”

“Mia,” I murmured, wondering how it was possible that she was a cashier as well as a maid in addition to being a con artist and thief. That seemed like a lot to juggle.

Then, without warning, her eyes rolled back in her head and she dropped to the floor.

### *Mia*

WHEN I CAME TO, I was on the floor, staring up at James. God, he was so good-looking. His face was filled with concern. He also was slapping my cheek gently in some weird attempt to revive me. I turned away.

“Stop. I’m awake.” I feebly tried to push his hand away but I had the strength of a feather.

“Are you okay?”

That seemed a pointless question. I was lying on the sticky tile floor of the coffee shop, my legs bent at an odd angle. “I’m fine,” I said, even though my mouth felt like it was full of marbles and my vision seemed to be at half-power. It was like a filter had been dropped over my eyes, making everything extra bright yet slightly fuzzy.

I hadn’t managed to completely switch shifts with anyone. I had struck a deal with Griffen that if he stayed late and covered the first four hours of my



shift Saturday, I would work the last four hours of my shift and then his next shift Sunday morning. It had seemed like a great plan, allowing me the opportunity to sleep for about three hours. I hadn't thought I would be able to function working straight through without at least a little sleep.

Apparently, I couldn't do it on three hours' sleep in twenty-four hours either.

The shift manager, Flores, was hovering beside James. "Mia? How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Two." I didn't have a concussion. I had just fainted from a combination of no sleep and not enough to eat. "Flores, give me a hand. I'm fine."

But James was already gripping my hand and slipping an arm underneath me to shift me into a sitting position. "Whoa," I said, when momentarily I got dizzy again. "What are you doing back here?" I asked James as my eyes were suddenly level with his chest.

"He jumped over the counter to rescue you," Flores said. She looked totally smitten by him. She wasn't even looking at me, but was gazing at him in adoration. "He was a complete hero."

Flores had a grandson about James' age, so if I wasn't sitting on my ass on the floor, it would have been entertaining to see her insta-crush. I knew the feeling. When I'd crashed into him back in December, he'd made me speechless.

James was brushing a hand over my cheek and feeling the back of my neck. "You're really... clammy," he said. "Are you sick?"

Clammy. What a fantastic way to describe how I felt. "No. I'm tired. Did you really jump over the counter?"

He shrugged. "I guess. You scared the shit out of me when you went down. It was like a sack of potatoes dropping."

"I'm a clammy sack of potatoes. Got it." I rubbed my forehead. Yep. I was cold and damp to the touch. "I guess I deserve that after my parting crack to you last night."

I'd been pretty proud of that smart-ass response in the moment, but now it seemed unwise to piss off the man who was holding me upright.

"I'm just glad you're okay. Should we call an ambulance for you?"

"Good grief, no. That's totally not necessary." Not necessary, and expensive.

"Mia, let's get you into the back room," Flores said. "We're gathering a crowd of onlookers."

Fabulous. Not.

Then James scooped me up in his arms and I felt decidedly less grumpy about the whole situation. Unlike me in my jeans and polo shirt, he was in a suit, minus the jacket. He looked sexy and scruffy and rich. I knew I was beyond fatigued when I had the thought that I wanted to lick him.

When I took in a deep breath to steady myself, I caught a whiff of alcohol. "Are you drunk?" That might explain the chivalry.

"Not so much anymore. But I have been up all night. After the wedding, we went gambling."

On closer inspection, he did look a little glazed and in need of sleep himself.

"Do you know each other?" Flores asked. "Mia, how do you know JJ Beckett?"

My manager had obviously recognized him. That made me feel like even more of an idiot. I'd spent nine hours with him and had zero clue who he was. Hell, I'd spent another hour with him the day before and still didn't catch on.

Now, as he carried me in his strong-as-steel arms, I realized it made a lot more sense. Not only was he ripped and huge, he had Gucci luggage and drank three-hundred-dollar glasses of bourbon. That definitely seemed more on par with a pro football player than a boat salesman. Though to be fair to me, who really knows how a boat salesman lives? I'd never actually met one.

"I do not know JJ Beckett," I told her.

James made a face. He set me down in a chair in the back.

“I need to call in a replacement for you,” Flores said. “And get myself back out there. The line is backing up to the elevators.”

“I can still work,” I protested. “Just give me a minute.” I took a deep breath.

“You’re not going back to work,” James said, firmly. He grabbed my hand and held it out in front of me. “Your hand is shaking like a leaf.”

It was. “I can’t just leave them short-staffed.” Besides, I needed the money. Things had gotten way worse since Mama’s unexpected stroke. But I had too much pride to admit that out loud to a man whose watch cost what I made in years and years.

“I can’t have you fainting again, Mia. It puts people off their breakfast,” Flores said. “Go home and get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Sleep did sound fantastic. “Fine. I guess I’m outnumbered.” I stood and had to pause when black spots danced in front of my eyes.

“How are you getting home?” James asked. “You can’t drive like this.”

“I don’t even have a car. That is not an issue.” My car had crapped out on me seven months earlier and I wasn’t in any sort of position to replace it.

He didn’t seem to know what to say to that. “Let me walk you out.” He put his arm around me and helped me stand up.

Flores handed me Mississippi and gave me a sympathetic look. “Get some sleep, hon.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry,” I told her.

Then I took James out the back door that led to a hallway right by the elevators. “Thanks,” I told him. “I appreciate quick thinking on your part.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. My feelings toward him were as muddled as my brain at the moment. I didn’t feel sharp enough to dissect what had happened between us.

“Oh, this isn’t goodbye,” he said, his voice as firm as his arm around me. “I’m not putting you in a car. You can sleep upstairs in my room.”

“I’m not sleeping with you,” I said, though even as I said it, the idea of curling against him was ridiculously appealing. Which meant I did need sleep and possibly an intervention, because the man had accused me of stealing from him and had lied about his identity. “Or having sex with you, if that’s what you meant.”

“I do not want to have sex with you,” he said. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

I gasped. “Wow. That was insulting.” Though I had tossed that “efficient” comment at him the day before.

He hit the elevator button. “No, I meant you’re dead on your feet. When we have sex again, I want you to be an active participant, not comatose.”

That was slightly mollifying. “I’m not having sex with you again, at any point.”

“Sure.”

He guided me onto the elevator.

What the hell was happening? Why was I just letting him lead me around? And why did he sound like he didn’t believe my protests? And why would he want to have sex with me again if he still thought I’d ripped him off?

I was way too tired to make heads or tails of any of those questions.

Without another word, I let him take me to his room, where he helped me into his unmade bed, still rumpled from my nap attempt the day before. I kicked my shoes off and climbed in, sighing in relief. He pulled the comforter over me, and just shook his head in amusement when I set my bag on the pillow next to mine. Then he glanced at his wrist and his dumb watch.

“It’s five thirty. Is there a time you want me to wake you up?”

I shook my head. “No.” I didn’t have a shift until the next morning. “Thanks.” The bed felt like nirvana. I wiggled down deeper under the covers.

“Sweet dreams, Mia.”

I watched him leave, closing the door behind him. I got back out of the bed and locked the door behind him. I didn’t trust myself not to offer him

Trixie on a silver platter if he decided to reappear at any point. I was basically at the point of delirium and didn't trust my judgment.

Then I set the alarm on my phone for seven thirty and was asleep in sixty seconds.

*JJ*

"WHY ARE you sleeping on the couch?" Miles asked me when I woke up, daylight hitting me in the eyes.

"Mia is in my bed."

"I don't think that's the way it's supposed to work. You're supposed to be in the bed *with* the female."

I tried to manage a glare, but wasn't sure I was very successful. "You don't understand."

"I really don't." Miles moved toward the kitchen. "And I'm pissed at you for never bringing me that coffee. Now I have to make some."

"Your life is very hard, Williams."

"Not as hard as yours. Because I just walked past your room and your bed looks empty to me."

"Shit." I kicked off my blanket and forced myself to stand. I was in my underwear, having stripped off my pants and shirt before stretching out on the couch earlier, a raging hard-on making sleep elusive for the first twenty minutes. I had heard Mia lock the bedroom door behind me. Apparently, she didn't trust me any more than I trusted her. Yet, I still wanted to nail her for twenty-four hours straight.

When I got to my room, Miles was right. No Mia. Not in bed or the bathroom.

“This is getting to be a bad habit,” I told Miles when I came back from my empty bedroom. “This is the second time Mia has rolled out on me.”

“Check your valuables.”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to find out that she had stolen from me after I’d offered her a bed to sleep in. That would really ruin my day.

But I couldn’t avoid it. I went back and did another thorough inspection of my belongings. I breathed a sigh of relief. Not because I cared about the possessions all that much, but because damn it, I cared about *her*.

Seeing her faint had made that clear. When I’d seen her go down, I’d thought of nothing other than to get to her and make sure she was okay. I’d been terrified something was seriously wrong. Now I knew it was just because she pushed herself hard, working tons of hours, and that did something to me. Made my gut tense and my heart soften.

“Everything is there,” I told Miles, feeling a little triumphant about that fact.

“I think you might want to think long and hard about seeing a woman who, after she leaves, requires you to take full inventory of your belongings. I’m just saying.” He sipped his coffee and shook his head. “So what are we doing today? It’s just the three of us once Young comes back from working out.”

“He’s at the gym? Damn. I’m impressed.” My head felt like a snare drum. “I don’t know. Sit by the pool with a Bloody Mary? That sounds perfect to me.”

“I can do that.” Miles glanced at his phone, then he started laughing. “Hey, did you see this? Young just sent it to me.”

“I don’t even know where my phone is.”

“Probably in that girl’s purse.”

“Shut up.” I glanced around and found it had fallen out of my pocket when I was sleeping on the couch. It was on the carpet under the coffee table. I had several dozen notifications. “Why is my phone blowing up? I can’t deal

with any of this right now.”

“Check this out.” Miles shoved his phone in my face and turned up the volume. It was a female news anchor behind the desk and in the corner was a picture of the coffee shop.

Oh, God, I knew where this was going.

“Raiders wide receiver JJ Beckett came to the aid of a young woman who fainted in a casino coffee shop this morning.” She continued talking as a video of me leaping over the counter appeared. “It happened at around five a.m. this morning, and wow, what quick thinking from the star player. It seems the employee in question is okay, but, ladies, let’s not all start fainting in JJ Beckett’s presence,” she said with a grin as the video showed me carrying Mia into the back room. “He can’t rescue us all.”

“You’re a damn hero,” Miles said. “Saving baristas in distress.”

“That’s Mia,” I told him. “Look closer.”

His eyebrows shot up, then he watched the video again. “What the hell? Why is the stripper maid and thief working at a Starbucks?”

“She’s not a stripper. I don’t think. Maybe she does that too on her night off.” She certainly had the body for it. “If she works all these jobs, would she really steal from me?”

He shifted his gaze from the phone to stare hard at me. “Maybe she stole from you because she has two jobs. She’s broke.”

“Maybe she stole because she’s desperate. Maybe she has stuff going on in her life that I don’t know about. She works her ass off, clearly.”

“Oh, hell, no,” Miles said. “You’re really going there? That is justification 101, Beckett.”

It was. But I had already gone there.

“And put some pants on, damn. I don’t need to see your hard dick.”

I did have a hard dick. It happened every time I thought about Mia. “Quit looking at my dick.”

“Gladly.”

## Chapter Nine

*Mia*

“*R*eally?” I asked the universe, as I stood on the sidewalk staring up at the building that I had run out of barefoot five months earlier. “This is just rubbing my face in the disaster my life is.”

It had been two weeks since I had sneaked out of James’ room in the early morning for the second time. The second time had been much less satisfying than the first. I had gotten a few hours of much needed sleep, which was more practical than sex, but the first time certainly had been more fun. I hadn’t heard from him since I’d left, which hadn’t surprised me. Arguably, I’d never given him my number. But that wouldn’t have stopped him if he’d really wanted to get in touch with me. He knew my name, had crept on my social media in the past.

He had *people*. An agent, probably an assistant. Someone could have found me if he had wanted me to be found. But he hadn’t. Which was all for the best.

Nothing good could come out of seeing a man who had both lied and thought I was a liar, no matter how good the sex. Which was really good. The best sex maybe ever.



I'd never been identified in the video that had aired on the news. I was simply "coffee shop employee." Also for the best. My manager, Dawn, hadn't been thrilled with me for switching shifts and then passing out, but had been mollified when traffic at our location had picked up big-time by people thinking they might catch a glimpse of JJ Beckett. We'd had more twenty-two-year old women ordering frappes than I would have even thought possible. I didn't even normally work the counter. I was a barista. But when I had changed shifts with Griffen, he'd been scheduled for the front, because he'd changed shifts with someone else, which I hadn't known. I had my eye on being promoted to assistant manager and I didn't need this to be the reason I didn't get the position.

Aside from all of that, the video was embarrassing and a turn-on, all wrapped up in one. I had watched it approximately seventy-two times and couldn't help but sigh every damn time at the commanding way James had leaped over that countertop to come to my assistance.

Not James. JJ.

I needed to remind myself of that repeatedly.

Now I was due to walk a dog for an owner who lived in the very same building where JJ had given me multiple orgasms. A dog named Mia. It was a horrible, horrible irony.

Normally, on the app I dog walked for, a job like this would have been snapped up instantly. The owner was an elderly woman named Essie. A luxury high-rise practically guaranteed a good tip, and normally you didn't have to even enter the owner's apartment. It was standard for a doorman to go up and retrieve the dog, which was reassuring to both dog owner and walker. But a fellow walker had given this job to me because he'd thought it was funny that the dog shared my name. Plus the dog was an adorable dachshund puppy who looked like a total cuddle bug.

I wanted to kiss her little face and bury my head in her fur.

It was the only tactile touch I was getting these days.

Not even Chrissy's little boy, Kadin, who I relied on for hugs and cuddles, wanted anything to do with me lately. He was going through a cranky growth spurt where mostly he wanted to hit my leg and cry.

It would be nice to just be able to pop people on the leg and cry.

Taking a deep breath, I entered the lobby and approached the doorman. "Hi, I'm here with Paws, to walk the dachshund in apartment fourteen twelve." I waved my phone to indicate the app. "I can show you the confirmation."

"It's not a problem, we were expecting you. I'll have the dog brought down."

"Thank you." I tried not to pace as I waited, uncomfortable with my nerves at being in the building. I didn't remember what floor James' friend's apartment had been on, but just being in the lobby had every minute of that night running through my head.

I wasn't over James. JJ. Which was so stupid. It was one night.

It didn't matter that he had been sweet to me after I had fainted. He'd been a total jerkface to me when he'd caught me in his hotel bed. Though thinking about that made me wince. How else was he supposed to react? I was half-naked in his bed. I wasn't exactly sure he was in the *wrong* there.

None of which mattered. I wasn't going to see him again. Damn it.

"Mia," a man's voice said. A sexy, warm, friendly voice.

Oh, God. That was James.

I turned quickly toward the sound and almost had an orgasm on the spot. James was standing in front of me, holding a long-haired dachshund puppy in his big hands. He had her tucked in the crook of his arm. He was in workout clothes. Basketball shorts, a sleeveless shirt that showed off those rock-solid biceps, and sneakers. He had a dog leash around his neck. It looked like he was en route to working out, not finished, because his clothes and hair were dry and I would have sworn his tank had been ironed. There wasn't a wrinkle in sight.

“What is going on here?” I asked, genuinely bewildered.

“What is going on is that you’re clearly trying to get to me through my puppy.” The corner of his mouth turned up, and his tone was charming, sexy. He didn’t sound angry with me. He sounded like he wanted to coax me out of my clothes.

He also sounded amused, but I was anything but. “I didn’t even know you had a puppy! Besides, what are you doing in this building?”

I know. A little slow on the uptake, but he’d caught me and my vagina completely off guard. A girl’s bits need a little warning when a hot man is entering the area.

“I live here. Or did you forget spending the night in my apartment? You know, the night you stole my wallet and championship ring.”

That irritated me. One, that he was bringing it up again. Two, that he was now calling it a championship ring, which did in fact seem more important than a class ring. In either case, I wanted to track down that missing ring and shove it up his ass. “I thought this was your friend’s apartment,” I said. “You live in Miami, or did you forget?”

He grinned. “Fair enough. But that still doesn’t explain why you’re here to walk my dog.”

The dog, who was adorable in every sense of the word, licked his arm. He lifted her to his face and gave the top of her head a kiss, which melted my heart.

Hold up.

“Wait a minute. You named your dog Mia?” I asked, heart no longer melting. “That’s seriously creepy, James. JJ. Whoever you are.”

“You’re the one stalking me. Who is creepy here?”

“I’m not stalking you! I just told you I didn’t know you had a puppy or that you actually lived here. Besides, how would I manipulate the app to be the walker?” I was so outraged it took me until the end of my speech to realize he had been baiting me. He had a smirk on his face.

“The puppy is a devious little redhead with a hoarding problem. The name seemed appropriate.”

Oh, no, he didn't. “I am not devious.” I wasn't going to deny the hoarding. Preparation is everything in life. “You need to change her name.”

James laughed. “You can't tell me what to name my dog.” He lifted her to his face again and spoke directly to the puppy. “What do you think, sweetie? Do you want to go on a walk? The two Mias having some girl time?”

The puppy licked his face. He kissed her head again and shifted her against his chest. “She's down for it.”

I was amused, in spite of myself. “When did you get a puppy?”

“A week ago. We've been bonding before I have to start training harder for the season. But now she needs to get comfortable with other people, being on a leash, and staying at home by herself. That's why I joined the app.”

A thought occurred to me. “Who is Essie, the elderly woman who allegedly owns this dog?”

“Essie is my grandmother. Did you see the picture I used?”

“I did.” Essie was a cute woman with a stylish pixie haircut.

“Pretty adorable, isn't she? I have to use an alias on the app so I don't have stalkers.” He eyed me. “You'd be surprised how many women want to either steal from me or marry me. I've walked into my room and found naked women in my bed before.”

That made me irrationally irritated. I wasn't sure if it was meant to be a dig at me directly or not. I was not some player chaser, trying to score with a football star. I also knew he was telling the truth that women were into him. I'd seen the parade of women prepared to faint at the first sight of him at Starbucks.

“It must be very hard to be you,” I said, dryly.

James grinned. “See, now you understand why I didn't say I was a pro player. By the way, I want to point out you knew my real name. I didn't lie

about that.”

He hadn't. It still didn't make it right that he'd misled me. I ignored all of that. “Your dog is very cute.” She looked so tiny in his enormous grip. “How old is she?”

“Ten weeks.”

I was itching to get my hands on all that puppy adorableness, but I wanted to make sure everything was cool between me and James. I really didn't have the time or energy for animosity. I didn't even want to be taking walk jobs, but I was a day late on my rent and still nearly fifty bucks short of what I needed. I was going to have to ask Chrissy if she could cover it for me, which I absolutely hated to do. She was as strapped as me.

“Are you okay with me walking her? I don't want you to be worried that I'll steal her,” I said. I wasn't really joking. We weren't talking about a wallet here. This was a living creature, who was vulnerable and trusting. If he had any reservations, I'd cancel the job and the app would send someone else. I'd worry about the money later.

Maybe that hadn't actually occurred to him. He clutched the puppy closer to his chest and turned slightly away from me like I was going to snatch her and run. “Don't take this personally but I'm not letting anyone take her solo. Not you, or anyone else. She's just a *baby*. I mean, maybe my parents, but not for a few more weeks yet.”

There was no way to see a grown man protectively holding his puppy and referring to her as a baby and remain unaffected. He was downright adorable and I was actually jealous of Mia, my puppy counterpart. I wanted James to cuddle me and call me “baby.”

“Why am I here, then, if I'm not supposed to walk her?” And why was I glad he hadn't sent me packing?

“We're going to walk her together. She needs to slowly be introduced to new people and to get familiar with being on the leash. I can't take her to work with me, obviously, but I want her to be able to travel with me, hang

out with other people, and not be neurotic.”

“We’re walking the dog together?” I wouldn’t want to do that with any other client. I preferred to be the anonymous dog walker. But with James, it sounded appealing, and that was a problem.

“Yes. Are you cool with that?”

More cool with it than I had any right to be. “She probably only needs ten minutes. After that, her puppy attention span will be shot.”

“That sounds perfect.” He handed me the puppy. “Here you go. Show me how it’s done.”

I ran my fingers through the dog’s soft fur and snuggled her against my chest, bending down to kiss her little head. “Hey, I don’t think I ever properly said thank you for helping me when I fainted.” It had been nice to have him taking charge, helping me. “I was seriously out of it. I appreciate your quick reaction and the use of your bed.”

“You’re welcome. And you can have the use of my bed anytime you want.”

Wouldn’t that be a perfect world? I tried not to think about how it had felt to be wrapped in his arms in the warmth of his bed, his hard, muscular body pressed against me.

I held my hand out, ignoring his comment. “Leash, please. You should probably start with not carrying her around all the time. She won’t want to walk if you carry her.”

“But she’s so little,” he said. “With very short legs.” He handed me the leash.

“Have you ever had a dog before?”

“When I was a kid. We lived in a small town and my dad was a plumber. He took our Lab to work with him every day. But big dogs need a yard, land to roam.”

I had a hard time picturing JJ growing up middle class in small-town Texas. “Texas, right? Or was that the boat salesman’s past, not yours?”

I wasn't about to admit in the past two weeks I had done some research into the real James Beckett Jr, commonly known as JJ. I knew for a fact he'd been raised in Texas. I also knew his height, weight, and, I was embarrassed to admit, his net worth. I hadn't gone looking for it. It had popped up almost immediately when I had done a Google search of his name. Well, technically not his net worth, but what his signing contract and bonuses had been. He had what my mama called "fuck you" money. So much money that you could say "fuck you" to anyone and get away with it.

"That was the truth. Everything I told you was the truth, except for my occupation. I do own a condo in Miami and I spend summers there. I grew up in Texas and went to LSU." He stared at me, intently. "And I want you to call me James."

"Why?" I scratched behind the puppy's ears to keep her calm. I clipped the leash onto Mia's collar. He really needed to change this dog's name. It was very uncomfortable to be her namesake. Oddly flattering, that he had still been thinking about me. But weird, because it didn't feel flattering.

"Because I do."

That was specific. I let it go and set Mia down on the sleek flooring. She took one excited step and then froze. I bent down and encouraged her. "It's okay. You're doing great. It's just marble. I think. I don't know my flooring, Mia. But you're safe, I promise."

She took a tentative step, sniffing the floor as she went.

"It's good to put her on different types of flooring so that she doesn't get scared of the sensation of sliding or the clicking of her nails."

"Do you have a dog?" James asked.

"No. I share my apartment with Christina and her two-year-old. A dog would add to the chaos. Plus, I work too much. It wouldn't be fair. But growing up we had tons of animals. I grew up wild in the woods."

"That I can totally see."

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Before I could comment on it,

he asked another question.

“What brought you to Vegas?”

I hesitated. I didn't want to share my personal life with James. But it wasn't really my personal life or my story. It was my mother's story and Lord knew she was proud of it. “My mama met a man on the internet when I was in high school and moved us out here. He was in a motorcycle club and mama loves a bad boy.”

James looked down at me. “That must have been a big change for you.”

“Huge.” That was enough said about that. “Come on, Mia, let's try this walking thing.” I looped the leash multiple times around my wrist to have full control so I could teach her how to respond to a gentle tug. I started walking and she eagerly tumbled forward, taking the hint.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” I glanced over at him but he wasn't looking at him. He was watching the puppy gallop along.

“What kind of men do you like?”

Him. Not men like him. Just him. But that would be idiotic to say because he still thought I was a lying thief. Besides, he was baiting me again. A second look over at him showed he had that smirk on his face.

“Apparently, I'm attracted to men who don't exist. Fictional men.”

He gave a grunt of acknowledgement, but didn't say anything further. The doorman held the front door to the building open for us and greeted James and the puppy. “Good afternoon, Mr. Beckett, Miss Mia.” Then he surprised me by smiling at me and giving me a nod. “Good to see you again, the other Miss Mia.”

“Thanks,” I said, slightly bewildered. He might have been the same doorman from back in December, but I wasn't sure. It had been the crack of dawn and I had been freaking out, rushing to get to work.

“You're the OG Mia,” he said.

“One hundred percent,” James said. They bumped fists.



Okay. This name situation was not cute.

Puppy Mia ran over and went potty on the thin strip of artificial grass.

“Good girl, Mia,” James said, in a singsong voice. “Daddy is so proud of you.”

Yeah. Not cute at all.

*JJ*

MIA, the woman, was ignoring me and focusing all her attention on Mia, the puppy. She was definitely annoyed about the name situation. I had to admit, it wasn't ideal now. But I hadn't expected to ever see OG Mia.

Yes, she fascinated me.

One hundred percent, I wanted her back in bed.

But I don't beg.

She'd made her feelings pretty damn clear by leaving again without a word.

I'd been contemplating my next steps. Or if there should even be any next steps. Only an idiot would go after her a third time and expect a different result, because she had a reason to stay away from me—she'd stolen my stuff and didn't want to get caught.

But that didn't stop me by being tempted by the thought of seeing her again.

So instead of tracking her down like I definitely wanted to, I had named my puppy Mia.

Getting a dog had been in my plans since the end of the season, and I had secured a puppy in this particular litter back in January, but the name had been an impulse move. I wasn't lying about the reason. My new puppy was a

devious redhead who liked to run off with anything left on the floor and hide it in the corner of my closet. She had a stash going of dirty socks and chewed-up tissues.

The puppy had arrived at the perfect time, keeping my thoughts firmly on getting adjusted to a new schedule with her, and away from her namesake. The dog couldn't prevent me from thinking about her at night though, when my bed was empty and my cock was aching for release. I hadn't been with a woman since a few weeks before Train's bachelor party and I had no desire to hook up with anyone random. Or even call an old friend with benefits.

I wanted Mia. No one else.

Miles thought I had lost my mind, and he wasn't wrong.

At the end of the day, Mia had to be responsible for the theft of my ring and wallet. Wanting her in my bed was all fine and good, but I shouldn't act on it, and I shouldn't be asking her anymore questions about herself and her personal life.

I knew all of that.

It wasn't going to stop me though. I wanted what I wanted. And I wanted Mia.

I had resisted the urge to contact her, so I felt like I had done my due diligence in staying away from her. I'd made it two whole weeks.

But then that morning she had appeared on the dog-walking app I'd signed up for. Just there. Mia, smiling in her photo, right at me. She'd been one of three walkers available right then and I had to bribe off the first guy who tried to snag the job by canceling his walk, but paying for it. Then after that, it was easy. She'd taken the walk request and had shown up at my apartment building on apparently pure coincidence.

The universe had us crossing paths three times now, and I was just going to roll with it. Naked. In my bed. With Mia.

Her sarcasm and unwillingness to back down impressed me. She might have been the only woman I'd met besides my mother who was willing to

call me out on my shit. I appreciated that. Liked the challenge. Got turned on by her sly comments. Her remark about liking fictional men was like waving a red flag in front of a bull. It was a blatant challenge, and I wanted to prove myself.

I also appreciated that she had thanked me for the coffee shop bit. It showed me she wasn't irrationally angry with me. That was progress. As was the way she kept sneaking looks at me when she thought I wasn't paying attention.

"I need to take a video of Mia," I said, pulling out my phone. "Her first walk."

"She's doing really well. Meandering a little, but she's staying on track."

"Probably because this is all concrete. The smells aren't as good as a more natural setting." I did feel guilty about raising a puppy in the city but that was why I'd chosen a small breed.

"It's still all new. She's curious, not afraid. That's a good sign."

"Okay, I'm going to mute us and add music to the video. This is a big moment."

"Too late," Mia said as without warning little Mia sat down on the sidewalk and gave me a mournful look, panting. "I think she's done. Too much pressure."

"Damn." I put my phone down. "She looks worn out. Maybe I should carry her."

"You're going to spoil her."

"You can't spoil a baby."

"Yes, you can. And she's a dog, not a baby."

"Shh. She'll hear you." I bent down and picked up Mia and held her close to me. "We shouldn't bicker in front of the child, you know. It's not healthy for her to be surrounded by hostility."

Mia was fighting a smile. She rolled her eyes. "You're being ridiculous."

"I'm being a parent." I was mostly kidding. But not really. I was head

over ass in love with puppy Mia.

“You can’t raise her in a bubble.”

“I’m going to try.”

“I thought you wanted to socialize her and make sure she wasn’t neurotic.”

Human Mia had a good point. “It’s a balancing act. I’ll get the hang of it.” I was nothing if not confident. You had to be if you wanted to be successful out there on the field and in life.

My phone rang in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw it was my mother. “Sorry, I need to take this,” I said to Mia. “Yo, Ma, what’s up?”

“Don’t ‘yo, Ma,’ me,” she said, sounding anything but irritated. “Did you talk to your sister?”

“When? Like, ever? Or recently?”

“Oh, Jesus, JJ,” she said. “I meant this week. She needs to know if you’re bringing a guest to the engagement party.”

“I thought her engagement party was in September.” My little sister, Abilene, who was all of twenty-three, and had been dating the same guy since high school, was getting married the following summer. Which was awesome. Her boyfriend, Sam, was a great guy and treated her the way a man should treat his woman. He fit right into the family, and always had. But every single conversation revolved around the wedding right now, and it really wasn’t my kind of thing.

“It is. We’re booking a venue, sweetheart. We need numbers.”

Mia was looking at her own phone. I felt an immature irritation that she didn’t even seem to be eavesdropping. “I don’t normally bring a date to stuff like that, Ma.”

Mia’s finger paused in scrolling on her screen.

That was better. “But I might bring someone this time.”

Mia wrinkled her nose.

My mother reacted as anticipated. “What? Well, that’s exciting news.

Who is she? Jim, JJ is bringing a date!” she called out to my father.

“Hold on, she’s with me. I’ll call you right back on FaceTime so you can meet her.”

Giving a start, Mia actually began inching away from me. She wasn’t looking in my direction, but her shoulders had tensed.

“Anna May, he’s bullshitting you,” I heard my dad say in the background.

The old man clearly had less faith in me. That made me grin because he was right.

I called my mother right back. She was sitting on the back deck of their house, her reading glasses on. She was probably poring through party menus. “Meet Mia,” I said, holding my puppy up for her to see. “She’s my date for the engagement party.”

My mother made a face. “What is wrong with you? You got my hopes up. I’ve met the dog. You’ve been sending me pictures every day. She’s adorable. But she’s not coming to your sister’s engagement party.”

“I am one hundred percent bringing the dog with me.”

She didn’t even hear me. The reading glasses must be doing their job because she had somehow spotted a glimpse of Mia in the background on my screen. “Who is that with you?” she asked, sharply.

Shit. That’s what I got for screwing with both Mia and my mother. “She’s my dog walker.”

Mia gave a snort of derision.

“Don’t be rude, let me say hello to her,” my mother said.

I turned the screen toward Mia. “Ma, this is Mia. Mia, this is Anna May Beckett, my mother.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Mia said, giving a smile that looked a little strained. She also gave a little wave.

“You too, sweetheart. But I’m confused. I thought the dog’s name was Mia.”

“It is,” I told her. “Human Mia inspired puppy Mia’s name. Because

they're both redheads.”

“I thought she was your dog walker. Didn't you just meet her?”

“She's also in housekeeping,” I said. “She cleans my room.”

Mia turned and gave me a look that could have peeled paint off of the wall.

My mother's eyebrows shot up. “I don't even want to know. But if you're calling your girlfriend your dog walker and housekeeper, I sincerely hope she dumps your butt.”

Mia laughed. “I'm not his girlfriend, trust me.”

“Hey.” This had taken a turn I hadn't anticipated. “Don't sound so happy about that.”

My mother nodded in approval. “Good. And, Mia, sweetheart, I hope he pays you a lot to put up with him.”

Okay, this had backfired. “Ma, you're supposed to sell your son, not sell him out.”

“Well, stop being an ass.”

“Exactly,” Mia said, giving me a smile that kind of scared me. “Stop being an ass.”

My mother picked up a notebook and made what was clearly an X. “No guest.”

“It's three months until the party,” I protested. “I have to commit to that already?” I wasn't even sure why the hell I cared. I never took dates to family events. It raised expectations. Nor would being marked as having no plus-one have ever bothered me in the past. “No, forget that. Mark me down for a guest.”

“But you don't have a date,” my mother protested. “Why would I mark you for a guest?”

A thought occurred to me. “Wait a minute. I'm paying for this thing.”

“So?” My mother looked confused as to why that mattered.

It was a gift I was happy to give my sister. I hadn't even given her a

budget because Abilene was always very conservative with her spending and unnecessarily grateful when I gifted her with anything. But it did mean I should have a say in the whole guest or no guest.

“So why do I have to say whether I’m bringing a guest or not? I’m paying for the head count. I’ll pay for the extra plate whether I bring someone or not.”

“It will mess up the seating chart.”

“There’s a seating chart?” I regretted taking the call. “It’s an engagement party. Shouldn’t it be more casual?” Then I shook my head. “Never mind. I’m sorry I asked. I want Ab to do whatever she wants. I want her to be happy.”

“Perfect. No guest.”

I wasn’t sure how we’d concluded that, nor was I happy about it, but I gave an exasperated sigh. “Fine. No guest.”

“I have to go. I love you,” she said. “Bye, Mia, it was lovely to meet you.”

“You as well.” Mia smiled.

“I love you, too.” I waved my puppy’s paw. “Bye, Mimi.”

After I shoved my phone back in my pocket, I apologized. “I’m sorry. That took way longer than I expected. I hope I’m not holding you up.”

“It’s fine. I’m on the clock,” she said.

Right. This wasn’t a date. It was a job to her. “I tip well,” I told her.

I expected her to make a snarky comment but she just eyed me. “I remember. You gave the bartender a forty percent tip the night we met.”

I didn’t even remember doing that. But I never gave below twenty-five percent unless the service was downright terrible. “Service professionals work their asses off and put up with a lot of crap.”

She nodded. “Very true. You’re paying for your sister’s engagement party. That’s very generous as well.”

Was I winning points with Mia without meaning to? I would take it.

“She’s my baby sister. She’s only twenty-three, but she and Sam have been together forever. She graduated with a nursing degree a year ago, so she works hard. I want her to relax and enjoy her engagement, not stress about money.”

Mia’s jaw worked. I realized I had hit a nerve. She was a woman who stressed about money, that was obvious, given the seven thousand jobs she had. There was no one to take care of Mia, clearly. Her nostrils flared and I kept talking, not wanting her to feel awkward.

Ironic, right? She stole from me and I was worried about her fucking feelings.

“I’m going to head back in with Mia. It’s getting hot out here. Are you free to try the walking thing again tomorrow? I want her to have stability in her life.”

But she shook her head. “I have to work at the hotel.”

I didn’t press it. “Let me have your number,” I said, impulsively. “I’ll give you mine, and if you’re ever free to go on a walk, you can let me know. Mia would love to see you.”

Me. I would love to see her again.

She was the only woman in years who had captured my interest. I couldn’t let it go. Couldn’t let her go. No matter if she was a thief or not. She might have her reasons, just like I’d had my reasons for lying to her about my identity. In fact, I was positive Mia was no regular con artist. If she was, she wouldn’t work as hard as she did.

She surprised me by holding her hand out for my phone. “On one condition. You change the dog’s name.”

I opened my contacts and handed her the phone. “Done.”

It was a no-brainer. I’d only been calling the dog Mia for a week, and now that human Mia was back in my life, it was weird. Besides, I’d give human Mia just about anything she wanted if she would let me taste her again.



Her eyebrows rose. “I didn’t think you would agree to it.”

“Were you bluffing?”

She actually grinned. “Maybe.”

I laughed. “This is Vegas, baby. You should know your bluff could be called at any time.”

## Chapter Ten

*Mia*

“James! Are you insane?” I demanded, staring at my phone.

I was standing in the apartment building lobby with James, having given him my number against my better judgement. I was about to call myself a car to go home, when I’d gotten an alert from the dog-walking app.

James had given me a five-hundred-dollar tip. I was both appalled and ecstatic. That would solve the rent problem and then some. Yet, that was a lot of money. People didn’t just hand out money without attaching strings, did they?

“What? What did I do now?” he asked, holding his puppy up and repeatedly kissing her.

“You just gave me an absurd tip.”

“You love the word absurd. It’s your favorite after efficient.” He didn’t look at me, just continued to cuddle the puppy.

He was absurd and hot and arrogant and frustrating and did I mention hot?

“They’re going to think that you paid me for more than dog-walking

services,” I said. “No one tips that much.”

“Really? Well, shit. I never thought about that. Are you sure? People do love their pets.”

The man was out of touch, obviously. “I’m pretty sure.” The most I’d ever gotten before was twenty-five bucks. But then again, he had enough money to burn a wet mule.

“I’m not sure what five hundred bucks would get me sexually. That seems kind of low.”

I stared at him. “Am I supposed to be flattered by that?”

“Just know your worth, that’s all I’m saying. Five hundred is low.”

I massaged my temples. God, he was thick sometimes. “But that doesn’t matter because all I did was walk your dog. With you, I might add. I barely did anything. It looks sketchy as hell. And why did you tip me five hundred dollars anyway?”

It was totally mystifying behavior for a man who thought I had ripped him off.

“You’re a hard worker. I thought you could use it.”

I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t buying it.

But when he didn’t say anything either, I added, “It was a twenty-five-dollar walk. I don’t even know how to do the math on that but it wasn’t forty percent.”

He just shrugged. “How are you making any money if you’re taking Ubers everywhere?”

“I mostly take the bus. This was an exception because I have to get to my other job.”

“If I hadn’t tipped you, your profit would have been like five bucks.”

He was right. But I needed every dollar of the five bucks. I almost told him I was late on my rent, but I bit my tongue. My pride wouldn’t let me say it, so I remained silent.

My car was three minutes away.

“And I could have given you a ride, you know.”

“Don’t you have football player things to do?” I asked, indicating his workout clothes. “Like sweating in the gym?”

He straight-up ignored that as effectively as I ignored his remark about my five-dollar profit. “I want you to take the day off tomorrow so you can walk Amelia with me,” he said. “Does the five hundred cover that?”

That almost made me break out into hysterical laughter. I wasn’t the only one who sucked at math. How much did he think I made an hour cleaning hotel rooms? Because I didn’t make anything close to five hundred dollars in one shift.

Plus, there was the real truth. He wanted his way. Strings. Attached.

Though I honestly wasn’t sure I cared. Five hundred bucks to spend fifteen minutes with James and his adorable dog? Not exactly a hardship.

“It does. Her name is Amelia now?”

“Yep. Close enough, but different. So you’ll be here tomorrow, right?”

It was tempting. I would rather be with a puppy and a hot guy than cleaning bathrooms. Hard to believe, I know. But I didn’t want to just give in to him. Besides, I was trying to get a promotion. I couldn’t call off last minute. “I can’t just take the day off. I’ll get in trouble.”

“Can’t you get someone else to work for you?”

“No one is going to want to take my shift the day before.” I swiped rapidly on my phone. “We have an app for work. I can offer my shift, but if no one takes it, I have to go in.”

I posted it and showed him the screen. “See? No one is going to take it last minute.”

“I think someone just did,” he said.

“What?” There was no way. No one ever responded that fast. Ever. I yanked the phone back away and stared at it. “Nina took my shift,” I said, stunned.

“That’s awesome. Now we can take Amelia for her walk. I think your car

is here,” he said. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

I was still staring at my phone. Did James somehow arrange for that to happen? Or was he just that lucky that everything worked out the way he wanted it to?

He opened the car door and leaned in to talk to the driver. I didn’t hear a word either of them said. When he pulled back and gestured for me to enter the car, I just did, thoroughly confused. I wasn’t exactly sure what had just happened but it felt like I might have lost a game of chess.

James had outmaneuvered me.

“Noon,” he said. “See you then.”

The door slammed shut.

Totally outmaneuvered.

And yet... his maneuvers had just solved my financial woes for the week. Hell, the month if I was careful.

I leaned back and sighed, relaxing my shoulders.

I could go grocery shopping. I’d been living off of oatmeal the last few days.

“You’re in a good mood,” Flores commented when I got to work.

I was. I gave her a grin. “I got to walk a very cute puppy today.”

THAT NIGHT when I got home, I was trying to puzzle through what exactly had happened with James, but when I tried to talk to my roommate, her son didn’t like the interruption to his very important efforts to dominate his mother’s attention. He gave me a frustrated look and a growl and hit my leg.

We were still in the leg-hitting phase.

“Hey, Kadin, I bet Auntie Mia has a sucker for you,” Christina said. “Help her look in her purse.”

I gave her a grateful look. That could easily burn up twenty minutes. There was so much shit in my purse that Kadin would get distracted and

probably forget about the sucker or the fact that he wanted no one else to be allowed to speak to his mother ever.

He immediately brightened up. I set my purse on the couch and opened it for him. Running a hand over his soft blond hair, I was glad I had moved my vibrator back to my nightstand. I'd never meant for it to be in my purse but had tossed it in there in a cleanup effort when our shower was leaking and maintenance needed to come in the apartment.

“Oooh,” Kadin said, pulling out a straw. He waved it back and forth like a sword.

“I had the craziest day,” I told Christina. “My walk today was for JJ Beckett’s new puppy.”

Christina, who had been in the midst of washing dishes, dropped a plastic plate in the sink, causing suds to splash up her arms. “What? That is crazy. How did you know it was his puppy?”

“I didn’t. Not until I saw him.”

“You saw him?”

“Yep.” Saw him, was attracted to him...

“What is he doing here in Vegas?”

“He lives here.”

“Oh, right. Why is that so hard to remember? I keep thinking he lives in Miami.”

“Because he said he did. I have a hard time with it too. I don’t think of him as a football player.” Even though out of curiosity, since finding out his true identity, I had watched a game from the previous season. It still didn’t seem like him. That was just a dude in a helmet running around on artificial turf.

“It just sucks so hard you were hooking up with a pro player and didn’t even know it. What a missed opportunity to feel awesome about yourself.”

There were several things here that sucked. “It sucks so hard that he lied to me.”

I watched Kadin pull out a fuzzy chick toy. Where the hell had that come from?

“Quack,” Kadin said.

“Yes, sir. Quack. Good boy.” I glanced over at Christina. “Plus, like I said, he was there. He brought the puppy to me and insisted I walk her with him. He named the puppy Mia.”

“Are you serious? That’s so romantic!”

This was where we totally differed. “I don’t think that’s romantic.”

“What would you call it? He got a puppy, that I’m sure he adores, and he named her Mia. That is not a coincidence.”

No. Obviously not a coincidence. I’d seen him right around the time he’d gotten the dog. “Hmm. True. Maybe it’s not as creepy as I first thought.” But I honestly wasn’t sure why he had given his puppy the same name as me.

“It’s hot. It means he’s in love with you.”

That made me laugh. “That’s a stretch. He thinks I’m a thief.”

“God, that’s so rude. Who would ever think you’re a thief? It’s ridiculous!”

“I know.” I glanced over at Kadin and my eyes bugged out. “Um, Chrissy,” I said. I pointed to the wallet in Kadin’s little hands. “Look what your son found in Mississippi.”

“What is that?” Then her jaw dropped. “Oh, shit, that isn’t James’ wallet, is it?” She clapped her hand over her mouth. “Shit, I didn’t mean to swear. I’m trying not to in front of you-who-know.”

Fortunately, Kadin dropped it on the couch, bored with the leather wallet. I opened it, hoping somehow that it was someone else’s wallet entirely, even though it looked exactly like the wallet James had in December. In other words, expensive. Not to mention, who else’s wallet would be in my bag? I saw James’ ID. His image stared up at me in judgement. “Whoops.”

“How the heck did you end up with that?” Chrissy asked.

“I don’t know! Oh my God, this is so bad. What am I supposed to do?”

He'll never believe I didn't know it was in my bag." I glanced toward our front door, like I expected the police or James to storm through.

"Do you have the ring too?" she asked, drying her hands off rapidly and rushing over to me.

"No!" Then I realized I couldn't say that with any certainty. I hadn't thought I had the wallet either.

Christina took the wallet from me. She eyed his ID and pulled out his credit cards one by one. "This is a lot of plastic." She removed the cash and counted it rapidly, her lips moving. "This is eighteen hundred dollars. Does that seem right?"

"He had about three grand at the start of the night, but our bar tab was eight hundred and he tipped three hundred."

"How the f—heck was your bar tab eight hundred dollars?"

"He had two glasses of bourbon that cost three hundred dollars each. Plus I had like three drinks and appetizers."

"That's bonkers. That's my half of our rent."

"I know. Then he spent money on a cab, and a Christmas ornament, so I don't really think anything is missing."

"I've never seen anyone but drug dealers carry this much cash." She waved the bills in front of her like a fan. "And that's on TV. I've never met anyone in real life who had this much cash."

"I said the same thing to him!" I told her, feeling vindicated. "I told him he better hope he didn't get robbed."

Hearing my words out loud had me smacking my forehead in sudden realization. "Damn it, geez. No wonder he thought I stole his wallet! It sounded like I was feeling him out, testing his level of suspicion. If I were him, I would think the exact same thing."

"OMG, my fingerprints are on this now!" Chrissy shoved the money back in the wallet. She rubbed the leather down the front of her jeans before dropping it back in my lap. "But on the up side, you sound like a very clever



criminal.”

“Except I’m not a criminal.” I wracked my brain trying to think when I had last seen his wallet. Maybe on the dresser? I knew for sure he had taken his ring off then. Understanding dawned. “I must have swept his wallet into Mississippi when I was leaving in such a rush. I just took my hand and dragged everything off the dresser and into my bag.”

Chrissy bit her fingernail. “Oh, geez. That’s not good.”

“I have to return this somehow without him knowing.” I tapped his wallet against my lip, then realized that was not hygienic. I lowered it to my lap. “What do I do?”

“Obviously you have to hook up with him again and leave it somewhere in his room.”

Hardly. “So the wallet that went missing in his apartment now reappears in the same place five months later? And I was in both places before the discovery it went missing and then reappeared? Yet it wasn’t seen during the interim? That isn’t exactly stealthy, Christina.”

“But if all the cash is still there, he can’t be mad about it.”

“It will just look like I replaced the cash I originally stole.”

“True. But mostly I’m trying to find a way for you to sleep with him again.”

That made me laugh. “Why?”

“Because he’s hot and rich. This could change your life, Mia. He’s already half in love with you, clearly. You’re his Cinderella.” Her eyes widened. “Maybe he likes that you’re a thief. Maybe that’s a turn-on.”

“But I’m not a thief. You seem to keep forgetting that fact.” I also didn’t really relish the comparison to Cinderella. Her life was shit. Though she did have her badass moments, refusing to give up.

“You’d better look for that ring,” she said.

“If I find the ring, I can’t return both the ring and the wallet at the same time.”

“I think you should. I think you just hand them to him and be like, sorry, here you go, and just see what happens. I bet he’s cool with it.”

For a split second, I thought maybe Christina was right, but then I knew that would mean he would never believe I hadn’t stolen them. Because if I told the truth, he would think it was bullshit, right? I wouldn’t believe me. Especially not after finding me in his hotel room months later.

“He’s in love with you, I’m telling you,” she added.

As long as I’d known her, Christina lived under the delusion that men fell in love much more often and rapidly than was realistic. That reminded me that I had no business taking her advice. She had the absolute worst taste in men and fell in love as frequently as my mother, which was as frequently as the lunar cycle. I knew I’d instantly connected with Chrissy because she was so much like my mother, but that did not mean I should listen to a word she said when it came to men.

“He is not in love with me. That’s absurd.” My favorite word, according to James.

I started digging through my purse, searching for the championship ring. “How much do you think a championship ring is worth?” I asked.

“I have no idea.” Christina swiped on her phone. “It depends on the player, and the particular championship game.”

“This is newish, I guess. I don’t follow football, you know that.”

“JJ Beckett scored the winning touchdown in the championship game five years ago.”

“Oh, great.” I was frantically throwing things out of my bag. Kadin thought it was a fun game and followed suit, pitching a container of crazy glue into the middle of the living room. “So it’s sentimental to him.”

“It looks like it’s worth thirty-five grand actual value to produce it, but the collector’s value is more like fifty to seventy-five thousand.”

That made me want to throw up. “Why didn’t he call the cops on me, then? He should have, otherwise how would he collect the insurance money?”

Or expect to have any chance to recover it? He didn't even contact me." That was bewildering and illogical.

"Because he's in love with you."

I groaned. "Stop saying that." It was both impossible and stupidly appealing.

Aside from keeping my housekeeping dress from me when he'd discovered me in his bed, James had been nothing but generous. He'd expressed interest in me, and he'd been so attentive to my needs in bed his tongue had basically taken up permanent residence between my thighs. He loved his family, was adorable with his puppy, had lots of friends, and treated service professionals well. Yes, he was psychotically neat, but that wasn't really a flaw.

Would it be nice to have a man like that in love with me?

Hell freaking yes.

But that wasn't the real world. That was Chrissy's fantasy land. Rich football players didn't fall in love with the broke-ass maid.

Even if the broke-ass maid allowed herself to fall in love with him.

*JJ*

MIA WAS on time for our dog-walking appointment, but when she texted me that she was in the lobby, she asked if she could come upstairs and use my bathroom. Which struck me as odd. There was one in the lobby and it seemed more likely that she would have asked one of the doormen if she could use it.

But whatever. Mia was a mystery I didn't think I was likely to solve anytime soon.

I texted her to come upstairs and I looked at Amelia. "The woman drives

me crazy,” I told her. “But she’s oddly irresistible.”

Amelia just stared back at me blankly.

“I know. I’m an idiot.” I heard a knock on my front door and went to answer it. Mia was standing there, looking anxious. Her face was pale. “You okay?” I asked.

“I have to pee really bad.” She was bouncing on her heels and clutching her enormous bag in front of her.

“Okay. Come on in.” I pulled the door open and she pushed past me, nearly jogging as she headed across my apartment. “There’s a powder room in the hall,” I said, gesturing, when I realized she was going toward my bedroom.

“It’s fine, I know where this one is,” she said, breathlessly, disappearing into my bedroom.

Was that fucking weird, or was I just being paranoid? Amelia offered me no sounding board. She was licking her empty food bowl, her paws slipping a little.

After a couple of minutes, I decided to investigate, and make sure Mia was okay. Maybe she was actually sick and didn’t want to admit to it. Maybe she had food poisoning or something and didn’t want me to hear her throw up.

When I went into my bedroom, I almost fell over Mia. She was on the floor, crawling on her hands and knees. Given that she was wearing a sundress that had ridden up and barely covered her ass, it was momentarily distracting. My dick got hard and my mouth watered. I had yet to enjoy this particular position with Mia. What would she do if I ran my hand over that curvy ass?

I resisted the urge. “What are you doing?” I asked.

She jumped, her hand moving so quickly she fell onto her stomach. “What?” she asked breathlessly, glancing back at me. “What do you mean?”

Now I was really curious. “You’re crawling on my bedroom floor,” I

pointed out. “A good seven feet from the bathroom, which you allegedly had to use.”

Mia’s red hair was in her face as she blinked up at me. She was lying on her one arm, hand tucked under her chest. She was partially propped up with the other hand. “I dropped my bag.”

Her bag was two feet behind her. “Show me what you’re hiding, Mia.” She was clearly lying on something to conceal it. I felt like I did with the puppy when she was running off with something she wasn’t supposed to have. Like I was going to have to go and take it from Mia in a grappling session.

For a second, she opened her mouth like she was going to spin a tale of bullshit, but then she just grumbled, “Fine.” She pushed herself off the carpet and sat back on her feet. She held her hand out to me.

My wallet was in it.

Interesting.

About time she admitted she’d taken it.

I took it. “You found my wallet? Crawling around on the floor?” I knew she hadn’t but I wanted her to tell me the truth.

“No. I found your wallet in my bag,” she said, grudgingly. “I didn’t know it was there, I swear. I was going to toss it behind your dresser so you would eventually find it and think it fell behind there that night we met.”

I had no idea if that was the truth or not. At this point, I wasn’t sure if I would ever know the truth. Without a word, I tossed the wallet onto my dresser.

“Aren’t you going to say anything? Or check inside?”

“No.” I didn’t care about the cash and my ID and my credit cards had already been replaced. “Do you actually have to piss or not?”

She shook her head.

“Then let’s go walk the dog.” Amelia was currently tumbling all over Mia’s legs, trying to reach her lap.

Mia pursed her lips and petted the dog. “Are you mad at me?”

“I’m not thrilled. And I don’t see my ring in your other hand.”

“I don’t have your ring. I dumped my whole bag out looking for it and I don’t have it.”

We were back to our original stalemate. “Okay. Let’s go walk the dog.” I scooped Amelia off of Mia.

“I feel like you’re mad at me.” She used the bed to pull herself off the floor.

“I’m not mad at you.” I wasn’t. Not exactly. I was determined to get to the bottom of what was going on with Mia. I was determined to have sex with her again. I was determined to have her continue to walk my dog with me. And I was determined that I was going to figure out why I was determined to do all of those things. “Do you care if I’m mad at you?” I asked, curious.

“Of course I care. I don’t want you to hate me.”

“I don’t hate you.” That I was certain of. Anything beyond that was fucking muddled in my head. “I feel a lot of things about you, but hate is not one of them.”

“Like what?” Her voice was husky as she stood by my bed in that short dress. The outfit was casual, but it showed off her legs in a way that made me forget what the hell we were even talking about.

“I feel like you need to step away from that bed before I put you on it.”

She opened her mouth, probably to reprimand me, when she glanced to the right. “Is that my shoe? It is.”

Shit. It was. Just sitting on my dresser, where I had plunked it almost six months earlier. I saw it every day, thought of her every day, and didn’t ever move the shoe. The shoe she’d left behind in December, like some sexy redheaded Cinderella. “You ran out of here so fast you forgot it. You were in a real hurry to run out barefoot in December.”

“I had to get to work.” She picked up the shoe and stared at me. “Why

didn't you just throw this away?"

That was the question of the year. One I didn't have an answer for. "I don't know. Maybe I thought if we ever saw each other, we could do an even exchange. The shoe for my championship ring."

"These shoes cost eight dollars."

That made me momentarily speechless.

Could you even make shoes for that little amount of money? My God, it must be like strapping your feet into zip ties. Nothing that cheap could be comfortable.

My expression must have given me away. She started laughing. "It's true." She lowered her voice to whisper and gave me a grin. "They're *secondhand*."

I was still speechless. Maybe even more so. The thought of wearing shoes someone else's feet had been in made my gut tighten. I have a bit of a neat freak personality, for no particular reason. The house I'd grown up in was typical, my mother's housekeeping normal, neither slovenly nor obsessive. It was a clean, but sometimes cluttered house, as the demands of life and kids and a husband who frequently ruined clothes at work would be. I had just always liked to be neat and tidy, with crisp clothes and new shoes. It was how I was wired.

"I never would have guessed," I said, when it became obvious she expected me to say something.

Mia set the shoe back down on the dresser, but kept her hand on it. "So it just sits here, like a cheap trophy? Don't other women you bring home ask you about it?"

Her tone was casual, but her shoulders had tensed. She was asking me if I had fucked anyone else in the last six months. Interesting. She wouldn't ask that if she didn't care what my answer was.

"Generally speaking, the women I bring home are mostly focused on themselves." I leaned casually against the doorframe, enjoying the way the

conversation was going.

Mia looked like she wanted to use that shoe to commit bodily harm against my other sex partners. She was jealous. And while jealousy wasn't a fantastic emotion, it did mean that she was way more interested in me than she was letting on. And I was more interested in that than I should be.

"It was brought to my attention that you have an active social life."

"It's a professional perk." I hadn't spent the last six months celibate, and I wasn't going to lie about it. Granted, none of those women had even come close to satisfying me the way Mia had, but I definitely hadn't been sitting at home feeling sorry for myself. She'd ditched me and I thought I would never see her again, especially when I didn't see her at the hotel during any of my stays.

"And luxury boat salesmen?" She was fingering the stitching on the back of the heel, not looking at me.

I wasn't sure what she was asking. If I had lied in the past or something else. "Considering you're the first woman to ever leave me without a word or a number, I'd say there are no obvious perks to being a luxury boat salesman."

"I am?" She was fighting a smile.

That was probably too much ammunition to give her, but too late. She had me by the balls and had since the second she'd slammed into me. There was no fucking denying it. I was stupid when it came to Mia. A fucking idiot. "You are. And I was going to ask you to dinner, too. I was going to give my confession that I had lied, capped by me going down on you, and then ask for forgiveness and a date. I had a whole plan."

Mia turned and looked at me from under her eyelashes. Her expression was sly, and it made me want to kiss her. Hard. "I didn't leave without a word because I wasn't interested. I was late for work and because you lived in Miami it seemed pointless to worry about it. How's that for ironic?"

"It's horribly ironic."



“I had fun that night, James. I would have said yes to dinner.”

“Even though I lied?”

She tilted her head, like she was considering it. “Yes. If you had told me that morning, I probably would have laughed about it.”

“So you’re telling me that you didn’t steal my wallet?”

“Yes, I’m telling you I didn’t steal your wallet.”

There were only two options. Stick firm to the belief that she was lying to me and had purposefully set me up as a target and stolen from me, in which case, I needed to cut her out of my life entirely. No more dog walking, no communication. Or I could choose to believe that taking my wallet was an accident of the dark room and her jumbo bag, and see where this relationship with Mia could go.

I already knew what I was going to do.

There was a reason that shoe was still sitting there and it wasn’t because I wanted to use it as a future bargaining chip. It was because I had wanted to see my redheaded, stain-removing, very entertaining Cinderella again.

It had invaded my thoughts every single night since December.

“Mia?” I asked her, stepping forward so that I could run my thumb over her bottom lip and gaze into her eyes.

“Yes?” Her voice was soft.

“Go to dinner with me.”

“Okay.”

Just like that. Okay. I smiled at her, pleased with her quick response.

I bent and brushed my lips over hers, in a quick, teasing kiss.

When I pulled back she sucked in a breath.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Amelia’s getting restless.”

## Chapter Eleven

*Mia*

*O* kay.

That was my answer?

I was so annoyed with myself. He hadn't even said if he believed me or not about the wallet. Nope. Not a word about that. Like it was no big deal. Like he hadn't kept me hostage in his hotel room in my underwear. Like he hadn't just busted me crawling around on his floor trying to hide his wallet.

He'd just invited me to dinner and kissed me.

It was a good kiss. A quick kiss, but one that reminded me immediately of the chemistry James and I shared. Explosive, combustible, exciting chemistry.

Fine. If he wasn't going to make a big deal out of it, neither was I. It must mean he was at least inclined to believe me. That was good enough for now. Because I liked spending time with James, and I had to admit, it had made me all sorts of warm inside when he had said he'd been planning to ask me out after our delicious night together.

Now we were walking Amelia, and it felt very couple-ish.

Which I really, really liked.

Which made me feel like Chrissy.

I was indulging in the fantasy.

It was just a kiss and dinner. I needed to remember that.

I had made no effort to take my shoe back. It was oddly satisfying to know he'd kept it sitting there on his dresser all these months. He'd been forced to think about me. He wanted to think about me. Or he would have tossed the shoe, right?

The doorman greeted me by name again and it made me feel important, before I remembered that James had so much as admitted he'd had a parade of women through his apartment. Maybe the doorman called them all by name.

Which reminded me of something that had always bugged me. "How did your doorman know my name the night we met?" I asked him as we walked very, very slowly behind Amelia. I had tried to get James to move her along and teach her a walk was a forward motion, not sniffing every inch along the route, but he was an indulgent dog daddy.

"What?" He was watching Amelia. "Look at how cute she is," he said. "I need another video."

He must have had seventeen hours of footage of the puppy by then. Which made him almost as cute as the dog. "Your doorman. When I left in the morning back in December, he called me by name."

James didn't look up from his phone. "I texted him and told him I was bringing a guest named Mia."

"Why?"

"I wanted to make sure he didn't say anything about football and have you realize I had told a stupid-ass lie."

Ah. So there was the truth. I was special in that I was the only one being lied to. The doorman clearly thought I was an idiot. Whatever. There had been no reason that night for me to believe anything other than what James had told me.

“I was telling the truth when I said I don’t know much about football. I don’t even know what position you play.”

“I’m a wide receiver.”

Yeah. That meant nothing to me. “Offense or defense?”

“Offense.” He gave me an amused look. “I saw a picture of you in team gear. Are you conning me?”

“No, not at all. I won a raffle at work. I played a dollar because it was a children’s cancer charity and I won the jersey and tickets to the game. I took my co-worker from the coffee shop because he’s a huge fan.”

“That wasn’t an ex-boyfriend?”

Was James jealous? The thought made me gleeful in a way I should be ashamed of, but wasn’t. “No. We did go on one date like two years ago but we both realized we were meant to be friends.”

“Did he suck in bed?”

His mind went right there? “I didn’t sleep with him. I didn’t even kiss him. We went to a taco truck and talked and it was awkward as hell and we ended up laughing and agreeing to never speak of it ever again.”

“That’s too bad,” he said. “Not.”

That made me laugh. “That didn’t sound very nice.”

“I’m not nice. I’m competitive.”

I was reminded of my comment about the sex being efficient. He was competitive all right. That one word had launched him into an assault on my vagina that had easily claimed the number one spot in my sexual history of oral sex performed on me.

My alarm on my phone went off. The sound brought me back to reality, and away from memories of what James could do to me. “I have to go. The bus will be by in a couple of minutes and I need to be somewhere.” I had promised my mother I would visit her and the director of the facility had emailed me about a meeting. Which was concerning. I hoped there wasn’t some financial issue.

“Do you need a ride?”

A ride would be great, but for some reason, I didn't want to discuss my mother with James. It made me feel too vulnerable. It had been Mama and me against the world for so many years, I wasn't ready to share how scared I was over her stroke and the thought of losing her. Even though I knew intellectually she was recovering well, she would never be the same carefree mother who had raised me. It was just too real to share with a man I wasn't even sure I trusted, and who probably didn't trust me.

“No, thank you, I'm sure you have things to do and I really need to get there now.” I reached down and gave Amelia a quick pet. “Bye, Amelia.” I stood up and started walking quickly back toward the building and the bus station that was a half block down from there. “Bye, James. Thanks.”

I didn't even know what I was thanking him for. The kiss? For not calling the cops on me when he caught me returning the wallet?

“Mia,” he said. “I can give you a ride.”

“No, really, it's okay, thanks.” I didn't turn around and just kept going, my heart racing. What the hell was wrong with me?

BY THE TIME I arrived at Oak Harbor, I had calmed myself down. “Jesus, Mia,” I murmured out loud as I pushed my shoulders back and entered the facility. Everything was fine. Me and James were cool. It was all good.

My phone buzzed with a notification and I absently glanced at it. Then swore softly out loud. He had done it again.

Another five-hundred-dollar tip.

I also had a text from him.

*Dinner Wednesday?*

I texted him back. *I can't. I have to work.*

Then a pic of him and Amelia, their faces close to the camera, looking mournful. Amelia, because she always looked like that. James, because he

was a smart-ass who had probably never been told no in his life. At least not his adult life.

*My first night off is next Monday.*

*What???? That's a whole week from now.*

I could practically feel his outrage and irritation. It made me smile. I shoved my phone in my back pocket and signed in at the front desk. “Hey, Jeannette, how’s it going?” Over the past six weeks of visiting my mother, I had gotten to know the staff. They were all amazing at their job, super friendly, always helpful.

“Oh, you know how it is. My kids have been out of school for a week and they’re blowing my phone up all day bitching about each other. ‘He sat on my head. She ate my cereal. He took a video of me without telling me and put it on TikTok.’ Listen, I don’t care what you all do, just don’t kill each other and don’t call me at work.”

“That sounds about right, though I guess I don’t really know. I’m an only child.” Though I was pretty sure if I had a brother, I wouldn’t want him sitting on my head. “They’re in high school now, right?”

“Yes.” Jeannette sighed. “I’m hoping one or both will join the armed forces. They’re both terrible in school.”

“I was terrible at school and look how I turned out. I work backbreaking service jobs for terrible wages and get little to no respect,” I said, cheerfully. “If you want, I can have your daughter shadow me for a day in housekeeping. That will straighten her out.”

I never resented having to work hard. I was grateful I had my jobs. But that didn’t mean it was a wise career path for a teenager who might have other options. I had just stumbled my way to this point and I wasn’t sure there was a way out, barring bank robbery. Not a fast way, at any rate. The plan was definitely to work my way up to store manager at the coffee shop, because even though customers could be a bear, I didn’t want to be cleaning rooms when I was forty.

In the meantime, I had my mind down and was just plugging away.

Jeannette smiled. “Thanks, Mia, I just might take you up on that. You can go on in. Margaret is dying to see you. She has good news.”

“That’s great to hear, thanks.” I waved and went down the hall.

Before I could get to my mother’s room, the director, Bill, saw me walking past his office and waved. “Mia, do you have a minute?”

“Sure.” I entered his office. “How are you?”

“Just wanted to let you know that everything has been signed off on and your mother will be released next Tuesday. She’s eager to go home and I’m sure you’re ready to have her back home.”

It was news I had been expecting eventually, but much sooner. “I thought we were looking at a few more weeks.”

“Nope. Doctor says she’s ready to go.” He gave me a smile.

“Great, thank you,” I said, even as my stomach clenched. That was fantastic news. And yet, I had nowhere for my mother to go. Where she would live after her release had been a problem I’d been putting off for later, thinking I had time. But the time was now and I wasn’t prepared. Prior to her stroke she’d been living with a guy who was only a notch up from Christina’s last boyfriend.

There was no way I was taking her back to Turkey’s filthy apartment. Yes, his name was Turkey. Which told you all you needed to know about him. He hadn’t even contacted my mother once in the six weeks she’d been here. He’d probably moved on to another gullible woman.

Guilt that I couldn’t provide a better place than Casa de Broke Bitches for my mother to recuperate in, threatened to overwhelm me. I gave Bill another thank-you and walked quickly down the hall, trying to hold my emotions in. I couldn’t let Mama know I was worried and upset. She would come home with me and I would give her my bedroom. I could sleep on the couch, and hopefully she would qualify for a nurse’s aide to do home health visits.

The thought of that paperwork also gave me intense anxiety, but I

clenched my fists open and closed and pasted a smile on my face before I entered my mother's room. "Hey, Hot Mama, how's it going?" I asked.

She loved that nickname. Mama prided herself on being a rebel, on being a girl who had hung out with the boys, and a sexy biker chick in her twenties and thirties. She had lots of stories about defending herself with a pool stick, about winning wet T-shirt contests at just the right time to pay off a bill and keep the lights on, and about traversing the country twice on the back of a Harley.

Her favorite story was about being engaged to her high school sweetheart at twenty and telling one of her co-workers at the deodorant factory she worked at that if she had fifty bucks, she'd ditch the fiancé, leave Georgia, and never come back. On payday, that co-worker came to her, held up fifty bucks, and said, "Ready to go?"

So she left with him. That man was my father. Spoiler alert: it didn't end well. In fact, it ended with her leaving him for another man when he dislocated her shoulder during a fight. She ended up back in Georgia at my grandparents' with me, where she swore she'd never live again.

But that was Hot Mama. Impulsive, full of love and life and spontaneity.

Her eyes were sparkling. "They're springing me, Mia. Only one more week in this dump." She said something after that that might have been "hallelujah," but it was garbled and hard to decipher, the aftereffect of her stroke.

I didn't ask her to repeat it because she would just get frustrated.

"I heard. That's awesome. But this place isn't bad," I told her. "The staff here is all amazing."

She tried to wave her hand, but the weakness in her right side only allowed her to partially raise it. "There are no hot guys here."

That made me laugh. "Maybe don't worry about hot guys right now, Mama. Let's get you right as rain, then you can find your flirt again."

"Always so sensible, my Mia. What would I do without you?" She



reached her arms out for a hug.

I'd heard those words my entire life. Mama always said without me she really would have gone off the rails. But she also had always depended on me to be reasonable. I didn't mind the role. It fit with my nature well. I hugged her back, hard, trying not to cry. That was why I felt like I was failing her now.

"What's going on with you?" she asked. "Any guy in your life?"

Her words were slow and stilted, but we both ignored that.

"Since four days ago?" I asked, dryly. "No." Which of course wasn't exactly true but I didn't want to tell my mother about James for the same reasons I hadn't told James about my mother. It made me feel vulnerable. Which I hated. I didn't like to feel exposed. I wanted to be in control.

That was also why I never resented working so much. Sure, I was tired all the damn time, but it was safe, predictable. Easy, despite the fatigue. Being emotionally raw was not comfortable at all.

"You're going to be an old maid," she said, with a smile.

One of her favorite jokes.

"Looks that way," I said, smiling back.

"Hey. Can I get..." She took a deep breath and frowned. "What's it called? The soft stuff you eat that's cold?"

I kept my expression neutral. "Ice cream?"

"Yes," she said, looking relieved.

"We'll get that day one when you come home with me next week," I promised.

Sitting down, I chatted with her for a few minutes, telling her random stories about Kadin, which she always enjoyed, and giving her the rundown on her favorite reality show about ex-convicts and their love interests. But she was fading out after a few minutes, so I said goodbye and gave her another hug.

In the hallway, the second the door closed, I blinked hard. God, I felt like

I was going to cry. I needed to get the hell out of there before I lost my shit.

I was rushing toward the entrance, clutching my bag, when I heard a voice call to me.

“Mia. Your boyfriend is here to pick you up.” It was Jeannette, sounding scandalized and thrilled all at the same time.

“What?” I wiped quickly under my eyes to make sure a sneaky tear hadn’t gotten loose, and turned to see what the hell she was talking about. Or rather, who the hell she was talking about.

It was James, standing at the front desk.

Jeannette was beaming.

James was smiling at me.

I took one look at him and burst into tears.

## Chapter Twelve

*JJ*

“*W*hoa, whoa,” I said, completely shocked as Mia started crying hysterically, her chest rising up and down rapidly. “What’s wrong?”

I went to her, and to my surprise, she threw herself against my chest and hid her face in my T-shirt as she sobbed. I wrapped my arms around her and ran my hand over her back. “It’s okay, sweetheart.” I hoped it was okay. Jesus, had her mother *died*?

I had gotten such a weird vibe off of Mia when she’d left that I had done something that might be considered fucked up. I had followed Mia’s bus in my car, Amelia riding shotgun in her crate. When I had realized where Mia was going, I thought maybe she was visiting a grandparent, but I had sweet-talked the receptionist, while making it sound like I knew what the hell was going on. I had told her I was Mia’s boyfriend, there to give her a ride home.

Jeannette the receptionist had taken one look at me and then my ID as I checked in and had been willing to tell me anything. She had chatted about Mia’s mother being on the road to recovery and how devoted Mia was and how I had a good woman in her. It was clear she and the entire staff thought Mia was amazing. I had just started to ask if I could actually go back to the

room when Mia had burst out, clutching her bag like a stuffed animal.

I was starting to figure out that bag was more than just a place to store everything she owned. It was also her security blanket.

Now she was in my arms and I was mystified as to why it was happening. I pulled back slightly and used my thumbs to wipe her cheeks. “Hey. What’s going on? Tell me.”

“I’m fine,” she whispered, her words tight.

“Is your mom okay?”

She nodded. “She’s great. She’s being released. Can we just go?”

“Yeah, sure, of course.” I smoothed her hair back and then turned to the front desk. “Thanks, Jeannette.”

“You’re welcome, JJ.” She gave me a big smile. “Now you take care, hon,” Jeannette said to Mia, her face filled with sympathy.

“Thanks, Jeannette. I’ll see you in a few days.”

I led her out of the lobby and into the parking lot. “Amelia will be happy to see you. I have her in her crate in my car with the air-conditioning running.”

Mia wiped her eyes and studied me. “Why are you here? Did you follow me?”

“Yes.”

“So you're stalking me?”

“Basically, yes.” I shrugged. I could admit it. “Something was off when you left and I was worried about you. Okay, and curious.” She’d acted nervous, like she was on her way to a heist. Since I still wasn’t entirely convinced she wasn’t a criminal mastermind, I had wanted to see where she was going. “It was impulsive. I’m sorry for invading your privacy.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said. “Thank you for getting me out of there before I embarrassed myself any further. I never cry.” She sighed. “God, that just came out of nowhere.”

“What brought it on?” I unlocked the car door and moved Amelia from

the front seat to the back of my SUV. “But sometimes you just need to let your emotions out, you know? You can’t bottle that up forever. That’s what I love about football. I can work out anything in the gym or during practice.”

“My mother is being released from the facility. She had a stroke in April.” She slid into the passenger seat.

“So you’re relieved? That’s understandable. Being released means she’s okay after a traumatic event. The past few months must have been really scary for you.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything else.

I shut the door and went around to the driver’s side. I got in and sat for a second, waiting to see if Mia would say anything else. I had a feeling I knew what was bothering her. But when she didn’t, I turned to her, my hand on her knee, caressing her. “You’re a very strong woman. It’s okay to not be strong once in awhile.”

“You don’t understand. I’ve always taken care of my mother, even as a kid.” Mia’s eyes pooled with tears again. “If I’m not strong, who the hell is going to be strong for me?” she asked, her voice raw.

I felt a wave of tenderness so damn strong I almost wasn’t sure what the fuck to do with it. But looking at Mia, I just knew what I wanted and that was her. I wanted to protect her and take care of her and coax a sassy smile from her.

“Me. That’s who.”

“You? I barely know you, James.”

I wasn’t sure that was entirely true, but I wasn’t going to argue with her. “That makes me impartial. Lay it on me. Tell me what’s upsetting you. I can either just listen or I can help you problem-solve, whatever you need.”

She looked reluctant, but she did finally say, “Well. It’s great that my mother is being released. But she has nowhere to go, except my apartment. It’s a small two-bedroom place, that I share with Chrissy and her son, Kadin, who’s two. I feel terrible that I can’t do any better than that for my own

mother.”

Wow. That was a heavy burden for her. “You work really hard, Mia. You’re doing the best you can.” She worked eighty-seven jobs for fuck’s sake. “Your mother knows that.”

She nodded, tucking her hair behind her ear. “She does. But I still feel bad, you know?”

I squeezed her knee. “I get that. But you can only do what you can do.”

“I don’t even have any food in my apartment. I’ve been eating oatmeal for the last three days.” Tears threatened to choke her again. “If you hadn’t given me that tip yesterday, I wouldn’t have been able to pay my rent. God, do you know how humiliating and frustrating that is? I’ve always believed that if I work hard, everything will work out. But lately, it’s hard to hold on to that.”

Damn, I wanted to just sweep Mia away, off into the fucking sunset, and make her life easier. I wanted to solve all her problems and give her all the love and support she deserved.

What I also suspected was that no one took care of Mia. She did all the caring.

That was about to change. Right now.

“I didn’t realize how tight things are for you. I’m sorry for asking you to take time off work to walk Amelia with me. I wanted to spend time with you and I wasn’t thinking.”

She gave a watery laugh. “It’s fine. You gave me more than I make in a shift.”

I still felt like a dick. “Okay, good. But how are you paying for your mom’s stay at the rehab facility?” Mia amazed me. I could see why the staff was fond of her. She worked her ass off and never complained and still made time in a jam-packed schedule to visit her mother all the time.

“Some of it is covered, but the rest I’m just going to be on a payment plan for the rest of my life. I might be out from under it by the time I need a home

myself.” She shrugged.

“That sucks,” I said, and I meant that sincerely. I also knew I was going to pay the bill. “How much is the balance?”

“Like fifteen grand.”

“Oh, that’s not bad,” I said, without thinking. I’d been envisioning like two hundred grand. I reversed the car and started driving.

She laughed, which perplexed me.

“What?” I asked. “Where do you live, by the way?”

She gave me her address and I punched it into my phone.

“That you think fifteen thousand dollars isn’t a big bill just makes me feel slightly hysterical.”

This was having the opposite effect of what I had intended. “I didn’t mean it like that. I was picturing something way worse, but I should have thought before I spoke.”

“Maybe we should cancel our dinner date, James.”

“What?” I stared at her, waiting to pull out of the parking lot. “Why?” That is not how I had wanted this conversation to go. I wanted her to feel like she could confide in me, not feel like we shouldn’t date.

“Go date a supermodel or a country singer. That’s who you belong with,” she said, sounding world-weary. She was actually leaning her head against the car window. “I’m a maid and a barista and a dog walker who is drowning in debt and will never get out. This is my life and I’m honestly okay with it. But I don’t belong with a man like you.”

“A man like me? What the hell does that mean?”

“A rich guy with flashy tastes. Your girlfriend should be flashy too.”

Even as I got pissed, nostrils flaring, I knew she wasn’t wrong. I was flashy. The guys all loved to give me shit about it. I had expensive taste and the money to indulge it. But that didn’t define who I was as a person. “If I wanted to date a supermodel, I would be dating a supermodel,” I said, voice tight. “I want to date *you*.”

“Why?” she asked.

“We just talked about this. Because we have fun together. We talked for hours that first night and it was easy, interesting. I knew who you were, you know. From the minute we met, I knew you worked in housekeeping and I never gave a shit. Why would that bother me? If anything, I respect the hell out of you for how hard you work. I don’t want a woman whose only hobbies are microblading and spending my money.”

“What the heck is microblading?”

“I don’t know. Something with eyebrows. Eyebrows are very important to a lot of women I’ve dated.”

Mia laughed again, and this time it sounded like genuine amusement. “So if I date you, I’ll be saving you from women who obsess about eyebrows?”

“Yes. Think of dating me as an act of charity.” I wasn’t taking no for an answer. I wanted to be with Mia. I was going to make it happen, no matter what her ridiculous objections might be. “One woman I dated had an Instagram account devoted to her eyebrows.”

“You’re making that up.”

“I am not. It was terrifying.” I glanced over at her. “Don’t tell me you named your eyebrows. I will be very upset if that’s the case.”

“I have not named my eyebrows. It’s never even occurred to me.”

“Good. Because you name everything, so I was worried for a second. But now there’s no reason we can’t date.”

“James...”

“Mia.”

“James.” Her voice was firmer this time.

“Mia.”

“Argh,” she said. “*James.*”

“*Mia.* I can keep doing this all day.”

“This isn’t a good idea.”

“Arguing with me or dating with me?”



“Both.”

“I don’t know. It feels right to me.”

“Arguing with me or dating?” Mia asked.

I laughed. “Both.”

She sighed, but I could tell she was caving. “I honestly don’t know what to do with you.”

That made my cock hard. I raised my eyebrows. “I can think of a thing or twelve.”

Mia didn’t respond. I glanced over at her. She was giving me a look that she didn’t even bother to mask. It was one of raw need. Desire. Her mouth was slightly open and her eyes were one hundred percent fuck-me eyes. I almost drove off the damn road.

I glanced at the GPS on my phone to see how long until we got to her place. If it was more than a few miles, I was going to have to pull over and make out with her at the very least. Five minutes away. I hit the gas pedal a little harder.

A thought occurred to me as I pulled into her apartment complex. She never seemed to have more than thirty-minute increments of free time. The woman worked without sleep. “How long before you have to be at one of your jobs?”

Mia glanced at her phone as I pulled into a guest parking spot. “Two hours.” There was the briefest of pauses. Then she said, “Do you want to come in?”

“It’s a little late in the day for coffee. A little early for a drink.”

“I meant that maybe you could tear my clothes off of me and distract me from all this crappy reality.”

Oh, hell, yeah. “I would love to come in and tear your clothes off.”

Mia tucked her hair behind her ears. “This is probably a bad idea. Right?”

“I think you already said that. I disagree. This is the best idea ever.”

She seemed to instantly feel guilty for her straightforward request. “Will

this complicate things if we try to date after we have sex today? This seems impulsive. Jumping the gun.”

That amused me. “Uh, Mia? We’ve already had sex. I think that ship has sailed, sweetheart. I’ve already touched every single inch of you.” I leaned over and kissed her. “I’ve tasted these lips.” I shifted a hand over her breast and she gasped softly as I teased my thumb over her nipple. “I’ve tasted this nipple.” I watched her eyes close briefly when I eased my hand between her thighs and under her dress. “And I’ve tasted this sweet, sweet pussy.” I stroked over her panties, dragging my palm up and down slowly. “I know the sound you make when you come.”

“Those are all very valid points you’re making,” she said, as she shifted her knees apart to give me further access.

“Then I think we should go inside before I prove them in this car.”

“I’m not going to argue with you.”

“That will be a refreshing change. Not arguing with me.” I pulled back and gave her a smile. “The dog has to come with me.”

“Of course.” Mia opened her car door.

I got out and opened the back to collect Amelia’s crate. She was peacefully sleeping on her blanket in it. I glanced around at the apartment complex and didn’t love what I saw. There was no overhead lighting that I could see, and zero security cameras. Not the safest place for a couple of young single women and a small child. It also had a general appearance of neglect, but I knew Mia was on a budget. Unattended landscaping didn’t surprise me. But hell, the management company could spring for some security.

I followed her with Amelia to her apartment, which was on the first floor. Also not great for security. A couple of guys were hanging around the entrance to the unit next to hers, doing some kind of money exchange, and when they saw me, they looked alarmed. They nodded, but one quickly retreated into the apartment and the other jogged toward the parking lot. I

frowned, having the distinct impression we'd witnessed a drug deal.

But once we were inside, I shoved those thoughts aside. I already knew I was getting Mia a new apartment, so I wasn't going to worry about her shady neighbors.

"This is the infamous Casa de Broke Bitches," I said, as she opened the door and stepped aside to let me in.

"Did I tell you that I call it that?" she asked.

I nodded. "In December."

She tilted her head and studied me. "You have a good memory."

"I remember everything about that night." That was the complete truth.

Mia gave me a look I couldn't decipher, but then she just shook her head. "I'm sorry for the mess. I'm not the cleanest person," she said as she closed the door behind us. "After cleaning other people's messes all day, I find it hard to have the energy to be spotless at home."

The apartment was small and cluttered with shoes and kids' toys and furniture that was too large for the space. A laundry basket was on the coffee table and the vacuum was sitting in the middle of the room, though it didn't look like it had been used. I wasn't surprised by what I was seeing. It was a small space, housing a small child and two adults who worked a lot of hours.

"You don't need to apologize to me. You have a lot going on. Besides, it just looks lived in."

Mia dropped her bag on the coffee table next to the laundry basket and grinned. "I've seen the way you live in a hotel room and your apartment. You are a neat freak."

"Freak might be a strong word for it."

"Not at all. You're a freak, James, admit it." It was clear she was teasing me.

I didn't mind. She could call me whatever she wanted as long as she was smiling at me. I set Amelia's crate down on the carpet and leaned down to pet her through the holes. She was actually still fast asleep, which was good. I

didn't think I should release her into an apartment with all sorts of things that she could chew on, and either destroy or hurt herself.

I stood back up and moved over to Mia. "Oh, you think I'm a freak?"

Her green eyes widened. "When it comes to tidiness, yes."

"Are you a freak, Mia?" I flipped the end of her hair with my finger. "Don't you ever just want to let go of all that responsibility and worry and do something crazy?"

"I already am. I agreed to go on a date with you."

That made me laugh softly. "Not exactly a wild and crazy thing to do, is it?"

"You'd be surprised from my perspective." Then she reached up and put her hands on my shoulders. She went up on her tiptoes so she was closer to me. "James."

The way she murmured my name was like a fist gripping my cock. I wanted her so damn bad. "Mia."

"Take me to bed. Now."

I felt the same sort of hyped excitement I did in the locker room. *Let me in, Coach.*

"I can do that," I told her. Then I picked her up under her ass and carried her down the hallway, her arms around my neck. "Which room?"

"Second door on the left. Do you know how hot it is that you can just carry me like this?"

It fucking better be. "It's efficient," I told her with a smirk.

She laughed softly, shaking her head so that her long red hair trailed behind her. "Let me give you a compliment."

I kicked open her door with my foot. "Tell me again, then."

"It's very hot that you're so strong."

Hey, who wouldn't want his ego stroked by his woman? "Good. I want to turn you on. And I do work hard for this level of fitness. The job demands it."

I set Mia down on her bed.

“You definitely do turn me on,” she breathed.

There were clothes everywhere on her bed. She just bundled them up and chucked them in the general direction of the floor. My eyes followed the movement. “Ignore them,” she said. “I can practically see you twitching to fold my clothes.”

For once, I hadn’t been. I pushed her back down on the mattress. “I don’t give a shit about your wrinkled clothes.” I eyed what she was wearing. The casual floral dress buttoned up the entirety of the front. Piece of fucking cake. Running a thumb over the top button, I leaned over and stared into her eyes. “You’re so beautiful.”

Then I used both hands and ripped her dress open with a hard tug, exposing her tits and her waist in a swift tearing of fabric and popping buttons.

She gasped. “What are you doing?” she asked, though she sounded more excited than angry.

“Tearing your clothes off of you.” I finished the job with a second tug, spreading open the dress from waist to knee. I let go of the fabric and it puddled on either side of her, the sleeves the only thing holding it on her. She was all creamy pale skin, high breasts, and enticing curves. I climbed on her bed.

*Mia*

“WAIT,” I put my hand on James’ chest as he bent over me.

“What’s wrong?” He instantly stopped and pulled back.

“Nothing. I just want you to take all your clothes off. I didn’t really get to see as much of you as I would have liked the first time.” It had been a lament

for months. Sure, I'd *felt* him. But the room had been dim and most of the time we'd been on top of each other. I hadn't enjoyed the pleasure of seeing him walk across the room.

The corner of his mouth turned up. "Well, I can't say no to that, can I?" He stood up and shifted a few feet back from the bed. He peeled his shirt off over his head.

I propped myself onto my elbows to have a better view of that hard chest, and ripped abs. "No, you really can't. I'm demanding it."

He undid his jeans, took down the zipper. "I'm not going to do a Magic Mike for you. Forget it."

I tried not to grin. I knew exactly how to get what I wanted from James. "That's okay. I didn't want you to," I said casually. "I can't imagine football players can really dance. Too big and bulky."

"Oh, I can fucking dance," he said. "When I retire, I'm going on Dancing With the Stars."

I couldn't help it. I grinned at him. "Should I get some music?"

James stopped and shook his head. "Damn, you played me," he said.

"You walked right into it. I couldn't help myself."

"No music for you then. I'll save the full monty for another time. Today all you get is me buck-ass naked, you little tease."

"How am I a tease?" I asked, drawing my eyes slowly over him. I wanted to commit his body to memory.

"More like you like to give me a hard time. I like that you're not afraid to do that." He undid the zipper on his shorts.

James tended to dress like he'd gone to prep school, but as the student who had snuck out repeatedly to go drinking, and who had seduced half a dozen studious virgins with very little effort. His clothes were expensive, crisp, traditional, but with an edge. The bad-boy-in-the-boardroom vibe.

I watched him shove his shorts to the floor. "Too many suck-ups in your past?" I asked him.

“Something like that.” James took his boxer briefs down.

It was a hell of a view. I swallowed, my nipples hardening. He was chiseled and defined, with muscular thighs and biceps for days. His cock was hard, and he raised his hands to clasp behind his head. Which only improved the view, which he clearly knew. He looked damn pleased with himself, a smirk playing over his lips as I drank in the sight of him. He should be pleased with himself. That was a body of perfection only a few would achieve.

“Should I turn?” he asked. “Let you stare from all angles?”

I shook my head. “No. Come here and finish what you started.”

He dropped his hands, his nostrils flaring. “Yes, ma’am.”

James came over to the bed and caged me in with his strong arms. He kissed me, hard, before undoing my bra with one hand. His enormous hand cupped my breast, squeezing with more force than I generally liked, but the pressure actually turned me on. It was just so damn sexy that he was so *big*.

But then he looked at me in a way that both thrilled and scared me. It wasn't calculating or a man following his usual choreography. It was *real*.

“Do you want me to fuck you now?” James asked.

“What else would you do?” I asked, breathless with anticipation and something else. Emotion that was springing from a deep well I had buried years ago.

“Maybe I'll touch your clit, rubbing it until you can't stay still.” His thumb slipped inside my panties, brushing over my clit, before easing into my pussy. “So nice and wet for me, Mia.”

I had my palms on his biceps and I squeezed, needing to hold on to him. Something was happening and I turned my head toward the wall, breaking eye contact. It was too much, too intense to maintain our locked gazes.

With each stroke, I gave a low sound of approval. James moved faster over my clit, rubbing in a light circle, another finger inside of me. He added a second finger, stretching me a little. I gasped, need coiling deep in me.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

“I can’t. It’s too much.”

James ran a finger along my jawline and over my lips. *Oh, God.* It was an unexpectedly gentle touch. I turned back, unable to resist, yet feeling vulnerable.

I could smell his cologne, feel the heat of his skin, the rough scrape of his knuckles as his hand went into my hair. He’d eased his finger out of me, and I could feel the hard nudge of his cock teasing at my entrance.

“Mia. My Mia,” he said.

Then he was inside of me and I was sliding down into an abyss of pleasure, an orgasm crashing over me.

“James.”



## Chapter Thirteen

### *Mia*

I woke up with that groggy feeling you have when you napped longer than you meant to. My sheets were cool on my naked skin. My totally naked skin.

Nope, that hadn't been a sleep-deprived fever dream. James had been at the assisted-living facility. I had cried hysterically. He'd brought me home and made me forget all my problems for an hour. And maybe introduced a few new fears, because holy shit, that hadn't been just sex. It was *intimacy*, and that terrified me.

Now he was gone.

I wasn't even upset or offended that he'd left without a goodbye. I had a feeling that he had been reluctant to wake me up. He really was kind of a sweet guy for a man with a playboy reputation and no real history of serious relationships that I was aware of.

Yawning, I forced myself to sit up and get dressed. I had no idea what time it was because I'd left Mississippi in the living room but I could hear Kadin playing in the living room. That meant it was at least four o'clock because that's when Chrissy picked him up from her mother's house on

Wednesdays.

When I made my way into the living room, I moved past Kadin, ruffling his soft hair. He was playing with a truck on the carpet. Chrissy was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables.

“Hey!” she said, smiling at me. “Did you get a good nap?”

“Yes. Hey, was James here when you got home?”

She bit a carrot and chewed it. “Uh, no. But I’ve only been home for ten minutes. What was JJ doing here, Mia?”

“Me,” I said. “He was doing me.”

“Yes.” She offered me a fist bump. “Tell me everything.”

That made me laugh and I indulged her by tapping my knuckles against hers. “No. Forget it. I’m not giving you details.”

I went to the coffee table and fished my phone out of my bag. There was a text from James.

*Didn’t want to wake you. Text me when you’re up.*

He ended it with the flame emoji. I wasn’t sure what that meant.

I wandered back to the kitchen and showed Christina. “What does this mean?”

“He thinks you’re hot.”

“Oh.” I was pretty damn pleased by that. Though I also wasn’t sure any of this was a good idea.

“How did you end up with JJ Beckett today, anyway?”

“I was dog-walking with him, then had to go visit Mama. He thought I was acting weird—he was right—so he followed me there. Then he drove me home from Oak Harbor. I may or may not have been crying hysterically.”

“About what? Are you okay?”

“They’re releasing Mama.”

“Oh, that’s great news.”

“It is. I think it was both relief and a little panic that I don’t have a great place for her to stay. I mean, I was like straight-up sobbing. And James

comforted me.”

“Damn. I wish I could get comfort in the form of a penis.” Christina bit her carrot again. Harder this time.

I couldn’t blame her. In the last eighteen months I’d only had sex twice. Though both times with James had more than made up for the dry spells.

“He asked me to dinner,” I told her.

“I hope you said yes because I have a knife in my hand. If you didn’t, I swear, Mia, I will hurt you.” She held the knife and made stabbing motions. “On behalf of all of us Cinderellas who haven’t stumbled on a prince yet, I’m begging you to go to dinner.”

“I said yes.”

“Phew. You’re lucky.”

I spotted my day planner on the kitchen table. Had I left that there? Being a visual person (one of the reasons for all the clutter in my bag and apartment) I put everything into my phone, but I also relied heavily on my physical planner. I had different colored pens and had a key code for everything. It was open to the current week when I could have sworn I’d left it shut and on my nightstand.

“Really?” I stared down at my planner. Sandwiched between my two shifts for the next day was written, “Date with James.” I flipped to the next week. Wednesday had “Dinner with James,” written on it. Underneath that was, “Stay over at James’ apt.”

Peppered throughout the next two weeks were entries like “Walk with James and Amelia,” “Drinks with James,” “Go shopping for sexy underwear to wear for James,” and my personal favorite, “Fly to Miami for the weekend with James.”

The man had lost his damn mind.

It also made me feel stupidly giddy.

“Look at this,” I told Christina, holding up the planner so she could see it. “He wrote himself into my schedule for the next two weeks.”

“Oh my God, you’re going to Miami?” she exclaimed. “That’s amazing!”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Chrissy, no, I am not going to Miami. I can’t take three days off work. Plus that’s right after my mom gets out of the rehab facility. This is just all stuff James wants me to do, not anything based on reality.”

“But it’s just so romantic.” She sighed dreamily.

“Or bossy. Entitled.” Romantic. It was romantic. Because I believed that James wanted to spend time with me. For whatever reason, he had picked me to be the focus of his attention, and yes, it did make me feel things. Between my thighs and in my heart. Lots and lots of feels.

“He’s trying to be *cute*,” Christina said. “If he was trying to be an entitled jerk, he wouldn’t do it cutesy-style like this.”

Hmm. Maybe she had a point. “This is flirting? Not him being a controlling asshat?”

“I think he knows that you can’t actually do all of these things. He probably figures that if he shoots for the stars, he’ll land on the moon.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant. “Am I the star or the moon? Because if I’m the moon, it sounds like he’s settling.”

“You’re neither. He’s trying to give you the stars and the moon.”

“What?” I was confused. “I don’t get it.”

“Look,” Christina said, shooting me a look that said she didn’t appreciate my lack of romance. “If he was going to your work and telling your boss you need time off, that would be controlling. This is just expressing his feelings. He wants to spend time with you. It’s as simple as that.”

“I don’t even understand why.” I bit my lip.

“Right now, I’m not sure why either,” she said, exasperated. “You’re being insane. Enjoy dating JJ Beckett, for crying out loud!”

That was a much stronger reaction than I usually got from her. “Okay, geez.” I closed the planner and held it against my chest. Whether to protect myself from Christina’s wrath or to cuddle against my heart the idea of being

with James, I wasn't sure.

Her voice softened. "I know you don't want to be like Hot Mama, leaping before you look, but honestly, Mia, JJ is no bad boy. Bad boys don't follow you when they're worried about you or leap over counters to pick you up off the floor."

"He has a reputation as a playboy," I said, not wanting to admit she was right. "You saw all those women on social media when we stalked him online. They all said he was a hit it and quit it guy." I may or may not have read more comments than could have been concerned casual interest.

Christina made a raspberry sound. "Whatever. Do you believe everything you read on the internet?"

She had a point. "You think they're all lying?"

"I think he's young, good-looking, rich, charming. I'm sure women have been throwing themselves at him for a decade. Yet, he's going to a lot of trouble to date you. Honestly, you're kind of a lot of work."

I frowned at her. "Oh, wow, thanks, that's nice."

She gave me a look back as she filled a plastic container with the cut vegetables. "Have you made this easy for him?"

"Probably not," I said begrudgingly. "But what if he changes his mind and gets tired of working around my schedule in a month?" I could admit it. I was afraid I would fall for James, and right about that time, he would get bored and move on. I had already fallen for James, who was I kidding? But I didn't want to make it any worse by spending even more time with him.

Her voice softened. "Then you have a good cry, eat some ice cream, and pick yourself back up. You will have had some great sex and some fun and had some fancy dinners. Where's the flaw in that?"

I knew she was right. "But it's hard to let go of control."

"Letting go of control and having fun don't have to go hand in hand. You're not your mother, sweetie. Far from it."

"Are you sure?"

“Positive. Why are you so insecure about this? That’s not like you at all.”

That was a great question. I wasn’t sure I liked the answer. “I don’t know how to let someone take care of me. I’m not even sure I know who I am if I’m not the care provider, you know what I mean?”

“As a woman who chooses thoroughly worthless men and takes care of all their needs, yes, I totally know what you mean.”

Taking care of my mother wasn’t the same thing as Chrissy’s codependent men. Well, not now anyway. But maybe before her stroke it hadn’t been all that different. She’d been impulsive and self-centered and I had enabled her.

“Don’t be a martyr,” she added. “Enjoy the attention and the orgasms and the champagne for a hot minute.”

When she put it like that, it did seem stupid to do anything but just appreciate that the man in my bed was generous, funny, completely rock-solid ripped, and was determined to see me.

“Attention. Orgasms. Champagne.” I fingered the entry James had written in. *Fly to Miami for the weekend with James*. “You’re one hundred percent right, Chrissy.”

Cinderella got to go to a ball. Why couldn’t I go to Miami?

JJ

WHEN IS YOUR BREAK?

*At ten.*

*Okay.*

*Why?*

*No reason.*

No reason other than that I was in the casino waiting to spend Mia's break with her. She'd told me she only got fifteen minutes, but I would take whatever the hell I could get. Dating Mia required some serious organization and planning. Her free time was non-existent, so I had to take advantage of every opportunity to spend a few minutes with her.

Why was that?

Just because I had one hundred percent fallen in love with her.

I wasn't sure exactly when it had happened, but it was somewhere between that first night and her bursting into tears and throwing herself onto my chest. I suspected it had actually occurred in December, right around the time I had bent down and kissed her for the first time, which was why I'd been so angry and unable to move past her perceived betrayal.

None of which mattered anymore, because I had admitted my feelings to myself, if not to her, and I was going all in. Mia was mine.

I glanced at my watch to check the time. Nine fifty-three.

The watch reminded me I needed to call Ji-Ho. I pulled out my phone. I had resisted the idea of hiring an assistant in the past, because as Mia had pointed out, I'm something of a control freak. I liked to arrange my own travel and make reservations, and handle my schedule of appointments. But when I had interviewed him, Ji-Ho had seemed to understand and respect that about me. He ran everything past me yet didn't need micromanaging, which was a serious skill. He was also just as much of a clean freak as me, and I knew that if he sent my clothes out to be dry-cleaned, they would arrive the way I liked them.

"Did you get the insurance on my watch?" I asked when he answered. I hadn't seen any paperwork.

"I sent you the documents to sign this morning. Check your email."

"Thanks. I also need you to go to Oak Harbor assisted-living facility and pay the final bill for a woman named Margaret Abernathy."

"Sure. How much is the bill?"

“It’s like fifteen grand. It’s for my girlfriend’s mother.” I got a cheap thrill out of using the term girlfriend. It had been *years* since I’d had an actual girlfriend.

I wasn’t sure Mia would agree with the label, but she would soon enough.

“What if the balance is higher than that?”

“I authorize you to pay up to thirty grand. Higher than that, give me a call.” I would still pay it, but we would need an itemized bill to go through. I didn’t want Mia getting ripped off.

Or me.

Ironic.

“Are you at a casino?” he asked. “I hear the slots.”

“I’m headed to a coffee shop in the casino. I’m not gambling.” I started walking in that direction. “And I need two tickets to see Katy Perry, three weeks out.”

That was met with dead silence.

“Shut up,” I said.

“I didn’t say anything,” he protested.

“It’s for Mia. She told me she loves Katy Perry.”

“Of course.”

“I’m being fucking romantic,” I told him.

“Of course.”

“Get great seats.”

“Of course.”

“Stop saying that, you’re making me uncomfortable.” I paused a few feet from the Starbucks. Mia was sitting down on a bench by an elevator, scrolling through her phone. I hung back, wanting to just observe her. She was so beautiful and strong and determined.

Oh, yeah. I was fucking done. So in love with her.

“Of course. I mean, right. Got it.”

“I need you to do something else,” I said to my assistant. “I’ll text you the



details in a minute. Gotta go.”

I ended the call and headed over to Mia. “Hi.” I sat down beside her.

Mia didn’t look at all surprised. “Hi. I was expecting you.”

“You were?” She was clearly catching on to me.

She nodded, her lips pressed tightly together, as if she were trying to hide a smile. “Coffee date with James was magically in my planner for today.”

That made me grin. “So far I’m three for three. You’ve gone to dinner with me, a movie, and now coffee. I’m a little surprised you’re letting me get away with this.”

“I’m surprised I am too,” she said. “But you’re almost as cute as Amelia. I can’t resist you.”

“Cute?” I growled. “Efficient and now cute. I’ve got work to do.” I slipped my hand behind her head and kissed her. Not a polite, public kiss. But a real, possessive, commanding kiss that showed her I meant business.

She moaned softly and pulled away. Her cheeks were flushed. “Point taken.”

“Damn right.” I ran my thumb over her bottom lip.

“You’re missing the part where I said it’s hard to resist you.” She leaned closer to me, her hand on my thigh. “I need to check my planner. I believe I have an appointment to spend the night at your apartment here soon.”

I was counting down the days. Four was way too long, but short of kidnapping her, I didn’t have much choice but to be patient. Not my strongest virtue, but I was getting a crash course in it. I put my hand over hers and laced our fingers together. Yep. I was holding her hand. It felt natural and pretty fucking awesome. “You definitely do have an appointment in my bed. Wednesday. It was the only night that would work with your schedule.”

“Good to know.” Mia gave me a look that would have made me think she would have leaned down and drawn my cock into her mouth if we weren’t right outside of the coffee shop.

She definitely looked naughty and I swore. “Fuck, Mia. Why are you

looking at me like that?”

“I was eyeing a bikini online for our trip to Miami. It’s very, very tiny.”

My mind went blank and my mouth went dry. “Are you serious? We can go to Miami? For how long?” Writing that down had been a Hail Mary throw in the fourth quarter. The odds were stacked way against me. But now I’d just caught the ball with one hand in the endzone.

“Forty-eight hours. That’s all I can manage. But you’re a cool guy who likes to make things happen. I’m sure you can arrange it.”

Who was this woman? I was torn between suspicion and wanting to fist-pump like an idiot. “Is this some kind of trick?”

She wrinkled her nose. “What? No! That’s just insulting. I’m trying to be flirty and sexy with you and you clearly don’t buy it.”

That made me laugh. Flirting wasn’t really her natural state. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. You are definitely sexy. It’s just that you called me a cool guy. And I’m assuming that means you are taking time off of work. Nothing about that sounded like you.”

Mia sat up straighter and tucked her hair behind her ears. “Oh, geez, you’re right. I sound like a try-hard.”

“But if you’re serious about taking a trip, I’m down. It doesn’t even have to be Miami. It can be anywhere you want. My buddy—do you remember Cash?—he’s having a big Fourth of July bash on his ranch outside of Nashville if you want to do that. Have you ever been to Nashville?”

“I’ve never been anywhere.” She looked at her phone. “I have to go.”

She put her arms around my neck and gave me a sweet kiss that I wanted to last forever. “Bye, James Beckett Junior, you irresistible man.”

“Bye, Mia Abernathy, you badass woman. I’ll call you later.”

I waited until she retreated back into the coffee shop, then I stood up. A young boy was staring at me, hovering. “Hey, buddy, what’s up?”

“Are you JJ Beckett?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes, sir, I am.”

He didn't say anything else, just stood awkwardly, bouncing his feet back and forth on the carpet. He was probably around nine years old. "Did you want a picture of you and me?" I asked.

He nodded eagerly, but didn't move.

I realized his father was standing next to him. "He's not allowed in the casino," he said. "You're two feet over the line."

Now that was a rule-follower. I was impressed with his willingness to listen to his father. "Gotcha. I will cross the divide and we can take a picture." I offered my hand to the father. "Are you on vacation?"

The man nodded. "We're here for my sister's wedding."

"Vegas is the place for that." I held my hand out to the boy and he took it and shook it with a reasonably firm grip. "Nice to meet you."

"I'm Foster," he said. "Was that your girlfriend you were kissing?"

Foster's father groaned. "Buddy. That is not appropriate to ask."

But the question amused me. I grinned at Foster. "Yes, it was. Only kiss someone who is your girlfriend."

"I don't have a girlfriend."

I clapped him on the shoulder. "Then I guess you don't have to worry about it."

"What if I want a girlfriend? How do I get one?" Foster asked.

This kid was killing me. Six months earlier, I would have told him the key to getting a girlfriend was to be a football player. But now I had a different answer. "You gotta be a hero," I told him. "Show her that you always have her back, that you'll take care of her."

Foster seemed to think that through. "Cool."

Other thoughts ran through my head about being a friend, about not being selfish, and making sure you weren't a little bitch when your woman had responsibilities, or hell, just interests that took priority over you. But that seemed like information overload for a nine-year-old who probably just wanted to sit next to a cute girl at lunch.

I held my hand out for a fist bump. “Let’s take that pic.”

*Mia*

“OH, the finance department included the final bill in your packet here to say that you’re paid in full,” Jeannette said, tapping the manila envelope she had laid on the counter for me.

“Paid in full?” I parroted. I’d just gotten a whole slew of discharge information from the doctor and Mama’s nurse and I was feeling stressed out. James had been busy today filming a commercial. Yes, a freaking commercial. He’d expressed regret over and over that he couldn’t pick us up, so maybe this was his way of making up for that.

Jeannette nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Paid in full.”

“Mia, did you rob a bank?” Mama asked from her wheelchair next to me. “How is that possible?”

I knew exactly how it was possible. “JJ?” I asked Jeannette.

She gave me a grin. “Yes. His assistant came in yesterday and took care of it.”

I didn’t even know he had an assistant, though it made total sense.

“Who is JJ?” Mama asked.

“JJ Beckett. Mia’s boyfriend,” Jeannette said. “He’s a professional football player. She didn’t tell you?”

“No, not one word! Mia, why wouldn’t you tell me that?” Mama shot me a dirty look.

Oh, a lot of reasons. Starting with not wanting my mother to get carried away and ending with the same. “I wasn’t sure how serious it was,” I said. “It’s... new.”

“They met when Mia fainted working at Starbucks in the casino,” Jeannette said, clearly relishing her role of being in the know.

“You fainted at work?” Mama looked upset. “Why?”

“I didn’t get enough sleep. It wasn’t a big deal.”

My nonchalance convinced Mama not to worry either. She immediately circled back around to the boyfriend bit. “Tell me about this football player. He must really like you if he’s paying your bills.”

The look on her face scared me. It was calculating.

“He jumped right over the counter and rescued her when she passed out,” Jeannette said. “I have the video if you want to see it.” Mama nodded eagerly, so she pulled it up on her phone and came around to show her. “Look at that. Mia just turns pale and crumples and bam, JJ flies over that counter.”

“Mia, you look like shit,” Mama said. “Good move, but a risky one. He might have just thought you were contagious and beat it out of there.”

I rolled my eyes. “It was not a *move*. I genuinely fainted. And I find it intensely irritating that someone was filming right then and there. Who films a Starbucks on their Vegas vacation?” Once we were away from Jeannette, I would tell Mama the truth about how James and I actually met, because I never lied to my mother. Besides, that was definitely less of a fairy-tale beginning to a relationship and might help keep her grounded in reality.

Not that it was working with Christina. She’d already mapped out my entire future with James and it included a wedding at the top of the Stratosphere and a set of twins. Neither of which I would want.

“It’s a good thing they were filming,” Jeannette said. “Now you have that footage forever.”

“Well, he must be a great guy,” Mama said.

That was a deceptively calm sentence. I eyed her suspiciously. “What are you thinking, Hot Mama? No shenanigans.”

“What are you talking about? Sheesh.”

I wasn't buying the innocent act. "Come on, time to go home, you crazy woman."

That made her grin. "Let's roll. No offense, Jeannette, but I hope to never see you again."

"Likewise, Margaret. Stay off the streets."

That made Mama laugh. "I make no promises."

I had wrongly assumed that my mother wouldn't ask me any further questions about James in front of the car service, but I don't know why I ever thought that. Mama never shied away from giving too much information away or asking nosy questions of strangers. She managed both in the car ride home to my apartment after I helped her into the backseat.

"How much do you make driving a car like this?" she asked the driver.

"Mama. That's a rude question."

"I don't think that's rude. I'm just curious. She can lie to me. How would I ever know?"

"Then why ask?"

"I'm showing interest."

"I'm sorry," I told the driver, a woman around my age.

"It's fine," she said. "This is okay money for a side gig."

"Huh. Mia, you should do that."

"I have three jobs already, Mama. I can't drive a car in my sleep."

"No, I guess not. Plus, you need to work on keeping your man happy. That should be your number one job."

"When you say it like that, it sounds so gross." I gave her an amused look. "Like I should be massaging his feet or something."

"You probably should after game day. The man makes millions. Give him a foot rub on Mondays. Along with another kind of rub."

I laughed. "Stop. That's not appropriate mother-daughter conversation."

"Says who?"

"Me." Not that it had ever stopped Mama in the past. I knew far more

about Turkey's alleged sexual abilities than was good for my sanity.

"Her boyfriend is a football player," Mama told the driver. "They met at, at... what's that place called, Mia? Oh. Starbucks."

That was such an embarrassing blatant brag. "I'm sure she could care less," I told my mother.

But the driver looked at me in the rearview mirror. "Wait. Are you the woman in the coffee shop who fainted and JJ Beckett saved you? I saw that video."

I wasn't sure what anyone thought JJ had saved me from exactly, besides my own stupidity of trying to stay at work, but it had been a heroic gesture. They didn't even know that at the time he had still thought I was a thief. "That was me. Pale, fainting girl."

"You guys are a thing now? God, I'm so jealous. It would be amazing to date a guy like that. I would love to have him spend his money on me." She gave a giggle. "VIP, bitches, all the way."

"He's a nice guy." I wasn't sure what else to say. I'd never been in a position of having anyone envy me. Okay, maybe that wasn't entirely true. I'd gotten boobs first in sixth grade and that had set off some tween envy. It was weird to think the reason this woman was now envious was because she wanted to live the very dating lifestyle with someone (anyone, really) that made me uncomfortable with James.

"Who cares if he's nice? He's hot and rich," she said.

I guess I shouldn't have worried about Mama being inappropriate. "I mean, I care," I said. "I work in a coffee shop and a hotel. Lots of people are dicks to me on a regular basis. I'd prefer not to have a boyfriend who is also an asshole."

I didn't really care what the driver thought or whether or not she was really serious about willing to date a prick if he had money. But hearing my own words made me realize something. Being in the service industry I did spend a lot of time gritting my teeth and trying not to eyeroll humans

behaving badly.

James was a great guy. He could have been an arrogant asshole, treating people like crap. Yet I'd never seen anything even close to that. He treated service staff well and tipped generously. He had a good relationship with his family and had long-term friendships. He'd been amazing to me. Hell, even when he'd thought I'd stolen from him, he hadn't called the cops on me. Why was I resisting so hard? Because I was still resisting. I had told him I would go to Miami, but I'd felt ridiculous saying it, and I'd felt awkward kissing him in public.

He'd even said I hadn't sounded like myself.

Having him pay Mama's medical bill made my palms sweat because I didn't want to owe him anything. But James honestly didn't want anything in return other than to spend time with me. Why the hell would that ever be a bad thing? Christina was right. It was romantic.

"Easy for you to say," our driver grumbled. "You already have the hot, rich, and apparently nice boyfriend."

"You're right. I do." I couldn't prevent a grin from splitting my face. "I'm really, really fortunate."

We pulled into the apartment complex, and even as I was mentally expressing gratitude for living on the first floor, which would make getting Mama inside so much easier, I saw James in front of my building. A jolt of pleasure rushed through me. I hadn't expected to see him. He put his phone to his ear. My phone rang in my purse.

I retrieved it and saw it was him. "Hi. I can see you in the parking lot. We're pulling in. I thought you were busy today."

"Hey. They have to reschedule a portion of the filming to next week. I called Oak Harbor but they said you'd left already, so I figured I would just meet you here and see if you need any help."

"You're very sweet," I said into my phone, watching him pacing back and forth, wearing a navy suit that showed off every single one of his



muscles. Damn, he wore a suit well. His shoes were very shiny and he had on sunglasses. He looked like James Bond, if James Bond were six foot five and ripped.

I had the strangest out-of-body experience watching him pace while simultaneously talking to him on the phone. My heart felt full, and I wanted to both cry and smile at the exact same moment.

“How’s your mom?”

“She’s good,” I murmured, my nostrils flaring and my eyes suddenly and unexpectedly filling with tears. I widened my eyes, taken completely off guard.

Holy shit. I was in love with him.

That’s what this strange sensation was. It felt like I was being inflated like a balloon and sent floating up into the atmosphere. It was love. I was totally and completely in love with James.

It was at that moment he turned and spotted us. “Hey,” he said softly on the phone, but making direct eye contact with me in the back seat. He removed his sunglasses and tucked them into his inside suit pocket.

I knew it was impossible, given the fifteen feet between us, but I swore I saw desire and passion and something softer than both in his green eyes. It made my catch my breath. Then James crossed the distance between us. I hadn’t imagined his expression. That’s exactly how he was looking at me.

“Thanks for coming,” I said into the phone still, needing the illusion of space it created, my throat tight. I’d never felt this and it was scary and wonderful all at once.

“I’m glad I could be here.” He lowered his phone and opened my door. He bent down and cupped my cheek, kissing me softly. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” I said, truthfully, and completely not caring that we weren’t alone. I loved him. I was in love with him. I looked at his face and I couldn’t stop smiling.

James returned the smile so that we were both just staring at each other

like idiots until Mama spoke up.

“Can you two eye-screw each other inside? I want to go in.” She sounded cranky about being kept waiting.

That definitely burst my little love bubble.

It made me scramble to get out of the car, easing past James, and sticking my phone in my back pocket. God, what the heck was I doing? “Sorry, Mama.”

James leaned past me and gave my mother a charming smile. “Let me come around and help you, Miss Margaret.”

I knew Mama would melt at that. She did. “Call me Mama, hon.”

When he stood back up and squeezed my hand, he winked. “I told you we’d get along. Mothers love me,” he said.

I rolled my eyes at him. I gave him a dry comment, because he liked me to call him out, and because it was a great cover for the fact that I had almost just started crying over my feelings for him. “Almost as much as you love yourself.”

He just grinned at me as he started around the back of the car. “You can’t be happy with anyone else until you’re happy with yourself, Mia. Don’t you read inspirational quotes?”

I ignored that and leaned back into the car to retrieve Mississippi and Mama’s bag. She was watching me carefully. Then she gave me a thumbs-up. “Hot.”

Rolling my eyes, I hauled our stuff out of the car, struggling to adjust the weight on either shoulder. But I was pleased.

James *was* hot.

And he was my boyfriend.

It was absurd. It was amazing.

## Chapter Fourteen

*JJ*

*M*ia's mother was exactly as Mia had described her to me. She was a wicked flirt, totally inappropriate, hilarious, and clearly relied entirely on her daughter to be the responsible one. I liked her in that she was entertaining and she obviously loved Mia, but I felt bad for Mia's upbringing. It was a role reversal.

We had gotten Margaret into the apartment and settled on the couch. I had chatted with her for a few minutes, pretending not to notice she occasionally slurred her words while Mia took her stuff into the bedroom. I also pretended not to notice Margaret had looked at my junk at least once, maybe twice. I thought that was a first—having the mother of a woman I was dating check me out. It wasn't exactly comfortable, so I was going to ignore it. Besides, I had to assume it was just harmless ogling. Mia didn't seem upset or surprised by the flirting.

Mia asked her mother, "Can I get you anything?"

"A burger and a six-pack." Margaret looked around. "Where's the remote? I want to watch my judge show."

"Mama. No. Absolutely not."

I was assuming she meant all three because who could stand to watch a judge show?

Margaret didn't miss a beat. "How about a pack of Camels at least?"

"Not a chance, Hot Mama."

"Is this how it's going to be? Prison would be better."

That made Mia snort.

Margaret turned to me. "See how mean she is to me? JJ, be a sweetheart and go grab me some cigarettes."

Like I was wading into this disagreement. "I don't think I can do that."

She grinned at me. "Pussy-whipped already?"

"Mama!" Mia sounded horrified.

My eyebrows shot up and my jaw dropped. I started laughing. "Nice try, Mama. I'm not falling for that trap."

"Smart man."

Damn straight. Like I was going to tell her mother the power of Mia's pussy had me upending my entire life and making new plans that entirely revolved around her. That Mia was the whole package, inside and out, and had brought me to my fucking knees. Stolen my heart and made me a sappy-ass motherfucker who wanted to hand her the entire world with a bow wrapped around it.

"How about when Chrissy gets home, I run to the store and get you some ice cream?" Mia asked.

"How come I can have ice cream and not a burger or some beer? What's the difference?"

She kind of had a point. At least between the burger and the ice cream.

Mia put her hand on her hip. "Do you just want soup and a salad, then?"

Margaret wrinkled her nose. She muttered something under her breath.

I thought she said that it was bullshit and maybe San Quentin, but I wasn't sure. What I was sure about was that Mia didn't have the time, the training, or the authority over her mother to take care of her the way she

needed to be cared for. Margaret needed a home health aide. I could see that already Mia's brow was furrowed and she looked stressed.

That was an expression I hated to see on her face. But this was an easy fix. I could have Ji-Ho make a couple of phone calls and we could quickly hire someone to stay with Margaret when Mia was at work. Also, for the occasional sleepover at my place. I was completely understanding of Mia's complicated life, but there was no way I wasn't going to share a bed with her at least once every couple of weeks.

Right now though, I thought maybe my best course of action was to leave Mia and her mother alone to get settled. I felt superfluous in the small space.

"I'm going to let you ladies fight this out," I said. "I have a meeting with my manager this afternoon that I need to get to." That was true, though I did have a few hours still. It just seemed better to roll out of there and give them privacy to adjust to the new reality of living together.

Mia had told me they hadn't lived together in years, so I was anticipating a mother-daughter power struggle.

"No fight," Margaret said. "I win."

Mia snorted. "Nice try." She turned and gave me a distracted smile. "Thank you for being here. I'll text you later."

I leaned down and kissed her briefly. "We still on for Wednesday?" I was going to be disappointed if she couldn't spend the night, but I would understand if she felt like she couldn't. Okay, more than disappointed. But it was what it was.

She nodded. "I'm going to need the break, I can guarantee it."

"I'll give you a massage," I said, feeling bad for her. She worked so damn hard. I wanted to rub her shoulders and give her an orgasm.

"With a happy ending?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

That made me laugh. "Of course."

"Lucky me."

I gave her a smile. "I've been told I have a wicked tongue."

“Oh, I’m well aware.” She stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest, like she was afraid if she didn’t, she might ask to leave with me. “Bye, James.”

“Bye, Mia.” I said goodbye to her mother and headed out. I called my own mother as I crossed the parking lot. “Ma, I’m going to have to wreck your seating chart for the engagement party, I’m sorry.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I’m bringing my girlfriend, Mia.” I loved saying that. It got my dick hard and tightened my chest.

“I thought she was your dog walker and housekeeper.”

“She was. Now she’s my girlfriend.”

“Why do I feel like there’s a punchline?”

“Why would you say that?” I got in my Bentley. I liked to drive it when I had PR gigs and business meetings. Today I had both, so I enjoyed the vibe it gave off. Power and money. I switched my mother to the hands-free car connection. I could practically smell her suspicion. “You should know your baby boy a little better than that, Ma. I’m offended.”

“Sure, you are. Give me a break, JJ. I’m serious, what is going on? You have avoided relationships like you do porta-potties.”

That made me laugh. “That is not true. I’ve had relationships. Nothing, and I mean nothing, will make me go into a porta-potty.”

“I know. The state fair was a nightmare with you. A totally aggravating waste of time.”

I pulled out of the parking lot and opened up the engine a little. I loved this car. “What can I say? I like nice things. That’s why I like Mia. She’s a good woman. The best I’ve ever met. I’m in love with her, Ma.”

I meant that.

“Well.” My mother sounded a little stunned. Which was how I felt most of the time when I thought about Mia. “That’s wonderful. I look forward to meeting her properly, then.”

“Me, too,” I said. I meant that. We said goodbye and then I called Cash. “Hey,” I said, when he answered. “You don’t care if I bring a girl to your place for the Fourth, do you?”

Cash was both chill and hospitable. I knew he’d never say no, but I had to give him the courtesy of asking.

“No, of course not. Is this a woman you like or just someone you’re having sex with?”

“I like all the women I have sex with,” I said mildly, shifting gears to get on the expressway. That statement probably wasn’t true, but I was sticking to it. Besides, that was all the past. My future was Mia. “But this is a girlfriend. I’m in love with her, bro.”

Cash whistled. “Damn. I didn’t expect to hear you say that anytime soon.”

He didn’t ask who it was and I didn’t tell him. None of the guys were going to think falling in love with Mia was one of my better ideas. “Can’t let Dak and Train have all the fun, can I?”

“You’re getting married?” Cash sounded downright shocked.

That hadn’t been what I’d meant, but the idea held a hell of a lot of appeal. “You never know. You just never know.”

“Vegas odds?” he asked.

That made me laugh. “Then I’d bet money on it.”

MIA and I were walking past the Bellagio fountains. I was always going to look at them now and think of the night we met. They were as vibrant as Mia. As my feelings for her. Hell, as we watched the water explode up in the air to music, I thought there were a lot of comparisons, some dirty, some not.

“What’s with that look on your face?” she asked. “I feel like you’re thinking about sex.”

“I one hundred percent am thinking about sex. Who could look at this and

not?”

Mia shook her head, but she was smiling. “I’m positive a lot of people don’t. Does that mean they night we met you were thinking about sex?”

“Uh, yeah. From the minute I found a vibrator in your bag I was thinking about sex non-stop.”

She laughed. “Me too.”

“Damn. And yet you played so hard to get.”

“I don’t think going home with you was playing hard to get. By the way, now that I know that is your actual apartment, why didn’t you have a Christmas tree?” she asked.

I glanced away from the fountain display to her. I shrugged. “It’s a busy time of the year for me with the season wrapping up. It’s a lot of work to do for just me and I’ll be honest, I wouldn’t even know how to start decorating a tree. My mother always did that. I wasn’t allowed to touch her trees.”

“You could probably buy one fully decorated.”

“What would be the fun in that?” I asked. “Nah. I figured I’ll wait until I have someone to decorate a tree with me.” I brushed her hair back off her cheek. “And now I do.”

“Then why did you buy an ornament that night?” she asked, staring up at me with luminous eyes.

I wanted to kiss every single one of her delicate freckles and lift her off the ground into my arms. But I resisted the urge.

There was no reason not to be honest. “It felt like a beginning. The start to a you and me.”

Her voice was soft. “You are a very romantic man, did anyone ever tell you that?”

“Nope.” That was the truth. “I haven’t had a lot of relationships.”

“I don’t think I want to hear about your playboy days out on the town with your boys.”

“Oh, trust me, I wasn’t going to tell you.” I wasn’t a total idiot. “When



was your last relationship?”

“Five years ago. We were together for two years and then he moved back to Pennsylvania when his Vegas dreams didn’t come true. It wasn’t a dramatic ending. Just a fizzle when we couldn’t make long-distance work.”

“That’s a shame.”

She laughed. “You don’t sound the least bit sincere right now.”

“What can I say? If he had been amazing, you wouldn’t be here with me right now. So fuck him. His loss, my gain. Same for the fool who stood you up the night we met. What was his name?”

“I don’t even remember.”

She looked like she was telling the truth. She had too much going on in her life to retain the name of someone who had been an unreliable prick.

“How’s your mom doing, by the way?” I asked.

“She’s fine. She’s not as grumpy as she was the first day or two. I’m grateful Christina can keep an eye on her tonight.”

“That’s good. It’s a big change for all of you. I’m grateful for Christina too, by the way. I feel like I need to send her a fruit basket or something.”

Mia laughed. “That’s not necessary. We’re best friends. We help each other when we can without expecting anything. I’ve watched Kadin a bunch of times for her. It’s a good arrangement for both of us.”

“That’s awesome. Having solid friends is everything.”

“It is. I can’t believe I met your friends the way I did. They must think it’s weird that we’re dating.”

I shrugged. “Nah. They’ve all had their fair share of interesting stories with women.” I also hadn’t told any of them yet, but she didn’t need to know that. “Cash is cool with you coming with me to his ranch for the Fourth.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I miss the country.”

I reached over and took Mia’s hand as we walked. It felt natural to entwine our fingers together. She was wearing a short dress that showed off her legs, and for once, she’d left her giant handbag at home. She was carrying

a small square beige purse. “Amelia misses you, by the way. She’ll be happy you’re staying over tonight.”

“How is that little girl? I miss her too.”

“She’s chewing everything in sight. And I may be turning into a sucker, because the last couple of nights I brought her into bed with me when she wouldn’t stop crying.”

“James,” Mia said, giving me a look of reprimand.

“I’m not a disciplinarian like you are,” I said, not even bothering to defend myself. “I fold. Cave. Crumple. I probably would have bought Margaret a six-pack by now if she was my mother.”

“My mother does not need beer, so don’t let her work you over. She’s settled in and watching her shows, but I do think she’s bored. I caught her downloading a dating app.” Mia shook her head. “Which she has every right to do. She’s an adult. But that just gives me another reason to worry. She has terrible taste in men.”

“As long as it’s not the guy next door to you. That dude is into something illegal, I can tell. Your whole apartment complex is sketchy.”

“The rent is cheap,” she said. “Well. Relatively speaking it’s cheap. At any rate, it’s all I can afford.”

“I need to tell you something. You’re probably going to be mad at me, but just remember how much you like me and my cock.”

Mia eyed me. “I do like your cock,” she said, dryly.

That made me grin. “Hold on to that romantic thought, baby.”

“Why am I going to be mad at you?”

“I have Ji-Ho screening home health aides for your mother. You can talk to him about setting up interviews so you can pick the candidate you think is the best. I’m paying for it, obviously.”

“Wow, James...” She took a deep breath, but didn’t say anything further.

“I’m not taking no for an answer,” I said. “You need to feel like your mother is safe at home when you’re at work. At least short-term for the next

month or two.”

“I’m trying to be better at accepting help,” she said. “It’s hard. Especially since you don’t even know me that well. Why would you be doing all of this for me?”

Did she really not get it? If she didn’t get that, then she wasn’t ready for me to tell her I was completely in love with her. I bit my tongue and picked my words carefully. “I know your character, who you are inside, and you deserve help. But you’re right. We’re still getting to know each other. Tell me something about you I don’t know.”

“I love thrift shopping,” she said. “Bargain hunting. I use coupon apps on my phone.”

“I am not surprised by that at all. You said your shoes cost eight dollars. Bargain hunting is a good skill to have.” Not a skill I possessed. Or wanted to possess.

“It’s an adrenaline rush, to be honest, to score something for a few bucks, way under its value. It started when I was a kid and I would go to garage sales with my grandmother in Georgia.”

“It sounds like your grandmother was a positive influence in your life.”

“She was. Is. How about you? Are you close to Essie?”

I was impressed that she remembered my grandmother’s name. “Yes, very. I really should go visit her soon. She was a nurse in Vietnam and she saw some horrible shit go down. But mostly I remember as a kid baking with her. I can bake, can you believe it?”

“That is hard to believe.”

“Hey. That feels like an insult.”

“It wasn’t meant to be. I just can’t picture you in an apron.”

“Oh, I fucking rock an apron. You think I’m getting my clothes dirty? Hell, no.”

That made her laugh. “Good point.”

“Now my grandfather, on the other hand, spent a lot of time with me

fishing and playing football and camping. I was a regular Texas boy. Don't let anyone tell you different."

"Who would tell me different?" she asked, looking amused.

"Haters. You'll get to see my tough side in Nashville."

Mia rose up on tiptoes and gave me a kiss. "I kind of like your sweet side. You're a cinnamon roll, James. Soft on the inside."

She could call me any damn baked good she wanted as long as she kept getting naked with me. "Don't tell anyone. It might make the locker room awkward."

Mia laughed softly. "Your secret is safe with me. Thank you for the home health aide, by the way, I really appreciate it."

That was just the intro. Time to lay it all on her. "Then you should probably know that I also bought you a house."

Mia let go of my shoulders and dropped back down onto the sidewalk. She stared up at me. "What? A *house*? That's... absurd."

Her favorite word. "No, it's not. The house barely cost more than my watch, and this is way more important than an accessory for my wrist." Well, maybe a hundred grand more, but she didn't need to know that right now. "I have the money, and it doesn't mean anything to me. Knowing you and your mom and Christina and her son are somewhere safe *does* mean something to me."

"But I can't pay you back. I'll never be able to pay you back."

I pulled her into my arms. "It's a gift. You're supposed to just say thank you and then enjoy it. It's paid for, so you can live there forever if you want. All you have to do is pay the property taxes, which are like two hundred dollars a month."

"James..." She was shaking her head.

My hand drifted to her lower back, then even lower, to the curve of her ass. Not so much to be sexual as because I wanted to pull her in as close to me as possible. I wanted to feel every inch of her and have the right to touch

her freely. “Mia. We do this a lot, you know. James. Mia. Mia. James.”

She stuck her tongue out at me.

I practically growled. “It’s stupid sexy when you do that,” I said. “All I can think about is the way your tongue looks sliding over my cock.”

“You’re trying to distract me,” she said. “From the fact that you just went and bought me a house. A whole house. When we just started dating.”

It sounded a little crazy when she said it out loud, but fuck it, it was only money. Mia was my future. I wasn’t taking no for an answer. She was going to be mine, forever. But I had to play it cool for now. “Look, if you decide in six months that I’m the most irritating man on the planet and you never want to see me again, at least something good will have come out of our relationship.”

The corner of her mouth turned up. “What makes you think it will take six months?”

I patted her on the ass in reprimand. “Hey. Don’t be like that.”

Mia laughed, but then she quieted, her expression serious. She furrowed her brow, studied me. “Why would you do this for me?” she asked, softly.

My throat and gut felt tight. “Because you’re you.”

That was it. That was everything. In one sentence.

## Chapter Fifteen

*Mia*

*J*ames had bought me a house. A. House.  
Who did that?

Pro football players, apparently.

Maybe I was getting used to his surprises and over-the-top gestures because instead of being horrified or worried, I was excited. And really, really turned on. What could be hotter than a man who was absolutely determined to make my life easier?

Nothing.

Especially since he was six foot five and looked like he had been chiseled out of stone.

I felt special and that was a new feeling. I didn't hate it. Not at all.

He could also dance, which surprised me. He'd readily agreed to go to a nightclub, and moved easily with me to the grinding music. I loved to dance. It was the most freeing feeling in the world to spin around, arms up, hips moving. There were no worries about Mama, no bills, no demanding managers when I was just dancing under the hot pulsing lights.

James matched his rhythm to mine and held me loosely against him. He

smiled down at me. “I told you I can dance.”

“I’m impressed,” I yelled over the music. “I might want my Magic Mike routine after all.”

He grinned. “There’s a price to pay for that.”

I didn’t have a chance to ask what that was. Someone bumped me and I realized it was a woman who was trying to insert herself between me and James and make it look like an accident. I was annoyed, but not jealous. Before I could react, James had shifted and cut her off. He firmly pulled me to him again.

She went right up to him and said something in his ear that I couldn’t hear.

He shook his head.

She was a pretty woman with expensive clothes and influencer-worthy makeup.

Okay, maybe I was a little jealous.

I wasn’t mad at her for throwing her hat in the ring and attempting to get his attention. As far as the world knew, JJ Beckett was single.

Would it be selfish of me to want him to go public with our relationship? Probably. The man had bought me a freaking house, now I wanted love posts on social media? That might be expecting too much.

His arm was still around me and I swayed awkwardly in our little dance floor trio.

I debated walking away to get a drink, but I didn’t want that to register as petulant.

But even though it felt like ten years, it was probably only a minute before he was pulling me away and over to the bar. “Sorry about that,” he said, brushing my hair back as he murmured in my ear. “Sometimes they catch me off guard.”

“It’s fine.” It was. He wasn’t responsible for women approaching him. I couldn’t be mad at him for that.

He cupped my cheeks and searched my expression, like he didn't believe me. I smiled up at him. He shook his head. "You're perfect, do you know that?"

Then he kissed me.

Which was a public declaration of sorts.

God, I didn't just love him. I *liked* him.

I kissed him back with everything inside me.

There was nothing I could ask for from him that he wasn't already doing. He was perfect. We were perfect.

When we broke apart, breathing hard, I said, "Take me home."

*JJ*

NORMALLY I WASN'T one to curse the traffic on the Strip. It was what it was. And I tended to get appreciative glances and catcalls over my car and I didn't hate that. But now I impatiently shifted as we crawled along, wanting to get Mia home.

Especially when she put her hand on my thigh. Lightly, she brushed right over my cock. I swore. "What are you doing, trying to get me to wreck the damn car?"

"I was just checking."

"Checking what?" I asked in disbelief. "It's there, trust me." And throbbing with need for her.

She laughed. "I wanted to see if you're as turned on as I am."

The light turned green and I sped up, glancing over at her as I shifted gears. "Are your nipples hard? Are you wet, Mia?"

She nodded. "Yes. To both."



“Are you aching with need and contemplating pulling over so we can fuck right here in this car?”

“Aching with need, yes. I hadn’t thought about sex in the car.” She sounded intrigued by the idea.

“Then I’m definitely as turned on, if not more, than you because I can’t think of anything but you and how soon I can be inside you.”

I switched lanes, seeing an opportunity to get off the main drag and avoid some of the congestion. “Tell me your fantasy. What do you want me to do to you?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“I find that hard to believe. You seem to always know what you want.”

“That’s true,” she said, with a hint of pride in her voice. “Okay, honestly, I want the massage you mentioned the other day.”

That surprised me, but then I wasn’t sure why. She worked her ass off and was constantly tired. She wanted to relax. She didn’t need to get railed, she needed me to focus on her. The thought of that got me even harder, and I hadn’t thought that could be possible.

“I would love to rub you.”

Mia laughed. “That doesn’t even sound right.”

“Then I’ll just quit talking.”

Twenty minutes later, after we took Amelia outside as quickly as possible, I led Mia to my bedroom. Amelia gave me a sad look when I left her in the hallway, but I firmly shut the door in her face. “Sorry, kid. It’s grownup time.”

Turning, I kissed the corner of Mia’s mouth, enjoying the way she shivered. I trailed my lips over her jaw, and up to that sweet little spot behind her ear. Easing the straps down on her sundress, I gave it a little push and it fell to the floor, pooling around her ankles.

I buried my lips in her hair, breathing deep in appreciation. God, I was so in love with her. I’d never felt this way, ever. It was all-consuming. All I

wanted to do was make her smile, make her life easier.

Lifting her up, I laid her out on my bed. She looked up at me with hooded eyes, her lips parting like she was going to speak. But she remained silent. I felt her vulnerability, felt her trust in me. I kissed her, teasing open her lips with my tongue, wanting to taste her.

Then I pulled back, put soft music on my phone, and kicked off my shoes. Then I opened my nightstand drawer, pulling out lotion. Squeezing the bottle, I rubbed my hands together to warm the lotion up, then ran my hands over Mia's shoulders. She sighed. It was all the encouragement I needed. I shifted her bra straps down over her shoulders, and settled over her, one knee on either side of her as I massaged her. Her neck, her shoulders, her arms. She closed her eyes and her breathing evened out.

Mia gave occasional soft moans of pleasure and I fell into a rhythm, taking the motions all the way down to her fingertips. It was an unexpected form of satisfaction, giving her relaxing, tactile pleasure, and seeing how much she trusted me.

"Turn over," I said, and my voice sounded raw. Commanding.

As she obeyed, I unbuttoned my shirt and peeled it off. When Mia was on her stomach, I undid her bra so that I could massage her whole back without interference. I got a refill on the lotion and eased my thumbs up her spine. "Move your hair so I don't get lotion in it."

She gathered it and piled it on top of her head. I loved the color of her hair. There wasn't really a word to adequately describe it, because it changed in every light. I bent down and kissed the back of her neck, and drew her earlobe between my teeth, enjoying the gasp she gave into the pillow. I wanted to tell her that I loved her, but I didn't want to distract her from just sinking into the bed fully, completely relaxing.

Murmuring into her ear, I said, "Do you want a glass of wine?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm good."

"Do you want to do this forever?"

She laughed softly. “Maybe.”

I lost track of time as I eased my hands over her back, going on instinct, and listening to her responses. I was rewarded with a few deep moans and soft words of gratitude.

“James, oh my God, that feels amazing.”

When she turned her head to the opposite side, I took my T-shirt off that I had on under my dress shirt. Leaning down, I ran my fingers through her hair, drawing it out across the white pillowcase. It was like fire and ice. Red on the crisp white backdrop. I traced down over her spine, watching the goosebumps rising on her skin in my wake. Her skin was soft, the music a lilting love song, the scent of the lotion rising up into my nostrils.

I eased her panties down. After removing them entirely and dropping them on the floor, I used the opportunity to take my pants and socks off. I wanted to feel my skin on hers.

Massaging the backs of her thighs, I let my thumbs slip between her legs, brushing over her pussy. Given that she was on her stomach, it was just a teasing light touch. There was still a little bit of lotion on my hands and I knew I couldn't use my fingers inside her.

But I could use my tongue.

I slid it over her and she jerked on the bed. “*James.*”

“Yes?” I murmured from between her thighs. It was an intriguing angle, a tease for both of us.

“This is...”

“What?” I eased my tongue inside her.

“I... I don't know... holy shit.” She lifted her hips a little so I had better access. “This feels so naughty.”

Gripping her hips, I lifted her higher so I could stroke in and out. Her moans got higher-pitched, desperate. The sound drove me like a whip. Fuck, yeah. When she came, the sensation was heady, thrilling.

I eased her back onto the mattress when she calmed down and shoved my

boxer briefs down. I had a condom on in record time as she lay there, limp, eyes half-closed. I placed my hand on her ass, amused that it nearly covered all of her. I squeezed a little, just wanting to feel the softness of her body, and to get a reaction from her.

She gasped and glanced back at me. “That was the best massage I’ve ever had.”

“Good.”

I eased her hips up and back a little. She didn’t move her upper body, so she ended up stretched out, face down on the pillow, hands over her head. With her ass up, it looked like such a position of submission, of offering, that my cock throbbed, and my nostrils flared. I swore. “You’re so fucking sexy,” I said.

“I feel lazy,” she said, her voice flirty and satisfied. “You don’t mind if I just lay here, do you?”

“No. I do not mind.” I held her hip and thrust inside her. “As long as you don’t mind me taking you hard.”

Not only did she give me a very rewarding gasp, her pussy gave me a very tight and wet welcome.

“I don’t mind at all. Do whatever you need to do.”

What I needed was to fuck her hard as an outlet for all the emotions I was feeling. The physical need was intense and building, desperate to explode, but I was also on the edge emotionally. So I held onto her waist with one hand, and the headboard with the other, thrusting in and out of her.

Mia sounded like I was actually knocking the wind out of her, which was completely fucking hot. Her loud cries from earlier had been replaced with low expulsions of air each time I buried myself balls deep in her. That, with the position she was in, had me coming in minutes.

“Mia,” I said, through gritted teeth, cock pulsing. “Fuck.”

She gave me a sly smile over her shoulder.

I eased out of her, and sighed, settling onto the bed. I pushed her hips

gently, so she could lay comfortably beside me.

“Your dog is whining in the hallway,” she said, rolling on her side to face me. She reached out and cupped my cheek in a gesture that did things to my inside.

I kissed her hand. “Ignore her.” Even as I said that, it did make me wince inwardly to hear my puppy crying so anxiously in the hallway. “Or should I let her in?”

“You can let her in but don’t bring her in bed.” Mia climbed over me in a tangle of warm limbs that had me groaning.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I have to go to the bathroom. Then I’m going to sleep. I have to be at work early.”

“Work sucks,” I said. “I wanted to have sex at least three times.”

She made it off the bed and stood beside me. “You are as whiny as your dog.”

I made a face. She laughed and kissed me. I touched her tit. But she brushed my hand away and went into the bathroom. The door shut firmly behind her.

Disappointed that the night was ending early, I ditched the condom and went and opened the bedroom door. Making sure Mia was still in the bathroom, I scooped up Amelia and brought her onto the bed. With a heavy sigh of relief, she collapsed down in a puddle of exhausted puppy, right between our pillows.

I tried to pretend I didn’t notice Amelia when Mia came back into the bedroom.

But Mia stopped short at the bed when she spotted the dog. “James, are you serious?”

“What?” I murmured, pretending like I had been sleeping. “What’s wrong?”

She snorted. “You were not sleeping. You brought this dog into the bed

and don't tell me otherwise, because she is way too short to jump up here by herself."

I rolled over and put my arm around Amelia, who snuggled closer to me. "She was cold."

"It's June in the desert."

"In air-conditioning. I'm serious. Feel her fur. She's cold."

Mia sighed and climbed back in bed. "You have a problem."

"I'm a sucker for redheads." I smiled at her. "It's just one night."

"You are such a liar. She's clearly been sleeping with you every night."

"I get lonely."

Mia fussed with the covers. "Then pull her closer to you. She's bed-hogging my side."

She rolled on her side and faced me as I obediently shifted Amelia across the imaginary dividing line that stated where the middle of the bed was. "Better?" I asked.

I had known she wouldn't make me toss out Amelia. Mia was just as much a sucker as I was. She couldn't say no to a puppy any more than she could say no to her employers, her mother, or Christina.

"No."

Apparently she could say no to me. I grinned.

"What are you smirking about?" she asked, the corner of her mouth turning up.

"You. Pretending to be badass and tough."

"I thought I was perfect," she murmured.

"You are perfectly badass and tough."

And generous and compassionate and caring.

Everything I could ever want in a partner. In a *wife*. In the mother of my children.

I moved Amelia to the edge of the bed, on my right side. I rested my hand on Mia's hip. "Better?"

She wiggled even closer to me, her eyes filled with an emotion I couldn't quite define. "Better."

## Chapter Sixteen

*Mia*

“*W*e really get to live here?” Christina asked, Kadin on her hip. “This is the shit. I mean, this is awesome.”

I felt equally as in awe as she did. It wasn’t an extravagant house. It was a ranch with three bedrooms and two baths and an open-concept kitchen and family room. No dining room. The back yard was small but fenced in. It was perfect. No steps to trip up Mama. A safe yard for Kadin. Close to work, but in a family-friendly neighborhood.

“I’ll let you look around,” Ji-Ho said. “If you let me know your moving date, I can arrange for the movers to pack up your apartment.”

“We get movers?” Christina said, sounding even more excited, if that were possible.

He nodded. “Of course.”

Of course nothing. “I’ll let you know,” I said. “We have to give notice at our apartment.”

“Oh, I already did that,” Christina said. “Last Tuesday.”

I eyed her. “What? Why would you do that before we knew for sure we had this house?”



“What would go wrong?” she asked. Then she asked Ji-Ho, “Hey, what’s it like to be an assistant for someone famous? Do you love your job or do you hate it?”

Like he was going to be honest. “Chrissy, you can’t ask him that.”

“I like my job,” he said. “Mr. Beckett is easy to work for, because I get the way his mind works, and he’s generous.”

“Are you single?” Christina asked. “And at least twenty-one? I can’t date a man who can’t buy me a martini.”

Oh, God. I quickly told Ji-Ho, “Don’t answer that. It’s an insult.”

“What? How is that an insult?” she asked.

“You have terrible taste in men.”

“I’m trying to change.” She smiled at Ji-Ho. “It’s a compliment. You’re not my type, *at all*, which means you’re probably awesome. I’m trying reverse psychology.”

I could only describe his expression as terrified. “I…” He seemed at a total loss as to what to say.

“Ignore her,” I said. “She’s kidding.”

“I’m actually not,” she said. “You’re very cute. You could be in a K-pop band.”

“I’ll just be in the car,” Ji-Ho said.

Smart move on his part.

“Wait!” Chrissy said. “Before you go, can I ask you a favor?”

This should be good.

“Of course.”

“Hold Kadin,” she said, thrusting her son at Ji-Ho. “I don’t want to put him down because he’ll take off running.”

“I…” Ji-Ho sputtered. But his instincts had him automatically taking Kadin and holding him.

I was shocked Kadin didn’t kick and fuss. He wasn’t a toddler who enjoyed being passed around.

Christina said, “Thanks. I need to just do this.” Then without warning she did a cartwheel across the empty living room. At the end of it, she jumped up and down and did cheerleader-like moves, yelling, “We live here, we live here!”

Kadin started laughing. Those big belly laughs that kids do that make you laugh too.

“Your mama is crazy, isn’t she?” I told him, highly amused.

“I’m crazy happy!” Christina said, fist-pumping and running in circles.

Kadin laughed harder.

Even Ji-Ho laughed.

Christina did a high kick that had her shirt riding up, exposing her stomach and a touch of underboob. She pushed her hair back and reached out for her son. “Thanks,” she said. “I just had to get that out of my system.”

Uh-oh.

Ji-Ho had a look as he passed Kadin back to her. That was appreciation.

“You’re welcome. I’ll wait outside.” He took two steps and then he turned, adjusting his tie. “Oh, and I’m twenty-five and single.”

Christina grinned. “Damn. Okay, then.” She put her hand to her face to mimic talking on the phone. “Call me.”

He hesitated again, but then just left without another word.

After he closed the front door behind him, I told Christina, “You could at least try to be subtle.”

“Subtle isn’t going to get me a date.” She walked toward the kitchen. “Flashing my boobs was an accident, though, for the record.”

“You could wear a bra.” She never did when she wasn’t at work. Not that I cared. But it did run its risks.

“Meh. I value my freedom. Besides, I could chair the Itty Bitty Titty Committee. It’s not a big deal.” She turned on the water in the sink, opened the fridge. “This is crazy that this is your house. Are you freaking out or what?”

I was pretty sure all my freaking out was out of my system, but it wasn't a guarantee. "This is crazy, isn't it? But I have a plan," I told her. "This is a golden opportunity I will never get ever again. It's like winning the lottery. I have to capitalize on it."

"What do you mean? I think having a house that's paid for is basically winning."

"It is. But it doesn't give me a career. I want to work my way up to manager at the coffee shop, see how everything is run, then buy my own franchise in three years with equity from this house." The idea had been on my mind nonstop, and I had turned and turned it around looking for flaws. But I didn't really see any. "I don't want to go to college at this point. I'd rather move into owning my own business."

"Wow, that's impressive," she said. "If anyone can do it, it's you. I'm just grateful that you're only charging me a hundred bucks in rent. I'm going to be able to save so much money and spend more time with Kadin. After I catch my breath, maybe I can plan my own future a little better."

"We can both catch our breath." I looked at her and grinned. "Okay, now it's my turn."

I did my own cartwheel on the living room carpet, though I didn't have Christina's skill. I barely got my legs up and I fell down at the end, laughing. Kadin jumped on my belly. "Ow, buddy," I said.

He just laughed like crushing me was the greatest game ever. I lay there and pulled my phone out. "I need to call Mama and tell her this house is amazing."

It was. It was safety and friendship and family and the future.

It was the greatest gift I'd ever been given.

For a second I got distracted by the memory of James touching me everywhere, then giving me an orgasm with his tongue...

My phone started ringing, jerking me out of my sexy daydream.

Speaking of James. It was him. "How is the house? If you hate it, we can

just resell it and find another one.”

He sounded genuinely curious. Casual about just chucking it if I didn’t like it.

“What would I change about a house I didn’t pay for?” I said, dryly. “It’s great, seriously. As soon as I move in, I’ll cook you dinner here and it won’t even be toasted cheese. It will be a steak or something.”

“That sounds kind of scary, actually. Do you know how to cook?” he asked.

“No,” I said, cheerfully. I sat up and pulled Kadin more comfortably into my lap. “But saying I’ll clean for you is decidedly less girlfriend-like and much more maid-like.”

“I don’t want you cleaning for me. Are you ready for Nashville?”

“I am. I’m excited.”

“You need to scale down your bag before we fly. I don’t think Mississippi will get through security and I’m not feeling like a body cavity search this week.” James’ voice was stern, like he expected me to argue.

I rolled my eyes even though he couldn’t see me. “I know. I have a wrench in my bag and duct tape. I don’t think TSA would appreciate that.”

“I got you a smaller bag. Choose wisely what goes inside it.”

I should have known. “I have smaller purses. You did not need to buy me one. You can return whatever you got.”

“Just keep it. Do you have a suitcase?”

“Yes, I have a suitcase.” I actually laughed. “I promise, I’m not going to show up with a stick and a sack made from a hanky attached to it. I save that for when I jump on trains.” I bounced Kadin and he made sounds like he was going over seriously rough terrain. “Do *not* buy me expensive luggage. That stuff probably gets stolen a thousand times more often than a black bag from Kohls does. I can’t show up at Cash’s ranch with no suitcase and be an outfit repeater.”

“My luggage has never been stolen.”

“Okay. I have to go. I need to wrap this tour up and go home and pack my budget suitcase in a way that will make you insane. I’m not planning to fold anything, just toss everything in there.”

“You’d better be joking.”

“Nope.”

“It’s a good thing you’re cute.”

“Same.”

I ended the call and looked up at Christina who had opened the slider to the back yard but was glancing back at me. “You two lovebirds are adorable,” she said.

“He basically called me a bag lady,” I said. “How is that adorable?”

She shook her head and smiled. “You’re happy and in love with James. Just admit it.”

I fell back onto the carpet with a groan. “I am! God, how did this happen?” But honestly, it would have been impossible to resist James. He was just determined to be with me.

“I don’t know, somewhere between cocktails and him buying you a house.”

I rolled on my side, taking Kadin with me, who giggled. “It’s a good house, isn’t it?”

“It’s a good man who bought the good house. Enjoy it, Mia.”

“I am. I plan to.”

She eyed me. “You’re scared he’s going to dump you, aren’t you?”

Yes. “No. Not exactly. I’m not scared. I’m just trying to be practical. Maybe he goes hard like this, then flames out. Maybe in a month this will all be over.”

“And maybe you should stop assuming that only things that are difficult and a lot of hard work have any value. Sometimes things, relationships, life, can be easy.”

“Not in my experience.”

“Maybe the other shoe isn’t going to drop.”

“And maybe Ji-Ho is secretly a famous K-pop star who is hiding in Las Vegas from his evil manager or a crazy stalker.”

Chrissy grinned. “Then I guess I need to stick close to him and protect him.”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE my fucking luggage got stolen.” James was fuming as we stood in the baggage claim area of the Nashville airport two days later.

I almost laughed, but I just shrugged, figuring it was better to keep my opinion to myself. I didn’t blame him for being upset, but the luggage was Gucci. Why would he check that and expect it not to get stolen? If I was a thief I would go right for the expensive bag, assuming it contained valuables. Seemed like a no-brainer to me.

“I guess you need to fill out a claim form.”

“I guess so.” He yanked my suitcase so hard it flipped on its side. He righted it, then started toward the office area. “Okay, I need to shake this off.” He actually shook his hands and jumped up and down a little. He rolled his neck. “They’ll find it, right? It’s not lost forever, just temporarily.”

“I’m sure they’ll find it.”

It was then that I noticed a man staring at him, like he recognized him. James didn’t seem to notice, so I just fell in step beside him as we went to the office a few feet away. Despite the fact that he was clearly irritated, James was calm and friendly to the woman behind the counter. She in turn seemed fascinated by him. She kept smiling and tucking her hair behind her ear. I felt completely invisible and superfluous.

After being reassured his luggage would arrive at Cash’s house later that afternoon, we left the office. James was immediately approached by the man who had been watching him. He wanted a selfie with him. James complied and I again hovered, feeling out of place. It was like getting bumped at the

nightclub by the woman looking to score with him.

It reminded me of being a maid. Everyone ignores the maid unless they need extra towels or the minibar replenished.

Not a new feeling, but not one I'd been expecting to experience with my boyfriend.

But after the selfie, James asked the man, "Hey, would you take a picture of me and my girlfriend?"

"Sure, no problem."

James smiled at me and pulled out his phone. He swiped on it and handed it to him, and then put his arm around me and tugged me in close to him.

I felt awkward and wasn't exactly sure why, but at the last second James kissed the side of my head, which was so unexpected, I smiled. Okay, I actually giggled like a schoolgirl. I admit it. But sometimes he could be really sweet. Or all the time now actually.

Flying first class had been a new experience. I hadn't even been on a plane in a decade, let alone where I was handed a hot towel to wash my hands. It had been amazing to get great service, but it had contributed to me feeling awkward. But James was easy to be around, he made me happy, and that was scary.

Chrissy was right. I was suspicious of anything that was pleasant.

How absurd was that?

"Thanks," James said as he took his phone back. "I appreciate it. You have a good day."

"Thanks, you, too." Then he blurted out, "Your girlfriend is really gorgeous. You're a lucky guy."

James laughed. "Right? Trust me, I know it, man."

That surprised me to the point I actually felt heat in my cheeks. Maybe being invisible was more familiar than this feeling. "Oh my gosh, thank you."

When we walked away, James looked down at me. "Do I tell you enough that you're beautiful? I feel like I don't."

“You tell me all the time.”

“I’m going to tell you more often. You’re very beautiful, Mia.”

He was definitely a cinnamon roll. So gooey on the inside. I grinned at him. “Thank you. And you’re very attractive too.”

“Even with my scar?” He pointed to his temple.

“Even with your scar. How did you get that? Football?”

“No. My little sister was falling off a slide and I ran to catch her. She kicked me in the head and I connected with the edge of the slide. My head split like a watermelon. I was ten, she was five.”

“That’s very graphic imagery.”

He just grinned back as we approached the rental car area. He had reserved a truck ahead of time and within minutes we were in it, heading out of the airport.

“I feel like I need to tell you something, but I don’t want you to be mad at me,” he said, shifting gears.

I eyed James suspiciously. “Is this where you tell me that you bought me a car? Or you replaced all the clothes in my suitcase with sexy lingerie?”

He laughed. “No. No car and no lingerie, though I wish I had thought of that myself. Damn. Next trip. I’m disappointed in myself for not thinking of that.”

“Then what is it?”

“Before Train and Sydney were together, she asked me to have sex with her and I basically said yes.”

“Basically?” I stared at him, not thrilled with the thought that I had to spend a weekend with someone he’d had sex with, married to someone else or not. “How do you basically have sex? With a latte in your hand?”

He gave a short laugh, then cut himself off, like he’d realized it was the wrong time to laugh at my joke. He didn’t look at me, but kept his eyes on the road. “No, no, we didn’t actually have sex. Nothing happened because at that moment seeing us made Train realize he wasn’t going to let that happen



and he hauled her off to his hotel room and knocked her up.”

Interesting. “So you didn’t have sex with her?”

“No. Nothing happened at all. I never even touched her.”

“Okay.” I was a little puzzled why he was sharing this, then.

“Sometimes Train or the guys like to give me shit about it and I didn’t want you caught off guard. Train was pissed at me for awhile, so I wanted to be honest with you. No secrets.”

“I appreciate that.” Then I realized something. Sydney was only five or six months pregnant. “When was this?”

“New Year’s Eve.”

“Ah. After we met.” I had known that he’d probably seen other women after our night together, and he had pretty much admitted that when I had seen my shoe on his dresser, but I didn’t really want details or to think too much about it.

“I was pissed you left without saying goodbye or leaving your number. My head wasn’t really on straight right then.”

“Don’t put that on me,” I said. Not because I was angry, but I didn’t see what I had to do with his decision to sleep with random women.

“I’m not putting it on you. I’m explaining that you had an impact on me when you ran out with one shoe like some Cinderella thief.”

That made me roll my eyes. “So your Prince Charming move was to have sex with other women? In the movie, he sent his minions out to look for her. He wasn’t banging all the single maidens in the land in payback sex.” I wasn’t sure why I was fixating on that. It wasn’t like I hadn’t already known he’d been with other women.

“How did we get here?” he said. “Oh, because I was trying to be honest with you. But anyway, for the record, I did look for you. I told you I found you on social media, but I also stayed at the hotel a few times and ordered lots of extra towels looking for you.”

Now I burst out laughing. “You did *what?*”

“You heard me.” He sounded grumpy now.

“That’s kind of... different. You could have just reached out to me on social media.”

“I thought you stole my stuff. You wouldn’t have responded. I wanted to catch you off guard.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that. “But we met again by accident. Right?”

“Correct.”

“And then with Amelia?”

“Also coincidence. Though I did pay off the kid who tried to take the walk first. I saw your profile on the app.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know how or what I was supposed to feel. “Thanks for being honest.”

“Speaking of Amelia, I miss her,” he said. “Can you put my phone on the kennel? We can see her on video.”

Was that a subject change? I didn’t think so. He really was obsessed with the dog. I picked his phone and held it up to him. “Do you have facial or thumb recognition to unlock it?”

“Just put the code in since I’m driving.” He rattled off his passcode.

I tapped the numbers, a little floored he trusted me with it. “Is the kennel an app?”

“You can just go to the website.” Then he added, “I have a confession to make.”

My gut clenched. What now? “Is this about Amelia or something else? Because if you tell me you have a secret baby, I’m not going to be cool with it.”

“What? No. Of course not. Who has a secret baby? What does that even mean, like the baby is in Europe or something? Hey, did you know Ji-Ho’s hot for Christina? He asked me to get her number.”

I mentally cursed myself for getting him off track. “What do you need to

confess? You're freaking me out."

"Oh, no, don't freak out. It's just I've never given my passcode to a woman before. I admit, I hesitated for a split second. But I want you to know I trust you."

I was relieved and touched. He clearly didn't think I was responsible for stealing his wallet or ring. "That means a lot to me. And I'll give you my passcode too, if you want it."

"Only if you want to give it to me."

"You called me your girlfriend in front of that fan."

He glanced over at me. "Yes. That's what you are. Right?"

"Does that mean we're... exclusive?" I thought we were. I just needed him to say it. For all I knew, he'd bought three other women houses this month.

"Yes. We are. I am not, nor do I want to be, seeing any other women. And given your schedule, I'm pretty sure you don't have any time for a side piece."

That made me laugh. "I barely have time for you."

"Trust me, I know."

I put my hand on his thigh. "I want to squeeze you in whenever I can."

When he glanced over at me, I realized that had been a poor choice of words. He was grinning. "Don't," I said. "Don't even say it."

"Say what?" he said.

I shook my head. The innocent act didn't work on him.

"Nothing. And I'll give you Christina's number but you need to warn Ji-Ho she has a child."

"He knows that. The kid was with her."

"I'm just saying that she's not skilled at casual dating and having a child involved could be messy."

James made a noncommittal sound.

"What?" I asked.

He gave me a smile. “You’re such a mom, you know that? You’re a beautiful person, Mia.”

My heart squeezed. “You’re not so bad yourself,” I whispered.

## Chapter Seventeen

*JJ*

“*Y*ou didn’t tell anyone I was coming?” Mia asked, the second we were alone in one of Cash’s guest rooms. She reached out and smacked my arm. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Ow,” I said, rubbing my arm, even though it didn’t hurt in the slightest. It was like getting punched by a feather.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. You get knocked on your ass by grown men twice my size. That did not hurt. Now answer the question.”

I put her suitcase on the dresser and unzipped it. I almost had a heart attack when I opened it. She packed like a toddler. “What the hell is this? Did Kadin pack for you?” Everything was just shoved in with no rhyme or reason.

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I told them I was bringing my girlfriend. I think I just assumed they would know that I meant you.”

That might be a lie. Sort of. I had thought they would think of Mia, but mostly I hadn’t wanted to hear any of the guys’ opinions on dating her. I regretted I’d ever told them about her alleged thievery.

But when we'd walked into Cash's house, they'd had no choice but to be polite. And they had been. They might have been surprised, but no one seemed particularly upset.

"That was embarrassing. Sydney didn't even remember my name."

"That's because you met her on her wedding day. She was distracted." I started pulling her clothes out and folding them, before placing them in a drawer. I was trying to be as honest as possible with Mia, but I didn't think she needed to know why I hadn't been totally forthcoming with my friends.

"Stop folding my clothes." She jerked a sundress out of my hand and threw it back in the suitcase.

"They're getting wrinkled."

"I like them wrinkled," she said, sounding completely irritated with me.

I stopped what I was doing and turned to her. I cupped her cheeks with my hands. "Mia."

"James," she said, begrudgingly.

"It doesn't matter. My friends are fine. Let's have fun." I kissed her softly.

She sighed. "Don't fold my clothes."

"Fine. I won't fold your clothes. I won't even iron them while you're asleep." I gave her a smile.

That made her laugh. "Oh, God, if you do that, I'm going to be very disturbed."

"It already crossed my mind."

"That's not normal."

"You're stuck with me, so get used to it." I wholeheartedly meant that.

"Leave the clothes and show me this ranch. I'm dying to see the horses."

As if I'd ever say no to Mia. I flipped the suitcase closed again. "Let's go."

I LEANED ON THE FENCE, my boot on the bottom rail, and watched Mia inside the ring. She had asked if she could ride, so she and Cash were out there, him holding the horse's lead, Mia gently talking to the mare.

She looked good seated. Hell, she always looked good. But even though she hadn't ridden in years, she looked at home on a horse.

Train and Sydney had stayed in the house, because Train was a city boy who wouldn't go near a horse, but Eloise and Dak were taking a stroll on the property not far from where we were. Miles didn't have any interest in riding, so he was standing next to me, watching.

"So... Mia, huh?" Miles asked me.

"I don't want to hear it," I said.

The sun was fading and I was feeling really damn content. I had missed the country, the fresh air, the green lushness of Cash's ranch. I just wanted to breathe deep, relax, and have a good time with Mia, not deal with any opinions or bullshit.

"Hear what? I just think it's messed up you didn't tell anyone you were bringing her."

I watched Mia laughing at something Cash said. Just seeing her enjoying herself gave me a ridiculous amount of fucking pleasure. "Just drop it, Williams. I told Cash I was bringing a girl."

"No problem."

I glanced over at him. "What's going on in your life, by the way?" Miles lived twenty minutes from Cash, but like most of us, he was approaching free agency in his career and had some decisions to make.

"I'm staying one more year with the league, then I'm retiring," he said.

That surprised me. "Seriously? You're only twenty-seven." I couldn't even imagine retiring yet. I hadn't gotten everything out of the game that I wanted to yet. I wanted to stick around another decade if I could.

"Twenty-six. I graduated high school a year early, remember?" He shrugged. "I don't want to fuck my head up. I've already had two

concussions and I want to apply to graduate school at Vanderbilt to get my PhD. Can't do that with scrambled brains."

"Damn. That's impressive. I think that's fantastic." I did. It wasn't for me. Football had been my life since I was five years old. I was leaving the sport kicking and screaming. Not to mention I'd never been the world's greatest student. I'd never had to be and I hadn't put much effort into it.

"I'm going to miss some things about football, but I'm ready for the next chapter in my life, you know what I'm saying?"

I watched Mia walking the horse across the ring. "Yeah. I definitely understand that."

"Subject change but have you ever had a stalker?" Miles asked.

That got my attention. I turned to him. "What? Like a crazy fan?"

"Maybe. But more like just a crazy female sending you gifts and notes."

That seemed more standard issue than a nutjob harassing him. "Sure. I've gotten lots of shit from women designed to grab my attention. Nude pics, you know, the usual."

Miles didn't say anything.

I studied him. He looked pensive. I tried to make light of it. "It's not a guy pissed that you dropped that pass in the red zone week fifteen last season?"

"Fuck you, no. It's a woman."

"Are they texts?"

"A couple of texts from an unknown number. Plus actual handwritten notes that show up on my car and at the gym and random places like that."

"So she must have met you personally then if she has your number. Trace her number. Has she threatened you? Like do you think she's crazy, crazy?"

"I don't know. Maybe. She sounds off. But I think mostly it's frustrating me that I can't figure out who she is. I just want to know who she is and why she would be basically harassing me."

"Maybe hire a private investigator or one of those IT people who can



trace stuff online.” It didn’t sound like anything more than a woman obsessed with him. That could happen to anyone at any time. “Or just ignore her and hope she gets bored.”

“I might have answered one of her notes.”

I gave him a look. “Are you insane? You don’t engage with a stalker.”

“Says the man who brought the woman who robbed him to a friends’ weekend. Your judgement isn’t all that, Beckett.”

That pissed me off. “She did not rob me. Fuck you.”

Miles gave me a dirty look. “Fuck *you*.”

Historically, I wouldn’t have thought much of an exchange between us like that, because Miles was my ride or die best friend and we gave each other shit, but I was genuinely pissed. I didn’t like his attitude toward Mia, so I knew I needed to walk away before I took a swing at him.

Without a word to Williams, I just went over the fence and over to Cash. “How’s Mia doing?”

“She’s a natural,” he said. “She has a way with horses.”

She had a way with *me*.

That damn luggage needed to show up because I had something in it I wanted to give Mia to show my appreciation for her.

I checked my phone. Nothing.

For now I was optimistic and content to watch Mia enjoying herself.

“You’re staying with Tennessee, right?” I asked Cash.

“If I can, for sure. I love living here, like the coach, our QB. I’m happy here.” Cash eyed me. “You looking for a change?”

“I have one more season on my contract, you know that.” I watched Mia taking a turn around the ring, leaning down to murmur to the horse. “Just debating options.”

There was a hell of a lot to consider now.

I was in love with a couple of redheads and I needed to think about both Amelia and Mia when I made life-altering decisions.

The dog would be cool with going wherever I wanted to.  
Mia was more of a wildcard.  
I loved everything about her and I wanted to lock it in.  
The question was whether or not she would agree to it.

### *Mia*

“ARE you sure I can’t do anything to help?” I asked Cash for the fourth time. It was an uncomfortable feeling for me to just be sitting around.

I had gravitated toward Cash in particular because he seemed easygoing and friendly. He’d told me he’d grown up poor in the bayou and his disposition reflected that to me. He felt the most humble of the group of guys, the most down-to-earth. He took their ribbing good naturedly, and while his acreage of land was impressive, his house wasn’t over-the-top. It was a very nice modern farmhouse, but it wasn’t massive or filled with extra features. It was a very solid house with lots of masculine decor.

The guest room that me and James had been assigned had a literal wagon wheel hung on the wall. It made me more at ease.

Frankly, I was more at home here than in James’ sterile apartment. He had no reflection of himself in that place, whereas Cash seemed to have infused his personality into his house.

“Nah, I’m good,” Cash said, flipping burgers on the grill. “Though I don’t suppose you know how to build a fire in the pit, do you? I thought a fire after dinner would be nice.”

“I one hundred percent can do that.” I felt an almost irrational relief that he was entrusting me with a task. I couldn’t sit still anymore. There was some weird tension between James and Miles and I felt awkward around Sydney,

though I wasn't sure why exactly, because she was being super friendly to me. Eloise was being the same, but I still felt like odd man out. They were both in serious relationships with Dak and Train and they were cousins to boot.

Hanging out with Cash felt like being around my own cousin, Seth. We'd grown up together running through the woods.

"Thanks, Mia." Cash gave me a smile. "Wood is on the side of the house."

"Got it." I set my glass of wine down and went in search of the woodpile. Grabbing an armful and making my way to the firepit, I saw James glance over at me. I smiled at him. He was sitting in an Adirondack chair with a beer in his hand talking to his friends. His eyebrows shot up.

He set his beer down. Damn it. He was coming over to me.

I set the pile down and went on my knees so I could assemble my structure of tinder and kindling.

"What are you doing?" James asked. "You should be relaxing for once."

"I think I'm broken," I told him. "I'm not sure how to sit still. It's making me antsy."

"Jesus, Mia."

"In all seriousness, I find this relaxing. I really do miss living where there's so much green space." I stacked the tinder at a thirty degree angle, making a tent with the wood.

"Where would you live if you could live anywhere?" James squatted down beside me.

That was a no-brainer. "In the house you bought me. Hand me that wood." I pointed.

James was wearing clothes borrowed from Cash because his luggage hadn't arrived yet. It was just basketball shorts and a T-shirt, but the fit wasn't quite right. Cash was a little shorter and stockier. James was actually wearing socks with sandals, which amused me.

“How are you surviving without your own clothes?” I asked him.

“I’m slowly dying inside. I couldn’t bring myself to wear Cash’s sandals without socks because I don’t want my feet touching where his feet were and his sneakers are too small for me.”

That made me laugh. “Poor baby. Maybe we should go shopping tomorrow morning if your bag doesn’t show up.”

“I already ordered some stuff to be delivered tonight. I just can’t.”

“That was a good idea.”

“I had a gift in my bag for you. I’m going to be really upset if that bag doesn’t show up.”

My mind immediately went to sexy underwear. “Lingerie can be replaced.” I eyed my structure. “I think I’m done.”

“Seriously, about my question... where would you want to live? Other than Vegas?”

I hadn’t realized it was a serious question. “I don’t know. Here. Georgia. I’ve heard Austin is cool.” Not that I had any plans to leave Vegas, but I did miss the woods.

“It has to be somewhere with a football team.”

Alarm bells went off. I turned my gaze from the wood to him. “Are you leaving Las Vegas?”

He shrugged. “No. Not this season. Maybe not even after. But my contract is up.”

I stood up, quickly. See, there it was. The warning that this couldn’t last.

He wasn’t staying in Vegas and I was not going to be stupid enough to follow around after a man who hadn’t promised me anything.

Hell, even if he did.

How could I give up my life to follow his? That was a move Hot Mama would make, not me.

“Then why are you bringing it up?”

James stood up. “I don’t know. It’s just you look comfortable here. It got

me thinking.”

“Well, don’t. The only move I’m making is to the house you bought me.”  
My voice rose at the end, higher than I’d intended.

“Don’t get upset.”

“I’m not!”

“You sound upset.”

I took a deep breath. I didn’t want to ruin the weekend. It was my only weekend off for weeks. Months. Maybe years.

“Why would we be talking about something that may or may not happen in a year?” I asked. “Who knows if we’ll even be together then?”

It was a stupid, insecure, defensive thing to say. But I didn’t want to get hurt and I didn’t want to give up everything I’d worked so hard for in Vegas. My pride was an issue and it was in control of my mouth at the moment.

James’ jaw worked. Then he said, “Come sit down.”

“What? Why?”

But he was already striding back to the patio.

It was either stand there or join him. It felt like we were fighting only I had no clue what we were actually fighting about. I didn’t know what he was thinking or intending. He had some kind of angle and I didn’t understand it.

So I went and sat down in the empty chair next to James. I took a deep breath and tried to appreciate the setting.

Miles was trying to get the guys to play touch football. “Come on, North, just throw me a few.”

“Why would I want to do that when I’m sitting here, on my ass, with a beer, about to eat a burger?”

“You all are getting soft. Lazy motherfuckers.” Miles shook his head. “Beckett. Come on. Let’s do something.”

“After dinner,” James said. He reached over and entwined his fingers through mine.

Miles swore. “If I had known you were bringing a date, Beckett, I would

have brought one too. Thanks for the heads up.”

“What does what I do have to do with you?” James asked. “Cash doesn’t have a date. Why do you need a date? Or go call someone and get her here. Call your stalker.”

Before I could even blink Miles had cuffed James on the back of the head and then James was up, dropping my hand. Suddenly they were squaring off with each other on the grass behind the patio.

“What are you doing?” I asked, astonished. “James! Someone is going to get hurt.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dak said. “They’re just talking.”

“With their fists?” I asked. I winced when Miles narrowly missed nailing James in the jaw. James retaliated with a hard shove that sent Miles stumbling onto his ass.

“Yep. They’re just messing around.”

They didn’t look like they were messing around, but then as quickly as it started, it was over. They were both laughing and James reached out a hand to pull Miles off the ground. It didn’t seem like there was a clear winner. Or a clear reason. I shook my head, bewildered by their actions.

My wine glass was empty so I stood up to get more. “Does anyone need anything?” I asked. “I’m going in the house. Eloise, Sydney, Dak? Can I get you anything?”

“Oh, I’ll take another beer if you don’t mind,” Dak said.

“Get your own fucking beer,” James told him, stepping back into the sandals he had abandoned. “She’s not your servant.”

I was mortified. “I offered. It’s the polite thing to do.”

“What is your problem?” Dak asked. “The fuck, Beckett. You used to be the chill one.”

I didn’t wait to hear the rest of the conversation. I just opened the patio door and slipped into the kitchen and went and topped off my wine glass. I took a bracing sip, wondering if James had reacted so strongly because he

was actually embarrassed by me being a maid. I'd never gotten that impression but now I wasn't sure. I grabbed a beer for Dak and headed toward the door. I hadn't closed the slider all the way and I could hear the conversation.

"No one cares if she's a stripper," Train was saying.

They thought I was a stripper? It was obvious that James had told them absolutely nothing about me. That was even more embarrassing than his overreaction. What the hell was I doing here? Mingling with rich people and drinking wine that wasn't in a box when no one had even been expecting me?

"As your friend, I do care that she stole your shit," Miles said. "Your championship ring is still gone, right?"

My cheeks burned. I waited for James to defend me, to tell them that I hadn't stolen anything, but he didn't. He said, "Maybe this was a mistake."

It made my heart sink. And my anger flare.

I threw the slider open. "Maybe it was a mistake. All of it. I want to go home. Now."

I may not have had money, I may not have had rich friends, but I had my dignity. I had a support system. I didn't need a boyfriend who was ashamed to tell his friends about me. While simultaneously planning my life.

"Mia, wait," James said, coming toward me. "Why are you so upset?"

I slammed the door shut again and whirled, setting my glass back down on the kitchen counter. I realized I still had Dak's beer in my hand so after James entered the kitchen, I brushed past him and quickly strode over to Dak. "Here's your beer. I'm sorry it took so long."

Dak jumped up out of his seat. "Mia, sit down. Talk to us. What's going on? Ignore whatever these idiots said to upset you."

Eloise had also stood up. "Dak is right." She looked concerned. "Maybe you and JJ can take a walk and talk." She reached out and gave me a hug.

I appreciated the effort but I was so angry and hurt, I felt like a wooden board. I stepped back from Eloise.

James was standing in the open doorway. “Mia. Please. Talk to me.”

A ringing came from inside the house.

“Is that the doorbell?” Sydney asked. “Is someone here?”

James glanced at his phone. “It’s probably the new clothes I ordered. Or my luggage. One of the two.” He made no move to go retrieve whatever it was.

“I’ll go see,” Cash said. On his way past me, he reached out and squeezed my arm. “I hope you stay, Mia. It’s nice having you here.”

That actually made tears well up in my eyes. “Thank you, Cash.”

“Mia,” James said.

“James.”

He gave me a slight smile. “We’re doing it again.”

I rolled my eyes, fighting back the urge to cry. I did not want to lose it in front of his friends.

“Walk down by the pond with me.” He left the doorway, took my hand firmly, and tugged me in the opposite direction of the horses. It always amazed me how strong he was. His grip was firm, his skin callused.

I let him lead me away because I was mortified that his friends had seen me having a meltdown. I hated feeling vulnerable like that. I tugged my hand away from his, and he let me go.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone I was going to be here?” I asked as we walked across the grass.

“Because they’re my friends and as of right now, they’re not sure they can trust that you didn’t steal from me. They’re looking out for me. I knew that, and I didn’t want to hear their opinions on how you might be using me, so I took the stupid approach of just springing you on them. I’m sorry. That was really not fair to do to you.”

That was an understatement. “Not at all fair.”

He ran his hands through his hair as we moved closer to the pond. “I want them to like you. They’re my best friends. And you’re very important to me.



But I should have just focused on you and me for awhile and not worried about what they thought.”

“That is all true.” I crossed my arms across my chest. I was wearing denim shorts and a T-shirt and the day had been hot. The night air was the perfect comfortable temperature. I glanced up at the stars. It was a beautiful setting and I was irritated that I couldn’t enjoy it. “Do you think we’re a mistake? If you do, tell me now, before it hurts more than it already does.”

James stopped walking and reached out to grip my shoulders. He turned me to him. “Mia, no. Hell, no. I don’t think we’re a mistake. What I said back there? I meant that bringing you here without telling my friends first was a mistake. We are *not* a mistake. Far from it.”

I let out a breath I didn’t even know I was holding in. The tears were threatening again and I widened my eyes and swallowed hard. I wanted to say everything. I wanted to say nothing. Because if I talked, brought up questions, what if I didn’t like the answers?

But I forced myself to address the obvious. The ultimate elephant in the room. “Do you think I took your wallet and ring on purpose?”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t. You told me you didn’t and I trust you.”

“What if your friends never believe that?”

“Then fuck them. This is my life. I don’t need friends that don’t trust me to know what’s best for me. They can either accept you and me or they can suck my dick.”

“Why would you jeopardize your friendships?” I asked, genuinely confused.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked, gruffly. “I’m in love with you, Mia.”

Oh, God. I stared at him. It was dusk, but I could see the intensity of his expression. “You are?” I whispered.

He nodded. “Hell, yeah. I am one hundred percent totally and fully in love with you.”

James was in love with me. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I stared

up at him, overwhelmed.

“You’re the best thing to happen to me,” he added. “You ran into me that night and you might as well have run me over with a truck. I haven’t been able to think about anything but you since that moment.”

“James...” My nostrils flared. I couldn’t speak. My throat was tight and I just wanted to stay in this time, this space, this feeling, forever.

“I love you,” he said. “I really, really love you.”

This could not be real life. At the same time, it felt so perfect that I just nodded my head, overcome with love for him, and an overwhelming giddiness.

“I love you, too,” I finally managed. “God, so much.”

The corners of his mouth turned up in a smile. “You do? Damn. I wasn’t expecting that. Hell, yeah, baby.”

He leaned down to kiss me, but I put my hand on his mouth to stop him. “Is this really what you want?” I asked. “You have your life and I have mine, and they’re nothing alike. I can’t be the maid that you’re embarrassed to be seen with.”

“I have never, not for one fucking minute, been embarrassed to be with you.” He put his hands on my shoulders and shook me a little. “I’m so damn proud of how hard you work and all the obstacles you’ve overcome. It takes a special person to keep it together as well as you do.”

That made me want to just jump into his arms. To just take the leap and not doubt anything.

But the practical me said, “There’s an imbalance of power between us. How does that work in the real world?”

He laughed softly. “You’re right. There is an imbalance of power between us. Since the second we met, you’ve had *all* of it. I fell for you right then and there and I’ve been fucking powerless ever since.” James tapped his chest with his fist. “I am standing here, with my whole insides laid bare to you, Mia. I have never, ever felt like this way about anyone and I never will

ever again. You're my everything. And I hope to God that my luggage showed up because there is an engagement ring in it for you."

"What?" I breathed, in complete shock. "An engagement ring?" I parroted, because it felt like my entire brain had gone blank. A ring. He had a ring for me.

He nodded.

Then he got down on his knee in the grass. "Mia Abernathy, will you marry you?"

I nodded, my hands going to my mouth. "Yes. Yes, I will marry you, James."

Then I finally let the tears come.

Christina was right.

Sometimes relationships were easy.

Easy and beautiful and amazing.

## Chapter Eighteen

*JJ*

*M*ia had said yes. The most incredible woman I had ever met had just agreed to marry me. I gave a victory yell. Then I stood up and hauled her into my arms and kissed her.

“I love you,” I said. “And that has to be totally obvious because I just proposed to you wearing borrowed socks with sandals. That is not the way I pictured this moment going.”

She laughed. “It was perfect.” She had her arms around my neck. “Hey,” she murmured.

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

I would never get tired of hearing that. “Good. Because I was just going to keep after you until you did fall in love with me. I was prepared to have to work at it for years.”

The corner of her mouth turned up. “You were not.”

Hauling her off the ground, I wrapped her legs around my waist. “Come on, you little thief. Let’s go get my suitcase then lock ourselves in the guest room.”

She gave a shriek when I just started walking with her in my arms. “I am not a thief.”

“You stole my heart.”

That made her laugh. “That is so cheesy. And I’m going to fall.”

“I like cheesy. And that is so insulting. You do realize that I happen to be a pro football player, right? I can carry my woman.”

“You’re right, I totally forgot. I stand corrected. Carry me all night if you want.”

“Maybe I will.” I took her to the patio where my friends were all still gathered. I sat down, which meant Mia wound up on my lap.

“Everything okay then?” Dak asked. He was stretched out on a chaise, his hand in Eloise’s, which was sitting next to him.

“Yep.” I looked around for Cash. “Where’s Young? Was that my Target order or my suitcase?”

“The doorbell rang twice. He just went back in to answer it a second time,” Train said. “So I think both came.”

“Perfect.” I eased Mia off of my lap and onto the chair. “Give me five minutes, baby.”

She bit her bottom lip, watching me with our shared secret. With love. “Sure.” She mouthed, “I love you.”

That was everything I wanted right there. Damn.

I went into the house and found Cash hauling my luggage into his front entry. “Hey, thanks,” I said, taking it from him. “Listen, I’m going to change, and then I need you to do me a favor. I need you to get my parents, Mia’s mom, and her best friend on a video call on your tablet, okay?”

“What?” He looked at me. “Why, what’s going on?”

“I’m proposing to Mia.” I patted my suitcase. “I have an engagement ring in here.”

“You put an engagement ring in a checked bag? Dude, it’s like you want shit to get stolen.”

I rolled my eyes. “Beside the point, Young. Can you help me out or not?”

“Of course I’ll help you.” He clapped my arm. “Congrats, man. Go get her.”

“Thanks.” Impulsively, I reached out and hugged him with one arm, because I already knew her answer and I was high on life right now.

Ten minutes later, I reappeared on the patio, Mississippi in one hand and a glass of champagne for Mia in the other. I had worked with Ji-Ho and Christina to get Mia’s handbag, and after Christina had emptied it, I had folded it up and stowed it away in my suitcase, hoping Mia wouldn’t miss it before we left. Now I had the ring box in it.

“For you,” I said, handing her the champagne.

She sat up and took the flute from me. “What’s going on? Why are you wearing a suit?”

“Because the occasion calls for a suit.” I glanced over at Cash. “You got this?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Say hi to everyone.” He held up the tablet in his hands.

“Is that my mother?” Mia said, straining to look at the screen. “Chrissy?”

“And my parents,” I said, waving to them. They waved back. Then I straightened my tie and jacket and held up her bag. “Play a game with me, Mia. Put your hand in Mississippi and see what you come up with.”

She set down the champagne and her hands came up to her mouth. “What are you doing?”

I opened the bag and held it out to her. “Come on. Play along. Dig around in there and see what you find.”

Her cheeks were pink and her eyes were sparkling. She pursed her lips together and reached out. Her hand disappeared into the bag. Given it was empty save for the ring box, it didn’t take her long to reemerge holding it. “I found a box,” she said.

I heard one of the women give a gasp behind me, but I never took my

eyes off Mia.

“Yes, you have.” I set down her bag and went down on one knee for the second time that night. “Open it.”

Mia flipped the box open. “Oh my God. James, it’s just so beautiful.” Tears were in her eyes suddenly and without warning. “Yes. Yes, I will marry you.”

“I didn’t even ask yet.” I held my hands out in a *what the fuck* gesture.

She let out a laugh. “Sorry.”

A couple of the guys laughed too.

“When I met you I wasn’t really looking for anything. But then you started wiping my shirt with club soda or whatever the hell it was and telling me what was what and there it was. The final puzzle piece of my life just clicked into place. You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. You’re generous and hard-working and strong and loyal as hell. You don’t take crap from me and you’ve reminded me what really matters in life. I love you so damn much and Mia Abernathy, nothing would make me happier than to call you my wife. Would you do me the honor of marrying me?”

She grinned. “Yes. Yes, I will marry you. I would be honored to marry you.”

There were cheers and applause from behind us and on the tablet.

I reached out for the box. I took the ring out and slid it on her finger. “It fits perfectly,” I told her. “My redheaded Cinderella.”

She cupped my cheeks and kissed me.

When we turned around, all my friends were grinning at us.

“Congratulations!” Sydney said, tears in her eyes.

Eloise was crying too and leaning against North.

“Who is this guy?” Dak asked in amazement. “Mia, what have you done to JJ? He’s totally transformed into a romantic son of a bitch.”

I got off the ground and held my hand out for Mia. “Maybe I just needed the right inspiration.”

Cash brought the tablet closer. My mother was crying. My father was nodding like he was happy. Hot Mama looked smug. Christina was next to her, jumping up and down with Kadin on her hip.

“Chrissy, you knew!” Mia said. “How did you keep that a secret?”

“It nearly killed me,” she said, dramatically. “Seriously. I almost died three times from holding it in.”

“Ma, Dad, how did I do?” I asked my parents. I straightened my tie. “Looking sharp, right?”

“You were doing great until just now,” my mother said. “Mia, I am so looking forward to meeting you in person.”

“You too,” Mia said. “Thank you for raising such a wonderful man.”

I put my arm around her and drew her by my side. “Damn. I’m blushing.”

My mother rolled her eyes. “Knock it off. Go get a glass of champagne.” She turned to my father. “Jim, do we have any champagne?”

“She’ll use any excuse to have a glass of champagne,” my father said, winking at the screen.

I wondered if I would start winking automatically when I became a father. It seemed like a package deal along with dad jokes.

“Jim!” My mother hit my father’s arm.

Cash set the tablet down in front of the grill and retreated into the kitchen as Train and Miles and Dak all offered me a handshake and a clap on the shoulder. The women were giving Mia hugs. Cash reappeared with three bottles of champagne that I had ordered earlier that afternoon.

“North, help me get some glasses and bring them out here.”

I accepted a hug from Eloise and looked around, wanting to commit this moment to memory. This was what it was all about.

Family, friends, and football.

That was all I needed.



## *Mia*

A LITTLE BUZZED from two glasses of champagne, and pure giddiness, I picked up Mississippi off the patio and shook it. “I can’t believe you brought my bag. That was perfect.”

James looked pretty damn pleased with himself, as well he should be. “Thank you. I thought it was a good touch.” He leaned in. “Even if I jumped the gun on our walk earlier.”

“I’m glad you did,” I murmured. I was. It had been a private moment between us. It meant when he’d changed and brought out the bag in front of everyone, I hadn’t been nervous. I had enjoyed the gesture.

We’d ended the phone call with everyone and were celebrating with James’ friends, who seemed genuinely for him. For us.

I dropped Mississippi on the ground. It made a faint clinking sound. “Is there something else in there? What did you do, James?”

But he shook his head. “There’s nothing else in there, I swear. Christina emptied it. Maybe something got left in there. It was a lot to remove.” He made a gesture like he was shoveling.

I laughed and smacked his arm. “Be quiet.” I bent over and picked it back up and shook it. There was definitely something in there, but when I opened it, it was empty. Feeling around, I felt a lump behind the lining. “I think there’s a hole in the lining.”

I tried to maneuver into the small opening with a finger, but I wasn’t that coordinated. Or possibly I was drunk. “Hey, Sydney, can you get this out? You have small hands and you’re sober.”

“Sure.” She took the bag from me and shook it. She felt around inside and concentrated intently. “Olek, push my glasses up,” she said. “They’re slipping.”

Her husband obeyed, barely breaking a beat in his conversation with Miles, as he used the tip of his finger to gently shift her glasses back into place.

Now that was marriage goals.

“I’ve got it!” Sydney said. She tugged something out and held it up so we could all see it. “It’s a ring.”

Well. There you go. It was James’ much debated championship ring.

“Holy shit,” he said, reaching out to take it from Sydney. “This was in your bag the whole damn time?” he asked me. “I thought you said you looked for it.”

Oops. “I did! But obviously it fell into the hole of the lining. But yay, we found it.” I tried to give him as innocent a smile as possible. “Sorry?”

He just shook his head and laughed a little. “Jesus, Mia. You need a new bag.” Then he held the ring up and put it on his finger. “I’m just glad to have it back.”

“Why were you wearing your ring anyway?” Cash said. “Seems kind of a douche move to wear it out on a first date.”

James punched his arm. “Shut up, Young. At least I have first dates.”

“I could have dates,” Cash said, looking annoyed.

James laughed. “Sure, buddy, you keep telling yourself that. But for your information, I was actually supposed to be meeting DeShawn, and I enjoy rubbing his face in the fact that I have a ring and he doesn’t. Lucky for him, though, and me, his wife went into labor that night. He got a baby girl and I met Mia. Win-win.”

“I’m glad you have the ring back,” I said. “I really did feel bad that it was missing.”

“I know,” he said. “Hey, Williams, you can apologize at any time.”

To my surprise, Miles came right over. “Mia, I do owe you an apology. I’m sorry I thought you ripped off my boy.”

“That’s okay. You were protecting him. That’s a good quality in a

friend.”

“Fresh start?” he said, opening his arms up for a hug.

“Absolutely.” I hugged him.

“We’ll be right back,” James said, when I stepped away from Miles. He took my hand.

“Take all the time you want,” Dak said, with a grin.

“No, I just want to take Mia down by the pond.”

“Again, take all the time you want.”

James tugged a blanket off the back of a chair and grabbed a bottle of champagne. “Should I find our glasses?” I asked.

“I can drink out of the bottle if you can,” he said.

“Works for me.” We walked, fingers laced together. “I think how we’re dressed for this is pretty indicative of both our personalities.”

It amused me that he had proposed to me in a designer suit and I was in denim shorts and a T-shirt.

“Cash recorded all of it too.”

We walked to the edge of the pond and he spread the blanket out. We sat down on it and stared at the water. The moon was high and the air was sweet with the scents of summer. “This is beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

I turned and realized James was staring at me, not the view. It made my heart squeeze.

“By the way, we’re going to tell our kids someday that we met when you leaped over that counter when I fainted,” I said. “That’s the ‘meet cute’ story.”

“But that’s not true,” he protested.

“They don’t need to know we met in a casino bar and hooked up,” I said firmly.

“I don’t feel like we should lie to our children,” he said. “Relationships are built on trust.”

I snorted. “So you want them to hear about your past as a luxury boat salesman?”

James laughed. “Fine. But I think in that case it’s a better story if we tell them about the second time we met. How I went back to the hotel suite looking for my watch and my bed was lumpy, so I threw back the comforter and found a hot maid in her underwear.”

I smacked him. “You can’t tell our kids that!”

“I can make it G rated.”

“How?”

“The hard-working maid decided to take a quick nap and I discovered her. Then I caught her when she fainted in the coffee shop. See?”

“Why are you referring to me as ‘she’ instead of ‘you’? Did this happen to you with someone else, too?” I asked, amused. I lifted my hand and admired my engagement ring, or rock, for the nine millionth time in the past hour.

“That’s how I tell stories.”

Without a warning, James pushed me back onto the blanket.

I gave a squawk and protested. “What are you doing? You’ll wrinkle your suit.”

“I have a connection in housekeeping,” he said, as he bent down and kissed me.

Sighing, I kissed him back. “I hope she’s good.”

He stared down at me, his thumb tracing over my bottom lip. “She’s the best thing to ever happen to me.”

“If the shoe fits…”

“Exactly, you gorgeous smartass.”

James took my mouth with his.

And ‘she,’ me, lived happily ever after.



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## About the Author

USA Today and New York Times Bestselling author Erin McCarthy sold her first book in 2002 and has since written over eighty novels and novellas in the romance and mystery genres. Erin has a special weakness for tattoos, high-heeled boots, and martinis. She lives with her renovation-addicted husband and their blended family of kids and rescue dogs.

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