



RUNAWAY BRIDE

for the Boss

A BEAUFORT LEGACY BOOK

MILA SUTTON

RUNAWAY BRIDE FOR THE BOSS

A SMALL TOWN MAFIA
ROMANCE



MILA SUTTON

Copyright © 2023 by Mila Sutton

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[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](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Epilogue](#)

35. Sneak Peek

INTRODUCTION

Alexander Beaufort is as beautiful as he is dangerous.

As grumpy as he is overprotective.

His perfectly tailored suits hide his tattooed body, like the family business disguises his dark deals.

He's been searching for me all year, and I just showed up in his town.

In a soaking wet wedding dress.

Fate seems to keep bringing us together.

And I'm not complaining about the way he worships my body.

But there's something mysterious about the Beauforts.

They own this town, and now Alexander owns me.

Autumn Montgomery is everything I'm not: gorgeous, happy, easy to love.

And way too good for me.

From the moment I laid eyes on her, I knew she had to be mine.

But she doesn't know that her ex owes me money.

Or that I've killed men for less.

And if I find out he's the one who hurt her,

He's done.

I finally found my girl, and god help you if you get in my way of keeping her.

CHAPTER 1



ALEXANDER

ONE YEAR AGO.

“Are you there yet?”

I roll my eyes at the unnecessary question from my younger brother. I’m not the talkative type; and after taking a commercial flight to this godforsaken city, I’m even less inclined to indulge his conversation.

“No, Ezra, how are things on your end? Has he talked yet?”

“No, and I don’t think he will. I helped our friends in the police department make it quite clear that if he so much as breathes a word to the wrong person, it won’t end well for him or his loved ones.”

Good. I prefer to be the one handling things, but this event is non-delegable. I very briefly debated sending Ezra in my place, but this situation with Larson is delicate. And Ezra can be...well, unpredictable.

“We’re here, sir,” George, my driver announces, and I glance out the window. The engagement party is a pretentious affair taking place in the *New York Public Library*. I sigh as I

stare at the front of the towering building, loitering with a few curious tourists.

The event started an hour or so ago. Normally, I hate tardiness, but I want to make the rat sweat as he wonders if I'll show up. The corner of my mouth lifts as I imagine the shock on his face when he sees me. He probably thinks he's home free since I didn't arrive the moment guests started filtering in. Fucking idiot.

“Goodbye, Ezra. Text me if anything changes.” I tell my brother through the phone as George gets out to open my door.

“Yeah, yeah, Mr. grump, I can handle it.”

For the sake of poor Dad's high blood pressure, I hope he can. I purposely ignore his jibe and end the call. I tuck my phone into the interior pocket of my suit jacket as I climb the wide marble stairs, taking them two at a time. Let's get this over with.

“Good evening, sir,” greets one of the two uniformed waiters standing at the large entrance doors. He has a clipboard gripped tightly in his left hand. “May I have your name?”

“Alexander Beaufort.”

He glances down at his list and nods. “Welcome, sir. The gathering is taking place in the rotunda.” As he steps aside for me to enter, his partner steps forward with a tray of champagne flutes, offering me one. I decline, I won't be here long enough to enjoy it.

I swing the door open just as a flash of strawberry hair hits my face. I'm not exactly a lightweight, but the surprise of the impact has me taking a couple of steps back with an armful of woman. I scowl, annoyed by the unsolicited bodily contact. But before I can make a scathing comment, the woman shifts from my grasp, stuttering an apology. Finally, I get a glimpse of her face.

Whoa. I inhale sharply. She's a stunner. A ten. An angel placed on this earth seemingly just for me to find tonight. Pale strawberry blonde hair with undertones of ginger piled high on

her head, leaving her face in stark relief. And what a face. I'm entranced by the curve of her lush mouth, the smattering of freckles across her small nose. Then her huge honey brown eyes snag mine, and I momentarily forget how to breathe.

Her lips are moving, but I can't hear what she's saying. The tears streaming down her face catch my attention. I shake my head.

"It's all my fault. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, I—" The woman suddenly stops talking, doing a double take as she takes me in. She blinks rapidly, her tears slowing. My eyes narrow as I wait for the inevitable.

She'll stand up straighter and run her hand through her hair flirtatiously as she introduces herself to me. They always do.

Her eyes go wide and for some unfathomable reason her lower lip trembles. My heart constricts tightly, and my lips part as I continue to stare. Who the hell made her cry?

She suddenly glances behind her and then does the unexpected. She pushes past me, rushing down the stairs. Something clinks as it hits the stone steps. She glances back briefly but doesn't stop running. Her eyes shift to lock with mine one last time. Then she's gone.

My eyes are glued to her retreating back as she disappears. Fuck, I should've followed her. I am moving down the stairs to do just that when a glint of silver catches my eye. I pick it up. It's a necklace with the initials AWM. Tiny diamonds sparkle over the letters.

Expensive shit.

She doesn't come back for it? My pulse starts hammering when I remember the tears on her face. What had her running? Did someone hurt her? For whatever reason, the thought has me clenching my fist around the necklace in my palm. Damn it. I have no dependable network in New York. Still, after dropping the necklace into my pocket, I take out my phone to text someone I know in the area. Kyle. I describe my mystery woman as much as I can and add two words—find her.

His reply is instantaneous like I knew it would be. A simple, “On it.”

I turn back to the library and walk in. The woman is still very much on my mind, but I have a rat to exterminate.

* * *

NOW.

I am arrogant enough to think that by the time I dealt with Larson, Kyle would have my mystery woman locked down. Spoiler: he doesn't. My description wasn't enough. He may not think he has much to go on, but her beautiful face will remain seared into my memory for eternity.

How many women with strawberry blonde hair could've been at the New York Public Library at seven fucking PM on that exact night? When I came home, I had my men digging deeper using her initials. But AWM was just as fruitless, and after a whole year of obsessively searching for her, she still proves to be elusive.

I sigh as I lift a glass of scotch to my lips, cherishing the smooth burn as the liquor glides down my throat.

“What's got your undies in a bunch, 'ol grumpy pants?” A dark haired, blue eyed woman smirks as she tops my glass. I roll my eyes.

Only my sister and brother can get away with insulting me, and that's strictly because they know my threats to them are empty. Mostly. I would never do anything to actually hurt either one of them...public humiliation is never off the table, though.

“Get out of here, Andrea.”

The shithead simply leans her elbow on the bar across from me. “No really, I want to know. You've been extra

grumbly ever since you got back from that New York trip last year. Do us all a favor and spill! My regulars basically consider me as their therapist. And tip accordingly,” she adds with a wink.

I’ve never met anyone half as observant as Andrea. Except me, of course. She could be really useful in the family business, but she’s always been headstrong and decided to branch off on her own. Being a girl certainly helped the decision go down easier with Dad. His precious baby girl can do no wrong. I take another sip of my drink then say for the umpteenth time, “Come work for me, Andrea. You wouldn’t really be in the family business if you’re working for me personally.”

She huffs and stands upright, taking a step away from me like I knew she would. Topic successfully changed. “I know what you’re doing, Alex. I’m only letting you get away with it because it’s a busy night for us, and I’m short staffed. We’ll continue this conversation later,” she promises as she leaves to tend to a customer, no doubt prying into their deepest secrets in the process.

The Liquid Elixir is one of the hottest bars in Brattleboro; it’s especially busy tonight because of the unexpected storm that rolled in this evening. I sigh when my phone starts to ring. Ezra.

“What do you want?”

“Wow. Is that any way to talk to your dear beloved brother?”

I sigh again. “Are you drunk? What the hell, Ezra? Where are you?” I’m already standing as I ask the questions, tossing a wad of bills on the bar top. Andrea catches my gaze from across the room.

“What?” she mouths. On nights when I have time to come into her bar, I like to stay till she closes. She has the protection of the Beaufort name, so I know she’s relatively safe. But there’s still the occasional brave idiot who tries to use her against us. She hired a security guard for the bar, but I still like being there.

“Ezra,” I mouth back and she rolls her eyes.

I smile. Those two fight like cats and dogs. The middle child and the baby, living up to their roles.

“No way bro. I’m not drunk. You are!” Ezra shouts in my ear, and I wince, taking the phone away from my ear.

“Where the hell are you?” I demand, lowering my voice menacingly so he knows I mean business.

As I make my way to the back door of the bar, my gut tightens and something pulls at my attention. A petite woman has her back turned to me as she walks toward the bar with hunched shoulders. Her wet hair is soaked through, as is her ivory dress. Is that a wedding gown? I do a double take but Ezra is rattling off an address, so I shake her out of my head, concentrating on my brother.

Either her groom is in the bar with her—although I didn’t catch sight of him, and she doesn’t exactly look like a blushing newly married bride—or she’s a runaway. It’s none of my business, but I’m discomfited by how much willpower it takes to leave her here, rain soaked and alone.

Not my problem, I repeat to myself and walk out into the rain.

CHAPTER 2



AUTUMN

*Head up. Smile. Don't look suspicious. Head up.
Smile. Don't look suspicious.*

I repeat the mantra over and over as I walk through the wide lobby of The Westin New York at Times Square in my ostentatious Monique Lhuillier wedding dress. I'm grateful the dress is long enough to cover my sneaker-clad feet. That would definitely raise an alarm. What bride wears sneakers to her wedding? It's strange enough that I'm leaving without my bridal party.

My heart pounds as I reach the front doors and the security guy stares me down suspiciously. Relief floods me when he nods, muttering, "Ms. Montgomery."

I try to smile at him, but only a grimace comes through. I wish I had had enough time to change out of this ridiculous dress, but undoing the buttons down the length of my spine alone would take probably thirty minutes, I can't risk it! At this very moment, Alicia, my soon-to-be mother-in-law—scratch that, ex-mother-in-law. Ugh, is that even a thing?

Anyway, by now, Alicia should be knocking at my room to tell me it's time to depart for the wedding venue. I glance around wildly, absentmindedly noticing the setting sun—Larson thought it'd be romantic to have a five PM wedding—as I try to quickly unlock the door of my green Volkswagen Beetle, glad as hell that I secretly drove my trusty car to the hotel instead of the shiny new one Larson had bought me last year.

I had finally agreed to have this car scrapped, but my sentimental heart convinced me to hide it in a parking lot instead of taking it to the yard. I told myself that I'd have it scrapped after the wedding. "Getting rid of the old as I enter a new phase of my life." What a load of bull.

My car groans when I turn the ignition. "No. no. no. Please no." Not now. I try again and it finally starts with a slight sputter. I blow out a relieved breath and drive away as fast as I can in this slow as hell car. I head south on Broadway toward west 47th Street. I adjust my legs beneath the massive skirt of my low-waisted appliqued dress. I swear under my breath, as I wish again that I'd had enough time to get my things. I didn't even remember to grab my purse and phone.

My only possessions right now are my car and the wedding dress I'm wearing. Damn it.

Why did I run away from my own wedding? I've been having second thoughts since before I even said yes to the proposal. There was the elaborate engagement party at the *New York Public Library* last year. That's when I finally built up the courage to voice my doubts to Larson, my fiancé – now my ex-fiancé. Was it the best time to share that I'd been feeling a little lost in our relationship and wanted to slow things down; no, probably not. But his reaction was blown way out of proportion.

He lost his temper and he shoved me, hard enough that I tripped, hitting my head on a table on my way down. I ran out of the party in complete shock that he could ever hurt me, my sweet Larson. Or so I thought. He was the nice guy, the safe choice, but that illusion has been crumbling for over a year. Then there was the incident this morning...but I can't even think about that right now. All that matters is that I'm getting far far away.

I turn onto the NY state route 9A, crawling along in the right lane and deciding I'll just follow the highway as long as possible. I should've left after that incident, I know. And I did try to end things, but he wasn't having it. I was in too deep and didn't see a way out. It didn't help that Mother was on his side, so I thought maybe I was overreacting like everyone said.

So, I went back to him with my tail tucked between my legs and just...*stayed*. I've hated myself for it every day since. But the interaction I overheard when I went to the groom's suite, to voice my concerns once again, was the last straw. It was enough to finally make me come to my senses.

I could stay and try to call off the wedding like an adult, but Larson would never let that happen. He's so persuasive, so convincing...and might even threaten me or resort to something drastic to force my hand. I feel like I don't even know him anymore, and I certainly can't trust him now. So, I bolted.

I don't particularly have a destination in mind as I take the ramp to the Taconic State Parkway, I just need to put as much distance between Larson and me as possible. I glance on either side of the highway, inhaling deeply as I admire how beautiful this time of year is in New York. The burnt orange and red hues of the trees that stretch as far as the eye can see on either side of the road are amplified by the twilight hour.

This has always been my favorite time of year. While some may see the dying leaves as an ending, I've always felt a sense of beginning, of rebirth in Autumn. What better time to say goodbye to that which no longer serves us and to find beauty in change and allow ourselves a fresh start? How ironic.

"Just enjoy the view, Autumn. And on the bright side, not having your phone with you means no way for him to track you," I say quietly, glancing at my reflection in the rearview mirror.

I glance back to make sure the coast is clear, then pull over to the shoulder of the road to defiantly pull my hair out of the tight bun it's in.

Wren, why do you have your hair down again? You know you look more presentable when it's up.

"Take that asshole. *I* think I look better with my hair down. And it's Autumn, not Wren."

I blow out a breath as I stare at the limp strands. My normally shiny and silky reddish-blond hair is dull and frizzy.

It's most likely damaged from all the heat styling.

Curls are unbecoming and unladylike, Wren. You're a woman, not a heathen.

I scowl at the sound of his voice in my head. I was such a dumbass, such a pushover. I let him change everything about me until I didn't even recognize myself.

"The curls will be back after a wash," I murmur to myself as I start the car. I'm never straightening it again. Ever.

I drive for hours, my car slowly chugging along as I take the exit onto I-90 E. I still don't know where I'm headed, but when a few minutes later I see a sign for exit 45 to merge onto I-91, I impulsively turn onto it. Another bright side is that if even I don't know where I'm going, no one should be able to track me down.

Not Mom, nor Alicia, and most especially, not Larson.

The sky slowly darkens, and at first I think it's because it's getting late, but then lightning flashes ominously.

"If it rains, that means the skies are endorsing my disappearing act from the wedding," I mouth with a small smile. I'm not exactly sure if I believe in a higher power controlling the universe, but when a clap of thunder follows my words, my smile widens into a grin.

A few minutes later, it starts to drizzle, slowly increasing to an outright downpour. This slows my already sluggish driving considerably. I squint, leaning forward until my chest is plastered to the wheel as I drive through the rain. I drive for another hour and a half, and see an exit coming up ahead. I can't make out the words on the sign through the rain, but I debate for a few seconds, then abruptly turn left at the last second.

I shift in my seat, my eyes watering from squinting while having my contacts in—one must've shifted—ass on fire from being in the same position for who knows how many hours. My stomach grumbles, and I wince as the hunger pangs I've been studiously ignoring feel like they're eating my insides. Damn it, I only had a blueberry muffin this morning. The rain

is still pouring heavily, and I'm totally lost as to where I am, but I keep driving.

The first tendrils of panic hit me when my car stalls, bucking and jerking in the middle of the road. I immediately glance at the gas meter. It's not on empty so that can't be the problem.

"Oh no. Please don't do this to me now, Betty. Don't quit on me," I mutter with a shaky voice as the car comes to a full stop. I can't see any signs through the rain, which leads me to believe that I'm not in a town yet. And it's probably the middle of the night already, so I might even be the only one on the road.

I wait for some time for the engine to cool—isn't that what to do in this situation? Then I turn the ignition. Nothing happens. I swallow hard. My car can't die here. It just can't.

"Come on, Betty, just a little further." I turn the ignition again and the engine sputters angrily. "Yes! That's it." On the fourth try, the engine comes to life. I know I only have at most thirty minutes of driving left.

I glance around again and see a left turn just up ahead. I take it hoping it leads to a town or at the very least, a gas station. Somewhere with people. I let out a relieved sigh when after a few minutes on the road I come across a tall sign with the words, *Welcome to Brattleboro, Vermont*.

I press my foot on the gas, mindful of the slippery road and the fact that the car could give out at any moment. I pass through a couple of small buildings. The town slowly takes shape, the buildings getting taller and closer together.

As I turn onto a road with a signboard that says, *This way to Historic Downtown Brattleboro*, I suddenly realize that the name of the town sounds familiar. Brattleboro. Brattleboro. Where have I heard that before?

Brattleboro is a shit town with stuck-up people and pompous asses.

Larson. Oh, my God, this is Larson's hometown.

CHAPTER 3



AUTUMN

I'm about to start panicking when with a low groan, my car rolls to a stop. Damn it. I sit in the car for several minutes trying to wrack my brain for any information I might have gleaned about the town from Larson.

Okay, I know he hasn't been here in years. We've been together for three years, and he hadn't been here for the two years before that, so five in total. That's right. For some reason, he hates this place and has no family left. He was a foster kid, like me. We bonded over that fact when we met, and he mentioned having no relations here, giving him even more reason not to return.

My heart starts to pound as my predicament registers. The rain is my first sign of approval that I did the right thing running from Larson. After a series of mindless and impulsive turns from New York, I manage to land here? The one place Larson would never think to look for me.

What runaway bride in her right mind would go to her ex-fiancé's hometown? A smart one who knows her ex hates this place more than anywhere in the world, that's who! But this wasn't planned at all. What are the odds that I'd end up here? My trusty old Betty is looking out for me, after all. I give her an appreciative pat on the dash.

I half-heartedly try to turn on the ignition of my car. Nothing. At least I'm in town already. And if I didn't make it Downtown, It's probably not far from here, anyway. I take a bracing breath and step out of the car. I suck in a sharp breath

as a gust of icy wind hits me. So, so cold. Not exactly the appropriate weather for a gown and no jacket.

The street is empty. I can't hear much above the pounding of the rain and the whine of the wind, but my heart sinks because there's no distinct sound of people nearby; no other cars and no pedestrians braving the weather for a night out. What if everyone's asleep? This place most likely isn't like Manhattan where the city is awake 24/7.

I can't see much in the rain as I wander down the road. I keep my head tucked down as I walk, only glancing up occasionally—I have the irrational fear that the rain might make my contacts slip out if I let it get into my eyes. It would leave me blind and stranded in a strange town. It's purely fate that I happen to glance up at the same time I walk past a red brick two-story building with rustic black rails on the balcony and a red awning.

A warm glow emanates from the ground floor. I can hear the sound of people coming from the building. Liquid Elixir is written in glowing red neon lights on a sign hanging from the balcony railing, and underneath it are the words, Lounge and Bar.

For some reason I come to a stop. Only then do I notice the blackboard to the side of the door. I squint to make out the words. Bartender needed. Apply within. Oh, God. My heart starts racing as I make my way towards the entrance. I shiver involuntarily when I open the door, and I'm hit with a delicious wave of heat. I didn't realize just how cold it was outside until now.

The warmth of the bar envelops me, and I immediately take in a deep breath of cinnamon and cedar, putting my aching muscles at ease. I don't realize how tense my shoulders are until I finally allow them to settle down and roll back, twisting my neck from side to side.

At first nobody notices me as I make my way to the bar, but slowly the conversation trickles down. Something makes me stop. I don't deny my instincts; it brought me this far, didn't it? An undeniable sensation runs down my spine. I stop

walking and glance back to see a tall dark-haired man in a suit walking toward the exit.

He opens a back door and disappears down a dark hallway. For some reason, disappointment and longing settles like a weight in the pit of my stomach. I frown as I stare at the door. What the hell? This bar is having a strangely euphoric effect on me; I really need to get some sleep.

My curiosity getting the better of me, and I start to walk to the door, but a black haired woman suddenly blocks my path. She takes one long look at me and frowns, her turquoise eyes darkening the slightest bit as our gaze meets.

“Hi there, you look like you need a drink.”

A drink? “I don’t have any money on me for a drink.” I lick my lips, craving the sharp burn of alcohol sliding down my throat. I need it after this hellish day. “I’m here because of the hiring sign outside. Can you point me to the manager?”

She frowns as she contemplates me, then yells to someone at the bar, “Keith! I’m going into my office for a moment. Hold the fort.”

“Aye aye, boss.” The man at the bar, Keith, salutes her, but there’s a frown lurking on his face, and his gaze flickers from the woman to me.

“Come on, follow me.”

I hesitate briefly, then follow her in the direction of the mysterious man. The door leads to a small hallway with several doors. She walks straight down the hall and opens an unassuming door. It opens into a quaint office. Most of the space is taken up by an oversized wooden desk. A tall, dainty chair is tucked under it, in direct contrast to the masculine desk. Two small leather chairs face what I assume to be the manager’s desk.

A few feet away stands a tall bookshelf overflowing with paperbacks, and not far from it is a black, overstuffed leather couch, decorated with colorful throw pillows. On top of a small coffee table is a glass vase with yellow flowers.

Overall, the space is well utilized, neat, and cozy. It has a faint floral smell. The woman rounds the desk to take the manager's chair and nods for me to take a seat across from her.

"Um, I'm good, thanks," I say, hyper-aware of my dripping dress. Thank God the floor is wooden and not carpeted or covered with a rug. I'd feel terrible leaving such a mess in my wake.

She raises a brow. "Because of the dress?" She guesses correctly. "Would you like to change?"

I would love that, but—"I don't have any change of clothes." I bite my lip, hating just how vulnerable I am at this moment.

If I had stayed in New York, I would be a wife by now, preparing for my honeymoon in Bali. It says a lot about my relationship with Larson that I prefer looking like a drowned rat in front of this stranger than being Mrs. Brown with all the luxuries that title brings.

"Wait here," the woman says getting to her feet. I watch her disappear through a door next to the bookshelf. It's on her side of the room, so I didn't notice it earlier. She's not gone long before she returns, fresh clothes in hand.

"I always have a spare change of clothes here in case of spills. If you don't mind wearing a stranger's clothes, would you like to change?"

My lips part as she speaks, my eyes growing wide. She doesn't even know me. For the first time today, my eyes sting with tears. I blink them back rapidly. "Thank you," I whisper, my voice breaking.

Her brows furrow as she watches my reaction, so I scurry through the still open door before I have a full-fledged meltdown and make a scene. It's just been so long since anyone's been kind to me, simply for the sake of being kind... without expecting a favor from Larson, or something in return.

The door leads to a small room with an adjacent bathroom, containing a small chest and a mirrored sink. I avoid catching my reflection as I step out of my dress. I never want to lay

eyes on this tulle monstrosity again. Like most things in my life, it was selected for Larson's approval. He likes me to wear clothes that are restrictive and *sophisticated* to fit his mold and not to draw too much attention from him.

Women are never to be bold; they should opt for subtle elegance and *neutrals*—ugh. I'm a colorful woman with a big, bold personality, and the sooner I remember that the better! I rip the bodice, sending buttons scattering, and inhale what feels like my first full breath in hours—maybe months if I'm being honest. It's dripping wet, but there's nowhere to hang it in here, so I just toss it in the corner, smiling when I absorb the finality of the moment. There's no going back now.

I do the same with my matching panties and bra, shoving them inside the dress to be somewhat discreet. Not usually one to go commando, I feel a bit uncomfortable, but the sight of those delicate lace undergarments, a gift from Larson, makes me want to hurl.

Goosebumps pebble my skin, and I quickly use the towel folded over the clothes she had left for me to dry my skin and hair. Then I throw on the joggers and shirt. The pants are a couple inches too long, Andrea is tall—or maybe I'm just short, so I fold the hem and drag them up past my belly button. I'm swimming in the shirt, so I doubt it's hers, but there's nothing to be done about that. At least I'm warm and dry...and not married. That's what counts.

I inhale deeply, then leave the bathroom. She's lounging on the oversized couch when I reenter the office, and she waves me over. "Here." She passes me a mug.

A quick sniff lets me know it's alcohol, and I hesitate briefly before knocking it back. I gasp at the unexpected burn and dramatically lift my hand to my throat, as if that will do anything to ease the harsh descent of the liquid before it pools in my belly, warming me further. The room does a slow spin around me, and I sway a little.

She jumps up to grab my arm. "Whoa, I wasn't expecting you to drink it all at once! That's about three shots of Jameson

you just annihilated.” She chuckles lightly. “I guess you needed it more than I realized.”

I blink rapidly as she guides me to the couch. “I’m sorry. It’s been a very long day.”

“I can imagine.” She takes a seat next to me, leaving a small space between us. “You said you’re here regarding my help-wanted sign?”

I nod shortly. “Yes. I assume you’re the manager. I’m Wre—*Autumn*. I’m Autumn Montgomery.”

Her raised brow lets me know she definitely noticed the slip. I can’t believe I almost introduced myself as Wren. I’m Autumn, damn it!

“I’m Andrea, the owner of Liquid Elixir. Do you have any experience bartending?”

I swallow hard. “No. But I worked as a waitress for a couple of years. I know they aren’t the same, but I’m quick on my feet and a fast learner. I’m not afraid to work hard,” I add with my cheesiest smile. The alcohol must be working its magic.

Andrea sighs, watching me quietly for a few moments. “Autumn, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you before, so that means you’re not local. You came in here in a wedding dress, dripping wet and looking lost. Are you in trouble?”

I sit up straight. Shit. “You’re right, I’m not a local. I’m from New York. However, rest assured, there won’t be any trouble. I was in my wedding dress because I finally came to my senses just before it was too late, but I doubt my ex will look for me here.”

“You drove all the way to Brattleboro from New York? That’s almost an eight hour drive. Have you eaten?” As if on cue, my stomach grumbles again. Warmth engulfs my face down to my neck, and I know my cheeks are likely as red as a ripe tomato.

“No,” I mumble. I haven’t been in many interviews in my life, but this is one of the strangest I’ve had.

“You know what? You’re hired!”

I glance up in surprise. “What?”

“I know what it’s like to be lost and floundering. I was there once. However, It’s a conditional offer, you’ll have to pull your weight. If the next two weeks go well, the job becomes permanent.”

“That’s more than fair. Thank you so much, Andrea, I won’t let you down.”

She gives me a small smile. “I have no doubts about that. Since you’re new in town, you can stay with me above the bar until you get your own place. I have a spare room.”

My lips part again. I’m floored. I sniff deeply as I blink back another flood of tears. Andrea continues. “The bar opens at five in the evening and generally closes by midnight, depending upon how busy we are. Because of the rain, customers are lingering tonight; but I’m going to kick them out soon.”

That reminds me, “What time is it?”

“Just past one. Hold on, I’ll be back soon.” I nod as Andrea leaves the office. She soon comes back with two halves of what looks to be the most delicious club sandwich I’ve ever laid eyes on. I inhale it within minutes, along with a bottle of water.

It’s strange. First the whiskey and now food. I’m usually not this trusting with strangers. Is it the situation or just Andrea? She does have a comforting quality about her, like she’s dependable. And she’s been kind to me so far, so what could go wrong?

After eating, I follow her to the bar and lurk in the corner as, true to her word, she kicks everyone out, announcing that she needs to get her beauty sleep. The patrons protest, but they slowly trickle out the door.

Andrea introduces me to Keith, a student at the local college who only works three nights a week. About thirty minutes or so later, Andrea and Keith lock up. The storm has slowed from the heavy downpour, but it’s still ominous.

Andrea leads me to the side of the building where there's an ornate iron railing and small gate. Behind the gate are tiled stairs leading to the second floor.

I follow Andrea up the stairs, which lead to a wide balcony filled with potted plants and a string of lights over a rustic wooden swing. We're sheltered from the brunt of the wind up here, and I'm able to take in my surroundings. I note the rustic brick finish on the building continues to those surrounding us. From what I've seen so far, this town is as quaint as they come, and the occupants are exceptionally accommodating. I feel surprisingly at ease, considering it's been less than twelve hours since I fled the city, Larson, and our entire life together.

She moves to the front door, which surprisingly has a complex lock installed, complete with a code and fingerprint scanner. Unexpected for a small-town bar; it certainly stands out against the aged building and rustic furnishings.

"I'll have to add your biometrics, so you don't always have to wait on me," Andrea says as she opens the door. "I'll call the security company and—oh, my god!"

I quickly make my way toward her, my heart racing as I wonder what she saw. A burglar? Surely not with that security system. I gasp as I take in the flood of water. The ceiling seems to have sprung a leak, judging by the bits and pieces of plaster scattered about the living room. Rain continues to trickle into the room steadily, pooling with the accumulated water on the soaked floor.

Picture frames, which I imagine must have been hanging on the now soaked wall, are floating in a puddle of water, and books are water-logged and ruined along the far shelving unit. There doesn't seem to be a spot in the room that has gone untouched by the damage; rugs drenched, cushions dripping, and electronics fried. Damn it. It's terrible, I know it is, but the first thought that pops into my head is *where am I going to sleep now?*

CHAPTER 4



ALEXANDER

“What are you doing here?” Ezra grumbles rudely as soon as he sees me. I roll my eyes in aggravation as I pull out a couple hundred dollar bills and drop them on the table littered with beer bottles.

“If you needed to get drunk that badly, you should’ve gone to Andrea’s,” I scold as I heave him up from the chair. “You know better.”

“Andie waters down my drinks, so forgive me if I chose not to support her business,” he retorts and drags his arm out of my hand, almost falling down in the process. I sigh as I watch him struggle to stand upright.

“What is it now? Why did you feel the need to get drunk?” I ask, wondering what happened during the deal he had to close this evening. Ezra has always had a hard time handling some of the *unsavory* requirements of the family business—oftentimes the less than legal aspects—and Dad lets him get away with it. Typical middle child, Dad would sooner disown me than allow my emotions to hinder our work.

Now that I’m finally taking over Beaufort Construction, I’ve been slowly bringing him back in, toughening him up. Do I regret it? No. He needs to grow a pair. He’s a fucking Beaufort.

“Leave me alone, Alex. Just leave!” he shouts and starts to walk away from me, stumbling over his own feet. I shake my head as I watch him go, my gaze accidentally meeting that of the wide-eyed waiter. His hands are visibly shaking, a bottle

tips off his tray and crashes to the ground. White liquid foams on the floor.

I raise my brow in disdain. He no doubt recognizes me. I give him a short nod so he knows I mean no harm. The poor boy looks as if he might pass out. I shake my head again. I walk out of the bar, growling under my breath when I realize that the rain has started up again. It let up a bit earlier, but it's back with a vengeance.

As soon as I'm out of the bar, Noah, my personal assistant and right-hand man, has an umbrella over my head. "Forget it," I tell him as I increase my pace to catch up with my brother.

"Ezra," I start, my temper fraying when the idiot walks faster upon seeing me. "Don't make me chase after you." He has enough sense to stop walking, and I grab him by the arm. "I'm taking you home."

"I drove here," he replies sullenly, but the rain must have sobered him up a little because he doesn't put up a fight when I lead him to my Rolls-Royce. Despite Noah following me around with the umbrella, my suit is soaked through, so I'm not particularly gentle as I shove Ezra into the back seat.

"Fasten your seat belt." I order before I walk to the other side to get in. Noah nods and makes his way to his own vehicle. "Ezra's place," I tell George.

"Of course, sir."

I pull out my phone to shoot off a few emails as we make the twelve-minute drive to Ezra's condo on Main Street. I must get lost in my work because I'm surprised when George says we're here. I glance at Ezra, who seems to have dozed off. I nudge him rudely, and he wakes with a start. "Go on in. We'll talk tomorrow." He stares at me uncomprehendingly for a few seconds, and I scowl as I repeat myself.

"Yeah. Whatever," he grumbles and gets out of the car. "Thanks for the ride, I guess."

I wait until Ezra's safely inside the building before telling George to take me home. My house is a small estate. I have a

few trusted men who live on the grounds with me as security. As my car approaches the large wrought iron gates, the doors slide open automatically.

A couple of my men on night shift stop to watch us drive in, nodding their heads before they continue their patrol. It's another two minutes down my winding driveway before the house comes into view. I finally relax as George idles the car in the driveway, but I frown when I notice the lights are on inside.

"Don't bother," I tell George who's ready to get out and open my door. I open the door myself and close it, waiting for him to drive off before going inside. I pat my sides to ensure that I'm armed before entering my home; this wouldn't be the first time someone has found a way past my security detail. Unfortunately, that means someone is getting fired tonight. And to think this idiot is bold enough to have the lights on. I sigh loudly as I approach the wide steps, leading to the front door, I'm in no mood to deal with this tonight.

Before I make it to the top step, the door swings open. "Welcome home, sir. Miss. Beaufort is here. She arrived with a guest about thirty minutes ago." My butler, Greg says as I walk into the foyer and release the tension in my shoulders, allowing my hands to relax at my side. My frown deepens. Why would Andrea be here at—I turn my wrist to check the time: 1:45 AM?

"Thank you. That will be all," I dismiss Greg. He nods and disappears somewhere in the house. My clothes are mostly dry from the ride home, but it's still uncomfortable. I'd rather change before I see my sister, but I need to know why she's here instead of in her apartment.

Did something happen at the bar after I left? I take off my jacket, draping it over the back of my arm, and start to climb the stairs when a noise stops me. Andrea? I change course and open the glass doors that lead to the breakfast room where the sound seems to be coming from, but there's no one there. The lights are on in the room, though, so the culprit is probably nearby.

Across the breakfast room is the bar, and beyond that the billiards room, but I turn left for the kitchen. What the— someone is rummaging through my fridge. I can only see the back of the shorter woman, who is certainly not Andrea. Her guest?

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask, my voice harsher than I meant it to be, but I’m fucking exhausted. I need this day to be over already; and why the hell has Andrea brought a guest over? She knows how I feel about strange people in my house—my sanctuary.

The woman jumps away from the fridge with a yelp and slams it closed, dropping a bottle of water in the process. I squat down to pick it up; and as I raise, my eyes rake over her body, which is covered in sweats and what appears to be my t-shirt. Once standing, I tower over her petite form.

Then, our eyes lock and time seems to stop. AWM? She slowly takes me in, eyes widening in shock. Her eyes, level with my collarbone, scan my face as if she can’t believe what she’s seeing, either. She reaches out to me, but just as her hand comes in contact with my bicep, she pulls it back like I’ve burned her, a small gasp leaving her lips.

No, this can’t be my mystery woman. I take a few steps to the wall at my side and with a flick of a switch, the chandelier turns on, bathing the room with sparkling golden lights. Fuck, it’s her. It’s the same oval face, same pouty lips, the bottom one a bit fuller. Same reddish blonde hair and pale brows. Those are the honey eyes that have been haunting my dreams. She’s not as done up as she was when she had bumped into me last year, but it’s her, alright...and more impossibly beautiful than I remember.

What the hell is she doing in my house? *Why is she here?*

Her hair curls over her shoulders, falling just below her breasts, framing her face. My gaze drops to the shirt dwarfing her—definitely mine—momentarily before meeting her gaze again.

She blinks at me once, twice, then whispers, “*You.*” She recognizes me?

I don't know how she ended up here in my territory, but fuck if I care. My heart starts pounding as the gravity of the situation hits me. The woman I've been obsessively looking for over the past twelve months is right here.

I start to walk toward her; my lips tilt up in a smug smile when she shuffles backward. My blood pumps faster as I continue to stalk her and she retreats further, our gazes locked. When her back hits the fridge, my eyes narrow. This must be how the cat who got the fucking canary felt. When she tosses a glance to the doorway behind me, I slam my hands against the fridge on either side of her head, leaving her no chance to scurry away.

Her body is caged in by my own, our chests only inches apart. Her breaths are coming in heaving pants, and her body trembles slightly. My gaze searches her eyes; her pupils are blown, dilating. All the blood rushes down to my cock when I realize that she's aroused. Fuck.

Her head tilts up toward mine ever so slightly, exposing her slender neck, and I pounce. One hand moves to the side of her throat, cradling the back of her head as I plant my mouth over hers. The world narrows until it's just us when she parts her lips eagerly for me. Fuck, I expected a little resistance, but not this sweet surrender.

She makes a small sound of pleasure, which drives me wild. I deepen the kiss, stroking her hot tongue with mine. She presses up into me, her hands coming up around my neck. Her breasts press warmly into my chest, it's like a shot of electricity straight to my dick. I groan, shifting my hands into her hair, using the grip to hold her still. Her palms stroke down my chest firmly. It takes me a second to realize that she's trying to push me away. I contemplate not breaking the kiss, as I've waited so long.

She was into it, I know she was. I could easily deepen the kiss and coax her back to me. But at the same time, I want to know how she got here. The need to know more about her is like a fever in my blood. I break the kiss and shift back, but not too far. Her tits brushing my chest as she pants is intoxicating and my eyes drop to her glistening lips. Just one

more taste, just...my head snaps to the left and the loud sound of flesh meeting flesh rents the air.

She slapped me? I smirk as I slowly turn my head to face her. She has a bit of fire in her after all. Good.

“How dare you!” she demands angrily.

“You’re the one in *my* house, wearing *my* shirt. I should be asking you that question.” My voice is dangerously low as I narrow my eyes on her and she swallows hard. She tries to shuffle away but there’s nowhere for her to go.

“I—I’m sorry—I didn’t know this was your shirt. Andrea gave it to me when I went to her bar so I could change out of my wet clothes, which were really cold, and I—” she rambles on but I’m no longer following.

Andrea? This must be the guest Greg mentioned. I smirk again. I should reward my little sister for the present she brought me. “Are you AWM?” I ask, interrupting her tirade. I already know, but I need her to confirm it.

The woman pauses. “How do you know my initials?”

CHAPTER 5



AUTUMN

He stares at me quietly for a few seconds, and I try to ignore the fever his gaze is inducing in me. Crap, I can't believe he just kissed me. And I let him. No, I even kissed him back.

"How do you know my initials?" I ask again, and he spins on his heels. I watch him walk away in long strides. Is he just going to leave without answering my question? What the hell?

When he's gone from view, I sag weakly against the fridge. I place my hand over my chest and slowly breathe in and out to regulate my heartbeat. He's definitely the man from my engagement party last year. His piercing eyes have stayed with me despite how hard I've tried to get him out of my head.

Those striking blue eyes with flecks of green and amber. But it wasn't just the color. It was the chilling lack of emotion in them, at least until they seemed to devour me, raking over my body like his next meal. He's as hot as I remember.

I'd say this is fate, but shit, I'm not in the market for a new relationship. I'm not even twelve hours out of my last one! I push away from the fridge and make my way to the gorgeous foyer, climbing the curving staircase to the second floor, where Andrea has designated a room for the night.

I toss and turn on the plush bed restlessly. What's going on back home? There would no longer be any doubt that I ran away once Mom sees my letter and shows it to Larson, as I know she would. She's a suck-up to money.

I sigh, the events of the day finally hitting me. I'm so lucky that I walked into the Liquid Elixir. Because of that choice, I'm sleeping in a highly secured home—I didn't miss the armed men patrolling the grounds, despite Andrea trying to distract me. I remember the high-tech door of her apartment above the bar. What the hell could possibly warrant such extensive means of protection?

* * *

I WAKE UP WITH A START. Bright sunlight is streaming into the room through the windows. I must have forgotten to draw the curtains last night. Oh shit, Larson is going to be so mad I slept in. My heart clenches with fear as I quickly sit up. I'm swinging my legs off the bed when I finally realize I'm in a strange room. Then the events of the previous day come crashing back and I sigh with relief.

That's right. I ran away. I no longer answer to Larson. A light knock at my door has me tensing up, could it be *him*? "Hey Autumn, are you up?" Andrea's soft voice comes through the door.

Equal parts relief and disappointment hit me, and I sigh. You need to pull it together, Autumn. "Yes. Hold on." I get up from the bed and make my way to the door. "What's up?"

She must have been up for a while because it's clear she's had a shower and is in fresh clothes. "Hi, sorry if I woke you, I wanted to introduce you to my brother before he leaves so he knows to expect you this evening."

"Oh." So the stranger *is* her brother. Shit, they've talked this morning then, did he mention the kiss? Somehow, I doubt it. I've never had a brother, but I'm pretty sure kissing strangers isn't a common topic between siblings.

Andrea raises her hands, and I finally notice the bundle of clothes. "I leave a few changes of clothes in my wardrobe here for when I visit. Why don't you get dressed and meet us downstairs? Here."

I accept the clothes and thank her, then close the door, locking it with a sigh. Damn it. I didn't want to have to face

him this soon. The en suite bathroom is stunning in the morning light: white marble tiles and white stucco walls. There's a built-in electric fireplace, and three alcoves with sliding glass doors.

One alcove has a white bathtub with a rack of towels, while another holds the sink which has a mirror above and a chest of drawers underneath it. The third alcove holds the toilet and a second small sink. Then in the corner is a large tiled shower that looks very inviting. I walk to the sink and rummage through the drawers until I find a few new toothbrushes. I tear one out of its package and toss the wrapping in the trash, then I quickly brush my teeth. Afterward, I take a hot shower, my body relaxing as the jet sprays hit me from all angles.

I get dressed sans underwear in a pair of jeans that are a little too snug and another baggy shirt. I dry my hair with the towel as much as possible and run a brush from one of the drawers through my hair, wincing when the bristles snag a few curls. I need my own products, damn it. I should have gone home to pack a few things. but it wasn't worth the risk of getting caught.

When I'm done, I take a bracing breath and make my way downstairs. I find them in the kitchen. Andrea is mixing what looks like pancake batter in a bowl, while her brother is sitting on one of the stools arranged in front of the island, reading a newspaper with a steaming mug in front of him. Who reads a newspaper in this day and age?

"Autumn, hey." Andrea grins when she sees me. To my relief, her brother doesn't look up from his paper, and she rolls her eyes.

"Alexander, I'd like you to meet my friend and new employee," she says and he finally looks up. *Alexander.*

My heart starts hammering when our gazes meet. The heat and passion from last night is gone from those gorgeous eyes, but there's a glimmer of interest in them.

"Autumn." He rolls my name around on his tongue. "What does the WM stand for then?"

“Wren Montgomery,” I answer before I can stop myself. Ugh. How does he know my initials? I should definitely be concerned.

“What? Have you guys met before?” Andrea glances between the two of us suspiciously.

“What? No,” I say quickly. Too quickly. “I’ve never left New York my whole life, so of course not.” Alexander’s lips tilt up in a smirk.

“Then how does he know your initials?” Andrea asks.

“Because I found something of hers when I got home last night. It had her initials on it.” Alex answers, turning back to his newspaper. “It’s in my study.”

“Really? What is it?” Andrea doesn’t seem like she’s going to let it go any time soon. Alex releases a long suffering sigh and stands up from the stool.

“Follow me, Autumn.”

I exchange a look with Andrea who simply shrugs in response, all suspicions apparently gone. I follow him to the back of the house where I’m surprised to see an elevator. He pauses outside the door waiting for me to enter the small glass box.

I hesitate briefly, then follow him inside. He clicks on the second floor and the elevator starts to move.

“There can’t be a repeat of last night,” Alex says. “It was an aberration. A mistake.”

“Yeah.” I agree, although slightly offended, glancing down at my bare feet to avoid meeting his gaze. The pretty pink polish is starting to chip off at the edges. I’ll have to repaint it. I let out a sigh when I remember I don’t have any of my polishes.

The elevator doors slide open, and he leads me down a short hallway; he opens the door to a masculine office. The walls painted a deep navy blue and the hardwood floor gleams. He walks to the large mahogany desk and takes a seat in the high-backed leather chair. I follow him, standing on the other

side of the desk, feeling unsure. He presses his thumb on a panel I can't see, and there's a quiet click. He pulls open one of the desk drawers.

Who puts a thumb print on their desk drawers? I happen to glance out the gleaming windows, and I see a few men walking around on the grounds. I remember they were armed last night. Where the hell am I?

He takes out a small, green box and slides it across the desk to me. I pick it up cautiously, wondering what could possibly be inside and unsure just how much I should trust this mysterious man.

CHAPTER 6



AUTUMN

I gasp when I open the box. My necklace. I run a finger over my sparkling initials. The necklace Larson gave me on my first birthday with him. I lost it last year and all Larson talked about for a week after is how careless I am. It would've been worse if I hadn't told him that I wanted to take a break the night I had lost it. He was trying to win me back, but he couldn't resist scolding me for losing such an expensive piece of jewelry. It was with Alex all this time?

I had taken the necklace off angrily as I stormed out of my engagement party. Not long after that, I bumped into Alex. It must've slipped from my hand as I ran away.

"Is there a pawn shop in Brattleboro?" I ask, calculating how much I could get for it. I'll be able to at least buy myself some clothes and a few other things.

"What? You want to sell it?" He frowns at me. "I assume this must mean something to you, do you need money that badly?"

"It means nothing to me." I close the box with a snap. "Thank you for keeping it." I start to leave his study, but he stops me.

"Don't you want to know why I held onto that?" he asks. I turn to face him.

"I've been searching for you. For an entire year. Do you know how many women go by AWM?"

"A lot?" I answer.

“In New York alone, there are about 328,152 persons who could’ve been my AWM.”

My lips part as his words sink in. “You really looked for me?” he answers that with a pointed look.

“Even if you combed through those three hundred thousand odd women, you wouldn’t have found me,” I tell him sadly. “I went by Wren Montgomery.”

“Why?”

“Because my ex thought Autumn was a childish name.”

His eyes narrow angrily in response.

“I know.” I shake my head in shame, I was such an idiot. “But I’m not going back.” I clench my hand on the box in my hand.

“Good,” he nearly growls.

I’m shocked by the anger in his eyes. Directed at me? Larson? I can’t tell, but his unbroken eye contact is unnerving. I leave his study after that, and he doesn’t stop me. I take the elevator back to the ground floor and walk to the kitchen, where Andrea is still cooking.

“So what did he find with your initials on it?” she asks me as I walk in. I open the box and show her the necklace. She whistles softly and mutters, “Pretty.”

“Do you know where I can sell it?” I ask. She glances up at me sharply and searches my eyes. I don’t know what she sees, but she nods without asking why.

“Right now, this necklace and my car are the only possessions I have,” I tell her, feeling the need to explain. “If I can sell this, I know it might not be enough to get my own place, but I can at least buy a few clothes and other essentials...and maybe fix my car so I’ll be able to get around.”

She nods in agreement. “But there’s no rush. You can stay with me as long as you need.”

I smile at her gratefully. “Thank you.”

“Shopping is a great idea! I need something to wear to Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow. But don’t worry, you can borrow one of my dresses!”

That’s right. Thanksgiving is tomorrow. Larson planned our wedding so we’d spend it on our honeymoon and then always celebrate our anniversary during the holiday. He doesn’t have any family, so he hates the tradition of gathering with relatives. This was his way of avoiding the day altogether.

“Why would I need a dress to wear tomorrow?” I ask, watching her as she dishes the pancakes onto a pair of plates.

“Because Thanksgiving is a big deal with the Beauforts. We all drive down to our parents’ home on Marlboro road for the holiday. We eat, we drink, and look our best doing it!” she explains, placing one of the plates in front of me.

“Thanks. But what does that have to do with me?” I wonder out loud.

“Because you’re coming with me, silly. Beaufort Construction is closed for the rest of the week, so my apartment won’t be fixed for a while. I’m not going to just leave you here alone when you should be with family, even if it isn’t your own.” She frowns as if that should be obvious. “My parents will love you, and don’t worry, Ezra, my other brother, isn’t nearly as moody as grumpy old Alex.”

I would actually prefer to be left to my own devices here, but I can see that will not go down well with her. “What about Alexander?” I ask when she sits next to me with her own plate of pancakes.

“He doesn’t eat breakfast,” she states and shrugs.

What? Who doesn’t eat breakfast? I glance toward the back of the house where the elevator is. I shake him out of my head and face my meal. After breakfast, I offer to do the dishes even though Andrea is a horribly messy cook. Then we make our way to her car to head into town.

Andrea waves cheerfully to a few of the men as we drive through Alex’s front gate. I shift forward in my seat with a

small gasp at the scenic view that awaits me. “You like it? Wait till you see the view from Alex’s room. It’s amazing.”

“Uh, why would I ever be in Alex’s room?!” I stammer, earning me a confused look from Andrea.

“I’ll show you later; he never locks his door,” she explains, and I let out a sigh of relief. Obviously, I won’t be in his room for other reasons.

So embarrassing, Autumn.

I return my attention back to the scenery. It was late and raining heavily when I got into town last night, so I didn’t get to take in the view. On either side of the road, the leaves have turned to a stunning combination of bright reds, yellows, and oranges. Beyond the trees is a large body of water sparkling under the sun, and far ahead jagged mountains rise up in an explosion of vibrant colors.

“Wow,” I breathe.

“This is one of the prettiest seasons in town and one of the busiest too. The tourists flood in in droves, not wanting to miss out on the sights.” I can see why.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, though. It’s been raining a lot since last week; our first snow will come in any day now, and it will get really fucking cold.”

“I don’t mind the cold.” I shrug, still glued to the window, not wanting to miss the scenic views. But Andrea takes a left turn, and we leave it behind as we enter the downtown area. I know because we pass my car.

“That’s Betty, my car.” I point to my Beetle.

Andrea nods. “We’ll have it towed to the mechanic’s after you sell the necklace.”

Brattleboro is a New England hidden gem. It looks like a scene from *Gilmore Girls* with its historic buildings, quaint parks, and gorgeous scenery. Not to mention the townspeople seem so friendly, many waving at Andrea as we drive by. I’ve never experienced small-town life, but so far I can’t say that I hate it! Downtown is a busy, but cozy looking hub, lined with

bustling businesses: small cafes, art galleries and a few boutiques. We drive past Liquid Elixir and a large theater before Andrea takes another turn.

She pulls the car into a parking spot in front of Evan James LTD: Fine Jewelers and Goldsmiths. Underneath it in cursive letters are the words *voted best jewelry store in the Brattleboro area*.

“We’re here,” Andrea announces as she turns off the engine.

A small tinkle rings through the store as we walk in. The interior is warmly decorated and smells like Christmas, if holidays can have a scent. I’m immediately put at ease. “Andrea Beaufort? Is that you?” An elderly man with a bald head greets us with a toothy smile.

Andrea returns the grin and ushers me forward. “The very one Mr. James. I have something here that you’re going to like!”

CHAPTER 7



ALEXANDER

She's here. Autumn. I should've known Andrea would bring her to Thanksgiving dinner. My sister is a sucker for lost puppies and defenseless animals. When we were growing up, the house ran amok with all the creatures she'd bring home because of one tragic reason or another. Until Mom finally put her foot down.

So, thanks to my baby sister, not only is Autumn in my presence yet again – something I have yet to fully comprehend after a year of relentless obsession – but she looks fucking unreal. I'm talking heart stopping, blow your mind gorgeous. Nothing could have prepared me for the way she stole my breath yet again when I walked in and saw her standing alone in my parents' dimly lit foyer gazing up at the sparkling chandelier.

The lights glisten in her eyes, and when she glances at me, I swear that I see a trace of tears in them, only further ripping my heart out. As her full lips part with a gasp at the sight of me, I nearly fall to my knees – it's not a sensation I'm used to...or comfortable with. I kneel for no one...but her. In that dress. I nearly drop to one right then and there to insist she be mine forever, but instead she turns her back and walks away from me yet again. Watching her walk away has become one of the most enjoyable yet infuriating occurrences of my life. And it keeps fucking happening.

After cocktails in the lounge, we all gather in the formal dining room for a Thanksgiving feast. Mom insists on having the chef make an absurd amount of food: turkey, yams,

mashed potatoes, every vegetable you could imagine, way too many salads for my liking and enough pie for us to each have our own. But I'm not complaining, I secretly look forward to stuffing my face all year. And to offset our glutinous tradition, we always donate an equally large spread to the local women's shelter, the homeless shelter, and a gathering at town hall for anyone who wishes to attend. We keep the donations anonymous, but everyone in town knows where the grand gesture comes from; and like me, they gladly partake in the free meal.

We may hold a monopoly in the construction industry, and the darker side of our business dealings are suspect throughout town, but our multi-generational success in business and investments has benefited us as well as the town's economy, earning the Beaufort name respect and the understanding that if you don't ask questions, you will be rewarded.

I try not to stare as we eat. I'm surrounded by vultures. Andrea. Mom. Dad. They'd pounce if they suspect I have even the slightest interest in Autumn. But my eyes can't help being drawn to her. I'm entranced as her lips part to sip the dark red wine; her pick over the white the servers suggested pairs well with turkey. I guess my girl likes bold, rich flavors. I approve.

I can already tell that my entire family, and probably the whole of Brattleboro, is in love with Autumn. She offers her smile to everyone she meets; it's as genuine as it is beautiful. It reaches every corner of her face, making her eyes squint at the corners and small dimples appear in her cheeks.

I don't blame them, but I can't help the stab of jealousy I feel every time I see another person fall for her. Mom hugged her when they first met as if she were part of the family. Dad paraded her through the house, making sure she saw every one of his God awful taxidermized hunting trophies; and because she's so pure, she genuinely seemed to love every second of it.

Even Dad's dogs, who are trained to stay on guard at all times, ran to her, their tails wagging, as soon as they heard her sweet voice. And, of course, she gave them the best ear scratches of their lives. That's what Autumn does; she makes everyone feel like they're the most important person in the

world and there's nowhere she'd rather be when they're with her – the exact opposite of me.

Boredom and anger drip off my face during even the happiest of situations, making everyone keep their distance, just the way I like it. Autumn seems to be the only person who doesn't avoid me. She keeps showing up in my life. And while she always runs away, I can see the tormented look in her eyes that tells me she wishes things were different.

But they aren't: I'm destined to be alone. And she deserves all the happiness the world has to offer and exponentially more than I could ever give her. I told her that our slip up couldn't happen again, and I meant it. As much as I want her, need her, nothing good can come from her being associated with me. I'm not willing to risk her safety for my own desire, even if I think she shares it.

Her soft hair glints under the glow of the lights, falling in loose curls over her shoulders. She's done up tonight, reminding me of the night I had first laid eyes on her. Yet somehow she is more free, more colorful. Her flowing emerald green dress contrasts with her ivory skin and strawberry hair, making her features impossibly more vibrant. Her eyelids are dark and shimmery, and her lips a deep shade of glossy pink. Her gaze meets mine briefly, then quickly skitters away.

She's seated to Dad's right and across from Mom. Thankfully, Andrea is next to her, but that doesn't stop Ezra from laying on the charm. He's a shameless flirt. I spare a second to narrow my eyes at my younger brother. But the fucker is completely clueless, or he's pretending to be.

“So, tell me Autumn, why did you leave your fiancé standing at the altar?”

“Dad!” Andrea exclaims with a scowl directed at him.

“What? You don't think I heard that my daughter took in a woman in a soaked wedding dress? Just because I don't come out as much as I used to doesn't mean I don't know what's going on in my town.”

“No, it’s okay Andrea,” Autumn offers. She inhales sharply then meets Dad’s steely gaze. It can’t be easy. I’ve seen many grown men quake in their boots when met with his glare. Granted, she doesn’t know his reputation...or the reputation of all Beauforts in this town. It’s still a pretty ballsy move on her part.

“The relationship was a mistake that should’ve ended before an engagement. He was controlling. He wanted me to go by a different name and maintain a certain image. Basically, he wanted to mold me into something I’m not. It was suffocating,” she tells Dad, her gaze not wavering from his impassive one. Impressive.

“My, you poor thing. I’m glad you took the initiative to leave. Good for you!” Mom leans forward to squeeze her hand. “What about your parents? Did you get in touch with them? They must be pretty worried.”

“I–um–not yet.”

“Autumn left without her stuff. No phone. No clothes. Just her car and the wedding dress she was wearing. Oh, and a necklace. I took her to Mr. James on Main Street, and he was kind enough to buy it,” Andrea jumps in. “The money was barely enough for her to get the essentials she needs, though, so for now she doesn’t have a phone. I’m guessing that’s why she hasn’t contacted anyone back home.”

“Still, she can use your phone to call her parents. Did your father know about your ex?” Dad asks. I can see he’s already softening toward her. These days, the old man is all bark and no bite.

“It’s just my mom.” Autumn’s eyes finally drop to the table. She stirs her spoon around her plate, a sign that she’s getting uncomfortable. “She adopted me when I was about seven. She knows everything about my ex, but she’s always been positive that he’d change after we got married. She’s probably disappointed and angry with me.” Her voice trails off.

“I strongly doubt that, Autumn.” Mom offers her a small smile. “I’m a mother myself, and while I want my daughter to

be happily married, at the same time I'll support any decision she makes in pursuit of her happiness and wellbeing. I'm sure she's going out of her mind with worry, Autumn."

Autumn nods shortly, her tongue darting over her lips. "I'll call her tomorrow."

"Speaking of, when are you going to fix my roof, Alex?" Andrea says, taking the attention off Autumn.

I shrug carelessly. Now that I have my mystery woman under my roof, I'm not exactly in a rush to let her leave. *I had been searching for her for a whole year after all.*

"You know the office is closed for the rest of the week because of the holidays, Andrea. There's nothing to be done until next week," I say to hold her off. I'm not planning to fix shit next week, either. But there's no sense in me telling her that.

She narrows her eyes on me suspiciously. She knows I don't actually give a shit about the holidays. I could easily call in a crew to go fix her place. But like I said, I'm not in a rush.

"What's wrong with your roof?" Dad wants to know.

"The storm from a few days ago damaged it and my apartment flooded."

"What? Where are you staying? Don't tell me you checked into a hotel, Andrea." Mom frowns. "There's more than enough space here for you and Autumn."

"As if." Ezra snorts. "She probably ran off to Alex's five minutes after walking through her front door. You really think Andie would slum it in a hotel? The little princess needs to have her privacy so she can—"

"Don't even start with me right now, Ezra," Andrea growls. "And stop calling me that!"

"What, Andie? Andie. Andie. Andie."

"How are you twenty-eight years old? You behave like a juvenile."

“Now, *Andie*, is that any way to talk to your big brother?” Ezra tuts, shaking his head slightly.

A soft giggle fills the room. If I wasn't already watching Autumn, I'd miss her face light up, and what that sound does to me. It destroys me. I need to hear it again, but she immediately raises her hand up to cover her mouth once the sound escapes.

Her eyes go wide when she sees we're all staring at her now. “Something funny?” I raise a brow as I wait for her response.

“Oh no. I'm sorry. I just—it's nice is all.” She drops her gaze to the table, face turning red as if she's mortified. Fascinating.

“I get that a lot, beautiful. Some even go as far as saying I'm the nicest Beaufort. Alex is the grumpy and cold-hearted one. Andie takes no bullshit. The ladies come to me with all their concerns.”

Autumn throws a quick glance at him, her lips curving up in a tempting smile. “I'll bet.”

“You ever get tired of staying with Alex and Andrea, I have plenty of space in my apartment.” He winks and she giggles again. I clench my fists, but before I can say anything Andrea cuts in.

“That's enough, Ezra. She's not interested.” Andrea draws attention back to herself, telling us she's hired Autumn to work at her bar until she gets on her feet and decides what she'd like to do. The rest of the dinner goes by with Andrea and our parents making useless small talk.

“You've been extra quiet today, Alexander,” Mom observes as the servers clear the table. I shrug. She knows I prefer to observe more than engage in conversations at these shenanigans she and Dad force us to attend.

Who the hell cares about Thanksgiving? It's just another Thursday. Except instead of actually being productive, I have to endure a family dinner. The reason I keep showing up is

because the food is impeccable, and they don't expect me to join in the conversation.

"Are town hall and the inspection office still trying to block our permit?" Dad asks, folding his arms as one of the servers tops up his wine glass. Except for Dad. He always tries to sneak in work conversations.

"I'm on it." I return, trying not to grit my teeth. Dad finally ceded control of Beaufort Construction and the organization to me a year ago, but he can't seem to resist keeping tabs on me. Trying to steer from the sidelines. As if it isn't bad enough that he has held onto the reins of the business for this long; in fact, Mom begged him to retire for years.

"Nuh uh. No business talk at the dining table," Mom scolds, passing pointed looks between me and Dad. Dad raises his hand in surrender.

After a few minutes, Autumn excuses herself to use the restroom. Andrea offers to show her where it is. My eyes watch Autumn retreat until she's fully out of sight. Like I said, watching her walk away has quickly become one of my favorite and most addictive hobbies.

"Boys, why don't we retire to my study where we can talk business?" Dad slowly gets up from his seat.

"For goodness sake, John. The kids are more than competent, so stop micromanaging them," Mom scolds. But Dad simply places a light kiss on her cheek before he leads us to his study on the first floor.

"You got drunk? What the hell, Ezra?" is the first thing out of his mouth as soon as we're in his office. Ezra tosses a look at me and I shake my head.

"When are you going to get your shit together? Just look at Andrea. She's your little sister, and she's got her shit all figured out."

"It won't happen again," he grits out.

"Better not. Alexander. Do you still have a pulse on New York? I believe Larson Brown is still under our thumb?"

“Yes, he is. What are you doing, Dad? We agreed you’d back off.” I remind him as he circles his desk to sit down in his high-backed chair. He stares me down, but I don’t back down. Enough of this shit already.

He sighs. “I know, I know. Old habits.”

“If you’re going to question me at every turn, then I can’t do this. I won’t. It stops now, Dad. Either I’m in charge, or you are. There can’t be two drivers in a vehicle.”

“I’ll try to hold myself back,” he grumbles. and I give him a look. “Oh, get out of here with that face. I won’t question you anymore, damn it. Am I not permitted to raise concerns over the company I put my sweat and blood into for over three decades?”

“Remember your blood pressure, Dad,” Ezra chides him. This doesn’t sit well with Dad.

“Get out of here you hooligans!” he growls angrily, throwing a stapled document at Ezra. “*Remember your blood pressure, Dad,*” he grumbles under his breath, mimicking Ezra. “Fuck my blood pressure.”

My brother and I share amused glances.

“Come on, Pops, don’t be like that,” Ezra cajoles him, walking closer to his desk. “Tell you what? How about we play a round of chess? If you can handle losing to me without your face turning purple, then I won’t mention your blood pressure again.”

“Prepare to have your ass whipped, boy,” Dad returns with a grin.

I shake my head at the two of them as I take my leave. This family may be the death of me, but they’re all I have. They know I’d kill for each and every one of them.

CHAPTER 8



AUTUMN

The Beaufort mansion is truly magnificent. The estate boasts a towering historic mansion situated on twenty pristine, heavily forested acres of land. I am mesmerized when we drive up the long, winding driveway lined with the most breathtaking assortment of trees that range in color from the deepest evergreens to burnt orange oaks and crimson red maples. I can't believe this is where Andrea and her brothers got to grow up, and I tell her as much.

Then I see the house, and I fall speechless. It has to be two hundred years old and has a gothic air about it. A shiver runs up my spine when I exit Andrea's car and glance up at the dark, stone facade. A wide staircase leads to the front door with stone lions perched as guard on either side. Eerie, but regal.

Andrea explains to me that Beaufort means "beautiful fort" and it was imperative to her father that their home become a sanctuary for his family. And it certainly is. Andrea leads me through the huge mahogany front doors, clanging the brass knocker to announce our arrival. After a very excited greeting from two adorably huge Cane Corsos, who are scolded for leaving their designated guarding posts, she runs off to use the washroom and leaves me in the foyer alone.

All I can manage is to stare at the overwhelmingly beautiful space. The walls are finished in Venetian plaster and trimmed with rich, dark wood. Gold and crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling with matching sconces that give off the softest glow. I notice that the entire home is dimly lit with

warm lighting, and the floors are all covered in rich, ornate rugs that give the house a homey yet decadent feel.

The last of the day's sunlight soaks in through stained glass windows high above my head, which magnify light in every color across the ceiling. The result is absolutely ethereal.

As I am lost in thought and feeling overwhelmed by how surreal the surroundings are, I feel a sensation like fingertips running up my spine. I turn to find Alexander watching me, studying my every move. His eyes roam over me as if he were memorizing every line and plane of my face. It is like tonight could be his last chance, and he can't risk forgetting a single detail. He so slowly takes me in from my shoes up the length of my shimmering emerald dress to my eyes that sting with the realization that this is the reality for some people: a home with a family that loves one another and gathers for special occasions and holidays, something I've never had.

He looks as handsome as ever in his black, three piece suit. His dark hair tousled from the wind, is pushed back, but a few loose strands fall to his brow. The need to reach out and touch them is overwhelming. I can't explain the pull I feel. And he's made it clear that although he had spent the better part of a year looking for me, he is not interested now. I don't know what I did wrong to make him change his mind, but my heart is in no place to find out. So I walk away. Again.

* * *

THIS HALLWAY on the second floor is like a shrine to the Beaufort siblings. Andrea escorts me upstairs to use the restroom, and now I'm wandering the endless halls, trying to understand this mysterious family. They clearly love one another immeasurably and have built a hugely successful empire – one that I have yet to fully comprehend. There are clearly many secrets behind the Beaufort name, the likes of which I will never be privy to; but right now, I just feel grateful to be accepted into their home to share one of my favorite holidays with a loving family. I'm beyond thankful for new friends and good food, and having the Beaufort brothers sitting across from me to feast my eyes on is an added treat that I certainly have indulged in tonight.

Every one of their milestones are documented in framed pictures on the walls. I see them as babies, taking their first steps, the first day in kindergarten, junior prom...and so on. Most of the pictures feature Mr. and Mrs. Beaufort—well, John and Martha, as I was told to call them—and the smiling children. I admire the pictures on the wall with equal parts pleasure and envy. How must it feel to have the assurance of parental love? And it's clear from the photos, and my interaction with them today, that the family is filled with warmth and adoration. Even through their banter, I can feel the unbreakable family bond.

Growing up being tossed from one foster home to another, with foster parents whose only concern was the paycheck from the state, has left me starved for that kind of love. I am so desperate for it that I am willing to do anything. That must be why I let myself become a fool for Larson. I shake my head, refusing to think about my ex and let him ruin my day.

I shift my gaze to Alexander's side of the wall and frown as I notice that at one point, he stopped smiling in the pictures. He's smiling in his junior prom photo and then in the next frame, a photo taken during his senior prom—each milestone written beneath the photo—his features are grim.

What happened to him? A shiver crawls up my spine with the thought.

“Enjoying yourself?”

I jolt at the unexpected voice and spin around, my heart in my throat. Alex. Where did he come from? I clear my throat, dropping my hand from my chest.

“Alex, you startled me.”

“That was not my intention. I apologize.” The corner of his lips turns up a little. “What was nice?”

“What?” I frown, not understanding the question.

“During dinner when Andrea and Ezra were arguing, you laughed. And when I asked what was so funny, you said it's nice. What was nice?” he elaborates.

“Oh,” I shrug. “The interaction. I was a foster kid, and most kids in the system are all about getting a decent home for themselves. I’ve never really seen dynamic sibling interaction. And when I got a load of this place when we drove in, I wasn’t —” I trail off, covering my mouth with my hand.

Alex raises a sardonic brow. “You weren’t expecting to see Andrea and Ezra bickering because we’re rich?”

“It’s just nice is all,” I say lamely. He’s about to say something more, but Andrea walks into the hallway.

“Alexander.” Andrea nods at him as she drops a protective hand on my shoulder. “I just said goodbye to Mom. We’re about to hit the road.”

“I see,” Alex replies, gaze shifting between Andrea and me.

“So, we’ll see you at home then?” She doesn’t wait for his reply. She simply waves at him and leads me to the stairs. I can’t resist glancing back; a rush of adrenaline fills my veins when I see his gaze is already on me.

I quickly look away.

“Stay away from Alex,” Andrea warns in a low voice as we walk toward the driveway where her car is parked. I blink at her in surprise.

“Shit, and Ezra too,” she adds as we get into the car. “Just trust me. Stay away from both of them. It’s for your own good. Promise me, Autumn, that you’ll stay away from my brothers.”

I don’t understand why she feels the need to give me this warning, but she’s the only friend I have here. The only person keeping me from drifting in a strange town. It’s easy to give her my word. “I promise.”

“Good.” She nods in satisfaction and turns on the ignition. She waves cheerfully at Martha, who’s watching us through the front window, as we drive off the Beaufort estate. And it is an estate. Similar to Alex’s compound, there are small houses visible in the distance where I assume the staff live.

When I first met Andrea, I assumed she came from maybe the upper middle class. Then she took me to her brother's, and I had a reality check. And now her parents' house? This place is practically a castle set at the base of a mountain. They must be *rich rich*. Old money.

While I'm yet to see armed guards patrolling the grounds, the men stationed at the entrance of the black wrought iron gate scream KEEP AWAY. Why would Andrea run a bar when the Beaufort family is clearly loaded?

Better question: why do the Beauforts need protecting? First the electric paneling at Andrea's place above the bar, then Alex's gated mansion and this place. They're just a family-owned construction company, who are they trying to keep out?

Who lives in gated compounds in small towns? By definition, aren't small towns the antithesis of crimes? Aren't small towns considered one of the safest places to live? But then again, I don't really know what it's like to have the kind of money they have. The Beauforts are certainly a mystery—an intriguing one.

It's dark by the time Andrea pulls into Alex's driveway, and I'm exhausted. We walk into the house quietly, only speaking when it's time to part on the first floor. "The bar opens at six pm tomorrow. I'll show you the ropes then," Andrea says.

"That sounds great," I say with a genuine smile. I start to open my door, but hesitate. "Andrea, thanks for today. And yesterday...and the day before that. Thanks for everything."

She gives me a wide smile, her blue eyes glinting with mirth. "My pleasure, Autumn. Sleep tight!"

* * *

"I WANT you to just watch Keith and I work today since you have no prior experience bartending, but that doesn't mean I won't teach you the basics. It might get really busy if it rains again, and then we'll need your help. Plus Keith isn't coming in tomorrow, so I really hope you're a fast learner," Andrea states as she leads me behind the bar.

I swallow hard. It's barely four, but we're at Liquid Elixir two hours before the doors open so I can start to learn the ropes of my new job. It's a small wood-paneled space with a wood burning fireplace and antique accents: the perfect spot to hide from the cool weather outside.

There are tall, dark wood stools stretched out in front of the glass-topped bar. Vintage lamps spill low light across the room, making the space feel intimate and welcoming. The entire ambiance begs patrons to stop in for a drink and then coaxes them into staying all night lost in conversation. I feel myself relaxing as I take in the space, grateful to have found a place that I can belong.

Andrea points at the bar wall—essentially a tall wooden shelf where the liquors are displayed. “One thing you’ll obviously need to know is the drinks we offer and our menu. Liquid Elixir is one of the only bars downtown that don’t serve food; we’re not about that shit. If you’re hungry, go to a restaurant.” She grins. “Anyway, know the menu and the drinks we have available, because when we get new patrons, they almost always ask for a recommendation.”

I nod along with her instructions. “Yeah, that makes sense. I’ll also need to know the ingredients in the cocktails; we make cocktails right? I can’t recommend a drink I don’t know everything about. I might even need to do a taste test.”

“Great idea! I have a feeling we’re going to get along just fine, Autumn.” Andrea goes on to tell me about keeping the bar clean and knowing how to keep conversations short.

“People always want to talk to the bartender. There’s like some sort of unwritten rule of the universe that bartenders make great listeners. It makes them feel better. Now, I’m not saying don’t engage them, do talk to them. But just cut it short; otherwise you’ll lag behind and make the other patrons feel neglected.”

She teaches me the correct way to hold drink bottles, how to mix and measure, and how to pour drinks. She also walks me through some of the bartending jargon: dirty means adding olive juice to a martini, neat means straight out of the bottle,

no ice, on the rocks means with ice...and so on. After an hour or so she declares I'm ready.

“Now you won't be making cocktails tonight, but you've got everything else down. I know it might become overwhelming when the bar opens; just stay calm and keep your eyes open. You'll do just fine. When in doubt, just flash that million dollar smile of yours, and you'll have this town eating out of the palm of your hand,” she adds with a wink. Then she opens the bar.

CHAPTER 9



ALEXANDER

“Mr. Beaufort, do you understand the gravity of what you’re asking me to do?” the puny man sitting behind the desk asks, sweat dripping down his chubby cheeks. “That building is in the historic district and is, in fact, one of the only protected historic buildings left in town.”

“I am aware of that—” I glance at the nameplate on his desk, Joshua Phillipson. “*Josh*, can I call you Josh?”

“Of—of course, sir,” he stammers.

“Now, Josh, I’m aware that it’s a historic building. But that lot is where I intend to build the new retirement home. It’s not only a means to create more jobs for the good people of Brattleboro, but it will also stop the older folk from leaving town and bring in even more seniors to live in the facilities. It’s a win-win for the community.”

A win-win for Beaufort Construction too, because this project is estimated to bring in at least a sixty percent return on investment once it kicks off. I’m not going to let an insignificant clause in the law stand in the way of that.

“I—I understand that, sir,” he blubbers, the sweat on his face seeming to double in quantity until the neck of his shirt is soaked through. I take out a white handkerchief from my suit jacket and hand it to him, wordlessly.

He hesitates then accepts it with a murmured thanks. When he’s clear of the grotesque perspiration, he continues, the act seeming to have built up his confidence. “The historic building

can't be demolished, sir. If you can work your plans around the existing building, I'll be able to sign off on the permit."

"Listen here, bud," Noah growls, taking a threatening step toward Joshua's desk. The man pales instantly looking as if he might pass out any second. I raise a hand up to stop Noah.

"Josh, listen to me, I need this permit signed and I needed it signed yesterday. And you're going to sign off on it right now. It's bad enough that you brought me all the way down here." I stretch my palm to Noah, and he places my phone in it.

I type in my password and immediately open a folder, where several incriminating photos are stored. I select one where Joshua Phillipson is caught in a passionate embrace with a woman who is certainly not his wife, then pass the phone to him. He pales even more, his skin turning a shade of gray I never thought was possible. Impressive really.

"Mr. Beaufort, please, this was a one-time mistake that I ___"

"Think about your political dreams, Josh. If this gets out, then poof." I snap my fingers. "It's gone. And with it, your wife and kids too."

He stands in such a rush, the leather chair screeches across the floor. He falls to his knees in front of me. "Please, sir, it was a mistake. I will never do that again, I—"

"You're hurting my feelings here, man." I grimace as I pick my phone up from his desk and hand it to Noah, who passes me a disinfectant wipe I use to clean my hands. "I don't want to be the one to destroy a man's dreams...destroy his family. Don't make me that man. Noah here has really slippery fingers. He might send it to the press by accident."

"I'll sign it! I'll sign it! Please don't send it to anyone. I'll sign the permit," he cries. Actually cries. Tears and snort rolling down his cheeks as he sobs quietly. Pathetic.

"I'll expect it on my desk first thing in the morning," I tell him as I get up from my seat. I stop with my hand on the door handle to glance back at him. "Don't disappoint me, Josh. If I

don't see that permit on my desk in the morning, that picture and several others will be featured in the Brattleboro Reformer within the week."

His sobs dramatically go up in pitch, and I shake my head in disgust as I leave his office. After a long day at work, the last thing I wanted was to come all the way to Newfane to get that permit.

"Tell me I have nothing else on my schedule," I say to Noah, turning my wrist to check the time. Nine PM. It's the Monday after Thanksgiving, and I've had a lot on my plate to deal with after the long weekend. Normally, Joshua wouldn't be at the office this late, but a call from Noah kept his ass at his desk waiting for me. He knows better than to not be here when I show up.

"Nope, that's all for today."

"Good. See you tomorrow." Noah nods, waiting till I'm in my car before going to his own.

"Liquid Elixir," I tell George when he starts the car. I haven't seen my sister and her *guest* since thanksgiving. I understand that Andrea is avoiding me, I'm not much of a talker, and it frustrates her, but Autumn? I know exactly why she's avoiding me, and I don't like it. Not one bit.

When I got home yesterday, she was lounging by the indoor pool. I was enjoying the view, but one glance at me, and she took off like the hounds of hell were after her. Did Andrea say something to her?

I try to shake her out of my head, shooting off a few emails. Trying to set the next steps in the retirement home project in motion, now that the permit is a sure thing.

"We're here, sir." My driver's voice makes me look up. It's been thirty minutes already?

"Thanks, George, you may go home." I'll hitch a ride with Andrea and Autumn.

My shoulders relax as I walk into the warm, crowded bar. I make my way to the booth in the corner that's always on

reserve for me; brows go up when I see that Ezra is already sitting there.

“Oh, look, everyone. Alexander is here, hide your daughters.” He grins as I take the seat across from him.

I roll my eyes at that ridiculous statement. I’m hardly the player he is. “That’s pretty ironic coming from you, Ezra. I’m not the one whose exploits are plastered in tabloids every few days.”

“Well, what can I say? I learned from the best.” His cocky grin fades as he shifts to business talk. “How did it go with the permit guy?” He looks like he has more to say but goes quiet when Andrea’s server, Keith, comes over to our booth.

“The usual?” he asks, and I nod in response. “Be right back.”

“So, how did it go?” Ezra asks again.

“It’s done.”

“It’s done? The guy was pretty adamant about never signing the permit. I wasted several minutes on the phone with him, and even the Beaufort name wasn’t enough to sway him.”

“It’s done,” I repeat succinctly. I don’t need to hash out the finer details; all he needs to know is that we got the permit. I glance at the bar, my gaze immediately seeking out Autumn. And there she is.

Her face is flushed as she moves behind the bar, tending to the patrons. Her reddish blonde hair is pulled up into a loose bun; several unruly curls have escaped to frame her perfect face. She flashes a full smile when a guy seated at the bar says something, and my gut tightens. What could possibly be funny about that smuck? She’s a natural behind the bar, all big smiles and easy conversation—everything I’m not. She’s great for business, but the thought of every guy in town lining up to sit and watch her work is driving me mad.

“Alex!” Ezra shouts, sounding put out.

I turn to him with a raised brow just as Keith comes back with my drink. Scotch. Neat. “What?”

“What is so interesting?” he asks as I take a sip of my drink.

“Why are you here?” I ask instead of answering his question. “You’re on probation with dad, you know? No more drunken episodes.”

“Pfft.” He waves my worry away. “After that game of chess, where I wiped the floor with his ass by the way, I’m back on a clean slate with him. I can do whatever I want. But no, I don’t plan on getting drunk again.”

“And the drugs? Have you stopped them?” I ask absently, my gaze moving to the bar again. She’s laughing now. It’s the same bastard. What exactly is he saying to her?

“Oh shit, Autumn? You’re into her?” Ezra’s eyes light up when my gaze snaps to him.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I scowl.

“Nuh huh. Actually, I think I’m onto something here Alex. You haven’t been able to take your eyes off her since you sat down. Don’t think I didn’t notice you watching her at Thanksgiving dinner. At first, I thought it was nothing—”

“It *is* nothing.” I grit out, interrupting him.

“But I’ve been wrong before and this time, my killer instincts are telling me that it’s definitely something,” he continues like I didn’t just tell him it’s nothing. “She’s not your type, man.”

I stay quiet, not wanting to give him even more ammunition, but Ezra is like a dog with a bone when he thinks he’s sniffed out something to tease me with. That’s one thing he and Andrea have in common.

“You know what? I’m going to go talk to her. Find out if the feelings are mutual.”

“Don’t you fucking dare, Ezra,” I growl.

The dumbfuck simply grins at me, tosses back the last of his drink, and gets up from his seat. “Be right back, *bro*.” He winks at me as he leaves, and I nearly crack my molars I’m clenching my jaw so hard.

Autumn hesitates when Ezra signals to her and then goes to him. He says something and she smiles, her shoulders relaxing slightly. Then she turns around, bending to retrieve a bottle from the lower rungs of the bar shelf, pushing her tight ass out.

Ezra turns to me with wide eyes and a grin. My fists tighten as I consider reintroducing the little shit to my knuckles; it's been too long. I toss back my drink and meet Keith's eyes. He raises a hand to let me know he's coming.

When I'm at Liquid Elixir, I always pace myself, stretching out three drinks for the duration of the night to stay alert, but I have a feeling it's going to be a long one.

CHAPTER 10



AUTUMN

I don't know why both Beaufort brothers are suddenly at the bar tonight when we haven't seen their faces since I started working. I sneak glances at their booth. Clearly, I'm not the only one who can't keep my eyes off them. I catch several women fucking them with their eyes from around the bar. But for some reason, nobody approaches them, which is weird. With their tall stature, broad shoulders, and sleek black hair, they both exude raw masculinity, but in completely different ways: Alexander gives off a moody, no time for talking vibe, while Ezra could make a woman forget her own name with one of his devastating smiles. You'd think they'd have women falling over themselves for a chance to experience either one.

Maybe it's because they're the bar owner's brothers? Andrea did have a reserved card sitting on the empty booth table the past few nights, so it's safe to assume that the booth is permanently reserved for the Beaufort brothers. Andrea must be very protective of her brothers...that must be it.

Of the two brothers, I always find myself drawn to Alexander in an inexplicable way. He's my polar opposite, and yet I've found myself entranced by his dark demeanor and studying every inch of his unique face from afar. His stark features contrast beautifully to create one of the most handsome men I've ever seen, from his full lips to his hooded eyes and heavy brow. I've even noticed a small groove in between his brows—permanent frown lines—so what happened to that smiling boy from the pictures?

All of a sudden, Ezra gets up from the booth and comes up to the bar...to my corner of the bar. I hesitate, wondering if he or his brother noticed me checking them out.

“Hey, Autumn. How’s it going?” he asks with a friendly smile that doesn’t fool me at all. He’s more open and charming than Alex, sure, but there’s an emptiness in his gaze that sends chills down my spine, and not in a good way.

Alex hides behind his scowl and Ezra behind his charm.

“It’s fine. Busier than usual.”

He nods in response. “How’s your dirty martini? I’d kill for one right now.”

I hesitate, taken aback by his intensity. Andrea explained how to make one, once. If it was anyone else, I’d gently nudge them toward another drink – like, say, a highball that I know I can’t screw up – but this is Andrea’s brother, and I don’t think it’s up for discussion. I turn around, bending down slightly to grab the bottles of vermouth and gin on one of the lower shelves –Andrea keeps the good stuff down there – and when I turn back to the bar, I see a look pass between Alex and Ezra.

“I only know how to make one in theory, you’re my first. So, please let me know if it’s not up to your standards,” I say a little nervously.

“Don’t sweat it, sweetheart, I’m sure you’ll do just fine.” He smiles at me, a little dimple winking out from his left cheek. I pause. His eyes are different from Andrea and Alex’s, being a light, almost translucent blue. Some might even say icy, but they warm up when his smile is genuine. Until this moment, I didn’t realize that he even had a fake smile.

I return his smile, finally relaxing as I mix his drink. “Here you go. One dirty martini for you, sir.”

He accepts the glass and makes a show of drinking it. I hold my breath as I watch him. “I’ve had several dirty martinis in this very bar, miss. None come close to this one.”

I laugh at the bald-faced lie. “Come on, don’t be like that. I actually want to know the mistakes I made, so I know how to perfect it next time.”

He hesitates like he's not sure if I'm being honest. "Seriously. I'm not even allowed to make cocktails yet. Being able to get a simple dirty martini right will give me some much needed confidence."

"Alright, alright. If you truly want to make me happy, make the next one extra dirty. I went easy on you, since it was your first time and all, but don't be shy with the olives." He offers with a devilish grin that I'm positive would have most women on their knees. I soon leave him to attend to another customer. I head back, a new drink in hand, and offer up my next attempt served alongside my sweetest smile.

"Now, this is nearly perfect." He smiles after taking a sip of the fresh drink. "All you need is a few more practices under your belt, and Andrea will have to watch out."

I return his genuine smile, noting how it reaches his eyes. "Thank you."

"I have a wet bar in my apartment. If you ever want me to show you the ropes, you can come over to my place on your next day off. I'm quite the mixologist, and you should see me handle a shaker cup, it's inspiring." He winks at me, and I laugh.

I don't doubt it. "Thanks for the offer. I'll keep it in mind."

He shrugs, taking the clear rejection good-naturedly, like only a man with his confidence could. A guy who knows he can get any number of single women to jump at his offer. "It was worth a try."

Ezra spends the rest of the night at the bar with me; it makes the busy night that much more fun. He's so funny and charming, the exact opposite of his brother. I toss a glance at Alex's booth, and my heart seizes when his eyes snag mine.

He's scowling, his eyes blazing angrily as he watches me, and I pause. My heart starts racing, and I reluctantly pull my gaze from his. Shit. Why couldn't my heart respond like that for easygoing, swoon worthy Ezra? Why him?

"You sure know how to pick 'em, Autumn," I whisper under my breath. Alex is as intense as they come, and that's

the last thing I need to be attracted to right now.

“What was that?” Ezra asks, and I glance at him in surprise. He watches me shrewdly. I quickly re-assess my initial thought about him being harmless. He might be more open and charming than his brother, but that doesn’t make him any less astute. Or dangerous.

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

“Happens to the best of us,” he says easily, but the assessing look doesn’t leave his eyes.

It’s past midnight and the bar is starting to wind down, so I find a clean towel to start wiping the bar top. I glance toward Alex. Yep, still staring at me. I swallow hard as I quickly look away, only to see Ezra watching me too. Shit, did he see me glance at his brother? I hesitate, waiting for him to say something but he doesn’t so I just keep cleaning. Keith walks to the front door and turns the placard so it says *closed* to anyone who might be passing by. Then he moves around the bar, picking up used glasses and taking them to the back to wash up.

Almost an hour later, we’re done cleaning, and Ezra is gone. He left a few large bills in his place, which more than cover his tab, leaving a substantial tip.

“Where’s the boss? Gotta let her know we’re done here,” Keith says, speaking to me for the first time in hours—we work at opposite ends of the bar and rarely have occasion to talk during work hours.

I glance around the bar in surprise. Andrea usually helps us during clean up. I glance at Alex’s booth and it’s empty too. When did he leave?

“I’ll go check in her office,” I offer and head to the small back hallway. As I make my way toward her office, I register raised voices and I slow down.

“I can’t believe we have to stay at your house again tonight. When are you going to fix my roof?” Andrea demands.

“When my men are able to,” A dry voice replies. Alex.

“When your men are able to? What’s that supposed to mean? First, it was because of the holidays, and now it’s when your men are able to?” Andrea’s voice is incredulous.

“A lot of houses got damaged during the storm last week, Andrea. And we had a lot of work before that,” Alex says, impatiently. “You can’t expect me to tell my men to leave the other more pressing jobs to fix my kid sister’s roof.”

“That’s exactly what I expect, Alexander. What’s the point of our family being the only construction company in Brattleboro if I can’t even get my roof done on time. This is why monopoly isn’t such a great thing, if the other companies hadn’t conveniently run out and—”

“Watch it, Andrea.”

I’m lurking in front of Andrea’s office like a total creep, blatantly eavesdropping. Monopoly? How can the Beauforts own the only construction company in a town of over twelve thousand people? Is that even possible?

“Why are you dragging your feet to fix my roof? I know you hate having people in your space. What’s really going on here, Alex?!”

“What’s going on is that while your roof is damaged, you have several very comfortable places, might I add, that you can stay in until it gets fixed. A lot of people in town don’t have that luxury, so excuse me if they’re Beaufort Construction’s priority right now.”

Andrea goes silent after that, and I recognize my chance to knock on the door before I get caught being the eavesdropper that I am. I go to do just that when the door is suddenly wrenched open. I gasp, stumbling backwards with my fist still raised to knock.

“Autumn.” Alex raises his brow at me.

“I um—I came to let Andrea know we’re done with the cleanup and Keith is about ready to go home.” I manage to say over the rush of blood in my ears. Alex looks unconvinced.

“Thanks, Autumn, I’ll be right out,” Andrea says. I nod rapidly before excusing myself.

“Were you eavesdropping?” Alex asks in a deep, rumbling tone that causes goosebumps to erupt over my skin. Following me down the hallway back to the bar I can practically feel his eyes burning into my back; the accusation in his tone is terrifying. Or is this feeling exhilaration? Unlike everyone else, I’m not afraid of Alexander Beaufort. He intrigues me, plagues my thoughts, and consumes my dreams, but he doesn’t scare me.

I spin around and meet his accusatory glare, refusing to back down even if he towers over me and is standing only a couple inches away. “No!” I say a little too forcefully, which isn’t exactly proving my innocence. “I mean, of course not. Were you talking about something important?” I ask innocently, changing my demeanor to that of the sweet, clueless bartender.

Despite my forced smile, I can’t control my breathing, which is causing my chest to lift with each labored breath. His eyes glance down first to my chest, then leisurely make their way to my neck. Can he see my pulse hammering in his presence? His lips part slightly, and his eyes darken momentarily.

Alex says nothing, making it clear that he doesn’t believe me, and his thoughts have trailed elsewhere. Then his eyes glaze back over, the indentation returning between his brows as his trademark scowl erases whatever feelings distracted him the moment before. He doesn’t ask me any more questions before brushing past and stalking out the front door, leaving me feeling more confused and turned on than ever.

CHAPTER 11



AUTUMN

When I wake up, the first thing that comes to mind is new glasses! Upon his insistence, I've worn contacts since Larson and I started dating, but now that I'm free from his control, I'm reinventing myself. Your girl loves to accessorize, and with my minimal wardrobe options, glasses will bring a little of my personality back into my look. I make my way to the bathroom where I get ready. When I'm done, I check the time on the nightstand alarm clock, shocked that it's nearly one PM.

I make my way to Andrea's room and knock gently, not sure if she's up yet. We've fallen into a sort of routine, Andrea and me. We work late, sleep in, and then eat together and talk shit about weird customers and exchange book recommendations. Honestly, it's nice. I've never had someone that I could vent to about my day, and Andrea totally understands and vents right back. I wonder why she's single, but I'm enjoying our codependency right now.

By the time we trudge downstairs bleary eyed, Mrs. Staten, Alex's housekeeper, is already on the premises and cooking something delicious. At first I was hesitant about using her services—the least I can do is feed myself—but Mrs. Staten is so kind and always insists on cooking for us both.

Then after eating, we go our separate ways, doing our own thing until we head to work for the evening. I spend most of my free time in the home library. I don't have a phone or a laptop to pass the time, so I read. Thankfully, Alex has a huge collection of fiction, my weakness, so I'm not forced to read

boring architectural shit, which seems to be his obsession, or worse, self-help books.

I tried one self-help book in a bid to be sophisticated and nearly spent an entire afternoon sleeping. I was literally bored to tears. I forced myself to read it for an hour, and my brain seemed to catalog that hour as torture. My thoughts inevitably wandered to my current situation, and I spent another hour crying over the years I wasted with my control freak ex-fiancé. I cried myself to sleep, then awoke hours later when it was time to head to the bar for the night donning puffy eyes and a headache. Never again.

I knock on Andrea's door again, a bit harder, biting my lip anxiously. She's usually up by this time. Did she go somewhere?

"Hold on. I'm coming," she calls out in a husky voice. Shit, did I wake her?

Muffled footsteps reach me and then the door is dragged open. Andrea stares at me blankly, eyes swollen, and hair a rat's nest. She blinks at me. "Autumn, what's up?"

"I thought you might be awake. I'm so sorry, I can come back later." I start to leave, but she stops me.

"Girl, cut the shit. I'm up now and I won't be—" She lets out a loud yawn and continues, "able to fall back asleep anyway. What's up?"

I hesitate. "I was just wondering if you've heard when my car will be ready, so I won't have to inconvenience you every time I need to go into town."

She squints at me. "You going somewhere?"

"Yeah. I need to visit an optician to get prescription glasses."

Andrea does a double take. "You need glasses? How have you been seeing?" She waves a hand in front of me, and I chuckle.

"I have contacts." I tap the corner of my eye with my index finger. "I've worn contacts since I came into town. My ex

didn't think glasses looked sophisticated, so I switched to contacts. But fuck him; I'm getting glasses back."

"Yes! That's the right attitude." Andrea grins and adds, "Hold on."

She runs a hand through her hair—which does absolutely nothing to smooth it down—and makes a beeline to the kitchen, grumbling a greeting to Mrs. Staten as she drops a K-cup into the coffee machine. After a few moments, steaming hot coffee streams into her mug. She picks it up and inhales deeply before taking a huge gulp. Her shoulders visibly relax, and she takes another gulp.

I'll never understand her need for coffee, being more of a tea drinker myself. Andrea is not a morning person at all; she usually needs a mug or two before she can communicate in more than grunts and grumbles. I'm surprised that she didn't snap at me when she opened her door; she's not herself unless heavily caffeinated.

Mrs. Staten and I share amused glances as Andrea finishes her mug and feeds another K-cup into the coffee maker. She turns to face us after taking a sip from the fresh cup and rolls her eyes, groaning.

"Not a single word out of you two. I don't want to hear it." She makes a zipping motion across her lips.

"We're not saying anything," Mrs. Staten assures her. She grunts as she drinks out of her mug and I snort from having to hold in my chuckle.

Andrea narrows her eyes at me. "Autumn, don't you dare."

I nod vigorously as I give her a thumbs up. I don't trust myself to actually open my mouth, a laugh might escape. When she's done with the second mug, she releases a satisfied sigh and makes her way to the sink where she rinses it out. Then she turns to face me.

"Give me twenty minutes to get ready. I'll drive you to the optometrist, and from there we can go to the mechanic to check up on Betty," she says, then hurries out of the kitchen.

“Optometrist?” Mrs. Staten’s brows furrow in concern. “Oh dear, is something wrong with your eyes?”

I pat her shoulder gently. “Only since I was about ten years old. I have contacts in and I’d like to not have to wear them every day,” I explain and she nods in understanding, releasing a relieved sigh.

True to her word, Andrea is out in exactly twenty minutes, and we set off for town.

I glance up at the cloudy skies. “Think it’ll rain soon?”

“Looks like it,” Andrea answers. “And this weather will usher in the cold. They’re saying to expect the first snow any day now.”

I sigh, enjoying the fall colors as we make the drive. I’ll miss them once they’re gone, but I love the holiday season, and the first snowfall is always magical. We drive through downtown, taking a right turn off Main Street onto Western Avenue, which is much quieter. The buildings are set off the road and further apart.

She stops in front of a quaint, white slate, one story A-frame house with a red brick chimney. There’s a sign hanging outside with the words *Brattleboro Family Eye Care* and underneath it is OPTOMETRIST in block letters. Beneath that are the names of the doctors.

“Ready?” Andrea asks, and I nod.

The receptionist is very friendly and tells us that one of the three doctors is free right now. She goes through a door, presumably to notify the doctor, and comes back a few minutes later all smiles.

“Dr. Roberts will see you now.”

I’m pleasantly surprised to see that Dr. Roberts is a woman, and young. Probably in her late 30s or early 40s with shiny black hair pulled back in a sleek bun and kind brown eyes. I don’t know why I was expecting an old, balding man.

“Hello, Dr. Roberts, thank you so much for seeing me on such short notice. I’m Autumn Montgomery.” I shake the

doctor's hand, and she indicates I take one of the chairs across from her desk. Her office is not particularly large; but like the rest of Brattleboro, what it lacks in size, it makes up for in charm. Mahogany wood trim accents deeply painted walls and brown leather chairs, giving it an old-school vibe.

Dr. Roberts asks a few questions and gives me a form to complete. Afterward, she leads me to the in-house lab where I have to take off my contacts before a couple of tests are run. I sigh inwardly as I imagine the amount of money being racked up right now. I should just kiss the idea of my car goodbye for now.

The test results are immediate, and the doctor explains in simple terms what I already know; not only am I practically blind, but I have astigmatism. It's a kind of defect in the eye that causes distorted images and makes things appear very blurry. Meaning glasses or contacts are not optional, especially while driving – if I ever get my car back that is.

“But you already knew that, didn't you?” Dr. Roberts asks kindly.

“Yeah, but I'm starting to get eye strain late at night. I'm not sure if it's because of the constant use of contacts, but I'd like to switch to glasses regardless.”

She nods in understanding and continues the exam. Once my prescription is determined, she takes me to the cases of glasses to try some on. She takes out three different frames to try that she thinks will accent my face shape, which I appreciate greatly. The doctor is clearly an elegant woman with impeccable taste, so I'll wear whatever she thinks looks good on me!

I take out my contacts and try on the first pair. I squint into the mirror. The doctor smiles politely and says, “Perhaps you should leave your contacts in until you choose your frames. The glass in these is just for show.” My cheeks redden, and I mumble, “Of course, that makes perfect sense.”

I love the gold frame and design of the next pair she hands me, which I try on with my contacts –I mean come on

Autumn, stop embarrassing yourself. “These are perfect! They make me feel like...me.”

“Great.” She looks pleased with my selection, which is reassuring. “Do you have insurance?” She winces when I shake my head to say no. Oh boy, that can’t be a good sign. My heart starts to pound with trepidation as she explains that the receptionist will give me the bill in an hour when my new glasses are ready. I thank her one last time before I head back to the front. I spend the next hour waiting in the reception area, barely able to focus on my book because I’m so stressed about the expensive purchase. *I’m doing this for me*, I remind myself.

“Looking sharp, Autumn.” Andrea whistles wriggling her brow at me and I chuckle. I lift my hand up to adjust the frame – which fits my face perfectly – and toss her a wink since I’m feeling sassy and confident in my new specs. I gasp when the receptionist hands me the bill, and I sway on my feet.

Shit.

“Um, do you accept payment plans?” I ask, but before she can respond Andrea drops a black Amex card on her desk. “Andrea!”

“Don’t give me that look. My treat.” She offers me a small smile.

A lead like weight forms in the pit of my stomach. “I can’t just let you pay for my glasses, Andrea.” I complain as the receptionist swipes the card, and Andrea types in her pin.

“It’s done. Consider it a signing bonus,” she declares. I sigh heavily as I follow her.

“Look, I appreciate what you’ve done for me so far,” I start as Andrea pulls out of the clinic’s parking lot. “But it doesn’t sit well with me to have you pay for my glasses. Here.” I squeeze a couple of bills into her pant pockets.

“Autumn—”

“No, listen. That only covers a small portion. My next paycheck should cover the rest. Please don’t argue, Andrea. When I left my ex, I promised myself not to become reliant on

anyone else. Not that I think you'd try to use it to control me or anything," I rush to add when she tosses a glance at me. "But it will make me feel better if you let me pay."

"Fine."

"Thanks." I murmur, glad she's not arguing. Larson started with buying contacts for me. Then a trip to the salon here and there with the expectation that I come out looking the way he likes. Then some clothes that fit his image of the perfect girlfriend...until it escalated so far that I didn't recognize who I was anymore.

"One day, when you're ready, you'll have to tell me all about this ex of yours. He sounds like a real piece of work."

He is. He really is. "We don't need to go to the mechanic anymore. I don't think I'll need my car to make any trips into town for a while, I have the essentials." And I don't have the money to pay for the repair right now, anyway.

Andrea gives me a pointed look but, thankfully, she doesn't try to argue. We continue the rest of the drive home in comfortable silence. I stare out the window while my thoughts slowly drift off to the smoldering gaze of one dark, haunted Beaufort brother.

CHAPTER 12



ALEXANDER

I'm in the middle of analyzing blueprints for a new office building when my office suddenly goes dim. The lack of natural light makes me glance up from my computer and out my window to see it's nearly dark. It can't be that late already, can it? I turn my wrist to check the time, and as I do, a familiar pitter patter sound starts outside. The time on my Rolex reads only four PM.

Looking up again I see raindrops beginning to fall. *Goddammit.* A heavy sigh escapes me as I rub my head with my fingers. We're putting up a new building off Briggs road today, starting with the concrete work. If the rain is heavy like it's threatening to be, it will really set us back. The rain picks up, falling down faster and harder. Just my fucking luck.

I get up from my seat just as my office door swings open. "It's raining," Noah announces.

"No shit, genius."

He rolls his eyes at my sarcastic reply and follows me out of the office. "From the looks and sound of it, it's only going to get worse," Noah says. I don't answer him as I get into the elevator. I text my driver to meet me at the entrance.

"We'll have to go to the site to see how far the guys have progressed so we know how to handle this," I tell Noah who nods in agreement.

My office is on the top floor of the three-story building that houses Beaufort Construction, so it doesn't take long for

us to reach the lobby. I curse under my breath when we walk out the door.

The street outside is drenched, the sound of rain bouncing off the ground and the cars parked along the street filling my ears. The rain is coming down so hard already that I can barely see the buildings on the other side of the street. Rapid streams of water rush toward the storm drains with a soft tinkling sound, adding to the noise in the air.

My Rolls-Royce pulls out front and before George can get out, I open the door myself and hop in.

“I’m right behind you!” Noah shouts so I can hear him over the din of the rain, and I give him a nod. He prefers driving his own car whenever we go out, in case something comes up.

Despite being one of the fastest growing small towns in Vermont, Brattleboro only has a handful of taxis, and they’ve managed to scare Uber away for the time being. I have to admire their tenacity, holding a monopoly in this town isn’t easy. Having your own transportation is imperative. During the five-minute ride, I exchange my suit jacket for a trench coat that hangs to mid-thigh; at least my upper body will be protected from the storm. I also change into steel-toe boots and grab a hard hat from under the seat.

I may look the part of a polished CEO ninety percent of the time, but I’ve earned the respect of the men on my job sites, and I like to come prepared when I arrive. No one takes a man seriously, who is too scared of getting his shoes dirty to get a job done.

The storm came out of nowhere, or maybe I was just distracted enough to miss the signs. November in Brattleboro is always filled with rain. Snow is surely just around the corner with December not far off.

I slick my hand through my hair and pull on my hard hat as I exit the car. “Wait for me,” I instruct as I get out.

Hard rain immediately starts pelting the plastic on my head and beads off my shoulders. Still, I saunter toward the half

completed building, boots splashing through small puddles. I rush for no one. My men are tucked under the roof of the ground floor, standing around waiting for instructions. They straighten when they see me. “Mr. Beaufort,” the head contractor, Bill says, stepping forward as I approach.

“Noah has a load of tarps and sandbags in his truck and should be here anytime. Set the bags up around the perimeter to avoid flooding and use the tarps to cover the concrete pilings that are still setting.” He nods just as Noah’s truck pulls up.

The men get to work immediately, and I join in to make things go faster. About thirty minutes later, everything is covered and protected from the downpour that has yet to let up. I’m glancing around the site with satisfaction when a flash of green catches my eye.

I squint into the rain and walk to where I saw the movement, running a hand down my face to remove the rain and sweat. A small figure hunched into himself is valiantly trudging through the rain, his arms tucked around his body.

Idiot.

“Hey!” I shout to catch his attention, and his head snaps up toward me. It’s a woman. The thought has barely registered when I take in the oddly familiar face. Gold framed glasses no doubt fogged up in the rain. Long hair plastered down her back. A body that’s shivering through the soaked green top and jeans.

“Autumn?” Since when does she wear glasses?

“Al—Alexander?” she asks through her chattering teeth as she looks in the general direction of my voice but not at me directly. Can she even see? *What the hell is she doing out here?*

I grit my teeth, anger filling my veins as I stride toward her and grip her upper arms tightly. Her head snaps toward me when I tighten my grip on her even further, but I’m beyond caring right now. I use my hold on her to drag her toward my car.

I rap on the driver's window and Goerge unlocks the car. I swing the door open and guide her in, careful to protect her head, then slam the door shut. I try to calm myself as I round the rear of the car to get in through the other side. I'm so fucking angry right now. What the hell was she thinking, walking around in this storm?

"What the hell, Autumn?" I bark as I get into the car and she jumps, glancing at me, but even through the foggy glasses I can see that her eyes are unfocused. I mutter a vicious curse.

"Turn up the heat." I tell George as I press a small button that rolls up the partition. Almost immediately, a blast of heat fills the car. I take the glasses off her and wipe them gently with the handkerchief I always carry in my suit jacket.

"Can you even see right now?"

Her brown eyes are still unfocused but they seem to be staring right at me as she licks her lips and whispers a no. My balls tighten at the vulnerable air around her, and I scold myself. Now is not the time to be getting aroused dammit.

When the glass is completely cleaned, I shift closer to her and brush her wet hair away from her face. Her shivering has stopped and she stills at the contact. "Alex?"

"Shhh," I murmur as I gently draw the fabric down her face, wiping the water away slower than necessary. My gaze drops to her pebbled nipples showing through her wet top.

It's because she's cold, I tell myself as I raise my gaze back to her face, which is now dry. I toss my jacket aside and drag the back of my hand down her smooth cheek. She inhales sharply, goosebumps appearing on her skin. Her lip trembles, inexplicably drawing my gaze to them. They're wet from the rain and glistening. And so pink. My breathing picks up as I lower my head toward her.

"Alex?" she whispers, and I immediately jump back. What the hell? What the fuck am I doing? I take her right hand and place her glasses in them.

"Here."

Her fists clench around the glasses, and she quickly puts them on. Fuck, why does that make her even hotter? Control. I pride myself in having a lot of it. So why is this woman shaking it?

She bites her lip as her gaze meets mine shyly. “Hi.”

“What the hell were you doing out in a storm, Autumn?” I ask, my voice harsher than I intend it to be.

She winces. “I haven’t really had the chance to explore the town, and Andrea said it’ll get really cold when the first storm hits, so I decided to wander before the bar opened. I didn’t expect the storm to come so hard and fast.” She says everything in a rush barely stopping to take in a breath. My eyes drop to her lips again.

“All of a sudden it started raining, and I was trying to wait it out in the park, but it just wouldn’t stop...and I don’t have a phone to reach Andrea. I knew she would be worried, and I was so sure that the bar wasn’t that far away because I hadn’t been walking for too long when the rain started...so I started walking back. But I must have gotten turned around because I suddenly got lost, and my glasses were so fogged up that I could barely see in front of me...and I was so worried about ___”

I watch her lips move, transfixed. She’s a talker, this one. My ears pop as my cock tightens in my trousers. Don’t do it, Alex. Not her. Anybody else but her. So what if you’ve been searching for her for a year. You’re bad for her. You can’t give her what she needs, and you don’t do commitment, period.

I try to negotiate with myself, but I’m finding it really hard to care about any of the reasons I’ve listed.

“Fuck it,” I mutter.

Autumn stops talking and squints. “What? What did you ___”

I kiss her.

CHAPTER 13



AUTUMN

I'm rambling. I know I am, but I can't help it. I ramble when I'm nervous, and I'm so nervous right now. Why is he staring at me like that? Like he's been stuck in the desert for days, and I'm a tall glass of cold water.

I continue talking, trying to ignore my fiercely pounding heart and the loud rush of blood in my veins. "I must have gotten turned around because I suddenly got lost, and my glasses were so fogged up I could barely see in front of me... and I was so worried about seeing anyone because this seemed to be a residential area. But then I heard someone shout, hey, and I was so scared because what if it was a serial killer? And there I was unable to see. But then I was so relieved when I realized it was you and—" I trail off when he mutters something.

"What? What did you—" The rest of my question is cut off by his mouth pressing onto mine in a devastating kiss that completely catches me by surprise. This man who spent a year searching for me after we shared one of the most intense and fateful interactions of my life – who then told me it was a mistake after we finally got to taste one another – is now kissing me as if he will die if he stops. Like this kiss is what is fueling him, breathing air into his lungs, keeping his head above water after he's been stuck below the surface.

The kiss doesn't start slowly. His tongue immediately probes my lips and invades my mouth as if he owns it. He is tasting me so thoroughly, so completely, I feel as though I am his and his alone to devour and consume entirely. In this

moment, anything he wants or asks for I would give over freely. But I feel as if he somehow already knows this. And maybe that's what is scaring him, although I don't think Alexander Beaufort scares easily.

His hand sinks into my hair and he angles my head to deepen the kiss. All rational thought flees from my mind. My eyes close, and I move restlessly on the leather seat as I kiss him back. My heart beat becomes wild, body trembling with need for this man before me. A need for more, for all that he is willing to give me. His tongue tangles with mine and a languid moan escapes me. Alex suddenly breaks the kiss. I realize he's breathing just as hard as I am. Before I can speak, he gently removes my glasses and places them next to me.

"I don't want to break them," he explains roughly as he grabs me by the hips and shifts me until I'm straddling him. His body is warm and hard, and I shiver deliciously against him.

My eyes adjust to his closeness. I finally get to really see him. I take in the stubble along his jaw, his glistening wet hair, and the silver flecks in his eyes. He's devastatingly handsome, frown lines and all. I trace a nervous hand over his brow, smoothing out the deep lines that represent all that plagues him. What is he hiding? What makes him so hard, so lost in his head? He seems to be taking on the world alone, and I feel the need to carry some of his burden. If even just for a moment.

My heart beats a hard and fast staccato as a hardness beneath me makes itself known, and I shift until I'm positioned directly over his length. Fuck, that's him. I can't control myself as my body involuntarily grinds against him, and one of his hands clamps down on my hips with a vicious growl, holding me still.

I whine breathlessly when he doesn't return the action. In response, he grunts as he slams his lips over mine again. He grabs a fistful of my wet hair, wrapping the strands around his fingers tight enough to sting, which only seems to stoke the flames of my pleasure.

A high pitched sound I've never made before escapes my lips before I can stop it.

“Fuck,” he groans, his lips moving across my jaw to the side of my neck. He runs his tongue from behind my ear. I tilt my head to encourage him further as he continues to my collarbone. My breathy moans seem to make all sense of control leave him, and he bites down on the tendons of my neck, then sucks on the flesh hard enough to leave a mark.

He shifts his hips on the seat, rubbing himself between my spread legs. I moan again and he grunts in approval. He releases my hair and moves both his hands to my ass, pressing me down onto him while simultaneously thrusting himself upward and against my most sensitive area.

“Alexander”, I whisper, throwing my head back and riding every wave of hot pleasure that's coursing through my body, bringing me so close to release that I'm desperate for it.

Alex suddenly goes still. I groan in frustration as I press myself down onto him. He curses darkly and moves his hands back to my hips, squeezing the flesh there to stop my frantic movements.

“Don't you dare stop or I'll—” I start to threaten him with bodily harm but stop when a rapping sound registers. Someone's knocking on the window.

Suddenly everything rushes back, and I realize where we are: in his car, in the middle of the street of God knows where. Some man is bent down, shielding his eyes against the glass as he knocks on the window. Thank God, the windows are tinted.

I scramble to get off his lap. For a moment Alex's grip on me tightens, and I consider that he might not let me go. But common sense prevails, and his face hardens as his control returns, and he releases me. I let out a sign, but whether it stems from relief or disappointment, I don't know.

“Stay here,” he orders tersely and takes a moment to adjust himself before getting out of the car.

Oh, my God, Autumn. What did you just do?

I moan miserably as I sink into the seat and my wet clothes slide against the leather. My eyes slide shut. What the hell was I thinking? I've tried to distract myself, keep him off my mind after that first night, and now this? I'm in no place to be falling for anyone, let alone kissing a man I barely know in the rain. "What's with you, Autumn?" I whisper.

He kissed me first, but that doesn't exactly matter right now when I responded far too eagerly. I never reacted that viscerally with Larson throughout our three years together. I can't explain it, but this man is irresistible to me. The more he tells me to stay away, the more I crave to understand him, to break through his stone facade. I have a feeling no one ever has, and he'd prefer to keep it that way. It's as if being closed off is his security. Being alone is his sanctuary and being misunderstood, his saving grace.

I'm only human, and he's an attractive man. So I reacted, so what? Kissing him is a religious experience. Which makes it so hard to deny and impossible not to want to repeat. I try to comfort myself. I'm only human.

Stay away from my brothers.

Oh, God, what am I going to tell Andrea? My first and only friend, and I've managed to break her trust by completely disregarding her one request; her brothers are off limits. How will she ever trust me again? I'm about to start hyperventilating when the door slides open and Alex slips in.

"Put your seatbelt on," he says shortly as the car starts to move. I open my eyes to glance at him, and my heart starts pounding when he's nothing but a blur. I can feel my eyes widening as I look around the vehicle, but I can't focus. My glasses!

"Your seatbelt, Autumn," he repeats, but I don't pay him any mind, as I quickly get on my knees in the car. I turn so I'm facing the seat and stretch my hands out on the blurred leather seat as I try to look for the damn glasses.

"What the hell are you doing?" A pair of strong hands grips my arms and heaves me up onto the seat. The seatbelt is

aggressively stretched out across my chest and clicked into place.

“Stop!” I shout, slapping his hands away. “I can’t see. I can’t see. I can’t see.” My voice progressively gets louder, and my breaths are coming in harsh gasps as I tip dangerously close to a full on panic attack.

Alex curses. Cool metal kisses the shell of both my ears, and the vehicle comes into blessed focus. Alex is seated in front of me, his hands holding the glasses in place. I’m still in the throes of anxiety though and gasping for air.

“You’re having a panic attack,” he says calmly even though his eyes are anything but. He looks furious. He grips my right hand and puts it up against his chest. His heart beats in a steady rhythm.

“Listen to my heartbeat. Watch me breathe and do the same. Inhale when I inhale. Exhale when I exhale.”

I do as he says and the steady thump thump thump of his heart begins lulling mine into a somewhat calm rhythm. We breath together slowly until the irrational fear abates, and I slump into my seat.

Alex’s hand is still holding mine over his heart; his grip tightens briefly before he drops my hand. He settles back into his seat. That’s when I notice the car has stopped moving. I glance around, sitting up straighter when I realize that we’re parked in front of Alex’s mansion. We’re here already?

“Why did you bring me here? Andrea is expecting me at the bar.”

He doesn’t even spare me a glance as he checks his watch. “It’s barely five PM. I’ll have George drive you back before you have to be at work. You need to change out of your wet clothes.”

Are we not going to talk about what just happened? Not that I mind terribly. I can’t believe I had a panic attack in front of him. I sneak glances at him as we enter the house, waiting for something. Is he really not going to say anything? I sigh heavily as I make my way to my room. My clothes are no

longer dripping wet, thanks to the heater in his fancy ass car, but they're still damp. I take everything off and throw them at the hamper in the bathroom. I take a hot shower, which I regrettably can't linger in.

I dry my hair as much as I can with a towel, wishing like hell I had a blow dryer. Whatever. It's been air drying for the past week anyway. I can't believe I've only been in Brattleboro for a week. It feels like months. I'm already so distant and detached from my life in Manhattan.

I miss Mom, but otherwise, I love my new life. Larson had me completely under his control. I wore what he chose. His friends were my friends. His hobbies were my hobbies. I was no one without him. And now for the first time in years, I get to decide who I want to be. It's exhilarating...and terrifying.

I throw on a pair of thick wool leggings, a bohemian, off the shoulder top, and a leather jacket – which was such a find when Andrea and I went thrifting. Then toss on a pair of tall socks and boots and some dangle earrings. Glancing at myself in the gold-framed full-length mirror and feeling content with what I see, I head out.

By this time, my hair is sufficiently dry, so I run a brush through it and pull it up into a high ponytail. I glance at my chipped nail polish and wince. There's nothing I hate more. Damn, I should have at least bought acetone to clean off this mess. I'll ask Andrea when I get to the bar if I can use a shot of vodka; that should do the trick.

I have no bag or purse so I walk out of my room, wondering if George will be waiting for me outside, or I'll have to seek Alex out. I seriously need to fix my car. That being dependent on the Beauforts good graces isn't something I relish in. I walk down the stairs and nearly scream when I see Alex leaning on the open doorway that leads to the breakfast room. This man is otherworldly in his ability to appear seemingly out of thin air.

“We need to talk,” he growls and walks away.

CHAPTER 14



ALEXANDER

“We need to talk,” I tell Autumn, not waiting for her response as I walk into the breakfast room.

“What is it? I need to get back to Liquid Elixir; the bar opens soon,” she says hesitantly, but her soft footsteps follow me like I knew they would. I lead her to the kitchen and nod at the island where a mug of hot chocolate is sitting.

“Drink.”

Her eyes narrow, and she stares at me like I just spoke a foreign language.

“You were soaked earlier. You need to warm up,” I say a little too abruptly. “But you don’t have to drink it if you don’t want to,” I add, doing my best to act nonchalant when all I desperately want to do is take matters into my own hands and warm her up myself, in my bed. I can’t have her catching a fucking cold. A small smile flits over her lips.

It doesn’t skip my mind that this is the first one she’s willingly directed at me. A rush of satisfaction fills me as she walks to the mug, lifts it, and closes her eyes to take a drink. The satisfaction rapidly changes to lust when her pink tongue darts out to lick off some excess chocolate on her upper lip.

My obvious reaction to her is difficult to hide, so I opt not to and notice that her eyes flit down to my now tight pants. Hunger burns through me when she recognizes her effect on me, heat covering her cheeks. That’s one way to warm her up.

“This is really nice. Thank you.” She gives me another soft smile and fuck if that doesn’t make my cock even harder.

“What happened earlier?” I ask abruptly, needing to get away from her before I do something I shouldn’t – like kissing her again. But this time, there’s no Noah around to interrupt us as I carry her upstairs to my room, where I’ll toss her on my bed and use my teeth to take off those obscenely tight le—

“What do you mean?” she asks, her eyes darting away from me. I shake my head, trying to remove the image of her sprawled out in my bed.

“In the car when you had a panic attack. I want to know what triggered it,” I elaborate. My fists clench at my sides as I wonder what asshole traumatized her so badly.

She places the mug on the island carefully and raises a hand to push her glasses up her nose. A nervous gesture that is oh so fucking hot. I had no idea she even had poor eyesight. She’s clearly been wearing contacts until now.

“Without my glasses, I can’t see anything. That’s what triggered the panic attack. I’m sorry if I scared you.”

I narrow my eyes on her. Does she really not know what I meant? “There must’ve been an incident in the past that triggers panic attacks when you can’t see. I want to know what it was.” My jaw clenches and I add, “Who it was.”

Her gaze meets mine briefly, and she quickly looks away as she shifts on her feet. “It was a long time ago. You don’t need to know. Can I go now?”

It doesn’t matter? I need to know so I know whose head will roll for scarring her permanently with that trauma. But it doesn’t look like she’s ready to tell me. Later then. Now that I know her full name, I can get a full report covering her entire life on my desk in the morning. So as far as she can tell, I let it go. But I’ll be damned before I let anyone hold that level of control over her. They’re going to fucking pay.

I round the Island to stand in front of her and she takes a step back. I smirk, remembering the first time I saw her in my house, in this very kitchen. “Why did you switch from wearing contacts to glasses then? It’s clearly a trigger for you to have them off.”

“Because I like them. I bought them for me, not because anyone else thought I should or shouldn’t wear them. I wasn’t expecting you to just pluck them off my face the first chance you got!” Her voice raises as she talks, clearly emotionally charged by the subject.

It perplexes me why she feels the need to justify buying something simply because she wants to. “I told you. I didn’t want to break them.”

“I thought maybe you didn’t like them.” A blush creeps up her face again.

I’m a man of complete control. I pride myself on executing every situation to the highest standard. But she makes those walls that I hold so firm feel like they could crack with her softest touch. I don’t know what I would do if that happens. She’s gutting me with that look in her eyes. As if I could dislike anything that graces her delicate face. “I won’t do it again.”

“Which part?”

“Any of it.”

“Can I go now?” she demands petulantly. “I don’t like being late for work, and I don’t have a phone to text Andrea. She’ll be worried.”

“I’m serious. What happened in the car earlier can’t happen again,” I tell her and she flinches. I take a step forward to touch her, but she stumbles backward, raising her hands up to stop me.

“Fine, whatever. It can’t happen again. You were the one who kissed me. The first time too, it was you. So maybe you need to be saying this to yourself.” She frowns. “Can I go now?”

She’s right, of course. I watch her for several seconds, and she shifts her feet. “George is waiting outside,” I finally say, and she spins around immediately, leaving me alone in the kitchen with a mug still half-filled with hot chocolate. I follow her to the car and pass the mug through the window, which she begrudgingly takes.

“And Autumn, the glasses are perfect,” I add before tapping the roof of the car with my knuckles and George drives off.

It’s not until the car is out of sight that I realize the hold this woman has on me. I don’t drink hot chocolate, yet I made it for her and chased her down to make sure she finished it. Not to mention, she’s barely out the door, and I can’t stop thinking about when I’ll see her again.

I haven’t even fucked her yet and already she has me not knowing up from down. I shove a frustrated hand through my hair as I go back into my house. Autumn Montgomery is a dangerous woman. That doesn’t stop me from shooting Noah a message.

Autumn Montgomery. She went by Wren Montgomery for a while. Find out everything about her and have it on my desk tomorrow.

I hesitate, then send off another message.

And get me the latest iPhone.

If she had a phone, she could have texted Andrea as soon as the rain started. My sister would have been happy to go pick her up. Then she wouldn’t have had to wander alone in the rain and get lost. What would she have done if her glasses slipped off in the rain?

Had a panic attack all alone? Why the fuck do I even care? I hesitate, then send another text.

Send someone to Andrea’s apartment tomorrow. Gauge the damage to her place and estimate how long it will take to replace the roof.

Noah replies with a thumbs up. The sooner Andrea’s place is fixed, the sooner Autumn can get out of my house and hopefully, out of my head. But for whatever innate reason, I like having her under my roof. Looking after her, keeping her safe. It’s in my nature.

She's not yours to protect, Alexander. The sooner you accept that the better.

CHAPTER 15



AUTUMN

“*W*here have you been? Are you okay? Were you able to avoid the rain?” Andrea shoots off rapidly as soon as I enter the bar.

“Autumn! We’ve been worried you got caught in the rain and got lost,” Jake adds, running his gaze over my body. He’s a kind man in his late forties, and one of the locals. Ever since I started working at the bar, he always sits in my section and makes easy conversation with me. He’s lonely because his wife of twenty years suddenly asked for a divorce. Apparently, she wants to explore life outside of Brattleboro.

“Sorry I worried you,” I say, my gaze jumping from Andrea to Jake. “I did get lost, but I ran into Alex and he drove me home where I changed out of my wet clothes. Then he was kind enough to have his driver bring me here.”

“Alex? As in Alexander Beaufort? As in Andrea’s brother?” Jake looks surprised and Andrea narrows her eyes on me.

My heart starts racing as I remember the kiss and Andrea warning me off her brothers. Shit, does she suspect something? I lick my lips nervously and casually –I hope – glance around the bar. The wall clock reads fifteen minutes past six so I’m not that late, and Jake is the only patron in the bar at the moment, so I let out a quiet breath of relief.

“What’s that in your hand?” Andrea suddenly asks, and I glance at my hands frowning at the mug. Shit. After finishing the delicious drink, I couldn’t exactly leave the dirty mug in

Alex's car, so I took it with me. I planned to wash it here and take it back home—no, take it back to Alex's place – when the bar closes.

“A mug?” I don't mean for it to come out as a question, but it does.

“A mug? I can see it's a mug, Autumn. Why do you have it with you?”

“Um—I—it—” I stop abruptly. Why am I stuttering, damn it? “Alex gave it to me. After changing out of my clothes, he gave me the mug...with hot chocolate in it. I drank it in the car on the way here.” Which is mostly true.

I hold my breath as Andrea frowns. “Mrs. Staten was still at the house?”

“What? No, she wasn't.”

“So, Alex made it himself?” she asks. I toss a helpless glance at Jake, but he's staring at me with interest, also waiting for my response.

“Um, I guess so. I guess he felt sorry for me.” I give her a small smile. What's with the million questions? “He did catch me in the rain, completely drenched.”

“Hmmm,” she draws out the word, but, thankfully, the bar's door swings open and Keith rushes in.

“I'm so sorry I'm late! I had to wait the rain out and what's going on here?” He glances from me to Andrea to Jake and back again.

“Nothing,” Andrea answers and turns away. “What are you waiting for? Come on behind the bar, warm up.”

I blow out a relieved breath. That felt like an interrogation. If I wasn't already convinced, now I know, I need to stay the hell away from Alexander Beaufort. Andrea doesn't say anything to me the rest of the night, and we work together quietly in tandem. As predicted, the night ends up being really cold, and by quarter to midnight the bar is filled to the brim with people, searching for company and a bit of warmth.

“You’re really starting to get the hang of this,” Betty, another one of the locals and a regular, tells me with a smile as I place her drink in front of her. She’s seventy-two years old and orders watered-down alcohol every night.

She lives alone in a small house on Bradford Lane and always comes in around eleven when she’s done with her nightly bingo game with friends. We bonded over the fact that she’s my car’s namesake. She took it in stride, claiming it’s an honor to see someone so young give their car a name she’s convinced is going extinct with time.

“You think so? Thanks.” I return her smile.

“You know, my grandson, Matthew; he’s around your age. Single too,” she starts and I chuckle. I know all about Matthew. He works in finance in Burlington. He lives in a penthouse apartment and owns a sweet sports car. He’s six feet even and easy on the eyes.

“Betty, I told you. I’m not looking for a relationship right now. I just got out of a terrible one.”

She harrumphs as if she doesn’t believe me. “It’s too bad I didn’t meet you last week when my Matthew came for Thanksgiving, I could have introduced you two. I know you would have hit it off.”

I chuckle as I move to tend to another customer. The locals here are so nice and friendly. Earlier when I was walking around, before the rain started, they waved cheerfully and offered warm smiles. They’ve been so welcoming and understanding that I really feel like one of them.

Someone smiling at me without trying to steal from me? That might have been my first culture shock. I’ve lived in New York all my life, and let me tell you, if a stranger smiles at you in the middle of the streets, run. More often than not, the smile is to get your guard down while they casually steal your wallet.

“My Matthew might not be as fine as that one, but you two would make beautiful babies for me. Of course, I’ve not seen anyone nearly as handsome as them Beaufort boys.”

My heart skips, and I go still as I wonder which of the Beaufort brothers has caught Betty's attention. I casually move my gaze to the booth reserved for them when she releases a long suffering sigh. Gorgeous blue-green eyes although I can't exactly see their color from here—snag mine immediately.

I quickly glance away. On time too, because Andrea arrives next to me at that very moment. I was so absorbed in not looking at Alex – then full on staring – that I missed her approaching.

“Hey, Autumn. You can take a break now. I've got this.” She smiles at me.

“And just in time, my legs are so shaky, I feel like I might collapse,” which is true. Bartending is a leg workout on a whole other level. We stand for hours and take short ten minute breaks. But on the bright side, my legs have never looked better—and it's only been a week.

Andrea and Betty laugh. “Go to the office then, take a seat, and stretch your legs.” Andrea takes out a bunch of keys from her pocket and quickly searches through them. “This is the one.”

“Thank you,” I say gratefully.

“Don't forget to lock the door behind you once you get in,” Andrea calls out as I make my way around the bar counter. Her office is in the same hallway as the restrooms; oftentimes, after using the facility, curious patrons like to snoop. The perks of a small town is that everyone wants in on each other's business.

I give her a thumbs up, so she knows I heard her. One of the things I like most about Liquid Elixir is that even though it's a small town bar, it's classy. The vintage furnishings and old school jazz set the mood. The songs croon softly through the speakers so patrons can actually hear each other, and the crackling fireplace makes the night slip by.

I've noticed most people walk in here to have real conversations and catch up with friends. So different from Manhattan where people mostly go to bars to brood alone,

pick up sexual conquests, or just to get drunk. People wave at me as I weave through the tables, and I grin as I return their waves. I pointedly avoid glancing over at Alex's booth as I make my way into the hallway, leading to the office. I quickly unlock the office eager to finally get off my feet and just recline. It's been a long day.

I push my glasses up as I sink onto the oversized leather couch and recline, blinking at the ceiling. I stay unmoving for a few minutes before my bladder starts protesting, so I get up to use the private bathroom. I wash my hands and rinse off my face when I'm done. I'm walking back into the office when the door handle jiggles.

I freeze, holding my breath as I watch the door. A curious patron? Andrea would've knocked.

"Open the door, Autumn."

I recognize that voice. Alex. I slowly shuffle toward the door wondering what he's doing here. We covered everything back at his house, didn't we? We have nothing more to talk about. I hesitate.

"What do you want?" I call through the door.

"Open the door," he repeats calmly.

I sigh as I turn the lock. So much for avoiding him. How am I supposed to forget about him and the way he makes me feel when everywhere I turn, he's right there? It's not fair.

As soon as the lock clicks, Alex pushes the door open, and I take a few steps back to avoid being hit by the swinging door. He closes the door behind him, and I swallow as he locks it. His hair is not as slick as it usually is and the tips are a bit wet – like he took a shower right before coming to the bar. I don't know if it's the dim lighting of the office, but his eyes look darker, filled with an emotion that makes my throat tighten.

Why does he always have to look at me like that?

"Hi," I whisper shyly. He scrutinizes me quietly for a few seconds, then pushes a bag I didn't notice in his hands to my chest. I grab onto it on reflex.

“What’s this?” I ask, watching him warily as he stalks around the office.

“If you’re that curious, then open it.” He stops in front of Andrea’s desk and turns around to face me, slowly leaning back until his ass hits the edge of the desk. His long legs stretch forward, and his right foot crosses over his left. Alexander Beaufort is a devastatingly handsome man, and fuck me if he doesn’t know it.

I glance down at the bag in my hands and open it. Inside is the familiar package of an Apple iPhone. “What’s this?” I ask again, confused as to why he’s giving this to me.

“It’s yours,” he answers smoothly.

“No.” I say immediately, and I march toward him to drop the bag next to his hip on Andrea’s desk. As I spin to leave, he catches my wrist in a tight grip.

“Don’t be stubborn, Autumn. What happened earlier could have been much worse. You were in an unknown part of town, walking in the pouring rain barely able to see through the fog on your glasses. What would you have done if the person that saw you wasn’t me?”

I gulp. I’ve been trying not to think of that scenario. “Brattleboro is a safe town, with only a few petty criminals. I would’ve been fine.”

His eyes darken ominously, and he stands up from his relaxed pose against the desk. “*No*. Use your head, Autumn. Anything could’ve happened to you. The streets were empty of people because of the rain and—”

“But the street I got lost on wasn’t empty. You were there,” I point out causing his jaw to visibly clench.

“And what makes you think you’re safe with me?” His voice is low, but there’s an undertone of a threat in his tone.

“Ask anyone in this town; I’m probably the least safe person you could find yourself alone with.”

His grip on my wrist tightens even more. “So, take the fucking phone, Autumn, you don’t even have to say thank

you.”

He drops my wrist with a muttered curse. “Whatever. Take the phone or don’t,” he growls and stalks out of the office, leaving me alone. I rub the fingers of my other hand over the spot where Alex held me and gingerly walk to the offering like it might jump up and bite me.

When I remove the phone’s box from the bag, a piece of paper flutters to the floor, and I bend to pick it up. The receipt with extended warranty, and it’s already in my name. He went out of his way to go out and buy this phone just for me. My throat closes up and tears sting the back of my eyes. I immediately blink them away, but a few escape, anyway. I’m such a weirdo, tearing up whenever people are kind to me. But it’s so rare to receive kindness without expectations.

In foster care, parents took me in because of the payout they got from the government, and they let me know it. When they bought me anything, it was usually because a social worker was coming that day to check on me, so the gift was a bribe to keep me quiet. Not that I would have said anything. None of them were particularly cruel; I was invisible to them, a means to an end.

When I finally got to my foster mom – my current mom – I thought I finally lucked out. But to her, I was just a substitute for the daughter she lost a year before she adopted me. And when she realized I wasn’t ever going to be the same as her daughter, she more or less neglected me, only remembering me when she needed something.

Even at the peak of my relationship with Larson, when he bought things for me, it was always in his name, so he could take it back whenever I did or said something to piss him off. And now, this handsome man just basically threatened me after doing something so sweet, solely for my well-being. Just who the hell is Alexander Beaufort?

I’m still a mess when the office’s door swings open. I immediately stiffen, but relax when I hear Andrea’s voice. “I told you to lock the door after you, so what’s wrong?”

I sniffle and quickly wipe away my tears. “Nothing.”

“Am I working you too hard? You have a day off tomorrow you can use to relax and be a tourist. It would be fun and—” She had been walking as she talked, and now she trails off when she sees the paper in my hand. “What’s that?”

I hesitate, briefly wondering if I should tell her the truth. “A receipt,” I whisper and pass the paper to her.

“You bought a phone?” She frowns, not understanding why it’s making me tear up.

“No. Alex bought the phone...for me,” I explain.

Her brows relax. “He was most likely worried. You did say that he caught you in the middle of the rain while you were lost. He knew you didn’t call me because you had no phone. It’s a good thing.”

I stare at her blankly. Somehow, that wasn’t the reply I was expecting. She’s been cautious about me being close with her brothers, and she even looked suspicious while she was questioning me earlier. Now she’s just taking it for granted that her brother bought a phone worth a thousand dollars for me?

“What?” she asks when I stare at her quietly.

“The phone is really expensive and—”

“I know you have a thing about people buying things for you because of your ex, the bastard. But sweetheart, that one K is nothing to a man like Alex. He’s not going to hold it over you.”

The fact that the phone is in my name is proof enough of that. “I know but—”

“No, buts. Just take the phone and enjoy it. Now, come on.” She tucks her hand into the crook of my elbow. “We still have an hour or so before we kick everyone out of the bar and go home. We’ll talk later.”

CHAPTER 16



ALEXANDER

Flick. Flick. Flick. The quiet whoosh of a lighter igniting.

I try to concentrate on the guy – Mason, I think – tied to the chair in front of me in this godforsaken warehouse, but it’s fucking hard with that incessant sound only a foot away. I’m already on edge and terse from my interaction with Autumn last night.

Flick.

“Would you stop that?” I burst out angrily, spinning to level a glare at my insolent little brother.

He’s lounging back in the plastic chair, tipped back to its hind legs while he turns on and off the obnoxious gold lighter in his hand. Dad’s lighter I might add.

“Sorry, Alex, but I find it soothing amid all this gore.” He sounds bored as he flicks on the damn lighter again.

“If you’re going to keep doing that then get the hell out.” I point to the door. Noah and a couple of my guys are on the other side, serving as lookout. Not that the cops would bat an eye, but I like being discreet.

He rights the chair and slowly gets to his feet. A year ago, when I first introduced him to this side of the *family business*, he couldn’t bear it, now he seems almost...*numb* to it all. “Whatever. Can you just get it over with already? It’s too early for this shit.” And the fucker yawns.

I roll my eyes and turn to face Mason again. “Now, where were we?” But he isn’t looking at me at all. No, his frightened gaze is fixed on Ezra. I tilt my head back wondering what the hell that asshole is doing now.

He has a cigarette tucked in his mouth and is slowly raising the lighter to it. “What the hell?”

“I’ve got this, Alexander, let me handle it.”

My first instinct is to say no, but then I pause. It wasn’t long ago that he got roaring drunk because he had to deal with something like this, so him offering to handle it is reassuring.

“Fine,” I agree, taking a step back and removing my gloves, noting that my knuckles are starting to bruise even beneath the protection of the leather. Mason has been on the receiving end of my frustrations for nearly forty five minutes and still hasn’t cracked. Impressive, I’ll give him that. Ezra grins and Mason whimpers.

Ezra flicks the lighter again and lights up his cigarette. I clench my jaw so I don’t scold him. This isn’t the place for that. And last I heard, he was trying to quit.

“Listen, Mason. I’ve been trying to quit smoking for weeks. Weeks. This is the first smoke I’ve had in a long while, and you know why I’m smoking?” He removes the cigarette from his lips to blow smoke in his face.

Mason starts into a coughing fit and my brother grins. I frown as I watch him. “That’s right! It’s because of you. You made me break my streak, so I’m not feeling very forgiving toward you right now. You’re going to tell me what I need to know, or you’re going to get very acquainted with my lighter.”

My frown deepens when Ezra drops his cigarette on the floor, grinds it down with his boot and flicks on his lighter again. Just what in the hell is he doing? He places the lit lighter right beneath Mason’s nose and moves it back and forth. Mason’s eyes follow the movement rapidly and his chest starts to heave.

“What? You don’t believe me?” Ezra sighs heavily. “I guess my reputation as the nice Beaufort brother precedes

me.” He lifts his thumb off the lighter wheel, and the light flicks off.

He tucks his hand into his suit jacket and takes out a flask. He opens it and upends the content all over Mason. “Ezra,” I warn.

“I’ve watched you pummel him for the better part of an hour, Alex. You rearranged his face with your fist, and your shirt is stained. All that for what? If he’s not going to talk, then I guess we have no use for him.”

He has a point. I tug on the collar of the stained shirt. After this, I’ll have to go home to change before going into the office. I sigh and wave at Ezra for him to go ahead. He flicks on the lighter and Mason starts screaming.

“Please, please, please. It wasn’t me. It wasn’t me. I swear to god, it wasn’t me.” The fucker actually looks toward me as he cries hysterically. He looks to *me* for mercy. That’s a first. Ezra is usually who they try to reason with when they start to break.

My lips tug up in a smile, pride swelling in my chest. That’s my fucking brother.

“Who did it then? Who stole our money?” I ask calmly and he slumps forward, his cries dramatically getting louder.

“Better think fast. My hit of nicotine is wearing off and my hand is starting to shake, Mason. Wouldn’t want me to accidentally drop the lighter, now would you?”

Mason’s head snaps up at Ezra’s threat, and he starts singing. “It was all Larson’s idea. I swear! He reached out to me last year about how we deserve a cut for all the grunt work we do for the Beauforts. I thought it was all bullshit, of course, but he’s a master manipulator, and he made me do it!” He ends on a wail, snot actually trailing out of his nose. “He made me do it, I swear.” The man is practically sobbing now. I shake my head in disgust, there’s no loyalty left in this world.

Larson fucking Brown. He’s a loose cannon and after visiting him at his engagement party last year to issue him a stern warning, I thought he’d straightened up. Fucking bastard.

“Guess my work here is done then.” Ezra starts to leave the warehouse, but I stop him with a raised hand.

“How?” I ask Mason. “How did you move the money under my nose?” I’m a stickler with the books and know about every penny exchanged through Beaufort Construction. It was quite accidental that I noticed the missing funds two months ago. It took seven fucking weeks to find the culprit because they were wily.

Mason snuffles, his cries finally dying down. Does he think confessing and shifting the blame to Larson gets him off the hook? If so, then he’s even dumber than I thought.

“He had me discreetly divert two percent of the funds into Bitcoin, and then he redirected it through the dark web to an offshore account. From there, it went back through the web and was ultimately used to purchase antiques, which are then resold anonymously, and the money is put into a hedge fund.”

Smart, very smart. Too smart and clean for the likes of Larson and Mason.

“Who else was in on it?” Ezra asks, having come to the same conclusion.

“I don’t know,” he answers. Ezra flicks on his lighter and the fucker starts crying again. “I swear I don’t know! Larson didn’t tell me, and I didn’t question it as long as I got my share.”

“We’re done here,” I say. I pick up my suit jacket from the back of the chair Ezra was lounging on earlier to drape it over my arm; then my brother and I leave the warehouse.

I stop briefly to speak to Noah. “Take care of it.” I nod to the warehouse, and Noah nods in understanding. When I glance to my side, Ezra is already heading toward his car and I call out to him. He pauses to toss a questioning look at me.

“Good work in there,” I tell him and he smiles.

“Psychology, Alex.” He taps his index finger on his temple. “Works every time.” He does a two finger salute and then gets into his car. I make my way to my own car and George drives me home.

I hurry into my house, taking the elevator to the second floor where my bedroom is to avoid running into either of my house guests. I check the time on my watch: 9:18 AM. They're probably still sleeping after their long night at the bar anyway.

I scowl when I enter my bedroom to see Andrea trying to open my nightstand drawer. "Why are you snooping?"

She doesn't even jump back or startle. She probably heard my car pull up, meaning she wanted me to find her in here. I need to start locking my bedroom door, at least while Andrea is still here. I never lock it because my staff would never dare cross me. Not my sister, though. She's an unapologetic busybody, always sticking her nose where it doesn't belong.

"Not like you make it easy. The only accessible thing about this room is the door leading to it. Everything else is locked up," she complains with an eyeroll.

I sigh, not in the mood to deal with her after the morning I've had. I fold my suit jacket and drop it into the laundry basket by the door and tug on my tie. I fold that as well and drop it into the basket.

Andrea's gaze drops to the blood staining the front of my shirt. "Do I even want to know?"

"Why are you here, Andrea?"

"My apartment. When are you fixing it?"

"Soon," I answer noncommittally. My man is going over today to check out what needs to be done, but I'm not going to tell her that. I like keeping her on her toes because she wouldn't hesitate to do the same to me.

She rolls her eyes again, and I take off my shirt, ignoring her. I unbuckle my belt and move to unzip my trousers when she makes a sound of disgust. She makes sure to hit my shoulder with hers as she walks past me to the door.

"Asshole," she mutters.

I lock the door behind her, not trusting her not to come back while I'm in the shower. Then I take off the rest of my clothes and walk to my en suite. I keep the shower short

because I have an important meeting in two hours, and after getting dressed, I brush my hair back.

I opt to take the stairs down instead of the elevator. I'm almost at the front door when I remember the report I got on the woman I'm meeting soon: Charlotte Square, a potential business partner in my expansion of Beaufort Construction into Burlington.

I haven't seen her in a year, and even then we didn't exchange more than a few words, so I had my PI dig into her. According to my report she's an avid fan of astrophysics and goes to several conferences and seminars a year. Even going as far as traveling to Australia a couple of months ago.

I backtrack to the first floor where my library is located. I have a few of Stephen Hawking's books on my shelves. My plan is to toss them on my desk for her to see when she comes in. It'll be a good ice-breaker for this first meeting and soften her to work with us.

I draw the door open and pause when I see Autumn standing on her tiptoes trying to reach a book on a top shelf of the fiction section. She's wearing the shirt – *my* shirt – that she wore the first night I saw her in my house with skimpy shorts that end just below her perfect ass.

She spins around and gasps when she sees me standing there. "Alexander."

There's something about the breathy way she says my name. I immediately want to hear her say it like that again, and again, and again, but in a different scenario, of course. The image of her tossing her head back on a moan as she rode me in my car yesterday floats through my mind, and I start walking toward her. Her eyes widen as she watches me approach, and her tongue darts out to lick her lips.

I swallow a groan at the sight of that pink tongue. I tasted it yesterday. In fact, the taste is seared into my brain, and right now the only thing I care about is devouring every inch of her.

CHAPTER 17



AUTUMN

*P*anic hits me when Alexander prowls toward me with that look on his face that tells me the only thoughts in his head are dark and full of desire, which can't happen because Andrea is on the other side of this shelf!

I jump away from the shelf, heart nearly pounding out of my chest, and I raise my fingers to study the chipped polish on my nails. "Andrea, my polish looks awful, I forgot to ask you yesterday if I could use a shot of alcohol to clean the rest."

Alex stops walking, tilting his head at me in question. I nod frantically, blinking to try to communicate that Andrea is in the room.

"Would that even work? I have some polish remover in my room, remind me to bring it to you later." Andrea's voice is distracted.

"Thanks. I love having freshly painted nails, but the least I can do is remove this chipped atrocity." I smile as I say it. It was the only thing I didn't let Larson change about me. Applying a coat – or several – of polish on my nails is my form of therapy, and a way for me to decompress. Of course, I only used nude polish after Larson and I got together, but still. What matters is I kept the ritual all for myself.

"You know, when I get my first paycheck, the first thing I'm buying is bright red nail polish. I miss it too much." I glance up, making my eyes go wide in hopes that will infuse my voice with surprise. "Oh, hi, Alex. Hey, Andrea, didn't you say you needed to talk to him?"

Alex's lips part as he watches me, his eyes darkening. My cheeks heat up because I know what that look means.

Andrea strolls out from behind the shelf. "Yeah, well, I already spoke to him this morning. I don't need to anymore. Why are you here?"

Alexander doesn't answer; in fact his gaze doesn't shift from me. Fuck, he's going to give us away after all my hard work. What am I even thinking? There's nothing to give away! But I can't help the stab of guilt.

"Um, thanks for the phone." I mutter, hoping that will get him moving.

He grips a hand behind his neck, clearly agitated, then abruptly turns away and marches to the row of bookshelves on the other side of his impressive home library. There are thousands upon thousands of books here, all categorized on dark, mahogany shelving. There's even a wooden ladder that runs along a gold bar for reaching the higher shelves. A plush velvet armchair is situated by the window; the perfect spot to sip a hot chocolate and get lost in a new read while rain pelts the glass. It's a book lover's heaven, and I've taken full advantage of it.

Andrea looks from me to her brother and back again, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. I use one hand to push my glasses up my nose and the other to push my hair back as I smile awkwardly at her.

Alexander comes back toward us waving a couple of heavy tomes. "I came for these."

Is that a textbook on Astrophysics? I squint at the book. Strange choice for a home library. He gives me a short nod and then backs out of the library.

"Is something going on between you two?" Andrea asks.

"What? No, of course not! What do you mean?"

She shakes her head slowly. "First he sees you in the rain and offers you a ride home. I imagine he was at a construction site when he saw you. Alex willingly left a work site to drive you home."

“Well, I guess so.” It wasn’t a question, but I feel the need to answer, anyway.

“Then when you got home, he made you hot chocolate while you were in the shower. He had George drive you to the bar, with said mug of hot chocolate that could have spilled in his precious car. Alex did all that? My brother, Alexander-the grump-Beaufort?”

“I was very careful to avoid any spills in his car,” I assure her, not sure where she’s going with this.

“And then, he bought you a phone, while making sure to add your line to his plan. You’re saying there’s nothing going on between you two...which can only mean one thing—” Her eyes go comically wide as she does the math and obviously comes to the wrong conclusion. “Alex has a *crush* you! How adorable.”

I’m so relieved at how left field her conclusion is that a laugh escapes my lips. And once I start, I can’t stop. Alexander Beaufort, a crush on me? I continue laughing, a couple of tears even escaping from the corners of my eyes. Andrea glares at me.

For some reason her glare is hilarious and it sends me into another fit of laughter. “Oh my goodness, I’m s–sorry. I’m not laughing at you, I swear.”

“What’s so funny, then?” She crosses her arms over her chest.

I inhale deeply, my laughter slowly winding down. “He doesn’t like me, Andrea, I promise you.” At least I’m sure of that. The man might want me, but he doesn’t like me. He doesn’t *like* anyone.

“You don’t know him, Autumn. If it were Ezra, I wouldn’t pay it any mind, because that’s the kind of person he is. But Alex? He doesn’t go out of his way for anyone.”

“Maybe he just feels sorry for me,” I point out. “After all, I’m living in his house because I’m homeless and have no money. Then he saw me drenched in the rain. I even had a

panic attack in front of him when—” I clamp my mouth shut. Shit.

“You had a panic attack?” Andrea grabs my arm. “When? What happened?”

It doesn’t feel right lying to her, but I can’t exactly tell her the truth, either. “My glasses got fogged up in the rain, and I couldn’t see. It led to a panic attack. He had to calm me down and then clean the glasses for me.”

“Oh, Autumn. I’m so sorry.” I gasp in surprise when she wraps her arms around me in a hug. “That must have been terrifying. Especially being locked in a car with the local grouch,” she adds with a snicker.

I slowly relax in her arms and hug her with a soft laugh. Andrea has a way of getting you to open up and then making you completely at ease. This must be what it’s like to have close girlfriends. It’s nice... really nice. Even before Larson made me cut ties with my friends, we weren’t all that close. Not really. I’ve always made friends easily, but kept people at arm’s length. I don’t even remember the last time I was hugged by a friend.

“Do you want me to take you on a tour of Brattleboro? It would be a VIP experience with a third generation local. I know all the good places.” Andrea grins, dropping her suspicions about me and Alex. At least for now.

“That would be amazing.” I say, returning her wide smile.

* * *

ANDREA DRIVES us to the Liquid Elixir where she parks her car so we can tour Downtown on foot, starting on Main Street. The streets are lined with huge elm trees, whose branches reach across and create a canopy over the road. At this time of year, the leaves have changed to orange, which adds an enchanting feel to the already quaint and charming town.

Andrea talks a bit about the town as she points out small shops and some landmarks, like the Wells Fountain at the Northern end of Main Street, which was designed in the 1800s

by a Brattleboro architect, who was actually a cousin of President Rutherford Hayes!

“Brattleboro may be a small town but it’s the city of small towns.” Andrea says, nodding with pride. “We actually have five colleges and college campuses, which is more than many cities can boast. Our population fluctuates heavily from students depending upon the time of year.”

Downtown Brattleboro has everything lined up in cute little stone-front stores with colorful awnings; from food and drink to galleries and entertainment, all within a three block stroll. Andrea points out Mocha Joes, which is everyone’s go to for coffee.

“But if you ask me, Patio Coffee has the best cup of joe in town.” We run into the shop to grab a warm drink, which she offers to pay for, but I decline. “I can’t believe you’d choose a hot chocolate over what I just said was the best coffee in town!” She sips from her cup and lets out a dramatic groan.

“I’m not a caffeine junkie, like someone I know,” I tease, and she hits my shoulder playfully, making me stumble a few steps. And there are a ton of breweries. Like a ton! On Main Street alone, I counted three breweries. In the Downtown district, the total is at least nine.

“And now for the crown jewel. Voila!” Andrea spreads her arms out dramatically as we reach the end of the street. She points to a breathtaking four-story art deco building. *Latchis Hotel* is written in bold neon letters.

We take a right turn, and I see the building extends beyond, making it quite large. About the same size if not even bigger than the New York Public Library, where Larson insisted we have our engagement party. And a few feet away there’s another sign; *Latchis Theater*, attached to the same building.

“This building has been a fixture of Main Street since 1938. A town within a town, all under one roof.” Andrea beams.

“A town within a town?”

She nods to say, “Yeah. That was the trademark used to advertise the building when it was first commissioned. And you know what? Beaufort construction was just starting out when it was built. My great-grandfather was one of the contractors hired. They used the tagline a town within a town because the building houses a variety of businesses. A theater. A pub. Restaurant. Shops. Bars. A five-star hotel. A Lounge. Whatever entertainment you’re looking for, you’re bound to find it here.”

Wow. “It must be nice to live in a place where your family is so deeply rooted.” I smile. “I can’t imagine what that’s like.” I don’t even know who my biological parents are, much less where my third generation grandparents worked.

“It is.” She drapes her arm over my shoulder and we continue our tour. But we only get to walk around Downtown because the skies suddenly darken. So, we hightail it back to the Liquid Elixir.

Andrea pauses in front of the bar to raise her nose up, inhaling deeply. “Hmm. we just might get snow tonight. There’s a dryness to the air.”

I also sniff, but I don’t smell anything different so I just shrug.

“Are you coming?” she asks when I linger on the sidewalk.

“Actually, I have to make a call.” She nods and goes inside without me. I hesitate as I take out my brand new phone from my pocket. I’ve been debating calling Mom all day. I miss her even though we aren’t all that close, but at the same time, I’m worried about the response I’ll get. I did walk out on my wedding without so much as leaving her a note.

I sigh as I type out her number, then I pause as a thought occurs to me. I exit the phone app and quickly go to my settings where I change my ID to private. I don’t trust her not to give Larson my number if our conversation doesn’t end well. And once she has my number, she might start calling to nag me to come back to New York.

I hold my breath as the line rings. “Please don’t pick up, please don’t pick up,” I murmur softly, biting down on my lip.

“Hello?”

My heart skips when her familiar voice comes on the line. I blink back sudden tears as a wave of nostalgia hits me. “Mom,” I whisper, my voice breaking a little.

“Wren? Is that you?”

Yeah, even Mom started calling me Wren when Larson demanded I stop going by Autumn, which is *a season, not a name*, he insisted What a load of shit.

“Hello?” Mom’s voice is harder, and I quickly shake my head.

“Hi, Mom. Yeah, it’s me. *Autumn.*”

“Wren! Oh, my God, are you out of your mind? Where the hell are you?”

CHAPTER 18



AUTUMN

“*I*t’s okay, Mom. I’m fine. I—”

“You’re fine? You’re fine?!” She explodes. “Well, good for you that you’re fine, Wren. Because nobody here is fine. Do you know what you’ve put us through this past week? Do you even care?”

My shoulders slump as I sigh. “I didn’t mean to worry you. I’m sorry. I just really needed to get away, I was suffocating —”

“Suffocating?” She interrupts me again. “I hope you don’t mean by that nice man, who paid for everything including that gorgeous wedding, might I add. Why can’t you be grateful for what you have, Wren? Do you know how many women are jonesing for a man like Larson Brown? Even now, a week after you humiliated him he’s not angry, he’s just worried about you. And you have the nerve to say you were suffocated?”

“Yeah well, they can all have him.” I mutter without thinking.

“What? Young lady, are you out of your mind? Where are you? You’ll come back home this instant!”

I sigh again. This is the thing about Mom; it’s not been more than a week since we’ve last talked and already I’ve forgotten how she gets. She never allows me to get a word in when she feels she’s justified. And she thinks Larson is worried about me? I say bullshit. He’s worried about his precious reputation being tarnished, that’s all.

He's probably furious and going on an angry rampage. But that will all be behind closed doors, of course. The one thing Larson loves more than himself is his pristine image. He takes care of his golden boy reputation like a mother takes care of her first born child.

"I'm not coming back. I just called you to put your mind at ease, so you wouldn't worry about me." Not that I should've bothered. The only thing she seems to be worried about is losing Larson as her son-in-law.

Mom is silent for a few seconds; then she says softly, "Why is the caller ID blocked? How am I supposed to reach you again? I worry about you, Wren."

I roll my eyes when I realize what she's trying to do. "It's Autumn," I say forcefully. "And the ID is blocked because I'm using a friend's phone. I'm sure you're aware that I left New York with nothing but the clothes on my back."

"And whose fault is that? Nobody chased you. You started running all on your own. Everything you're facing now is your own doing."

"I have to go."

"No! Wait, honey. I shouldn't have said that. Look, I don't know what happened between you two, but I get that you were angry. If you come back now and apologize, I'm sure Larson will take you back. He still loves you and is worried out of his mind. He thinks perhaps you were kidnapped."

"Why would he think that? I left a note." I roll my eyes.

"Yeah well, the note might have been to throw us off the scent of the crime."

I scoff in disbelief. "Scent of the crime? What crime? Whatever, Mom, just tell him I'm okay. There's no crime."

"Wre—Autumn, honey, I know all about lovers' tiffs. I've had them myself over the years, and let me tell you, you always make up. Always. Don't ruin a good thing over a temporary lapse in judgment."

“What?” I raise my index and middle fingers over my temple, where a migraine is starting to make itself known. “This wasn’t just a lover’s tiff or *my* lack of good judgment. It’s an accumulation of various, pretty serious, issues we had. Issues you know all about!”

Of course, she knows all about lover’s tiff. After she adopted me, her husband at the time was very angry. He was still mourning his daughter and having to look at me – when I looked so much like her – as it seemed to make his pain worse. A month after my adoption, he served Mom divorce papers, and since then she’s had a rotating door of husbands. She’s currently on number six.

I’ve never considered any of them my father because they couldn’t care less about me, and they never lasted long. At worst, I was like extra furniture in the house. At best, an extension of their wife, like an extra limb they had to feed or something. I learned to detach myself from them. But I’ve never quite been able to detach from Mom. She might not be the best mother, but she’s all I have.

She sighs impatiently. “I know. And you’ve made your point. I’m sure Larson has learned his lesson. You don’t have to stay away any longer. Come back home, please.”

“I am home.” I say defiantly and realize, it’s true. It’s only been a week but Brattleboro already feels more like home than New York ever did. The people here are genuine, and I feel included, like I’m part of a big family. I actually have friends...or a friend, but she’s a great one – a real one! That’s more than I had in New York.

“You don’t know what you’re saying, Wren. The temperature is getting colder, where are you even staying?” Is that a hint of concern in her voice, or is it just wishful thinking?

“I’m fine. I’m staying with a friend until I get on my feet,” I assure her.

“A friend? What friend? You don’t have any friends!”

I close my eyes in resignation, wanting this conversation to be over already. “Just know that I’m not exposed to the elements.”

“Listen to me very carefully, Wren. I’ve given it some thought. You don’t have to stay with Larson if you don’t want to.”

I hold my breath, a tentative hope budding in my heart. Is she finally coming to my side? “Really?”

“Of course. You can come back for now and apologize. Get married and after a year or two, we can set him up, and you’ll divorce on the grounds of cheating. You’d get half of everything, and we’ll never want for anything again.”

My face falls as my hope is dashed, yet again. You’d think I’d have learned my lesson after fourteen years of this. “Are you serious?” Clear disappointment laced in my voice. “No, Mom.”

“Don’t be so shortsighted and selfish, Wren! Think of someone other than yourself for a change, will you?”

My eyes slide shut. “For the first time, Mom, I’m finally putting myself first. Can’t you just be happy for me and give me your support?”

“This is getting ridiculous. Hold on, I was driving when I got your call. I’m almost at Larson’s office. You two need to straighten out your spat yourselves. Being the middleman clearly isn’t working.”

“What? Mom!” What part of this *isn’t just a lover’s spat* does she not understand? “Look, I just didn’t want you worrying. That’s why I called. Now I really have to go.”

“No, Wren. You stay on the phone until you speak with Larson. Don’t you hang up on—” I end the call on those angry words and blow out a breath. Why can’t I just have a normal, caring mom? Hot tears spill down my cheeks and I sniff, letting them flow.

“Hey, sweetie, are you okay?” I stare blankly at the woman looking at me in concern. I quickly wipe my tears off my cheeks, realizing that I’m crying in the middle of a busy

sidewalk. It's not lost on me that this random woman has shown more concern over my well-being than my own mother.

"Yes, I'm fine, thank you." She doesn't look like she believes me, but she nods and continues on her way. As soon as she's out of sight, I make my way to the side of Liquid Elixir, where the stairs leading to Andrea's apartment are hidden.

Away from the sidewalk where everyone can see me, I give myself a minute to feel sorry for myself. I replay the conversation with Mom in my mind, wondering if it would have gone differently if she was my biological mother who truly loved me. That's a moot point, and I will never have that.

My vision blurs, a sob catching at the back of my throat. I'm completely shocked when I hear a light flick and a pair of booted feet come into view. I let out a short shriek as I jump back.

"You good?"

I open my eyes at the familiar voice. "Ezra!" He's leaning against the gate, leading to the apartment. "Oh, my God, you scared me."

"So, I gather. Sorry." He gives me a quick smile. As my heartbeat slows, I finally take him in. His dark hair is slicked back like Alex's usually is, and he's in a suit like he was just at the office.

A cigarette is dangling from the corner of his lips and an expensive looking – *obnoxious* – gold lighter in his hand. He raises a brow in question when I'm silent for too long.

"You smoke?"

"You cry?" he returns. I give him my back as I quickly dry my face.

"I didn't know you smoked," I say, turning to face him when I'm relatively composed.

"I'm trying to quit, but it won't quit me." He gives me a boyish smile, and I chuckle. "What's wrong? Why were you crying?"

I sigh, “Nothing much. Just sucks sometimes.”

“What sucks?”

“Life. Emotions. Parents. The question should be, what doesn’t suck?”

Ezra chuckles and agrees, “You have a point.” He takes the cigarette from his lips and tosses it into the bin next to the gate. “Wanna eat it off? I’d say drink it off, but I don’t want to corrupt you.”

“Do you drink that often?”

“I’m trying to cut back.” He shrugs, and I study him for a moment. The more I find out about Ezra, the more complex he turns out to be. He’s more than just the charming exterior he exudes.

“Liquid Elixir doesn’t serve food.” I finally say.

“That’s okay. I know a place.”

CHAPTER 19



ALEXANDER

Ezra blows off the meeting with Charlotte Square. Since we were able to come to a mutually beneficial agreement during our first meeting, she decided to go ahead with the plans for the expansion of Beaufort construction into Burlington.

Squares are a big deal in the Burlington construction and real estate scene. Charlotte's late father's company – hers now I suppose – is to Burlington like Beaufort Construction is to Brattleboro. That is, it's the only thriving construction company in the whole city, and it's slowly taking over the real estate market. She oversees the business aspect, while her twin sister oversees the more hands-on aspect.

Before Dad retired he'd been working tirelessly to break into the Burlington market, but Charles Square, Charlotte's dad, had the city locked down. Dad even went so far as trying to secure an engagement between Charlotte and Ezra, but for some reason the two couldn't be in the same room without fighting.

He wanted me to step up, but I refused. If I'm ever going to get married, it will be on my terms. Ezra and I were both supposed to have this meeting with her, but the asshole texted me an hour ago not to expect him. I let it go because he was instrumental in getting the information out of Mason a few days ago, but he should have at least given a reason for not showing up. I know it's probably because he's trying to avoid the woman I'm meeting with.

“I think we’ve got everything ironed out as much as we can.” Charlotte offers me a tight smile from across the desk.

When her father died last year, Charlotte and her twin were still in their final year of business school and were understandably overwhelmed. That’s where I swooped in. I sent someone competent to take over for her, temporarily, of course, while virtually overseeing things to make sure the company flourished. I handed the reins back to Charlotte early this year, but the construction demands in the city are too much for one company, and Charlotte had declared she and her sister didn’t want to spend their entire life in the office, like their father did.

I immediately reached out to her when I got word from my contact in her company.

I nod and say, “We do indeed. Thanks for being so cooperative, Ms. Square. Since you have no objections, why don’t you sign on the dotted lines?” I pass my pen to her and she signs the contract with a flourish.

The contract essentially states that Square Construction and Beaufort Construction will co-exist in Burlington without trying to sabotage each other. The party that breaks the contract will have to leave the city. It’s the only conclusion my legal team could come up with to get past the old men on her board. I don’t need the whole city, at any rate. A piece of the pie is more than enough, for now. Our families aren’t rivals; we have our boundaries, and we’ve always honored them, which is why I helped out in their time of need. But don’t think I won’t act if that changes. Cross me and you’re done. Period.

Now that that’s out of the way, my shoulders relax.

“Enough with the Ms. Square nonsense. We’ve just essentially signed a truce and with our history, I think it’s time to let go of all formalities. So, please call me Charlie.”

“Then I insist you call me Alex.”

She drops my pen on the desk and gets to her feet. “That sounds great, Alex. Why don’t we grab a bite to eat? It’s

getting late, and if I wait until I'm back in the city, I'll be famished."

"Of course, my treat." I also stand up, straightening my tie, then shrug on my jacket. "I know a great place."

I study Charlie as we get into the elevator: light brown hair dyed nearly platinum blonde around her face is pulled back in a professional chignon. Piercing blue and brown eyes. Heterochromia, I believe. And a sharp mind. She's a long way from the young woman who was nearly engaged to Ezra a few years ago and the heartbroken woman I saw at her father's funeral last year.

"I thought your brother was supposed to join this meeting? What was his name again?" she asks easily, running her hand through her hair.

"Ezra. An unavoidable situation came up so he regrettably couldn't join us," I say smoothly, not buying her nonchalance at all. Doesn't remember his name? I very much doubt that.

"Good. I know he can be a bit of a troublemaker, and our meeting might not have gone as smoothly had he joined us."

I release a noncommittal, "Hmm."

Once we're outside, she chooses not to ride in my car. "Thanks, but I don't want to come back here to get my car. I'll just drive home from the restaurant."

"You drove here yourself?" I'm surprised. Burlington is about two and half hours by car. I would've expected her driver to have brought her. "What about your driver?"

"I don't have one." She grins and her cheeks dimple. "I love to drive. It helps clear my mind."

"I see," I reply for lack of what to say. She gives me a two-finger salute so reminiscent of Ezra that I stare at her back as she walks away. My brows shoot up when she gets into a bright red Subaru BRZ. Surprising.

She flashes her headlights at me. I turn to see George already holding the door open. "Peter Havens," I tell him as I get in.

“Very good, sir,” he replies.

I text Ezra as we leave the office.

Meet me at Liquid Elixir in 2 hours. Don't even think about being late.

I'll try to round up dinner as quickly as I can so I can scold him, then go home to Autumn. Will she even be there? She has her first night off from the bar tonight, and she's a young woman in her twenties. What if she decided to go out?

No, she wouldn't. I bet I'll find her curled up in the library, nose in a silly book.

“We're here, sir.” I glance at the popular Downtown restaurant. I probably should have called in advance to make a reservation, but they'll make an exception for me. They always do.

“Wait for me. This won't take long,” I instruct as I get out of the car. I watch Charlie expertly park her car down the road. When she gets out, I'm taken aback to see her hair is now let down her back.

She gives me a dimpled grin as she approaches. I realize a little objectively that she's actually quite pretty. So, why aren't I interested? She took her hair down for dinner and her lips are now glistening, which means she's trying to look good for me. Or is that an arrogant assumption?

Normally, I wouldn't hesitate to flirt with her through dinner, if you can call unrelenting eye contact flirting. It's my only move, and it hasn't failed me yet. But for whatever reason, the effort sounds unappealing tonight. For her, anyway.

“This place looks amazing! But it seems to be packed, will we be able to get a table?”

“We better,” I mutter, suddenly in a foul mood as I march through the entrance of the restaurant. Damn it all.

“Okayyyyyy,” I hear Charlie say behind me. I wonder if she's rolling her eyes right now, but I don't care enough to turn back to check.

“Mr. Beaufort!” Rosie, the hostess walks forward, fluttering her hands nervously. “We weren’t expecting you tonight.”

“My companion and I need a table. Is my usual available?”

“Actually, the other Mr. Beaufort is at that table tonight.” I know it’s not my father leaving the comforts of his private chef to venture into town tonight, which means Ezra blew off our meeting to take one of his side pieces out? Fuck, I’m going to make him regret it.

“But we can get you one! Give me a moment, please,” Rosie adds quickly and rushes inside. I glance back at Charlie who’s gone stiff as a board.

“Is there a problem?” I raise a brow, not caring about the answer either way. I’m already regretting agreeing to this dinner.

“She said ‘the other Mr. Beaufort.’ That would be Ezra... right?”

“And?” I query, not seeing what the problem is.

“You know what? I don’t think I’m that hungry anymore. We should probably take a rain ch—” But she’s interrupted by the waitress returning.

“Follow me sir, madam.”

We trudge through the throng of diners, Rosie leading us toward the back of the restaurant. A tinkling laugh suddenly hits my ears, and a chill runs down my spine. My head snaps in the direction of the sound. I immediately spot Ezra, seated facing me, but he’s not what has my attention. It’s the woman across from him.

I don’t realize I’ve stopped walking until Charlie runs into my back. “Ouch. Give a girl a warning, will you?”

But I’m not paying her any mind. I’m stuck staring at the familiar back of my brother’s date. Strawberry blonde curls falling past her shoulders. The woman turns slightly to me as she grins at her companion. She’s wearing a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. *Autumn.*

She laughs heartily at something Ezra says, like she always does, never holding back and making the recipient feel like the funniest person she's ever met...on top of the world. Then raises her hand to push her glasses up her nose. A loud roaring starts in my ears, and I see red as I march to their table.

CHAPTER 20



ALEXANDER

“*W*hat the hell is this?” My voice is louder than I intend. My body shakes with rage. How dare he?

Ezra glances up in surprise, then his gaze slides behind me. “Charlie?” He looks blindsided, but I don’t give a shit about their history right now.

“A–Alex. What are you doing here?” Autumn stammers, her eyes widening. If that doesn’t sound like an admission of guilt, then I don’t know what would. My jaw is practically cracking, I’m clenching it so tightly.

“Seriously man, what’s up?” Alex has the nerve to chime in.

I’m about to lay it on him when I notice we’re garnering quite a bit of attention from the other diners. Instead, I stare down at Autumn. “We’re leaving. Now.”

“Alex, what are you doing? I’m not done eating. Alex. Alexander!” Her protests fall on deaf ears as I pull her chair out from the table. When I move to pick her up, she smacks my hand away. “Don’t touch me! I’m coming.” The patrons watch our interaction in horror, clearly expecting me to explode. No one talks to me like that and lives. Let alone physically hits me. To my relief, she stands and storms out of the restaurant, my long strides hot on her heels.

We make it to the sidewalk; and for the first time, I realize that she’s wearing a provocatively short dress. The material clings to her curves, and my mouth waters as I take in the

expanse of bare, pale skin. A gust of sharp chilly wind blows, and I growl angrily when she shivers.

I take off my jacket and am about to drape it over her shoulders when the firecracker lifts her hand to slap me, Alexander Beaufort. The nerve of this girl. To her surprise, I catch her wrist midair and see her furious gaze, challenging her to keep fighting. Our eyes lock, and I note the rapid rise and fall of her chest. Her lips part, and the air between us thickens. Before we collide mid-sidewalk, either out of anger or lust, I continue my original task and cover her shoulders with my jacket before glancing around for my car.

“Alex, what are you doing? Why are you mad at me?” I ignore her questions as I text George.

“Alexander! What the hell?” I spin around to face Ezra. I rush him, catching his cheekbone with my fist. Caught totally off guard, he staggers backward, cupping his face.

Autumn screams and runs to him. Seeing her dote over him in concern ignites my anger further, and I wrap my arm around her waist to drag her away. George pulls up at that moment, so I carry her to the side of the car.

With my mouth next to her ear and her ass pressed to my groin, I can barely focus. “I had my tongue down your throat a few days ago, and you were all too eager for it. Now you’re on a date with my little brother?” She tries to pull away, but I don’t let her, tightening my arm instead. “Not on my watch.”

“What are you talking about? I can’t even have dinner with my friend because we’ve kissed?”

I rapidly spin her around and press her body against the car. “Your friend?” My lips curl up. “You think Ezra is your friend? He doesn’t want to be your *friend*, Autumn.” I spit out the word like it offends me.

“Let me go, Alex. You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Autumn says breathlessly.

“My brother might be friendly to women but he’s not friends with them. No, he fucks them and discards them.” I

press myself harder into her, every plane of our bodies connected.

Autumn gasps, but before I have a chance to accuse her of more, two hands grab my shoulders, ripping me from the heat of Autumn's supple body. As I'm ready to voice my further annoyance, one hand turns me by the shoulder, and my head snaps to the side from a powerful punch. A throbbing pain starts in my jaw where Ezra's punch lands. I wiggle it as I turn to face him.

"Enough! Enough!" Autumn shouts, stepping between us. "That's quite enough, Alexander."

I pause as she glares at me. For some reason, I feel chastened so I glare back. I'm not the one in the wrong here! George starts to get out of the car, surely dreading having to back me up against my brother, but I hold up a hand to stop his advance. I snap open the back door.

"Get in," I order. Autumn doesn't move, and I take a threatening step toward her. "Don't test me, Autumn. I'll bundle you in that car myself if you don't get in right this moment."

She narrows her eyes at me and marches forward, but Ezra holds her back. An angry rumble escapes my throat.

"It's fine, Ezra. I'm okay." She gives him a tight smile. "This brute doesn't scare me." Then she gets in the car and I slam the door shut.

"She was crying." I stop at Ezra's word. "I don't know what happened, but she was crying so I took her to dinner. It's not whatever it is you're thinking." Ezra glares at me, then spins away. I stare at Charlie, who just waves me off.

I give her a terse nod and round the back of the car to get in from the other side. "Take us home, George," I instruct, then press the button to raise the privacy partition.

"Autumn," I start, not sure what to say. She folds her arms across her chest and twists away from me to stare out the window. She doesn't want to talk. Message received.

The ride home is filled with a terse silence; sometime along the way, it starts to rain. As soon as George stops the car in the driveway, Autumn shoots out the door, slamming it in my face. I sigh as I reopen the door and get out. “Autumn!” I call out, but she doesn’t answer, racing through the front door.

I jog up the stairs after her and catch her just before she disappears into her room, where I’m sure she’ll slam the door in my face again. “Autumn, listen.”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you.” She rips her arm from my hand, angrily. “You wouldn’t listen earlier.”

She marches into her room, and I allow myself in after her. “You were in a restaurant alone with my brother. Wearing that! What was I supposed to think?”

“Oh, I don’t know. That we were eating? And what about you? You came in with another woman. What about her!” She gives me a withering glare.

Confusion creases my brow. “That was nothing. Charlie is a business acquaintance. Why were you—”

“Charlie! *Charlie!* You’re on a first name basis, and you expect me to believe that she’s just a *business acquaintance*? Do you take all of your acquaintances to private one-on-one dinners?”

“She *is* a business acquaintance,” I grit out. “And yes, I occasionally meet business associates outside the office. But let’s get back to talking about you.”

“What if I don’t believe you? Should I go find this Charlie person and slap her in front of the whole town for being with you!”

My lips part as I watch her. She’s really angry at me, and it’s glorious. Not to mention the thought of scrappy Autumn is making me fucking hot. I like this side of her...too much.

“I shouldn’t have hit Ezra. I got caught up in the moment,” I admit softly.

“You think? Why would you even do something like that? What were you thinking?”

That's the thing. I wasn't thinking. Fuck, what is she doing to me? I shove my hand through my hair, agitatedly. "I don't know. I saw you sitting there with my brother, laughing, happy and carefree, and I saw red. I thought it was a date."

"So what? You were jealous?" She rolls her eyes.

"No," I snap.

She stares at me with a look of complete boredom on her face, clearly not convinced by my declaration. "You *were* jealous. Alex—"

"*No*," I growl as I stalk toward her. She starts to back away, but she's not fast enough. One hand grabs the side of her throat while the other slams against the wall next to her. "I wasn't jealous, Autumn. I was fucking furious."

But I was jealous. Out of my mind with jealousy in fact, but I've come to a sudden realization.

"You know why I wasn't jealous?" My thumb encircles the front of her throat. Her neck is so delicate that I could nearly wrap one hand all the way around it. She tips her chin in invitation, and I crush her body against the wall with my hips. "Because jealousy is for a man who can't have what he desires. But that's not me, is it?" Her pulse hammers against my thumb. I drop my head to drag my nose up her face.

"Because you're mine, Autumn. You're fucking *Mine*." Damn the consequences. I tighten my hand around her throat slightly as I crush my mouth against hers, eager for her sweet taste. Her hands flutter up; but instead of pushing me away, she drags me in.

I groan at the taste of her surrender. Revel in it. That's right baby. You're mine now. All mine. And I won't let you fucking forget it. My pulse races as my tongue sinks into the warm recess of her mouth, heat spreads through me when her tongue meets mine. Blood rushes to my cock, hardening it. My balls draw up painfully as the fierce need to fuck her – claim her – hits me, driving me almost feral.

I tighten my grip on her throat even further and grind my cock against her stomach. She releases a throaty whimper that

I swallow eagerly as her body tightens with need. I release her throat and drop both hands to her waist, slowly trailing them to her pert little ass. I knead the firm flesh between my palms, then pick her up and push away from the wall in one quick movement. She breaks the kiss on a throaty groan, and her legs wrap tightly around my hips.

I spin away from the wall and lead her to the bed in the center of the room. As I place her gently on it, her dress rides up her thighs. “Alex,” she coos softly, treading her hands up to the back of my neck. And fuck me if I haven’t thought about her saying my name in this exact position a thousand times. And it never lived up to what she’s doing to me right now. She’s killing me slowly and oh so delicately.

My gaze drops to the exposed flesh of her legs, I slowly bunch the skirt of her dress up to her waist. I pause, waiting for her to protest but she doesn’t say anything. She’s giving herself to me, in full, and I’m ready to collect and prove my worthiness. Her satiety is my utmost concern and my only focus. I like to have the best, and I treat my possessions with the care and attention they deserve. I’m a man of obsessive attention to detail and determination to be superior in all my endeavors. She is no different.

My eyes slowly roam back up her body, taking in every inch of her offering to me. *Mine*. I grab her chin and tilt her face up. “Look at me.” Her hooded eyes slowly open and lock onto mine. I grip her hips and shift her to the center of the bed before I push her shoulders until she’s flat on her back. She goes willingly.

I spread her legs and get to my knees between them. Finally breaking eye contact, I drag my nose down the silky soft skin of one thigh, then the other. Her legs quiver in my hands. I shift my attention to the scrap of silk between her legs. I press my nose into her and inhale deeply. Her sweet scent is intoxicating, and I tighten my grip on her hips as I place an open mouthed kiss over the material. Autumn shifts restlessly, but I press down firmly on her legs to keep her in place. I’m going to enjoy every inch of her, slowly and thoroughly.

I trail my right hand from her hip to her inner thigh, enjoying the impossibly smooth feel of her flesh beneath my fingers. I move back a little to palm my hand between her legs. *Mine*, I think again with complete satisfaction. I press harder against her, grinding the heel of my palm against the most sensitive flesh.

A soft moan rumbles out of her, and I smile as I rub harder. Her panties soak through just as the enticing smell of her arousal heightens. My cock hardens even further at her readiness for me. “You like that, baby.” It’s blatantly obvious that she does, but I need to hear her say it.

“Mmhmm,” she mumbles as she grinds her hips up trying to increase the friction against my hand.

“Tell me what you want, Autumn...what you need.” I pinch the lace fabric of her panties so it bunches in her center, enjoying the view far too much.

“God, Alexander,” she pants as I pull her panties tight against her clit and press my flat tongue over the sweet spot, earning a gasp from her sensual lips.

“You. You’re all I need...”

Those words are my salvation and my undoing. This woman is my resolution to be better, to try harder...the answer to every question I’ve ever pondered. I know that I’ll lose myself in her, willingly. When I’m found, I can’t tell if what’s left of me will be a better man or someone much worse. Because there is nothing I wouldn’t do for her. I’ve claimed her as my own, and I’ll destroy anyone who dares to get in our way. Whether I leave a path of destruction in our wake, I don’t care, so long as she’s there to bear witness to my cruel tendencies and remains mine to possess. To pleasure...to worship.

CHAPTER 21



AUTUMN

The pressure of my panties against my clit is unbearable. I groan as electric tingles surge through me, threatening to bring me to unparalleled elation. Alex continues to drag his tongue over me, while his large hands massage every inch of my exposed flesh. This man is a magician. A very thorough and experienced one at that. I've never felt like this before. Like my body is being worshiped by a man, whose sole focus is on bringing me pleasure.

He weighs my every moan against each subtle movement of my body to know exactly what I need and respond to. His attention to detail is unbelievable, and I'm giving into every second of it...just like I've given myself to him. He wants me. I am his. In every form, he can have me.

I lift my hips toward him in encouragement but he eases the pressure of both his hands and tongue. "Alexxxx," I whimper, lifting my hips again.

He chuckles deeply and murmurs, "Shhh. I've been fantasizing about this for a year, so don't rush me." He flicks his tongue, slowly dragging his thumb up my center to press down on my throbbing clit.

I throw my head back in abandon as I shout his name. My glasses shift into my hair, and my vision goes hazy, but I'm far from caring. At the moment, the only thing on my mind is the impending orgasm.

"Hmm. You taste even better than I could've ever imagined." He runs his tongue up my center again, but this

time he doesn't stop. Back and forth, back and forth until I'm delirious with pleasure. His tongue pushes me to the finish line, but I'm unable to cross it. As if he can feel my body tense on the precipice of release, he eases up just before I tip over, only to continue his delicious torment again.

Tears of frustration gather in my eyes, further blocking my sight. "Alexander, please. Please," I beg.

He hums in approval. "I like when you beg me." He stiffens his tongue and slowly presses it into my empty core. I welcome the fullness, not realizing how much my body aches for it. I flutter helplessly against him and he groans. His thumb and index finger hold my clit firmly while his tongue continues to penetrate me, bringing me so close to my sweet release. I can feel it build. I chase the high, knowing that he will finally let me reach it. Like an addict, I already crave my next hit of this man.

"Alexxxxxxx." I scream, back arching off the bed as I'm hit with blazing, white-hot pleasure. Electricity tingles through my veins. I shudder beneath him, my throat working helplessly. He continues to move his tongue as the unrelenting waves of pleasure course through my veins. Finally, my body begins to relax, and Alex pulls away, allowing me to come down from my high.

I'm panting heavily, my poor heart pounding furiously when I realize I can't see. *My glasses*. My body clenches in panic. Just as anxiety is about to overwhelm me, a weight presses my entire body. Alex is lying on top of me, one arm supporting most of his weight, the other bringing a hand to my face to caress my cheek.

"It's just me, baby. Shhh, let me in." Alex murmurs softly. I run my hands down his muscled back, slowly taking deep breaths as I return to the moment and find peace in his eyes. "I need you now, Alex. All of you."

He shifts his weight to lean back and remove my panties, never letting his eyes leave mine. At this close proximity, I can just make out the color surrounding his blown pupils. His gaze grounds me, keeping me in this moment with him. He quickly

removes his clothes; and before I have time to take in his divine form, he is back on top of me. I feel his cock press against my opening and I grind my hips upward in eagerness. Without waiting another moment, he sinks himself into me one inch at a time. “Fuck,” he groans.

I lift my hands toward the hazy figure above me to grip his shoulders. My fingers dig into him as he slowly fills me, giving me time to adjust to a fullness I’m not used to. He finally bottoms out, his pelvis hitting mine gently. I’m completely full, his wide body above mine, and my sight out of commission.

I should be panicking, but instead I feel surprisingly free. I shift under him impatiently, needing him to move. Alex curses again and moves his hips, slowly withdrawing and thrusting back in. I know, in this moment, that nothing will ever compare to him...to this. I’m ruined for anyone else. It’s as if he knows my body better than I do. With every thrust he drives in a little harder, and I’m completely lost. His intense burning gaze sees deep inside me, understanding everything I could ever need or want.

I moan throatily, my core already beginning to tense around his length. Then he stops, his body stiffening. “Fuck, Alex, don’t stop. I ne—” His hand clamps over my mouth, tightly silencing my plea.

“Shhh,” he murmurs into my ear, “listen.”

I try to take my mind off the burning need to have his cock buried deep inside me repeatedly and listen for whatever it is he hears; but it’s hard with his addicting scent tickling my nose and his warmth spreading over my body. At first I only hear the hard pitter patter of rain hitting the roof. It seemed to have picked up since we got home.

Then I hear my name. “Autumn! Autumn, are you home?”

Andrea.

“Jesus fuck.” Alex swears, his voice almost angry when she starts knocking on my bedroom door. Shit, did we lock the

door? I start to struggle under Alex. He curses again, but withdraws from me.

My core clenches around the sudden emptiness. I immediately miss the warm expanse of his body.

“Here,” Alex says quietly, and the familiar weight of my glasses hits my nose just as my vision sharpens. I command, “Answer her.”

“Andrea, hold on.” My voice is husky, and I quickly clear it.

“Tell her you’re in the bathroom,” he orders, and without thinking, I do as he says.

“Okay, meet me in my room when you’re done,” she calls out and her footsteps slowly recede.

Alex climbs off the bed with a low curse and grabs his pants from a heap on the floor. I have a brief moment to admire his physique, which is obscenely muscular. The chiseled plane of his chest has an intricate tattoo spread across its width, and I’m just noticing his forearms are also covered in dark markings. He’s always wearing a dress shirt and suit, keeping this secret hidden.

I can’t make out the exact pattern in the low lighting; all I can think about is tracing every line with my fingertips and asking him what they mean and when he got them all. My attention is drawn to his large member that he’s now adjusting in order to fasten his pants. I do a double take, and my heart nearly stops, my earlier rage returning in full force.

“You didn’t use a condom?!” My voice is horrified. I have to remind myself to keep my voice down so Andrea won’t hear me. Alex stiffens, and he also glances down at his cock, which is clearly bare of rubber.

“Oh, my God, you didn’t!” I get up from the bed and yank my dress down. We didn’t even take off all of our clothes. I still have my bra on, for crying out loud. “What if Andrea hadn’t come in? What were you thinking!”

Alex blanches, his face going white; and for the first time since I met him, I can read his thoughts clearly. He *wasn’t*

thinking. He suddenly spins around and walks out of the room. I slump back on my bed with a sigh.

What was *I* thinking? What the hell is wrong with me? I almost had sex with the guy. I did have sex with him, if only for a short while. Is that enough to get someone pregnant? My hand drops to my belly, and I imagine it expanding with a baby. Alex's baby. What would that be like?

I sit up on the bed sharply. "Stop thinking nonsense, Autumn. You have an IUD." A mixture of disappointment and relief hits me. I throw myself onto a pillow to let out a muffled scream. Why am I even feeling this way? Anger at Alex and solace over my protective birth control are all I should be focusing on.

Damn it, I need to get my head on straight. I just met him a *week* ago! I mean technically I met him over a year ago, but I can't be fantasizing about having his baby! Even after three years together, I *always* made sure Larson used a condom even with the double protection. If I'm being totally honest, I never fully trusted his faithfulness to me.

Of course, pregnancy isn't the only reason to use birth control. What if he gives me something? Though for some inane reason, I trust Alexander completely.

"He's such a control freak; he probably gets a checkup biweekly to make sure he's clean," I say to the empty room with a sigh.

What if Andrea hadn't come home? Shit, *Andrea*.

I quickly get up from the bed and rush to the bathroom. I take a shower to wash off Alex's lingering scent, sweet as it may be. I'm trying to shake off the disappointment that Alex and I were interrupted. Not that I feel unfulfilled: he made sure of that. But that was the most connected I've ever felt to someone. Having his undivided attention, his eyes never leaving mine, felt like a religious experience. He's so intense, and I felt every ounce of his passionate focus.

I shake my head and quickly toss on a fresh pair of underwear, a sweatshirt and the joggers Andrea gave me that

first night – last week, I remind myself. It’s only been a week. I put my hair up and leave my room.

“Andrea,” I call out as I knock on her door, which is down the hall from mine.

“Come in.” Her voice sounds a little muffled. I open the door and enter. She pokes her head out of the bathroom with a toothbrush in her mouth. “Hold on,” she says before going back into her bathroom.

I make myself at home on the soft couch facing the flat screen television. I’ve been in her room a few times before. It’s similar in size to mine, but where mine has been decorated in soft pastel colors, hers is a mixture of rich colors with black accents. It matches her personality perfectly.

“Hey, sorry. It seemed like you might take a while, so I decided to just get ready for bed,” Andrea says as she comes out of the bathroom in her pajamas, actually shorts and a tank top.

“Getting ready for bed?” I glance at the time on my phone. “But it’s just past six, so what about the bar?”

She scrunches her face in confusion. “Where have you been? We got the alert to close all businesses because of a sudden freezing rain warning. The rain started about thirty minutes ago and changed to a sleet storm maybe ten minutes in. We’re supposed to get about six inches of ice too. Even the schools have been closed for tomorrow.”

I gape at her. “What?” I mean it was raining a little just after Alex and I left the restaurant. How can it be that bad already? I move to the window and pull the curtains aside. I can’t see much, but the rain – sleet – seems to be coming down hard and fast.

“By the way, where did you disappear to after your call? I checked outside the bar and you were gone. I was hoping you were safely home. How did you get here?”

“Um–” I stare at her blankly, a stab of guilt hitting me hard. She asked me to stay away from her brothers, and I had

dinner with one and sex with the other – all within two hours. At least the interaction with Ezra was innocent enough.

“I called my mom so she wouldn’t worry, but it didn’t end well.”

“Oh, no. Was she upset you left without telling her?” Andea asks.

I smile sadly...if only. “She wants me to come back home and apologize to my ex. She thinks I’m being selfish and he’s a once in a lifetime catch.”

“What?” She frowns. “I don’t know the guy, and you’ve been pretty tightlipped about him; but from the little I’ve been able to gather, he sounds like a prick and you’re better off without him! How could your mom not see that? Hasn’t she met him?”

“She’s too in love with his money to see his flaws, or how awfully he had treated me.” I sigh as I make my way back to the couch. “Anyway, we got into a bit of an argument. She drove to his office while we were on the phone and asked me to hold, so I could talk to him.”

Her jaw drops in surprise. “She what?!”

“I hung up on her—”

“Good for you!”

I smile as I remember Alex saying something similar last week, but the smile fades when thoughts of him quickly shift to what we were doing mere minutes ago. I continue talking. I can’t think about him right now.

“I was crying when I ran into Ezra. He was kind enough to take me to dinner to get my mind off things. It was strictly platonic,” I add when her brows go up.

She watches me quietly for a moment. “Okay. I believe you. Did he drive you home?”

“Um, no, Alex did. He coincidentally showed up for dinner at the same restaurant with a business associate. I think it was someone Ezra knew. He mentioned her name...was it

Carlie or Charlie?” I frown as I wonder which one it is, hoping Andrea won’t question why Alex drove me home.

“Charlie? About this tall with blonde bangs?” she asks, raising a hand up to her eye level.

“Yeah, she seemed to be the same height as me. I wasn’t really paying close attention, but I could swear her eyes are different colors.”

“Oh, my God, yes! That’s Charlotte Square. She was in town, hey? I can see why Alex drove you home. Ezra must have ditched as soon as he saw her.” She nods. I hesitate, not seeing what she’s seeing. Ezra did look surprised to see her.

“Is there history between them?”

She sighs and explains, “Yeah, a long time ago. Anyway, I’m done talking about other people. I need to enjoy my first night off the bar in months. Let’s watch a movie.” She sits next to me on the couch and picks up the TV remote from the marble coffee table.

“First night off in months? Why?” As the boss, shouldn’t she be able to take nights off as she wishes?

“It’s just been Keith and me, and I can’t leave him alone. He’d get overwhelmed. Now that you’re with us, though, maybe I’ll take a real night off one of these days.”

She scrolls through Netflix for a moment and sits back as she selects a rom com. The opening credits play, and I settle into the couch, trying to focus on the movie instead of the large, muscular man who was inside me only an hour ago.

CHAPTER 22



AUTUMN

The next morning, I glance out my window and smile at the sight of ice sparkling on every tree, leaf, and blade of grass across Alex's entire front yard. A haze has settled near the ground, creating an enchanting display. I open the window just a little to inhale the sharp bite of the fresh air. Winter is here, and right on time. Today is the first of December. Let the Christmas countdown begin, my absolute favorite time of year!

I close the window and go to the bathroom to get ready. After dressing, I hesitate. What if Alex is still home, and I run into him? This is his house, after all, and according to Andrea, the roads have been closed, so he'll most likely hang around. But he's a busy man; surely he'll be holed up in his office, making calls all day.

I debate staying in my room all day, but there's almost next to nothing to do on my phone. I haven't logged on to social media, partly in fear that Larson might use it to track me, and partly because I know he's probably sent me a ton of messages. Once I log in, he'll know that I've received them and my hiding days are over. Essentially, the only thing I've done since I've gotten this phone was call Mom. I'm too scared to even log into my iCloud because we share accounts. He'll be notified once I do.

How did I let myself fall so completely under his control? At first, I thought it was his way of showing affection. But eventually whenever I tried to put my foot down, it turned into a huge fight, so I just did what he wanted to avoid conflict.

Sure, Alex is controlling in his own way. He did nearly drag me out of a public restaurant yesterday without even asking for an explanation. But when I retaliated and pushed back, he seemed to love it. I noticed the heat in his eyes when I yelled at him; it was turning him on. I know I shouldn't compare the two, but where Larson tried to keep me under his thumb and scolded me for having an opinion, Alex seems to encourage my emotions. He wants me to fight for myself, while Larson wanted control.

However, I'm getting stronger and someday soon, I'll reach out to have a conversation and break up properly. It's the least I can do to give him some closure. I'm sure Mom has told him that I called her, and he's probably trying to trace the call. Thank God, I had the foresight to hide my ID.

A sharp rap rattles my door, shaking me out of my thoughts. "Yo, Autumn, you up?"

Andrea. I smile as I open the door. "Yes, I'm up. What's up?"

"Mrs. Staten has breakfast ready, so come on."

I hesitate. Will Alex be there? I can't ask her that, of course. It would be weird. "How is Mrs. Staten here? Aren't the roads closed?"

Andrea rolls her eyes in exasperation. "She lives on the property, silly. She has a cottage on the compound. She lives with Greg."

I blink. "Greg? As in the butler?"

"Yeah, he's her husband," she exclaims, and my jaw drops. Greg is a bit stiff and formal. I've been living here for a week, and he still hasn't warmed up to me, whereas Mrs. Staten took to me from the very first day we met. And she's very chatty. Greg has a shocking mop of gray hair, while Mrs. Staten's hair is devoid of any color but an unassuming brown. They couldn't be any more different if they tried.

"What? Get out!"

Andrea chuckles at my shock. "I know, right. I guess it's true what they say about opposites attracting."

It's a little bit ironic that the maternal housekeeper is on a last name basis with the household, while the uptight butler is simply Greg. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Mrs. Staten will get a kick out of your reaction." Andrea grins and loops her arm through mine. I resist her attempt to pull me out of my room.

"You know, I'm actually not that hungry yet. You go on without me."

She narrows her eyes, suspiciously. "What's going on? Are you still sad about the call with your mom yesterday?"

I debate lying, but Andrea has been so kind and open to me ever since we met that I murmur instead, "I just want to be alone, I guess."

"A little bit of warm food and company will make you feel better, trust me." Andrea pats my arm. I give in, letting her lead me toward the stairs.

Alex is nowhere to be seen, and I breathe a discrete sigh of relief.

"There you two are! Alex left home a couple of minutes ago. I was feeling sad that no one would partake in my tradition this year." Mrs. Staten grins, her face lighting up when she sees us.

"Tradition?" I ask.

"It's a Beaufort tradition. Since we were kids, the morning after the first snow of the year, we indulge in brown-butter banana bread with a hearty chili beef soup. It was Mom's recipe, but she's passed it on to us, and we've all continued to make it in our own homes. Ezra can't cook to save his life, so Mom sends him a dish every year. I have the recipe, but I like to come here. No one makes it better than Mrs. Staten. Don't let Mom know I said that though!"

I grin, loving the idea. I've never really been part of a tradition. Mom and I meet at a restaurant for Thanksgiving, and she sends me postcards during Christmas because she always spends it out of New York as the cold is bad for her

joints, according to her. But it's nothing like the warmth of this kind of tradition.

"I love it. I was wondering what that amazing smell was."

"Wait till you taste it." Andrea kisses her bunched up fingers in a chef's kiss gesture.

Mrs. Staten leads us to the sprawling kitchen island, where Andrea and I share most of our meals. Now that I think about it, I don't know why I was so worried. Alex never eats with us. Then she slides a plate of steaming beef chili soup in front of each of us, followed by the bread, which smells phenomenal and looks so soft. My mouth salivates as I watch her cut into it. She wasn't shy with the butter, which is melting over the ooey gooey goodness.

I immediately break off a chunk. It melts in my mouth with the taste of banana-caramel nutty decadence. The different flavors should clash, but it just adds to the richness of the meal. Pure comfort food. "Oh, My God, Mrs. Staten," I groan, my eyes rolling back.

The housekeeper grins with satisfaction. "You like it?"

"I love it. Can I have the recipe?"

"Only if you marry a Beaufort. It's my nana's secret recipe," Andrea counters, taking a bite of her own bread.

"But Mrs. Staten isn't a Beaufort by birth or marriage." I point out as I scoop a bit of the soup into my mouth. I let out a deep sigh as I relish the taste.

"She doesn't count. She's Beaufort by association."

"Well, I want to be a Beaufort by association too."

"Nuh huh, it doesn't work that way, sis." Andrea pokes her tongue out playfully.

"Well in that case, will you marry me, Andrea?"

A throat clearing grabs our attention and we look toward the doorway to see Greg – Mr. Staten – hovering there watching us uncertainly.

"Goodness, Greg! What are you doing there?"

“I have a package for the miss from Mr. Beaufort.”

“Hmm, is Alex trying to bribe me? What could he possibly want?” Andrea looks almost giddy as she beckons the butler forward to give her the gift box in his hands. But Greg shifts uncomfortably on his feet.

“For the other miss, ma’am.” He glances at me pointedly, and the soft bread becomes lumpy in my throat. My heart starts racing when Mrs. Staten and Andrea turn to look at me, with varying states of confusion.

“Me?” I squeak. I pick up my glass of water and quickly wash down the bread, which is suddenly sticking to my throat and making it hard to breath. Greg walks forward, extending the box. I hesitate briefly then accept the package from him. What is Alex thinking by sending me a gift in front of Andrea?

“Well? Come on, the suspense is killing me.” Andrea nudges me, a hard edge to her tone when I only clutch the box in my hands without attempting to open it.

I glance at her but her expression is closed off...so different from the warmth and playfulness from earlier. What is she thinking? Oh, God, does she suspect something? Greg nods at us and exits the kitchen quickly, clearly not interested in joining our chit chat. Mrs. Staten murmurs an excuse I can’t really hear over the pounding of the blood in my ears. She leaves the kitchen, so it’s just Andrea and me.

I swallow hard as I lift the box lid and fold back pieces of tissue. I lift out a bag filled to the brim with nail polishes of different colors. What...

“Polishes?” Andrea frowns at them like they’ve personally offended her.

I glance at my nails, which are a total eyesore with what’s left of my wedding manicure. Did I mention loving painting my nails in his presence? Then I remember. The library. When Andrea was there, and he was looking like he was ready to attack me.

What am I going to do with this man? Why am I getting giddy over nail polishes? My grip on the bag tightens and

something crinkles. I peep inside to see nail polish remover as well as a package of cotton balls.

Alexander.

I hear the sound of Andrea pushing back her stool from the island and look up to find her glaring at me. “Andrea, it’s not what it l—”

“Don’t,” Andrea cuts me off. “Just don’t.” She shakes her head and stands up from her stool, the rest of her breakfast forgotten as she stalks off in a huff.

“Andrea.” I call after her, quickly getting to my feet. By the time I follow her outside, she’s already in her car and driving off. I don’t have a car to follow her so I just helplessly watch her disappear down the driveway, skidding over the ice.

CHAPTER 23



ALEXANDER

“*H*eads up, your sister is in the building and headed to your office. She looks really *really* pissed. What did you do?”

I frown at Noah’s furtive tone over the phone. I can count on one hand the people my assistant is scared of; Mom and Andrea. Before I can reply, my office door is thrown open and the little she-devil strides in.

“Alexander Fitzgerald Beaufort. How dare you?” she growls, her chest heaving.

“How did you get here, Andrea? I know for a fact that the roads aren’t salted yet, so you couldn’t possibly have driven.” I glance out the window where sure enough, there’s still traces of the heavy sleet on the road. There’s her car parked right in front of the building. She fucking drove here. I frown at her.

“Don’t start with the overprotective big brother bullshit, Alex. In case you can’t tell, I’m furious.”

I raise a brow. “I can see that. Can I assume that you’ll enlighten me as to the reason for this condition of yours? If not, you can leave because I’m not going to guess.”

That seems to piss her off more. She makes a rude gesture with her hand, then stomps right up to my desk, making sure to slam the door shut behind her.

“Autumn? Seriously?”

I sigh, finally realizing the reason for this little display. “What about her?” I ask, not sure how much she knows;

there's no way in hell I'll willingly tip her off. I know a thing or two about torturing information out of a man, and while this certainly feels painful, I'm not giving in.

“What about her? Are you seriously going to pretend you don't know what I'm talking about? First, it was giving her a ride home, then getting her a brand new phone, and now a box of fucking nail polishes?”

Damn it, did Greg give Autumn the damn gift in front of Andrea? “And?” I ask calmly.

Her hands form tiny fists at her sides, and she makes a frustrated sound that's a cross between a groan and a short scream. “No, you can't have her. She's mine.”

“Actually, you've got that part dead wrong, Andrea. Autumn is *mine*.”

Her jaw drops, and she stares at me quietly for a moment before making a wheezing sound like she can't believe my audacity. “Is she the reason why you've been stalling on repairing my roof?”

Yes. “That's none of your business. Besides, you'll be happy to know that I've made arrangements for my men to start working on it tomorrow.”

She wasn't expecting to hear that, and it seems to take the wind from her sails – at least for a moment. She starts issuing commands *to me*. Who the hell does she think she is?

“You'll stay away from her, you hear me? She's fresh off a relationship that ended badly, and she doesn't need you or our family problems hanging over her. She was my friend first!”

My brows steadily climb at each word out of her mouth. “Are you finished?” I ask when she seems to run out of steam. “I'm going to let the fact that you came into my office with such disrespect go because you're my little sister.”

She starts to argue, and I raise my hand up. “I love you Andrea, but you don't get to dictate what I can or cannot do. I'm fixing your roof tomorrow, and the day after that you and Autumn can move back into your apartment. That said,

anything that does or does not happen between me and Autumn is none of your business.”

“But she trusts me to pr—”

“She’s a grown woman who can make her own choices. You don’t need to storm in here and make a scene to protect her. She doesn’t need protecting from me.” At least not in the way she’s thinking.

The truth is after last night – and the almost accident of me fucking her with no protection – I’ve been out of my mind. I never make mistakes like that. One of my first rules in life is no glove, no love. There’s no way I’d risk impregnating a random woman who might try to use a Beaufort baby to rope me in. No fucking way.

I wasn’t really thinking. I hardly think when it comes to Autumn Montgomery, and I was shocked to the core at my carelessness. When I finally came to my senses, the first thought that came to my mind was would it really be so bad?

The thought of her growing belly, carrying my child, made the animalistic side of me awaken. It made me realize that I definitely need to stay the hell away from her before I do something we’ll both regret. So why in the hell did I call to a drugstore this morning? Then leave my house to drive on unsalted roads to go to said store and shop for fucking nail polish...

Autumn has a vice grip on me, and I haven’t even had her yet. Not really. So just minutes before my sister marched in like the hounds of hell were on her heels, I’d changed my mind. I’m keeping her and to hell with the consequences.

I’ve been obsessed with thoughts of her since she had bumped into me last year. I spent months searching for her; and now that I have her in my grasp, am I really going to fumble it by being indecisive? Hell no.

I don’t know what expression Andrea sees on my face but she gasps – quite dramatically I might add – and takes a couple of steps back from me. “Alexander Fitzgerald

Beaufort,” she says again, but this time the bite is gone from her voice. “I never thought I’d see this day.”

“What day?” I ask, exasperated from this entire interaction. She shakes her head slowly, then gives me a mischievous smile. Like she knows something I don’t. “What?” I ask again.

“Nuh huh. Figure it out yourself.” And with that she spins around and marches out of my office the same way she had marched in. Just as I let out a sigh of relief, the little troublemaker pokes her head through my door.

“Make sure my apartment is fixed tomorrow. I love Mrs. Staten and her delicious meals, but it’s a pain having to drive into town every day.” Her head disappears momentarily, and then she pokes it back in again.

“What now?” I groan.

“Did you know that Autumn doesn’t have a way of getting around because her car stopped working just as she got into town? I think it must’ve been fate. If her car hadn’t stalled in the middle of the interstate, she wouldn’t have taken the turn for Brattleboro.”

“What are you getting at?” I demand.

“I got her car towed into Fletcher’s Auto Repair. She’s waiting for her first paycheck, which she’ll get by the end of this week to visit the shop to fix the car. If you want to do something about it, now’s your chance.” She leaves; and after a few more minutes, I decide she’s not coming back.

I pick up my phone and dial the owner of Fletchers.

“Mr. Beaufort! To what do I owe this honor?” Leo Fletcher’s voice is inflected with fake cheer.

“My sister had a car towed into your shop about a week ago. Fix it by the end of the day and send the bill to me,” I say without a preamble.

He goes silent for a moment “Are you sure about that? I personally checked out the car when I realized who had it brought in; and I gotta say, the thing is on its last legs. It

should be scrapped...unless you want me to do a total overhaul and order new parts.”

“Do that,” I say. Somehow, I doubt Autumn will accept the gift of a new car graciously. I had to damn near threaten her to accept the phone.

“The car can’t be ready by today; it will take a while for the parts to get here and—”

“How long is a while?” I interrupt.

“Three weeks.”

“No, you have until the end of this week,” I insist. He splutters indignantly, so I repeat myself. “The end of the week, Leo. Don’t disappoint me.”

“Yes sir,” he mumbles and I hang up.

CHAPTER 24



AUTUMN

*J*agonize over the damn polish all morning and almost wear a hole in the rug in my room from pacing back and forth. What does it mean? Why is he being so nice to me? Is it because of last night?

Then Andrea came home from wherever she went, and she's a completely different person. I was convinced she was angry when she saw the gift from her brother. What changed? I glance at her from the corner of my eye: we're in the private cinema watching a funny movie, but I'm so in my head that I can't tell what has happened for the past twenty minutes.

"What? What is it? You've been staring at me since I got home." Andrea pauses the movie with the flick of a remote.

"It's just weird. You were angry this morning and then you disappeared for two hours and came back wanting to watch a movie together. What gives?"

She sighs. "Look, I won't lie, when I saw the nail polish I immediately thought you were trying to lock down my rich brother...and possibly succeeding since I've never seen him go out of his way to buy such a personal gift."

"I—"

"No, let me finish," she interrupts. "I was wrong. As soon as I was in my car driving to town, I realized how wrong. You wouldn't even let me pay for your damn glasses, and have been dropping all your tips to pay back the expense. "Alex got you the phone, and I could tell you wanted to return it. Knowing Alex, he probably threatened you into keeping it,

and since then you've hardly even used it to make calls. When Greg gave you the gift box earlier, you were visibly uncomfortable. But then you opened it, and those damn polishes made you melt."

"No, it's—"

"I'm not done yet. I realized the reason that you aren't comfortable accepting gifts has to do with your ex, but those polishes were different. They were thoughtful. By the time I got to Alex's office, I was only angry at him for trying to seduce you."

"What? No, he isn't trying to seduce me. He's just being nice," I rush to defend him. My face heats up when she gives me a knowing look. Damn it.

"Anyway, I made a discovery, and I couldn't really be angry at him anymore."

"What discovery?"

She shrugs. "You'll find out soon enough. Let's stop talking about it. Why haven't you cleaned that off?" She nods at my nails. "You have actual nail polish remover now, not to mention plenty of options to replace that chipped mess."

Honestly, I was worried that if she saw that I had used the gift, she would be set off again. I really can't stand Andrea being mad at me. I won't say that, though, so I just shrug.

"Come on, let's go." She turns off the projector and drags me to my room. She tears through the package that's still exactly the way it was when I got it and hands me a bottle of remover and the cotton balls.

I sit cross legged on the floor and quickly rub off the old polish. My heart races as I sort through the different colors: there must be at least two dozen options, and so many fun, vibrant choices, unlike Larson's preferred nude or clear.

"You're smiling." Andrea observes, and I glance up at her. She's sitting across from me on the floor. "No, no, don't frown. It's just nice is all. I've rarely seen you smile since we met. How about this one?" She points to a bottle of rich royal blue polish.

I immediately love it and pick it up, trying not to think about what she just said. Of course, I haven't been smiling much. I left everything and everyone I've ever known for a fresh start in a new place. It's a terrifying prospect, but I've been really lucky.

"You know, I'm really glad that I stumbled into your bar that night. You're like the sister I never had."

She gives me a warm smile, her eyes going a very light shade of blue. "I'm glad I hired you. I finally have someone to talk to. Growing up, girls only became friends with me to get close to my brothers. It was tiring trying to find out who was a true friend."

My heart does a hard thud, and my smile slowly fades. I'm not friends with her because of her brothers, but that doesn't mean I should jeopardize what we have by getting involved with either of them.

I swallow and announce, "I'm going to stay away from Alex and Ezra."

She gasps. "No, that's not what I meant. Don't do that. Relationships can't be limited at any rate. Whether you stay away from them or not, if they're determined to have you they will. So, don't do it, at least not because of me."

I frown at her, not understanding what she's getting at. "But you specifically asked me to stay away from them."

"Yes, and it was shortsighted of me. You're like a sister to me now, so imagine if we actually *became* sisters!"

My frown deepens. "Become your sister...but that would mean I marry one of your brothers and—" I stop when she giggles, literally *giggles*.

"Yes, exactly! Wouldn't that be fun? Then you would have the right to our secret family recipe...and the other family secrets..." She trails off. "So don't stay away from them unless you really want to." She winks.

Marry one of her brothers. My heart skips a beat when blue-green eyes fill my head and I quickly shake it off. What

am I thinking? “I doubt that would happen,” I pronounce honestly.

“Well, we’ll just have to wait and see won’t we?” she says enigmatically. Before I can think of what to say, she scoots closer and asks if she can apply the polish. I say yes, of course.

When we’re done she loves the way the color comes out, so much that I offer to apply it to her nails.

“I don’t know. I have to wash my hands so often at work and cleaning up alcohol spills would probably ruin it, no?” she asks, staring at the polish with something like longing.

“If it does, we can just reapply it,” I point out, and she extends her hand.

I hum as I clean her nails first with a cotton ball and polish remover and then apply the first coat. I wait for it to dry a little then go in with the second coat.

“You enjoy this, don’t you?” Andrea observes.

“Yeah, ever since I was in foster care, it was a way to get out of my head. I’d steal some polish from whomever I was with at the time and go outside to apply it – sloppily, I might add, getting the polish on my hands and fingers, so it would dry faster. When I was done, I’d admire my nails while daydreaming about Prince Charming finding me and slipping a ring onto my finger to whisk me away from my reality.” I chuckle at the confession.

“That sounds so sweet. When did you enter the system?”

I shrug and admit, “I was young. My biological mom had me when she was about seventeen; and when I was four years old, she took me to child protective services herself. I guess she didn’t need a child weighing her down.”

“That’s...I’m so sorry.”

I shrug again as I close the cap of the polish, now done with the second coat. “I don’t remember her, so it’s not like I miss her or anything. I just wonder about her from time to time. Hold your hand still so the polish doesn’t smudge before it’s fully dry.”

We're silent as I arrange the polishes back into the bag. "I forgot to tell you earlier," Andrea starts, waiting for me to meet her gaze before she continues. "Alex said he's sent someone over to fix my place."

My stomach churns, and for some reason, anxiousness sinks my heart into my stomach. "Really, are you sure?"

She smiles, wiggling her fingers at me. "I didn't believe him either, especially after last night's storm. I'm sure Beaufort Construction has quite a bit of work on its hands. But I swung by the bar to check it out."

"You drove to Alex's office *and* to the bar? I thought the roads were closed."

"They were. But people know me and have a tendency to do what I say when I ask nicely." She winks.

"So, they just opened the roads for you to pass through? That was very dangerous. The roads were closed for a reason." My anxiety spikes as I imagine what could've happened if she had lost control of her car on the slippery road.

"Relax. My car has all-wheel drive, and I was extra careful. I'm back safely, aren't I? Gosh, you sound just like Alex."

I clear my throat. "I just got a little worried is all. So, you went to the bar?"

"Yes, I did, and guess who will be able to move back to their apartment tomorrow?"

I swallow. "It'll be done by tomorrow?" So quickly? Don't these things take time?

"Yes, by tomorrow evening, we'll be back in my apartment, well *our* apartment. Isn't that exciting?"

"Yes, exciting," I murmur feeling the exact opposite of excited, which is crazy. This isn't my house, and the arrangement has always been temporary. Even my stay at Andrea's is temporary...a few months at best, until I can scrape together enough money to get my own place.

That night, for the first time since we had moved in, Alex joined us for dinner. I was startled when Mrs. Staten said dinner would be served in the dining room. Andrea and I never eat in there, preferring the island in the kitchen, although we rarely have dinner at home because we're usually at the bar by this time. I was even more shocked when I saw Alex already at the head of the table.

As soon as I walk in the room, he looks up, and we lock eyes. My heart starts racing, and I know I'm in big trouble. I momentarily think about feigning sickness to get out of dinner, but then I realize that this will be the first and last time we'll eat together, since we're leaving tomorrow.

I try my best to ignore the excitement buzzing in my veins at the sight of him. I say a murmured thanks for the polish and sit down across from Andrea. I can't focus on the conversation or the delicious meal placed before me. All of my attention is consumed by his presence, by the power he holds over me. Why won't he stop staring at me? The sharpness of his gaze is like fire licking at my flesh. His obsessive attention on me is intoxicating and makes me feel like the only person in existence.

He stares at me hungrily, while spooning food into his mouth and sipping red wine. My core clenches when his tongue dips to lick a lingering drop off his lip, all while staring into the depths of my eyes. The look promises his intentions, which I can only assume to be equally as sensual and decadent.

My heart is pounding so hard that I half expect it to jump out of my chest. It wasn't this bad when I first met him, was it? I don't remember being so viscerally affected by this man.

"Autumn." I freeze when he purrs my name.

CHAPTER 25



ALEXANDER

“Autumn,” I say to catch her attention. She’s been studiously avoiding my gaze since we started eating.

She looks incredibly uncomfortable in my presence, and a blush is creeping up her neck. Seeing the physical effect I have on her is only further stoking my need to have her again. I want to taste every inch of her and study every inch of her body – the way such a masterpiece deserves. I want to bring her so much pleasure that the mere memory of our time together will bring her half way to climax. My eyes burn into her throughout the entire meal, as images play in my mind. The meal is over, and very soon, Mrs. Staten will come out to clear the plates. She’ll leave after that.

For some reason, she goes deadly still and then slowly raises her head to stare at me like a deer caught in headlights. “Yes?” Her voice is husky. She couldn’t have said more than two words since she sat down.

She picks up her wine glass with a shaky hand, and my gaze drops to the bold color of her nails. My lips lift up in satisfaction. She used them. I was expecting to meet some resistance before she accepted the gift, but I’m pleased to see that she indulged herself instead of overthinking a simple gesture. Although, I spent the better part of an hour picking each color, imagining how the tones would look on her delicate hands...and how those perfectly manicured hands would look as they run over my chest and her nails dig into the flesh of my back.

“Is something wrong? You haven’t said much,” I announce. Mrs. Staten comes in just then and clears our plates. Andrea glances between me and Autumn, and her eyes sparkle with mischief.

She picks up her phone and exclaims, “Would you look at the time? I have to be at the bar. It’s bad enough that I’ve left Keith on his own for this long. Good night, kids.” She winks at me.

I stare at her back as she leaves. What is she up to now?

“I have to go too, I—” Autumn stands up, but I stop her with a hand around her wrist.

“Did you only get one night off from the bar? It should be two.”

She hesitates and states, “I got two nights off. But it’s getting late so I want to turn in.”

I check the time on my watch. “It’s 7:30. Have dessert with me.”

“Dessert?”

Mrs. Staten walks back in with a tray laden with different deserts and carefully places it on the table. “That will be all, Mrs. Staten. You may go home now,” I tell her without taking my eyes off Autumn.

She glances around the table with interest. “What’s all this?” she asks when Mrs. Staten is gone.

“Dessert. You wouldn’t want all this to go to waste, would you? Take your seat, Autumn.”

She slowly sinks back into her chair, and my chest expands with satisfaction...and something else. Something I’m not too eager to explore yet. I just want to enjoy taking advantage of having her in my house one last time.

Fuck, why did I have to repair Andrea’s place so soon? I could’ve had her here for a little longer. Maybe there will be another storm tonight, and something horrible will happen to her apartment, something much more difficult to repair. Noah could certainly have that arranged.

Autumn glances at the dessert hesitantly. “You shouldn’t have. This is too much, I can’t possibly finish it all.”

“Nonsense.” I push a plate of cake like strawberry cobbler to her. “They’re small. My ten-year-old niece could polish them all off.”

“You don’t have a ten year old niece.” She rolls her eyes as she draws the plate the rest of the way to her.

I finally received the background report I had requested from Noah a few days ago. It is a measly five pages detailing every single thing about her. The first thing I checked were the things she enjoys. Noah is detailed like that. I don’t know how he does it, but the man could find out where you were on a random Tuesday six years ago if I asked for it. I had Mrs. Staten make three of the desserts on the list.

Strawberry cobbler cake – which sounds gross, but it doesn’t actually look too bad – Praline bread pudding topped with vanilla ice cream and dark chocolate mousse with a maraschino cherry on top.

“These are all my favorites,” she murmurs, glancing at the dishes. “How did Mrs. Staten...how could you possibly know?”

“I have my ways,” I say mysteriously. I doubt she’d appreciate knowing that I dug into her past. “Well, go on, try them,” I add when she hesitates. “If you’re worried they won’t taste as good as they look, don’t. I’ve yet to see a dish Mrs. Staten can’t perfect. She was actually a chef in a well-known restaurant Downtown before I snatched her up a few years ago.”

She dips a spoon into the cobbler first and hums when the spoon enters her mouth. “This is so good! It tastes even better than if I had made it myself,” she exclaims. I lean forward with my elbows on the table, my fists propped beneath my chin as I watch her take another bite.

Her eyes close as another heavenly moan rumbles from deep in her throat. This is my new favorite hobby. I may be a man of routine and structure, never one to over-indulge, but I

could fucking overdose on her. I could spend eternity watching that look of pure satisfaction and pleasure cross her face, and it wouldn't be enough. And to think I had brought it to her. I am the one who makes her moan with joy, and I'd quite literally kill to do it again. And again. Autumn's fulfillment and happiness is my new fulltime job.

She glances at me, then offers me the spoon loaded with cobbler. I smirk and lean even further toward her as I part my lips. She hesitates then feeds the spoon into my mouth.

"Delicious," I murmur lazily. She clears her throat and quickly spoons up more of the dessert into her mouth. It doesn't escape my attention that we are sharing a spoon. What I just had my tongue around is now a vessel for her enjoyment. I watch her lick a crumb off the back, her pink tongue flicking over the silver utensil.

I watch her finish the cobbler without saying a word. She does a tiny dance on her seat with the last bite; it takes iron clad control to stop the chuckle in my throat. It would only make her self conscious, and my hard gaze on the spoon entering her mouth repeatedly is likely unsettling enough.

When she finishes the cobbler, she pushes it away in exchange for the pudding.

"How is bartending going for you? Do you like it?" I ask, when the pudding is almost gone.

She shrugs and offers, "It's not bad. It takes my mind off things, and the people are surprisingly nice. I haven't met a drunken asshole yet."

"What about a prick making a pass at you?" I ask, and she pauses with the spoon a few inches from her mouth. Damn it, of course, that's happened. She shifts uncomfortably so I change the subject. "What were you doing before you came here?"

All these things are probably in the file in my office, but I want to hear as much as I can directly from her. I can read up on the parts that are difficult for her to talk about.

“I wasn’t doing much. After graduating two years ago, I got a job waitressing to pay off my student loan because it was tough to get a job with my degree, especially because I had no prior experience working in the field. That is really lame, by the way; how could I gain experience if no one hired me?”

“It’s unfair, yeah, but that’s just how it is. No one wants to take a chance on a fresh graduate, who will undoubtedly make mistakes.”

“But people make mistakes in order to learn from them!”

“So, you were a waitress?” I steer the conversation away from that subject since I’m guilty of the offense of making her angry. Why hire a fresh graduate when I can have someone with infinitely more experience?

“For a short while my ex-fiancé, then my boyfriend, didn’t like it because he thought it was beneath me to serve people. He wanted me to quit, but I wouldn’t. So, he paid off my debts behind my back and told me that I now owe him instead. His first requirement was for me to quit my job.” She glances down to her plate, the corners of her mouth turning down.

“So you did?”

She nods. “I had been working for just eight months, and Mom said he was right. It was silly but I was twenty-two at the time. It’s not an excuse, but I know the me I am now wouldn’t have just given in like that. It was the beginning of things going downhill between us. He proposed shortly after.”

“How long were you with him?”

“Three years. Can we stop talking about him? It’s ruining my appetite.” She stabs her spoon into the pudding.

“Fine.” I’ll read up about it later anyway. “What about your degree? What did you study?”

She smiles as she scoops up a bit of pudding. I wait for her to finish munching. “Landscaping.”

How odd. “Did you choose it for yourself?”

“Of course. I like art, but I have zero artistic talent. Growing up, I always preferred the outdoors because my home

conditions were less than ideal. I noticed things: how the yards of some people's houses can be so beautiful, with so much care and attention put into them. I dreamed about living in those houses and how the others were drab and neglected. People don't realize the land surrounding their home is an extension of the rooms within – a direct display of how much pride you take in it.

“That's the first impression people get. Whether we like it or not, people have and will always judge a book by its cover. I decided I'd help beautify the cover of people's homes, but it's not an easy industry to break into when you have debts weighing you down. I couldn't wait patiently to get a job or branch out on my own like some people had advised. But one day, I swear I'm going to start my own company and bring some of my designs to life!”

Her face lights up as she speaks. I realize that she's really passionate about it, so I speak without thinking.

“Beaufort Construction works with a number of landscapers for current properties and some we're contracted to build. I've been meaning to look into hiring a long-term landscaper to be exclusively ours. Send me your portfolio and a written proposal, and I'll consider you for the job.”

She blanches and spine goes ramrod straight. “I told you about it because you asked, not to solicit for a job,” she says stiffly as she rises to her feet. “Thanks for the dessert. It was delicious.”

A jolt of panic hits me as she starts walking away. I shoot to my feet and grab her arm for the second time tonight, stopping her from leaving, “Autumn.”

She gives me a cool glance. “I might be destitute and without direction right now, but that doesn't mean I'm going to jump at a chance to displace some local, deserving people from their jobs. Like I said, I have no prior experience in the field, so you clearly have ulterior motives for offering me a job.”

I tighten my grip on her arm. “Listen to me very carefully, Autumn,” I growl. “I want to fuck you, yes. I'm not going to

deny it when it's so blatantly obvious, but that's not why I told you to apply for the job. If you don't want to, fine. But you can be rest assured that it would only be an application, and I will be hiring the most suitable person whether it's you or someone else. You don't rise to my level of success by handing out charity."

She glowers at me and takes a step closer until we're nose to nose, shocking me with her bold standoff. "If you didn't know me and I submitted an application through your website or whatever, would I even be considered?" I don't answer, and she scoffs. "That's what I thought."

I give her a slight shake. "I'm not denying that you'd have the opportunity because you know me; It's an ugly reality, but one you better get used to. Don't be naive, Autumn. It's how the world works. You either know someone or you know someone who knows someone."

"Only the extremely lucky get a job in this world with no experience or are willing to work without pay. And I didn't offer you the job, Autumn. I said I'll *consider* you. The job isn't automatically yours because I want to fuck you. No pussy is sweet enough for me to hire someone incompetent."

"Fuck you," she spits, her eyes flashing.

"Be my guest," I shoot back, then press my lip to hers.

CHAPTER 26



AUTUMN

The kiss is hard, showing that I pissed him off with my words, but I'm also fuming at him, and I transfer all that rage into my actions. His hands come up to either side of my face, his fingers digging into my flesh as he angles my head and parts my lips with his tongue. I retaliate by biting his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood; in return I get a deep growl as he pushes me back until my thighs hit the table. His large body looms over me, and I claw at his back to keep from falling back onto the table. I won't give in and lie down like a good little pet.

The feel and taste of him explodes inside my mouth, and I whimper as my core clenches. Damn him. I can't control the response of my body just from being around him. He's furiously intoxicatingly, and I can't seem to get enough. The way he looked at me as I polished off the desserts, combined with the memories of what he did to me last time we let ourselves succumb to our passion, has my body ready to explode. My eyes flutter closed, and my heart starts pounding. I go light headed from the adrenaline coursing through me.

I thrust my tongue to meet his, and we duel for dominance. He wins, of course, and grunts in victory as he sucks my tongue into his mouth. I moan throatily, my eyes rolling to the back of my head. His cock hardens against my belly, and I moan again, relishing the fact that I'm causing the same effect he has on me. There's no denying our pull to one another; and at this point I can't imagine fighting it any longer.

He picks me up deftly, and I wrap my limbs around him tightly as he starts walking, careful not to break the kiss. I hear the ping of the elevator as if from a great distance. Before I can glance around, he backs me against the mirrored wall. One hand moves to my hair, while the other holds my hip steady as he thrusts his hard length into me.

I arch back, grinding into his hardness. The elevator pings again, and the door slides open quietly. He shifts backward, taking my weight off the wall of the elevator and into his arms.

I tighten my legs around his hips and move my hands into the short silky strands of his hair. I plaster kisses all over his face, barely noticing that he places his finger against a dark pad next to a pair of looming hardwood doors.

A green light flashes from the pad and with a click, the doors swing open. He carries me over the threshold, but I have no time to admire the masculine space before I'm tossed onto a large, decadently soft bed. I have impressions of mahogany floors and black and gray damask wallpaper before Alex climbs over me, blocking my view and my interest in anything but him.

His pupils are blown, so dark they're almost black. He gently brushes back a few stray curls that have somehow made their way to my face and adjusts my glasses. Then his lips are back on mine as he delivers a devastating kiss. His tongue probes between my lips, and they part eagerly for him. Chills spread all over my body and goosebumps erupt as I gasp into his mouth.

"Alex..." I moan.

"Fuck." His hands sink into my hair as he deepens the kiss, demanding more until I can barely catch my breath. Why does he taste so good? My hands move up his back and my fingers dig into his shoulders as I arch into his warm, hard body.

His tongue is hot and demanding, flicking in my mouth and flirting with mine. He shifts a little and nibbles on my bottom lip, his teeth softly grazing my flesh. One hand leaves my hair to trail down my body, then slides beneath the band of

my sweatpants. His large, hot hand caresses me over my panties and lightly squeezes me.

Oh God. His hand leaves my pants, and I shudder in disappointment as he pushes away from me. But he suddenly is grabbing my tank top and ripping it over my head, before gripping the straps of my bra with both hands. He tears them down my arms, exposing me. My first thought is to shy away from his brazen inspection of my body, but I instinctively arch my back and thrust my breasts to him in offering.

My nipples contract and harden, pointing toward him. Before I can react, he bends forward and draws one tip into the hot heat of his mouth. I cry out as he sucks hard and sinks his teeth into the sensitive flesh. I can tell he's leaving his mark on me, which only fuels my lust further. My hand runs through his hair, and I dig my nails into his scalp, earning me a deep groan.

"Alex!" I shout. He sucks harder and lifts his free hand to my other breast to tweak the nipple. Pleasure ripples from my nipples down to my core where I'm very much ready for him.

He switches to the other side and runs his fingers over the already wet and aching tip. He rolls my nipple between calloused fingers while feeding from the other. I feel my body beginning to tense. An orgasm is building from this sensation alone, reminding me why this man has such a hold on me. Then he shifts and slowly trails kisses down to my stomach. I whimper when he pushes my sweatpants down my legs and tosses them behind him.

I'm now lying before him in only my panties. He rakes his eyes painfully slowly down my body, stopping at the lace material that is clearly damp between my thighs.

"Fuck, baby. You're soaked through," he murmurs huskily, staring at my panty-clad pussy hungrily. I shift my hips needily, far beyond embarrassment at this point. He knows what I need and exactly how to give it to me – of that I'm sure.

"Alex, please," I plead. My climax is so close that I swear I can taste it.

“That’s it, baby. *Beg*. What do you want? My hands, my lips. Beg and I just might give them to you.”

“Your cock,” I whimper, dropping my eyes to the bulge in his trousers.

“Look at you licking your lips. You’re hungry for it, aren’t you?” he groans and shifts until he’s standing at the foot of the bed.

He unbuttons his shirt swiftly and drags it off. I inhale sharply at the bared expanse of his large, golden chest. Such lickable abs. His tattooed chest is fully exposed, and I can make out intricate swirls that cover the tops of his pecs and spread to his shoulders. My eyes continue to drink in his large form and travel to the dark trail of hair, leading from his navel into his waistband.

I pant as he unbuckles his belt, flicks it through the loops and tosses it to the floor carelessly. He pops the button and drags down the zipper before he pushes his trousers off. His black briefs allow his cock to spring out angrily. Fuck, just like the rest of him, his cock is big and looming.

He places his knees on the bed and starts to climb toward me with a possessive look in his eyes. “Condom,” I have the presence of mind to whisper.

He frowns as he walks to the nightstand and pulls the drawer open. He tears the package with his teeth, then rolls it on while staring me down. Under his scrutinizing gaze, I bridge my hips and pull my panties down my thighs, tossing them to land where they may.

“You better get on birth control, because next time, I’m fucking you bare,” he orders as he climbs back on the bed.

All I can do is nod as the gravity of what we’re about to do sinks in. I grab his shoulders as he crawls over top of me, parting my legs. I need him like I need air. I crave him like I do a good book, and I’m afraid once won’t be enough.

“I’m yours, Alexander, now fuck me,” I demand as I shift beneath him, rubbing my clicked center along his length. I know Andrea is at work and won’t be back until past

midnight, but I fear that we might be interrupted again, and I need to have him at least once before that happens.

Alex's nostrils flare, and his jaw clenches at my words. His eyes dart between mine as he comprehends what I'm asking. Before I have the chance to start begging again, he leans down to drag a hot, wet kiss against the tendons of my neck. I gasp when the broad head of his cock presses against my entrance. I have to widen my legs even more to accommodate him between my legs.

Before I can take another breath, he shifts his hips and thrusts forward, burying himself in me. I gasp as the full length of his cock slides deep inside. "Oh, God. Alexander," I whimper, my head hitting the headboard from the impact of the single motion.

He doesn't give me much time to recover before I grab his shoulders, hanging on as he digs his fingers into my hip to hold me steady as he thoroughly and truly fucks me into ecstasy. He grabs my left leg up to hook over his hip, allowing him to drive in deeper and faster. I throw one hand up to brace myself against the headboard.

His breaths come in pants, and he grunts into my ear with his thrusts. He's pounding me so hard that each thrust testing my strength as I press against the wood with my palm. Before my arm gives out, he grips my hips and drags me to the edge of the bed. He gets to his feet, never pulling himself out of me, and continues to pound into me. The angle of his hips allows his thick cock to graze my upper walls and brings me to the brink of an explosive orgasm. My nails claw at his back as I ride the pleasure fueled high, chasing the delicious release that I know he will deliver soon.

His hands leave my hips to roam my body. He palms one breast, the hard nipple squeezed between his knuckles. His other hand dips between my thighs, his thumb working me in tantalizing circles as he continues to pound into me. My toes curl, eyes rolling to the back of my head as an orgasm hits me like a sledgehammer. I sink my nails into his flesh as I scream his name.

His hands move back to my hips to hold me still as I shudder beneath him. His thrusts become erratic, wild, and less controlled.

“Autumn, fuck,” he plants one of his hands next to my head as he jerks into me. Shit. I want to feel him release into me with no barrier. My core clenches around him and he curses.

We stare into one another’s eyes, not sure what words could encompass the emotions passing between us, now both panting, both satiated and yet craving more. I see it then. I see how he really feels, and I’m terrified that I’m not far behind. But I know I’m lost in him. His secrets will become mine to bear alongside him, his darkness mine to face.

CHAPTER 27



AUTUMN

The extreme heat wakes me up. I glance around the room bleary-eyed as I wonder where I am. Then memories from last night come rushing in and I stiffen. How did we go from fighting to fucking? I folded into his arms so easily too.

Then I realize the reason for my current overheated state: I'm under a thick duvet with Alex wrapped tightly around me. My back is tucked into his chest while one of his legs is draped over mine, and his arms are gripping me. The heat is emanating from his sweat-slicked body. I reach a hand up to adjust my glasses and realize they're gone.

I shoot up in the bed as panic slithers down my spine, not caring about waking him up. As I glance around, I'm able to make out the shape of the nightstand. I shift toward it slowly, my arms outstretched.

"Autumn, what are you doing?" Alex's voice is deep from sleep, and my core clenches tightly as liquid desire washes over me. His voice alone has an alarming effect on me.

"My glasses. I can't see," I state. He curses behind me, and the room suddenly gets brighter. I still can't see beyond blurry shapes, but at least I can make out the nightstand.

"Hold on, they're here," Alex murmurs. His hands clamp over my shoulders, and he turns my body to face him so he can place them on my face. Everything immediately comes into focus.

"Thank you." I smile at his handsome face.

His eyes narrow as he searches my gaze. “You didn’t have a panic attack this time.”

Huh. Except for the initial panic I had when I realized that I didn’t know where my glasses were, I took the situation relatively well. “That’s surprising. One of the main reasons I let Larson convince me to get contacts is because I’d wake up in the middle of the night and have horrible panic attacks when I couldn’t see.”

“So the panic attacks are something you’ve always had?”

“Not always—” I trail off trying not to think of the incident that initiated them.

“What happened?”

I sigh, finding it surprising that I want to tell him when I’ve never told anyone else. Not even Mom knows. “It happened a couple of months before Mom adopted me – a few days after my seventh birthday. I had been in and out of several homes, but this particular one already had some other kids. The kids tricked me into going into the woods with them, then one of them dared me to give him my glasses because he wanted to try them on. I stupidly handed them over, trustingly.”

I was desperate to find a place where I could belong. The kids had been in the home for a year, and I thought if I were easy going and fun, they’d convince their parents to let me stay too.

“Fuck,” Alex curses already having an idea how the story will end.

“The last thing I heard was their mean-spirited laughter as they ran away. I couldn’t see more than the blurry shapes of the trees. As I tried to find my way out of the woods, I only managed to go deeper and deeper. I was lost for over twelve hours – well into the night. When I was found, I became withdrawn and scared of my own shadow.”

“I would have terrible nightmares every night, screaming the whole house awake until they finally had enough and took me back to social services. Mom adopted me a few months

later. I still had nightmares and remained withdrawn, but I guess she needed my brokenness to heal her own.” I took her mind off her lost child, but then her husband filed for divorce.

“Eventually, I faced my demons and the nightmares mostly stopped once I had accepted their cause: my lack of vision is out of my control, but trusting those around me isn’t. I can never control the panic I always have when I wake up without my glasses, but I can stifle it once I realize that it’s only temporary.”

“And? What happened to the kids?” Alex demands.

I shrug. “I’m not sure. The foster parents at the time sent me back into the system because they thought the event broke me, and it wasn’t what they signed up for. I never saw them again.”

“Do you remember their names?”

I squint at him. “What? Why?”

“Their names, Autumn.”

Maybe he’s trying to get me to say their names, so they don’t hold so much power over me. I tell him, even though they stopped controlling me years ago. “Richard, Everly, and Kieran Smith.”

He nods like he’s made a mental note, then draws me into his arms. I go willingly. “Who would have thought you’d be a cuddler?” I tease.

“I’m not,” he assures me.

I chuckle, and my gaze is drawn to the alarm clock: 12:43AM. Shit. I stiffen and push away from him. “I have to go back to my room.”

“No, you don’t.” He tightens his grip.

“No, Alexander, I really have to go. Andrea will be home anytime now, and she might check on me.” I’m still not sure if she meant it when she said I don’t have to stay away from her brothers, but even if she did, it doesn’t mean I’m going to rub this, whatever it is, in her face.

Alex sighs and releases me. He lounges back on the bed, his hands folded behind his head, watching me as I quickly get dressed. “Have dinner with me tomorrow,” he demands.

“I’ll think about it. We’re moving back into Andrea’s place, and I don’t know what excuse I’ll give her.”

“Tell her you’re having dinner with me. You’ve had dinner out with Ezra. How’s this any different?”

I give him a pointed look.

“I don’t care how you want to explain it to her. You’re having dinner with me.” His voice brooks no argument, and I sigh as I relent.

“Fine.”

“Come here.” He nods his in beckoning.

“Alexander...”

“One kiss,” he cajoles. I sigh again, but my heart is racing as I slowly climb on top of him to drop a chaste kiss to his lips.

“You can do better than that,” he murmurs, his eyes twinkling. I kiss him again, and he moves lightning fast, tumbling me onto my back and plants his mouth over mine.

“Fuck,” he growls as he pulls back. “Forget going back to your room, let’s just stay here.”

“Alexander!” I exclaim, pushing his chest but he doesn’t budge.

“Fuck,” he curses again and rolls off me. “Get out of here before I rip your clothes to shreds and tie you to my bed.”

I scramble off the bed and rush to the door, my heart racing and desire thick in my veins. But then I stop. “Wait, I can’t have dinner with you. I have to work tomorrow.” Disappointment slumps my shoulder against the door.

Alex watches me for a moment. “Lunch then?”

“I’ll try to get away if I can. I’m not sure what we have to do to make Andrea’s place inhabitable again.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he says and waves a dismissive hand. “I’ll send some people over to take care of everything. Just make yourself available for lunch.”

“Okay.” I grin at him and mutter, “Good night.”

I sigh dreamily as I take the stairs down to the first floor. What am I doing? Last week, I was set to marry Larson, and now...what?

I tiptoe past Andrea’s room just in case she’s home. I am not quite ready for her to know the truth: I’m falling for her brother.

CHAPTER 28



ALEXANDER

Richard, Everly, and Kieran Smith are unfortunate bastards because according to the report I'm staring at they live just two hours away.

"Who are they anyway?" Noah asks, raising his shoe clad feet onto my desk. I glare at him, but we've been working together for so long he isn't afraid of me anymore.

"They hurt Autumn. Scarred her. I simply want to return the favor." I get to my feet and adjust my tie. "Coming with me?"

"You're going now?" He drops his feet and stands. "You haven't read the full report I got you on Autumn. And you have a very important appointment with Adam Townsend in an hour."

Adam Townsend is one of the town's politicians campaigning to be voted onto the Selectboard. He likes to call himself a philanthropist and master strategist. I accepted his appointment because I realize there's a strong chance of him becoming one of the five Selectboard members in the election next year.

"Reschedule it. I'll see him tomorrow." I glance at my watch. Past seven. If I go now, I should be back in time for my date with Autumn.

"Reschedule a meeting with Alan Townsend?" He sounds surprised. I never reschedule prior appointments because I hate changing plans, especially not with politicians I deem potentially useful. They can be slippery and quite annoying

when they feel slighted, but this is important. It has to be dealt with today.

“Reschedule it,” I repeat, walking out of my office. He follows closely behind me.

“But what about the report on Autum – Ms. Montgomery?” he corrects himself when I give him a sideways glance. “There’s an important detail you need to know.”

“The report isn’t going anywhere. I’ll get to it when I’m back.”

Instead of calling for my car, I walk toward Noah’s truck. This is personal. I wait for him to unlock the doors and get into the passenger seat. Noah gets in the driver’s seat, and I type in the address to the GPS.

“Let’s go fuck some people up,” he says with something like glee in his voice. I roll my eyes at him. He still gets excited when we have to go put the fear of God, no, the fear of the Beauforts, into some sad soul.

Noah floors the gas, exceeding the speeding limits. No one is going to stop us and he knows it. We get there in a record hour and a half.

“Solid driving,” I commend him as I get down from the truck.

“I try.” He grins.

We both turn to inspect the small house in front of us with its loping roof, peeled paint, and a sorry excuse for a garden. The home of Richard Smith. The other two live nearby making this really quite convenient for me. I would hate having to make this take any longer than it needs to.

We walk toward the house and Noah pounds on the front door.

“What? Who is it?” an annoyed voice calls from within. Footsteps approach and the door is swung open. According to the report, Richard is thirty years old, but he looks like a solid

forty. Bad habits like smoking and hard drugs will do that to you.

“Do I know you lot?” He squints as he glances between Noah and me.

I grin at him. “No, but you’re about to.”

Noah pushes Richard back into the house, and I roll up my sleeves as I follow him. “Richard Smith, you were a really bad boy. You hurt someone I’ve come to really care about.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” he shouts. “And if you don’t leave my house, I’ll call the police.”

I bark a harsh laugh. “Why don’t you go ahead and do just that?” I suggest, taking my tool box out of my jacket pocket. I place it on the high table conveniently located in the living room. I don’t pay him any mind as I take out my scalpel, gloves, scissors, forceps and a few other contraptions.

“Wha–what’s that for?” Richard stammers, and I nod at Noah who hits the back of his head with enough force to knock him out. I don’t actually need the tools, but it will certainly add an edge of terror before I go ahead with taking his eye out. The goal isn’t just rendering him half blind; it’s to induce lifelong trauma. The kind that will stick with him through what’s left of his pathetic excuse of a life and haunts his dreams, leaving him paranoid at every corner. I want him to never answer his front door in peace again. Every time he looks at his god awful face in the mirror, I want him to think of me and shudder.

Noah brings out the black cable ties and secures his wrists behind his back and his ankles to the chair legs. I drag on my rubber gloves and casually make my way to his kitchen where I fill a bowl with cold water. I walk back to where Richard is passed out and pour the water on his face. He comes to with a harsh gasp.

“Oh good, you’re up,” I say conversationally. “You won’t want to miss this part, I promise.”

I nod at Noah again, and he plants his hands on Richard’s knees to hold him still. I hover over his chest. “Listen,

Richard. I only want to take out one eye. I'm going to place my hands on either side of your face and dig my thumb into your right eye until it pops out, simple as that. But you have to stay really still or I might accidentally take out both of your eyes, you don't want that do you?"

The coward whimpers. "P-please. I didn't do anything."

I sigh irritably. I don't have time for chitchat, but I do want him to know that I'm doing this for my girl. "Think back to say fifteen years ago, a small girl with glasses was adopted with you and your siblings and you left her in the woods blind and alone. Does it ring a bell?"

He doesn't remember at first, but then his eyes widen dramatically. "Autumn?" he asks in a hushed voice.

I snap my fingers. "Bingo. Now hold still." He doesn't hold still, of course. They never do, I think with disgust as I grip his face tightly. Part of me wishes this was my first time doing this, but it's definitely not, so this shouldn't take long at all.

The fucker starts screaming as I force my thumb and index finger between his eye socket. Because of the natural lubricating fluids and tears, his eye is slippery. I swear under my breath as I try to get a hold of it.

Richard makes the mistake of closing his eyes, which makes pinching his eyeball between my fingers easy. I apply pressure until it pops with a loud squelch and the fucker's scream increases in pitch as blood streams out of the empty socket. Then he passes out.

Noah curses behind me, moving away from the fucker's knees as I wipe my gloved hand clean on Richard's shirt. "What is it?" I ask him.

"He fucking pissed himself," he says in disgust.

I shake my head as I walk into the kitchen. I wash the remaining gore and blood off my gloved hands, then pat them dry with a dish towel. When I'm done, I remove the gloves, putting them into my pocket. I walk to the table in the living room and pack up my tool box.

“Come on, we don’t have time to dally. We have two more folks to get to,” I tell Noah.

“You’re taking the girl’s eye too?” Noah raises his brow at me as we make our way back to the car.

“No.” The Beaufort code draws the line at kids and women. We aren’t above threats, but I’d never lay a hand on either. Honor between thieves and all that. “I have something special prepared for her.”

Everly Smith, or rather Everly Morgan, is happily in love. She got married a couple of months ago and she’s pregnant too. So poor Mr. Morgan will have to take the punishment for her. A lesser one, of course, considering he’s likely innocent in her crimes, but something brutal enough that she will regret ever crossing paths with my Autumn.

* * *

I BARELY MAKE it back in time for lunch with Autumn since I have to go home to change. I wave a hand at Greg to stop him from getting out of the driver’s seat. I’ll get her door myself.

“You’re late,” Autumn complains as she gets into the back of my Rolls.

“I’m sorry, baby. I had something to take care of,” I apologize as I lean forward to help her pull on her seatbelt.

“I can do it myself.” She tries to slap my hands away, but I don’t let her. “Andrea is watching,” she finally growls. I don’t let her words stop me. I pull the belt firmly across her body and click it into place.

When I close the door, I glance at the balcony, where sure enough my sister is watching with a serene smile. I frown at her as I wonder if she’s sick or something. She waves cheerfully at me. I tilt my head.

“Go on,” she mouths to shoo me. I just shake my head at her. Maybe Ezra’s crazy finally rubbed off on her.

“How was the move?” I ask Autumn when I’m in the car and Greg pulls away from the curb.

She shrugs. “It was okay. We only had a few clothes at your place so it’s not like we had to do any heavy lifting. Plus a cleaning crew came in this morning.”

Yeah, the cleaning crew I sent. “Good.” It will be unsettling coming back to an empty house tonight. She and Andrea only spent a little over a week there, but somehow she filled it with her presence. She’ll be back there soon enough if I have my way, and I will. I always do.

Greg pulls into the parking lot of the Marina, a great restaurant with exceptional food and atmosphere. Although it looks unremarkable from here, the view inside is unparalleled. It rivals the view of the water I have from my room. Autumn follows me quietly through the front door. I nod at the hostess as I weave my way through the restaurant to the upper deck overlooking the water. Autumn gasps softly as she glances around.

“This is so beautiful,” she says.

“It’s one of the best restaurants in town. I hope you like seafood.” I take her to an enclosed private dining area toward the back of the deck with seating for two. I drag back her chair and nod for her to be seated. She murmurs a “thanks” as she sits down. I gently push the chair forward and signal to a waiter to bring us my favorite bottle of champagne. It’s cool out, but the overhead heaters and outdoor fireplace make it comfortable. I place a blanket over Autumn’s knees for good measure.

She can’t seem to take her eyes off the gleaming water and the trees with brown and burnt orange leaves tucked into the foot of the hill just beyond the water. “You should see how it looks at sunset.”

That’s one of the main reasons I wanted to have dinner with her here, but I have to admit lunch works better for what I have in mind for today.

A young man approaches and wordlessly pours us two glasses of champagne before placing the bottle on ice. “Are you ready for your meal, sir?” He wisely keeps his gaze on me.

I glance at Autumn, who is still taking in her surroundings. “Yes, bring everything out as it’s ready.” She looks at me confused, as there’s no menu on the table.

“Very good, sir,” Daniel says, “I’ll be back soon.”

I lift my champagne in a silent toast. Autumn does the same as she narrows her eyes at me. “Trust me,” I say.

True to his word Daniel is back in a few minutes. He carefully places the dishes in front of us and then he’s gone.

“That was fast. What is this?” Autumn asks, frowning at her food.

“I called ahead with our order. I don’t like to wait. Lobster mac and cheese. It’s incredible,” I assure her. She nods. A gust of chilly wind blows and she shivers. The weak sun is no competition for the chill that had descended into the town after the hailstorm last night. I stand to turn up the heaters that surround us and wrap a second blanket around her back.

As my hands run gently over her shoulders, I notice the subtle move of her head to the side, exposing her elegant neck. I take the opportunity to lean down and place a delicate kiss on her soft skin. She gasps in surprise, clearly not realizing that she made the movement, but I take it as a clear sign of trust to expose such a vulnerable area to me. Her subconscious even knows she’s mine.

I move back around to my seat and watch her enjoy her food. Her hair is hanging loosely around her face and draped over one shoulder. Her natural curls a little unruly – just the way I like them. She’s wearing a pair of tight jeans that cling to her curves and a thick sweater that is a bit loose but still grazes her ample breasts; breasts that I had my mouth all over last night. When my gaze moves back to her face, her cheeks are flushed and I can’t help the smile that pulls at my lips. Her response to my attention is addictive.

“You’re blushing, Autumn,” I state in a low tone that only she can hear. “I wonder how far down the red extends. Your chest? The tops of your breasts?”

She turns an even deeper shade of crimson as she murmurs, “You’ll never know.”

I smirk at that. Sure I could say something to scandalize her the next time I have her naked before me. Perhaps tell her how good she looks as she takes all of me or maybe how I want to fuck her mouth so badly that it keeps me up at night. But I don’t say it now. I watch as she scoops up a bit of her food and lifts it to her mouth.

Her eyes open wide with pleasure and she hums, “This is delicious.”

“I know.” I dig into my own meal with gusto, and we eat quietly. When we’re done, I ask if she’d like dessert, but she declines.

“I over indulged in Mrs. Staten’s delicious desserts last night, and I better not make a habit of it.”

“You worked it off shortly after,” I remind her and she blushes again.

“I suppose I did...” She waves a hand, trying to look unaffected as she leans back in her chair. “The view here is really incredible.”

I let her change the subject. “It is.” I take out the folder that’s been burning a hole in my suit pocket.

CHAPTER 29



AUTUMN

My brows narrow suspiciously when he pulls a folder from inside his suit and places it on the table, the waiter having already cleared our plates. “You have a pocket big enough to fit a folder in your suit jacket?” He’s very broad, so there’s certainly room to hide one, but they don’t make pockets that big, do they?

“My clothes are custom made,” he says in a matter of fact tone as he pushes the folder toward me. Feeling somewhat perturbed by the fact that I have to live with miniscule women’s pockets, while men wander around hiding God knows what beneath their clothing.

“What is that?” I ask, hesitating to open the folder. Alexander Beaufort is an enigma. There could be anything inside. When he asked me to dinner last night, I worried maybe it was a booty call; but then he agreed to lunch, and so far this doesn’t seem like an excuse for a quicky.

“Just open it,” he orders.

I open it gingerly and frown when I see the words on the page. It’s a business proposal. Most importantly it’s a landscaping business proposal. “What is this?” I ask again.

“Do you want to become an independent landscaper?” he asks instead of answering my question.

“What?”

“You don’t want to work exclusively with Beaufort Construction, I can respect that. However, If you start your

own business, you can become an independent contractor for several different construction businesses.”

I gasp as the enormity of what’s in front of me sinks in. “You created a business proposal? For me? What the hell, Alex?”

“I want to invest in your business. There are no quality landscapers in Brattleboro. We have to bring them in from the city, which can be a real hassle. It would be a win-win solution for all.”

“Win-win? But it sounds like I’m the only one with something to win. I never even submitted my portfolio,” I growl. “So, what? You brought me here and softened me up with food and a beautiful view to spring this on me?”

“No, I wanted to eat with you and work with you, so I’m killing two birds with one stone.”

“How about this? Not a chance in hell, Alexander. I’m not your charity case.” I get to my feet angrily. “Take me home. Now!” I snap when he moves to argue.

He narrows his eyes, but drops a wad of bills on the table and gets up. He picks up his folder – the fucking business proposal – tucks it back into his suit and leads me outside.

The ride back to Andrea’s is filled with a frosty silence.

“Think about it, okay?” he murmurs as he escorts me to the back stairs that lead to Andrea’s apartment.

“There’s nothing to think about, Alex. I’ve given you my answer. Good bye.” He leans forward, and I narrow my eyes at him. Is he seriously trying to kiss me right now? He must read my thoughts because he straightens up with a grunt.

“I’ll see you later,” he stammers. I turn and climb the stairs to Andrea’s place. I try not to, but I’m unable to stop myself from slamming the door as I let myself in with my fingerprint.

Andrea immediately shoots out of her room. I didn’t tell her about the recent development between Alexander and me – how do you even tell someone that you slept with their

brother? – but she was still weirdly excited about our date, even though I explicitly told her it wasn't one.

“That bad?” She frowns taking in my sullen expression. What the hell was I expecting anyway? For him to say he misses my presence in his home – after just living there for one week – and that he can't live without me?

“Apparently, this was a business lunch.” I complain, throwing myself on one of the comfortable green sofas.

“Explain,” she orders, taking a seat across from me, and so I do. Andrea listens attentively. She sighs when I'm done. “My brother is extremely calculated, and dangerous,” she adds, “but he can be tactless sometimes.”

Dangerous? What does she mean by that? Before I can ask, she continues. “I didn't know you have a degree in landscaping. You couldn't have come to a better place to utilize it. Brattleboro is a land hungry for its own landscapers. Is it that you don't want to be a landscaper or you don't want Alex to be involved in your business?”

I don't even have to think long for the answer. “I don't want Alex in my business. I don't need his handouts. Larson wasn't financially invested in my career, and yet he somehow still wrestled all control from me.” I don't want that to happen again, not with Alex. I don't know where we're headed or what we're even doing, but I know I don't want to be at a man's mercy ever again – no matter who he is.

“Larson would be the ex-fiancé you jilted at the altar?” Andrea guesses, and I nod. “I think you already know just what I think about him. As for Alex, I can't say as to the nature of your relationship with him, although I can guess,” she adds with a wink.

My face heats up as I stammer a response, “It's not...we're not like that.”

“Yeah, yeah, I already told you that I want you to marry one of my brothers, preferably Alex.” She winks again and my blush deepens. “Anyways, back to what I was saying... despite or in spite of what might be going on between you two,

Alex is an investor. No, let me talk.” She lifts a hand up to stop me when I try to interrupt.

“Alexander is an investor and he probably has majority shares in most, if not all of the businesses in Brattleboro, mine included. And that’s not necessarily a good thing if you ask me. He just likes having his hand in slices of pie around town so he can issue orders to anyone and have them scurry around to please him. That said, my brother cares about you—”

“Andrea—”

“No, I mean it. This isn’t just lip service Autumn. I’ve never seen Alex act around any woman the way he acts around you. He really cares, and I know for certain that he’d never try to use his influence to control people he cared about.”

“And when he stops caring about me? What then?”

She doesn’t even hesitate when she says, “That’s why I was going to tell you to come up with your own business proposal. I’ll even call Ezra to meet us here so he can help us draw up a mutually beneficial contract for Alex to sign. That way if things go sour between you two it doesn’t in any way affect your business.”

Is that a risk I’m willing to take? Do I see myself being able to work in the same town as Alex if we break up? Not to mention living in the same town and likely running into him regularly. And are we even together at this point? He’s possessive, yes, but we haven’t actually talked about it.

I sigh and stammer, “Thanks Andrea, I’ll think about it.”

The thing is, I’d rather continue working as a bartender: it’s not a bad job at all. From my tips and the rest of the money I got by selling my necklace, I’ve been able to pay off half of what Andrea paid for my glasses. By the end of the week when I get my paycheck, I’ll be able to take care of the rest. In fact, if things continue like this, I’ll be able to get my car back by the end of the year. January for sure.

Hours later, the bar is completely full when someone walks through the front door, bringing a blast of cold air with him. I look up to see that he’s very tall and looks to be in his early

thirties, but his hair is already graying at the temples, leading me to believe he might be older. He clearly takes care of himself.

I watch him walk to Andrea out of the corner of my eye. They talk for a few minutes and then Andrea points at me. Wait, what? My heart starts hammering as I briefly consider the possibility that he's a private investigator hired by Larson to look for me. Andrea wouldn't point me out so carelessly, would she?

The man starts toward me, and I push the frames of my glasses up my nose as I try not to panic. I absentmindedly fill the glass in front of me with a dirty martini and slide it to the customer across from me. He nods his thanks.

The man chooses a seat on my end of the bar, so I have no choice but to go ask him for his order. "Hello, what can I get you?"

"You the owner of the green Volkswagen beetle that was brought into my shop about two weeks ago?" he asks.

I hesitate and start, "Yes..."

"Great. I'm Vincent Fletcher. We got the call to fast track the repairs." He takes out a set of keys from his pocket – *my* keys – and drops them on the bar top between us. "Your car is parked right out front."

"Fast track the repairs?" I ask in bewilderment, throwing a glance at Andrea, but she's busy attending to someone. "I didn't make any such request. What about the bill?" I assume I'll have to pay extra for the quick repair.

A lump grows in my throat, and my heart hammers even faster. How am I supposed to pay him right now? The cost of the repair alone will be exorbitant, and now this? *Oh no*. I can't believe I'm about to sink into debt, two weeks into my fresh start in a new town.

Vincent chuckles softly. "I know you didn't make the order. I was with my father when he got the call directly from the top. And don't worry about the bill; it's all sorted out."

“From the top?” Who’s considered *from the top*? And why would they make such a request for me?

A look of surprise covers Vincent’s face. “You didn’t know? Alexander Beaufort called in a few days ago to demand the car be ready by the end of the week: *today*.”

Alex did what?

CHAPTER 30



AUTUMN

Vincent Fletcher leaves after dropping that bombshell; and because the bar is incredibly busy, I can't stalk off to Mr. Beaufort's office and give him a piece of my mind. He may be *from the top*, but who the fuck does he think he is?! And for him to pay for it...

What the hell is wrong with him? I'm fuming at this point. Andrea catches my eye across the bar and raises a questioning brow to which I shake my head in dismissal. Later.

We're closing the bar hours later when a fancy SUV pulls up in front of the building. "Ezra finally decides to grace us with his presence." Andrea rolls her eyes in annoyance, and I remember the conversation we had this afternoon. She called Ezra to come help us put together a business proposal.

"Is this about the investment with Alex?" I start shifting uncomfortably on my feet when Ezra gets out of his car. "I told you I wasn't interested."

"But it doesn't hurt to have the contract drawn. Just in case. Why are you late?"

Ezra comes to a stop in front of us and tugs at his tie, loosening it as he scowls at Andrea. "Does it ever occur to you that I could have business that ran late?"

His eyes are bloodshot like he hasn't slept in days, and there's a small shiner bruising the top of his cheekbone. And something red on his collar. I narrow my eyes at it, my stomach churning nervously.

“Is that b–blood?” I ask. Andrea’s gaze drops to where I’m staring, and she rushes to him.

“Oh my God, Ezra. Did you get into a fight again?”

“No,” he growls, pushing her off him. “I had a pest to deal with. It sounded urgent on the phone, so I came directly here. Can I shower in your apartment?”

Andrea nods, still looking concerned. Ezra walks back to his car to retrieve a duffel bag from the passenger seat. My mind is racing almost as fast as my heart as we make our way up to her place.

He had a pest to deal with? What could that mean? Somehow I doubt it was a literal pest troubling him.

“Give me a minute.” Ezra says and walks directly to the bathroom.

“You okay?” Andrea asks me with a raised brow, I nod absently. “Ezra is the best at writing up business contracts. And maybe a little ruthless, especially when it comes to one-upping Alex; but trust me, you want Ezra on your side when it comes to legalities.”

“And he’s on our side?”

“Of course.” She says it like it should be obvious. “We all love Alex, I promise, but he can be a stick in the mud and overly controlling sometimes.”

“He’s not that bad,” I jump to defend him, blushing when she raises a brow. I don’t like hearing her talk about Alex like that when all he ever does is try to protect and provide for the people he cares about. She just doesn’t understand him. There’s controlling because you want to keep people beneath you, and then there’s protective because you want what’s best for the people you love. Alex is the latter.

He’s been trying to provide for me from the get go. I think about that again, and I gasp when I come to the obvious realization. There’s no way Alexander Beaufort could feel that strongly about me. Yes he’s possessive of me, but that’s strictly physical. I assume.

I sink to the couch weakly.

“What is it? Are you okay?” Andrea asks again.

“I’m fine.” I repeat it in my head. She watches me through narrowed eyes for a moment and then makes her way to the kitchen, where she warms the dinner Mrs. Staten sent with us this morning.

She’s dishing out the food when Ezra comes out of the bathroom in flannel shorts and a t-shirt, his duffel in hand. He walks directly to a chair in the dining room and sinks into it heavily.

“That smells delicious. I assume Autumn made it?”

Andrea glares at him. “Mrs. Staten. But that doesn’t mean I’m not making progress in my strides to becoming a half decent cook. Thank you very much.”

He yawns dramatically. “I’ll believe it when I see it.” He smiles, revealing the charming dimple in his left cheek. Handsome as he looks in this moment, it doesn’t hide the fact that he looks exhausted.

Andrea brushes a hand over his forehead as she places his plate in front of him. He slaps her hand away gently. “What?”

“You look tired. You haven’t been getting any sleep, have you? What’s wrong?”

Ezra brushes her concern away. “I’m fine,” he mutters. Exactly what I said earlier. Andrea tosses an annoyed look my way.

“What’s with people saying they’re fine when they look anything but?”

“Whatever. Tell me why you called me here, Andie,” Ezra says as he digs into his food with gusto. Andrea takes the seat across from him.

“My darling big brother, you know I love you right?” Ezra chokes on his soup and starts coughing. Andrea scowls as she pushes a glass of water toward him. “What? Telling you I love you makes you gag?”

I chuckle quietly, but maybe not quite enough because Andrea glowers at me. I raise my hands up in surrender. “I’m not doing it,” Ezra declares when his coughing fit is over.

“Come on! You don’t even know what it is yet,” she complains.

“I know that whenever you start a conversation that way, you’re about to ask me for something impossibly difficult. The last time was to help convince Dad to let you have this place and become a bar owner. I almost lost my family jewels, remember, *darling sister*?”

Andrea sniffs indignantly. “Dad wouldn’t have really shot you, he was just bluffing. You know he loves you, and he’s desperate for grandkids. He would never do anything to jeopardize that. I knew you, and your precious *jewels*, were safe the whole time.”

Almost shot him? My eyes go wide as I let out a small squeak.

“What I want this time is easy enough,” she continues. “Want to one-up Alexander?”

Ezra smirks, “Okay, I’m listening.” Andrea explains what had happened this afternoon, and she’s not even done talking when he says he’s in.

“I’m not actually interested in going into business with him,” I speak up for the first time.

“Why? Because you don’t want to mix business with pleasure...or because of something else?” Ezra asks, gazing into my eyes with those light blue eyes of his. I start to stammer that there’s no *pleasure* between Alex and I when Andrea interrupts me.

“If even I know about you two, you can be rest assured that Ezra knows you and Alex are together.”

But we aren’t together. Not really. “Yeah, well that’s why I’m not interested. My last relationship was doomed from the start, but things really started to deteriorate when he started to use his money as a means to control me. Not that Alex and I

are in a relationship or anything, because we're not," I rush to add, and Andrea smirks at me.

"Then let me assure you, if Alex is saying he wants to invest in your business it's because he believes in your abilities and not because he wants to keep you under his thumb. He's had several past flings bring proposals to him which he declined because they weren't good enough," Ezra insists.

I realize I have no right to feel jealous over the mention of previous flings, but God help me because the thought of some other woman trying to sink her teeth into Alex and his influence has me seeing red.

"Besides," Andrea adds, "Alexander is an astute and picky investor. Although he has a pulse in every business in town like I told you, it's because of him that they've survived and ultimately thrived. Most of the companies he invested in as startups are now booming."

"Yeah, but—"

"If you have another reason you don't want him in your business, I'll totally understand and back off. But it would be incredibly stupid to let go of this opportunity because of something trivial, Autumn," Andrea states. "So, what if you two don't work out? Who cares?"

Um, I care. But she continues ruthlessly, "Don't you think you'd regret letting the opportunity to start your own business go? Fine, you'll eventually be able to save enough to start off on your own in a couple of years, but why wait when you can do it now?"

"I'll make sure the contract is ironclad in your favor so that any eventuality of your relationship with Alex, can't compromise your business," Ezra assures me.

My heart starts to pound again, but this time for another reason. They're right. Alex can be controlling, yes, but he's not like Larson who steamrolled all over me and tried to change everything about me.

He likes me for me. I push my glasses up my nose. I imagine finally being able to work as a Landscaper. Excitement fizzles in my veins as I envision it. And being the only Landscaper in Brattleboro wouldn't exactly hurt my chances at success.

“She's in,” Andrea announces and grins.

CHAPTER 31



ALEXANDER

“*A*lex,” Noah pops his head into my office. “You finally done with that report?”

The report documents Autumn Montgomery’s life from birth till her car broke down in my town two weeks ago. Feels like it’s been much longer. She’s held my interest from the moment she ran into me at what the report informs me was her own engagement party a year ago. All this while, I’ve been searching for my AWM, but she’s been right under my nose. In fucking Larson’s arms. She’s gone through a lot in her twenty four years, and things became even worse after she started fuck– dating that rat. The thought of them together, of him touching her, has me seething. That piece of shit is so far beneath my girl, it’s laughable. What finally made her leave, though?

“Yes, I am.” Larson Brown went into hiding the moment he found out Mason, his accomplice, had been caught, but my men are hot on his trail. He was already going to die for daring to steal from me when I was merciful enough to let him live after his mistake last year, but now I’m afraid that his death will be slow and painful.

He nods. “Someone’s here to see you. She doesn’t have an appointment.”

“I’m not interested in whatever business deal she’s bringing. Send her away,” I order.

“It’s Ms. Montgomery...”

I straighten in my seat. “Autumn? Send her in.” Noah gives me a knowing look like he wasn’t expecting a different response from me, but I don’t pay him any mind.

He moves away from my door; a couple of seconds later, Autumn walks in. I lean back, taking her in. She’s wearing a flowery patterned dress with a flirty skirt just shy of her knees. Her curls are pulled back into a tight bun. I frown as she’s always had her hair down.

I’m a bit taken aback when I realize that she’s glowering at me. “What is it, Autumn?”

“You made the call for them to fix my car and have it delivered yesterday? And then you *paid* for it?” she growls as she slams the door behind her. “What made you think you had the right to do that for me? I was going to pay for it myself. Eventually.”

Great. Her accepting my previous gift lulled me into falsely thinking she wouldn’t be terribly angry at me for fixing her car. “I would have just bought you a new car if I knew you’d be angry, anyway,” I mutter. I don’t intend for her to hear me but she does, and it seems to stoke the flames of her anger. Damn it, it turns me the fuck on.

“What did you just say to me?” she asks in a deadly whisper, and darned if I don’t feel proud that she has that in her. If I was a lesser man, I might quake in my shoes. But I’m not.

“You need a car to get around town, I fixed your car not because you’re not capable of doing it yourself but because I needed it done as soon as possible for my own sake, not yours. I worry, you know. I’m sorry it made you mad.”

Her eyes soften behind her glasses, but her stance remains rigid. Is she surprised that I’m apologizing so easily? Or that I said I worry about her?

“You should have told me about it and not just gone behind my back to make the call. That can never happen again, Alex. It just can’t.”

“It won’t,” I say smoothly, meaning it now that I know she doesn’t like surprises. In the future I’ll tell her my plans to buy her gifts, then go ahead with my decision whether she agrees or not. I can’t help it if I’m aching to shower her with every luxury the world has to offer.

“Good.” She hesitates, then whispers, “Hi,” as she pushes her glasses up her nose nervously.

I narrow my eyes when she finally walks forward to take the seat across from me. She’s no longer angry then? Good. She bites her bottom lip, then opens the ridiculously big bag hanging from her shoulder to take out a couple of documents. I realized she’s here for more than one reason.

“I thought about what you said yesterday, and I even had a conversation with Andrea about it. I’m going to accept your offer, that is, if it’s still on the table,” she adds quickly.

“Of course it’s still on the table.” I try not to smile, so she won’t think I’m gloating.

“Great.” She gives me a tentative smile and says, “I’m going to accept your offer to invest in my company. Here.” She pushes the documents at me.

“What are these?” I ask, barely glancing at the printed words.

“I thought it would be more appropriate to come up with my own proposal, so I drew up a draft of the agreement contract. Go on, read it.”

I push the drafted contract to the side to take a look at the proposal first. It’s almost identical to what I had come up with. If not for the fact that she hadn’t read past the title page, I would think it was plagiarized.

I finally let a smile spread across my face as pride swells in my heart. She did this on her own. I wasn’t completely blowing smoke up her ass yesterday when I said the contract is separate from my feelings for her, I had no doubt that she could bring in a solid ROI; but I have to admit that she wouldn’t get the offer this soon if not because of our relationship – and I’m proud of her for taking the initiative.

“Great minds do think alike after all,” I murmur softly. “This looks great, Autumn. Especially the part where you will give Beaufort Construction the right to first hire every season.” It’s not the same as being the sole business she works with, but it does give us an edge.

“It’s only fair that I do that since Beaufort Construction is giving me the chance to take off. So what do you think? Would you like to change anything? Do you have any questions for me?” She looks a bit anxious.

“No. Everything looks good, for now,” I assure her, and she relaxes into her seat. I hesitate, then draw the contract toward me. Immediately, I detect my brother’s conniving signature all over it.

I grin, though, glad that Ezra is trying to protect her. He knows that I can be vulturous and even self-centered when it comes to investing in startups. He’s worded the contract in such a way that there are no loopholes for me to try to take over the company at a later date or even get majority shares without breaching the contract. Sneaky bastard.

“Nicely played,” I praise her and she demurs. “Now that that’s over, there’s something I’d like to show you.” I get up from my chair and command, “Follow me please.”

We walk to the elevators and ride down in silence. “You brought your car?” I ask her when we’re out front of the building, and she nods. “I’ll have someone drive it back to Andrea’s for you,” I tell her, leading her to my Bentley.

“You drove today?” she asks in surprise.

“Yes, I needed to clear my head.” It is mainly thanks to her. She lowers herself into the car. I wait for her to strap her seatbelt before closing the passenger door.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise. It’s not far so you’ll find out soon enough,” I add when she narrows her eyes on me. I drive her to the empty plot of land on Lawrence Street, not far from the construction site, where I saw her in the rain a week ago.

She takes in the land and the small buildings slowly erecting across it. “What is this place?”

“If things go according to plan, it will be Brattleboro’s new business district in a couple of years.” Brattleboro is the size of a small city, bigger than most towns in the US, and it’s growing fast. The Downtown historic district encompasses most of the town’s thriving businesses as of now, and most owners don’t want to branch out of the area.

That’s why the town manager came up with an industrial project for a new business district, separate from the historic Downtown scene. I immediately bought up most of the lots in the area as soon as the project was approved.

“I see. Why are we here?” She turns her back to the land, squinting at me suspiciously. She’s onto me.

“We’re here because this is where your office will be. Have you come up with a name for your business yet?”

“My office?” she echoes.

“When the contract is signed, I’m going to lease you this land until you’re ready to purchase it yourself. We can sign a separate contract for Beaufort Construction to help you build whatever you envision.”

“Whoa, don’t you think you’re moving a bit too fast?”

“Too fast?” I raise my brow in surprise. “I see no reason to delay. I’ll have my people draft up another contract today and send you the final version tomorrow so we can move on to the next stage. By the first quarter of the new year, your office should be up and running.”

She sways on her feet. I move fast, catching her before her knees give out. “Autumn!”

She blinks up at me, then pushes off my arms and straightens her glasses. “I’m sorry. This is just a lot. I had to put my dreams on hold the last couple years, and when I left New York, I gave up on the altogether, so it’s a little hard to believe they might actually come true.”

Yeah, I get that. I might be expediting the process, but I truly see no reason to wait. And in any case, the faster we move, the faster she's going to realize her dreams deserve to come true.

CHAPTER 32



AUTUMN

Alex pulls me into his arms and coos, “Believe it baby. I’m going to work hard to make all your dreams come true.” He slants his mouth over mine and kisses me. I gasp softly, and he uses the opportunity to slip his tongue between my lips.

I kiss him back hungrily, eagerly exploring his mouth with my tongue until he breaks the kiss with a short groan. “Come home with me,” he pleads.

“Now?” I whisper. “It’s eleven AM.”

“Right now, Autumn. It’s the only time we’ll get to be alone until your next night off. I need you to myself,” he cajoles softly, his fingers sinking into my hair to massage my scalp. “I’ve missed having you in my arms.”

I sigh happily and sink deeper into his embrace. Right now, it’s hard to remember why I was ever mad at him and even harder to think of a reason to say no, “Okay.”

Alex doesn’t waste time bundling me into his car and driving home. As soon as we pass through the front door, he whisks me into his arms. I squeal when he starts jogging to the stairs.

I cling to him tightly. “Shouldn’t you take the elevator?”

“I’ve got you.” He bounces me in his arms playfully, and I hold on even tighter as he ascends the stairs with grace. He takes me to his room and sets me on my feet at the foot of his large bed. With the haste we used to get here, I expect him to

start ripping my clothes off – or at least his – but he walks to his nightstand and pulls out the drawer.

He removes a brown envelope. He opens the flap and takes out a document. He walks over and hands it to me. I adjust my glasses and then glance through the document, hoping he's not springing another business proposal on me when I'm here to get laid. But it's a clean bill of health. I read the numerous tests he took the day after we had sex – from the date written at the top. All the results are negative.

My heart pounds as I realize what it means, but I wait for him to clarify.

“I've never done this before, Autumn, but I meant what I said last time. I don't want anything between us. You're going to get on birth control. Tomorrow,” he orders.

“I've never not used a condom, either,” I whisper shyly, ducking my head down when heat spreads across my cheeks.

Alex pinches my chin between his index finger and thumb and raises my head, so I'm gazing into his gorgeous blue-green eyes. “Not even your ex-fiancé?” he asks softly.

“There's only been him,” I admit. “But no. I told him we could ditch the condoms on our wedding night. He didn't like being told what to do, of course, so we stopped having sex about eight months ago.”

“Of course, he didn't.” He gives me a warm smile that makes his eyes crinkle at the edges. “I'm glad. I can make you an appointment tomorrow, Dr. Young is the best in town, very discrete.”

“There's no need. I'm already on birth control.” I tap my inner arm where the implant went in. “It helps with my cycle.”

“Good. That's good.” He takes his test results out of my hands. He tosses the envelope over his shoulder, grabs my face between his hands, and kisses me. Just as I start to cling to him, he breaks the kiss and orders, “take my belt off”. I do as he says, reaching down to the top of his pants until I feel the cold metal beneath my fingertips.

I'm lost in his mesmerizing eyes, the blues and greens darkening by the second as I continue to loosen the leather and then release the belt from his buckle. He reaches down to rip the belt from the loops. I tense not sure what he plans to do next, but he tosses it behind him.

"I thought you were going to tie me up or something," I say huskily.

"Would you want me to tie you up, Autumn? Does that turn you on? The thought of leaving yourself completely vulnerable to me to do with you as I please?" he asks seriously.

"I-I don't know." My heart rate is increasing; my chest is heaving at the thought of being exposed to him with nothing I can do to stop him from having his way with me.

"I think if I reached beneath your skirt right now, I'd be pleased to find that it does. Are you wet for me right now, baby."

All I can do is nod my head in shock with myself and my uncharacteristic brazenness. I am completely entranced by this man. There's nothing I wouldn't let him do to me. The truth is, I trust him entirely and know that anything he does would be incredibly pleasure-inducing. I'm suddenly aching to find out exactly what that might be like.

"All in good time, my love. Today is just about me and you, with nothing between us. I want to feel you Autumn. I *need* to feel every muscle in your body tense as you come around me and squeeze my cock so tight that I see stars. I want to see the look in your eyes when I first thrust into your soaked pussy," he continues as his eyes burn into mine. "And today, I want your hands on me."

"Eyes on me until I tell you that you can look away." His hands go to his tie to loosen the knot before he tugs the tie off, which is weirdly sexy. I lick my lips with anticipation as he shrugs his jacket off. I'm finally about to see him fully naked. Last time I was too lost in pleasure, and then I somehow knocked my glasses off so I couldn't really see him in all his glory.

He undoes his shirt buttons, exposing the top of his mysterious tattoos, then continues to slowly unbutton his entire shirt before I reach up to push it off his shoulders. The sight of him steals my breath, and I gasp softly as I take in his rigid pecs and thick abs. He towers over me, his presence looming, but I never look away.

I trace my fingers over his chest and the markings there. His tattoo is intricate and elegant, comprised of a fleur de lis with vines that spread to his shoulders like a crest. He bends to push his trousers down, then stands back up in only his tight Calvin Klein briefs that sit little low on his lean hips, his arousal now very obvious.

“Look at me, Autumn.” My eyes shoot back up to his face. “Good girl.”

He stalks toward me and curls a finger under my chin as he leans in. His other hand burns through my dress where it lands on my waist. My eyes slide closed momentarily as his lips cover mine in a sweet kiss that I let myself fall into.

His hand goes to my back, and he slowly unzips my dress. He takes a step back and the dress falls to the floor, leaving me in just my bra and panties. They are of matching black lace, and from the look in his eyes, he approves.

His eyes darken as he watches me, and I can't stop my eyes from falling to his cock, which is now rock hard. “Take your hair down,” he commands, his tone raspy. “I like it loose and natural.”

So do I. “I was going for a professional look,” I explain as I lift my hands to take out the pins holding my hair in place.

“Fuck that,” he growls, encroaching into my space. His long fingers sink into my hair and massage my sore scalp. I moan loudly and melt into him. My nipples tighten and pebble under my bra. My core clenches. This man.

One hand continues massaging my scalp, while he trails the other down my back, where he expertly unhooks my bra with one squeeze. Both hands move up to my shoulders to drag the straps down and toss my bra to the floor.

He leans down and nuzzles the hard peak of one nipple, then he draws it into his hot mouth, flicking it with his tongue. I let out another moan as my hands sink into his hair, cradling his head to me. He sucks harder, tugging my nipple between his teeth. I whimper, clearly loving it.

He switches his attention to my other breast as his hands move down my sides to my waist, and he tugs my panties down to my knees. I do a little shimmy to make them fall to my ankles. Alex shifts back and takes me with him, making me step out of them.

He straightens, leaving my nipples wet and aching and pushes me until the back of my knees hit the bed. I let my knees fold and sit on the bed. Then he goes to his knees in front of me. "Spread your legs for me," he commands. I do as I'm told. "Wider."

I'm fully exposed, watching him take me in. His dark eyes are focused between my legs, and his hands slowly stoke the small tuft of hair growing there. He licks his lips before flashing his eyes up to mine. He stares me down as he runs his fingers down my center. I thrust my hips toward him in response.

I'm so wet that his fingers slide around easily, caressing every soft crevice he can find and stoking the fires of my lust. I place my hands on the bed behind me and rest on them, hot and dizzy with pleasure.

He strokes my clit, earning a breathy moan from my lips. "Do you like to watch me, Autumn?" I nod in approval, then gasp when he thrusts two fingers into me, his digits big enough to make me feel full. He adds a third, and I grab his arm with a whimper.

"Shhh, you can take it baby. You took me, didn't you?" His voice is soft, and his thumb moves to my clit, where he works it in tight circles. Again and again and again, making my deep muscles convulse around him as I throw my head back.

"There you go, I knew you could take it." He places a gentle kiss on my inner thigh, the kiss too light for the way his

fingers are invading my core. He flicks my clit faster and faster, thrusting his fingers in and out of me harder, sending sparks of pleasure through me.

“Oh Jesus,” I groan, shuddering as his thick fingers probe even deeper. I relish the relentless pressure of his thumb on my clit. “Oh God, Alex. Alex. Alex!” I call out, collapsing back on the bed as an orgasm rips through me.

I whimper, arching up on the bed as spasm after spasm wracks my body. The delicious tingles continue endlessly, and I nearly black out when his middle finger curls inside me.

“Fuck. Yes, that’s it, baby. Keep coming for me.” He leans forward to draw my clit into his mouth. He sucks hard on the bud, and black spots flash behind my lids as I’m catapulted into another climax hot on the tails of the last.

“Fuck, look at you strangling my fingers. I’m going to fuck you so hard,” he growls against my clit as he relentlessly works his tongue over me. He stays on me until I come down from my high.

Sweat beads on my face and my glasses fly off when I collapse back on the bed but the muscles of my body are so languid and relaxed right now that I can’t find it in me to care. He finally eases his fingers out of me, and I sigh with contentment.

His hand drops to my waist and he shifts me up so my entire body is on the bed. I see the blurred shape of his large figure looming over me, the head of his cock dragging up my body leaving a trail of precum. I shiver in anticipation.

He places his forehead to mine and pauses. “Alex?” He pulls back a few inches as his eyes scan my face.

“Shhh, I just want to look at you for a moment. You’re so beautiful,” he murmurs softly. I glance at his face, but I can’t see past the blurred outline. He places my glasses back on my nose and reminds me to keep my eyes on him.

He cups my cheek and leans in, his lips brushing over mine. His thumbs rub my cheeks softly, and I lift my hands up to sink them into his silky hair. He strokes his tongue against

mine, and the contact sends a charge of electricity rushing through my veins.

He deepens the kiss, twining his tongue with mine, until we're sharing breaths. My God, this is the most intimate moment of my life. Nothing comes close to the connection I feel to him right now. My chest tightens. I feel vulnerable, exposed, yet seen and cherished at the same time.

The things this man does to me. No one has ever made me feel this much. As the broad head of his cock kisses my entrance, I'm struck by the thought that I'm done for. This is it for me. Alexander Beaufort is *it*.

CHAPTER 33



AUTUMN

Play on my stomach on the bed languid after coming four times. Warm fingers stroke the small of my back, running upward along my spine and down again. It feels good. Really good. I sigh, melting into the bed in a puddle of limbs.

Alex is lying next to me, his skin radiating warmth, keeping me comfortable in my nakedness. One of his hands moves up to caress my hair. “You’re mine now, Autumn, you know that right?”

“Yours? As in your girlfriend?” I ask, my voice a little scratchy from all the moaning.

“If that’s the title you’re comfortable with, then let’s go with that.” I frown at his cryptic words, but before I can comment his phone starts ringing. He rolls off the bed fluidly taking his heat with him and my frown deepens as I turn my head to face him.

I didn’t realize how much the weight of his life affects him until I see the way his shoulders visibly tense before answering the phone. All relaxation from our session lost. I’m immediately overcome with the need to carry some of his load, to lift the weight even if only temporarily. If I can be the source of his peace, I’ll do whatever it takes to bring it to him as often as he’ll let me. I’m his? That makes him my responsibility now too. One I’m proud to take on. He takes the phone out of his pants pocket and answers.

“Speak.” He frowns and his jaw clenches. Damn it.

“Who did you say is here?” He listens to what the caller says and for some reason tosses a concerned look my way. He curses under his breath and says tersely, “I’m on my way.”

“You’re going somewhere?” I ask.

“No, baby.” He walks to my side of the bed and drops an affectionate kiss on my forehead. “I just have some trash to pick up outside. I’ll be right back.” He disappears through a doorway I’m guessing is the closet and walks back out in pajamas pants and a black shirt. He gives me a short nod as he leaves the room.

I sigh and turn to my back on the bed. I stare at the ceiling blankly for a few minutes. Is it possible to fall for someone this fast? Love is a powerful feeling, but not one I’m overly accustomed to. It took me over a year to say it to Larson, could Alexander really have broken down my walls in such a short time?

My phone pings with an incoming text message. I glance at my purse on the floor a few feet from the bed, next to my rumpled dress. I sigh again as I get out of bed. I take out my phone and see that the text is from Andrea.

So? How did the meeting go? Don’t keep me in suspense!

I smile at my phone but it fades when a stab of guilt consumes me. No. She took back her demand to stay away from her brothers. She even gave her blessing, so to speak. I shake it off and gasp when I see the time. Past one already? I went in for the meeting with Alex around ten.

I walk through a second door in his bedroom, which I assume is the bathroom, and I’m right. A huge en suite with an inviting claw tub and walk-in shower. I stare at the tub longingly for a moment, then turn on the shower.

I play around with the knobs and sigh with relaxation as a barrage of jets spray me with warm water from all angles. I linger in the shower, reluctant to leave, but I have to get back to Liquid Elixir before Andrea suspects something is up. As if she isn’t already suspicious.

I dry my hair as much as I can with a towel and put the damp strands up in a bun. Then I pad into Alex's closet, which is massive. His clothing is hung with scary precision, but should I expect any less? He's a controlled, calculated man who doesn't tolerate sloppiness. Everything is arranged in color-coded sections, even though it's ninety percent black. Rows and rows of suits line one wall. Different colored ties are folded in a drawer with a glass covering. I can see them from where I'm standing.

Another glassed drawer has a variety of expensive watches. There's an entire shelf dedicated to shoes. Just how many shoes can one man wear? I linger among his things and try not to snoop. I finally go to the back of the closet where the casual wear is.

I take out a navy blue round neck from the rack then hesitate. How would it look if I wore his clothes to Andrea's? Bad, it would look bad. I reluctantly return the shirt and go back to the bedroom. I put on my bra and the ruffled dress sans underwear, which I tuck into my purse. I realize that I haven't replied to Andrea's message, so I shoot her a text.

It went well. Will tell you all about it when I get home.

I glance around Alex's room one last time, quickly taking in his jaw-dropping view. I leave, closing the door quietly behind me. I pad softly down the rugged hallway, opting to use the stairs instead of the elevator. My hand trails down the wide railing as I make my way down the stairs. I pause on the first floor and glance at where my bedroom used to be with a sigh.

Whatever. It doesn't matter that I don't live here anymore. Alex and I are together now. That's all that matters. As I reach the ground floor, several raised voices reach my ears from just outside the front door. I can make out Alex's voice and another eerily familiar one. Larson. I pause, my heart beginning to pound. How did he find me? I tiptoe toward the front door. I'm just about to open it when their words reach my ear.

“Please stop, I promise I’ll return your money!” Larson’s voice is high pitched and filled with fear. “That’s why I’m here. Mason’s body was found, and I know it was you. I also know you’ve been searching for me,” he sobs. *Sobs.*

My mind races frantically. I desperately wish the door had a peep hole so I could see what’s going on. I could never have imagined the day would come when I’d hear Larson beg like this. A twisted part of me is enjoying it.

“You think turning yourself in means I’ll show you mercy? Then you really don’t know me at all,” Alex says dryly. A sickening crunch that sounds like a fist meeting flesh is followed by Larson’s cry of pain.

“Shut your fucking mouth, or I’m going to make this even more painful for you,” Alex growls angrily. I gasp softly and take a step away from the door.

“Please, Alex. I’ve done everything you ever wanted me to do without question...you can’t do this to me!”

“And in exchange, I let you take the reins in New York. That clearly made you over confident enough to get greedy. You *stole* from me Larson. What could possibly make you think you would get away with that?”

Larson babbles out something incoherent that I can’t hear over the loud roaring in my ears. What’s going on here? At first I thought maybe Larson was here for me. And since they both grew up here, maybe he thought to ask Alex, but that doesn’t sound like the case. Someone’s body was found, and he thinks it’s linked to Alex?

I try to make sense of the bits I’ve heard, but I can’t piece it together. This feels surreal, like my head will explode. I march to the door and swing it open before I can stop myself. Four pairs of eyes turn to me. There’s Larson with blood streaming down his face, Alex standing over him with bloody knuckles, and Noah off to the side with a gun – a *gun* – in his hand. The last person is a man I saw regularly when I lived here: the head of security.

“Wren?” Larson’s voice is nasally from his broken nose, but his surprise is evident. “What are you doing here?” His brows snap together followed by a sharp wince.

“Go back inside, Autumn. I’ll come find you when I’m done here,” Alex orders sharply, but my limbs are frozen, and I’m unable to move. “Go inside Autumn!” Alex snaps again, making Larson flinch, but I merely glance up at him. He doesn’t scare me.

I know he would never hurt me.

“Wren, why is he calling you Autumn? Did he kidnap you? You asshole!” Larson jumps to his feet to punch Alex, but he easily sidesteps him. He tries to throw himself at him, and this time, Alex catches his fist and twists back his wrist. He lifts his other hand, and the same fate meets it. He yells a curse when Alex doubles down on him, and he slowly crumples to his knees. But the idiot won’t stop shouting.

“Why do you have my fiancée? You have to let her go!”

“I’m not your fiancée,” I say with all the calmness I’m not feeling. “I broke up with you. I left your ring and wrote you a note.”

“What? No, don’t say that, Wren. Do you know how hard I’ve been looking for you? I was very concerned when Mary said she got a call from you and that you used a friend’s phone. A friend whose ID was set to private.”

So Mom told him that I called her. I wasn’t expecting anything different, but I still feel a twinge of disappointment that she sold me out. I look right into his eyes. “You’re delusional, Larson. I heard you and your secretary fucking the morning of our wedding, which I made sure to mention in my note. What made you think I was kidnapped?”

“Because he’s a lowlife who’s made a lot of enemies. He couldn’t wrap his small mind around the idea that you’d walk away from him, so he conveniently chose to believe you must’ve been taken,” Noah spits out.

“I was right, wasn’t I? She’s here, isn’t she? Wren knows I never come back to this shit town for a reason. So, there’s no

way she'd come here willingly, not to mention slumming it with Alexander Beaufort," Larson snarls, taking in my rumpled dress and my wet hair.

"Shut the fuck up." Alex punches him, and he falls to the ground and goes limp. "You don't talk to her; you don't even look at her. You're not worthy of her time."

"That's rich coming from you, the king of Brattleboro's organized crime scene. Just because you have your fancy name, house, and cars doesn't make you any better than me, you murderer!"

I've heard enough. I spin away from them, determined to get as far from this town as possible. I glance at the driveway wildly, looking for my car; but then I remember that Alex drove us here. Damn it. That's when I see the Bentley parked down the driveway, and I start running.

"Autumn!" Alex shouts. I chance a quick glance back to see that he's staring at me with more exasperation than anger...and something that resembles fear, which is a look I never expected to come from him.

Before he makes a move to catch me, I scurry into the driver's seat of his Bentley. I slam the door shut and immediately engage the locks. That's when he starts prowling toward me. I glance at the ignition, but it's not there – just a row of high tech screens and a bunch of buttons. He slams his palm on the window next to me, and I jump in the seat.

"Get out of the car, Autumn." His eyes are wild. "Get out of the fucking car!" I gulp and face the buttons in front of me, trying to remember how he had started the car earlier.

"Autumn!" he shouts again, and I stab the closest button. The car comes alive with a low growl, and my heart skips in shock. I wasn't expecting to get it on the first try. I toss one last glance at Alex, and I'm taken aback by the panicked look on his face.

"At least wear your fucking seatbelt," he says calmly. I nod and quickly draw the belt across my chest, then I just stare at him. He watches me quietly. "If you have to leave me, I

understand. Take the car. Don't get lost. The GPS will guide you."

Tears burn at the corner of my eyes. Why is he being so calm when he was yelling at me just a minute ago? The look in his eyes is one of understanding – and complete brokenness. But I can't dwell on that right now. I'm not safe here with men I clearly know nothing about.

"Wren!" I start at the loud voice and turn my head to see Larson banging on the passenger side window. "Open the door, Wren. Come on, it's me, babe. Just let me in, and we can go home."

I narrow my eyes at him and press my foot down hard on the gas. The car responds immediately. I grip the wheel with both hands as I skid around the circular driveway. My heart pounds erratically in my chest, my mind racing as I drive off. I don't look back.

As I near the gates, I realize that Alex just let me leave. Then I remember I'll have to go through the gates at the end of the road. Surely that's his plan – for security not to open the gate, trapping me. Then he'll come find me after I've made my big dramatic exit. Fuck. But I can't deny I feel a flicker of relief. I don't want to run away from him. Not really.

As I approach the gates and slow the car, they swing open willingly. He's really letting me go? What the hell? Then what was all that talk about me being *his*? He's not even fighting for me. What's wrong with me? This is a good thing. *It is*. But I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince.

CHAPTER 34



ALEXANDER

I watch the taillights of my car disappear down the drive, approaching the iron gates. There goes my fucking heart. What the hell could be going through her head? She fucking ran from me, but I don't blame her. She handed herself over to me without actually knowing me – the monster that I've hidden from her. I don't know how long I was planning on keeping it from her, but I didn't think it would come out so soon. And not like this.

“Alex?” Noah asks, frowning at me, probably wondering why I just let her take off with my expensive as fuck car – a car I never let anyone else drive. “Should I call down to the gates, so they don't let her through?”

“No, let her go.”

“What?”

“And get this piece of shit out of my sight,” I order, walking back into my house. I'll deal with him later. I take the elevator to the second floor and go straight to my room, where I change out of my pajamas, giving Autumn enough of a head start so she can use the time to think she's getting away from me. What part of being *mine* did she not understand? This is the first and last time she'll ever get to pull this stunt. I'm going to let her enjoy it.

I pick up my cellphone to check where she is and see she's parked out front of Liquid Elixir. The car's engine isn't turned off, though. What's she doing? Telling Andrea goodbye?

Maybe she just went to Andrea's to clear her head. For her sake, I hope that's the case.

That Bentley is recognized as mine by anyone within a 100-mile radius. And that's not necessarily a good thing. Sure the cops won't pull her over, but it puts a huge target on her back, one she would never think to expect. A slither of panic and something that feels suspiciously like fear lodges at the back of my throat.

I shake it off as I close my bedroom door. I can't give in to it, or I won't be able to function. I've given her more than enough time anyway, I decide.

When I leave the house, Noah, James, my head of security, and Larson are nowhere to be seen. Good. They've taken him to the basement. I'm not proud of it, but it closely resembles a dungeon for circumstances exactly like this: it's cold, dark, and soundproof, and not somewhere most people get to walk out of. I walk calmly to the garage. I press my palm to the panel next to the safe box and select the key for my Harley. After securing my black helmet, I straddle the bike and pull out my phone.

I go to the tracking app and notice that she's left the bar. She is in the car, turning toward the interstate. Shit, baby, you're really going to make me chase you. My guys wave me through the gate and I nod in return. I open up the throttle and let loose down the winding road. If I wasn't on a woman hunt, it would be a great day for a ride. As soon as I drive out of town, any possible enjoyment is lost when the sky darkens, and a cool wind starts blowing. She doesn't know how to drive the Bentley in perfect conditions, let alone snow, sending my worry into a spiral.

When I get onto the interstate, I glance down to where my phone is secured between the handlebars and see that she's taken a turn onto a back road. I fantasize about what I'm going to do to her when I find her, so my thoughts won't turn dark. She's heading straight to a gas station that I know to be frequented by lowlifes and scum. I've dealt with them myself a time or two. She must be looking for a spot to ride out the storm.

“Don’t do it, baby,” I mutter under my breath, but, of course, she pulls right into the gas station. My heart kicks up, and I gun the engine. Damn it, Autumn.

I’m there within five minutes. My veins fill with ice when I see the Bentley parked haphazardly, Autumn nowhere to be found. I glance around the station at the loiterers, all of them avoiding my gaze. I haven’t even taken the helmet off, but a predator always recognizes one of his own kind.

Once it’s off, the guy closest to me gets to his feet. “Alexander,” he mouths.

“My woman came through here. Gorgeous, curly reddish-blond hair, glasses.” I nod to my car. “Know where she is?”

He grimaces and points to the convenience store. I nod my thanks and make my way to the decrepit building. A cheerful sound fills the store when I walk through the front door.

“Damn it, Jerome, I told you to be on the lookout, what do you need?” An irritated voice calls out from somewhere behind the shelves.

I don’t say anything as I walk in his direction. My vision goes red when I see Autumn – *my* Autumn – struggling wildly on the floor under a bulky redneck. Her eyes go wide when she sees me and her thrashing intensifies. The piece of shit turns his neck my way, angrily. The scowl on his face gives way to recognition when he sees me. He slowly gets off her hands held out in front of him, reading the fury on my face, “Alexander Beaufort.”

“Step away from her,” I order quietly.

“What? N-n—” He’s still trying to stammer out a no when I bend swiftly and take out the M9 tucked in the back of my jeans. “Wait—” But he’s too slow. I have already pressed down on the trigger.

The shot hits him directly between the eyes, throwing him back against the shelves; splattered blood coats the window behind him. By the time his body slides to the floor with a thud, the M9 is back in my pants, and I’m gathering Autumn in my arms. She’s shaking and grips my shoulders tightly.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” I tell her, but this really isn’t the best place for me to scold her. I just scoop her up and stalk out the door.

I carry her to my Harley, the lurkers having dispersed. Being the lot of cowards that they are, they most likely bolted as soon as they heard the gunshot. It’s starting to snow. I inhale the sharp and dry quality in the air as I glance around wearily, well aware that they might return with backup. The fear of the Beaufort family only runs so deep with lowlifes.

“It’s snowing...the first snow,” Autumn murmurs quietly as I put my helmet on her head.

I sit on the Harley, grip the handle bars, and lift the bike off its stand. I order, “Get on.” She doesn’t put up a fight, quietly gripping my shoulders and lifting her leg over the back fender before settling into my back. With her arms secured around my waist, I speed out of there, spitting gravel as we go.

We’re back home in record time, and I lead her straight to my room.

“You killed him,” she whispers, perching on the edge of my bed and avoiding my gaze. “Back at the gas station, you killed that guy.”

I tilt my head, wondering what she’s getting at. “Yes, I did. He deserved it. Does that bother you?”

“There’s more to your family than just being in construction, isn’t there?” Her eyes are racing like she’s replaying every conversation she’s had since arriving in our town. “Is that why Andrea chose the bar over the family business? Is that why Larson never wanted to come back here?” she asks instead.

Not sure just how much she’s ready to hear, I sigh and mutter, “Yes.” She was going to find out sooner or later. “As for Larson, he was pushing drugs in my town, making the streets dirty, so I sent him off to establish connections in New York. His punishment was not being allowed to return.”

“Are you in the m–mafia?”

I contemplate my answer, “That depends. Do we utilize organized crime to manipulate outcomes? Sure. But do we answer to a higher organization of crime lords? No. The Beauforts left that life and that official title behind when Ezra first stepped on US soil. And while we prefer to take care of our own dirty work, we’ve built a network of men over the years who will do our bidding without hesitation. Men who are loyal to the Beauforts and the Beauforts alone.”

She takes a moment to absorb what I’m telling her. I don’t like the word *mafia* even if that essentially describes what we do, and ultimately makes me the mob boss of Brattleboro. Who needs labels.

“Ezra?” She frowns at me.

“Not my brother. My great-grandfather,” I explain. “He left the seedy streets of Strasbourg in the late 1800s, trying to leave the life of a gangster behind. He wanted a fresh start for himself and his family in a quiet town, and he built an empire here,” I tell her proudly. An empire I now head.

She blinks at me, so I say, “Est-ce que tu m’écoutes?” Are you listening to me?

“That’s French. Strasbourg? You’re from France?”

“Strasbourg,” I correct the enunciation. “And yes, my family is originally from France, but we’re well and truly Americanized now.” Except for Ezra, the second that is, my brother. He loves to randomly break out the French. He thinks it makes him exotic. Dumbass.

“I need to know everything. Will you tell me?” she asks, staring at me with liquid brown eyes. My heart turns over, and I realize I’m gone for this woman. I can never deny her anything.

So I tell her how Ezra Beaufort I was an enforcer for Le Milieu – the French mafia – and how his father and those before him had always been enforcers. It was the family’s birthright back then. But then the reigning family were taken out by their own consigliere along with everyone related to

them, so Ezra faked his own death and ran away with his pregnant young wife to Italy.

From Italy they went to Spain, from Spain to Mexico, and from Mexico, they ultimately crossed the border into Texas, where my grandfather was born. They didn't just stay in one place, instead moving from state to state and town to town before finally settling in Brattleboro and getting into the construction business.

He was out of the mafia world for good and didn't want to join any body of organized crime in America. Turns out you can take the enforcer out of le Milieu, but you can't take Le Milieu out of the enforcer. Petty crimes helped elevate his budding empire. And no one seemed too concerned about the slight uptick in local crime when the economy was taking off and everyone in town profited.

Initially, the crimes ranged from bribery to extortion, eventually escalating to threats and occasionally torture, when necessary. But the Beauforts have always followed a strict code of conduct. Our system of organized crime runs on a scale. For every misdeed, we give back to the community tenfold. And there's no denying that the sorry souls we target to push our agenda always have it coming to them. Corrupt politicians, greedy businessmen and elitist assholes are all fair game in our quest to conquer the local construction industry, while redistributing their wealth in our own unique way to those who deserve it. And we line our own pockets along the way.

Ezra Sr. got into drug dealing for a time in an attempt to control the movement of narcotics in the area and prevent outside infiltration. But we stopped that years ago. Dad didn't have the stomach for it, and Ezra Jr. was indulging in the substances, so we shut it down. Besides, this is our town, and we keep it clean. No one benefits when drugs run rampant, and we can do that without being the source.

When I'm done talking for what feels like the longest one-sided conversation of my life, I glance at Autumn. She gives me a grim look, but I'm shocked by what she says next. "I want in."

“What?”

“Earlier, when that guy had me in—” She swallows and continues, “When he had me in his grip and overpowered me, I realized just how weak I am. The Beauforts might no longer be in the mafia, but I’m sure Andrea would never get caught in such a situation.”

My sister chose to leave behind that legacy but she always carries a gun, has a couple of knives, and she knows how to handle all of them. I taught her self-defense myself, even though Dad was against it at the time. He thought her duty to the family solely involved marriage to enrich the business. My sister soon disabused him of that notion.

“Teach me,” she says.

“Why did you run away earlier?”

“I don’t know,” she says as she pushes her glasses up her nose. “While I was driving aimlessly I realized that I took a lot of shit growing up, and the day I ran out on my own wedding was the day my rubber band of resistance broke. And earlier, I was overwhelmed by the onslaught of secrets being exposed to me. It hurt not being trusted enough to know these things. I’d expect that from Larson, but not you. But it helped me understand you so much more and the burden you carry. The need to protect at all costs. I was scared. But I never should have ran, not from you.”

“How can I be sure you won’t run again?”

She licks her lips nervously, “Earlier today, I vowed to myself that I was yours and yours alone. And while you protect everyone, no one is looking out for you. And I don’t think they have for a long time. I saw the photos of you in your parent’s house. I noticed when you stopped smiling for the camera. I assume that’s around the time you stepped up as the protector of the family. I don’t know if my word means anything to you now, but I promise to always be by your side.”

It means everything. I finally relax and tug off my leather jacket. “You scared the hell out of me.”

She glances down at her hands in her lap. “I’m sorry. I regretted it as soon as I got to the gates and realized that you were letting me go because that’s what I needed in the moment; to feel in charge of my decisions, of my life.” After a brief pause, she glances up at me. “Thank you for coming back.”

I drop to my knees in front of her. “Watching you drive away killed me. But you don’t ever have to question if I’ll come after you. There’s nowhere you can hide from me, Autumn. I’ll always come to claim what’s mine. I’d go to the depths of hell to pry from the cold dead hands of Satan himself if I have to. Without you, I’m nothing. I know I’ve only known you for a month, but I’m fucking crazy about you, Autumn.”

“I’m crazy about you too.” She whispers shyly. I can’t stop the grin spreading across my face. I lean forward and plant a kiss on her beautiful lips, tasting a hint of salt from the tears that have escaped.

“Why are you crying, baby girl?” I ask.

“I’m just really happy, Alexander. You make me the happiest woman alive.”

“You know what would make me really happy, sweetheart?” I ask mischievously. “If you would move in with me. I can’t stand to be apart from you for another minute. And as soon as you let me, you’re getting off that birth control, and we’re filling this huge fucking house with as many babies as we can.” Just the thought of Autumn pregnant with my child makes me hard. She throws her head back in a full laugh that fills my heart to the absolute brim.

“Well well well, Mr. Beaufort, I didn’t realize that I’d be calling you Daddy so soon.” She pushes me back on my bed and starts to crawl up my body. “We better get practicing then.”

My grin widens, and my heart expands in my chest. This woman. *My* woman. I lean forward and kiss the hell out of her.

EPILOGUE



AUTUMN

ELEVEN MONTHS LATER...

I stretch languidly on Alex's...well *our* bed. I finally let him convince me to move in with him a few weeks ago. I reach out to his side of the bed and frown when the space is empty. I drag my hand across the cool sheets, indicating that he left the bed some time ago.

My eyes snap open, and I sit up to take my glasses from the nightstand and place them on my face. I glance around our bedroom with a slight frown. I flick a glance toward the clock on the nightstand: it's barely past seven.

"Alex?" I call out, thinking he might be in the bathroom, but it's quiet in there, and I don't get a response. Did he have an early morning meeting he forgot to tell me about? Thanksgiving is in just two days, and he's been trying to wrap up work enough so that Ezra will be able to handle both their workloads while we're out of town.

I tried to convince him to wait until the New Year to fly to Cancun, since Ezra has been trying to spend more time with

family, but he's insisting on the day after Thanksgiving.

He's been shifty these past two weeks, so I suspect the rush might be because he wants to propose on the beach or something super romantic. My heart does a swift pitter patter at the thought and I squeal quietly as I roll to my stomach on the bed.

I adjust my glasses, smiling like a fool as I raise my left hand up and imagine a ring on my finger. What will Alex pick, I wonder. I don't care what it looks like or how big it is as long as he's the one putting it there. Alex down on one knee makes me feel all kinds of turned on. He's knelt before me on a handful of occasions – always in the throes of intense pleasure.

“Mrs. Autumn Beaufort.” I whisper quietly. I can't help squealing again.

To think that exactly a year ago, I was scheduled to marry another man. Thank God, I didn't go through with it. Now Larson is in a prison somewhere in Miami. Alex was going to kill him for his betrayal last year, but I had to stop him. It's not that I cared about the outcome of his life, but it just didn't sit right with me. I know exactly what kind of awful treatment he'll be receiving there, locked up with all kinds of men that he surely deems beneath him. They'll certainly humble him. I chuckle darkly at the thought. A worse punishment than death, I conclude.

So, after Larson pointed out the third person who helped steal from Alex, he planted some incriminating files he had on Larson and the police picked him up. Alex wanted him as far away from us as possible, so Miami it was for Larson Brown. I sleep like a baby every night without an ounce of guilt. What an ass.

The sound of a car pulling up in the driveway reaches my ears, and I reluctantly get out of bed wondering who it might be. We rarely get visitors, and I'm not expecting Andrea until at least ten. I stroll to the window and pull the curtains back. I frown when I see Andrea's car; the woman gets out of the car bundled up in warm clothing and rubbing her hands together as she jogs up the front steps. The cold came early this year,

and we got the first snow last week. It's been freezing ever since.

My frown deepens as she disappears through the front door. We're supposed to go Christmas shopping at eleven because Alex and I won't be back in town until next year. I want to buy all our gifts and wrap them up today, then pass them out on Thanksgiving at the Beaufort estate when we're all together. The thought of last year's gathering makes butterflies erupt in my stomach. The ambiance, the family dynamic, how far Alex and I have come since then – it's all a dream.

Why is she so early? I know she was at the bar until at least two AM last night because I stopped in after a really late night at work – Hill of Autumn Landscaping Inc. My dream job and one I can't seem to stop putting in overtime hours to build.

I groan as I trudge to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face. When I'm done, I'm honestly surprised Andrea isn't already banging at the bedroom door. I make my way to the closet and bypass my own side in favor of Alex's clothes. I toss on one of his shirts and leave the room. What's taking her so long? Patience is not one of Andrea's virtues.

I'm making my way to the elevator, wondering if Andrea is in the kitchen with Mrs. Staten when I realize she's probably down there pounding five cups of coffee. I smile as I reach the elevator. I notice the door to Alex's home office is ajar. My smile widens and I make a detour, although my steps slow when I hear Andrea's voice. *Huh*. I don't mean to eavesdrop. My plan is to go into my man's office and claim a taste of what I was searching for in bed this morning, but then I actually hear Andrea's elated voice.

"This is so beautiful," she coos. "I came as soon as I got your text. I can't believe after weeks of searching, you finally found the perfect one."

My feet stall as I wonder what she's talking about. Weeks of searching for what? The perfect what?

“I should have just had one custom-made from the start. Only the best for my special girl.” There’s a richness in his voice that indicates that he’s smiling.

I scoot closer to the doorway and peep. Andrea bounces a little on her feet as she claps her hand. “I can’t wait for her to see it. I can’t believe this is happening, Alex!” She moves into his arms to hug him tightly. “Congratulations.”

Alexander chuckles as he wraps his arms around her and gently pats her back. “Don’t get ahead of yourself; she might not like it.”

I might not like it? Like what? And what did he mean by something special for me?

Andrea pulls out of his arms. “What are you talking about? You know she’s going to love it because she loves *you*.” She closes the small square box in her hand, and I almost faint.

Oh, my God, oh my God, are they talking about what I think they’re talking about? My heart starts pounding loudly, and I almost miss her next words.

“Ugh, Thanksgiving suddenly feels so far away now. Can’t you just give it to her today? I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep it in for that long.”

“You’ll keep quiet about it, or I’m going to make you suffer for the rest of your life,” Alex threatens as he places the box on his desk. My gaze follows the box avidly. I narrow my eyes, willing them to develop X-ray vision to see what’s inside. Earrings? A necklace? No, Andrea wouldn’t tell him congratulations for that. And he said it’s something *special*. A ring, I think hopefully.

She snorts, “You wouldn’t, you love me too much. Where’s the woman of the hour?”

“She’s still sleeping in our room.” Alex’s head moves to the office’s door as he speaks, and I quickly move out of view. They suddenly stop talking, and I run as quietly as I can back to our bedroom, my heart pounding like mad.

Did he see me? I run to the bathroom when I hear footsteps approaching and close the door behind me.

There's a short knock on the bedroom door and the door swings open. "Autumn?" Andrea calls out.

I clear my throat quietly. "Andrea?" I call back, making my voice sound low and sleepy. "What are you doing here so early?"

"I know, I know. Things changed so I had to come early. Are you using the toilet or taking a shower? I'm coming in!" Her voice sounds closer.

Things changed? What changed?

I walk to the sink and turn on the faucet. I splash water on my face and pat it dry with a hand towel. Then I walk to the door and open it. "I was brushing my teeth." I smile at her. "What? Do you have a date tonight?" I ask, trying not to let on that I know why she came so early.

Andrea has been through a lot over the past six months. But I'm so happy to see her finally relaxed and back into the routine of her life with the bar.

"Yeah, something like that. Why don't you go get dressed, and we'll be on our way since you're awake, and I'm here anyway?"

"Yeah, sure. Sounds good." She follows me into the walk-in closet and talks about how unfair it is that she lost me at the bar a few months ago, and now Keith has put in his notice.

"How am I supposed to survive working on my own?" she complains.

"I'm sure you'll find someone," I assure her. When I'm done getting dressed, we leave for town in our separate cars.

The whole time we are shopping for the presents, I'm distracted and Andrea notices it. I brush her off the first few times she asks if I'm okay, but the fourth time she asks, I know I have to give her something or she'll be suspicious.

"I'm trying to remember if I'm all packed for our trip and I'm stressed about leaving the Hill of Autumn in my assistant's hands so soon after the opening," I say, which is true enough.

“It’ll be fine, I promise. Jane is perfectly capable of running everything.” She pats my back, and I nod absently. Andrea tugs me around in the mall, and I soon get lost in the ritual of shopping for presents for my family. *My Family*. Ugh that feels so good to say.

“Thanks for today.” I hug Andrea after putting my bags in the trunk. “It was bearable because you were here.”

“You don’t have to thank me, babe. I was able to get my own Christmas shopping done early thanks to you.” She tightens her arms around me and whispers, “I can’t wait until it’s official.”

“What? Can’t wait until what’s official?” I ask, and she shifts back from my arms, her eyes growing wide.

“Um, I meant, I can’t wait until everyone sees their presents. I’m sure they’ll love them! Okay, I have to go now, bye!” She waves at me and practically runs to her car. I narrow my eyes on her as she leaves.

My pulse races all through the drive home. I try to talk myself out of snooping through Alex’s office. Alex already added my biometric to every lock on the house as well as to his home office, so I could easily slip inside.

Just a peak. *No, I shouldn’t.*

“Welcome home, Autumn. How was the shopping?” Mrs. Staten asks with a smile. I say something in reply, but I’m not really sure what, and she waves me off.

Blood whooshes through my ears and my palms begin to sweat as I climb the stairs. Maybe I’ll just check to confirm what sort of box it is. I won’t even open it. It will be enough for me to just confirm it. He’s going to give it to me in two days anyway, so there’s no harm in being sure.

I would be crushed if on Thanksgiving day he gives it to me, and I find out it’s just earrings or a necklace. While I’m sure they’d be beautiful, it’s not the same as a *ring*. Alexander knows me too well for me to disguise my disappointment. He would know. I’d have to explain that I eavesdropped on his and Andrea’s conversation.

No, it's better that I know for sure. I increase my pace as I make my way down the hall to his office. Damn it, I should have asked Mrs. Staten if he's home, but it's midday already; he's never here at this time, especially since he's trying to clear his schedule for four weeks.

The door to his office is closed and locked, and I face a moment of dilemma. Should I just turn back now? Should I take the locked door as a sign? Alex rarely locks his office. But as I raise my palm to the black panel next to the door, a soft beep fills the air and the lock mechanism disengages. I open the door slowly and tiptoe inside. I glance around, then make a beeline for the painting, hanging directly across from his desk. I swing it to the side, revealing the small safe tucked into the wall.

I glance around guiltily one last time, then hunch down so the security scanner can scan my eye. Once that's successful, I type in the code. This isn't a betrayal of his trust; it's for his own good. I'm just making sure it fits.

"Looking for something?" I jump away from the safe with a scream. I whirl around to see Alex leaning against the door frame. How did I not hear the door open?

"A-Alexander. What are you doing here?"

He raises a brow at me, "Shouldn't I be asking you that? You're in my office, unlocking my safe," he points out.

"I-um, I was—" I trail off, no excuse coming to my frantic mind.

He pushes away from the doorframe and prowls toward where I'm standing. "I knew I saw you eavesdropping this morning."

"I-I—"

Alex grins and takes my shoulders, slowly spinning me around to face the safe. "You want to see what's in there? Go ahead."

"Alex, listen, I didn't mean to eavesdrop, I was just—"

“Go ahead and check the fucking box, Autumn,” he interrupts; so with a hard swallow, I open it. The only thing sitting in it is the jewelry box. A small, black, rectangular box. “Now, take it out.”

My hand is trembling as I pick up the box, my heart racing. What’s going on right now? Is he mad at me? Is he *not* mad at me? When did he get home? Didn’t he go to work today?

“Open it,” he orders softly into my ear and presses a small kiss to the jumping pulse at the base of my throat. I feel him smile against my skin as I slowly open the box. I gasp when I see the ring inside it.

It’s a stunning, daisy-cut blue topaz with a diamond halo set in white gold with tiny baguettes encircling the entire band. “*Alex*,” I whisper, as happy tears fill my eyes.

“I was going to do this when we’re surrounded by family, but you know what? This is better.” He spins me around to face him, then lowers to one knee. “Two years ago, you bumped into me, and I’ve been obsessed with you ever since. I was lost, searching for my mystery woman in every corner of the world, until fate brought you back to me. You may already be mine, but I want to make it official. Marry me, Autumn. Be mine forever and let me cherish you the way you’ve always deserved. I can give you the family you’ve always dreamed of.”

The tears spill down my cheeks as I laugh quietly. “Yes, of course, I’ll marry you, Alex,” I say tearfully. He raises up and snatches me into his arms to plant a kiss on my lips that leaves me dizzy and intoxicated with love.

“Next week in Cancun. Marry me there,” he whispers against my lips, and I swoon in his arms.

“Really? Yes. Yes, of course!” I sigh, melting into him. I thought I’d be getting a proposal in Cancun, but I was wrong, I will be getting a husband.

I place my head on his chest and raise my left hand, admiring my ring finger just as I did when I woke up this

morning. I certainly have everything I could ever dream of to be thankful for this year.

The End

IF YOU ENJOYED *Runaway Bride for the Boss* then you'll LOVE *Billionaire's Fake Plus One!*

[CLICK HERE to read Billionaire's Fake Plus One: A Single Dad, Nanny Romance](#)

WILLOW NEEDS to get out of the city, Lucien, her ex's billionaire older brother, needs a nanny for his twin girls. What could possibly go wrong? Until Lucien asks Willow to be his fake girlfriend at a wedding...She agrees, for a price, but what she doesn't realize is that it's not just any wedding...it's her ex's! Sharing a hotel room and a bed is only half the struggle. Pretending to hate him and keeping their hands to themselves is the real challenge.

READ MORE on the next page!

SNEAK PEEK



BILLIONAIRE'S FAKE PLUS ONE

***B*eing the twins' nanny is a dream.**

Their grumpy dad... a total hot nightmare.

SO WHY AM I boarding his private jet, pretending to be his girlfriend?

Oh right, he's paying me A LOT of money.

HE DIDN'T APPROVE when I dated his brother.

And he just caught me half naked in his pool.

But we live under the same roof this Summer, and your girl gets hot.

I HATE the way he watches me.

But his daughters need me and I need to pay off hospital bills.

So I agreed to be his wedding date. For a price.

WHAT HE FAILED TO MENTION:

The groom is my ex.

And we have to share a bed.

KISSING IN PUBLIC IS EASY.

But when his tawny gaze burns into me even behind closed doors,

Pretending I still hate him is torture.

HIS EX SAW him as just a pay day.

If only he could stop seeing me as *just the nanny*.

[\(CLICK HERE to get Billionaire's Fake Plus One\)](#)

Chapter 1

“THIS IS SO CRAZY,” My best friend, Rachel says for the millionth time, watching me pack up the rest of my clothes.

“You’re only saying that because you want me to stay in Seattle. As the exceptional lawyer you are, if you really think about it, you’d realize that this is the only decision that makes sense.”

She groans and walks over to me. “I’m going to miss you so much.” She wraps her arms around me in a tight side hug. “Make sure you call me every day. If you eat, I want to know about it!”

I laugh as she moves to help me zip up my suitcase. “I’ll give you daily updates until you’re sick of me.” I promise, lifting the luggage until it’s standing on its squeaky wheels.

“What time is your ferry ticket again?” She follows me out of my bedroom and helps me arrange the storage boxes against the wall.

“Eight am tomorrow. Are you sure about having these in your apartment?” I ask as I stare at the two small storage boxes that comprise the items I’m not willing to sell but can’t take with me.

“For crying out loud, Willow. Yes, I’m sure.” She rolls her eyes. “I barely go there anymore, and after the wedding, I’m moving in with Andrew.” She wriggles her engagement ring in front of me, like I might have somehow forgotten she got engaged to the love of her life a few months ago.

“The wedding isn’t until next year.” I point out sensibly, but Rachel only rolls her eyes again. I chuckle, which I didn’t think was possible when Mom died four weeks ago. My heart clenches tightly, and the smile slowly fades as I remember that terrible day.

“Hey.” Rachel runs a hand down my back in comfort. “I know you have to leave, but I hate that you won’t have a

support system on Bainbridge Island. Can't you put it off for a few more months?"

I shake my head, slowly breathing despite the tightness in my chest. "I can't Rachel. The mortgage on this house is outrageous, and it doesn't make sense to continue paying it now that...Mom is gone." My heart squeezes tight until my entire chest aches fiercely, the way it does whenever I think about or mention Mom. My breath catches and Rachel rubs her hands in circles around my back.

"I already quit my job, so I need to start a new one ASAP if I want to make the next Medicaid payments and pay off the loans I took out to help with her treatments."

"You know you just need to say the word, and you'll get your job back right? You've worked with Kane and Wilson since you graduated from high school; they'd be willing to pay your way to school if you ask."

I shake my head slowly. "Law firms only do that if the individual intends to go to law school. I might not be sure about what I want to do now, but I know it's definitely not becoming a lawyer."

"Well, being a nanny for the summer gives you plenty of time to find out what you're passionate about," Rachel says, infusing a false cheer in her voice.

"Bainbridge Island is only an hour drive; we can still meet up whenever you can come there. And remember, I'm going to be giving you daily updates; you won't even have the chance to miss me." I spin around in the living room in a full circle. This place holds so many memories, both happy and sad, but I can't wait to be free of it.

It's a bittersweet feeling: a part of me doesn't want to let it go because it's the last connection I have to my mother, but at the same time, I need out. I've had a constant migraine these past few weeks from a lack of sleep. Whenever I close my eyes, my heart starts pounding and my ears become alert, listening for her footsteps, her sweet voice calling out to me, or just the sounds of movement in her room next door that lets me know she's up and about.

Tears sting the back of my lids, and I blink rapidly, not wanting to cry again. I've fallen apart so many times in Rachel's arms, and I don't want our last day in the same city to include me crying on her shoulder again. She's being such a rock. I can't imagine how I would have survived the heartache without her.

"I'm going to hold you to that," Rachel says sternly. "You know you're the only friend I have. It's bad enough that you're leaving me, so don't go radio silent too. I want to hear all about the girls you're nannying."

I walk further into the living room and sink into the couch. "What time is the party? It can't run too late into the night, Rachel. I have to wake up early tomorrow, and I need my beauty sleep so I won't wake up grumpy."

She gasps dramatically. "How do you know about that?"

"How do I say this..." I begin delicately, drawing out my words. "You don't have a discreet bone in your body, babe. You've been acting so suspicious at work, being all jumpy and shifty."

She unwinds her scarf from her neck and flings it at me playfully. "I kept mine and Andrew's relationship a secret from you, didn't I?"

"For all of one week," I taunt and squeal when she picks up the book on the coffee table I haven't gotten around to packing because I'm reading it. "For the love of God, do not throw that book at me, Rachel! Not my precious book, please."

She growls, dropping the book and coming at me. I jump up from the couch and run around it, raising my hands up. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Don't go all hulk on me."

She flips her blonde hair over her shoulders with an arrogant humph, then sashays away. I let out a breath of relief, but then she runs at me, jumping over the couch like an Olympic athlete to tackle me to the floor. I let out a scream as she tickles me mercilessly. I writhe, trying to dislodge her from me, while giggling and hiccupping helplessly. Save to say, I don't get anywhere, so I change tactics.

“P-please, Rachel. I’m s-so-sorry!” I plead, stuttering because of my incessant hiccupping, tears streaming down my cheeks from how hard I’m laughing.

“Will you question how discreet I am again?” she asks, still tickling me.

“Never!” I scream. She finally stops and jumps off me. “You’re ruthless,” I moan, raising a hand to cover my face.

“Whatever. The party starts at six, two short hours away, so we need to start getting ready now. And you better act surprised when we get there.” She flounces to my bedroom, but stops to add, “And the reason you know isn’t because I’m not discreet, it’s because you’re nosy. You always have to know everything.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” I mutter, slowing sitting up on shaky limbs.

“What was that?” Rachel demands, suddenly whirling around to face me, her arms settling on her hips.

“I said I’ll practice a sufficiently surprised expression in front of my mirror before leaving.” She huffs but thankfully lets it go. Rachel continues on to my room to shower while I use the guest bathroom. Then we get ready together for my *surprise* goodbye party.

We take Rachel’s car – I don’t have one – to the sky view observatory center at Columbia Center, where the party is taking place. I tighten my grip on Rachel’s arm as the elevator climbs up to the 73rd floor. “I can’t believe you chose to have the party here.”

She grins at me. “I remember you saying you’ve never been here before. I can’t let you leave Seattle without visiting one of the best places to get an eagle eye view of the Pacific Northwest, can I?”

The elevator doors swish open softly. “Surprise!” Everyone yells, and I widen my eyes as much as they allow, trying to appear shocked.

“Oh, my God, you guys!” I smile as familiar faces come forward with wrapped gifts and warm hugs. At a point, a few

tears slip down my face as the gravity of my decision hits me. I've been working with these people for five years. I'm not really close with any of them, but I'll miss the familiarity and camaraderie at the law firm.

"Since you insist on leaving us." Kane, my boss and Rachel's fiancé hands me a small wrapped gift, then tugs Rachel into his arms.

"Kane, you didn't have to. Thank you." I give him a quick hug and hurriedly wipe my eyes. He grins at me and ruffles my hair affectionately, like a big brother might if I had one. I return his smile, grateful he and Rachel were able to work things out between them. Over the five years I've reported to him, I can count on one hand the number of times he's smiled at me. But ever since he got together with Rachel, he's been noticeably happier and less stiff.

"I told you to stop calling me that. You can call me Andrew." He returns proving my point on just how much he's changed. He used to insist on everyone calling each other by their last names at work.

"You guys are having your own little party over here without inviting me?" Jake, Rachel's brother and the second partner at Kane and Wilson, asks, walking up to us with two champagne flutes. He hands one to me with a smile. "What's the name of the fucker taking you from us again?"

I roll my eyes at him as he drapes a hand over my shoulders. "No one is taking me away. I just need time to rediscover myself."

He ruffles my hair and I groan, bending down to escape from his arms. I try to rearrange my hair as much as I can without a mirror. "Between you and Ka...Andrew, my hair is going to look like a rat's nest by the time this party is over," I complain, although deep down, I love it. When Rachel and I became close, I didn't just gain a friend; I got two annoying big brothers as well, and I'm going to miss them fiercely.

"I have to get in all the rufflings I can tonight. Who knows when I'm going to see your ugly mug again?" he smirks as he sips his drink.

I mock-glare at him. “If you ever want to see my ugly mug, you can come out to Bainbridge Island. It’s just across the Puget Sound, literally an hour drive, thirty-five minutes if you’re ferrying. I’m basically still in Seattle if you think about it. And God knows you and Andrew need to take a break from work.”

He rolls his eyes. “Don’t start, Willie, I have enough nagging from Mom and Rachel already.”

I gasp in outrage, “Never ever call me that again, Jacob Wilson.”

Rachel bursts into laughter. “I told you he’s terrible at making nicknames. He calls me Rach, for crying out loud.”

“That’s not so bad, Willie is just sacrilegious,” I protest and shudder.

“Hey, you guys keep quiet. The fireworks are about to start.” Andrew scowls at us.

We wade deeper into the party, making our way to the wide railings. I exhale as I watch the view spread before us. The Great Wheel, Elliot Bay, Pike Place Market, the Cascade Mountains, Mt Rainier, San Juan Islands, Mt Baker, Bellevue, the Space Needle and Bainbridge Island - the entire Northwest Pacific is laid out as far as the eye can see.

Crackling fills the air as a number of bright lights shoot up to the sky, where they spread out in arches of shimmering blues, pinks, greens and purples. The fireworks. I smile as I watch the beautiful display of colors. Rachel really went all out for me. I glance at her, but quickly look away when I see her making out with Andrew.

I turn my face up to enjoy the view, smiling because I’m thrilled my friend found her happily ever after. I don’t know what my future holds, or if it will ever include a love like theirs, but at the very least, I’m looking forward to a fresh start on Bainbridge Island and finally discovering myself... whatever that means.

[\(CLICK HERE to keep reading Billionaire’s Fake Plus One\)](#)