



Garbed

BY THE

BILLIONAIRE

MISTY ELLIS

Saved by the Billionaire

Misty Ellis

Copyright © 2023 by Misty Ellis

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Epilogue

Chapter One

Noelle

*O*n and on and on. Doesn't this guy get tired?

“... but I didn't get it, you know? I just kept going for the job, but still no luck. I guess some things aren't meant to happen. I was pissed, though! I wore my best clothes to the interview!”

This is probably a big mistake. A song filters from a speaker nearby, the warm melody giving me a brief reprieve from Trevor's constant droning. I force a smile, bearing the agony.

I'm definitely blocking this one.

Since I entered my first relationship in high school, it's been an unbroken string of romance, heartbreak, and repeat. At one point, I believed it was me. But it isn't. Even those close to me have suffered from the vicious cycle. At best, they're trapped for life, like my estranged parents.

Just a week ago, I was on *Fishin'4Love*, a popular dating app, when I got a match. Trevor Jones. I wasn't expecting

much from the app, so I checked him out just for fun. And I was ... *wowed*.

On the app, Trevor's bio is perfect – a foster dad of the cutest puppies I've seen in a while, a volunteer firefighter, and someone looking for love and commitment. He seemed like the ideal man. Yet, so far...

“So, you're telling me you were never a volunteer firefighter?”

“Look, that's a piece of genius there. Chicks dig firefighters! What better way to get some than to put the voluntary firefighter tag on my profile? As I said, I'm still struggling to find a job. Society is cruel!” Sipping some soda, he adds, “Also, who needs a job anyways? Jobs are restraints placed on us, so we don't have the freedom to do what we want!”

I'm shocked. Is he seriously admitting he's lied about having a job? I glance around. Other people are dining or conversing, caught up in their world, while I'm here with... *him*. Trevor rubs his palms together and licks his lips as our waiter approaches our table with a tray bearing our orders.

“Finally! It's about time!”

I groan as he claps when our meal is served.

“Chicken tenders? Chicken salad? Sesame Chicken? Now, *this* is what I call a dinner!” He laughs, grabbing his knife.

Deep breaths, Noelle.

“So, Trevor, you’re also a foster dad for two puppies, right? How did that happen?”

He looks up and swallows a mouthful of chicken, before clearing his throat. A goofy grin is plastered on his face.

“Ah, Ree and Dee. My two darlings. Picked them from an animal shelter. My, those two were the light in my world. They made my days seem so bright with their little whines and barks.”

“*Were?* Did something happen to them?”

He chuckles, rubbing his jaw. “So, um, you see ... it’s a crazy story. Why does life have to be so mean to me?”

“That’s not telling me much.” I raise an eyebrow.

His grin vanishes. “See, the thing is ... Three years ago, they were taken from me! By society’s agents of oppression – pet services!”

He bangs a fist on the table, and the low murmurs around our table cease. Conscious of the attention he’s drawing, I smile awkwardly.

“I’m sorry.” I try to add as much sympathy to my voice without showing the irritation growing in me by the minute. “What happened?”

“Three years ago ... those darned agents came to my home and snatched my puppies from me! After I’d had them for just three weeks! They told me I was endangering the safety of the puppies! Can you believe that?” He throws his arms up. “They told me my apartment wasn’t *animal safe!* What the fuck?”

I can only stare with eyes wide. Why am I not surprised? He hasn't had a puppy in three years. That means the picture on his profile was one he took three years ago. No wonder he looks different. He looked less of a slob then.

I grimace. This can't get any weirder. Another bad date is in the cards. Does the *'right one'* even exist?

"That's bad. How did you manage?"

"Oh, I had a girlfriend then. But she left me a week after the puppies." He clenches his fists. "All the girlfriends I've had left in less than a month. Those backstabbers! They're crazy for leaving me. All of them!"

"I... I see." I purse my lips for a moment, before taking a bite of some chicken nugget. Chewing slowly, I tune myself out of the conversation and stare at my phone. I smile inwardly at the wallpaper. It's my favorite picture of me and Abbie when we were fourteen. Our arms are linked around each other's shoulders and we're posing with identical smiles at the beach. Two beautiful best friends, I remember my mom saying with admiration as she took the picture. A pang of guilt washes over me and I look away from the phone.

I should call her tonight. It's been three days since she left town and I haven't gotten feedback. I hope she's okay.

Trevor's loud chewing brings me back to reality. "Do you know why they leave me? They're crazy, that's why! All my exes. They wanted to put me down. Oh, but they just wait. I'll become the richest man in New York, and I'll show them!"

Oh, God. And his exes are the crazy ones?

“Wait, I’ve been talking about myself all night. Tell me about yourself. Do you have a job?” He leans forward, and I cringe inwardly. His lips are greasy and his mouth is full of salad. He’s talking with his mouth full.

Somebody save me.

“Um, I work in an office—”

“Oh! That reminds me of the time I went for an interview in this fancy office.” He points at me with his fork. “Now, I had to wear wet clothes, because I took my clothes to the dry cleaners’ late, and...”

On, and on, and on...

I stifle a groan, keeping a smile plastered on my face. If he wasn’t going to let me talk, then why ask me anything in the first place? God, I’d do anything to leave right this minute.

Soon, we’re done with our meals. The waiter comes with the bill. He glances at the both of us, and Trevor gazes at me with that same grin on his face.

Wait. Is he expecting *me* to pay the bill?

The waiter clears his throat. “Excuse me, but who’s paying?”

Trevor doesn’t say a word. He keeps his eyes on me.

“Um, I have to go now. I have work tomorrow. It was nice talking with you.” *That’s as big a lie as they come.* “Also, you have some grease on your... lips.”

He cleans his oily lips with a napkin, then places his hand over mine. I withdraw my hand and jerk back.

“I’ll let you know something today, uh ... Maddy. You see, society *wants* us to be divided. This is what they want. But I say no. We will not be subject to the whims of a repressive society. I’ll go with you tonight, and we’ll be united in spirit and body! Also, I’ll need you to get the bill. There should be equality.”

What the fuck? This weirdo invited me on a date, and I can’t leave without him following me?

So much for trying to find the right one.

“Look, Trevor, it’s Noelle. And I need to get some things done before tomorrow. But I’ll see you another time, so don’t worry. I’ll message you later.”

As if. I’m blocking your sorry ass.

“I insist, Nelly. We have to stick together.”

The waiter presses his lips together. He takes a deep breath.

“Someone’s gotta pay the thirty-five dollars and ten cents, sir. Ma’am. Who’s it gonna be?”

I drum my fingers on the table. Trevor isn’t budging.

“My God, it *is* you!”

My breath lodges in my throat as I catch a glimpse of the new person. Tall and long-limbed with broad shoulders, he walks over to our table and smiles at me. His silvery-gray hair is combed back, revealing a face featuring clear, blue eyes and

high-sculptured cheekbones. His turtleneck sweater and slacks look tailored to a perfect fit, hugging his broad shoulders. He is a sight for sore eyes.

“Don’t you remember me? I’m Dr. Hazel. How’s that rash going? Oh my, I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t say it out loud.”

My brows crease. My doctor?

That’s when I catch a slight wink from the striking, middle-aged man. He’s trying to help me out.

Trevor frowns. “Rash? What rash?”

The man leans in, and his voice is a whisper. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

He turns to me, shaking his head. “Your tests just came back and there is something that you need to know. I was going to call you tomorrow, but since you’re here now... “

That’s my cue.

“Oh, thank you, doctor! But can I still spend the night with my date?”

The man shakes his head as if disappointed. “I’m sorry, but the risk is too high. This is all my fault. I didn’t explain how your illness can easily spread.”

My hand flies to my lips. My eyebrows draw up in feigned shock.

“Oh no! But I was really looking forward to him staying with me. So, maybe just once is safe enough?” I feign a question there for added effect.

Trevor waves his hands. “Hold on a minute here. You mean to tell me you have an infectious disease?”

The ‘doctor’ sighs. He leans in closer to Trevor again and whispers loud enough that I can hear too, “You’re lucky I caught up with her here, young man. Honestly, this would have been a night to remember for a long time. And *not* for the right reasons, if you know what I mean.”

“What the fuck? What the actual fuck is going on here?”

The man holds my hand. His grip is gentle and warm, and his skin on mine sends tingles through my skin.

“I’ll have to get her to the hospital now. We need to run more tests and quarantine her, but rest easy, young man. If there was no physical contact between you two, you should be okay. Just in case, look for swelling or color changes in your crotch area over the next three months, and if nothing changes in the meantime, it means you were fortunate and get to keep all your body parts. Especially *that* one.” His eyes look fleetingly to Trevor’s crotch area, letting him know exactly what he is talking about. And I almost break character at Trevor’s look of horror as he finally gets what the ‘doctor’ is telling him. Then the ‘doctor’ turns to me. “Come along, now.”

Trevor trembles, wiping beads of sweat off his forehead. I choke back a laugh and manage to convert it into a cough. He jumps from his seat, nearly tripping. I hurry out of the diner with the handsome stranger, holding my hand to my lips to push back my laughter. When I look back one last time, Trevor

is racing in the direction of the washrooms, hands in his pants. I guess his self-diagnosis starts right now.

Poor Trevor. But in a way, he deserves it. He's lying about who he is to get free dinners and a night of sex with as many women as he can and he's been a weirdo all evening.

The stranger leads me out of the diner and to his car, a breathtaking Tesla Model S. He releases his grip and opens the door for me.

“Let's go, before your weirdo society-hating date comes for you.”

Without hesitating, I hop in. The silver-haired stranger gets on the steering wheel and drives away.

“Where do you stay?” he asks, stopping when we're a safe distance from the restaurant. “I could drop you off here if you want.”

He has a point. I've had one bad date already, and I don't even know this man. But he saved me tonight, so it's not a bad idea if I get him to drop me off somewhere near my apartment, right?

“Uh... downtown Manhattan. Just keep heading straight.”

He nods and drives off.

“I didn't catch your name, you know?” he says, keeping his gaze on the road. “Guess your date was too preoccupied with himself to mention you.”

“I won’t argue with that.” I twirl a strand of my hair. “It’s Noelle.”

“Beautiful name.” He turns to me, flashing a winning smile that warms me from within. “Fits you.”

“I didn’t get yours as well. And I’m sure as hell it isn’t Dr. Hazel. Are you even a doctor?” I ask, suppressing a giggle.

He bursts into laughter. “No, I’m not. I just had to come up with something. I’m Maverick.”

“Well, Maverick, you’re my silver knight in shining armor. Thanks again for rescuing me from the brunette ogre.”

“Anything to make society a better place.” He smiles at me, and I blush. “Plus, it’s a beautiful night. I couldn’t stand by and see it ruined for you.”

He’s right. There’s a bright full moon, sending silvery ripples across the sky. The city of Manhattan is already lit by lights in every building. It’s a beautiful night indeed.

He turns to me. “You, uh, okay with making a detour? We could hit a bar nearby. The night is still young. Don’t worry. I promise I won’t rant about society’s injustice.”

That makes me giggle. I scan him once more. He is certainly an upgrade from Trevor so far. And anything would be better than the date I just had. Besides, he came along like a white knight in an electric car. Having a couple of drinks with him doesn’t sound like a bad idea.

“Sure. Why not?”

He moves his gaze to the road, and I glance at him. He looks familiar ... Why do I get this gut feeling that I've seen him before?

Chapter Two

Maverick

The door swings open and Noelle places her hand on mine. I give it a gentle squeeze.

“After you, *mademoiselle*.”

“*Merci*.” She bows slightly, and I chuckle.

“Here we are. A regular old bar without any weirdos. This should be fun.”

She laughs and we enter hand-in-hand. There are only a few people, either drinking and gazing out the windows, or talking in hushed tones. We make our way to a secluded table in the corner, where there’s more privacy and the smell of gin is less prevalent. She sits, but I remain standing.

“Wait here. I’ll get some drinks. What would you like?”

“A beer will do. Got to wash away all the weirdness.”

Smiling, I walk to the high wooden counter. The bartender, who’s whistling a tune and cleaning a glass, turns to me.

“Welcome, sir. Bright night, eh?”

“Yeah. I’ll have an eighteen hundred Tequila and two Budweisers. Also, a glass.”

He nods, before fetching the bottles and the cups. A wide grin plays on his lips.

“Sure those two bottles will be enough for your missus?”

I turn to Noelle, who’s twirling her blond hair and gazing outside the glass windows. She has a sort of quiet beauty that I couldn’t help but notice earlier. Her green eyes seem to gaze into one’s inner depths, but it’s her smile that sends warmth coursing through my veins.

“Who knows? It’s a long night. I want to show her a good time.”

She turns, and our eyes meet. I smile, and my chest flutters as her beautiful lips curve in return.

The bartender chuckles, before handing me the bottles. I return to our table.

It’s been a long day. The takeover I’ve been processing for weeks is finally complete. At this moment in my life, work is all that matters. As the CEO of a media company —and an advertising agency after today— that’s understandable.

“What were you talking about with the barman?” She places her elbows on the table and rests her chin on her palms.

She sounds just like Vanessa and just the right height, too. Pain stabs at my heart and I mentally shake off the intruding

thought. No thinking of the past tonight. No use in awakening it. I've accepted my wife is gone for good and that's the way I'd like it to remain.

“He thought two bottles won't be enough for you. I said hey, let the night take its course. I don't think you need too many bottles to forget Mr. Anti-Society, do you?”

She throws her head back and laughs. Then, she leans forward over the table until we're almost nose to nose. Her sultry gaze makes me ease back an inch.

“I don't think I'll need beer for that.”

She's so close, with her lips slightly parted. I swallow. It's all I can do not to bury my hand in her hair and brush my lips across hers in a heated kiss.

“You don't need the drink, but who doesn't *want* a drink?”

Nodding, she grabs her bottle, raises it to her mouth, and pops it open. *Whoa.*

“To a different turn in the night!” She raises her bottle.

Smiling, I pop open my tequila and our bottles clink. “How did you meet your date?”

She groans, slamming her bottle on the table.

“That's a long story.”

I ease back into my chair. “We have all night.”

“So, there's this dating app I'm in, alright? Just for fun, you know? Who knows, I could meet someone interesting. Scrolling through, I get a match. He's a cool guy, with two of

the cutest puppies I've ever seen! And he's a firefighter! What else could I want?"

Chuckling, I drink some more. "Reality is a bitch, isn't it?"

"A big one! Here I was, thinking I'd finally met someone I could go out with. And what do I get? A jobless guy that doesn't even have any puppies or any plans for his life! Someone that can't even foot the bill for a dinner date he invited me to!"

"Don't forget the part where he insisted he has to go with you for a nightcap," I say, grinning.

She huffs. "That was the craziest part! Like, who does that?"

"A man you met on a dating site, that's who. Why didn't you just refuse him outright?"

"Well ..." She hesitates as if picking the words to say. "Two reasons. I was sadder for the guy than annoyed. He's pathetic, and no, it's not society that made him that way. I just feel ..." She lets her words drift off and my curiosity spikes.

"Feel what?" I lift my glass to my lips, studying her as I take another drink.

She sighs, before taking another big slug from her bottle.

"I feel he might have turned out better under different circumstances. He seemed like a nice enough guy online."

"I see what's going on here." With a smirk, I pour myself another shot. "You're trying to justify your bad date."

“I... Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s just my rotten luck with guys.” She shrugs, before finishing the last of her beer and opening the second bottle.

“I see. And what’s the second reason?”

“He’s a weirdo. I don’t like weirdos. I guess I was a little...?”

“Afraid?” I raise an eyebrow, filling in the gap.

She twirls her hair, looking away. “Maybe.”

Her neck, smooth and pale, looks very inviting. How would it feel to bury my lips in it? I’ve not had thoughts like these in a long time. Strange.

My hand reaches out to hers. She glances at my fingers on hers, then at me. I hold my breath, but she doesn’t turn away.

“Good thing I came along, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Looking away, she takes another swig.

Why would someone this pretty get a misogynistic date like Trevor? Earlier, when I sat behind them, I found myself listening to their conversation. It was obvious Noelle wasn’t having much of a good time. It wasn’t my business, so I didn’t want to butt in at first. But the asshole went too far.

“What’re you thinking about?” She circles a finger on my hand.

Her touch gives me shivers from within. My nerves tingle in response to her finger’s movement. I sip.

“Nothing much. Just my crazy awesome luck tonight.”

She gives me a sultry gaze. “*I’m* the lucky one here.”

Clearing my throat, I twirl my glass.

“Do you often have bad dates like the one I saved you from?”

She rests back, wrinkling her eyebrows.

“You will not *believe* the number of bad dates I get with men of my age group.”

Chortling, I curl an eyebrow. “Your age group?”

She takes a long gulp. Finishing her beer, she drops the bottle on the table.

“Do you... need more beer?” I’m almost on my feet.

She licks her lips. “I’d rather go for a shot of tequila.”

“You sure?” I sit. “It’s some pretty strong stuff.”

She laughs, before pointing a finger at me. “I’ll have you know I can hold my drink, mister.”

Grinning, I fill my cup and hand it over to her. My jaw drops as she drinks it all in one go. *Wow*.

“What did you mean when you said your age group? You don’t get any good dates with young men?”

“They’re all just immature dudes. Dudes, not men!” She slams the glass on the table so hard that I jump.

“What kind of men would you prefer to date, then?”

Her carefree laugh envelops me in her world, making everything else in the bar seem like an out-of-focus extra. It’s

like a movie, with just the two of us as the leading man and woman.

Gritting my teeth, I suck in air. I'm stepping into territory I've not entered in years. Since Vanessa's death, my relationships with women have been brief and only for pleasure. No woman has affected me like this in a long time. A shiver creeps up my spine. It's with my best efforts that I maintain my cool.

"You said it. Men. Older, mature, good-looking men with manners. I want to go out with a man that'll make me feel like a lady! Is that too much to ask?" she asks, still laughing.

"Does that mean you like older men?" My eyes meet hers.

She stops laughing and looks away. Her cheeks are flushed red. I take another sip of my tequila.

"I guess." She swirls a strand of her hair. "Someone like you."

I cough, nearly spitting out the tequila. A man like me? Her clear green eyes bore into mine, and my heart stops for a moment.

"Ah, that's flattery. I'm not the best option for someone your age."

I mean it. I'm not... good enough for you.

She shakes her head. "I don't agree. In fact..."

I wait for her to complete her sentence, but she doesn't. The color on her face deepens.

“In fact what?” I lean forward.

She glances at her watch. “It’s late. I should probably be heading home.”

Sighing, I stand, hold her hand and walk to the counter. I drop a couple of notes on the wood for our drinks and a tip. The bartender nods and we walk out of the bar.

“That was fun, wasn’t it?” I ask as we get in the cab.

“Yeah. I had a great time.” She beams at me.

As the car gets on the road, our earlier conversation comes to mind. What was she going to say?

“You didn’t finish what you were going to say.” I glance at her.

She remains silent. My grip on the steering tightens and I keep my eyes on the road.

“I wish you pretended to be my date. I like older men, and you tick all my boxes.”

I cock my head and lift an eyebrow. Is she serious? Her gaze meets mine, and I find myself studying her face. Her clear eyes. Her thick, black lashes. Just then, she licks her lips.

“Um, right.” I try to focus as she catches me off guard.

If there was a perfect time to get her number, this is it.

“You know,” — I clear my throat — “you can always call on me to be your pretend date if you need. To save you from embarrassing situations like tonight. I’m always down for that.”

She giggles. “Are you trying to get my number, mister?”

“Pretty obvious, right? Also, it’s Maverick, as I said.” I chuckle. “You’re right. Did it work?”

“Yes, it did. I’ll take your offer, Maverick.” She motions to the driver at a spot just yards ahead. “You can pull over there.”

As the car comes to a stop in front of an apartment, I take the opportunity to exchange numbers.

“So, this is your apartment?” I tilt my head for a better view.

“Yeah.” She clutches her purse.

“Right.”

I exit the cab and move to the other side to open the door for her. She holds my hand and I help her out.

“Thanks for a wonderful evening, Maverick. Who knew I’d have such a good time?”

I smile. “You’re welcome, Noelle.”

As I turn, she pulls gently at my shirt. That stops me, and I face her. She’s blushing again. What did she want to say this time?

“What... what if I wanted you to be my real date instead of a fake one?”

My jaw drops. It takes a moment before my senses function again. This cute, innocent-looking girl I just met hours ago wants me to be her date?

She peers at me from underneath her lashes. Her sultry smile leaves no doubt. Noelle is flirting with me. Clearly, I’m

not the only person that's feeling an attraction.

I tug on a lock of her hair. My hand brushes across her temple and moves to her chin, then down to the back of her neck.

I lean forward and claim her full lips in a light kiss. She opens up immediately, her tongue stroking my lips. She deepens the kiss with a passion that steals my breath. My free hand moves to her backside, pulling her closer. She presses a hand to my chest and wraps the other around me.

After some minutes, she pulls back. She licks her lips and grins.

“Want to come in?”

I chuckle. “Yes.”

Chapter Three

Noelle

“**G**ood evening, Mrs. Graham.” I smile at the old woman coming out of the elevator.

Mrs. Graham smiles at me but narrows her eyes when she sees Maverick. He flashes her a smile, and she... *blushes*? The elevator opens, and I nudge him in.

“I think Mrs. Graham might like me.” He chuckles.

Casually, Maverick leans against the elevator’s wall as his eyes touch mine. A little light-headed, I shift as he draws closer. Warmth spreads through my body and especially in my panty-clad pussy.

“Looks like you need some help,” he says with a soft knowing smile teasing his wonderful lips. “Feeling warm?”

“Maybe.” Flushed, I’m tempted to look away from his eyes.

Maverick sweeps one hand over my hair. His warm breath caresses my neck and I shudder. His soft lips are a breath away. My grip on my purse tightens. Unable to resist having

him so close, I kiss him. I nibble at his lower lip and enjoy the smoothness of his tongue and his teeth. Delicious.

The ping of the bell announces the lift's arrival on the seventh floor. The elevator slows to a smooth stop and the doors slide open.

"M-my floor," I say, breaking the kiss.

I lead him to my apartment and open the door after a brief struggle with my keys. It's hard to maintain focus when a man as attractive as Maverick is breathing down on me.

"Welcome to my apartment." I move inside, tossing my purse onto a couch and turning to face him. "My roommate isn't around, so we have the place to ourselves."

We have the place to ourselves? Seriously, Noelle?

Feeling flushed and a little drunk, it's not surprising I'm this bold. My body is full of nervous energy that seems to be mounting.

A lopsided grin plays on his lips but he says nothing. His approving look and his tongue moving over his lips are enough to melt me from within. He steps in, closes the door, and scans the living room for a brief moment. His eyes return to me and he comes closer.

Still silent, he trails my hair through his fingers and his eyes drift through my body from head to toe. His mouth crashes onto mine and he pushes me against the wall. I meet his breathtaking kiss and welcome the spearing of his tongue into my mouth.

Hoisting me up, he grabs my ass and his erection presses against my mound. He's close. Close enough that his touch heats up my skin, making my head swim.

I tear my mouth from his and press my lips to his throat. His firm yet delicate touches turn my legs into jelly. He unzips my dress and I slump my shoulders to help him ease it off my body.

We move through the hallway and to my bedroom. I tug at the edges of his turtleneck, drawing it over his shoulders. He removes his undershirt and I gasp. His body is lean but toned and muscular, with a broad chest and defined abs. I lick my lips, swallowing to wet my dry throat.

I pull him toward me and tug loose his belt before pulling his slacks down. My breathing shudders as I feel his cock through the fabric of his briefs. He's as huge as I imagined he would be.

"Looks like you're packing, Maverick. I'd love that monster in me right now," I breathe in his ear.

Why the fuck would I say that?

I cup and squeeze his balls, through his briefs. He groans, before easing my hands away. He pulls down his briefs, and my breathing stops for a moment. His cock twitches, erect and with veins popping out along its length.

My fingers move to his shaft, which is hard and hot to the touch. It's been more than a while since I was with anyone –

since I felt this desire for a man. He groans and finds my lips again, but this time the kiss is less gentle.

I pull back, meeting his still gaze.

“Can I t-taste it?” I ask, my face warm.

He chuckles, nodding. I lick my way from his mouth through his chest and stomach muscles and down still. My tongue flickers around the domed tip of his cock. One hand encircles the base of his hard and trembling shaft. I grip tighter as I work him, my movement making him tremble.

“Damn.” He closes his eyes. “That feels good.”

I suck on him, tasting his precum. He digs his hands in my hair and urges me further. My pussy tingles as I take him deeper into my mouth, using my lips and tongue to lap over him as he slides deeper into my throat. I retrace a path over his shaft and linger at the tip, tasting him.

“Do you want me to go on?”

In reply, he holds my head and pushes his length into my mouth. My hand doesn't stop moving on his cock and his sac underneath. My pussy throbs with need.

I pull him out of my mouth. “Let's try something else.”

He chuckles as I lie across the bed. Looming over me, he grips my breasts and frees them from my bra's restraint. His fingers grip, tweak, and tug at both nipples. The sensations make my belly knot and the folds between my legs pulse.

He shifts and leans over me, taking a breast into his mouth and sucking sensually on my nipple. His fingers slide down my taut belly and slip over my pussy's lips. He bends over my face and kisses my forehead, before looking into my eyes as his fingers drive me crazy. I spread my legs and he grins. He cups my mound and his middle finger pushes past my lips and deep inside my slick pussy. I lift my hips to meet him, my body bucking.

“So hot. So wet and ready. Do you know what I'm going to do now?”

“W-what?” I gasp as he tugs away my thong, the fastenings ripping as if made of paper.

“I think you know the answer. You can feel it coming, can't you?”

“Y-Yes...yes!”

I shudder, wondering what kind of mess I'll make on the bed cover. My body is on fire from his touches, with little snaps of pleasure fluttering in my belly.

He brings his face closer to my ears. “Do you want me now?”

“Yes... I want you so bad.”

I squirm on the bed, with his teasing touches driving me to places unknown. Maverick's tongue teases my breasts, then glides over my belly, down my thighs, then over my calves as he kisses his way down. I quiver in response to his kisses, the

press of his lips to my soft skin, and his flickering tongue on my navel.

His mouth now settles on my core. I buck my hips and grip his head with my thighs as he flicks my clit. He slides his tongue over my mound, closes his lips, and pulls on my warm flesh.

I gasp as unfamiliar sensations overwhelm my senses beyond my control. My back arches as his two fingers curl, and he draws and pushes them in and out. My pussy gets wetter until my juices leak onto my thighs.

It's like the immense pleasure is about to swallow me and I can't control what is rushing up to meet me. I grip the sheets as my body tenses. I'm shaken by an immense force of climax that pushes me over the edge.

“Do you have any condoms?” His face is a mask of pure lust.

Panting and unable to utter a word, I point to my bedside table. He opens the drawer and pulls out a condom. I swallow as he tears the package and rolls it on his cock.

Then, he kneels between my legs and slides the head over my parted lips. Leaning forward, he bears his weight on one extended arm. I squirm, digging my fingers into his skin as his cock slides past my lips and fills me up.

Maverick glides in and out of me in slow, rhythmic thrusts at first but his pace soon quickens. I clench and tug on him, with every thrust of his pushing me up the bed.

“M-Maverick... Fuck... I’m... going to—”

I scream, drawing my legs up and gripping my ankles. He kisses me, silencing my cries with his mouth. I suck on his tongue as we share the final moments of crazy, unimaginable sex. I cling to him as waves of my orgasm rush in upon me.

“You okay?” he whispers.

I can’t speak. I nod and guide him deeper.

I wrap one leg around his thigh, holding on to his hips as we move again, faster, then slow, then fast again, ramping up the pace until it feels like I can’t hold back.

I come again, hard. My whole body seizes as I’m gripped by a force that sweeps over me. A moment later, he groans, throwing his head back, reaching his peak as hard as I have mine by the looks of him, then collapses on top of me.

We just lie until we’re both back to reality. I can’t think about what comes next. I can’t think about anything except the sensation of being thoroughly ravished. He pulls out and lies beside me. I snuggle into his arms, and soon fall asleep.

* * *

When I wake up, it’s still dark.

I snuggle underneath the covers. Before yesterday, I haven’t had sex so good. How could something as ordinary as sex be so ... profoundly satisfying? I snuggle closer to the other side of the bed, then open my eyes. It’s empty.

Sitting up, I scan the room, but there's no sign of him. Maverick is gone.

What did I expect? I beat my pillow with a fist, before lying down. At least he could have said goodbye. I tilt my head. My phone lies on my bedside table. Perhaps...

No. I'm not calling him. I sigh, before closing my eyes.

A voice filters to me from the bathroom. It's low, but I recognize that rich baritone from last night. I heave a sigh of relief. Maverick hasn't gone yet. Maybe he's on a call. But who is he calling in the early hours of Saturday?

I lift myself off the bed and tiptoe to the door. My breath hitches as I lean forward, placing an ear on the door. I shouldn't eavesdrop, but I want to know who he's talking to. Maybe he has a wife? I didn't even consider that last night.

"... Yes. It'll be ready before Monday. I should start fully on Monday. Just had the last of my meetings yesterday."

He pauses. My eyebrows furrow. Is he talking about work?

"HireCorp is in good hands. The takeover was smooth." Another pause. "Yes, Monday. I have big plans for the company."

I gasp. That's when it clicks into place.

Maverick looks familiar because he's the new owner of the company I work in!

Oh shit.

His voice ceases, meaning the call has ended. I hurry back to the bed and close my eyes, taking deep breaths to calm my racing heart. The bathroom door opens. Maverick's arm hooks around my shoulders.

I blink, as if just waking. He grins at me.

“Hi there.”

Holding my neck, he draws me in for a thorough kiss. My pulse races as his lips brush over mine.

Here I am, making out with my boss, after a night of wild and hot sex.

I pull away. “L-let's go get coffee.”

His finger circles around my breasts, before moving down to my pussy.

“There are better ways to start the day.” He grins, before turning me over.

I take deep breaths to calm my racing heart, but Maverick's tongue over my clit makes my efforts futile. He grinds me to a climax that leaves a pit in my stomach. I'm left breathing heavily, my heart hammering from both from the spine-melting climax and my horrid discovery.

Chapter Four

Maverick

The silver-glassed building about ten floors tall comes into view, glimmering in the sunlight. The bold, red logo of an ant and the letters HireCorp are emblazoned on the top of the building, standing out in a sea of glass and sun.

It's not the first time I'm coming here, but today, I finally grip the reins. Throughout the last week, I've been preparing for this moment. I went straight from a strategy meeting on Friday to dinner, where I met Noelle.

My grip on the steering wheel tightens, and I take a deep breath.

Focus, Maverick. HireCorp is what's important now. Time for pleasure has passed.

Ever since the acquisition of HireCorp, a recruiting agency, and its merger with my media firm, I've been busy with meetings with the former stakeholders and legal proceedings. Now, it's time for me to take my place as the new CEO.

“Mr. Thatcher! You’ve arrived!”

A man waiting in the company’s parking lot where I’m pulling over waves at me, grinning. I clutch my briefcase and exit my car. It’s going to be a long day.

“Duncan, right?”

He nods. “Yes, Mr. Thatcher. It’s good to see you again! The members of your team are eager to meet you, but I suggest you take it one at a time. You won’t want to be burned out on your first day. Follow me, sir.”

I follow him, grateful he took the trouble of meeting me in the lot. Almost two decades or so younger than me, Duncan is a man with a lot of energy. It still amazes me how much vigor one person can have. He’ll be a great asset to the team if I can channel his energy to productive means.

I have a lot of work cut out for me.

We pass through security, and the red-haired receptionist blushes as I stride into the reception hall. We slow a bit but keep a steady pace. Duncan offers a few remarks about the company’s operations, and I nod. He diverts me to a corridor leading to the elevator.

“My office is on the last floor, right?” I ask as the steel doors slide open.

“Yes, Mr. Duncan. It’s ready for you. Do you want to go to the last floor first, or go on a tour to meet the people you’ll be working with?” His finger pauses over the buttons.

I think about it for a moment and make a quick decision. I know little about my team, so it'll be better if I have my meetings first and process all the information I get later while resting up in my office.

“Please take my briefcase to my office. I'll start with the meetings.”

He grins. “Alright, sir. The second floor it is.”

As he pushes the button, the doors close and the elevator moves up. I run my hands through my hair and tug at my suit. Duncan tries to suppress a chuckle by my side but fails.

“I need to make a good impression on my first day. Don't you think?” I smile, adjusting my watch.

“Right as rain, sir. On my first day, I was nervous as hell. And I was just an intern. I didn't know what to do. It was all so new to me.”

I turn to him. “And how did you manage? Did it go well?”

He bursts into laughter and I just stare at him not sure if that is a good or a bad sign.

“It went horribly, sir. I poured coffee on myself, slipped in the restroom, and typed wrong figures when I was given a task.” He wipes tears from his eyes, still laughing. “Oh, it was a crazy day.”

The elevator bell chimes, and I step out almost immediately.

Saved by the bell.

“Good luck, sir!” Duncan grins.

The elevator moves, and I turn. The operation area is spacious, with employees seated at their tables typing or carrying folders around. A woman with blonde hair approaches me. Her hair is shorter than Noelle's.

Ah, Noelle.

There's a tingling in my chest as the events of Friday night are played over in my head. Till now, she still hasn't called. She didn't pick up my calls either. Well, it was a great one-night stand. No hard feelings.

“Good morning, sir. You're Mr. Thatcher, right?”

I nod. “Where is the HR department? I'm supposed to meet Sara Carter.”

Sara Carter is the head of the Human Resources department, according to my information. If I want to know my employees, her office will be a good place to start.

“I'm Sara's assistant, Regina. Please follow me.”

I follow her to an office. Standing by a desk is a woman I'll have to admit is gorgeous. Tall and slender, with dark eyes and midnight black hair, she looks better than in the profiles I went through. Her red lips glimmer, and her cheekbones are high and sculpted. Her dress, although formal, clings tight to her hourglass figure. She's a perfect fit for a model, coupled with a noticeable sex appeal. Not that I care. The only thing about her I'm interested in is her skill.

“M-Mr. Thatcher. You've arrived.” She tugs at her hair.

“Mrs. Carter, am I right?”

She giggles. “It’s ‘Miss’, Mr. Thatcher. But you can call me Sara. Please, have a seat.”

Good start. Looks like this won’t be hard after all.

“It’s good to finally meet you, Mr. Thatcher. Can I call you Maverick?”

Is that ... color on her cheeks? Why is she blushing? This is a dilemma. I can’t have my employees getting all too familiar on my first day, but I don’t want to get off to a bad start as well. Maybe Sara is the friendly type. I suck in a sharp breath. A distance has to be maintained.

“I think for now, we should remain formal and we’ll go from there.”

“Alright, Mr. Thatcher. Nice suit.” She winks.

“Thanks. Now, it’s time to get down to business.”

“Right. Um, which department will you be moving to from here?”

I still have to cover the marketing department, the accounting department, and the strategy team, before making stops at the numerous mini-departments.

“We’ll be moving to the marketing department. Now, you’ve worked with most of the teams I’ll be meeting today beforehand, so I’ll need your experience. Also, I’ll need your expertise in human relations.”

She smiles. “Anything for you, Mr. Thatcher.”

Is she flirting with me? I'm not pleased with the way she is acting and I purse my lips, refusing to return her smile. I don't condone in work environment relationships, so I'm hoping this is just her being nervous for meeting me and not something I have to worry about.

I rise to my feet. "Let's go."

We walk out of her office and head for the elevator where some people are already waiting when we arrive. We all enter as the elevator doors slide open.

Inside, Sara stands before me. We are not exactly at full capacity and there is room inside, but Sara moves back and her ass presses against my crotch. Not wanting her to have the wrong idea or cause an incident, grimacing, I move back an inch. This dance of her stepping back against me and me pulling away lasts until I'm against the elevator walls. I'm not enjoying this and I'm almost sure she is doing this on purpose, since there is no one in front of her that could cause her to be pushed back against me. Just as she's about to press into me again, we reach the sixth floor. Heaving a sigh of relief, I get off.

What is Sara playing at?

"I'm sorry about the elevator, Mr. Thatcher. It was a bit tight in there and I needed space. That's why I kept shifting." She beams a smile at me. "Was the ride uncomfortable for you?"

Yes, because I don't appreciate having my personal space invaded like that. "That's okay. I understand."

We arrive at the marketing department.

The main area is busier than the human relations department. A man on a call nearly collides with me, and he waves a hand in apology. I look around. How am I supposed to find Chris like this?

Chris Burnham is the manager of the marketing department, responsible for our firm's marketing and promotion to the public. Of the managers for the departments I dealt with, he's the one I'm most familiar with. In the initial stages of the takeover, I had to rely on his knowledge.

Sara touches my shoulder. I turn, shrugging it off in the process. I'm starting to get really annoyed at her lack of awareness and respect for my personal space, whether she is doing it on purpose or not.

"Are you looking for Chris's office?"

I nod. "Do you know where it is?"

She beams a smile. "Sure, Mr. Thatcher. Follow me."

She leads me through a corridor to a reception area. There's no one behind the desk, so I walk to the door and knock. It's open, so I pull it back to let him know I am here.

Chris is on a call, pacing. Tall, and lean, Chris is a man with striking features: slicked-back auburn hair, and grayish eyes. He grins when he sees me, and waves to a seat.

"Yeah. Just get it done. I have to go now. I'll call you later."

He ends the call. He's almost on his feet, but I wave him back.

"Mr. Thatcher. You're here at last. It's so good to see you again, sir." He shakes my hand, before turning to Sara. "You're giving him the tour, right?"

"Not really," I say, even though the question isn't for me. "I just needed her expertise on some matters. There's still that meeting with the department heads, but I thought I'd meet you first."

He nods. "The meeting is at eleven. You still have an hour or so to get acquainted with your floor. I suggest you go take a breather."

He has a point. I've not seen my new office.

"Good idea. Both of you should prepare for the meeting. I'll go get settled."

I shake both of their hands, with Sara's lingering on mine longer than usual. I clear my throat and pry my fingers from her hands, before leaving the office and heading to the last floor. This is only my first hour here and I don't want to make any waves yet, but whatever Sara is thinking needs to stop soon or I'll be forced to do something about it.

Stepping off the elevator, I scan the spacious floor, with a reception area in one corner. A dark-haired man walks up to me, holding a notepad.

"Good morning, sir. Remember me?"

I grin as we shake hands. "Good to see you again, Derrick."

After Chris, Derrick Thomson was probably the most useful during my transition period. Athletic and towering at nearly six-foot-seven, he looks more like he should be playing some kind of sports than stuck in an office. One of my first acts as the new CEO was appointing him as my assistant and secretary.

“Duncan dropped your briefcase in the office earlier. I’ve already arranged the files containing all the information you need to know about the company. Welcome to HireCorp, sir.”

I thought I could use the down time to get ready for the meeting, but I’m more curious about the team than anything, so the office can wait. The other departments still need checking out.

“Thanks. I’ll be back to check out the documents. I want to visit the accounting department first.”

The tour of the accounting department is over in a little over fifteen minutes and I head for the elevator. As I step inside and the doors slide close, a figure walks by. It’s a blonde, with a figure just like Noelle’s. The door clasps shut before I can get a better view.

Now my imagination’s messing with me.

Chapter Five

Noelle

“**H**ave you seen the new boss? God, what a fine specimen!”

I wince inwardly as I grab myself a can of soda. Rhonda, my coworker who has a reputation as a voracious lover of handsome men, keeps praising the new boss. On a normal day, I'd try to indulge her in a conversation. Not today.

There's only one reason: I know the new boss. I had a one-night stand with him just a couple of days ago.

Grimacing, I gulp some soda. When I spotted Maverick earlier that day, my heart beat like crazy. I had to make a quick escape to the bathroom and hope he didn't spot me.

Rhonda's rambles are often so intense she's hard to ignore. Sighing, I turn to her.

“I've seen him. He has almost silvery hair, right?”

“Yup! That's the man. Maverick Thatcher. Alpha! I'd do anything to get under all that hotness.” She bites her lips.

I force a smile. ‘Getting under all that hotness’ is worth drooling over – I can tell from experience. Rhonda isn’t far off. Maverick *is* an alpha male.

“You know, he could be married with kids in college.”

Rhonda giggles. “Nope. Heard from Brittany that he’s a widower. Have no idea if it’s true. But whether he’s married or not, I still want a piece of all that gorgeousness.”

I gulp the last of my strawberry soda and toss the bottle into a trash can nearby. I leave Rhonda to her fantasies and head for my office. I check the corridors, wary of Maverick. Why did I have a one-night stand with my boss of all people? True, I didn’t know at the time, but I could have asked what he did for a living, or how he got his Tesla. But no. I was too turned on by his hotness.

In my small office, adjacent to Chris’s much larger office, an imaginary scene where I stumble into Maverick plays in my mind. I can’t hide from him forever.

Rhonda mentioned something about him being a widower, so he may let off steam through one-night stands. If that’s the case, isn’t there a possibility he might forget me?

Then again, even if we meet, I might not have to talk directly with him. Since he’s at the very top, his people will be the managers of departments. He has nothing to gain from talking to me.

I shake my head as if that’ll wipe my thoughts. I have to forget Maverick. I can’t jeopardize my job. It’s a shame

because the chemistry we shared was off the charts. But he's my boss, and I'm just an employee. If anything goes wrong, I'll be the one to lose her job.

Throughout the day, thoughts of Maverick dominate my mind. I breathe a sigh of relief when the day ends. Rounding up my work, I grab my bag. I'm almost at the elevator when I stop short. Maverick is coming along the corridor, talking with Chris. I bolt to a turn in the corridor, hoping I wasn't spotted.

They enter the elevator.

That was close.

I exhale in relief. I've survived today, at least. Through the window nearby, I get a glimpse of Maverick's Tesla as it pulls out of the parking lot.

I give myself a minute to breathe.

A hand rests on my shoulder. "You're still here, Noelle?"

I jump, pressing my hand to my chest. It's just Chris, my manager.

"Y-yes, sir. I still have a couple of things to do in the office. I should be done soon." I smile, stepping away from the window.

"Right. Follow me. I need to discuss something with you in my office."

Sighing, I follow him to his office. Ever since I started working here, Chris has been hitting on me. Can't he let it go? Some men just can't take no for an answer.

We enter his office, and he waves me to a chair. He sits in his chair and swivels for a moment.

“You’ve been one of the best workers in this department and I’m proud of you. Keep up the good work.”

I raise a brow. He’s not hitting on me? What next? Will I find a unicorn on my way home?

“Thank you, sir. I’ll keep trying my best.”

“That’s good to hear.” He leans forward. “But that’s not the reason I called you here.”

Here it comes.

“What’s the matter, sir?”

He sighs. “For the umpteenth time, you can call me Chris. I think we’ve known each other long enough for that.”

“But—” I hesitate, looking away.

“But what, Noelle?”

“I can’t call you by your name, sir. It’s a little bit ... weird.”

“That doesn’t matter. Now, as you know, we have a new CEO. There are going to be a lot of changes in this firm. A lot of work.” He removes his glasses and rubs the corner of his eyes. “I’ll need you at your best. Nothing less than a hundred percent. Can I get that?”

“Yes, Mr. Burnham.” It’s the best I can do.

My brows crease. The change in his behavior is more than welcome, but something must have happened to him that he isn’t his normal flirty self.

“Good.” He nods. “That reminds me. What about the proposal for the PR event I sent to you? How far have you gone?”

“The one I was supposed to review? I’m done, sir. I made some adjustments and created a spreadsheet with slides and all. I was going to send it to you tomorrow.”

He grins, his eyes glowing. “Good job, Noelle. That proposal might just be the thing to put this company on the map.”

I shift in my chair. This meeting is taking too long.

“Will that be all, sir? I should be heading home soon.” I rise and head for the door.

“Wait!” He walks up to me, ruffling his hair. “Um, have you had dinner?”

“No, Mr. Burnham.” I glance at my wristwatch, keeping my distance from him. “It’s just a few minutes after six.”

“If you’re not doing anything, I was thinking we could, you know, grab some dinner this evening. I found a restaurant that’ll blow your mind.”

Here it is. Took him long enough. I don’t know how many times I’ve rejected his advances, but he still keeps pushing and pushing. Why doesn’t he take the hint already? Groaning internally, I struggle to smile.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Burnham, but like I told you, I still have some things to do here. Maybe some other time?”

He reaches out to tug at a strand of my hair that escaped my ponytail. His finger brushes my temple and I step back.

“Another time, then. Off you go now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

You don’t need to tell me twice.

I dash out of his office, heaving a sigh of relief. I’ve survived another day.

* * *

I glance at the time. Eight-thirty. It’s been a long day at the office, and I thought it’d never end. Maverick’s appearance and Chris keeping me back late at the office didn’t help matters.

Stretching my legs on the table, I yawn. I tear open my bag of cookies, ready to delve in and watch a Netflix movie. A sound from the door catches my attention.

Who’s that at this time of the night? My breath hitches when it dawns on me that Maverick knows where I live. What if he’s come visiting again?

I swallow as I head for the door. A young woman of average height and with short, red hair stands in front of me. She raises her head and smiles. Abbie.

I hesitate, uncertain as we face each other. When Abbie left a month ago, it was under sad circumstances. After her breakup with her boyfriend of four years, she became aloof. Withdrawn. The woman standing before me looks like her old self.

“Noelle!” Laughing, she surges forward and grabs me in a bear hug. “Say something!”

I return the hug instantly, wrapping my arms around her. She’s much frailer than before. My heart sinks.

“Abbie! It’s so good to see you!”

We rock back and forth, neither of us attempting to break the embrace.

“How long are you staying?” I ask, dreading the worst.

She laughs. “Looks like I’m back for good! It’s just me and you now.”

“Great!” I squeeze her once more, before releasing her.

I help her with one of her two trunks, setting it in a corner of the living room. She walks around, scanning the area. I gaze at her figure, my brows furrowing. She’s gotten thinner.

She sinks into a couch and turns to me, tapping the space near her. “We have a shit ton of things to talk about.”

“Tell me about it. Hey, have you eaten dinner?”

She grabs my pack of cookies and munches on a few. She shakes her head, and I sigh.

“Did you eat lunch?”

She shakes her head again, only this time more slowly.

Taking a deep breath, I ask, “How about breakfast?”

She looks down. Sighing, I head for the kitchen. I grab a spaghetti pack and some refrigerated meatloaf, beginning my

preparations for dinner. Abbie walks into the kitchen a few minutes after.

“Don’t worry about me, Elle. I promise I’m eating. I was just very busy today so I couldn’t get proper food. At least I’ll get dinner, so yeah.” She flashes me a smile.

I glance at the microwave.

“The meatloaf should be done in fifteen minutes. Then, I’ll make the spaghetti. There’s still sauce, so I’ll just microwave that as well. In the meantime, I made some hot cocoa to go with the cookies.”

“Alright.”

She waits by the doorway as I prepare two cups of cocoa. We move to the living room and settle on the couch, placing our cups full of steaming cocoa on the round table. Outside, the horns of vehicles and the occasional shouting puncture the silence and stillness of the spring evening.

“Never thought I’d miss New York. The noise. The excitement.” She smiles. “Good to be back.”

“Good to have you back.” I sip some cocoa. “A lot happened when you were gone.”

“Tell me about it. Is there any...” She hesitates, clearing her throat. “... any lucky man now?”

“Not yet.” I laugh for a while, then pause. “Although ... I had a man over last week.”

Her eyes widen. “What? Who?”

“It’s a funny story. Remember *Fishin’4Love?*”

She raises a brow. “The dating app?”

“Yup.” I nod solemnly. “I finally met a match, and we set a date.”

Her eyes gleam. “That’s awesome! So, what happened?”

“I thought Trevor was awesome too at first, but I got a huge reality check when we went on our first and *last* date.” Cringing, I take another sip of hot cocoa. “Dude was a misogynist, a narcissist, and a slob.”

She giggles, almost choking on her cocoa. “He was so bad you had to get a dictionary just to describe how bad he was. So? If he was that bad, why invite him over?”

“Thing is, I didn’t. He wanted to follow me, and things got weird, but then another man – an older man – swooped in and... saved me.”

She leans closer, her eyes glinting. “Who was that?”

“I’ll get to that. We went to a bar and drank a little. He’s very handsome, so I did a bit of flirting. He drove me home, and I invited him in.” I giggle as Abbie’s jaw drops. “One thing led to another, and we had sex. This is where it gets crazy.”

“What happened? Did he leave without a word the next day?”

“Worse. I found out that he’s—” I groan. “— My new boss.”

Abbie gasps, before bursting into laughter. Of course, she'd laugh. Who wouldn't? I join in the laughter, but with more restraint.

“He's your new boss? How? You hadn't seen him before?” she asks, still laughing.

“No. That's the thing. He's the man that just took over our company. When I found out, I felt like shit. The worst thing is, I've seen him in the office now and I'm still trying to evade him.”

“You know you can't evade him for long. What are you going to do?”

“Honestly, that's a question I don't have an answer to.” I slump on the couch. “Looks like we're two unlucky women when it comes to men.”

Abbie sighs. “You're right about that.”

I pat her knee, “We'll be fine, Abbie. Now, let's go make some dinner!”

Later, as I settle in my bed, my conversation with Abbie runs like a loop in my mind. When I said we're both unlucky, I never imagined how true the statement is. For Abbie, it's a recurring nightmare. She's had her heart broken one too many times.

I sigh. I better go check on her. She looks so thin I fear she's not eating well again. Hopefully, the worst has passed for her.

I enter her room, opening the door with care. She's already in bed, her chest heaving. Something catches my attention.

There's leftover spaghetti and meatloaf on her plate. Judging from the amount of food, it looks like she ate very little. My heart drops to my stomach.

The nightmare has returned.

Chapter Six

Maverick

“Run it through me once more.”

I cross my fingers, waiting for the summary of the report. My assistant, Derrick, clears his throat.

“The project for the expansion of HireCorp will span five years. Extending our services to entrepreneurship consultation is the major agenda, but we need to create a new department for that. There are other plans to boost our finances, but they’ll be formulated step-by-step. We need to find a way to boost our image in the meantime.”

“I know.” I pinch the top of my nose. “I’ll think of something. Have Sara from PR see me.”

“Yes, Mr. Thatcher.” Derrick saunters out of my office.

I lean back. It’s not easy taking over a new company. This firm has potential, but it’ll be a task trying to unlock that full potential. I run over my plans once more. They’re ambitious, but it’ll take a lot of effort to bring them into reality.

I need to boost our public image. I rack my brain for new ideas but none pop up. There's no choice. I'll have to take the longer route of advertisements, mostly online.

A knock on my door. "You called for me, Mr. Thatcher."

"Yes, Miss Carter. I need to discuss something with you."

She comes in, holding some files to her chest. Getting to my desk, she drops the files and leans forward. Her blouse is unbuttoned right until midway, exposing her ample cleavage. I grimace.

"Please take a seat. And do something about..." —I nod in the direction of the exposed part— "that."

"What's that?" She looks down, then giggles. "Oh, silly me. I'm used to bringing it down. These dress suits can be restrictive, right?"

I look away as she buttons up. She still leaves three buttons open, and there's still some cleavage visible. I shake my head. It's not important.

"You're the head of HR. I need your advice."

"On what, sir?" She leans over my table again.

Rising to my feet, I pace. What do I want for this company? It's not hard to answer. Redefining the values of this company and entering new fields that'll yield better results. Those values are what took my media agency to a new level, and instilling them in this new merged institution is a priority.

I freeze, clenching my fists. Those values were passed to me by Vanessa, my late wife, years ago. They built up my character as a young entrepreneur, and now they're pillars. She was that kind of woman.

"Are you okay, sir? You look pale." Sara rises.

Waving her down, I resume my pacing. "When I took over this firm, I had one thing in mind and that's rebranding and expansion. We're moving into new fields, and we need to be at our best. Any ideas on how to improve productivity?"

"That's simple. Just be a good boss. Also, you can introduce some juicy benefits for good conduct. If the others see you're rewarding good work, they'll want to prove their worth to you as well."

I nod. Looks like Sara might have something up there after all, but it is still too early to tell. It'd be easier if she wasn't so flirtatious.

"Alright. Those are good suggestions. Thank you." *If only they weren't so basic and shallow.*

"You know," she says, blushing. "You'd make a great actor, Mr. Thatcher."

I turn to her, raising an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

She smirks. "You have the looks. And the charisma. I'm sure you won't have a problem with the female employees trying to impress you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“It’s just a compliment, sir,” she says in a throaty voice.

I grit my teeth. “Thanks. You can leave.”

“Can I ask a question, Mr. Thatcher? It’s a teensy bit personal.”

I can’t get off to a bad start with my human relations manager. I’ll indulge her, for the moment.

“Depends on how personal, but I’m listening.” I settle in my chair.

“You aren’t...” She lowers her voice. “Married, are you, Mr. Thatcher?”

“No.” My eyebrows crease. “How did you notice?”

“There’s no ring on your finger. I’m very observant. It’s a skill I need to relate with people.”

I’ll give her that. “I...” I try to swallow the lump in my throat. “My wife passed away.”

“Oh no!” She presses her fingers to her lips. “I’m so sorry. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. But thank you.”

“Don’t you get...” She places a hand over mine. “... I don’t know, lonely?”

I withdraw my hand from hers, frowning. What is she playing at?

“That is not something that concerns you. You can leave now, Miss Carter. I have a lot of work to do.”

“We’ll talk later, Mr. Thatcher. I want you to see me as a friend. If you can.”

Turning on her heels, she strides out of my office.

I heave a long sigh. I have enough issues trying to get things in order, and I don’t need an employee – and an important one at that – acting inappropriately around me.

Another knock on my door. I clench my fists, stopping short of bellowing an order.

“Come in.”

If it’s Sara again...

It’s Derrick, my assistant. He runs his hand over his smooth, black hair before entering.

“Chris Burnham from the marketing department requests a meeting with you, sir. Says it’s important. Something about boosting the company’s image, just like you planned.”

I rise to my feet. This is huge. If Chris’s plan is a viable one, I just might make this work.

“Tell him to meet me in the closed conference room in five minutes.”

“Alright, sir.” He exits the office.

I straighten my crimson tie, check if the cuffs in my suit aren’t out of place and comb my hair with my fingers, before grabbing my phone and notepad. Impatient to hear Chris’s idea, I hurry to the conference room.

In the empty conference room, I sit by a small oak meeting table instead of the larger and longer mahogany roundtable. I'm going over my notes on HireCorp's web presence and existing social media outreach when the automatic doors slide open. Chris breezes in, glancing around. His eyes meet mine and he walks over.

"Looking sharp, Chris." I extend a hand, smiling.

"Thanks, Mr. Thatcher." He shakes it, his eyes twinkling.

"Derrick told me you wanted to meet me. He said it was urgent. What's the matter?"

A wide smile plasters on his face. "I have a proposal, sir. A marketing strategy that'll blow your mind."

I could use some ideas.

"So? What's the idea?"

He takes a deep breath. "A PR event, Mr. Thatcher."

"A PR event? Like a party?"

"Exactly. Hear me out, sir. Imagine if we had an event that has widespread coverage. So much it becomes a trend online. The event will be a coronation for you. We'll introduce you as the CEO of the new rebranded company. It'll be the PR event of the century! One that'll resonate around the whole of Manhattan. Think of it, sir. The paparazzi. The headlines. The red carpet. The music. The thrill. The glamor. All of this coming together, Mr. Thatcher. Won't it be wonderful?"

He does have a point. Organizing an event so big the whole city notices is a sure way to spread our name and recreate our image. Rebrand it. It'll be a good introduction.

“That’s a brilliant idea, Chris!” I beam at him. “Well done.”

He grins. “That’s not all, sir. I intend for the event to double as a networking summit. We’ll attract different high-end companies in different industries like tech, banking, and manufacturing amongst others. We’re even considering approaching companies in the renewable energy sector.”

Looks like he’s had it all planned out. Nodding, I lean forward.

“You have my approval and support, Chris. We need to begin planning immediately. How many weeks would the preparation last?”

Chris opens his tab and swipes the screen. He looks up after a moment, rubbing the back of his neck.

“It’s going to be a huge event, so I suppose fifteen weeks. If we’re efficient enough, we can bring it down to ten. How does that sound, Mr. Thatcher?”

I lean back and close my eyes, weighing my options. Chris’s idea is the sort of thing I’ve been looking for. Of course, it’s a major event as he said, so it’ll need a lot of delicate planning. I open my eyes.

“We can work with that. Do you have a venue in mind?”

He fixes his gaze on his tablet. “I have a couple in mind, but I should get one before next week so the planning can

commence in earnest.”

“Looks like we’ll be going on overdrive, right? There’s a lot of work to be done if we want to see this through.”

His gaze meets mine, and he smiles. “I thought of that sir, so I’ll be assigning someone from the marketing department to you specifically for this project. If you don’t mind. I know Derrick is your assistant, but you’ll need someone to assist on the marketing front.”

“Sounds good. Do you have anyone in mind?”

“Yes, Mr. Thatcher. She’s one of our best minds. I’ll call her in now.”

Chris holds his phone to his ear and waits a moment. “I need you now, Noelle. Please come down to the closed conference room.”

Noelle?

He drops his phone and grins. “She’ll be here, shortly, Mr. Thatcher.”

It’s probably a coincidence, right? I mean, there could be hundreds of Noelles in New York.

“This ... *Noelle*, you sure she’s up to the task?”

He beams. “She’s more than up to the task, Mr. Thatcher. She’s one of the best in our department, with a good track record to show it. She’s just wonderful.”

He’s smiling weirdly. I raise a brow. Before I can ask another question, the doors open to let inside my one-night

stand from Friday.

She stands at the entrance, with a smile plastered on her face. The air leaves my lungs in a rush. Her dressing is simple – a blue shirt, black hip-hugging skirt, and blue heels. Her blonde hair is packed in a simple ponytail. She’s just as beautiful as she was that night.

This is actually happening.

“Ah, you’re here. Noelle, meet Maverick Thatcher, our new CEO.” He turns to me. “Mr. Thatcher, meet Noelle Quinn, one of our best minds in the marketing department.”

How do I handle this? Do I pretend we’ve never met before, even after the wonderful night we had? My fingers grip the arms of my chair.

Chris glances sideways at me, then at her. He turns to me, raising his eyebrow.

“Is... there anything wrong, sir? Have you met?”

Yes. I saved her from a weirdo last week then we had the hottest sex ever.

“Nothing’s wrong. Sorry, I was thinking about the event so I kind of spaced out.”

Smiling, I stride over to her. She’s so flushed her face is bright red. I extend a hand, but she hesitates for a while before taking it. I give it a gentle squeeze, and she flinches.

“It’s a pleasure meeting you, Miss Quinn. It *is* Miss, right? I don’t want to make assumptions on my first day.”

She stares at me for moments, not saying a word. Finally, she nods.

“S-Same here, Mr. T-Thatcher.” She looks away. “And it is ‘Miss’.”

“Mr. Thatcher,” Chris says behind me. “Noelle will be your assistant for the PR event.”

My gaze doesn’t leave her. “I... I see. Okay, then. I look forward to working with you.” I turn to Chris. “We should get talking, shouldn’t we?”

We move to the small conference table. I pull a chair for Noelle but she looks away. Her face is still red. I lean in closer and say, as quiet as I can, “Sit, Noelle.”

She complies in an instant.

“We have a lot to discuss.” Chris pulls out the chair next to hers and my brows crease for a moment.

“Indeed we do.” I settle in my chair, facing them both. “Let’s get started.”

As Chris scrolls through the detailed plans on his tablet, my eyes dart to Noelle. Chris’s suggestion and my approval means I’ll be working with her for the next four months.

Only a week ago, she was writhing and wiggling under me. Now, she’s under me again — except under very different circumstances. My chest knots.

How am I supposed to handle a work relationship with an employee I just had a one-night stand with?

Chapter Seven

Noelle

It's already happening. I'm face-to-face with my new boss, Maverick. It's what I've been trying to avoid for the past four days. So much for that.

I struggle to swallow the lump in my throat. It's a hard task trying not to fidget for the next two hours as Chris spreads out his plans for the event. At times, Chris asks me some questions, and I answer to the best of my ability. Most of the time, my insides are heating up because of the intense gaze from Maverick.

Chris can be overbearing, but he's good at winning his bosses over. Except for the occasional glance he sends my way, Maverick pays attention to Chris's layout of how the PR event will go, the awareness it should spread, and the value it'll create for the company.

As we stand in front of Maverick, Chris doesn't seem like the same man that's constantly pestering me with his date requests. Countless times, I've rebuffed his proposals one way

or the other. I can't help but flinch at the thought that this project will tie me to him for the next couple of weeks. I'm sure this is why he chose me for this project. It forces us to work close together. How am I supposed to deal with him?

But the main source of concern – and attraction – for me is Maverick. Seated with fingers crossed, he looks exceptionally dashing in his gray suit, white turtleneck, and gray slacks. The magnetism he exudes draws me in with every passing second.

He glances at me again, leaving a pit in my stomach. How can he be so calm? Last Friday, we had the time of our lives. It's been less than a week, and he's acting as if nothing happened.

It's for the best, Noelle. You shouldn't get attached.

“Well done, Chris,” Maverick says after Chris rounds up his speech. “I look forward to going over the plans in private. I'll get back to you if there's anything I feel we can change or improve upon. Also, I'll set up a committee to handle the event. I'll be the head of the committee, and you'll be my mouthpiece. Noelle here will be my assistant. What do you think about the project, Noelle?”

Startled for a second, I blink. “Excuse me?”

I flinch at the intensity of his gaze. He keeps his eyes on me, with his long fingers drumming on the table. He strokes his hair, arresting my attention. I swallow.

What those fingers can do...

“What do you think about the project?” he asks again.
“Which of Chris’s suggestions do you prefer?”

“I think they’re all great.”

His face is impassive. “You’re free to share your opinion. No one will think differently of you. In fact, we could use your input a lot these coming weeks.”

Chris’s eyes move from me to Maverick. His brows crease.

My hands grip my chair’s armrests. “Thank you, but I do think all his ideas are great. However, I can add to the idea pile if you want.”

“Please do.” He has an annoying smirk on his face, eyes lit with curiosity.

“Maybe we can incorporate more incentives to call more attendees. For example, if, as the CEO, you were advertised as a keynote speaker, it’d create a noticeable buzz. It could be a way to show everyone where you plan to take the company and address major questions people have regarding the company’s direction and goals. It would serve the dual purpose of calming down your employees and attracting potential investors.”

“That’s actually a great idea,” he says enthusiastically.

I’m stunned. And the smile on his face is doing things to me. Damn him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can tell that Chris is frowning at us, as if watching a tennis match, his eyes go from one to the other and his gears are turning. I can’t face him, because if

I do, I know I'll give myself away, so I keep my eyes on Maverick.

“The fact that it would appeal to everyone makes it brilliant. Investors, employees, and even the general public must be interested to know what our goals are, our five year plan, shall we say? And the fact that I can address it at this event will call people to it. I like that.”

Suddenly, it's as if he suddenly remembers Chris is there with us. He clears his throat and adds, “We'll review that idea and see if we can put it to practice.” Maverick stands and pulls the edges of his suit. “There we go, Chris. We'll start plans in earnest. The committee will have its first meeting next week. We'll revisit the plans and make any revisions or corrections we can.”

I sit for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts. What's Maverick playing at? My breath rasps as I try to fill my lungs with air. I glance at Chris, who's still staring like he's trying to solve a difficult puzzle.

Rising to my feet, I shake Maverick's hand once more. He squeezes mine. Then, he shakes Chris's hand.

“See you soon, sir. Thanks for your time.” Chris turns to me. “Let's go, Noelle. We have a lot of work to do.”

He leads the way to the door. I follow, aware of Maverick following us. He stays behind me as we walk to the elevator. He makes some small talk with Chris about the company's previous marketing strategies, but I can't pay much – or any –

attention when he's so close that my body is responding to his heat.

When the elevator doors open, I breathe a sigh of relief and as I step forward with Chris, Maverick pulls me back with a hand around my elbow, and his touch jolts my nerves. I wobble on my heels, tumbling backward. He catches me by the waist, turning me and pressing my chest to his. All the air in my lungs dissipates, and every bit of control I have over my senses vanishes.

Even though there are layers of clothing between us, my breasts are pressed to his hard chest and my palms rest on his biceps which are like stone slabs. My nipples harden, stimulated by the feel of his body against mine. Just like that night. Vivid images play in my head, increasing the heat in me. He sucks in a sharp breath and lets me go. I try to pretend I'm not affected, that all is well, but even if no one else knows it, the two of us know that's not true.

"A moment, Noelle," Maverick says, his voice like silk over my skin.

Chris raises an eyebrow. "Is there a problem, Mr. Thatcher?"

"She'll be right down. I need to discuss some things with her, as she's now my marketing assistant. Also, I need to know a few things," he says as the elevator doors close on Chris's astonished face.

Maverick says nothing until the elevator is on its way down; then he pushes a button. He keeps his face straight, looking

forward. My pulse is still racing from my earlier stumble.

After a while, he turns to me. His gaze is searing.

“We need to talk.”

Unable to speak, I avert my gaze from his. The elevator returns, and he enters. He presses the button for the top floor, and the elevator begins its ascent.

I clear my throat. “Can ... can I know where we’re going?”

The skin over his cheekbones tightens. He keeps his eyes on the elevator walls.

“My office.”

This elevator ride is a far cry from that of last Friday. Soon, the door opens and we step out. At least, the walk to his office is short. Derrick, Maverick’s assistant, stands as he approaches.

“I’m not to be disturbed, Derrick. Hold my calls and tell anyone who asks I’m in an important meeting,” Maverick says to his assistant as he steers me into his office through the open glass double doors.

Despite my stomach-churning reservations, I marvel at Maverick’s spacious office. It’s one part of the building I’ve never been to. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlook the city of Manhattan, providing a stunning view. The opaque walls provide a breathtaking backdrop for the office. There’s a distinct sitting area that’s bigger than my office.

Maverick presses a button and almost immediately there's a reflective hue over the glass walls, shielding his office from sight and allowing for privacy.

Maverick shrugs out of his coat and hangs it on a wooden coatrack nearby. He moves closer to where I remain standing just beside the doors.

"Can I get you something to drink, Noelle?" His voice is gentle.

"No, thank you."

Damn it. He looks more irresistible in just his long-sleeved turtleneck. I remember just how broad those shoulders are without any clothes. How strong his hands are, and how warm my body gets as they roam. How captivating his biceps and muscles flex as he moves in me, over and over.

He gestures toward a leather sofa. "Have a seat."

"I have to go back to work."

He fixes me a stare. "And I have a shit ton of work to do. But we need to iron this out so things don't get weird. The sooner we can, the sooner we can both get back to business. Now, sit down."

"What do you think we're working out ... sir?"

Sighing, he closes the distance between us.

"This weird friction. The crazy sex we had last Friday. The fact that I didn't know you'll be working under me, and you didn't know I'm your boss. All these sound familiar?"

His breath on my face makes me shiver. Giving in, I take a seat. He sits next to me.

“I’m sorry about last week, sir. I had no idea.”

“Why apologize? It was one of the best nights of my life.”

Flushed, I tug at the hem of my skirt. I shift an inch from him.

He narrows his gaze. “You still feel it, don’t you?”

I tilt my head to meet his blue, straight eyes, which look like they’re staring deep into me.

“F-Feel what, sir?”

He strokes his hair. “For God’s sake, Noelle. What happened to you calling me by my name?”

“A lot of things have changed since then, sir.”

He stares at me with narrowed eyes. “Let’s be honest with each other. We had the night of our lives together, and there was some crazy chemistry. There still is. Denying it won’t help.”

I grit my teeth. It’s frustrating because he’s right. But what am I supposed to do? Have a fling with my boss and put my job in jeopardy?

“I’m sorry, sir. There’s no attraction on my end.”

Maverick touches my hand and I shiver. His brows shoot up as I withdraw further.

“See? Well, then.”

“Are we done?” I stand, unable to meet his gaze.

He rises as well. “Hardly.”

I stride to the door and yank on the handle.

He groans. “Wait. I did mean it when I said I had something important to talk to you about.”

His footsteps come up behind me. His hand presses against the door, and his other hand touches my shoulder. I shudder as his touch makes my skin tingle.

“Turn around, Noelle.”

My eyes close against the surge of arousal his touch brings. His body presses against mine, spurring my wild desire for him. This sensation overwhelming my senses is further intensified by my lingering frustration and recent aggravation with Chris.

I still want Maverick. So bad it almost amazes me. But he’s no good for me. He’s my boss, for crying out loud. My life can be pretty messed up by adding him into the equation.

I turn. “W-What, sir?”

“Tell Chris to make enough copies of his plans for the committee. I need to get everyone on board as soon as possible.” He takes a deep breath and adds, “Next time, Noelle.”

He lets go of me and strides back to his desk without looking back.

Stepping out of his office, I head for the elevator. A ding signals its arrival, and I step in once the doors open. Thankfully, I'm the only occupant.

I take several breaths to calm my hammering heart. I've never been so embarrassed at work before. Never been so aroused. I lean on the brass walls, trying to bring myself back to reality.

The doors open, and the sight of Chris pacing in the waiting area on our department's floor greets me.

"Bloody hell, Noelle," Chris says, coming to an abrupt halt. "What the hell was that? Why did he want to see you? What did he want?"

For a moment, I forgot about Chris.

"Nothing much, but a briefing of my roles as his assistant." I exhale in a rush. "He likes your plans, and he asked us to make some copies for the department heads and committee members so they can review them. He didn't want to hold you back any further."

A grin chases away his frown. "Oh. Well, that's nice. You can handle the extra copies, right?"

I nod, and he saunters to his office.

The rest of the day passes uneventfully. One question appears in my mind as I close for the day.

How do I handle Chris and Maverick at the same time? And what the hell did he mean by "next time"?

Chapter Eight

Maverick

*G*oddamn it.

A walking temptation is right within reach, and I can't touch her.

Drumming my fingers on my table, my mind drifts off.

There's no denying the fact that the heat still exists, with her body still reacting so beautifully to my slightest touch. Eyelids shut, I take in Noelle's flowery scent, still wafting in the air. Her presence a while ago, and her reactions to my touch make desire pool in my center that is noticeable in the tightening of my pants, and even now, her scent is tempting enough to make me do things I'll rather not do in my office.

A scene plays in my mind: Noelle bent over my desk, her skirt hitched up to her hips. My lips buried in her neck and my hands cupping her breasts through the lace of her bra.

My erection presses painfully against my pants. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my hammering heart. This isn't

helping. I plop on my chair, thoughts of Noelle lingering in my head.

A knock on the door distracts me for a moment. Derrick breezes in, holding his notepad. There's a middle-aged woman with him. Monica Hamilton, head of the accounting department. Just the person I wanted to see.

"You asked for Mrs. Hamilton, sir."

"Thank you, Derrick." I turn to Monica. "Please take a seat, Mrs. Hamilton."

She settles down in one of the two leather chairs in front of my desk.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Thatcher?"

I nod. "I need to create an agenda for the weeks ahead. Chris approached me with a proposal for a PR event, and I think it's a good idea. I'll follow through, but I need to know the costs, and how much time and money I need."

"A PR event, sir?" Monica asks, raising an eyebrow. "What's the planned scale of the event?"

"It'll be a big one. Big enough to put the company on the map." I hand her a folder. "Those are the details of the project."

I gaze at her as she goes through the document. Her eyes widen.

"Wow. This is detailed. How are you going to handle this?" She looks at me.

“I’m creating a committee that’ll oversee the PR project.” I tap a finger on my table. “I want to address the company only when I’m sure we’re executing the plan, and the public when we’re getting somewhere in the execution.”

“I understand, sir.” She glances at the proposal once more. “So, where do I come in?”

I lean back. “I’ll need an estimation of the total budget. An event like this is going to cost a lot, and I want to make sure we don’t spend more than what we have. When will that be ready?”

Running her fingers along the smooth texture of the paper, she gazes up as if something caught her attention. After a while, her clear blue eyes meet mine.

“Two days, Mr. Thatcher. We’ll run a full estimate and deliver it to you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hamilton. That’s all for now.” As she rises, something else comes to mind. “One more thing. If you want to submit your findings, please meet Noelle Quinn in the marketing department. Chris made her my assistant for the planning.”

She smiles, nods, and leaves. I bury my head in my palms. There’s so much work to be done. The idea I needed fell to me on a platter of gold, but there is a hiccup. Noelle is now my assistant.

I stand and pace, overwhelmed by my recurring thoughts. What the hell is the ‘*sir*’ card? The sound of my name on her

lips last Friday was intoxicating. Now she's suddenly become the respecting-my-boss Noelle. Such a huge difference. And equally tantalizing. But it's my name I yearn to hear her say.

Why am I so concerned about this? All we shared was one hot night of passion and maybe a morning of another. My best sex, but it's nothing more than that. I hardly know her. But, as much as I try to convince myself of this, my gut still tightens from her aloofness.

I punch the speed dial button for my secretary's number, and in less than three seconds, he picks up.

"Hand me Miss Quinn's file." I swallow to try to ease my dry throat.

Silence hangs in the air.

Hesitating, I add, "Miss Quinn as in Noelle Quinn from the PR department."

"In a minute, sir." The line cuts.

I don't have to explain the reason for my actions to my employees. He doesn't need to know why I need the file. Why I want it.

About thirty minutes after, my door clicks open, and Derrick walks in, file in hand. Finally.

"Here, sir. The file you requested." He hands it to me.

"Thanks. That will be all. You may leave." He heads toward the door but stops mid-way before turning.

“I’m sorry if I come off as nosy but, may I ask why you need the file, sir? Miss Quinn is from a separate department and I’m not sure Mr. Burnham knows about this. He was surprised that you needed the file.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Why do you ask?”

“I couldn’t get access to it without asking him.”

What’s Chris up to? One moment he’s willing to make Noelle my assistant for the planning, and the next he’s surprised I needed her file?

Then it hits me. My earlier dismissal of him might have aroused suspicion. Only a blind man would miss the fact that Chris dotes over Noelle. It can only mean one thing: he has feelings for her.

“I guess Chris might just have thought that you didn’t need to know that Miss Quinn and I will be working together in the next few weeks.”

Or he’s skeptical about me getting access to her information because he thinks I’m out to get her.

He nods, and a small ‘o’ forms on his lips.

“I’m so sorry to pry.”

“You’re my secretary after all.” I shrug, a half-smile on my lips. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a lot on my plate.”

“Right away, sir.” With that, he leaves my office.

The ‘having a lot on my plate’ isn’t technically a lie. I do have a lot on my plate, but I’ll start with this. I scan the file

and narrow my gaze as my eyes fall on what I'm looking for. Twenty-three. That's exactly twenty-two years difference. That's yet another factor worth considering.

If we're going to be working together, I'll have to be able to put this attraction aside. I'm her boss, and the age difference is something.

But I can't help the way I feel.

Maybe getting her under my sheets just one last time would make me stop wanting her so badly.

Although, Noelle seems just fine with the way things are between us. She's not making a big deal out of it, and if she doesn't want to talk about the passionate night from last week, I'll have to back off.

The hole in my chest is almost all consuming.

Noelle was able to fill it for that night, but the hollow feeling Vanessa left in me when she died made my mind blank for days. It took a long time to crawl out of that hollowness.

I can't afford to go back to that. My life was just perfect as it was before Noelle walked into it. Forming an entanglement with another woman isn't something worth considering, not even if it's someone like Noelle. Tossing her file to the side, I flex my fingers.

There's a whole lot of work to do here. Might as well start now.

* * *

News sure travels fast. The PR big party has everyone in the company talking. It's going to be my first major event in *MediaHire* —the renaming has been formalized— and it's even more reason to do everything I can to make the party a memorable and exciting one. That's my number one priority. Putting the company on the map.

I walk into the general office just in time to catch the staff chattering about it, before my presence silences the room. I can't help my lips from curving slightly at that.

“Mr. Thatcher!” A sultry voice calls out from behind me, just before I press the elevator button.

Turning, I manage a smile. Sara catches up with me, her face beaming.

“Sara! You seem so...excited.”

“I'm glad you noticed.” A blush creeps on her face. “The PR party event has everyone's toes curling, and I'm not an exception. Might I add that other than that, I'm a sucker for parties? It's always a good way to unwind after months of heavy workload.”

She twirls her hair and leans forward a little, showing her exposed cleavage. My gaze remains fixed on her face.

“Good for you. I'll leave you to your work now. If you'll excuse me—”

She takes one step closer, blocking me.

“Mr. Thatcher,” she says in a drawling voice, “I think the party is a great opportunity for us to get to know each other...”

you know. I can tell you all about my experience.” She winks, biting her lower lip.

I grimace, quirking my brows. Keeping my temper, I remain professional.

“Miss Carter—”

“I’ll like to have you as my date for the party,” she blurts out, and I pause, jerking back.

Have me? Not a chance. The thought alone is enough to make me cringe.

I suck in a sharp breath. “I already have a date for the party, Miss Carter.”

I don’t miss the souring expression on Sara’s face as her brows squish together.

“You already have a date?” Sara tugs at her hair.

“I do. Noelle Quinn is my date.”

Her throat bobs, and she blinks rapidly. Her head flinches back slightly and she takes a step back. Without another word, Sara scuttles away from me and I grin.

That’s more like it.

The elevator door dings and I step in, happy at having dealt with that situation in a satisfying manner. Then it dawns on me. What the hell? Noelle? My date? What happened to keeping a distance? I rub my forehead and sigh.

Will Noelle even agree to be my date if I ask her? Three weeks ago, I rescued her from a bad date. Returning a favor

won't be so much of a big deal, will it?

Chapter Nine

Noelle

Coffee. I need some coffee.

All morning, I've been on my laptop. The preparations for the PR event are climbing to a peak, and a party frenzy has taken over the office. It's all that's on everyone's lips.

All these weeks, I've managed to keep my relationship with Maverick professional. He's my boss and I'm his temporary assistant. It can't get any better than that. Right?

I groan. Who am I kidding? My skin still heats up and tingles anytime I'm around him. But he doesn't show any signs of reacting, and I'll be damned if I do anything. Things are perfect this way.

I blink and stretch, before shutting my laptop and heading for the employee's lounge. I step out of my office, stopping for a moment to take in all the buzz.

"Busy, aren't we?"

That familiar voice makes my skin crawl. I turn to face the speaker.

You just can't catch a break, can you, Chris?

“There’s a lot of work to do, Mr. Burnham.”

His lips curve as he gazes at me with avid, dark-brown eyes.

“Now, now. You shouldn’t overwork yourself. Take some time off once in a while. You know you need it.”

I clench my jaw as my lips purse. “I don’t think I have that much free time.”

He shrugs. “You do. But I guess it’s your hard work and industry that makes you one of the best employees. Speaking of hard work, how is the planning coming along?”

“Just well. We’re making progress.”

He grins. “Having the party is a really good idea, isn’t it? That reminds me. Do you have a date for the event?”

I roll my eyes inwardly. Not like I can let him see it, but I wish I could. There the bullshit goes. For a moment I wondered when he’d spout it.

“Can I get back to you, sir? I need to attend to an urgent matter.”

“Go ahead. Sorry for holding you up. Remember, you can always come to me if you need some free time.”

No, thanks.

“Thank you, Mr. Burnham.”

He saunters back to his office and I wrinkle my nose. Our little tête-à-tête did nothing but leave an unpleasant taste in my mouth. Some coffee should help.

I stride to the lounge, where I fetch myself a cup and prepare some coffee in the mixer. A few employees are seated, either drinking some coffee and stretching their legs or having a conversation. Most likely about the party.

I pour the steaming coffee into my cup. I've only taken a sip when Sara comes marching toward me. She's part of the committee – does she need a file or something?

“There you are. I've been looking around for you.”

“Why? Do you need something, Miss Carter?”

“Yes.” She rests her hands on her hips. “I need to know something.”

I rest my coffee on the table. “What's that?”

She clears her throat. “I found out about you and Mr. Thatcher earlier today. Is it true?”

Stumbling back, I place a hand on my chest. My heart races like it's going to explode.

What? What is she talking about? Does she know about our one-night stand?

Gulping, I take a deep breath. “T-True about what, Miss Carter?”

She snorts. “Don't act ignorant with me! Did he ask you to be his date for the party? If yes, why the fuck would he do

that?”

Giddy, I lean on the counter. It’s only moments later that her words register in my head. My eyebrows shoot up. What? Maverick’s date? The conversations around us cease until there’s total silence in the lounge. My gaze meets Sara’s. She doesn’t flinch.

Is she telling the truth? Did Maverick tell her I was his date? I take an involuntary step back, with my pulse already racing again.

“I-I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, don’t bullshit me! Did you think no one would find out? You could just have the boss to yourself and that’s it?”

I’m about to deny it when I catch Chris from the corner of my eye. When did he get here? Wait. I still haven’t answered his question about having a date. I know he’ll ask me if he knows I don’t have one, and saying no to him doesn’t stop him from pushing the subject until I’m blue in the head. And he has all the time in the world for trying to change my mind. We work together, after all.

I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s an opportunity I didn’t even think I needed. I’d be a fool to let it slide.

“Well, Mr. Thatcher did ask me. Since I’m his assistant for this project and he wants to be in on every detail, he thought it better that we go together. Since his reasoning made sense and he is my boss, I saw no reason to say no.”

“What? That’s a load of crap!” Her nostrils flare.

I take a deep breath, before smiling as wide as I can.

“If you need more information, you can always ask him, Miss Carter. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have some work to do.”

I pick up my cup of coffee and head for my office. Chris is standing by the door, mouth agape. He doesn’t say a word as I pass by him. I nearly burst into laughter when I enter my office. That’ll teach those two some manners.

My mirth dies quickly. Why would Maverick say I’m his date?

Memories of that night return. Maverick promised to save me from bad dates. I don’t know how he did it, but he just fulfilled the promise, saving me again. Now I won’t have to endure having Chris as my date.

I suck in a long breath to calm myself.

My phone beeps, distracting me from my predicament for a second. It’s a message from my mom.

Call me.

I dial her number, and she answers almost immediately.

“Mom! What’s wrong?” I drum my fingers on my table.

“Nothing, love. I just wanted to hear my daughter’s voice, and I didn’t want to call you while you’re working.”

“Then next time, please be clearer in your texts. I thought something bad had happened.”

“I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay. It’s good hearing your voice too, Mom. I’m sorry I haven’t called in more than a week. I’ve been busy planning an event my company is planning to hold. How’re you doing?”

“Oh, I’m just fine. I miss you, Noelle.”

“I know. I miss you too, Mom.” I pick at my fingernails. “And how’s Dad?”

She scoffs. That’s not a good sign.

“Mom? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. He’s ...” She pauses. “He’s alright, I guess.”

I roll my eyes. “Alright, Mom, tell me what’s going on.”

She sighs heavily. “These days, I’ve not been very fond of your dad. It’s always one thing or the other. He’s pushing it, this time.”

Dad has always been pushing it. So has Mom. That’s not new.

“How?” I ask.

“It’s like our love has disappeared. There’s no sign that he cares anymore. We’ve been having more fights. Also,” —she lowers her voice— “I think he’s seeing another woman. I have this gut feeling he is.”

A feeling? Well, that’s not new. Once, she had a feeling he had another family because she thought it was suspicious he was always going to conferences. Heck, she barged into one to accuse him!

“Don’t worry, Mom. He’ll come around.” I giggle. “You can try your special pie, you know? It always works wonders.”

She harrumphs. “I’ll give it to him only when he deserves it.”

I chuckle. “Gosh, you haven’t changed. Alright, gotta go now. Still have a shit ton of work left. Love you, Mom. Say hello to Dad for me. And no more fighting.”

“Whatever. Love you, darling. Take care.” She ends the call.

Over the years, Mom and Dad have had a complicated relationship. But they stayed together all that time. No matter how much my mom complained, she could never leave him. And neither could he. I don’t think they’ll be starting now.

I turn on my laptop. Time for some work. Thoughts can come later. Thoughts of my mom and dad. Thoughts of my triumph over Chris.

Thoughts of Maverick.

* * *

“Gosh, today was so much fun, Abbie!”

Abbie sits near me, leaning closer. She’s gotten paler and skinnier. Is she still starving herself?

“So, you’re telling me your boss can see into the future?”

I munch some chips. “There’s no other way something else would have happened. You know Chris, right? The one I complain about a lot? Well, he was about to ask me to the

party. I had to find an excuse. I didn't know what to do. Then what happens? A solution appears from *nowhere!*"

"Really? What happened?"

"Sara happened. She's this woman in my office crushing on our boss. So, she marched up to me, trying to cuss me out because Maverick told her I'm his date!"

Her mouth falls open. "Your one-night-stand boss? Why?"

One-night-stand boss? I roar with laughter.

"No idea. Anyways, you needed to see her face. She turned red. Then, I saw Chris in the doorway, and I decided to milk the opportunity." I smirk.

Abbie laughs. "Really? What did you do next?"

"I admitted I was going out with our boss. Yes, he's my date. What are any of you going to do about it?"

"Did you say all that?" She gasps.

"No, no. I just told her it was true, and I walked away. They couldn't say a word."

"Why, though? Why would your boss tell Sara that? Does he want to go with you so bad he figured the best way was to tell others?"

"To be honest, I don't know. But who cares? I got to see a bewildered Chris. He surely deserved it."

Abbie laughs so hard she coughs. The coughing gets serious, and I rush to her. I help her lie on the couch. I flinch when I touch her neck. She's burning up.

“You have a fever, Abbie. And you’ve shrunk. Aren’t you eating? You need to eat so you can take your medication.”

There’s a weak smile on her face. My brows wrinkle.

“I’ll be fine, Noelle.” She coughs. “I just don’t have an appetite today.”

“I’m worried, Abbie, You need help. We need to visit the hospital.” I hold her hands in mine.

She shakes her head. “No. I’m okay. You can get me something for lunch if that makes you happy.”

Sighing, I head for the kitchen. As I fix some lunch for Abbie, tears sting my eyes. My best friend needs help, and I’m powerless to do anything but watch.

No matter how hard I try, I can’t shake off the feeling that something’s wrong.

And it’s way bigger than a loss of appetite.

Chapter Ten

Maverick

“Looking for something?”
Noelle whirls around and exhales in relief. “Oh, God, you startled me.”

“I’m sorry.” I chuckle and close my office door. I haven’t seen her since I told Sara she was my date and I was kind of dreading this moment, but we need to talk about this. “I just didn’t expect anyone to be here. Are you busy?”

She looks down at the files in her hand. “Oh, no, I was just stacking up these documents. It’s, uh, it’s for work. If you’ll excuse me.”

She crosses the room and sidesteps me. Instinctively, I reach out and grab her wrist. Her lips part in surprise and she gazes up at me, startled at the abrupt gesture. I can’t let her get away from me yet. She needs to understand that it is more than just being my date to the event. She needs to make it look like we are dating. I just hope she doesn’t kill me or throw me under

the bus. Lowering my head, I whisper in her ear, “Stop avoiding me.”

Noelle’s face flushes and she jerks her hand back.

“I’m not.” Beyond my unconvinced gaze, she averts her eyes and clears her throat. “I’m not. I’ve just been really busy.”

Leaning closer, I graze the nape of her neck with my lips and she shivers which delights me beyond words. “What you’re busy with is more important than me?”

“Considering it’s work, then yes. I have to get these files to the marketing unit before the day ends.”

“It can wait.”

“Mave—Mr. Thatcher, I really need to get to work. The PR event is something we can’t afford to ruin. It’s a big day for all of us.”

Laughing, I brush a strand of hair from her flushed face. “Don’t worry. Chris says you’re one of the best minds on the team. I’m reassured you’re not going to ruin anything.” I tilt my head, eyeing her curiously. “Speaking of PR events, did you receive the gift I sent?”

“I did.” Her eyes don’t meet mine. “Thank you.”

“Did I get the fit right, then? I was unsure of your size.”

“The dress is perfect, Mr. Thatcher. Thank you.”

I frown a bit, taken aback by her frosty tone. Withdrawing my grip from her wrist, I tilt her chin up. Her eyes are cloudy.

“Is something wrong, Noelle?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Bullshit. I know happiness when I see one and your pretty face isn’t wearing that right now. Talk to me. Is it the dress? I thought it would be the perfect way to apologize to you for putting you in this situation, but I’d be happy to give you something else, if you prefer.”

“It’s not the dress.” She sighs and turns away from me. She crosses the room to stay beside my desk. Folding her arms, she says, “It’s us.”

“Us?”

She nods. “We’ve gotten into this,” she gesticulates her arms in the air, as though trying to emphasize a point, “this... thing and I honestly don’t know the best way to make sense of it.”

“You mean, our relationship?”

“I was referring to the date to the event. What do you mean our relationship?”

“I need you to be my girlfriend or say that you are dating me.”

I’m floored. And the next second, I’m pissed. What the hell?

“You want me to lie to everyone and say we are in a relationship? I’m sorry but are you freaking crazy, Mr. Thatcher?”

“Oh, please, Noelle, don’t call me that.”

“See? That’s exactly what I’m talking about.” She exhales and runs her fingers through her hair. “You’re my boss. How am I supposed to be on a first-name basis with you?” She sighs. “Look, I’m very thankful for the fact that you saved me from a miserable night with Chris. He wouldn’t have taken no for an answer and, even unknowingly, you kept your promised and saved me yet again from a horrible date. But you *are* my boss. There is no way I can have a relationship with you. Even a fake one.”

“I don’t care about that, and if you are because you’re worried about what people think, then you shouldn’t.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Because it’s easier to do. Noelle,” I approach her. “Listen, what we did, what we had nights ago, do you honestly want to tell me that any of it just didn’t mean anything to you?”

She stares at me and I can see doubt creeping in, but she doesn’t waver. “Sex isn’t emotions, Mr. Thatcher. We had an amazing night, the best sex ever, yes, but that was it. That is all that can be.”

“I know that. And I agree. Partly.”

“So, what do you mean?”

“I need to get Sara off my back. It’s annoying and frankly, if she keeps it up I may end up firing her because she is bordering on harassment, so you’d be helping her as well, though she won’t see it that way.” I smirk. “Besides, you need

to get Burnham off your back too. I've seen the way he looks at you and frankly, I think it's a bit disturbing. Almost as disturbing as Sara's advances to me. Just think of it as a win-win situation for the two of us because it's going to help us."

She shakes her head. "It can't work."

"Why do you say that?"

"Sara hates my guts. Because of you."

"Because she knows there's nothing she'll ever do that'll measure up to what you do. You are an incredible force of a woman, Noelle Quinn, and I don't want that privilege slipping out of my hands." I actually want my hands all over her. My mouth kissing every single inch of her skin. But this is not the time or the place to be having these thoughts or to tell her that.

And even if all I said to her is true, ever since Vanessa left, there's this black hole in my heart. Before Noelle, I never felt any physical attraction for another woman. Feeling something for her now feels like I'm cheating on Vanessa somehow. On the other hand, there's something about the green-eyed vixen that I can't quite understand. She's everything that my ex-wife was; the charm, the allure, the beauty. It's like a second chance at what I had and lost all too soon.

Unable to help myself, I stroke her cheek, and gaze into her eyes.

"So what do you say, Noelle? Are you ready to let this go on for as long as it's convenient for us?"

She scoffs and looks away. “I don’t do well with gossip, and trust me, there’s going to be a lot of that once they get wind of us being together.”

“Ignore them.”

“I can’t. Jesus, how easy do you think this whole thing will be for us? Because I assure you, it won’t. Not even close. I’m just a worker here and you’re my boss.”

She’s breathing fast, her lips swollen from biting too hard on them. She’s worried and anxious, as she should. Office romance rarely end well, especially if the person of interest is your boss. Or is there something else? Is she hesitant because of our age-gap? Or about what people will say when they find out?

“Noelle,” I take her hands in mine, “look, you’re scared and you’re worried and that’s fine. You’re supposed to feel that way. Hell, I do too. But if I’m doing this, I want to do this with you.”

She looks into my eyes and I see the moment I win. The moment she relents. And warmth fills me at knowing she is doing this with me.

Setting her shoulders, she says, “But we keep our feelings out of this, do you hear me? No falling in love. We can pretend for a while and see if it works, but the moment something changes, we are done.”

Nodding, I say, “It works for me.”

Finally, she lets out a breath and says, “Okay. Let’s do this.”

Smiling, I smoothen her hair. “All in?”

“All in.” She nods.

Taking up her hand, I tenderly kiss her knuckles. “Good girl.”

There’s a stirring within me as I gaze at her. Desire. Need. Protectiveness. I care about her. She is different somehow, I just wish I knew what it is about her that calls to me.

I kiss the top of her head. “I don’t like it when you worry, Noelle. Especially seeing that little frown. It ruins your beautiful face.”

Her lips quirk into a small, shy smile. “I can’t help it. Between planning an event and having to deal with a femme fatale that’s competing for your attention, it’s hard to stay cheerful.”

“Well,” I lean in and nibble on her left earlobe. “You don’t have to worry about that anymore. I’ll have everything sorted out for you. How’d you like that?”

Giggling, she encircles her arms around me and pulls my face to hers. “Very much. I’d like that very much.”

My lips caress her neck.

“As I understand it, that night was a one-time thing,” she whispers. I can hear the want in her voice. Inside my head, a war is raging. Part of me wants to be tender, to be romantic and polite. But I hear it in her voice, see it in her eyes. She wants a repeat of last time.

“You have needs, I have needs, and there is no reason that we can’t help each other out, so maybe we need to reconsider that notion.” My mouth moves against her skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind to linger on my neck. “Especially now that we are ‘dating’, I’m more than happy to help you with that.”

Sliding my hand alongside her jaw until it’s resting in her hair again, I grip it hard and kiss her harder, until she’s rubbing her body against mine. Her hand comes around to my lower back, pulling me in close to her and she cups the back of my head as we kiss. Her warm lips caress mine, and I grip her hair, clinging to her while our kiss grows hotter and more passionate.

Pulling away, I stroke her face and brush some of her lustrous hair out of her eyes. “On your knees.”

Noelle blinks once, then blushes. She kicks off her heels and kneels at my feet. Her eyes are dilated with pure lust. Eagerly, she strokes my bulge, teasing her fingers over the curve. My cock pushes at my jeans to the point I swear the zipper is going to burst. She looks up at me with her large, beautiful eyes, her face still slightly pink, and puts her hands together on her lap.

“Ready?” I ask.

She swallows hard. “Mm-hmm.”

“Free me.”

Slowly, she starts working her fingers on my belt buckle and the fly of my pants. Pushing down my boxer briefs, she smiles and runs her tongue over her lips, caught up in the moment, looking up at me as if she's waiting for permission.

I nod, moving over and sitting on the desk, my legs spread. Noelle crawls to me, and after getting into position again, reaches out with her tongue, licking me slowly around the head while her hand slowly pumps my shaft. I groan softly, enjoying the wonderful tingle her tongue causes, the tip of her tongue going down to trace the veins of my cock. She's so amazing at this, finding all of those secret little places that leave me oozing precum, and sucking me off like a pro. It is heaven, plain and simple.

I let her have her fun for a bit, but soon I want more. Reaching down, I pull her up and yank the hem of her skirt up over her waist. Turning her around to face the desk, my hands go up inside her blouse to cup her breasts.

“Grab on to the other side of the desk.”

As she does what she is told, she moans softly and arches her back, spreading her upper body across my desk. She scoots her ass against me and parts her legs open. I push her panties to the side, and easing into her, I slowly grind against her, while rubbing her clit in a drawn-out tease that makes her scream in pleasure. I grab her hair and turn her head to the side. I want her to see who is giving her pleasure. Keeping my eyes fixed on hers, I slide my cock inside, working it in and out in slow, short thrusts. Without warning, I slam into her,

pressing our bodies together hard. Once. Twice. Soon, I'm lost in a sea of sensations that leave me unable to control myself. I want to mark her. To own her. And I'm fast approaching the edge.

I'm shaking, flying apart now, and the only things keeping my soul inside my body are the insatiable greed that this woman has unlocked inside of me and the desire to make her feel the same pleasure that I do.

Leaning over without breaking stride, I bite her shoulder, marking her, as I fuck her harder and faster, just the way she likes it. The way *I* like it. She's rocking back and forth with the orgasmic pressure, moaning, begging for more.

Her body is so exquisite and everything in me is focused on the friction of our bodies moving together. "Noelle," I say, my voice hoarse. "You don't know what you do to me."

Her scent fills my nose, warm and rich, like fire, passion personified. Tantalizing. Irresistible.

Her breaths come faster, more shallowly, and I can feel the evidence of her pleasure coating my dick. I know she is close, so I stop touching her clit and change the angle. I don't want her to come yet. I want this to last as long as possible and I know as soon as she goes off, I'll follow.

She moans her disappointment. Her frustration, but I just keep going. I'm going to enjoy being inside her for as long as I can.

When she begs me to go let her come, to go harder, deeper, I lift her hips slightly and I slam into her. Hard. Then I pull almost completely out and slam into her hard again. And with each stroke, she makes the most perfect sound of satisfaction. After a minute or two, I resume the pace that had her ready to go over the edge, and she moans with each breath.

“You’re such a good girl, aren’t you? That’s right.” I grunt. “Take it, Noelle. Take it all, my darling.”

Please,” she murmurs, hips rocking to keep pace with me. “Oh, please.”

I reach out and play with her clit just for a second or two before she cries out and her walls start pulsing around me. I grip her hair tightly and follow her over the edge, releasing into her, shuddering against her tiny frame.

When we come down and I pull away. She straightens up on wobbly knees and we adjust our clothes. Hooking the last button of her blouse, she smiles at me, then leans over to capture my lips in hers. Before opening the door, she turns to me. “This is going to end badly,”

Smirking, I wink at her. “But we will have one hell of a ride,” I pause. “If you are up for it.”

“You’re not usually this agreeable, Mr. Thatcher.”

“Neither are you. However, in your case, I like to bend the rules a little, so I’m glad we met halfway.”

Tongue-in-cheek, she whispers, “Maybe we can do this again sometime?”

Smiling tenderly at her, I say, “Whenever you want, Miss Quinn.”

Chapter Eleven

Noelle

If there's ever a recast in Elizabeth Banks' Walk of Shame, I'd be the leading lady.

Slipping back to the cubicle with my head down, I'm more than self-conscious. My eyes dart around quickly, scanning the faces of the people in the lobby, dreading to find a reaction but there's none. Everyone's doing their jobs and minding their own business.

God, I'm being paranoid.

Lately, my life has been a whirlwind of me doing the things I never imagined I'd ever do. Finding a potential love interest on a dating app, and going on a date with him, only to be rewarded with the complete opposite of what I was rooting for. A fraud, through and through, and a completely miserable one at that. But it paid off, didn't it? I was rescued by a perfect, older gentleman who gave me a blissful one-night stand. Who turned out to be my boss.

And now I just had the hottest sex of my life. On his desk.

Seriously, why did he have to be my boss? He could have been an engineer, a fire-fighter. *Anything*. Anything that didn't have any remote connection to my personal life.

I know what we just did is wrong, but all I can think about is the feeling of him inside me, stretching my body to accommodate him.

What am I doing saying yes to this arrangement when I know that I could fall for him?

I collapse in my chair and tightly shut my eyes.

How did my life become so complicated?

I should end it. I should do the right thing and stop this thing between Maverick and me. If it means perpetually dodging Chris's whims, then so be it. I can handle that. I can tell him off, once and for all.

And it'd keep Sara's sharp tongue away from me.

The one-night stand three days ago was a fluke. Let's call it momentary insanity by lust. But it also was the biggest highlight of my life.

I'd never done anything like that before. Never gone home with a man I barely know and definitely never slept with a total stranger before.

No matter how free I felt that night, how perfect it was, that is not me. And this situation with Maverick is also not me, so it needs to end.

For good.

Time to move on. Time to return to my blissfully happy existence.

Determined to put Maverick's face out of my mind, I shift my attention to the list of unread emails on my desktop. I've just rounded up on the second to last email when someone knocks on the Plexiglas of my office door. My heart sinks when Chris's face appears before me.

Oh, God...

"Hey, Noelle, mind if I come in?"

With a dispirited sigh, I wave him in. He strolls inside and without an invitation, takes a seat across from me. "How's it going?"

"Very well, Mr. Burnham." I stare at him. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Well, yes. I've been waiting for the files that we assigned to the marketing unit. You were supposed to get Mr. Thatcher's approval, remember?"

Shit. I forgot about that.

Stilling my composure, I clear my throat. "Yes, I do remember. Unfortunately, I forgot to take it." I draw back my chair and stand up. "If you'll excuse me, I'll be right back."

I hastily brush past him, eager to be away from him. I'm almost at the door when he says, "You shouldn't be dating him."

I stop in my tracks and whirl around, my eyes burning a hole at the back of his head. “Excuse me?”

Chris turns and faces me. His eyes harden. All the softness in him drops away as he crosses his arms over his chest. That’s the Chris I expected. Haughty, selfish, angry. “Whatever you got going on with Thatcher, you need to put a stop to it.”

My face flushes with acute embarrassment. Not that I already hadn’t thought about it, but who does he think he is? The guy has some nerve. Swallowing hard, I say curtly, “Thank you, Mr. Burnham, for your advice. Is there anything else?”

“I worry about you and what he’ll do to you, you know?” He smiles at me. “So, can I give you a word of advice?”

“I think I’m good, thanks.”

“No, seriously, take it from me. I’m a professional when it comes to this. Guys like him? Not worth the stress. All they’re interested in is taking what they want and leaving you high and dry. You think someone like him will settle for someone like you? I mean, you are beautiful and all, but you are out of his league. You know that, right? He has his pick of women and I heard him talk about a few of his conquests. It’s all about the thrill of the hunt, and when they are caught in his net, he can’t wait to throw them out wet and wanting. I’d think you wouldn’t fall for the pretty words of someone like that. You’re better than that, Noelle.”

I know he is right and I’m out of Maverick’s league, but I also know what we are doing and what this is about, so I say

nothing. Silence is the only way to treat people like Chris Burnham. He continues, “Unlike him, I care about you, Noelle. And I don’t want to see you get hurt, so maybe you should choose your companions better. I’d provide for *all* your needs. It would be my pleasure to make sure you were satisfied.”

My face pales. There’s no way he just said that.

“Are you—I’m sorry, are you soliciting me?”

“What?” Surprise is etched on his face. “No, no. That’s not it. You’re getting it all mixed up.”

Of course. Classic time to play the dumbo and feign ignorance.

“I don’t think HR would approve of something like this, do you?”

His eyes widen for a moment. “What? What did I do? I’m just providing some friendly advice. Being a good friend. Offering my help with whatever you might desire.”

I’m fuming, so I close my eyes and count to three. Ten. Fifty. When I open them, they’re blazing with fury. “Get out.”

He holds up his arms. “Wait, Noelle, I was only —“

“Get. Out!”

His eyes are still trained on mine as he exits the cubicle. My hands are trembling as I watch him leave. Licking my dry lips, I reach inside my drawer for a water bottle. My heart is racing wildly as I drink it all.

The symptoms are vaguely familiar. I'm on the verge of having a mild panic attack. Shaking, I pick up my bag and make a run to the restroom. Locking myself in a stall, I lean back against the wall and slide down to the tiled floor.

Breathe, Noelle, just breathe.

My phone buzzes in my bag and I hesitate. Please don't let it be him.

Exhaling, I take it out and unlock it. Several notifications line the screen, but one makes my heart skip. Fifteen missed calls from my mother.

Shit, I really need to stop putting my phone on vibrate.

I call her and she picks up on the second ring but the other end of the line is faintly static.

"Mom? Are you there?"

"Noelle." Her voice cracks into the mouthpiece.

"Mom, I can't hear you. You're breaking up."

There's silence for a bit, then a bit of whirring static, before it dies down. Then my mother's voice, crisp and clear, comes on. "Hello? Noelle? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm—" I pause mid-sentence. There's something about her voice that hadn't registered before.

"Mom, are you crying?"

She goes quiet. I sit up, fear hammering in my heart.

"Mom, talk to me. What's going on?"

“Noelle,” she says in a choked, throaty tone. “Your father and I are getting a divorce.”

“What?” I whisper. There is no way I heard her correctly. “What do you mean?”

“It happened yesterday.” She sobs into the receiver. Loud, painful sobs that tear me apart. “He came home drunk and was smelling of some cheap lady’s perfume.” She sniffed. “I confronted him about it and he said nothing, Noelle. He didn’t even try to deny it. Apparently, they met at some conference and they’ve been doing it for nearly three months. *Three months*, Noelle.” She wailed loudly.

Helpless, I sit there, listening to her cry. My heart is torn into a million pieces. Why would my dad do this?

“He doesn’t love me anymore. He doesn’t. We—we’re starting the divorce process tomorrow. He’s already... oh, God, this is just so hard for me.”

“He’s already what, Mom?”

“He’s already taken his things, Noelle.” She breaks down in tears. “His car wasn’t in the garage when I got here from my morning walk and I’m looking at our closet. All his clothes are gone. All of them. He even took a few of the paintings and books we had purchased together. I hate this so much.”

This cannot be happening. Yes, my parents always had these fights and they were always pushing each other’s buttons, but that’s what couples do, right? They push and pull but the love is always there, even if they sometimes drive each other crazy.

They had been together for over thirty years. They were my love compass. Now it is broken and I'm lost. I thought, like my parents, I'd have a forever kind of love. Someone to be there for me and that would sometimes go crazy because of me and drive me crazy but that I could always count on.

But that kind of love doesn't exist, does it? If my parents can't make it, what chance do I even have?

"I don't want to do this anymore." My mom's broken words pull me from my head. I can't focus on me right now. This is not about me. I have to help her through this.

"Mom, calm down." I rise to my feet and unlock the door. "Listen to me, okay? Are you listening?"

She makes a sound to indicate yes.

"I'm calling you a taxi as soon as I get off the phone. I just... I just need you to go to Aunt Jessica's and stay there, okay? Just stay there. I'll be right with you soon."

"I don't want to go to my sister's, Noelle. I'm fine. I'm fine, trust me."

Yeah, the last time you said that, you almost ended up burning down the house.

I swallow the emotions choking my throat and blink back my tears. "Mom, please. Just do this for me, please. Just stay with Aunt Jessica for a little while. I'll be there as soon as I can."

The line is quiet. My heart is thudding fast as I hold my breath in anticipation.

“Okay.”

Exhaling, I say quietly, “I’ll call a cab right now.”

Chapter Twelve

Maverick

The PR event is finally here.

I'm waiting outside Noelle's house with my car parked across the street. A week ago, she took a brief personal leave stating she had to look after her sick mom, but she promised we'd still be going together, so I came to pick her up. In the meantime, she was working from home to make sure all the final arrangements got done on time.

The door opens and my jaw hits the ground.

Holy—

She's dressed like a goddess. No, she *is* a goddess. Fuck, those curves! My pants are feeling the pressure of what seeing her is doing to me. Her hair is piled on top of her head and her heels complement the dress, giving her a confidence that is both sexy and awe-worthy.

I keep my eyes glued to her as she approaches, speechless. I pat myself on the back. This is the dress I sent her as an

apology for springing a fake relationship on her and I made the perfect choice, if I do say so myself.

Noelle comes closer. She tucks a stray tendril behind her ear, “Hey.”

My God, she smells so wonderful. Of summer nights and starry skies and a wild night with just the breeze to warm our skins as they brush against each other.

And I can’t get enough of watching her move.

She pauses and tilts her head, and I realize I haven’t given her a response aside from an open-mouthed stare. She’s probably used to it, but I have worked long and hard to be better than this at dealing with people.

“Hi,” I finally manage to say. “Uh... you— you look so beautiful.” I shake my head. “No, sorry, that’s cliché, isn’t it?”

She smiles. “I’m not complaining, Mr. Thatcher.”

Pulling the passenger door open, I step aside with a flourish. “Shall we?”

She enters and I close it.

Oh, we were definitely having fun tonight. I can’t wait to see where we end up. Hopefully together in bed making up for lost time.

“So, is the flu all gone now?”

Noelle frowned. “What?”

“Your mom? You told me she had the flu?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, that’s right. She’s doing great.”

“So, that means you’re coming back to the office soon?”

She nods, with a small smile. “Definitely.”

“Good.”

I continue driving in silence. Then I blurt out, “I missed you.”

She glances at me. “Really?”

I try to cover up my apparent neediness by saying, “Of course. Sara was up to her typical shenanigans while you were away.” I send a quick look at her, hoping to find a reaction, but her face is passive. “Not that it mattered anyway, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

She nods and looks out her window. Then she quietly says, “It’s okay.”

The heavy weight of silence stretches out way too long this time around and I clench my fists around the steering wheel. Something is wrong and as painfully clear as that is, I have no idea what it can be. Is it the party? Is she having second thoughts? We had a deal about tonight and last time we were together, I had her bent over my desk, but we said goodbye on a good note, so what happened? Tonight was supposed to be about us being happy and content. That’s our default when we’re in the public eye. Anything else and it’s an invitation for unsolicited gossip.

But the problem is I realize I’m genuinely worried about her. I care about her enough that I don’t want to ruin it. On the

outside, I keep up the cocky persona, but inside there's a major shift in my heart and soul.

In life, I learned it doesn't pay to get close to anyone. It's too dangerous, for both Noelle and myself. Anyone could be taken away at a moment's notice.

And yet, Noelle has something shifting inside me. A need, a desire to please. She's working her way inside me, even if she doesn't realize it. Even when I fight it.

It scares me, and it thrills me.

I glance at her. She's still staring out the window, a pensive look silhouetting her face.

"Noelle?"

"Hm?" she says, face still pressed to the window.

"Hungry?"

She glances at me and frowns, then shakes her head.

Okay, so it's not food. "You're not... er, at that time of the month, are you?"

Her lips twitch a little and she gives me a bemused look. "No, why? What's this about?"

"You look ready to leap out of my car and return home."

"No, I'm just—"

"Anxious?"

She nods. "Something like that."

Okay.

I can't stop stealing glances at the side of her beautiful face, the knot of hair that I'm dying to unwind, to feel the heavy weight of her silky mane of hair slide across and between my fingers, then along my skin. I place my hand on her thigh and say, "Everything's going to be fine, Noelle. Trust me."

She smiles at me but it doesn't reach her eyes.

Pulling into the venue's parking garage, I kill the engine and turn to her. "You ready for this?"

"Yeah, of course. Fake it till we make it, right?"

"We can do this. But are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Let's do this." Without waiting for an answer, she opens the car door and gets out. I sigh and follow her lead.

"Noelle, before we go in..."

She looks at me, but doesn't smile. "Yes?"

I hate that something is off with her, but I have no idea how I can help her. "Just let me know when you start to get bored, okay?"

"Why? You planning to whisk me away?"

"Yes." I lean in to place a tender kiss on her shoulder. "That's exactly the plan."

And her smile is reward enough even if it only lasts a few seconds.

The event's in full swing by the time we get inside.

Entering the master lounge of the venue, I make a straight beeline for the open bar and Noelle quietly steals away to visit the restroom.

I'm on my second vodka shot when she makes her way back to me.

She looks distracted. And there's that damn frown again. Why?

Both of us notice Chris coming toward her. She hurries to my side. Time to put on a show.

I walk to meet her halfway and when I reach her just before he does, I interlace her hand in mine. Leaning in, I press a kiss to her lips. "Hey, babe."

"Hey," she smiles back in relief, and gives my hand a small, appreciative squeeze.

Turning to Chris, I nod. "Mr. Burnham."

Noelle turns to him and says, "Good evening, Mr. Burnham. I hope you are enjoying the event."

He fixes me an unwavering stare. "Mr. Thatcher." Then he leeringly looks at her and says, "Indeed I am, even more so now." His eyes sweep her from head to toe and I feel her shivering, but I don't think it's the good kind as I notice her pale complexion and her lips pressed in a thin line.

Purposefully ignoring the man, I turn to Noelle. "Would you like a drink?"

Gratitude shimmers in her eyes. "I'd love one."

Linking her elbow in the nook of my arm, I ask with a flourish, “Wine?”

“Yes, please,” she says.

“Red is your favorite, is it not, sweetheart?”

“Indeed it is,” she answers with an adoring smile as we both walk past a visibly stung Chris.

When we’ve reached a considerable distance, she looks up at me, her green eyes full of appreciation. “Wow, you keep saving me time and time again.”

I chuckle and pat her hand. “I think I might quit my job and become your full-time superhero.”

She stops walking and faces me, her eyes softening. “Thank you, Maverick.”

I brush away a stray lock of hair and press a kiss to her temple. “Anytime. Just know that you can always file a harassment suit against him if he ever does something extreme. And I assure you I’ll be right here to support you.”

“Thank you, Maverick. You really have no idea how much that means to me.”

I smile at her. “You can always count on me.” I look at my watch. “Unfortunately, I have to leave you for a little while. The time for my speech is approaching and I have to head to the stage. Will you be alright or do you want to come backstage and wait there for me? Make sure to keep you away from creeps and jerks.” My tone is teasing, but I can’t help but

wonder if Chris will ambush her while I'm up there and can't rescue her.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. I'll just stay here by the bar and if anyone even looks my way, I'll head closer to the stage and ask someone for protection." She smiles but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. Whatever is bothering her is still there, and I just hope this party doesn't add to it.

I kiss her softly on the lips, just because I can, and squeeze her hand encouragingly and then head to the stair leading to the stage where I'm already being summoned.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to tonight's gala. As you know, our new CEO, Maverick Thatcher, has been very generous in providing us with all the food, drink, and entertainment, and in order to thank him, and have him address a few words, we'd like to welcome him to the stage."

The presenter did an amazing job introducing me, but it's up to me to wow them. I have all my notes with me, though I know my speech by heart by now, so here goes nothing. I climb the stairs as she says, "Ladies and gentlemen, let's hear it for the man of the hour, Mr. Maverick Thatcher."

Polite applause follows and I know I have my job cut out for me.

"Good evening, everyone. Thank you. I hope you are having an amazing time and please enjoy the rest of the evening. I'll keep this short and straight to the point."

I cast my eyes throughout the audience purposefully leaving the bar for last. When my eye meets hers, I start my speech.

For a while I talk about all my plans for the company and the growth we aim for.

“We have ambitious plans and ambitious timelines, but I also know we have the best team for the job. I have every confidence that by this time next year, MediaHire will be the number one company in our sector and we will be branching out and growing, bringing all those who work for that success along with it.

“This is a company that relies on people and that will also reward people for its success, so stay tuned, everyone, because we are starting point to the sky and we’re going to blow this thing sky-high. In a good way, of course.”

Applause rings out and this time it is deafening.

Raising my glass, I smile and add, “To the future of MediaHire.”

“To MediaHire,” the audience replies.

I leave the stage and immediately head to the bar where Noelle is. She is not looking at me. She is staring at her glass and her mood seems to have soured even more. I wish I knew what was wrong so I could help her. When I reach her, I kiss her cheek and can feel Chris glaring at me. Good, let him know she is off-limits.

But I can’t pretend I’m not worried. Because I am.

“Hey, is everything okay?”

“God, are you going to ask me that all night long? How many times do I have to say yes?”

Whoa. What is this about? “I’m sorry, it’s just that you look like you have something on your chest, and I was trying to show you I’m here for you.”

She looks at me and whispers, “Just leave me alone, will you?” And she heads for the bathroom.

What the hell am I missing?

Chapter Thirteen

Noelle

I turn off the faucet and tear out paper towels to dry my hands. I know I was a bitch to Maverick, and he didn't deserve it at all, but I just can't deal with him right now. I can't be here, but I have to and it's killing me.

Staring at the ringing phone atop my purse, I silently pray for my mom to answer but the fifth time that night, the call disconnects and the line goes dead. It's been a week and things are pretty much the same between her and Dad and my world is crumbling because my foundation is turning to dust.

Shutting my eyes tightly, I clench my fist in frustration.

Why isn't my mom picking up? She's home alone tonight and I have no way to check up on her.

I'm at a loss on who to call. Aunt Jessica is working a shift at the police department tonight and she's unavailable.

Sighing, I send my mom a text message.

Please call me when you see this, mom. I need to know if you're okay.

I throw the phone into my purse and exhale deeply. Planting my palms on the surface of the porcelain sink, I hang my head and close my eyes.

Useless. I feel completely useless.

Nothing's working and I'm tired of pretending it is. Last three days, on a phone call with my father, he was insistent on his decision. A divorce is happening and nothing else. Pleading with him to see reason was ineffective and a waste of time. My father always weighs each decision he makes and may take his time, but once he makes up his mind, there is no turning back.

Sniffing, I delicately brush away the tears from my eyes with my fingers. Avoiding my eyes in the mirror, I tear out a paper napkin and carefully dab my face, then reapply my eye-shadow and lip gloss.

Never let them see you break, my Aunt Jessica always tells my mother whenever she starts her crying fits. I've never understood its meaning, until now. I'm at a point in my life where the shitty things are rearing its ugly heads and I'm taking it upon myself to not let any of it get to me.

But, goddamn, it's so hard. My parents have been together for a long time, spanning three decades. How am I supposed to feel okay with them splitting? Slap on a pleasant smile all day and pretend everything is okay?

“Never let them see you break,” I whisper as I replace the cap of the gloss.

Especially Maverick.

A lump of guilt hangs in my throat and I swallow it down. Am I a terrible person for acting the way I did? I’m supposed to be here acting as his girlfriend, and instead I snap at him and hide in the bathroom.

Maybe I should tell him the truth, make him understand what I’m going through.

But I am nothing to him. Why would he care? We’re just fake dating partners. I know I’m growing to care about him more than I should and now with what’s happening with my parents, I wonder if I should just cut my losses and stop this now.

Hugging myself, I stare at my reflection in the mirror.

He’s... different and he’s certainly not like the other men I’ve met.

My entire sexual experience up until our first night together happened in high school. It was a little over-the-clothes fumbling with a senior who promptly denied anything had happened between us to prove a point to his dumbass friends.

But Maverick isn’t like that. He’s much older, charismatic, and generous. To a fault.

My gaze slips down to my gown. It’s a truly beautiful piece. One that must have cost a fortune. I remember him telling me it was an apology present for the fake relationship thing.

When it boils down to it, Maverick and I have pure animal magnetism between us. We have sexual chemistry in spades, and our bodies make some beautiful magic together.

Like how warm his lips feel when they touch mine.

Or how he slides his hand under my dress and my body lights up like a Christmas tree on steroids.

Or the sheer relief when his lips flick through my clit making me wetter than I've ever been.

I don't think I've ever wanted anybody more.

And that's not good. Not good at all.

Maverick's my boss, my much older boss, and that makes him unpredictable. I can never figure out what he's thinking, what he's going to say or do next, and that's dangerous. How are you supposed to protect yourself when you don't fully understand a person's motives?

The two of us are only looking for hook-ups, not love. And while many people can make the whole "casual" thing work fine for them, I'm not wired like that. And even if I was, it'd be a terrible idea being in a casual relationship with your boss.

There is no way that could ever fly between an employer and his employee. Because even though sex is just sex, there is also intimacy involved, and that brings about certain emotions. Those emotions can then cloud your judgment, and I can't afford to have that happen.

Hell, I can't really afford to let that happen. I need this job... and right now I also really need a drink.

Turning away, I'm about to walk out the door when it opens. Sara, wearing a dark-blue sequined gown with a plunging V-neck shows off a large expanse of cleavage. She flicks me a scathing glare as she strides into the bathroom, shutting the door loudly.

“Enjoying the party, aren't you?” she asks, reaching for the soap washer. “You should be. We've had to make it a success since you conveniently stayed away for a week, leaving us to fix your job.”

Why the little. I did all the work, even after I requested a leave and now she is trying to put me down?

I'm about to let her have it, but I stop myself. It's not worth it. I don't owe her an explanation and I certainly am not going to indulge in whatever game she's playing.

Dignity and poise, Aunt Jessica also likes to say, *Keep it that way*.

“Why yes, I actually *am* enjoying the party.”

“Well, that shouldn't be so hard since you're following Maverick around like a bitch in heat.”

My eyes narrow. “Excuse me?”

Sara's lips quirk up in bemusement. “Oh, did I strike a nerve? Or are you just mad that it's true? We can all see that he's just with you for a good time. You're a slut and that's all you're good for.”

Breathing harshly, I glare at her. Bewildered pain makes me tremble inside. How dare she...? No, I will not lower myself

to her level. I take a deep breath and count to ten in my head. I know what's she's trying to do but I'm not going to give in. I won't let what she says bother because it's not what I am.

"You're just jealous." I shrug.

She arches her brow. "Oh?"

"It's not my fault he asked me and not you to come with him tonight."

"He asked you because he is going through some sort of mid-life crisis and decided to fuck someone twenty-two years younger than him. You're nothing but a bed warmer for him. And probably getting paid to be one too. Because there is no way he feels anything for you. Have you even looked at yourself in the mirror? You are nothing. What? Were you hoping he fell in love with you? What a joke!" Her lips curl into a contemptuous sneer.

I swallow, but say nothing.

"You may have fooled everyone with your perfect little act of adoration for Maverick but not me. No, Miss Quinn, not me."

Damn, not this again. Didn't this lady have anything better to do than to be bitchy?

"We're done." I clutch my purse as I make an attempt to sidestep her. "Please, excuse me."

Roughly, she grabs my arm, halting me in my tracks. Glaring at me, she says, "*I'm* not done."

I waste no time in pushing her away. My skin is crawling at the mere touch of her hands on my body. “Touch me again and I’ll teach you a lesson you’ll never forget.” And I don’t even have to touch her for it. Just press charges and let the law do its thing.

Her eyes blaze with fury. “What’s your deal with him? Huh? What’s the deal with Maverick? Is it the sex? He fucks you so good, is that it? Or, let me guess, he promised you a yacht and a house in Bali? Well, newsflash, honey, it’s all an illusion. You’re pitiful and disgusting.”

I step away from her. How much lower can this woman go? This is what it has come down to? Physically assaulting me over a man?

“Maybe, but at least I’m not crazy like you, psycho.”

“Bitch,” she says, fiercely stabbing my chest with a fake fingernail. She’s shaking visibly, her entire body caught up in the tremors. “You think you know what you’re doing but you don’t. Maverick’s mine and I’ll make sure I free him from your greedy little paws.”

I’m so done with this. This conversation, this party, this situation. This life. I’m done,

“Be my guest,” I say as I storm out of the bathroom and back to the party. My throat is dry and in need of a drink.

I spot him across the room, looking around anxiously, while checking his phone from time to time.

Sara's right. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm doing at all. This whole thing was a mistake. A truly terrible mistake.

I hate that my body reacts every time he is around, but I hate it even more that my heart does too.

This is a fake relationship. It isn't supposed to involve feelings, but my body, my heart, my soul aren't listening to my mind. And they are winning the battle.

I need to face the fact that I am developing feelings for him and that is a hard no for me.

I haven't been with Maverick for too long but I know the kind of man he is. He has a biting intellect and a driving nature that sweeps everyone along with him like a tidal wave. And it hurts.

I know I have to let him go and he'll find someone else soon enough. Maybe even Sara, if she gets her way. And he'll do to her all the things he did to me and more.

The thought of Maverick having sex with another woman causes red hot jealousy to flare up inside of me, but I tamp it down. I have no claim to him, and it's time to put on my big girl panties and concentrate on my job.

I'm done having to deal with Sara and her snide remarks, And I'm even more done dealing with her abuse. This needs to end now.

I can't deal with this shit at work while I have my life at home in shambles.

I know I'll break sooner or later. I know I'll drop the ball soon enough if I don't do this, so I have to let him go. And the best way to do it, is for me to make the move. I have to leave him. I have to go. Now.

Clutching my purse tightly, I weave my way through the bodies until I reach the exit door. I don't look back. I can't. I'm afraid if I see him again my resolve will falter and I can't afford that. My phone buzzes but when I look at it, it's him, so I ignore it.

I can't be here. I need to leave. I can't breathe.

My phone doesn't stop vibrating. My heart is breaking into a thousand pieces. It's not something that's supposed to happen.

I know I have to tell him this is over, but not tonight.

Tomorrow. I'll do it tomorrow. And this time, it's for good.

And as the decision solidifies, my heart shatters in my chest and the first tears start to run down my face.

Inhaling deeply, I run outside.

Chapter Fourteen

Maverick

Fuck, where is she? And why isn't she picking her phone?
Uneasy, my eyes roam through the sea of people looking for a flash of white.

Finally, I spot it.

Noelle's making her way through the exit door, her head lowered, palm held out to shield her face.

Wait, she's leaving?

Hastily pushing my way through the crowd, I sprint after her. The hallway is empty, save for the lingering scent of her perfume. Just then, my ears catch the faint thud of a door closing.

Racing toward the exit, I pray I get there in time to still catch up to her,

Come on, come on, come on.

I open the door and I run out, eyes wildly searching everywhere. Pressing the call button again let's me know her calls are now going straight to voicemail. My heart is pounding as I swivel around, calling out her name in the night repeatedly.

Frantically looking everywhere, I notice a speck of white in the distance, walking past the parking garage.

“Noelle!” I yell, running to catch up to her.

She keeps walking, paying no attention to me.

“Noelle! Hold on!”

Reaching for her arm, she tries to swing it away but I hold on tightly to her. She struggles to free herself from my grasp but when she realizes that I'm not planning to let go, she lets them fall and whispers, “Please, I can't take it anymore, I just want to go home.”

Her eyes are red and misty with tears. And there are red marks in her arm. I release her, but don't move away.

“Noelle, what's going on?”

She stares at me, then heaves a sigh. “This can't work. I'm sorry but it can't.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Us!” Her shoulders sag as she lets out another long exhale. “This whole thing between us. It's a mistake.” Tears are falling down her face, but it's like she isn't even aware of them, even when each of them slices my heart.

“Not to me. And where the fuck is this coming from? Who put all that in your head?”

“No one, okay?” her voice breaks. “I just...I need to be alone.”

“Fine, but this is not a mistake,” I tell her resolute. It’s not. I know what I want and I can’t let her go without a fight. “I want you, Noelle.”

“Well, I don’t want you!” she explodes, her eyes flashing. And I stagger backward as if her words are a physical blow. “I can’t,” she whispers. “I’m sorry, but it has to end.”

The distant music from the party fills the silence. Noelle looks away, avoiding my eyes. How long has she been nursing this decision? I know she’s impulsive and quick to act, and underneath it all, she has an entire moral code that she lives by, a set of rules that propels her entire existence. I also know that she lied to me when she says she doesn’t want me. Even if she doesn’t realize it, that ‘I can’t’ ruined the whole effect. I know she is hurting and I wish she’d let me help her. I know I’d do whatever it took to see her smile.

“You want us to end it?”

Wrapping her hands around her body, she gives me a small nod.

I know she is lying, or at least partly so. I just don’t understand why. “And what does that leave me with?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you have to know.” Why’s she doing this? Why’s she changing her mind now? “We had a deal. We started this because we wanted to help each other. And considering how I saved you from Burnham tonight, I can say it’s pretty much working. Why do you want to change that now?” I pause. “Wait. Did something happen, Noelle?”

She pushes her hair back and exhales. “Nothing happened. I just... Look, there’s a lot of things that I want but acting as your fake lover isn’t one of them.”

“Because you’re scared?”

“Of what?”

“That you’re going to fall in love with me when it gets overwhelming for you?”

She scoffs and blows a breath. “You’re delusional.”

I sigh. Nothing about this woman is easy. I swear every time I interact with her, I feel like I’m trying to figure out the next move in a complicated game that I don’t know all the rules to.

“Am I right?”

“No! I barely even know anything about you.”

“Same goes for me when it comes to you.”

“I guess that solidifies my point, then.”

I bring my head forward and slant my lips over hers, and it’s the kind of kiss that’s been missing from my life for so long. One that starts off as a slow burn, a soft meeting of lips and the feather-light flick of the tongue. She’s receptive and her

lips fit into mine. It's like she's laying the groundwork for something fierce. She's building a fire, each teasing kiss serving as the kindling, until finally I unleash a groan, drive the kiss deeper, and the fire engulfs us. And then we're devouring each other's mouths again, making out with a passionate frenzy that's heated. I pause for a moment, breathing heavily. Noelle's gorgeous eyes peer back at me. A deep, dark green, like the jungle after a heavy rainfall. I can see why men like Burnham go nuts for her.

We stare at each other when we pull away, ignoring the gust of wind nipping at our skin.

"Don't you ever do that again," she rasps, pushing me away and turning her back to me.

I nod even though she can't see me. "We end this, it's back to the basis. Burnham leeches on to you, and Sara does the same to me."

"That's a risk I'll have to take."

"Until when?" I go around to face her again. I need her to look me in the eye when she rejects me. I need to see if she is hurting even a fraction of what I'm hurting with this conversation. And this is an arrangement. It shouldn't hurt. But fuck...

"Until—"

A vibration echoes from her purse and she unclasps it, taking her phone out.

Her face pales when she sees the caller ID. Turning away from me, she says, “Abbie? Hello?”

There’s an inaudible response in the background that I can’t decipher. Suddenly, Noelle gasps and let out a small shriek. “Oh, my God. Abbie, just stay right there, okay? I’ll be home soon.”

When she cuts the line, I round up to her. “Is everything okay?”

Fidgety, she tries to step away from me. She’s trembling furiously. “I— I need to go home.” Her voice is breaking. “I’m sorry but I... but I have to go.”

Perplexed, I stare at her. “What’s wrong?”

Tears are forming in her eyes. Her mouth is moving but no sound comes. Her pain is so clear it is almost as if I can touch it.

“Let’s go. I’m driving.”

Nodding, she briskly follows me to the north wing of the parking garage where my car is and I drive to her apartment. Her eyes are shiny with heavy, unshed tears and she taps her foot impatiently on the car floor. Her mouth quivers as she takes in a sharp breath. “Please, go faster.”

Her house is thirty minutes away and I’m breaking laws and regulations left and right to get her there as fast as I can. I’m not taking any chances. Glancing at her, I ask, “What happened?”

A tense silence hangs between us. In a side glance, I see her expression soften. I reach out and squeeze her thigh. “It’s all good, Noelle. I got your back, okay?”

She bites her lip and gives me a grateful look.

I change lanes to pass a truck that’s traveling half the speed limit.

“Abbie,” she shakes her head, her face crumpling. “She... she’s my best friend. I think she has an eating disorder. She has been losing weight and always says she is not hungry, but I can see she is getting weaker by the day. When she called just now, I could barely hear her on the phone but it sounded like she couldn’t breathe well.” Burying her face in her palm, Noelle drags in a painful inhale. “It’s my fault. I should have been a better friend. Made her go to a doctor. Force her to eat. I knew she needed help, but I chose to respect her wishes and let her be even when I could see she was killing herself.”

Fuck. I know exactly what she is going through. I also know this is a one-way street to nowhere good.

“Don’t,” I say with an edgy tone. “Don’t ever do that. Don’t blame yourself. Just don’t.”

“She’s relapsed three times in four months.” Her voice cracks. “I don’t—I just don’t know what else to do...”

She lapses into silence and moodily stares out the window, apprehension reflecting on her face. From the corner of my eye I notice her wringing her hands together. I hate seeing this badass girl so shaken. And although I’m still not clear with our

situation, I reach across the center console and grip her hand. Right now I need her touch as much as she needs mine, even if she doesn't know it.

She glances over gratefully. "Thank you for helping me."

"No problem," I murmur.

I want to be here for Noelle, regardless of our conversation before, but this is so over my head I don't know if I can.

I know what it is like to lose a loved one, so I know what she is going through. And the fact that I know is what makes me hesitate for a second. She sits upright as we reach her street and as soon as I park the vehicle, without even waiting for me to kill the engine, she unstraps her seatbelt and makes a dash to the front door. My heart is racing as I kill the engine and dash after her.

Whatever happens, I need to be there for her the same way I wish someone had been there for me.

Chapter Fifteen

Noelle

Abbie is lying on the couch, but her breathing is labored. She is sheet white and her eyes look almost like they are trying to retreat into her face.

“No, no, no, no.” I fall to my knees and gather my unconscious best friend in my arms. Heart thumping, I cup the side of her face and tap her awake. “Abbie? Wake up. Please wake up. Abbie, please stay with me. Stay with me.”

The front door was left open because I couldn’t even remember to close it, and Maverick rushes in. He takes in the scene with wide eyes and let out a breathless, “Oh, my God.”

Just then, Abbie’s eyes flutter open and she whispers my name with a strained voice.

“It’s okay, I’m here. I’m here.” Hugging her sickly frame, I glance up at Maverick. “Call an ambulance. We need to get her to the hospital.”

Abbie's eyes fly open. "No, no," she clutches my arm, fear resounding in her voice. "No hospital. Please."

I gaze at her, listening to her distressed pleas. Then turning back to Maverick, I nod, "Please."

He takes his phone in his hand and steps outside.

"I hate you." Abbie is sobbing, her voice throaty and dry. "I hate you so much."

"I'm doing this for you, Abbie." My tone is gentle but firm.

"No, you're doing it for yourself." She rolls away from me and slowly, painfully, if her winces are an indication, sits up, glaring at me. "Everything you do, you do for yourself, Noelle."

"That's not true."

"It is. You are selfish, and now you are going against my wishes and trying to force me go to a hospital when I don't want nor need to go."

How can she say she doesn't need it?

I reach out to hold her, but she angrily slaps my hand away. "Stay away from me!" Her voice comes out strangled. I think she was trying to scream at me but she can't even master the strength for that anymore.

Now, my patience is slowly wearing thin. Swallowing my frustration, I become placating once again. "Abbie—"

"You're a selfish bitch, Noelle. That's what you are."

"What?" I snap back.

“You tell me you want to help me but that’s nothing but a lie. The only person you want to help is yourself because that’s what you do. It’s all about you. So you can feel better about yourself. That’s why you’re fucking your boss. You want to turn him into your little pet project so it’ll give you a reason to feel good about your shitty existence. Well, newsflash, that’s not happening with me. I won’t be your pet project.”

My head reels, listening to her words. How can she say this?

I know I have feelings for Maverick, and yes, I want to help him if I can. But I’m also pulling away because why should I even try? Love is just an illusion that can last for thirty minutes or thirty years, but in the end, it will end up hurting you all the same, so might as well not get too attached.

I stare at Abbie. Before I knew Maverick, I’ve lived alone, while Abbie went away for a while. I’ve worked hard. I’ve been true to myself. I’ve always known my flaws and worked through them but I’ve been my own person all the same. Now every single part of my life is being hit repeatedly by a wrecking ball and I just can’t catch a break.

Using her hands, while grunting and groaning, Abbie gets up on her feet. Her bones are jutting out through her top. She’s a malnourished and morbidly underweight mess. My heart breaks just looking at her.

The first time Abbie puked out her food, it happened in fifth-grade and I was present. We’ve just rounded up gym and she was complaining about stomach gripes, no thanks to the cafeteria food. When she returned from the bathroom ten

minutes later, she was smiling. Happier than ever before. Life has not been the same since that happened.

Abbie's health has been a concern ever since. A robust one-hundred-and-sixty-seven pound gifted volley-ball player reduced to nothing but bones and more bones.

I've read articles on anorexia nervosa that bases the reason on "a compulsive addiction to lose calories."

And in Abbie's case, it's connected to a sense of grief that she hasn't been able to shake yet.

When she moved in with me, things were bad. For months her routine was the same. Wake up. Feel angry. Avoid human contact. Eat. Vomit. Sleep. Repeat.

I've tried talking to her, calling her to reason. When she got mad at me, I tried turning the other way, but that would never last very long. I always tried to have a meal for her to have, even when she said she wasn't hungry. It's been years now, since she started on this road, but this time, she's gone too far. She is about to starve herself, and I love her too much to let her do that to herself.

"See?" she sways unsteadily, rocking back and forth as she stands. Her knees are trembling so badly underneath her bony weight. "I can get up myself. I am fine. Now, I'm going up the stairs and I'm going to pack my things and I'm going to leave." She throws me a scornful glare. "Goodbye, Noelle."

She takes a step and almost crashes to the floor before Maverick comes out of nowhere and catches her. Sweeping

her up in his arms, he turns to me and says, an inflection of worry in his tone, “We’ve got to get her to the hospital and we’ve got to do it now. Waiting for the ambulance is a risk.”

Amidst Abbie’s weak protests, I push open the front door and he runs past the porch to the car. I open the back door and he gingerly places her inside, then locks it with the child safety feature. We drive to the hospital, all the while ignoring Abbie’s screams to be let out.

She doesn’t stop begging and pleading, tears streaking down her face.

At the entrance of the hospital, Maverick cuts the engine and opens the door to bring Abbie out. She struggles aggressively, punching his chest with puny fists.

Maverick doesn’t budge as he runs into the hospital, and I hold open the door for him to enter.

“Emergency!” he yells, attracting the attention of several patients in the waiting room. He places her on a stretcher and holds down her flailing arms.

A blonde orderly nurse runs up to us. “What happened?”

“I think she has an eating disorder and she—she’s been coughing a lot and she is so weak,” I stammer, my heart beating erratically. “She was unconscious when I got home.”

She nods quickly. Hailing a couple of nurses nearby, one goes to call a doctor, and the other comes to us.

“What’s your name, ma’am?”

“Noelle. Noelle Quinn.”

“And hers?”

“Abbie Jensen. She’s my best friend.”

“Thank you for bringing her in, Noelle. We’ll take it from here.”

“Wait,” I stop her. “Will she be okay?”

Offering me a sympathetic smile, she says, “I can’t determine that now, but we’ll do our best. Just sit tight, okay?” The nurse adds to her colleagues, “Let’s take her to curtain two, now,” and starts dragging the stretcher. The doctor, the other nurse called, arrives as they start taking her away.

The nurse behind the front desk gives us a chart to fill with the information about Abbie as the group wheels her behind a closed curtain as the doctor yells orders about running tests and IV medication.

“You can wait there, please. Someone will be out as soon as they can to give you an update,” she says, pointing to the waiting room.

Burying my face in my palms, I break down into tears. Two strong arms wrap around me and I inhale Maverick’s spicy and leathery cologne. It brings me comfort I so thoroughly need.

“Why? Why did this have to happen?” I sob against his chest. “She doesn’t deserve any of this. She doesn’t deserve it.” I’m crying in earnest now, letting the emotions I haven’t allowed myself to feel flow free for the first time in a long time.

Maverick pulls me closer and I wrap my own arms around his back, snuggling in closer to his comforting heat while he holds me as I cry. My shoulders bow, my face crumples, and I collapse against his chest. Grief bubbles up in me, great wracking sobs that seem to come from someone else completely, and a small, detached part of me listens to the anguished howls filling the small hallway of the hospital.

This one hug, this affectionate action from him, means more to me than anything. I've never felt so secure before, so okay to be vulnerable. It makes me want to stay nestled in his embrace forever.

He rests his chin easily on the top of my head, one hand rubbing my back slowly, soothingly, the other in my hair. "It's not your fault. You didn't lead her to make that decision. You didn't do that. It's not your fault, Noelle, and don't you ever forget that."

He leads me to the rows of chairs and I sit. "Here," he takes out a handkerchief from his suit pocket and offers it to me.

I thank him and dab my tears.

He sits beside me and gazes at me. "You did the right thing, Noelle."

I swallow and look away. "Somehow I'm not so sure about that. She's always hated hospitals. Never wanted to be in one. Her dad died from a septic infection when she was five. Right here in this hospital." A fresh wave of tears burns through me and I exhale. "I'm so scared. I've never been so scared."

“Do you have someone you can call on her behalf?”

Shaking my head, I say, “No. She’s been estranged from her mother and sister for a long time. They couldn’t watch her do this to herself, so they just asked her to leave. They gave up trying to help her. Gave up on her.” I sniff. “She’s just been dependent on me ever since.”

“It must be very exhausting.”

I let out a lukewarm laugh. “You have no idea. Watching your best friend go through that, knowing that no matter how much you help, it’s never going to work, it’s just... painful.” My lips wobble. “I...I just don’t know what to do.”

“I know how you feel.”

I stare at him. “You do?”

“Yeah,” he says, running his fingers through his hair. Then he shuts his eyes and sighs deeply. “I, uh, I’ve been in a situation like this before.”

“What happened?”

He looks away and swallows. “My ex-wife. She, uh, she... had a lung infection.” His eyes are a million miles away. A lifetime away too, apparently. “She never wanted to go to the doctor. Always assured that it was just the air, you know, the one that comes with living in the city. I could tell she had some trouble breathing sometimes. Wheezing and coughing. She also got tired really easily.” He shrugs. “We lived in New York, at the time, so I felt that it was fair. She self-medicated herself with cough medication but after over a week, she was

still the same or worse. She kept pulling back whenever I asked to go to a doctor, saying I was silly for worrying, that it was a flu, the pollution, allergies.

She gave me so many excuses. So many reasons for her symptoms.” He is shaking his head. “Eventually, after she tried every single option with no result, she finally agreed to go to a doctor and when he ran some tests, the results were bad. Really bad. She had lung cancer.” His eyes fill with tears. “And it had already spread. It was stage four by the time we finally knew what it was. There was nothing we could do except make sure she was comfortable and try to medicate for the pain. She didn’t suffer for long, thankfully.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. He went through so much. Poor guy.

“Yeah, well, like your friend, she didn’t want to go to a hospital. She hated hospitals and was kind of in denial for a long time.” He breathes out and blinks a few tears away. “I blame myself. Or did, for a long time. I should have made her go to the doctor sooner. I should have insisted, I should have paid more attention... But the shoulda, coulda, woulda game is one that has no winners. It can take you to a dark place. It took me a long time to realize that her choices were her own. I did my best with the information I had.” His eyes meet mine. “I told her multiple times to go to the doctor. I asked her to see someone. Short of forcing her or taking her there myself, I did all I could. And so did you.”

His eyes get that faraway look again.

“Seeing your best friend today—” he shivers slightly.

“—reminded you of her,” I say softly.

“Yeah.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, it did.”

I stare at him, disconcerted at the revelation. Losing a partner is a terrible thing to go through. How was he able to go through life with the feeling of grief and loss and still come out better, unscathed? Did he ever heal from it? Is he still healing? Numerous questions are swirling in my head. A cold feeling of dread settles like a lump in my chest. If Abbie dies, what’s going to happen? No, she can’t. I’ll never forgive myself if that happens. I’ll never truly be okay. She’s more than a best friend to me. She’s my sister, the only person in the world who truly matters to me. Losing her is something I’ll never get over. Ever.

The brown of his eyes gazing at me fondly startles me, deep and intense, with hidden depths, like well-polished cherrywood, and his mouth, full and soft. I can’t help the sudden picking up of the pace of my heart in my chest. He is so close, too close. But even though this room has to be over a thousand square feet, I can’t move an inch.

The shadow of his stubble, now almost two-day’s growth, darkens his cheeks, and I find myself aching to run my own face over his skin, to feel the rough evidence of his masculinity on my smooth, feminine jaw. It’s an impulse I’m entirely unaccustomed to. Deep, raw. Primal.

Our connection is deep.

So deep.

For the first time in my life, I'm safe and protected.

If he leaves me ... how will I cope?

I've been hurt before, and although I know that this is in a completely different league than my past relationships, the prospect is terrifying.

This one will hurt ... deeply.

My chest constricts at that thought.

Minutes become hours and the day takes a toll on me. My eyes get heavy and soon I'm transported to the blissful peace of oblivion.

Chapter Sixteen

Maverick

The first nurse emerges from a room with the doctor by her side. I watch the two of them talk, their eyes darting to us, now and again.

When the nurse points to us, the doctor nods and she disappears again. The doctor approaches us, his face grim.

I stay seated, trying to make sure Noelle doesn't wake up just yet. She is beat and if this is bad news, she needs to get her strength back first before she is dealt another blow.

The doc's eyes moves from Noelle and back to me as he comes forward. Then he nods at her and softly asks, "Noelle Quinn?"

I nod to let him know he has the right people but still don't make a move to wake her up. He'll talk to me first and then I'll decide if she should be disturbed or not.

Keeping my voice soft and low, I ask, "How's she?"

"Are you family?"

I have to think quick on my feet, so I say, “They are stepsisters, and I’m her husband.” Nodding my head to indicate the sleeping Noelle.

“Very well,” the doctor says. “I’m afraid Ms. Jensen’s health has deteriorated by a drastic margin.”

“What does that mean?”

The doctor looks at me. “It means there’s no telling what can happen in the next few days. We’re going to place her on extended bedrest and monitor her progress.”

“Is she going to make it?” I ask because I know Noelle would too.

“We are doing everything we can to make sure she does. It is up to her now, but we gave her all the weapons to make it a fair fight for her life.” The doctor smiles.

“Will she be able to have visits tonight? I’m sure my wife is dying to see her.” My wife. It’s been so long. Since I said those words last, and unlike what I expected, they don’t hurt this time. Could it be because of whom I’m referring to?

The doctor shakes his head ruefully. “I’m sorry but it isn’t a good time. I’ll contact you when she’s fully awake and fully aware of her surroundings.”

“Very well. Thank you.” I shake his hand. “You’ve been such a great help.”

“Before you leave, I’m going to need you to sign a couple of forms, so we can begin the treatment on her. The psychiatrist will be down to see her within the next day or two

and when she's stable enough, I'll transfer her to a nutrition specialist who'll put her on a diet regimen for a couple of weeks. Now, seeing how much feeding has always been hard for her, I must let you know that it's not going to be an easy journey."

"I understand. But at least there is a chance and we can hope for the best."

He nods appreciatively. "I have to go now, since I have a few rounds to make, but we'll keep in touch." Then he leaves.

I turn to Noelle and kiss her head before softly rousing her.

"It's time to go home, sweetheart." The endearment just slipped from me. Must be the exhaustion.

"But Abbie..." Her voice is rough and slightly slurred from sleep. So adorable.

"She will be okay for the night. She can't have visits yet and the doctor said they'd let us know if anything changes, so we should go."

She sits up straighter and looks me in the eye. "Thank you."

And I can tell she means it. "For what?"

She gives me a weak smile. "For being here."

I embrace her warmly and whisper into her hair. "Anytime."

The ride to my house is silent.

Pulling into the driveway, I kill the engine and turn to Noelle.

She's sleeping against the window, her hands clutched around her waist. Every now and then, she mutters something incoherent. With a smile, I watch her lips move, her eyes closed.

"Never would have pegged you to be a sleep-talker," I tell her sleeping form, knowing she won't hear me.

I gently nudge her awake. She groans a little, opening her eyes, and blinking them rapidly to get her bearing. With a jolt, she sits upright and glances around.

"Where am I?"

"At my house."

She relaxes but her eyes are still wary. "Why am I here?"

"I don't want you to be alone." I shrug.

She rolls her eyes and reaches to unlock the door. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not. I won't leave you alone tonight. Besides, it's midnight already."

"I'll be fine. I'll call a taxi."

Hell if I'm letting that happen. "Look, I'm not asking for too much. I'm just looking out for your safety. Just sleep over and you're free to leave tomorrow."

She levels me with a cool gaze, then sighs. "Fine."

"Thank you."

Stepping out of the car, I lead her inside and tell her to wait. When I return with freshly-laundered sheets, she stops looking

around and looks up at me, sheer incredulity plastered on her face. “You—you live here?”

“No, I killed the owner and their kids and buried their bodies in the backyard.”

Her jaw drops to the ground and blood drains from her face.

I grin at her, enjoying the horrified expression. “You should see your face. You get spooked quite easily.”

She clamps her mouth shut and narrows her eyes at me. “That wasn’t funny.”

“No, but it’s sad that you actually believed it. Do you really think I’m capable of something like that?”

She looks away, a sheepish smile playing at the corner of her lips.

“Oh, uh,” I approach her and point to the two different beddings in my arms. “I wasn’t sure which one to choose.”

“Really?”

“Well,” I scratch the back of my neck. “I wasn’t quite sure which you’d prefer.”

She giggles and takes the red sheets from my hand. “You’re so corny.”

“Just being a gentleman, really. Uh, do you want to wash up?”

She looks down at the smudged gown and back at me. “Please.”

“Okay, your room is the second one at the end of the hall. It has its own bathroom, so just knock yourself out.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll get you something to eat since you must be starving, and quite frankly, so am I. So, choices are leftover lasagna or a sandwich.”

“Lasagna? Did you cooked it yourself?”

“Yes, I did.”

She fakes a grimace. “So, there’s a chance I’m going to get sick if I consume it?”

Placing my hands over my chest, I feign a hurt look. “Noelle...”

She laughs. “I’m joking, I’m joking. And yes, I’ll like to try your lasagna, even if it’s way past dinner time.”

I nod my head to the direction of the stairs. “Go wash up.”

“Yes, boss.”

She returns just in time as I’m done setting the table. Looking up, I’m about to say something when I freeze mid-sentence, shock reverberating through me. “Wh—where did you get that?”

She’s wearing an old Nirvana castoff that belonged to Vanessa. Well, it belongs to me. My wife was just fond of wearing it when she was painting in the basement, but now it hangs loosely on Noelle’s slender frame.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to put back the dress again, so I looked in the closet. It was in a small laundry basket. I thought it was yours.”

I say nothing, still staring at her. She looks just like Vanessa, except for the green eyes and the wavy blonde hair. Vanessa’s hair was dark and she was blue-eyed. They were both similar in a way, in build and height, in attitude and personality. Was this why I’d taken it upon myself to save Noelle from her date that night? Was I projecting a part of my past? No, I saved Noelle that night because I saw how she wanted to be away from that creep. That was it, and nothing more. There’s no coincidence. None at all.

“Maverick?” She tilts her head and stares at me. “Do you want me to take this shirt off? Should I change?”

“Uh, sorry. No, no, it’s fine. I don’t.... mind. Um.” I swallow. “Will you—will you like some vinaigrette or just plain?”

“Plain works for me just fine, thank you.”

Nodding, I place the steaming bowl of lasagna, along with a small plate of chili. She thanks me with a smile.

A distant memory of Vanessa flits through my mind and I quickly blink it away. Taking a seat across from her, I watch her dress her lasagna with a spoonful of chili, stirring it delicately. Seeing her in that shirt brings me back to my past, a place that I’ve always buried in the deepest recesses of my brain. It’s been so long since I let myself go there. Since I allowed myself to feel this, and Noelle’s doing that all too

easily, sitting at the dining table and sharing a meal with me, while wearing an old shirt of my late wife's favorite band.

"Hmm," Noelle purrs through a mouthful of food, nodding her head in approval. When she swallows, she says, "This. This is the kind of meal that can put Guy Fieri out of business."

I gaze at her steadily. "That good, huh?"

"The best. The very best." She raises her brows. "You're not eating?"

"Not hungry."

She shrugs a shoulder. "More for me, then, I guess." She raises her spoon to her mouth for another bite. "Okay, you've managed to convince me. This is a ten." She licks her lips. "Mm. How'd you learn how to cook so good?"

"My late wife taught me. She was teaching culinary school when we met. I guess it's easy to say she did a good job with that, didn't she?"

"Yeah, she absolutely did." Then after a pause, she says, "Tell me about her."

My head rears back. "You want to know about her?"

Noelle nods. "Back at the hospital, you were telling about her and I..." her voice trails off.

"You want to know more?"

She gulps and lowers her gaze. Nodding, she says, "But I don't want to pry."

I smile at her. “You’re not, trust me.”

It’s been so long since I talked about Vanessa. So long since I let myself think about her.

Taking a big breath, I begin. “Well, we met in Michigan. I’d just finished at Wayne and she was also rounding up a program at a cooking school. We met at a taco joint, of all places.” I chuckle, recalling the incident. “You know, those with the awnings and the terrible customer service. Anyways, a rude worker mixed up her order and wouldn’t change it, and she’s yelling at him, ready to cause a scene. I’m behind her, watching the whole thing happen and I’m like, ‘Damn, this one’s definitely got it,’ and I just fell in love with her right there.”

Noelle’s smiling at me. “Then what happens next?”

“I tried to step in, play the macho man and all, and she just straight off shuts me up and tells me to mind my business. She’s like, ‘I’m doing the talking here. I don’t need your unwarranted interference’, and damn, I nearly fell to my knees because that certainly did me in.” Noelle bursts out laughing and I do, too. “It was funny, really. She had a mouth on her and she wasn’t scared to use it when it mattered. Long story short, the owner apologized over the mix-up and gave her not one, but two tacos and told her to come again next time.”

“Did she?”

“Without fail. Also, that’s where I proposed to her.”

“Oh...” Noelle’s eyes are glistening with tears.

“Yeah,” I smile. “Felipe, the, uh, the owner, he made us a taco cake. And it was damn near the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Noelle smiles back at me. “I bet it was.”

“When we married, we had to leave for New York. We’d saved up enough money to open up her own restaurant. I started a finance job. Things were going on very well, until she fell sick. She couldn’t go to work, so she took up a painting hobby, helping out with murals and banners and stuff like that, for the neighborhood.”

“When did she die?”

Sighing, I study the table, a heaviness tightening around my chest. “Three years after we moved to New York. She was about to turn thirty... and it was just fifteen days to her birthday.”

Swallowing a large lump of emotions, I scrape back the dining chair and stand. “I have to go to bed.”

“Oh.” Her disappointment is evident on her face.

“You know how to operate the dishwasher?”

“I’ll just do it by hand.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“No, I think I’m good.”

Tucking the chair in, I take my plate in.

“Thank you so much for doing this.” Noelle’s voice is barely audible.

“It’s okay. Goodnight, Noelle.”

She returns it. “Goodnight, Maverick.”

Chapter Seventeen

Noelle

The aroma of cooking eggs gets me out of bed the next day.

I roll onto my side and stare at the closed window drapes. Inhaling the sheets, I close my eyes in pleasure. They are butter soft and the bed is like a cloud, and it smells a bit like Maverick.

Maverick!

I jolt awake and quickly regret it. My head is aching terribly. God, it's been an eventful twenty-four hours. Everything out there is bleak, and it seems to be getting absolutely worse. I should go to Aunt Jessica's today to see my mom, but I just don't have the mental energy. I need time alone to lick my wounds and heal. I'm okay ... empty, but doing okay.

With a grunt, I bury my head under the pillow. The memories of last night come flooding through me. Abbie. Oh, Abbie. I can't ever forget that look of pure terror on her face

when she was strapped on that stretcher. She was truly scared, scared to be there, scared to seek help— and I've never understood why. Why does she resent it? Why does she always run away from the one thing that can fix her?

Groaning, I push myself up and stagger to the bathroom. Maverick, thankfully, put out a new toothbrush and toothpaste the night before. I clean myself up with a quick shower.

Descending the last of the stairs, I swallow hard. This house is massive. I'm willing to bet my entire month's salary that there's some sort of ridiculous swimming pool in the back of it somewhere, and that each individual item of furniture inside is worth more than all of my worldly possessions put together.

Probably even the welcome mat at the front door is worth more than everything I own.

The floor is cool, white stone, probably some sort of marble that I would recognize if I were fancier. The staircase has a banister that is actually gilded so it looks like it's made of gold. And in the three-story living room is a giant wall covered in granite with water running down the sides in several streams, each lit by a single lightbulb.

The furniture is all black leather and chrome, of course, and I can even tell it costs more than my monthly salary to sit on anything here.

Padding barefoot to the kitchen, the sight of Maverick in an apron takes me aback. For a second, I lose my voice. He's wearing a white T-shirt that hugs his biceps, making him look so damn appealing. His dark hair is swept back from his face,

emphasizing chiseled cheekbones and a jawline that makes me drool. He's completely clean-shaven this morning. So yummy

Girl, focus.

Shaking my head, I step up to the island. "Um," I clear my throat. "Good morning."

He turns to me and grins. "Hey, good morning. You're just in time."

"Uh," I draw out a chair and sit. "Just in time for what?"

"Breakfast."

"What are you making?"

"Food," he says simply.

Oh, well...

"How long did I sleep?"

"Ten hours tops. Orange juice or water?"

"Juice, please." I pause. "Do you have lemonade?"

He glances at me over his shoulders. "Yeah, why?"

"I like to mix them together."

"Lemonade and orange juice?"

"Yeah, it's really good. You should try it."

"That's a lot of acid intake, Quinn. You should cut it."

Shrugging, I pick at a frayed thread on my T-shirt. "It's never hurt me."

"Yet. It's never hurt you yet."

He crosses the room and places a tall glass of juice and a plate of scrambled eggs, diced bacon, and six slices of toast in front of me. “Eat up.”

He reaches underneath the island and gives me my phone. “Here. Charged that for you during the night.”

I give him a grateful smile and unlock it. There’s a new text message from my mom.

I’m fine. I was asleep when you called. Your aunt and I are going to see a movie tonight.

I reread the message, over and again, trying to decipher any hidden context but there’s none. Short, simple, and almost cursory, but fair enough. Making a mental note to call Aunt Jessica later for confirmation, I quickly send in a reply.

So glad you’re doing okay, mom. Have fun at the movies! I’ll call to check up later, xoxo <3

My mind draws back to Abbie and I sigh inwardly.

There are moments in your life that you know you will remember forever.

Certain situations that are poignant and helped shaped who you are.

Last night was one of them. I get a vision of the hurt on her face and my chest constricts. I keep going over and over it in my mind, and I just want to know that she’s all right. I stare at my phone. I need to call the doctor to find out how she’s doing. He’s promised to update us as soon as she’s stable. I wonder how long that’s going to take.

Setting the phone down, I pick up my fork and start to dig in. Maverick is watching me, an unreadable expression on his handsome face.

“Everything okay?”

I nod, reaching for my glass to hide my eyes. “Yeah, definitely. This is delicious, by the way.”

He nods in appreciation, then says, “You talk in your sleep.”

Leaning back in my chair, I gape at him. What the hell? “How’d you know?”

“Yesterday, when driving you here. You were mumbling something. Something about your mom. You kept telling her not to leave you.”

Lowering my eyes, I stare at the edge of the island counter that was currently serving as breakfast table, past the meal on my plate. “I see.”

He says nothing as he goes back to the kitchen. When he comes out, he’s holding a plate and a mug of coffee. He sets it down across me and takes a seat, then begins to eat. We eat our food in silence until I can’t take it anymore. Exhaling aloud, I say, “My parents are getting a divorce.”

He stops chewing for a while, and gazes at me. “Why?”

“Irreconcilable differences.”

“Which means?”

“My father’s a serial cheat, apparently.”

Inhaling deeply, Maverick looks away. “How are you taking it? Can’t imagine it’s easy.”

“I don’t know. I’m sad. Angry. Devastated. Pick one. Or all of them.” I tear a piece of brown toast and pop it into my mouth. “I should also mention grief but your food is somehow subduing that, so, thanks a lot.”

A ghost of a smile lurks at his lips. “How long have they been together?”

“Thirty years.”

“That’s a long time.”

“A lifetime.”

“What’s going to happen now?”

Well,” I chew slowly on my eggs, as I think about his question. “The worst that can happen is a property repossession.”

“Of whose?”

“My mom’s.”

Maverick’s eyes are filled with disbelief. “She signed a prenup?”

Glancing away, I wipe my mouth with my napkin. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Please.”

He raises his hands in surrender. “Fair enough.”

Biting my tongue, I ease myself out of the chair. “I’ll do the dishes. It’s the least I can do to help.”

“Not on my watch.” He stands and clears his plate. Brushing past me, lifting my empty plate as he moves away. “You need to rest.”

Seriously, what’s with this man?

Folding my arms, I watch him stack the dirty dishes in the dishwasher. “I’m fine.”

“Say it till you believe it.”

I smile. “How original.”

He shuts the door and moves to the sink to wash his hands.

I stare at him, noticing his practical meticulousness. Everything he does is done with purpose and skillful efficiency. No form of dilly-dallying and what-not.

He tosses the paper napkin in the trash on his way out. “What’d you want to do, then?”

I shrug. “Whatever you want to do.”

He chuckles. “Whatever I want to do?”

“Yeah, I’d like to know what you do for fun.”

His lips twist into a lopsided curve. “I see. Ever heard of virtual reality?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m twenty-three, not seventy. Of course I’ve heard of VR. I’ve never used them before, though.”

He turns away and I follow him to the lounge. “Well, that’s how I unwind.”

“With VR?”

“Yeah.” He reaches for a cardboard box and places it on the coffee table. I sit next to him on the couch, fascinated. “I used to have an extra set of glasses but not anymore. An old friend of mine asked me to keep them and I gave them to him.” He pulls out a medium-sized aviator-looking pair of glasses. “So, this is the perfect thing for you.”

“Why’s that?”

“It temporarily distorts reality, and God knows you really need that right now.”

Well, he’s not wrong.

“What’s your dream country?”

“Uh... Fiji.”

“Beaches, hmm. That’s a good choice. Now, I’m going to turn it on and it’s going to load for a while. See, this little button here? That’s your little ticket to your island, princess.”

I giggle.

“Like to surf?”

“Oh, yes!” I clap my hands in glee. “I do, I do. I really do.”

He slips the glasses on my face and presses a button. It instantly brightens and I recoil at the brand-new view. I’m no longer in Maverick’s house. I’m running on the beach, with a surfboard in hand.

“Oh my God! This is fucking amazing!”

I surf on the beach for a while, screaming now and then at the tremendous waves. When I finally take off the glasses,

Maverick is staring at me. We pull together like magnets and with one mind, we start to kiss. He inches closer until our bodies are touching and a wave of pure emotion spills over me.

I'm not sure if it's the adrenaline wearing off, or if I'm feeling overly needy given everything. But the emotional connection we made last night is merging with the deep physical ache I feel for him whenever we're together. I don't know how long we lie there making out, enjoying just the touch, the feel, the taste of each other, but soon kissing is not enough. My breasts feel heavy and my core is throbbing. I push him onto his back and as he and I come together as one, when he pushes inside me, we make love. I have no other way to describe the coming together of our bodies. It has never been this intense. This deep connection that feels like our souls are bonding with one another.

When we finally reach our peaks of ecstasy together, we come as one, so in synch it is like our bodies and hearts have melded together as our moans echo through the room.

When I come down from the highest high of my life, turning on my side, I snuggle close to him, the warmth of him spreading through me.

“Come here, baby,” he mumbles. “Let's get some sleep.”

“Our first sleepover, Maverick. Isn't this exciting?” My sarcasm lacks its usual bite. He's right. I'm tired and I know he is too. And I just want to erase the memory of everything from my head. He's lying on his back, and my head is on his

bare chest. He smells fresh and clean, and his skin is so warm. From my position, I can hear his heart thumping beneath my ear. Steady, soothing beats.

There's something different about us, though. This feels more intimate.

Maybe it's because of the confession he made last night. Opening himself up to me, allowing me to experience, at least secondhand, the traumatic events he's gone through. He'd been so vulnerable, and for a moment I'd almost felt inadequate. As if this glimpse into his soul that he was trusting me with was beyond what I was capable of taking on.

I'm seeing the same vulnerability in his eyes right now, and I can't help but feel—

Nope, I won't go there. One simple heart-to-heart doesn't change anything, regardless of what we just experienced. This entire relationship we have is sustained by two things: sex and our workplace. Nothing more, nothing less.

Even considering this could be anything more scares me, and with a man like Maverick, it'll never happen.

Maverick and I settle into a spooning position on the couch and he lightly traces circles around my belly as his arms envelop me. Then he whispers, "Noelle?"

"Hmm?"

"What are you doing Friday night?"

"Nothing, I think."

“Good, ‘cause I want to take you out on a date?”

Tilting my head backward, I frown, eyeing him suspiciously. “Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you want that?”

“Because I want to take you out on a real date.”

My heart skips a beat. “I thought you only wanted to have sex with me.”

“Yes. Badly. But maybe I want something more too.”

And I have no idea what to do with that, because something is changing between us, but I have no idea how to feel about that.

Ever since the event, he made me feel cared for. Safe. Precious. Almost loved.

I’ve never felt this way before.

And more than anything, that scares me to death.

Chapter Eighteen

Maverick

When I park my car at MediaHire, I turn to Noelle.
“Have an amazing day, sweetheart. I know it might not be easy being back with everything you are going through, but I’m always here for you, okay?”

She just nods and gives me a half smile. “Thank you.”

I can’t help myself, so I kiss her before we get out of the car and head for the elevator. When we get inside, we leave the world outside for a few seconds. It’s just us in this bubble, and I kiss her again just because I can.

When we get to her floor, I wish her a good first day back and as the doors close, I’m left alone. Time we go our separate ways, but I wish we didn’t have to.

Everything that happened after the event has somehow shifted our relationship, hopefully for the best, though I’m not sure exactly how I feel about everything and especially about Noelle.

As I reach my floor, I go straight to the meeting room.

We have a deal on the making. A well-known company named Nexus. It has the potential to make us grow even more if everything goes smoothly.

I'm meeting with my team so we can hash out the potential gamble that'll determine what will happen.

Scanning the faces of the people in the room, I tap my fountain pen against the table, frowning. "To expand MediaHire's prospects, Nexus is the best way forward."

Sara's the first to clear her throat. "I beg to differ."

Lifting an arch eyebrow at her, I ask, "Why?"

"The stakes on this are too high."

"I agree," Chris says. "It all seems a bit rushed."

"Exactly," Sara says. "Besides, Nexus have always been in the news for one controversy or the other. Why should we give them the privilege of doing business with us?"

I shrug easily. "They're dedicated and they're committed."

"Mr. Thatcher is right," Joe Weston takes a sip from his glass of water. "Nexus has all the potential to elevate us to the pinnacle. We can't afford to miss out on that opportunity, Ms. Carter."

"Exactly." I nod. "We're basically tenderfoots when it comes to things like this. It also doesn't help that we're a weaker and more vulnerable unit."

"All of which started when you did," Chris states.

Silence descends upon the room.

Sitting up, I cock my head at him. “Excuse me?”

“I’m just saying you should know better than going with this idea. It’s a terrible one.”

Joe lowers his brows, squinting at Chris. “Why do you say that?”

“Nexus only works with agencies and organizations that are well established. We aren’t exactly that.”

Joe’s smile is thin. “They worked with Derrico a year ago, when they were just opening their tech startup. Now, look at them, they’re thriving.”

“Under a terrible working ratio,” Sara cuts in, a disdainful grimace on her face. “Look, I don’t mean to burst your bubble, Mr. Weston, but they weren’t exactly the Microsoft prodigy everyone expected them to be. They’re failing, period.”

“Which will happen to us if we take whatever Nexus is offering to us,” Chris says with a nod, echoing Sara’s words.

Joe looks at me. “What’d you say, Thatcher?”

I pause, looking hard at the tempered-glass table, then I say, “We call in a risk analyst. They go over the necessary details, and if they give their okay, we’re in. If it’s not, we pull out. How’s that?”

They nod in unison.

“Good,” I say. “That’ll be all. You’re dismissed.”

“Alright.” Chris rises to his feet and picks up the document file. “We’ll be reviewing the rest of the proposition and we’ll keep you informed if we have any other concerns.”

Joe leaves the room.

“Chris, a word, please.” I say as he is about to follow Joe out.

Everyone is clearing the room and Sara is looking at us with a frown on her face. “You too, Sara.”

She just nods and stays seated. Chris huffs and sits beside her. I guess they are trying to present a united front.

When the room is cleared, I start, “I have no idea what happened here today but I expect more professionalism from the both of you.” Their mouths hang open and they start talking at the same time.

I raise my hand to shut them up.

“I’m sick and tired of certain attitudes and behaviors I’ve either witness or been told about. You two have now been warned. This is a place of work. My company. And I won’t tolerate anyone who hurts our work environment or our work overall. This company is a ship, and it needs to run like one. I have no problem throwing any dead weight overboard. Do I make myself clear?”

“But...” Christ tries.

“Mr. Thatcher...” is Sara’s attempt.

“This is not a dialogue. This is me laying down the law, so it’s a yes or no question. Do. I. Make. Myself. Clear?”

They huff and puff, but say, “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now get back to work.”

Without a backward glance, I leave the room.

I hope this is enough to keep them in check. I know both of them still give Noelle a hard time, and Sara is still acting like a man-eater sometimes, so this is a way to maybe draw a line and if any of them steps on it, there will be consequences. I just have to consider which ones when the time comes. But like I said, I’m not above firing them if it comes to that.

I’m about to take the elevator to my office when Noelle strides in before the door closes.

“Hey you, going up?” I ask casually, sliding my hands into my suit pocket.

She nods.

“What floor?”

“Uh, fifteen.”

We ride in silence. I take my time to admire her in the elevator mirror. God, I can still remember the kiss we shared in this elevator this morning. And she looks so hot today. Her alluring lips are coated with a shimmery pink gloss and make-up on her eyes that seemed more defined than before. There’s a small amount of cleavage protruding from her silk blouse under her black blazer.

Glancing below at the bulge slowly rising in my pants, I mentally shake my head.

Keep it down, son. Keep it down.

I try to get my mind off the insane idea of throwing her over my shoulder and taking her back to my office to make her mine. Own her. Mark her. Make her beg for me. So, instead, I say, “You look beautiful.”

A smile paints her lips as a hint of red blushes her cheeks. “Thank you.”

Keeping my voice neutral, I continue, “How has your day been? Any trouble so far?” I know Chris and Sara can’t have bothered her yet, since they have been busy being pains in my ass, but there are her parents and Abbie that I know she worries about.

I can’t help but admit to myself that I’ve been pining for Noelle. I crave everything about her, her eyes on mine, her body, her smile, her smell, her touch. I want to hold her so bad it hurts. But unlike when we got here, just before office hour, this time we can be interrupted at any time and I want us both to present a professional front. But maybe just a small kiss...

“Noelle—”

Just then, her phone rings. Digging into her bag, she peers at the caller ID on the screen. She frowns before she answers, “Hello? Yes?” Her back stiffens and she looks like she is expecting bad news. I reach out to put my hand on her back. Show her my support. Remind her I’m here for her.

I never do touch her, because at that moment the elevator doors open at her floor and she runs out.

What the hell was that about?

Three minutes later, as I walk into my office, Dennis sidles up to me, wearing a look of apprehension. “Sir, Mr. Landry is on line four. He wants to talk to you about the Nexus deal and he doesn’t sound pleased.”

Sighing, I hang my coat suit on the rack and sit behind my desk. Andre is the divisional project manager and he’s never pleased by anything. Matter of fact, I have a feeling he secretly resents my guts, as well as everyone else’s. He’s efficient to the core, but a proper misanthrope if I’ve ever known one.

“I’ll take it later. Oh, and, Dennis?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Find me a nearby florist listing and send it to me.”

Perplexed, he does a double take. “Sir?”

“Just do it.”

“Alright.”

A moment later, I’m on the phone with a written number Dennis handed to me.

On the first ring, a woman’s voice says briskly, “Hello. Welcome to Azealia’s Bloom, how can we help you?”

“Yes, I’d like to make an order. Do you do deliveries?”

“Yes, sir. Single or bouquet?”

“Uh, I’d like a bouquet, please.”

“Alright, sir. Any specific flower in mind?”

“Uh,” I lean back in my seat, unsure of what to say. Damn, what does Noelle like? Roses are the most cliché choice to pick, hardly worth an apology. What does she smell like? What does her fragrance remind me of again? “Tulips. I’d like tulips.”

I send her the details of the billing address and hang up. I lean back in my seat, a pleasant smile on my face.

Time to set the wheels in motion.

Chapter Nineteen

Noelle

I run out of the elevator without a second thought. This is amazing news.

“She’s awake? Oh, um, can I come see her? Right now? Yes, yes, definitely! I’ll be there soon. Thank you so much. Yes, of course, bye.”

Oh, my God, Abbie’s awake.

As I get to my desk, I hesitate.

What should I do?

A huge lump of emotion is stuck in my throat.

Picking up my phone, I call Maverick. Now that I’ve calmed down a bit, I feel bad that I just left him there without an explanation. He was there to help me with Abbie, so I should tell him she is allowed to get visits now.

When he answers, I just dive right in. “I’m sorry I just ran out of the elevator and left you standing there. That was the doctor calling.”

“Good news?”

“Abbie’s awake.” I’m almost giddy right now.

“That’s terrific. What are you waiting for? You need to go. Can I give you a ride?”

“But it’s not my lunch break yet... and we still have hours to go.” I have no idea what to do.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll take care of it. Let’s go. You should be with her.”

I let out a big breath of relief. “Okay. Thank you, for everything.”

He says gruffly, “It’s nothing. I’ll meet you in that parking lot by my car in five minutes.” Then he hangs up the phone.

The drive there is nice but silent. We are both lost in thought.

When he gets to the hospital he says, “You go in and be with her for as long as you want or as long as they let you.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be waiting for you to let me know when you are ready to leave. Okay?”

“Thank you so much. I feel all I do lately is thanking you, I owe you so much.”

“You owe me nothing.” He leans forward and kisses me on the lips. A fleeting but very charged kiss that leaves me wanting more. “Now go, and text me when you are ready to leave, okay?”

“Okay, I promise. Thanks, Maverick.”

“Anytime.”

I get out of the car and run inside to the nurses station to find out which room is Abbie’s.

After being told, I go to her. As I get to the door, she looks so frail. I feel like crying all over again.

“Hey,” I say and hesitantly get inside the room.

“She opens her arms to me and I run to hug her.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I was so mean to you and all you wanted to do was help. Thank you.”

“It’s okay. You’re okay now. Or you will be soon.”

“No, it isn’t. I really wanted to die. I’d probably succeeded if it weren’t for you. You saved my life.”

I stare at Abbie, sadness tugging within me. She looks almost unrecognizable to me. Her shoulders are slumped against the bed and there’s a dullness in her eyes. Her hair is in a blue cap and she’s wearing a matching hospital paper gown.

“Abbie,” I whisper.

“I know. I know what you’re going to say. I know I didn’t deserve to put myself through any of that. It’s just...”

“What?”

Exhaling aloud, she closes her eyes briefly. When she opens them, they’re pooling with tears. “I hate myself so much, ‘Elle. So, so much.”

“Hey.” I scoot closer to the bed and lay my hand on hers. “This isn’t your fault, Abbie. It’s not.”

“It is.” She sniffs. “Ever since that day at the gym, ever since what happened, I... I’ve never felt the same.”

“Everyone gets a nasty stomach bug from eating crappy food, Abs. I keep telling you all the time. This isn’t something you should always beat yourself over.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “No, ‘Elle, it wasn’t... it wasn’t the cafeteria food that caused all this. It was something else.”

Tilting my head, I sit up in my chair. Craning my body closer, I blink. “What are you talking about, Abbie?”

She goes silent, concentrating her attention elsewhere as she picks at something on the bed sheets.

“Abbie?”

Her lips wobble as she raises her teary eyes to me. “I’m sorry, Noelle. I know I shouldn’t have listened to them, and I tried, I tried so hard but they wouldn’t stop talking. Their voices were in my head a lot.”

My breath quickens. “Whose voices?”

“Eden’s.”

That whispered word knocks the breath out of me. Exhaling sharply, I lean back in my seat, staring at Abbie. “And her friends?”

She hesitates, then nods. “Wh—when I was in the bathroom, I... I’d just finished cleaning up when she walked

in with Kathryn and Delaney. You... you remember them?"

I nod. These are the people that constantly bullied Abbie and I. They were seniors, and they enjoyed picking on us. My fists clench in fury and I swallow hard, knowing what's coming next.

Looking away, Abbie continues, "They laughed when they saw me. Eden called me all sorts of names. Said... said I was a fat loser and I was better off dead." She pauses to catch her breath. "Of course, I'd heard all that before, but for some reason, that particular moment was a paradigm shift. I can't explain, but I never felt the same after she said that."

"What happened next?"

Abbie swallows hard. "It... it all happened so fast. When they left, I got back into the bathroom and I... I did it. I stuck my finger inside and everything came out. I remember feeling... powerful," she whispers. "Like I was in complete control of my body. And the gripes, they— they just disappeared."

Gazing at her, my mind goes back to the moments when Abbie always disappeared in the middle of whatever she was doing. After gym, during classes, or too frequently, after lunchtime at the cafeteria. I never questioned it because I didn't quite see a reason to. I always assumed it was a typical standard to use the bathroom, especially after a meal.

Nine years later and I'm now discovering the truth.

Without a word, I reach over and embrace Abbie, hot tears burning through my eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry you had to go through that. I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

She circles my back lightly, sniffing back her own tears. “Don’t say that, Ellie. It wasn’t your fault. You’ve looked out for me too. All these years, even when my family didn’t want me. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I should have told you, Noelle. I’m so sorry.”

She’s crying as she’s talking, her tears soaking through my blouse. When she pulls away, her eyes are red and her cheeks are wet. “Again, I’m so sorry for what I said to you before, at the house.” She sniffs. “I remember everything. And... oh God, it was so stupid. I should never have even said that.” She expels a shaky breath. “It’s... it’s not true. None of it. You’re nothing like that, Noelle. Nothing.”

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I pull back the bedcover and gingerly ease myself next to Abbie. Luckily, I don’t weigh much so I don’t take up a lot of space. I wrap my arms around her and kiss the top of her head. “You don’t have to apologize, Abs. It’s fine.”

“But—”

“Shh.” I flick away a lone tear sliding down her left cheek. “No more words. I’m not mad, I swear.”

After blowing her nose and cleaning her last few tears, she smiles up at me weakly. “Best friends forever?”

Stroking her hair, I smile back. “Best friends forever.”

She gazes at me, a gentle smile playing at her lips. Then she buries her face into my chest and hugs me tight. When she doubles up, she asks, “How’s Maverick?”

My smile dies a bit. “Good. He’s, uh, good.”

Abbie tilts her head and gives me a knowing look. “Trouble in paradise?”

“No. I mean, I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“What happened?”

I sigh, lifting my eyes to the ceiling. “I think he’s falling for me.”

Abbie’s face morphs into a large grin.

“Oh, god,” I hit her arm lightly and groan. “Don’t do that!”

“Why?” she asks, a bit puzzled. “It’s good news.”

Bringing my palm to my face, I let out another groan. “No, it’s not.”

“Why’d you say so? He’s charismatic, he’s rich, he’s good-looking, what more do you want?”

I sigh and throw my head back on Abbie’s pillow. “I don’t know. Well, I do know. It’s just...” I trail off and look away, biting my lip glumly.

“Sheesh, girl, make up your mind, will you?”

“I like him. A lot.”

“Then go for him.”

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“Well, for starters, I don’t want to commit.”

“Because of your parents?”

I nod, stifling the urge to cry again.

“Oh, honey, I understand how you feel. Really, I do.”

“I’m scared I’m going to end up like them. Heck, I’m scared of even having to commit. I mean, the thought of having to spend my entire life with someone is the scariest thing ever. Please tell me you understand, Abbie.”

“Perfectly. I understand perfectly, Noelle. However, the only thing I can say is that you’re the only one in control of your life. Not your parents, or me, or Maverick. It’s just you, babe. And whatever decision you make out of this should never compromise with your happiness, because you deserve to be happy, Noelle.”

I nod. I know she is right. I just don’t know if I’m strong enough to take the leap. “Thank you,” I say, smiling at Abbie.

“Anytime.” Then with a grunt, she pushes back the covers to show me the nasogastric feeding tube sticking out from her flat stomach. “By the way, see this? It’s so cool. I’m like preggy but without no bump.”

Laughing, I lean in to stare at it. “Does it hurt?”

“Nope.”

“When do you think you’re going to be out of it?”

“Dunno. We’ll have to wait for the doc.”

“I feel bad for you, Abbie.”

“Why?”

“Hospitals have shitty foods.”

She gives me a bemused look. “Who says I’m planning to eat that crap?”

I’ve been with the doctor and we’re both monitoring Abbie’s post-meal rounds. Her meal plans are basic and heavy on a lot of calories, which will, over the next few days, build up to the stipulated twenty-five hundred plus calories. She has also been placed on a refeeding menu for around three weeks. Because it’ll be her first solid meal prep since regaining consciousness, it’s directly sourced from the hospital cafeteria, much to my best friend’s visible distaste.

Dr. Faber has also brought in a nurse to watch her for a specified period of time. The evaluation on Abbie’s mental and physical health means she’ll be on bedrest until she has clearance.

Which won’t be for at least six to eight weeks.

She holds my hand when she’s administered a sleeping sedative and, before I leave, the kind dietician, with a kinder smile, promises to update me on her progress.

It’s nighttime when I finally reach my apartment. I’m tired but a little fulfilled. I told Maverick hours ago that he was dismissed from chauffeur services. He tried to argue with me

but relented when I told him I'd let him know if I needed anything and that I'd let him know when I got home.

Stepping on to the porch, I notice the familiar cardboard box next to a beautiful bouquet of tulips at my front door.

A tingle of anticipation flutters across my belly.

There's only one person that must have come from.

Heaving the package, I open the door and set it down the dining table, going back to pick up the bouquet, which I immediately put in water.

I kick off my shoes and shut the door, then start to unwrap the package. It's a sleeveless burgundy flower print cami dress and a matching scarf. There's a black boxed pair of strappy heels underneath. Tucked into the box is a card. My heart flutters in anticipation as I unfold it. Frowning, I turn the card from side to side. There's nothing on it.

That's odd.

Rummaging in my purse, I pick up my phone and dial his number. Maverick answers on the second ring, his voice warm and tingly. Myriads of tiny goosebumps envelop my arms.

"Did you send me flowers and a package?" There's a slight hesitation. "No."

I roll my eyes. *How very subtle.* "Uh, are you lying?"

"Yes."

I chuckle. *God, this man...*

"I take it you like it, then?"

“Yes, both the bouquet and the content of the package are very beautiful, thank you.”

His voice shows he is smiling when he asks, “How’s Abbie?”

“She’s doing great. She’s started treatment already.”

“Is she going to be okay, then?”

“Well...” I saunter to the couch and collapse on it. “She’s pulling through, thankfully. Uh, the doc thinks she’ll be released in time for her to start work with the specialist, so that’s what we’re all counting on.”

“That’s good.” “Yeah, it is.”

There’s a beat of awkward silence until I clear my throat. “Um, I should go.”

“Wait.”

Oh?

“Are you free tomorrow? After work, that is.”

Clearing my throat, I toss back my hair.

Play it cool, sis. Play it very cool.

“Tomorrow?” I click my tongue, pretending to mull over the question. “Um, I’d have to check my schedule.”

He laughs quietly. “You don’t have a schedule, Quinn.”

My cheeks burn and I’m grateful he can’t see the mortification spreading over my face. “Well, I don’t, but I do have work.”

“Work ends by five. I hope you don’t have plans after that.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m taking you on that date. And I’m also not taking no for an answer, Noelle.”

I roll my eyes, humored. The sheer arrogance of this man.

“So, what do you say? You want to go on a date with me?”

Well, he seriously doesn’t expect me to say no, I mean, not after buying me a dress for the occasion. Also, on the positive side, every girl likes a good date. We don’t like to say no to that kind of thing.

“Hmm.” I chew on the inside of my cheek, pretending to be deep in thought, even though he can’t see me. “I’m not sure...”

“Noelle... please.”

Keeping the excitement out of my voice. “Fine. Tomorrow works for me.”

“I’ll pick you up. And, Noelle?”

I close my eyes, savoring the thrill of his words as they zing through my body. “Yeah?”

“Don’t lie about having a schedule to me again.”

I giggle at his assertiveness. “Of course, Mr. Thatcher. It won’t happen again. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” He laughs softly before hanging up the phone.

Jumping out of the couch, I twirl around my living room,
pure frisson of delight racing through my veins.

Oh, I just can't wait!

I have a feeling it's going to be a night to remember!

Chapter Twenty

Maverick

“**W**hat the hell is taking so long?”
“We should be getting feedback by tomorrow, Mr. Thatcher. I’ve mailed the rest of the copies to Mr. Burnham, as well as Ms. Carter. They’ll contact you as soon as Nexus has drawn up the terms of their proposition.”

“Good.”

As I turn off the phone my mind immediately goes to Noelle and our date tonight. I want to show her how special she is and how things can be between us.

The door opens as I replace my phone in my tux pocket. Noelle walks up to me and, she looks amazing.

I step forward and kiss her cheek. “Hi.”

Her cheeks go slightly pink. “Hey.”

I set her hand on my arm and walk her to my car, opening the door to her and holding her hand while she gets in. I go around and get in too and start the car.

“Want some music?”

“No, thank you.”

Backing out of the neighborhood, I glance at her. “How’s Abbie?”

“She’s doing fine. She got her tube out this morning and she’s been regretting it ever since.” She unlocks her phone and start scrolling for something on the screen. “She, uh, she sent me this.”

When we are at a stop sign, she brings the illuminated screen to my face. It’s a selfie of Abbie in a hospital gown, holding up a bowl of something that looks like gruel. There’s a tag underneath the message that reads, “Second helping of grits for dinner and I feel like a buffalo” alongside a couple of crying face emojis.

“Glad to see she’s doing better.”

That part is rather much true. There’s no resemblance with the girl I saw at Noelle’s apartment. The abject dejection in her eyes is gone and she has some color on her cheeks.

Her progress is clear.

I pause at a red light. Noelle chuckles to herself as she types something to her. “Now, she’s calling herself a porcupine. I swear, she’s so dramatic.”

“She’s lucky to have you.”

“Well,” she lets out a breath as she puts her phone back in her purse, “I’m just glad she’s doing better. We’ve been

through this before, so it's not new. The only thing I'm scared of is her relapsing again."

"That's not going to happen." The light turns green and I step on the accelerator. "Besides, have I told you, you look beautiful tonight?"

Noelle crosses her arm and gives me a reproachful look. "Not even once, Mr. Thatcher."

Reaching over the console for her hand, I lift it to my lips to kiss her knuckles. "Apologies, Miss Quinn."

She laughs and jerks her hand away. "Focus. Um, where are we going again?"

"Reece's."

Instantly, her eyes bulge. "On Main?"

"Yeah?"

"It's expensive. Heck, a meal costs half my paycheck."

"So?"

She goes silent for a while. Then she anxiously glances at me. "Are you planning to propose to me or something?"

A deep laugh rumbles from my belly. "Where did that come from?"

"I don't see why you've got me dressed up and all to go to a fancy, not to mention *very* expensive place."

"You deserve it. You deserve all the good things, Noelle."

She blushes furiously. “Just to be on the safe side, I have a question. There’s no ring? I mean, you’re not planning to propose on this date, right?”

I glance at her. “Is that what you want?”

“No.” She sounds panicky.

Ouch.

“Then I assure you, there’s none.”

We fall back into silence as Noelle gazes out the passenger window at the city lights. I take in the shape of her legs through the semi-darkness of the car. This dinner date isn’t just a break away from the apparent chaos of her personal life. It’s a break away from our professional lives too. It’s also my opportunity to talk to her. Get to know each other better.

I pull the car to the curb and kill the engine. An eager valet helps Noelle out and I tip him. He throws a mock salute as I lead Noelle inside. The maître d’ gives us a pleasant smile as he ushers us to a reserved table. When we’re seated, he asks, “May I bring you something to drink?”

“Uh,” Noelle casts a cursory glance at the menu. “I’ll... I’ll just have red wine, please.”

“I’ll have a glass of martini, Edward. No ice, of course.”

When Edward leaves, Noelle leans across and whispers, “I’ve never been to a place like this before.”

Deciding to tease her, I bring my head forward and say, “I know. It shows.”

Thankfully, she catches on to the joke and laughs. “I hate you, really.”

And I think I'm starting to fall in love with you...

“This reminds me of something,” she says in between chuckles. “Something that Abbie and I did when we were teenagers.”

“What’s that?”

“Okay, get this. We were at an event with our parents and it was kind of a big deal, you know the ones, where everyone secretly has this need to impress the other person. Right. So, the event was being held in a restaurant similar to this. There were a lot of...”

I tune her out, watching her talk, her hands moving in sync with her words. She’s smiling brightly, her eyes radiating nothing but happiness. The covered candle lights cast a soft, ethereal glow on her skin, giving her an indescribable allure.

God, she’s so fucking beautiful.

The day we met at that diner was the day everything changed for me. I thought I’d lost her for good, until I ran into her again at MediaHire. That’s the moment I knew everything had been set in stone. And ever since she walked into my life again, wearing her sensible yet sexy office attire, she’s been getting to me.

There are so many things about her that I find attractive.

The radiant way she smiles at me sometimes...the way she looks at me when she’s paying close attention. It’s like I can

feel her attention on me. And I like it.

It's been a kind of torture. Seeing her, smelling her fragrance, being around her—every fucking workday—almost since I started this job.

She is mature beyond her years. Calm, collected, sweet, focused, reliable...with a ready laugh, even when she's stressed.

Yet, she also has a defiant side. She has boundaries and she's not afraid to draw them. She deflects my bullshit with remarkable ease sometimes.

And her banging body, her milky skin, and her luscious mouth, and that long, silky hair all drive me crazy.

Now, after nearly a month, I'm growing more attracted to her and less sure that our age difference matters. I want to find out if my instincts about her are right... whether she wants someone to settle down with, just like I do.

“Here you go,” the maître d' announces as he draws up to us. He's accompanied by a uniformed waiter who serves the drinks and goes away.

“What do you recommend, Edward?”

“Tonight, I'd go with the Chef's Surprise. It's a three-course meal that I'm sure you'll absolutely love. The chef has prepared a special dessert.”

“How's Chef Veif doing?”

“Very well, sir.”

“Tell him I have a guest, and I want to give her nothing but the finest dining experience,” I say, my eyes locked on Noelle. She smiles and looks away, her cheeks flushing deep scarlet.

Turning to me, Edward asks, “Shall I bring out the appetizers, then, sir?”

“Yes, please.” Catching his eyes, I give him a small nod of my head, my eyes sending a message. Understanding, he nods in return and slips away. I glance at Noelle. Her eyes are closed as she sips her wine. She opens them and exhales. Setting down the glass, she says, “That was the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“Jamal knows his stuff. He’s been trying to get me to switch to wines.”

“The owner? You know him?”

“We attended Harvard business school together.”

“Wow, you’ve certainly got the pedigree.”

“Not quite.” Flustered, I clear my throat. There’s a momentary lapse of discomfort that I get when I hear things like that. I know I’m supposed to take it in good faith, but it’s a bit foreign to me. Compliments have never been my strongest suit, especially when they’re lauding my accomplishments. And, yes, I know I’ve ambitiously worked my ass off to get to where I am.

Edward is back with another waiter, ready to roll out the first course of the night. With a flourish flick of his wrist, he

announces, “Candied carrots with honey, cumin, and paprika. Enjoy.”

We eat and we talk about anything and everything. I enjoy the meal immensely and the company even more. Noelle is the perfect date and I could see myself doing this with her for the rest of my life, if she’d let me.

When dessert comes, it is a chocolate lava cake and we decide to share it.

“Here,” I say lifting my spoon to her mouth.

Her pink cheeks make me want to follow that spoon with my mouth and lose myself on her.

Following my lead, she lifts her spoon to my lips and I’m loving this intimate moment even more than the heavenly dessert.

We feed each other the dessert and when we are done, I am so ready to take her home with me that I ask for the check immediately, so we can get out of here.

“I don’t want this night to be over yet. Is it okay to drive you to my house? We can take a walk in the garden or just sit on the porch and watch the stars for a while.”

She nods, eyes shining and a smile on her face.

Turning the keys in the ignition, I drive us home.

Home. When did I start to think of my house as home for us?

I know I'm falling for her. Hard, I just wish I knew if she feels something deeper for me. I can't deny that I can very easily envision sharing my life with the amazing woman sitting beside me. And the more I think about it, the more I imagine it, the more I want it for us.

"Thank you so much for bringing me here, Maverick. This night has been magical so far." Her voice takes me out of my head.

"Thank *you*, for allowing me to show you what a real date should look like and for letting me show you how a relationship should be. I know things are tough around you, but I want you to know that you can lean on me, if sometimes things feel too overwhelming."

I take her hand in mine and kiss her knuckles.

I just have to show her that this is worth fighting for. That *we* are worth fighting for.

If only tonight didn't have to end. Ever.

Chapter Twenty-One

Noelle

He lets go of my hand and puts his hand on my thigh.

First, his thumb draws a few circles, but soon his fingers are lightly tracing my inner thigh.

His touch is driving me crazy as his fingers draw closer and closer to where I want them but never really touch me where I need.

A soft moan escapes my lips and I caress the back of his neck. “What are we doing?”

“Well, I’m touching you. I love feeling your skin on mine.”

I’m wet and aching and he keeps torturing me until we get to his driveway.

When he parks the car and turns it off, his fingers finally find my moist pussy.

Leaning over the center console, he nips my ear and whispers, “I want to worship you tonight.”

I gasp in pleasure as his words are punctuated by him generously rubbing against my clit over my soaked panties. “Oh, yes. I’d love that.”

Leaning in, he takes my lips in his. When we break for a moment of intense, heavy breathing, I finally allow myself the luxury of reaching up and running my fingers through his hair. The texture is silky against my fingers, and the scent of his spicy shampoo intensifies, sending little pleasant tingles to pool in my belly, breathing deeply as he slides his finger inside me, inch by inch, filling me up.

“I need you,” I whisper, looking into his eyes. No hesitation.

We get out of the car and get inside. As soon as the door closes, he is on me. Kissing me, touching me. Owning me.

Pushing me up against the wall, he takes my leg and puts it around his waist.

“This time, I want you in my bed, “ he almost growls And I melt completely.

He carries me up the stairs, legs wrapped around his waist and kissing me the whole way there.

When we get there, he lays me carefully on the bed and kisses me some more, before I become impatient. I want these clothes off. His and mine. Now!

Rather than telling him, I show him by reaching for his belt.

Within seconds we are completely naked and his skin is blissfully touching mine as he fulfills what he said before.

For I don't know how long, I lose myself in the sensations he brings while he worships me completely with his mouth, his tongue, and his hands. I feel cherished, adored. Loved.

He drives me over the edge a couple of times before finally, *finally*, he's inside me, and it's even better than I could have imagined.

A small gasp escapes me as I come yet again, and he follows me into the bliss, releasing inside me.

When I finally come down, he pulls me to him and envelops me in his arms. We just stay like that, cuddling.

“Gah, I'm probably a mess.”

“Not to me,” he says, and kisses the top of my head. “From where I'm standing, you look beautiful, Noelle.”

He gets up to go to the bathroom and gets a wet towel, that he uses to clean me. It is an act of devotion and I feel like I'm falling deeper and deeper for this man at each passing minute.

When he is done, his eyes are running all over me with desire, right from my lips to my heaving breasts, and finding their way between my legs. He leans into me, laying his lips against my neck, kissing it up and down with so much softness you'd think my neck was made of porcelain. I close my eyes. It takes just that for me to get wet all over again. This is it, I'm sure I won't survive the night.

He kisses my chin and goes down to my neck again; this time he doesn't stop there, though, continuing down to my collarbone. He cups my breast, laying gentle kisses around

them in a maddening climb to my nipples. My muscles are already twitching, my whole body electrified with the perspective of his tongue on my nipples.

I moan as his tongue finally licks and explores my rosy peaks. When he flicks it, I gasp and hiss out a moan. I close my eyes, a stream of delight rippling through me.

More, more, more!

He rolls on top of me and lowers his head. Fitting my nipple between his lips, he sucks on it slowly as his fingers go down my belly and crawl down to my inner thigh. My hips sway of their own accord, my pussy aching and begging to be touched as if we haven't just been together as one. He takes his time, stroking my pussy. Making me beg for him.

He nibbles the inside of my thighs and looks up at me.

He runs his tongue from the base of my pussy to my clit, brushing against it so softly I can barely feel it, and yet, in such a way that it is all I can feel. There is no pressure of his tongue, it feels as light as a feather on me, but as it rubs against my clit it's as if lightning has struck my body. I arch my back and thrust my hips upward as ecstasy slaps all my thoughts away.

When I fly into oblivion, he kisses his way up to me again and waits until I open my eyes to gaze at me deeply as he enters me. A gasp hitches in my throat as he slides in easily, filling me up, and I lift my hips to accommodate him. Pinning my hands over my head, he thrusts in and out of me, his thighs slapping against mine. I moan loudly at the sheer pleasure as

he increases the tempo of his thrusts. Gripping his hair, I wrap my legs around his waist tightly as he releases. It doesn't take me long to succumb to my orgasm, and my whole body spasms in a seizure of ecstasy. I twitch and spasm until I'm limp. Following after me, Maverick collapses onto the bed next to me, completely spent. We're both panting and staring at the ceiling. I close my eyes, delirious, yet satisfied.

I didn't know it was even possible for things between us to be like this! It's absolutely insane, and it only makes me want more. He presses a kiss to my eyelids and wraps his arms around me.

“... and I ended up crashing Uncle Henry's car into the pool.”

It's three AM and Maverick and I are seated against the refrigerator door, stuffing our face with ice cream and oversharing embarrassing childhood experiences.

I'm too excited to fall asleep. And apparently, so is he.

I glance at Maverick. He's wearing nothing except his boxers, and there's more than ample sexiness for me to swoon over.

Chuckling, I scoop up a spoonful of chocolate ice cream. “So, what happened next?”

He licks the back of his spoon. “Well, let's just say I was forbidden to drive a car until I went to college.”

“Damn.” I laugh and lick away a droplet of ice cream on the back of my spoon. “That bad, huh?”

“My mom never forgot that incident. She still brings it up till today. She even did that when delivering a eulogy at Uncle Henry’s funeral.”

I set down my spoon, staring at Maverick. “He’s dead?”

“Sadly.” A fleeting look of pain passes his eyes. “Hit and run.”

Drawing in a sharp intake of breath, my hands instinctively clutch his arm. “I’m so sorry, Maverick.”

“Oh, it’s fine. I’ve moved on past it.” He looks mischievously at me and asks, “Tell me, honestly, what are you scared of?”

“Me? Nothing.”

“No, there’s something. There’s something about romance that has you scared. That’s why you tried to end it after the event, isn’t it? What’s it?”

“I’m not scared of romance, or love in general. I’m scared of the effect.”

“The effect?”

I set down the spoon and stare at him. “Commitment.”

“You’re scared of commitment? What, with the wrong person?”

“With anyone. Look at my parents. They are living proof that commitment will hurt you sooner or later.” I snort. “Also, I once had a thing with this guy and it was going great. We

were completely different people and he'd also just lost his ex-girlfriend to, uh, cancer."

Maverick's eyes dims. "Oh."

"Yeah. Anyways," I clear my throat. "He got in too deep and I felt he kind of wanted to be with me but I wasn't sure I wanted to be with him."

"Hmm. Sounds a lot like us."

I let out an awkward laugh and glance away. "It's not. It's a coincidental story, which, I, um, relate to a lot."

He gives me a doubtful look but says nothing.

We talk a bit more about relationships and family until we're out of ice cream. Then we stumble back to bed to make love again. And again. And again.

When we are both spent, he spoons me. His long, muscular legs entwined with mine are like silk-encased marble; the downy hairs on his legs against my naked skin feel softer than velvet somehow. My ear, resting against his sculpted chest, picks up all the sounds of his body; from the steady thump-thump of his heart to the small rumblings and creaks of any human body at rest. One of his arms is curled around me, that hand stroking my skin; or making little circles with the tips of his fingers; or playing with a lock of my hair.

Being here with him makes me want things that I shouldn't. Things that I know will eventually hurt me. Things that I know may be my ultimate demise.

But as I lie here in his arms, I can't help but let the what-ifs take over my mind and my heart.

What if we can have a future? What if we are right for each other? What if my luck is changing and this is my time?

I'm falling so hard and so deep for him, that the chance he is not there to catch me when I'm all the way fallen is terrifying.

But if the way he touched me today and made me feel is any indication, he might be taking the plunge with me.

God, I really hope so.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Maverick

“Don’t do it.”
I roll my eyes. “Why not?”

“Because it’s going to ruin your recruitment agency faster than you can say Mamma Mia. And, as you can read in my report,” Mabel Pines, the risk analyst, leans back in her seat, “there’s a number of reasons that sustain my recommendation.”

I let out a big breath as I stare at her, biting the inside of my cheeks in contemplation.

There’s no reason to doubt Mabel’s authenticity. If she says something, she means it. She’s one of the best financial advisors in the state and if she’s against the idea of my company joining hands with Nexus, then I should listen.

“So, what now? We turn down the proposal?”

“And save yourself a lot of hassle in the future. Nexus has a penchant for two things: giving start-up businesses a false

sense of protection and also, in the long run, draining the coffers of these said businesses. Derrico is a fine example. Not to mention Sersa as well as Caplan and Roald.”

“Never heard of those.”

She leans forward, fixing me with her big, baby-blue eyes. “Exactly.” She takes a sip of her coffee. “Three years ago, they were the newest and hottest business agencies looking to expand. Nexus offered to help and they did help. They gave them everything they needed, spruced them up real nice.”

“Then what happened?”

“Then the tax collection started and it got so overwhelmingly gross, these businesses couldn’t handle it anymore. They declared a state of liquidation and the rest, as you know, is history. Sersa still exists, however. They found a way to break free of Nexus’s hold but the damage has been done. Now, they’re scrapping their funds from whatever financial enterprises are working with them, out of pity, of course.”

I resume gnawing on my cheeks, pondering upon Mabel’s words.

“Maverick, you and I go way back and I’ve never been wrong about things like this.”

I nod. “I know that. This job has always been your forte, after all.”

“No, not just that. Nexus has been everyone’s business nightmare, especially with how they run what they have. They

have only one goal, and that's an intent to deceive. MediaHire has a lot of potential, and with the right management and adequate timing, I assure you, you're going to do great things with this place. Don't sell yourself short. And look out for moles."

I glance at her sharply. "Moles?"

"Nexus knows they can't buy off some companies because they know these companies have gotten wind of their whims so they come up with a strategy. Infiltration. Keep a close eye on your workers. And don't divulge too much to your associates, either."

When Mabel leaves, I'm left to my thoughts again. The stakes in this are too high and the outcome will certainly be anything but positive.

There's only one thing I have left to do. I'm pulling the plug.

Rising, I step out the door and walk to Dennis, who's stuffing his face with a club sandwich. He swallows immediately when he sees me coming and places it aside, his face red. "Sorry, but it's lunch break already."

"I don't mind." Glancing around, I lower my voice. "I need you to organize a meeting. I want everyone in that conference room, it's important. And Dennis?"

"Yes?"

"I need this to be done as quietly as possible. I'll forward you a list of faces that I need to see there. Noted?"

He gives me a perplexed look, wondering what the heck I'm up to now. "Uh, yeah, sure."

I steal a glance at Noelle's cubicle but she isn't there. I turn to Dennis. "Where's Miss Quinn?"

"Uh." He looks up from his computer and frowns a bit. "She told me she was going to get coffee from the rec room a while ago."

"How long ago was that?"

"Twenty minutes, I think?"

I draw my brows in a wrinkled line. That's too long.

I make my way to the rec room. The door is ajar and there is no one inside when I enter. My glance falls to the cold cup of coffee next to the coffee pot. Approaching, I look up sharply when I hear whispers behind the door of the locked pantry.

I place my ear against the wooden door, just in time to hear Chris's voice say, "Just a little kiss, darling; no one has to know. Come on, I've seen the way you look at me, you little tease, and I know you want it, too. So, come on, get on your knees and show me what you can do, baby."

My blood runs cold. My breathing grows erratic.

"Please, Mr. Burnham, *please* just let me go."

Dazed, I pull my head back. *Noelle?*

"Don't play games, Noelle. I know you want this. I know it. You think I don't notice how you strut your sexy little body around the office teasing me? Think I don't notice how you

always dress just the right way to leave me hard and wanting to fuck you only to have you say no over and over again? Enough is enough. Now it's time to do your job, Noelle."

"I...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I wasn't..." There's undisguised fear in her voice. "I need to leave. I can't breathe. Please get away from the door. Please, I—I just want to leave."

"Is this about your boyfriend? You're worried about what he's going to do? Oh, no, sweetie, you don't gotta be worried. Nothing's going to happen, as long as you don't say anything."

There's momentary silence, broken by the sound of a belt buckle unclasping. Then a zipper running.

Behind the door, Noelle lets out a whimper and then she gasps. "No, no, no, please. I'm begging you."

I see red.

Pulling back, I kick the door and send it flying open. Chris turns his face to me just in time for my fist to connect with his face. He goes down in a heap and clutches the side of his face, groaning.

Reaching down, I grab him by the lapels of his jacket, hauling him off the floor. Putting his face to mine, I growl, "You bastard. What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Whimpering, he says, "I'm sorry. It's all her fault, she asked for it. I want to file a complaint for sexual harassment in HR."

Noelle gasps. My eyes stay on him.

“Save it, you sick fuck.” I spit out and roughly push him away, causing him to fall on the ground again. Rushing to Noelle who’s holding a packet of sugar to her chest, eyes wide with fear, I gather her in my arms. Tears are falling down her face and her body is trembling. She immediately starts sobbing against my shoulders. “He tried to touch me. He tried to touch me. I told him to let me go but he didn’t listen. He was going to... he was going to...”

“It’s okay, honey, you’re safe now. I’m here. You’re safe,” I whisper into her hair.

“He tried to do what?” Joe’s face is contorted in rage.

“Exactly. She goes into the pantry to get sugar and he jumps her out from behind and locks himself inside with her. I was there and I heard everything.”

And it was disgusting.

“Did she press charges yet?”

“No. She was too shaken up, but she intends to.”

“Good. Everything she needs, I’m ready to support. Where the hell is that bastard, anyways?”

“Fired. He’s been taken downtown to the police department. Even if she didn’t press charges, I would.”

“Good.”

He leaves my office and I take the elevator downstairs to the conference room. Noelle is inside, seated, hugging herself.

A policewoman is taking her statement and she's answering with nods and shakes of her head. They look up as I enter. The officer looks at Noelle and says, "I'll be back to check in tomorrow. Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Quinn."

She gives me a nod as she steps outside.

I go to Noelle. "Hey, are you doing okay?"

"Yes," she whispers.

She looks so helpless and scared, it breaks my heart. Sitting across from her, I take her hand in mine. "He's gone. He's never coming back."

She looks at me, tears pooling around her eyes, and shudders. "I was so scared. I wanted to scream so badly but I couldn't." She shakes her head. "I was always able to brush him off or put him off before, but when he locked that door..." She visibly shudders. "It was like I lost my entire composure in that pantry room."

"I'm just glad that I got to you in time, and I'm just glad that you're okay. He's never going to hurt you again, Noelle. I promise you that."

Wordlessly, she nods.

"Are you ready to press charges?"

"Yes," she says without hesitation, her eyes burning. "I want to make sure he pays."

That's the spirit.

I nod. “Also, you don’t have to come into work tomorrow. You’re free to take a break today. Go home. Put yourself together. You can take as long as you need to—”

She looks at me defiantly. “I’m coming to work tomorrow. And I’m not leaving today, either. This is my story to tell, Maverick, and I’m not going to shy away from it like a coward. I refuse to be a victim.”

“You’re not a coward or a victim. You’re a survivor and a fighter, Noelle.”

I just want to hold her. Smell her. Be near her and share her body heat. Protect her.

But not here. And not now.

Sighing, I rise to my feet. “I’ve got a few work issues I need to attend to. You’ll be okay?”

She nods. “Yeah.”

“Noelle?”

She glances up at me.

Say it.

No, don't say it.

Swallowing hard, I simply say, “Be safe, okay?”

Numbly, she lifts her head in a small nod. “I will.”

Sara is waiting for me when I step outside. “How is she?”

“She’s holding up fine.”

She licks her lips and exhales, her eyes darting everywhere.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“We were clearing out Chris Burnham’s desk and we found this.” She opens her left hand to reveal a black flip phone. “It’s his burner cell.”

I frown, puzzled. “Everyone has those, Sara.”

“True. Then I went through the call logs and I found something very interesting.” She flips the phone open and hands it to me. “Check the first three names.”

I read the saved contacts on the sepia screen and my jaw tightens.

No fucking way...

Bringing my eyes to her, I ask, “How true is this?”

“True enough. Dennis is running a background check on the third contact with the forensics team but he’s gotten enough data on the first two. They belong to Nexus. And Chris was working for them.”

“How long?”

“Can’t say. From the minimal time frame, we can only assume on the nature of the calls. They were probably just arranging meetings or so.”

“They’ve been meeting?”

“Most likely. As well as strategizing.” She steps forward to whisper, “Joe Weston told me what the risk analyst recommended.”

My jaw tightening. Mabel was right all along.

Chris Burnham was the mole.

Is he the only one? Are there others? A man like Burnham makes for an overall easy target— and a scapegoat.

What a sell-out and a terrible bastard to boot.

So, he agrees to play a small role in their ridiculous scheme—but only because he's receiving a substantial amount of hush money. Now that the plan has gone awry, he has everything to lose.

And I'm definitely going to make sure that happens.

What I don't understand, and probably never will, is why he was campaigning against them in the meeting. If he was working for them, shouldn't he be trying to have me sign the deal?

Being the little rat he is, he was probably double-crossing them too.

Disgusted, I snap the phone shut and give it back to Sara. She's wearing a pensive look, waiting for my response.

“Who have you shown this to?”

“Just Dennis and his friend in Forensics.” She tilts her head.
“You want me to call this one in, boss?”

I nod. “Do it. Now.”

“Just one more thing,” Sara calls out before I can get away. I turn and face her. If this is one of her shenanigans again, I'll

fire her too. I already warned her, so I hope she takes me seriously.

“Yes. What is it?”

She seems to squirm for a little while and says, “ I know you probably don’t want to hear this, and most likely won’t believe me, but I think Noelle isn’t as innocent in what happened as she is leading you to believe.”

I’m fuming. How dare she?

“What are you talking about? How can you say that? I listened to the whole thing.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just that they were always whispering to each other and he was always complimenting her and she never seemed bothered by any of it. Never heard her complain about him once or even talking to him in any way that indicated she wasn’t interested in his advances.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. Like I said, I was there, I heard everything.”

“Again, you’re right. But did you see what was going on? Because roleplay is a thing between lovers, you know?”

I’m taken aback. “Lovers?”

“What I mean is sometimes things heard out of context can be deceiving. Just think about it. I’ll leave you now, Mr. Thatcher. Have a good day.”

As she is walking away, I’m numb. Unable to move, to react, to think.

There is no way Noelle was involved with Chris. No way!

Or was there?

Could what Sara just said be truth? Could they be roleplaying?

No, they couldn't. Noelle hated Chris. I saw her reaction to him enough times to know she loathed and feared him.

But what if she was just roleplaying then too?

When I punched, he did say she had wanted it.

Could it be true?

As much as I want to believe in Noelle, this nagging suspicion is killing me. Maybe I should step back from her for a bit and see how things go from there before I go all in into a relationship that could probably just be one-sided.

The pain of losing Vanessa was devastating. I can't go through a loss like that again. Even if it is just a break-up. Breaking-up is the death of the relationship, so the pain is just as overwhelming. Better to keep my distance now than letting my feelings grow to the point of no return.

As my heart breaks at the thought of pulling back from Noelle, my only thought is, *Too bad it feels like I'm already there.*

Chapter Twenty-Three

Noelle

The company wastes no time in hiring a replacement for Chris Burnham after he's fired.

Staring at the older, dark-haired Hispanic woman working away at his computer, it marvels me how quickly she's settled into this place, considering she only just started four hours ago. Rumor has it she's one of the best, and the company had its eye on her for a while.

The female officer from the day of the incident is waiting for me in one of the meeting rooms. It's been four days and she has come to give me an update. As I walk there, I think of Maverick.

Where can he be? What has he been doing?

I haven't seen him since the day he saved me. I shiver thinking about what Mr. Burnham could have done to me. I'm so glad I don't have to deal with him anymore.

I tried calling and texting a few times, but my phone calls go straight to voicemail and my texts remain unanswered.

I just want to know if he is okay and thank him for what he did for me. He keeps saving me from these situations. I can't help but fall a little bit harder for him each time.

The female officer is seated already, so I sit across from her. She is nice, but every time I see her, I'm reminded again of why she is here, and I just want to be able to put it behind me as soon as possible.

After letting me know he'll stay in jail for now, waiting for a hearing to find out if he makes bail, she shakes my hand and leaves with the promise to let me know if anything changes.

I'm beyond relieved when she leaves.

Still worried, I think about Maverick and where he can be. He has to be okay.

Unlocking my phone, I dial his number again and sigh. Still nothing.

Come on, where are you?

My mom's smoking again. She had been free from her addiction for the last two years. Now, she's picked it up again.

We're sitting on the patio overlooking the garden of Aunt Jessica's house, enjoying the blissful silence of the warm spring night. I didn't tell her about the workplace incident because I don't want to take the risk of aggravating her mental health. She's worked too hard to get off her depressive phase. Now, she's been on a good roll and I can't ruin that.

“It’s been a while since I did that, you know, the nicotine,” she’s saying, letting out puffs of smoke. “Your father completely hated it. Of course, he didn’t know that I did it while he was away on those damned business trips of his.”

Throwing back a gulp of my root beer, I watch her silently as she talks, trying to gauge her mood. She looks... different. Very different. I noticed it the minute I walked through my aunt’s door. There’s a newness to her, one that’s physically evident. She’s started wearing makeup and also putting highlights in her hair.

All she has to do is to go on *Fishin’4Love* and rope me a new step-daddy. And with the rate at which she’s doing her own ‘moving on’, that won’t be too hard.

Oh, god, what if my step-father turns out to be some college kid looking for a sugar mommy? I glance at my mom. She’s a good-looking woman, but she’s also broke, so that won’t work—thankfully. Or what if she lands a fellow divorcee who’s a deadbeat to his kids? Or worse, what if she matches with an older Trevor? A laugh bubbles up my chest and I quickly swallow it down. No, that isn’t funny but that’s a possibility I can’t rule out, either. The possibility of matching with a lot of men has a fair potential of being a wrecking ball. It’s a risky gamble.

I sigh and throw back a gulp of my drink. Divorces really bring out a lot in people. I’ve only spoken to my father twice since the whole thing happened. The first was two days after my mom broke the news to me and the second time was

yesterday. He sounded truly remorseful for the toll it was taking on me. As for my mother, well, let's just say the only thing she got was a cryptic apology. I don't know what exactly happened between them but I had a feeling it wasn't just about infidelity. Well, that played a part, too, but that isn't the major reason for their split. Their marriage has simply run its course and they are better off not staying together anymore.

Plus, the pre-nup doesn't even come off as a bone of contention. My mom has received a large cash settlement fee — minus the house and cars— and entitled spousal support. The alimony is enough to compensate her for life, so any other legal tussles are off the table.

I slap away a mosquito hovering around my knee and set down the bottle on the table. “I got good news. The doctor says Abbie's going to pull through.”

“Oh, that's good.” My mom smiles at me, happiness reflecting in her pale-blue eyes. “When's she getting discharged? Still next month?”

“Possibly. Depends on how well she continues to respond to treatment.”

After a few seconds of silence, I blow out an anxious breath. “Mom.”

“Hmm?” she tilts her head. “What is it?”

“You look good. Better. Like a new you. I just wanted to tell you that I like it. I like seeing you coming out of your shell again.”

She smiles at me.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” She looks off into the distance. “You know? Having your dad leave just like that hurt. A lot. The betrayal I felt consumed me and I couldn’t see past it. But then, one day, I picked up a cigarette and I was able to smoke it without having him putting me down. And I felt good about that. I still hurt, of course, but each day that passed I was able to do more and more of what I used to do before I married your father and not have the weight of his recriminations to put me down.” She looks at me then.

“It took me this long to realize we weren’t happy. We weren’t even right for each other.” She shakes her head. “So much wasted time.”

I remain silent. I have no idea what to say to all she is laying on me, so I let her talk and just listen, because that’s what we both need. She needs to have her full a-ha moment shared and I need to understand why their thirty years together just crumbled out of the blue.

Looking off into the distance again, she says, “I know your dad cheated on me, here and there. Looking back now, I can see that I didn’t make his life easy, and he didn’t make mine easy either. We would bicker about this world and the next, but it’s like we were determined to stay together no matter what. We were both miserable, but none of us wanted to throw in the towel. And I think that was a mistake.” she sighs. “This last person he cheated on me with, he is still with her, you know? I think with her he saw how things were supposed to be. How

things could be for him if he just took the step. So he did.” Looking back at me, she adds, “And I’m grateful for it. Had he not found her, we would still be living under the weight of self-imposed shackles that were slowly killing us and we didn’t even notice it.”

As my mom talks, I can’t help but compare what she is saying about her relationship with my father, with mine and Maverick. It’s like water and oil, night and day.

But that doesn’t mean anything, right?

“Mom? Is it worth it?”

“What, dear?”

“Love. Is love worth it if it hurts so much?”

Looking right into my eyes, my mom takes my hand.

“Honey, love is *everything*. It is worth every pain, every struggle, every tear. Because love, even this skewered one I had with your father, brought me you. And I wouldn’t change that for the world.” She smiles. And tears start pooling in my eyes, clouding my vision.

“Besides, love, when it’s right, is the best feeling in the world. And I wish it for you with all my heart.” Now a tear falls down her face too. And I can understand that it carries the weight of all the mixed emotions she is carrying inside. “Same as I wish for me. Because now that I’m free, I want to find love too. Real love.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Maverick

Fuck, I miss Noelle. It's been days since I last saw her, which was when the incident happened, and I can't get her out of my head. This is my first day back. I've been working from home, trying to keep my distance and to get some perspective, but it is impossible.

Sitting in my office, I recline on my chair and look at the ceiling. Could she really be roleplaying with that disgusting prick? The more I think about it, the more doubts I have.

I know what I heard. I could almost taste her fear, but was it really fear or is she just that good an actress?

I don't think she was acting at all. She was rejecting him, through and through. Right?

I can't seem to escape this whirlwind of thoughts no matter how long it passes because I have no answers for any of my questions.

It doesn't help that Sara is constantly reaching out and inserting her jabs here and there. I wonder if she thinks that if she can take me away from Noelle, she is next in line? Because if she does, she is in for a rude awakening.

There is a knock on the door that pulls me out of my musings. I sit up straight again.

“Yes?”

Speak of the devil. Sara struts into my office and I barely contain a groan. What now?

“How may I help you?” I ask dryly.

She sits in one of the chairs in front of me and crosses her leg. Her skirt is short today and her thigh is on show. It'd be an erotic sight, if this was not Sara. If it was Noelle, I'd be on her in a second.

I inwardly groan. I have to stop thinking about her. But I can't because my heart calls out to her every damn second of the day and I have no idea what to do.

Sara throws me a sober look and says, “You look tired. Have you been getting enough sleep?”

“A few hours, here and there.”

“Trust me, I understand how you feel.”

“You do?”

Her expression softens and she says forlornly, “I'm a bit of an insomniac these days.”

I raise my brows. “Really?”

“Ever since Mark divorced me, it’s been very hard for me to fall asleep. It’s been three years since it happened and I still haven’t known how to deal with that.”

“Have you tried going to a shrink?”

“Oh, no,” she says with a laugh as she stands. “I don’t have the luxury of time for that anymore.”

“It might help.”

She shakes her head as she approaches me. Leaning over, she breathes, “It won’t.”

“Why’d you say so?”

“Because what I need is not a shrink, Mr. Thatcher.” Her dark eyes flicker through me.

Indulging her for a second, I ask, “What is it, then?”

Her lips curl into a sultry smile. Edging a little nearer, she lowers her voice, “Well, according to what one of them told me, what I need is companionship. And not just with anyone.” Her eyes are pinned on mine and she lets out a shaky breath. “It has to be someone who... understands me. Someone who’s just like me. Someone who’s also experienced their unfair share of loss, and is finding it hard to move on, just like me.”

“Sara—”

“Don’t you miss it, hmm? I miss it, all the time.” She sighs and closes her eyes. “It’s the way my body is. I just can’t help it.” She puts one finger out and touches the blond hairs on my wrist. “I just... can’t help it.” Her index finger moves up my

forearm, making my skin crawl. “I’ll go crazy if I don’t feel someone’s arms around me soon.”

I lift my eyes to hers. Next to me, she looks so small. There’s no denying what a stunning body she has. Underneath her suit, her cleavage is visible, tapering down to a V-shape that conceals her full, creamy breasts.

Objectively, she’s beautiful and tempting, but her personality and this constant harassment put me off in a big time.

Our eyes meet again, and this time, in the depths of her eyes I see her emotions... fear, and longing, and hope.

A rare moment of vulnerability, unguardedness, openness... But unlike with Noelle, who calls to something deep inside me, I feel nothing.

Not today. And not ever.

Clearing my throat, I get up from my chair. “Well, I wish you luck in finding one. Excuse me.” I head to the door to show her out.

“Have you gone insane?” she screeches angrily.

I turn to look at her, stunned. “I beg your pardon?”

“What’s wrong with you?” she demands, propping her hip against my desk, crossing her arms and glaring at me. “I throw you all this,” she fumes as she thrusts her voluptuous chest forward, “and you turn it down, for what? Huh? A kid? I mean, come on, Maverick, I thought you were done with her!”

Maverick? Since when does this lady think it's okay to call me that?

“Excuse me?”

An indignant hiss escapes her lips. “Noelle Quinn. Or aren't you? She really has all of you wrapped around her little finger, doesn't she? First Chris, now you.”

Ignoring the rest of her spiteful tirade, I ask, “Who told you Noelle and I were done?”

Her head draws back in surprise and she blinks. “I thought... I assumed you two were no longer... together. After what happened in that pantry. I mean...”

I open the door and say to her, “First of all, my name is Mr. Thatcher to you. I have never and will never give you any indication you can take those liberties with me.” Turning, I walk to her and pulling on her elbow, gently, I guide her to the outside of the door as I add, “Second of all, don't believe everything you hear. Now get back to work, Miss Carter. And if you ever act like this again, with me or anyone else in this company, you're fired.”

I close the door in her face.

I should have done that a long time ago. God, it felt good.

I have no problem imagining what Sara's face looks like. Bewilderment and shame, and a bit of self-criticism.

It's honestly the best reaction, especially when you put entitled people in their place. I just wish I'd been able to enjoy it for a second.

This little interaction only reminds me the type of person Sara is and that maybe I should give no credit to what she says. I know I have fallen hard for Noelle and staying away is hell. Love is precious and I was lucky to find it a second time. Should I throw it away just because of the words of a scorned woman? That would be a giant mistake.

I have to know what really happened inside that pantry and I need to know now. Picking up my stuff, I head out the door. It's five o'clock, so maybe I can still catch her at her office.

But when I get there, Noelle is gone for the day.

I decide to head to her place.

When I get there, I knock on her door. This is a conversation that is long overdue.

When she opens the door, she seems weary.

“Hey. Everything okay?” She asks shyly. “I’ve called and texted a couple of times but you haven’t been answering.”

“I had a lot on my mind. Just had to take a couple of days for myself.”

She nods. “Uh, I was worried so, that’s why I reached out. I’ll give you your space next time. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have bothered you. I’m sorry”

“It’s okay. Look. Can we talk for a bit?”

Again, she nods. “Of course.”

She steps away from the door to let me inside. Her whole demeanor screams hurt and dejection. Fuck, it’s all my fault.

I've got to fix this.

“Noelle.” I turn to her the second she closes the door.

She looks back at me. Her eyes are so sad. “Yeah?”

Mortified, I close my eyes and rub my aching temples. With a sigh, I say, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ghost you.”

She lowers her eyes. “It’s okay. It’s not like you owe me anything.”

Walking past me into the living area, she asks, “Do you want anything?”

I shake my head and she heaves a heavy breath and sinks to the couch, staring at the untouched mug of tea in front of her. Must be getting cold.

“I need you to tell me everything that happened that day, please. I need to know. Were you really rejecting him? Or did I stop something that I shouldn’t have?”

All my strength leaves me with those words and I sit down next to her.

“How can you ask me that?” she whispers. “I’ve never felt more afraid in my life than at that moment. I was trapped, I was powerless. All I wanted to do was run, hide, cry, scream, at him, at myself, at anyone that would listen and stop him from saying those things. From...” she shivers.

I feel like a monster for ever doubting her as I watch each tear leave a track down her face. She is hugging herself,

sobbing now. And it's all my fault. Again.

I love this woman, but it seems all I can do is hurt her over and over again. I need to make this right.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I just had to be sure. You shouldn't have to go through that and you shouldn't then have to endure an interrogation from me. I guess I was just..." Insecure? Jealous? Being a dick?

She remains silent.

"I guess I for a second there I wondered if maybe you were looking for something else. Someone else. And that threw me off, I guess. I'm sorry I was insensitive. I didn't mean to question your integrity, I just had to make sure. Please understand."

"I guess I understand," she says after a few seconds of silence that felt like hours.

"That's why I went away for a while. I was afraid you wouldn't need me anymore. Wouldn't want me around anymore. That I wouldn't matter to you, I guess."

"You're the one person that matters to me, Maverick."

Her words hit me unexpectedly. The conviction in them is so raw.

I've been such a dick. I can see that now.

Am I really the type of man who deserves this level of respect? Especially from someone as pure and innocent as Noelle?

I haven't been that type of man ever before, but words really make me want to step up.

"You matter to me too, Noelle. More than you can ever know."

"I do?"

"Yes, sweetheart, you do. I'm at a stage of my life that I don't know how to deal with surprises, and ever since you came along, my life has been one surprise after the next."

"I guess. But surprises aren't always bad, though. If you hadn't chased me all the way up to my apartment that night, we wouldn't be here now." The fondness in her tone makes me squirm in mortification. "I mean, I had the entire night planned out, thinking everything was going to go so well with Mr. Dating App. And when it doesn't, you show up. Like a fallen angel."

I smile at her. "Want me to let you in on a secret?"

She looks up at me. "What's that?"

"I was watching you two all night."

Her lips parts in surprise. "What?"

Nodding, I continue, "I saw when you came in. I was watching every scene, basically because it was outright entertaining."

"No, it wasn't." Noelle narrows her eyes and huffs. "It was anything but entertaining."

“It was, to me. Few minutes into the conversation, I saw the way that smile wiped off your face when you figured out who he truly was. And I was thinking, someone’s got to save her. She looks like she’s ready to knock him out if he continues with this shit.”

Noelle laughs. “That is... realistically true. I was thinking the exact same thing.”

“I’m glad I came to the rescue.”

“Me too.”

We gaze at each other, sharing a tender moment.

“I guess, that specific contingency plan seems to have worked out well enough for the two of us.” And I mean it.

“Indeed.” she whispers.

Life, they say, has a way of doing you a favor, especially when you least expect it. I didn’t plan on having an hour long conversation at a bar table with a stranger that I saved from a terrible date. Or on giving her a ride home to her place and having some of the best sex of my life with her. Or falling in love with her.

Life’s fucking weird.

What I feel right now is too deep, too profound, too... sacred to express in words. Even if I had the words to tell her, I don’t know if I could...I don’t know if I’d dare.

I don’t know if I can make myself so vulnerable to her...

Yet. I want to. I want to tell her how I feel. I owe it to the both of us.

I get up and hold out my hand and she takes it, a puzzled expression on her face.

“What are we doing?”

I help her stand. She’s staring at me with a small smile. Without her high heels on, I almost tower over her looking down into her eyes. “You know what I just remembered?”

“What?”

“We never slow danced at the PR party.”

“Oh.”

“Ready?”

She laughs in disbelief. “What, right now? I don’t even know how to dance. Really, I’ve got two left feet.”

“Come here.” I place my hands on the small of her back and lean my chin atop her head. With liquid grace and restrained strength, I pull her into a dance, both of us moving sensuously and slowly to the beat of our hearts and the music inside our heads. I should feel stupid. I mean, here I am, in her living room, slow dancing to no music at all. I should feel like the world’s cheesiest idiot.

But I feel happy. Happy and content.

Dipping my head, I whisper against Noelle’s neck. “Let me stay with you tonight.”

“Maverick, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“You’re like a drug to me, Noelle.”

She gazes at me, shocked.

“And you’re so beautiful.”

She inhales sharply. “Maverick—”

“I’m not trying to be flirty, Noelle. I really mean it. Please believe me.”

“I do.”

“Good, ‘cause you should.”

She pauses and bites her lip. “Remember when we were stuffing our faces with ice cream that night? What I said about once loving someone?”

“Yeah.”

“You were right, Maverick. I was talking about you.”

I smile tenderly at her. “I knew that. You’re not exactly subtle.”

She chuckles and strokes my neck. “You make me happy, in a way. And safe. You’re kind and sweet and basically everything I’ve always wanted in a Prince Charming.”

“I didn’t rescue you from a tower, though. Or from a wicked witch.”

“Well, you kind of did. A number of times.”

I wrap my arms around her and draw her close to me. I whisper into her hair, “And I’m glad I did.” I take a deep breath and say what I’ve been wanting to say for so long now.

“I love you,” she whispers.

I go silent, staring at her.

Her body has stopped moving against mine.

I swallow. She has no idea what her words are doing to me. My heart stops and jump starts and starts racing, all in the millisecond after I hear those words.

“You don’t have to say it back. I understand it’s new for you.”

I hold her gaze. “What if I want to say it?”

Her breath catches. Hesitantly, she asks, “Do you? Because you have no idea what that would mean to me.”

I rest my forehead against hers, looking right into her eyes. “I love you, Noelle.”

She smiles and her blue eyes are brimming with genuine emotion. “I love you, Maverick.”

“Say it again.” I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of hearing those words from her.

“I love you so much. I loved you the moment you saved me from that date. I’ve never stopped, and I don’t think I ever will.”

It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard.

“I love you so much, Noelle. You have no idea how much.”

I sit back down on the couch, pulling her to me, my eyes never leaving hers. I haven’t felt this way for any woman in a long time.

Noelle is special and she is mine. I'm going to protect her till I die. She completes me, she makes me happy and I love her more than I thought possible to love another human being.

After Vanessa was gone, I thought I was done with love. It hurt too much. My heart was shattered. I often wondered how long it took for a man's heart to mend, but I didn't think it ever really would.

I was wrong.

When I met Noelle, my heart became whole again.

And since that day, it's only and always been her. Noelle.

Just Noelle.

Noelle Jessica Quinn.

She's the one.

She's the one who brings out a bone-deep desire, no, need... need to be with her, to protect and provide for her, and to keep her by my side, safe and loved, until the day I take my last breath.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Noelle

The champagne froths as Maverick uncorks it and pours it into a pair of flutes and hands one to me. Clinking his against mine, he asks, “What should we toast to?”

“The six-month anniversary of my famous disastrous *Fishin’4Love* date that happened right here, of course.”

He throws back his head and laughs. “Damn, has it been six months already?”

“Yes, it has.” I sip my champagne and lean back in my seat, watching him intently.

We’re sitting at the table where I had my date with Trevor that night, The exact place where we met for the first time. When he was my knight in shining armor, even if he did allude to me having a very nasty STD.

There is a balcony right next to us and the doors are open, letting the breeze inside.

The dusky weather creates the perfect ambience as the hot April wind blows through our hair. He looks totally handsome tonight.

Maverick's good looks are more rugged than pretty-boy. He kind of reminds me of a young Taylor Kitsch. Cut and built, with long, sturdy legs and the arms of a line-backer, his presence is imposing, daunting... yet comforting.

Maverick rented the place for the night, but he hired a very special crew.

Edward, the maître d' from Reece's, the place where we had our first official date, accompanied by a waiter handling a trolley-laden with food, approaches us, a warm smile on his face. "Enjoying the night?"

"Yes, thank you," Maverick says.

I smile at Edward. "I also enjoyed the appetizers, too."

"I'll relay your message to Chef Vief. Do you care for the main course now?"

With an indulgent smile, Maverick asks, "So, what do you have for us?"

Without a word, the waiter starts to arrange the meal. My eyes widen when he's done. Everything looks fabulous. The chef has excelled himself as usual. The lobster bisque smells exquisite, the roast lamb looks mouthwateringly succulent on its bed of greens.

"Just the way the lady likes it." Edward beams a smile at me.

I giggle happily. “Oh, I just can’t wait to taste it all already.”

“Bon appetite,” Edward says and leaves with the waiter.

Maverick and I dig into our meals, eating with mutual gusto.

A notification pings from my phone. I flash an apologetic smile at Maverick. “Sorry, excuse me.”

Opening the text message, I grin at the content.

“What?”

“Abbie’s back in town!”

“Really?”

“Mm-hmm.” I set down my phone. “I wasn’t expecting her back until May. You should see her Instagram. It’s completely filled with pictures of Tennessee. She’s so obsessed.”

“She’s happy. She deserves to flaunt it.”

“I know.” I pout, fingering the stem of my champagne flute. “I really missed her.”

Maverick’s brows go up. “You had me to keep you company.”

“Yeah, on days you’re not swamped with work.”

He grins. “But look how it paid off.”

He’s right. In less than three months, the finances of MediaHire had skyrocketed. Everyone put all hands on deck to make that happen. It’s a thing of pride for Maverick to brag

about— giving the agency a big boom without the help of external forces. It's truly remarkable.

My salary has also experienced a huge projection, giving me more than enough. I bought a car, and thanks to Maverick's recommendation, it's the perfect model. I quickly moved out of the apartment, putting it up for rent. My crappy landlord was delighted to see me go. I really don't care. I never did like him anyway.

Plus, Maverick's the perfect roommate.

I've gotten to know a lot about him in the last six months.

And I've found out that he can be charming and funny, and randomly, unexpectedly humble. He's fascinating to me... masculine, scary, intimidating, sweet, hot, and mysterious.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that he's so attractive, but I've always needed more than looks to turn my head.

I'm sure that I'm the luckiest person in the world to be loved by someone like him, a man of rare talent and exceptional character. I'm head-over-heels in love with him and there's no point in pretending otherwise. It's always on the tip of my tongue to say it all the time, and to shout at the top of my voice to the whole world.

I'm happy, more than happy, because I already know that he feels the same way. It's in the way he touches me, and kisses me, the way he's so magnanimous and generous with me, and the way he talks to me,

And it's in the hopeful edge in his voice when he asks if I've ever thought about marriage, and children.

When we're not working, we have our own little special moments. His whole house has a lot of memories now. We have taken advantage of every nook and crook.

Every day with him proves how much this is the best bet I could have ever made and everything about this relationship feels so deeply honest in a way that is only due to Maverick himself.

Time and again, I still pinch myself when I wake up next to him. He's so perfect. Not just perfect-looking but perfect on the inside, too. Noble, courageous, visionary. He wants so many good things for me, and us. And I'm more than lucky to have him.

When we finish eating and the plates are cleared away, Maverick says, "I have something for you."

A tingle races down my spine. When he says this, it always comes with the best things.

I smile at him. "Another gift? Really, Maverick, you have to stop spoiling me."

"Never!" He grins. Then he gets up and comes over to my side.

I can't stop smiling at him, wondering what is up his sleeve this time.

As he stops, he holds my hand and gets down on one knee.

This cannot be happening. What is he doing?

“Noelle. My life stopped making sense when Vanessa passed away.” I smile tenderly at him. Vanessa is a huge part of his life and we often talk about her. She was a good part of his life, left fond memories, and deserves to be remembered and cherished. I feel like I know her by now and I like to think we would have been friends if we had met.

His eyes are on me. Shining and so honest. So loving. I absolutely adore this man.

“But when I met you, that changed. My world shifted on its axis and you became my sun, my moon. My gravity force. You are my everything and you mean the world to me, darling. You give my life meaning and reason. You are what makes sense in my life.” I squeeze his hand. Tears are falling down my face but my smile seems to be glued on.

“I don’t ever want to lose you. I love you, more than words can express. So, that’s why I’m asking...” With his free hand, he reaches for something in his pocket. He opens the velvety box, exposing the loveliest diamond ring I’ve ever seen. “Will you marry me?”

Tears now run unbidden down my face, blurring him for a second.

Is this real? Is this really happening?

“Oh, Maverick. I love you so much.”

“Is that a yes?”

I nod, staring into his eyes passionately. “It’s a million, billion, gazillion times yes.”

He slides the ring onto my left finger and kisses it, then embraces me. When he pulls away, I let out a small gasp, the overwhelming truth hitting me. “Oh my god, we have a wedding to plan.”

“Yup.”

Panic-stricken, I look at him. “I don’t have the slightest idea on how to do that.”

“Well, my dearest fiancée, you’re lucky your best friend’s coming to town, then.”

Relaxing, I gaze at the ring. *Fiancée*. I’m a fiancée. Oh, Abbie’s going to be over the moon.

We have a wedding to plan. We have so much to do, so many decisions.

“But what about the venue for the wedding?”

He settles back in his seat. “What about it?”

“I can’t think of any one. I mean, I have a lot of ideas.”

“Hey.” He leans over to plant a kiss on my lips. “There’s no rush. We can hire someone if that makes you feel better. But I do not want you stressing over it, because all that matters is that you are there. And wherever that is, I’ll be there, I don’t care where it is.”

I nearly melt just hearing those reassuring words. “You make me happy, Maverick. Don’t ever forget that.”

He strokes my knuckles. “Happy and content. Now, come on, I’m taking you home to celebrate.”

He sets the check on the table and stands. Holding my hand, we make our way downstairs, past the lounge and into the street. The valet quickly hands Maverick the keys.

Before we get in the car, I glance at him. “Keys, please.”

There’s a bemused look on his face as he offers them to me.

I love having surprises for my man. He absolutely hates being surprised in any way, shape, or form, and I can’t resist forcing him out of his comfort zone. I get behind the wheel.

He sits in the passenger side. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

He interlocks his fingers through mine as I drive.

I park the car when I reach our destination. He looks out the window and back at me. “Why are we at this bar?”

“You remember this is where you brought me after saving me from that terrible date? You had the initiative to fuck me.”

“So, we’re role playing it tonight?”

I smile at him. “Every last detail.”

We enter the bar and he orders a glass of whiskey. I drink non-alcoholic wine because I’m driving us home tonight.

He smiles as he holds my face in his hands. “I love you so much. I don’t want you to ever change anything.”

“I promise.”

“I can’t wait to live the rest of this life with you.”

I sit back as I sip my wine. “You know, I always imagined that I would find my dream guy and fall in love, and then there would be this big cheesy climax where I get proposed to on a date.”

“So, I got it right?”

I giggle. “You got it right.”

“I love you.” He takes my hands in his. “I won’t fuck this up, I promise. I’ll never let you down. We’ll live happily ever after.”

And I believe him, because that’s what I vow to him too.

Epilogue

Maverick

A year later...

I'm so nervous. I have no idea how I'll survive the next ten minutes. Looking around, I take in all the people that are seated looking at me. Some are smiling, some are talking amongst themselves, but a lot of eyes are on me.

Reaching to my collar, I try to loosen it, but it is no use.

Then the music starts and everything else fades. Except her.

She is a vision as she walks down the aisle.

Today is the day we officially become husband and wife, and I can't wait. Ever since I proposed a year ago, we have been talking about growing as a family. I think we even talked a bit before then, but that is when we made our decision. Tonight, on our wedding night, I'm going to give it my all. I want a mini her. She is my everything and I dreamed of having kids when I was with Vanessa, but she was never really ready. I'm so glad Noelle wants to have kids just as much as I do.

She has been on the pill since before I met her. She promised a few months ago she'd get off it after the wedding so we could try and we've been practicing a lot, but after tonight, we are going to be actively trying.

All my dreams are coming true since I met this woman and I can't wait to live every adventure with her.

When she reaches me, her smile matches mine. Open, loving, permanent.

I take her hand and we face the officiant.

After lots of back and forth, we decided the best place to get married was right in our backyard, and here we are.

The gardens look amazing, lush and vibrant, but for me, she steals the show.

The ceremony begins and all I can think about is having her say 'I do'. When that happens, we will officially belong to each other. I'll be her husband and she'll be my wife.

My chest swell slightly as I think about calling her that.

"I understand you have prepared your own vows, is that true?"

Both Noelle and I nod at him.

"Very well, Mr. Thatcher, you go first."

I take her hands in mine and look deep in her eyes. I need her to feel as well as hear what I feel about her.

"Dear Noelle. You are the love of my life. I'm ready to go on this adventure with you. I'll keep you safe, mind, body, and

soul. I gave my heart to you the day I first saw you and you've kept it safe ever since. I promise to do the same with yours. You are my biggest treasure and I'll always put you first. Through hell or high water, my love, I'll always be by your side. You're it for me, and I can't wait to spend forever with you."

Tears fall down her face and her smile lights up my world.

"I love you," she whispers. And my smile grows impossibly larger.

"Miss Quinn." Both our heads turn to the officiant when he calls her. "It's your turn now to say your vows."

Looking back to one another, I fall into the depths of her eyes again. I'm totally and utterly in love with this woman, but I find that I'm falling deeper and deeper for her each day.

"Maverick, honey. You are my knight in shining armor, my prince charming, the love of my life. I don't know how I survived before you came along, but I'm really happy I'll never have to wonder again. You make me feel safe, loved, adored, worshipped, cherished, protected, and I know that I can always count on you."

I couldn't be happier and prouder of the words she was saying to me. Knowing she could feel all I felt for her was the biggest reward ever and I could die a happy man because I had done my part right.

"Life has been bliss since we took a leap of faith with each other and the time has come to embark on a new journey. You

are about to become my beloved husband and I'll forever be your wife. And I can't wait to see what that will bring for us. I love you."

A tear or two have made their way down my cheeks.

I whisper, "I love you so much," as I squeeze her hands. I wish it was time for the kiss already.

She smiles and starts talking again.

"Life with you has been the best so far, so I hope you're ready for what's coming."

"I'm ready for anything," I let her know. Because with her on my side I can take on the world.

"Good, because this new life that we are starting will be a little more crowded."

I frown. Crowded. I look at the officiant who is looking at us amused. I look at the people around us but they are all looking expectantly at us.

"Honey?" she calls my attention back to her and my eyes crash on hers. She smiles tenderly, places a hand on her flat belly and says, "We're pregnant."

And my world stops at that word. Pregnant.

My eyes fly to her belly, then back at hers.

"Yeah?" I ask tentatively. She can't be serious, right?

She nods, grinning. "Yeah!"

"Yeah?" I ask more assertively now, my smile threatening to break my face in half.

She laughs and tears stream down her face. “Yeah!”

As everyone around us celebrates our happiness, I can't talk. I just pick her up, twirl her around, and kiss her with all the feelings swirling around me. Love, hope, happiness, more love. This woman right here just made all my dreams come true in one fell swoop.

“It is not time for the kiss yet,” the officiant teases and everyone laughs, including us.

“Sorry,” we say together.

As if I'm on a cloud, I witness the rest of the ceremony and we say our I do's. When it comes time for the kiss, I take her in my arms again and show her just how much I love her.

This was already the happiest day of my life, because I was getting married to Noelle. Now it is doubly so.

I can't wait for what tomorrow may bring with her by my side.