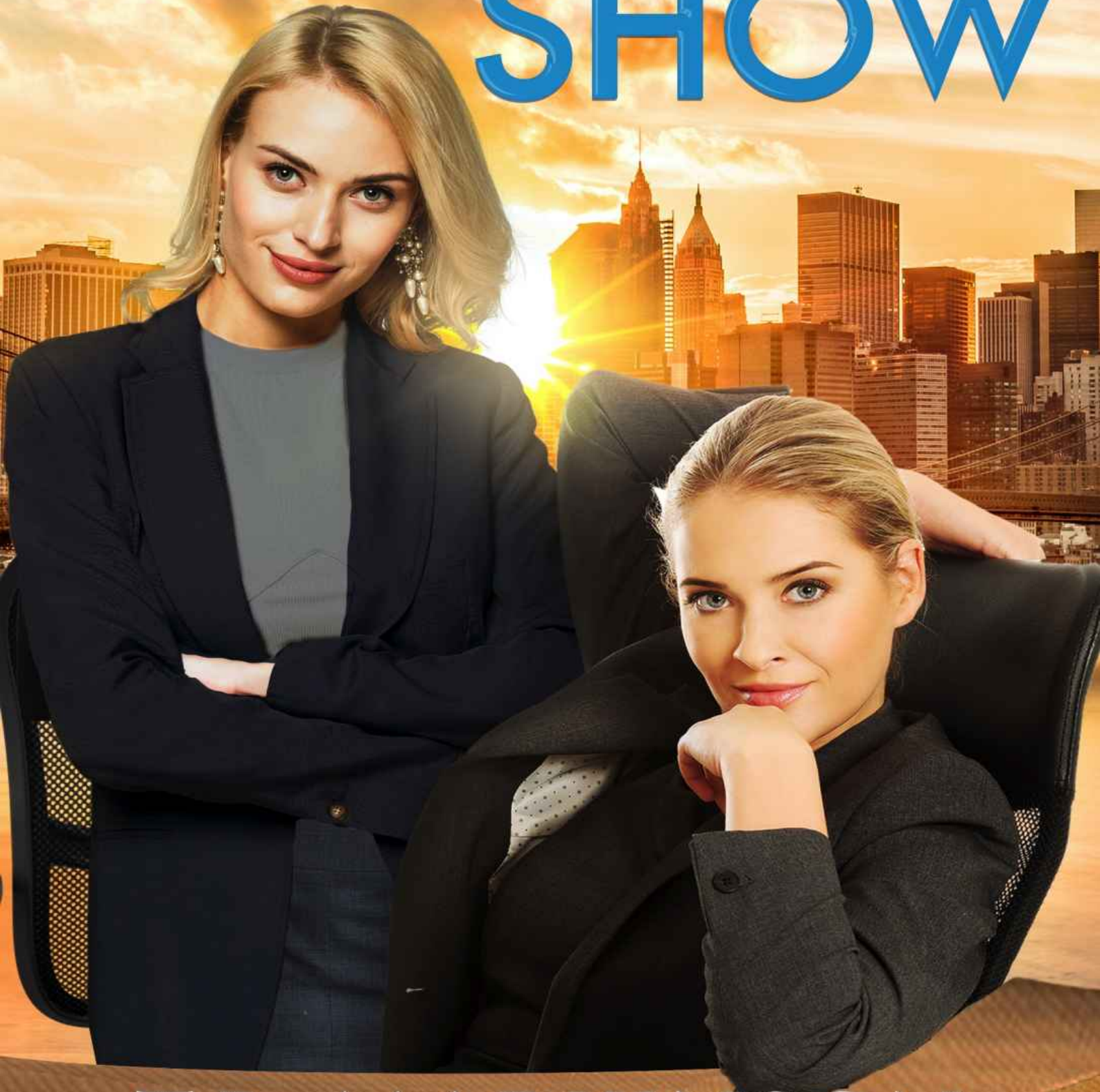


The AM 
SHOW



T.B. MARKINSON
MIRANDA MACLEOD

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TB MARKINSON
MIRANDA MACLEOD

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CHAPTER ONE

AMANDA SCANNED THE NEAT ROWS OF WHITE, FOLDED PLACE cards, searching for her own last name amid the alphabetized sea of scrolling calligraphy. Marsh, Mitchell, O'Toole. Her brow crinkled as she read them again. The name Morgan was conspicuously absent.

"It's that one, there." Coming up beside her, Jason picked up a card and handed it to her.

"Jorgan?" Amanda shot the groom's father an incredulous look.

Jason gave a *don't shoot the messenger* shrug. "According to Jen, there was a typo on the final guest list when it went to the printer."

"Uh-huh." Amanda could've added *bullshit* but held her tongue.

An honest mistake? Please. This was just the latest insult in a steady stream of slights her ex-wife, Jen, had been dishing her way since the day Zach and Valerie had first announced their engagement. But there was no point spoiling the day for everyone around her by whining. She'd keep her mouth shut, for Zach's sake.

"It was a nice ceremony, didn't you think?" Jason shifted his weight from one foot to another, clearly struggling to make small talk. Amanda could hardly blame him. The only thing they had in common was they'd both married and divorced the same woman. "Zach made a helluva groom."

Correction. She and Jason had two things in common. A ghost of a smile teased Amanda's lips at the mention of her stepson. "Our little boy's all grown-up."

Pinning a boutonniere of red rosebuds to the lapel of his tuxedo that morning had been the highlight of Amanda's life. Jen was probably beside herself with jealousy, but the fact Zach had reserved that special task for her made Amanda swell with pride. She'd loved that boy from the moment she'd met him, an awkward and gangly twelve-year-old wearing a Little League uniform and a crooked grin. When Jen had divorced her, Amanda had been terrified she'd lose Zach, too.

Was that why Amanda had offered to help pay for the wedding? Probably. She'd needed Zach to know she loved him like he was her own son and always would. But she'd underestimated how much Jen would resent her for it—and how many spiteful ways there were to exact revenge. There was nothing quite so humbling as shelling out more than fifty-grand, only to be treated like a platter of three-day-old sushi by an ex who was moving at lightning speed to leave every remnant of their years together in the rearview mirror.

"What table are you?" Jason asked, oblivious to the ache in Amanda's heart as she pressed the misspelled card into her palm. Then again, as Zach's biological father, his position in the boy's life was assured.

Amanda checked the card, gritting her teeth as she did her best to overlook the alleged typo. "Looks like I'm at Merlot, whatever that means."

"Same as me. Must be the family table. Sit together?"

"No plus one tonight?" That was unusual. In all the years she'd known him, Jason had rarely flown solo.

"I'm between wives at the moment and was told it would be inappropriate to bring, and I quote, *some rando*, to Zach's wedding." Jason jerked his head to the side with a faint look of disgust. "Too bad Jen didn't take her own advice."

Amanda's eyes panned the tables under the tent, zeroing in on the willowy brunette she'd once been certain her whole

world revolved around, a woman who now stood beside a plump, middle-aged man with thick white whiskers and absurdly unruly eyebrows. Considering Nick was Jen's new husband, it wasn't quite the same as bringing a Tinder date to the wedding. Still, Amanda couldn't argue with Jason's assessment that this rebound-fling-turned-spouse was the very definition of random. To make matters worse, the ink had barely dried on the divorce decree when the two of them had eloped to Vegas.

Jason leaned closer. "Is it just me, or does that guy look like an out-of-shape mall Santa?"

Amanda snorted. Decades in the public eye had trained her not to verbalize petty personal observations, which is why it was such a relief when someone else did her the favor of pointing out what she was thinking.

"When Jen started dating you, I kinda understood," Jason confessed. "I mean, you were a famous morning show host on national television. I really couldn't compete with that."

Amanda gave him a quick up and down. "You'd never be able to pull off the high heels."

"True. My calves have never been my best feature." Jason glanced in Nick's direction again. "Seriously, though. This joker? It's a gut punch, and I've been out of that woman's sphere for a while. It must be a real blow to know Jen's crawling into the sleigh bed with jolly old St. Nick instead of you."

Amanda didn't answer, but yeah. It hurt like hell. Anyone who tried to claim it doesn't smart at least a little when an ex chooses to leave you and marry someone else—and then has the audacity to seem blissfully happy with the decision—is probably trying to sell something.

Amanda crossed her arms, giving Jason a dubious look. "I don't remember you being so zen about the whole situation when Jen and I first got together."

"That was three divorces ago." Jason shrugged. "Water under the bridge. I can't imagine what she sees in him, though."

Maybe he's good in bed."

"With that beard?" Amanda shuddered. "It would be like taking a Brillo pad to your thighs.

"I guess he's successful, anyway."

"I think the word you're looking for is pretentious." Considering how many politicians and business tycoons she'd interviewed over the years, Amanda had met her share of self-important braggarts, but Nick brought it to a whole new level. "There hasn't been a single time I've spoken to him when he didn't mention being head sommelier and buyer for the largest restaurant and hospitality group in Oregon. Like anyone cares."

Okay, maybe she was being a little harsh on the guy, but she couldn't help it. Nick was older than she was, not as physically attractive, had less money, and didn't seem so hot in the personality department. Exactly how bad a spouse must Amanda have been that he'd still seemed like the better option? Sometimes Amanda woke up in a cold sweat, fearful that every bad thing Jen had ever said about her—a list at least as long as the one Santa kept on naughty children—was entirely true.

To add salt to the wound, apparently Amanda's love life was so completely pathetic that Jen, who had spared no effort harping on her about nearly every other aspect of her participation in this wedding, hadn't even bothered to warn her not to bring a date. Like the chances were so remote it couldn't possibly have been an issue worth considering. It made Amanda spitting mad to have to admit Jen was right. For two years, memories of her ex-wife's criticism, and a twenty-pound gray cat with a serious attitude problem, had been her only bed companions. It was impossible to say which of the two held her more in disdain.

"Is it true that Nick's love of wine was the only reason the kids chose this vineyard for the wedding?" Jason asked, dragging Amanda away from the ledge of self-recrimination just in time to avoid falling over the edge.

“It was also the only venue that could do it on three months’ notice.” Amanda pressed her lips together. Now was not the time to let spill exactly what she thought of her son’s hasty marriage. Like it or not, he was an adult, and if that was what he wanted, all Amanda could do was support his decision in public and pray for the best in private. “But yes, the owner gave them a great rate on their package in hopes that Nick would feature their brand as a house wine in his restaurants. It was a hard offer to pass up.”

Incidentally, that discount had been Nick and Jen’s sole contribution to the wedding expenses. Sure, her ex had raised hell with absurd accusations that Amanda was trying to buy Zach’s affection and turn him against his *real* mother, but when it came to writing the checks, suddenly she’d gone quiet. Not that Amanda wouldn’t give Zach the moon if he wanted it. But as the invoices stacked up, it sometimes felt like Jen saw her as nothing more than a convenient piggy bank. In other words, married or divorced, little had changed.

“Does Zach even like wine?” Jason’s nose wrinkled. “I’m more of a craft beer man, myself.”

Amanda wished she had a snarky response, but when it came to beer versus wine, she and Jason were on the same team. Which was annoying. She’d found herself agreeing with her ex’s ex a few too many times for comfort already today. Another opinion or two in common and they’d end up best friends. How awkward would that be?

As Amanda turned to the easel with the seating diagram on it to locate the table named Merlot, a harried young man in a blue blazer with rolled-up sleeves nearly ran over Jason. The expensive camera around his neck offered a big clue that he was the photographer. “Are you the groom’s dad?”

“Sure am.” Jason puffed out his chest, a privilege Amanda supposed he’d earned. Whatever his faults, he’d done a solid job where parenting was concerned.

“Thank God I finally found you.” The photographer clapped him on the back, keeping his hand there to help

maneuver Jason away from the seating chart. “We need the immediate family for a group photo.”

Amanda moved to join them, but the photographer shook his head.

“Just parents, ma’am.”

Was he serious? Amanda drew a deep breath, but before she could chew him out or remind him who would be signing his check that night, Zach rushed over. “No, Bill. That’s my stepmom. She’s absolutely needed for the photo.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” At least the photographer had the decency to look embarrassed, which took some of the sting out of being brushed off and treated like she didn’t belong. Unlike the hundred times her ex-wife had done it, this guy had no reason to know better and hadn’t meant anything by it.

Valerie and her mom and dad were already arranged along one side of the gazebo that overlooked the lush rows of vines with a view of Mt. Hood in the distance. There was an empty space next to the bride for Zach, with Nick and Jen flanking the other side. It was all very balanced. What was wrong with Valerie’s parents that they didn’t have a few ex-spouses thrown into the mix?

Actually, that brought up all sorts of questions about Valerie’s very conservative family and traditional upbringing. When it came to how they’d been raised, Zach and Valerie were as different as night and day. Who got married after dating only six months, unless there was a baby on the way? Zach had assured Amanda there wasn’t, though she had still spent most of the ceremony trying to discern any sign of a telltale bump beneath the bride’s lacy dress. Despite how much she wanted to support her son, she feared the marriage would never last.

But that wasn’t what was bothering her right now. No, what concerned her was the photo looking lopsided. The photographer must have been thinking the same thing, because he squinted and motioned for both Amanda and Jason to squeeze in. “A little closer, okay?”

The man snapped a few photos, checking his screen and then saying, “Come on, you two. You can get closer than that. Set a good example for the newlyweds, and act like you love each other.”

Amanda almost swallowed her tongue when she realized the photographer had mistaken Jason and her as a married couple. She supposed it was an honest mistake. Zach had referred to Amanda as his stepmom, and she *had* been standing next to his father at the time.

But, still.

Gross.

Zach, bless his heart, attempted to explain the situation, but the photographer was too busy framing the picture to pay any attention. Her stepson shot Amanda a smile brimming with apology, but she waved away his concern. This was his wedding day, and there was no way she was going to make a fuss or take a single moment away from his happiness.

Just grin and bear it, America's Sweetheart.

Scooting in as close as she could tolerate, Amanda flashed her *made for television* smile. The photographer's eyes lit up. “Yes. Like that! Good. Good.”

The camera clicked a few hundred times. As she followed the photographer's instructions, Amanda focused on keeping her lips parted and teeth together, but without clenching them so tightly she'd risk cracking a filling. She wondered if Jen was as uncomfortable as she was, but it was impossible to tell. Her ex didn't so much as glance her way the whole time. Not even once.

What was that about?

Once the portraits were out of the way, Amanda went in search of her table. She prayed she wouldn't be seated next to Jen. The waves of chilliness flowing off that woman would be enough to make her dinner freeze on the plate.

It turned out she'd had no need to worry. Once she'd sorted through all the tables with their wine-themed names like Chablis and Syrah, it turned out Merlot was not the family

table, as she'd assumed. Not even close. It was about as far from the center of things as it could possibly get without being under a different tent.

The truth sliced her to the bone. She had been seated at the castoff table.

It had to be a mistake, but a second check of the table marker confirmed she had the right location. Neither Zach nor Valerie would ever have been so cruel as to humiliate Amanda in this way. No, this was Jen's doing. Amanda was sure of it. That woman excelled at the art of killing her with a thousand cuts, putting Amanda in her place like no one else ever could. Not even Amanda's hypercritical mother, who, thank God, was not in attendance today. Good thing Amanda was equally adept at hiding her scars, camouflaging the emotional damage they inflicted with the larger-than-life TV personality that had earned her the nickname Dragon Lady.

This seating arrangement? It was an outrage! Except, instead of lashing out as if a maître d' had shown her to a less-than-stellar table at a trendy Manhattan restaurant, it was all Amanda could do not to cry. Even the biggest dragon can be slain if a person tries hard enough, and Jen had certainly been giving it her all.

Maybe Amanda deserved it.

After all, had she always done a great job prioritizing her marriage? Amanda wasn't delusional. She knew the answer was no, that she'd put her career first in ways too numerous to count. But when it came to Zach, the story was different. Amanda had never missed a single game, school play, or parent-teacher meeting. Her blood pressure ticked upward as she clenched her hands into fists. Was this really the reward Jen felt Amanda deserved?

"I'm glad you could make it."

Amanda's entire body stiffened at the familiar sound of her ex-wife's voice. As was so often the case, Jen's words said one thing while her tone implied the exact opposite.

Amanda unclenched her fists, slipping into her on-air persona as she turned to face her tormentor with the same dispassion she might employ when preparing to interview an unsavory dictator. If she could make it through half an hour with Vladimir Putin at the G-8 summit without losing her cool, surely, she could show similar strength for a few minutes with her ex-wife now. “You know I wouldn’t miss this.”

Jen offered a thin-lipped smile. “Honestly, I was more worried some major news event would come up, and you’d have to take a chopper out of here in the middle of the ceremony.”

“That happened *one* time.” Amanda had to give Jen credit, both for her exceptional memory and for fitting in her major grievance about their marriage in her second sentence. For as much as she’d loved the lifestyle it had afforded them, Jen had always resented Amanda’s career and her dedication to it.

“For Zach’s sake,” Jen’s jaw was so rigid it was a miracle the words could escape, “I hope you can refrain from calling attention to yourself like you usually do. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have guests to greet.”

“Always a pleasure catching up,” Amanda called after her, balling her fists once more.

As if I don’t know how to fly under the radar.

Amanda would never win with that woman. Take her dress, for instance. She had chosen it specifically in response to Jen’s outrageous concern that Amanda would somehow manage to upstage the bride. As if that could happen. Amanda knew full well there wasn’t an outfit in the world that could make a middle-aged mother shine more radiantly than a young bride in love.

Amanda plucked at the dull purple fabric of her dress with distaste. She may have gone overboard trying to prove her ex wrong with this one. It was plainer than plain. No one looking at her would think she was a television star with access to the country’s top designers. In the depths of her heart—assuming the woman still had one—Jen had to have been impressed with the result. Amanda looked like a purple cow.

Tonight's ensemble wasn't merely off the rack. It looked like it came from a clearance rack at a discount store. Amanda had gone easy on the makeup and hair, too. Hell, the only way to be more incognito would be to wrap herself in a trench coat and don a fedora. Sorry, but in the late June heat, there was no way to make that work. But Jen would never be satisfied or willing to believe anything was more important to Amanda than being in the limelight.

Her ex had never understood her at all.

If it wasn't for Zach, Amanda would have relished the opportunity to toss a glass of this very expensive wine she'd paid for in Jen's face and storm out. That would be one hell of a satisfying way to call attention to herself. Honestly, though, the last thing Amanda wanted was anyone looking at her tonight. Not while she felt like the love child of an overripe eggplant and a washed-up sea hag.

No wonder I'm all alone.

Amanda sank into her chair as all forty-seven of her years weighed on her at once. Having her son get married made her feel ancient enough, but her ugly dress was working overtime to accentuate each and every unwanted bulge. It was a cruel reminder to her that no number of hours spent in the gym could stave off middle age. She wanted to curl into a ball and have a good cry. Instead, Amanda did what she had trained herself to do from her very first live broadcast. She forced herself to sit up straight, plastering a smile on her understated pink lips.

Snap out of it, she ordered, her internal voice resembling that of a four-star general. You've interviewed three sitting presidents. You will not be defeated by a vindictive ex and her wine-swilling Santa Claus.

She was Amanda Fucking Morgan. She hadn't climbed to the position of America's number one morning show host by indulging in weakness. Too many people would love to see her break. Her ex-wife, for starters. Her mother, too, probably, considering the woman had only decided Amanda was acceptable as a daughter after she'd become famous. Not to

mention dozens of newscasters around the country who salivated at the prospect of Amanda losing her edge and giving them an in to take over her job.

Well, too bad. Amanda might've found herself closer to the edge of the abyss tonight than she'd been in a long time, but by God, she wouldn't give anyone the satisfaction of seeing her fall in. Not now and not ever.

AFTER AN ANNOUNCEMENT that dinner would soon be served, wedding guests filtered to their tables.

Jason took his seat next to Amanda with a befuddled look on his face. "Are you sure this is right?" He checked his place card for a second time, just as Amanda had done earlier.

"It's not right at all, but I'm afraid it's correct." Gutted by the stricken look on the man's face, Amanda did her best to cheer him up. "Come on. I've been amusing myself by trying to guess which other rejects Jen saw fit to seat us with. Wanna help?"

"Rejects?" Jason's face turned white, and Amanda regretted her word choice. It had obviously hit too close to home.

"You know what I mean. I was thinking we'll get a distant cousin who gets sloppy drunk by the second course. Or one of Nick's business associates who will bore us all to tears talking about the finer points of wine distribution all night."

Jason offered a half-smile in response. Amanda took it as a win, even as she cursed their coldhearted ex. When Zach and Valerie had taken Jen up on her offer to help with the seating chart, there was no way they could've known she would wield it as a weapon. Amanda, on the other hand, shouldn't have been as surprised as she was. Maybe she wasn't as cynical as she liked to let on.

As the minutes ticked by and the other six seats remained empty, another possibility came to mind. Maybe Jen

considered her two ex-spouses so toxic no one else had been assigned to their table at all. When the servers started placing plates of food on tables and the other spots still remained unclaimed, all Amanda could do was shake her head.

“Is she trying to humiliate us on purpose?” Jason muttered, gesturing to the empty chairs. “People are going to think we have body odor. Or leprosy. I could’ve sworn there were other guests assigned to the table.”

“Well, they’re not here now.” Amanda ran a hand through her hair, hoping it made her look like all of this was bothering her a lot less than it did. She was spared from further comment by the clinking of a fork against a glass.

“Your attention, please,” an announcer said. “The father of the groom would like to say a few words.”

“Do you need to head up front?” Even as Amanda was asking, a storm cloud settled over Jason’s features.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.” The speakers produced a high-pitched squeal as Nick held the microphone too close to his mouth. “Oops. Hold on.”

“Did you know about this?” When Jason shook his head, Amanda grasped his forearm. “Is he fucking kidding? You’re the father of the groom. He’s been in Zach’s life for, like, a year.”

As she watched in horror, a red-cheeked and glassy-eyed Nick covered his mouth, presumably because he had to burp from too much wine, but it was hard to tell for certain from all the way out in the cheap seats. “Jen and I can’t express how proud we are of our son, Zach.”

“Ten bucks he doesn’t know Zach’s middle name,” Jason grumbled.

“I doubt he knows his own at the moment. He looks like he can barely stand. I thought wine connoisseurs were supposed to swish the wine around and spit it out.”

She waited for Jason to jump on the *let’s make fun of Nick* train, but when their eyes met, she was shocked to find his

brimming with tears. “Was I a bad father? Is this why Zach’s letting this happen?”

“No, Jason. You know Zach had nothing to do with this. Look at him up there with Valerie.” Amanda nodded toward the small sweetheart table where the bride and groom sat alone, gazing into each other’s eyes like they couldn’t see anything else. “He’s just a kid too goofy in love to pay attention to the scheming going on around him. I bet neither he nor Valerie has any idea where a single one of the guests is sitting right now.”

“Jen did this, then?” Jason’s face twisted, making Amanda fear he was going to be sick.

“Who else? She’s a control freak.” Amanda said this with the full knowledge that she was often accused of being the same. The difference was Amanda focused her energy on herself and the things that directly impacted her environment as a way to manage the out-of-control stress of her high-profile career. Jen preferred to control everyone around her merely because she could. It had taken Amanda years to recognize it and even longer to accept Jen’s cruelty wasn’t solely a result of Amanda’s behavior. Jen simply had a mean streak buried deep beneath a cunning smile.

“You don’t think I was a bad father?” The timidity in Jason’s voice told Amanda he had yet to learn not to take their ex’s catty meanness to heart.

“We’ve had our differences, but I would never say you were anything but a great father.” Amanda tightened her fingers around Jason’s arm, giving it a squeeze before letting him go. “As for that puffed-up elf she’s married to, the only thing he’s done is select a bunch of expensive wines for the reception and then try to take all the credit.”

“When you’re the one who paid for it,” Jason pointed out magnanimously. “And you know why? Because you’re a good mom.”

“You think so?” Amanda’s heart clenched. Stupid as it was, she’d needed someone, anyone, to tell her that, because she sure didn’t feel like it was true.

Jason crossed his arms. “I don’t know how this night could get worse.”

Nick continued to ramble for a few more minutes, looking increasingly tipsy, until the crowd grew uneasy enough at his wobbling that Jen stood and finished the toast. Not once did she so much as point in the direction of the two occupants of the Merlot table.

When the speech had ended, Amanda pressed her lips together. “I didn’t know Jen could be such a cold bitch.”

“Yeah, but she’s a hot bitch, too, which makes it even worse. Just look at her.” The longing in Jason’s voice was palpable. The poor guy still had it bad for his ex, and he wasn’t used to being alone. No good could come of it.

“Tell you what,” Amanda said, giving Jason a bump with her shoulder. “Why don’t we go find the bar and see if they have something other than wine in this place? It’ll take the edge off.”

What she really wanted to do was go back to her room and drink alone, or possibly break some shit. But if the tabloids got wind of either, it would be a PR nightmare, and her contract was up for negotiation soon. Amanda was a realist. At her age, and with as much money as they paid her, the suits at her network would love any excuse to paint her as a menopausal lunatic so they could replace her with someone younger and cheaper. She couldn’t provide them with the ammunition. Getting plastered with Jason was a safer, if less desirable, option that was not as likely to get her fired.

“I’ve got a better idea.” As Jason refocused on Amanda, the wild glint in his eyes was unsettling.

“Oh?” Amanda was pretty sure she didn’t want to hear it.

“I’m getting laid.” Jason slapped his palm on the tablecloth, making the water in the glasses jiggle. “You should, too. You know what they say. The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else, right?”

Was he serious? “I rescind my suggestion to go to the bar. You’ve obviously had too much to drink already.”

“Come on,” he urged. “Weddings are the perfect place to hook up. I’ve never failed. Young and hot is the ticket for tonight.”

“Spoken like a true middle-aged white dude.” Amanda raised her nearly empty glass to him. “Sometimes I resent how easy it is for all you straight people. Even if I wanted to hook up with someone tonight, statistically speaking, I’d be lucky to find more than three women on the entire guest list who would be open to the proposition.”

“And one of them is Jen’s Aunt Myrtle, if the rumors are true. Unless you’re up for a little May-December romance.”

“With Aunt Myrtle?” Amanda cringed. “No thanks. Besides, I know better than to think I’m still a May, and I pray to God I’m not a December.”

Jason gave her a thoughtful look as he stroked his chin. “Mid-October?”

“Hey! I’m not a day past September, thank you very much.”

In her head, Amanda could almost hear the clock ticking away the last remaining seconds of her youth. Her son was a married man. Next thing she knew, she’d be a grandmother.

I’m not ready to be a grandmother.

Jason burst into laughter. “I see a couple bridesmaids who’ve wandered away from the pack. I’m not going to pass up this golden opportunity.”

“Careful.” Amanda eyed the young women in their matching red gowns. “Those two look more like Marches to me. You don’t want to end up in jail.”

“Okay, calendar girl,” Jason taunted. “I’ll ask for ID.”

With that, Jason strutted onto the dance floor with way more confidence than a man of his age deserved. The guy was pushing fifty. Meanwhile, though she’d mostly said it to be snarky, a small part of Amanda really wondered how the bridesmaids, who all looked so young from her middle age vantage point, could possibly be of legal age. At twenty-five,

the groom barely was, for God's sake. Meanwhile, while Valerie was a nice enough girl, at thirty-one years old, she was basically a cradle robber. And even she didn't seem mature enough for this kind of commitment.

Why did my little boy jump into marriage so soon? Amanda's heart sank. It would never last. Between their impulsiveness and their six-year age gap, the deck was stacked against them so high it was insurmountable.

Amanda sighed. "I give them seven months, tops."

"Really? I was going to say nine."

Amanda's heart leapt into her throat as a woman's voice made it clear Amanda had not kept her cynical comment inside her head as she'd intended. She turned to see who'd spoken, and even in the dim lighting, it was evident this gorgeously curvy woman, in a brilliant green dress that perfectly complimented her golden hair, easily ticked both the young and hot boxes.

Don't forget straight, Amanda cautioned, lest she allow herself to get any naughty ideas. Zach already had both his parents and the Santa imposter likely to make fools of themselves publicly tonight. She didn't need to add her name to the list of poor role models.

The young woman fanned herself with one hand while she rested the other on the back of the chair beside Amanda. "Mind if I sit? My table is getting rowdy, and I need a breath of fresh air."

"Be my guest." Amanda gestured to the empty table. "As you can see, I've got room to spare."

"Is that your husband out there?" the woman asked, lowering herself into the seat and pointing at Jason. He was still on the dance floor, sandwiched between the two barely legal bridesmaids, and from their gyrations, there was a horrifying chance all three of them might end up in bed together.

"Uh, no." Amanda couldn't hold back a derisive chortle, adding, "Thank God."

“Not your type?” The young woman flashed a charming smile, her teeth as straight as she no doubt was.

Amanda chuckled. “You could say that. No offense to him. Men in general aren’t really my type.”

“I’m with you on that.”

Amanda tensed, her pulse ticking faster. Had she heard that right? To hide her sudden flustered demeanor, she swiveled her head toward Jason, who had kicked his overeager mating antics into a higher gear. “It’s like watching a car crash.”

“It really is.” The woman stuck out her hand. “I’m Dakota, by the way.”

Amanda reached out her own for a shake, even as she was overcome with the worry that her palms would be as sweaty as a teenage boy. What was wrong with her? Encountering another lesbian—who wasn’t ninety-year-old Aunt Myrtle—in a social gathering of more than three hundred people was hardly unexpected. It didn’t mean she had to get all twisted up in knots about it. This was what happened when you listened to a guy like Jason and actually took him seriously. Big mistake.

The woman—Dakota, which Amanda was pretty sure hadn’t even been a legitimate name back in her day—was looking at her with an odd expression. “Do you have a name, as well?”

“Oh. Yes.” Amanda’s stomach dropped. This was the moment she always dreaded, when she told a stranger who she was, a name everyone in America knew, and she ceased to be anything but a celebrity they wanted a piece of. “It’s Amanda.”

“Nice to meet you.” Dakota studied the dance floor like she was trying to learn some new steps.

That was it?

Amanda waited a beat for the woman to make the connection, but nothing happened. She flinched as the cruel truth set in, slicing her like a knife to the gut. There was only one thing worse than being recognized, and she was

experiencing it. This young, hot lesbian had absolutely no idea who the fuck Amanda was. Could this cursed night get any worse?

“Amanda Morgan.” Despite emphasizing her last name to the point she sounded like she might have missed a dose of important medication, there wasn’t so much as a flicker of recognition on the young woman’s face. Talk about a blow to the ego. Her ex getting hitched to Father Christmas was mild by comparison.

And she was still holding the woman’s hand.

Jesus Christ.

Amanda’s grip sprung open like she’d suddenly realized she was grasping a hot potato. “So, what do you do?”

“Huh?” Dakota managed to drag her attention away from the gyrating couples long enough to mumble something that Amanda could’ve sworn sounded like cock-a-doodle-do.

“Oh, that’s interesting.” Was Dakota a chicken farmer? That was absurd but made sense in a weird way. After all, it didn’t get much more hipster than raising chickens in Portland.

The woman shrugged, scoping out every single guest at the reception except Amanda. Seriously, no eye contact whatsoever. Sure, *The AM Show* had slipped in recent years in the eighteen to thirty-four demographic, but Amanda Fucking Morgan was a goddamned American institution.

Had it finally happened? Amanda’s chest constricted. What if she’d crossed that threshold in middle age where she’d become invisible? If that had happened, her life might as well be over.

Bitchy Jen was at the front of the reception tent, holding court with guests like this was her special day instead of her son’s. Nick, miraculously still conscious, was drinking wine straight from the bottle. The bride and groom were nowhere in sight, not that Amanda expected them to carve out extra time for her when they had hundreds of friends and family to greet.

As if to rub salt in her wounds, whatever pulsating nonsense everyone was dancing to was coming to an end, and

one of the bridesmaids was pulling Jason off the dance floor by his tie. The other bridesmaid followed. The meaning of their actions was crystal clear. That son of a bitch was about to have a threesome. And Amanda was once again destined to sleep alone.

I'm becoming irrelevant.

Oh, hell no. If pudgy Jason could score two coeds at once, then she—the woman who had once sung a duet with the French president Jacques Chirac on live television in a world-exclusive interview—yes, *she* was going to convince this young lesbian chicken-lady to come back to her room.

What they would do when they got there, she hadn't decided. Amanda had never been the one-night stand type, for about a million reasons. But she'd never felt this desperate before, like her entire future rested on another person finding her desirable.

A slow song replaced the throbbing electronic disco beat. Affixing her award-winning, million-dollar smile to her lips, Amanda held out her hand. "Okay, Rooster Girl. Care to dance?"

CHAPTER TWO

OH. MY. GOD.

Dakota had chosen the table at random, simply needing a place to sit far away from her former classmates. And their spouses. Seriously, with Valerie getting hitched, every friend Dakota had gone to college with was married now. Even her little sister had already tied the knot. Meanwhile, Dakota's most enduring relationship was with Riley, her golden retriever.

It had never bothered her before, but she'd felt like such a loser during dinner to be the only one without a shiny gold band on her left hand. But now? Right now, Dakota could barely breathe. Amanda Morgan—renowned journalist, gay icon, and her lifelong celebrity crush—was holding that very same hand.

Holy fucking shit.

“Lead or follow?” Amanda asked.

“Huh?” Dakota faltered, her brain refusing to process the meaning of words. It was only when Amanda's right arm snaked around her waist, pulling her closer, that Dakota understood the question. By now it was too late to answer because, in the face of Dakota's total silence, Amanda had chosen to lead by default.

Was this for real? Dakota's biggest celebrity crush was escorting her to the dance floor. Would it be completely insane for her to never wash her hand again? Yes, probably. But she might not care.

Bumping into Amanda Morgan in person at a friend's wedding was about as likely as encountering a tiger on Main Street. It seriously hadn't dawned on Dakota how familiar the woman at the empty table looked until she was halfway through introducing herself. Even then, she'd thought it a trick of the dim lighting. But when the woman had told Dakota her name, it had nearly knocked her to the floor, leaving her incapable of coherent thought or speech.

"Do you tango?" The newswoman's voice was smooth as silk, sending a tingle down Dakota's spine, among other places.

"Er..."

Damn it. Amanda Morgan was infinitely sexier in person than she was on TV. It was almost cruel how much so. It was killing Dakota not to be able to film everything that was happening right now and post it on social media with the hashtag *DreamsComeTrue*.

Stop it, Dakota, she urged herself. Don't act like that crazy person. Play it cool.

In the absence of a reply, Amanda took things into her own hands, dipping Dakota backward like they were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. No one had done that before with her. Which was a real shame, because it was a fucking hot move.

"You're good," Dakota managed to say, her heart pounding.

"I'm good at a lot of things," Amanda purred, shooting a jolt of raw lust straight to Dakota's clit.

Pretty sure I'm going to die.

"Dancing." She swallowed, nearly choking on her tongue. "I meant at dancing."

This playing it cool thing was not going as well as Dakota might've liked.

Dakota clung to Amanda's shoulder, struggling to retain her outward composure even while visions of holding the

woman like this, naked in some dark corner, played through her mind like an X-rated movie.

Whoa, girl. Rein it in, she cautioned herself before her imagination took things too far. It was highly unlikely anything of the sort was going to happen tonight, or ever, but a girl could dream.

The music continued, slow and sultry. The women moved in tandem, their bodies totally in sync, owning the dance floor as every inch of space between them dissolved. Dakota was lost in the spicy scent of Amanda's perfume, the brush of blonde locks against her cheek, the strong arms encircling her like they'd never let go.

All too soon, the music came to an end.

"That was—" Dakota let out a breath, uncertain how to describe what that experience had been. Electrifying? Tantalizing?

Amanda's ruby red lips curled upward, amusement—and maybe something more—dancing in her eyes. "Catch you later, Rooster Girl."

Dakota wanted to grab her and make her stay, but if she didn't want to send Amanda running at full speed in the opposite direction, it would behoove her not to do that. And she definitely should keep, "I've been a super fan since I was in high school, and I even gave a speech one time about how I wanted to be you when I grew up," to herself. There was no way to phrase that without coming off as a creep and/or possible stalker.

Dakota should know. As one of the hosts of a nationally syndicated morning news program herself—not that the *Cock-a-doodle Rooster Report*, focused primarily on America's agricultural heartland, was remotely in the same universe as *The AM Show*—Dakota had met plenty of unhinged fans and knew how scary they could be.

As Amanda left the dance floor and melted into the shadows along the edge of the tent, Dakota searched with eagle eyes for the bride. Even though it was Valerie's wedding,

Dakota was of half a mind to descend on her and give her the what-for.

Spotting a lacy white dress, Dakota waved. “Valerie!”

“Hey there!” Valerie beamed, a combination of excitement and the mostly finished whiskey in her hand—despite getting married at a vineyard, her former roommate had never cared much for wine—turning her cheeks a rosy red. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

Dakota gave her friend a hug, then fixed her with a stern expression. “How could you have failed to mention that Amanda Morgan was invited to your wedding?”

“Of course, she was invited.” The bride giggled in a decidedly not-sober way. “She’s Zach’s stepmom.”

“What?” Dakota clamped her hand over her mouth as soon as she realized she’d shrieked. But who could blame her? Valerie had known about Dakota’s obsession ever since their freshman year at Northwestern University, when one entire wall of their dorm room had been plastered with photos of the beautiful broadcaster. Valerie had given her shit about it all year.

“I told you that, didn’t I?”

“No, you didn’t.” Dakota couldn’t understand how Valerie could have held out on her with intel like this. “Not only is Amanda Morgan the reason I went into broadcasting, she occupies the top slot of my celebrity freebie list.”

“Your what?”

“You know, the list of famous people you can sleep with if given the opportunity, and your partner can’t call it cheating.”

“Oh.” Valerie took a sip of her whiskey. “I have the Chrises on mine.”

“The Chrises?”

“Chris Hemsworth. Chris Evans. Chris Pine—”

“So, like, any actor with the first name Chris?”

“Basically.” Valerie’s eyes didn’t quite focus as she looked into Dakota’s with a sudden seriousness. “Are you thinking of doing it?”

“You mean, do I plan to sleep with your *mother-in-law*?” Dakota looked at her friend aghast as the words sunk in. It sounded so wrong, so why did she want to do it even more?

“She’s barely old enough to be Zach’s mom. Jen’s at least five years older than Amanda. Besides, Amanda’s like a mom people would still want to sleep with, you know?” Valerie sank her teeth into her lower lip, looking perplexed. “I feel like there should be a name for that.”

“Yeah. There is.” Dakota patted her drunk friend on the shoulder. Until that very second, Dakota had never truly understood the term MILF, but she sure did now.

“Oh, come on,” Valerie urged. “You’ve gotta try. I can introduce you to her. This is exciting. I’ve never known anyone who got to use their celebrity *get out of jail free* card. Have you?”

“No,” Dakota admitted, “but since I’m not actually dating anyone, I don’t think it counts.”

“That’s a shame.” The bride pouted. “I’m dying to know how that whole freebie thing would go down. I’ve honestly never known anyone who even came close. Do you have to have the list in writing ahead of time?”

“Good question,” Dakota replied, although she was pretty sure she’d actually written out Amanda Morgan’s name in sparkly gel pen somewhere when she was in high school, surrounded with hearts, right around the time it had occurred to her she might be into girls.

Valerie cocked her head to one side. “What do you suppose the etiquette would be when it came to informing your girlfriend?”

“You mean if I had one?” Pondering this, Dakota couldn’t help feeling a little deflated, both because of her single status and because there was as much chance of her sleeping with her idol as there was of finding life on Mars. Not impossible, but

not bloody likely, either, and definitely not tonight. “I can’t decide if it would be polite to mention it ahead of time, or if after the fact would be the better way to handle it.”

Valerie nodded slowly, the now-empty whiskey glass in her hand the most likely culprit for her giving such weight to Dakota’s words. “Single or not, you’d be an instant legend if it happened.”

“I don’t think—”

“Valerie, there you are.” Zach joined them, putting an arm around his bride. “The DJ wants to get started with the grandparents’ dance.”

“Duty calls.” The bride gave an apologetic shrug. “Let’s catch up soon, though, okay?”

“Sure thing,” Dakota said, wishing she didn’t know how unlikely it was to happen. Growing apart from old friends was the worst part of becoming an adult.

“Okay, folks. Where’s the bride’s grandpa?” The DJ’s voice boomed, making Dakota jump. A spotlight swept the crowd, coming to rest on a table near the edge of the floor. “There he is. Come on up here, sir. Now where’s Grandma hiding? Help me out, folks. The groom says she’s wearing a purple dress.”

Suddenly, the glare of a spotlight lit up Amanda’s face at the far end of the tent.

“Why are they shining that thing on her?” Dakota mumbled to herself, frowning as the spotlight remained stubbornly fixed on Amanda’s face.

“We found her!” the DJ announced.

While the crowd whooped and hollered, Amanda’s jaw tensed, her expression freezing in an expression somewhere between pain and horror. Dakota’s breath caught. Surely, the DJ didn’t think Amanda was one of the grandparents, did he? That was preposterous. But the spotlight wasn’t moving.

“Come on, Granny. Show ’em what you’ve got.”

Amanda spun around and started moving, not breaking stride until she was out of the tent. With a growing sense of urgency, Dakota pushed toward the edge of the crowd, squinting into the darkness as she tried to locate Amanda somewhere within the rows of vines.

Quickly realizing his error, the DJ shifted the spotlight to illuminate the actual grandmother. Other than the fact the elderly woman also happened to be wearing a purple dress, she bore no resemblance to Amanda whatsoever. The DJ was clearly a moron.

Dakota's heart pounded as she tried to decide if it was better to give Amanda her space or offer some company in her distress. Her shadowy outline was barely visible still moving at a fast clip. Dakota had about one more second to make the decision before the woman disappeared completely.

Dakota went with her gut, sprinting out of the tent.

“Amanda, wait up!”

DAKOTA GAVE chase down the narrow, dirt path that ran between two rows of vines. The woman didn't exactly stop, but she slowed her speed enough for Dakota to catch up. “That guy's an idiot. The person he was looking for happened to be wearing a purple dress. That's all.”

“Figures.” Amanda pinched the eggplant-colored fabric at her thigh, eyeing it with derision. “Only an old woman would wear something this ugly.”

As much as Dakota wanted to cheer up Amanda, she had to agree. The gown was one of the worst things she'd ever seen, and not even close to the beautifully tailored suits the woman was known for. “Why did you wear it?”

“My ex.” Amanda groaned softly. “I promised I would do my best not to stand out on my stepson's special day.”

“You must love him very much.” Dakota gave the dress a thorough up-and-down look, her lips puckering like she'd

tasted a lemon. “Wearing that gown in public is a selfless act.”

“Sure. I’m right up there with Mother Teresa.” Amanda continued to scowl, but humor lurked in her tone.

She interviewed the actual Mother Teresa, Dakota realized with a sense of awe, recalling this fact in her extensive knowledge of Amanda Morgan trivia. This woman was a total legend, and, even straight-as-an-arrow Valerie had recognized the living embodiment of a mom people would like to... *well, you know.*

“Only a woman as beautiful as you could make that dress work as well as it does,” Dakota let slip, ogling Amanda’s purple-sheathed curves before she could stop herself. She froze as Amanda gave her a sharp look, wondering exactly how closely her expression resembled that of a hungry wolf eyeing its dinner.

If you have to ask, you already have your answer.

“You’re quite the charmer.” Even in the moonlight, it was fairly obvious Amanda’s cheeks had turned pink. “I’m afraid my figure isn’t as forgiving as it used to be.”

“Oh, please.” Dakota patted her hips in a less-than-convincing attempt to cover her tracks. “As my mom loves to say, I’m wide enough to pop out ten kids. Mind you, that’s her idea of a compliment. I won’t even tell you what she says about my legs.”

Amanda took a step back, giving Dakota the once-over with a thoroughness that made her skin burn. “You know what? Sometimes mothers don’t know what the fuck they’re talking about. Trust me. I know better than most.”

“Oh yeah?” Dakota reached for Amanda’s shoulder to give it a squeeze, shocked by the boldness and how her hand wasn’t flicked away. “Neither do DJs.”

“Agreed.”

On top of the ongoing scorch of attraction, Dakota was nearly consumed with the strange desire to give Amanda a hug. It was hard to reconcile the image Dakota had of Amanda in her head, the journalist who was never ruffled and who took

no prisoners, with this flesh and blood person who was deeply human and vulnerable. Was it actually possible such a stunning and successful woman didn't know she was the most fucking amazing person on the planet?

Knowing a hug would cross all sorts of lines, Dakota opted for the next best thing she could think of. "Wanna go back for another dance? Or maybe some wine?"

"I think I've had enough partying for one day," Amanda declared. "Besides, I have a stunning view of the vineyard from my suite and a bottle of wine to die for."

"Oh, right." Dakota forced a smile, trying not to be too obvious about her crushing disappointment. "Well, I guess I'll just—"

"Would you care to join me?"

Dakota's jaw nearly dropped off its hinge. "I—"

Before she could answer, her phone rang. After fumbling to get it out of her handbag, she silenced it immediately, shoving it back into the silk-lined depths with a menacing glare.

Amanda arched an eyebrow. "Do you need to get that?"

"Nope." Dakota clicked the clasp shut. "You said something about wine that was to die for?"

"Yes, I did." No longer able to ring, Dakota's phone started to vibrate. "But it sounds like you might have other plans. I wouldn't want to keep you from them."

"Not at all." Dakota tucked the still-pulsating handbag under her arm, hoping the caller would take a hint and drop off the face of the earth immediately. "Shall we?"

With Amanda in the lead, they snaked their way through the vines, avoiding the lighted tent with its increasingly noisy and intoxicated crowd. They entered the inn via a backdoor, where Amanda paused at the base of what appeared to be the service staircase.

"I'm on the third floor. Do you mind a climb?"

Dakota opened her mouth to point out there was an elevator in the main lobby but realized Amanda was certainly aware of that fact. The back stairs offered a more private route to the room. For a celebrity used to, and sometimes wanting to avoid, the public eye, taking a back way made sense. “I can always use more exercise.”

They began the climb in silence, which suited Dakota fine, in part because her mind was still short-circuiting over the fact she was heading to Amanda Morgan’s bedroom—which even if it wasn’t for anything less innocent than a nightcap, was still a big fucking deal—and also because she hadn’t been kidding about needing more exercise. By halfway between the second and third floors, Dakota’s lungs burned like she was climbing Mt. Everest.

When they reached the room, Amanda waved her keycard at the knob. The lock clicked, and she opened it wide, stepping through and gesturing with a flourish for Dakota to enter. “Right through here.”

Dakota entered the luxury suite. Her step wobbled in astonishment, and she tried not to gape like a hick as it struck her how much nicer this one was than the small room she’d been assigned, which was directly above the kitchen and smelled like stale onions.

Dakota stiffened as her purse began to vibrate again. It had to be work calling about some sort of breaking news. Either that, or it was someone running a bank scam. No one else would be this persistent.

She tucked the bag even deeper into her armpit and did her best to pretend it didn’t exist. She loved her job, but she was off the clock. And maybe, just possibly, about to get laid. That would definitely not happen if she ignored the gorgeous goddess she was with and answered the phone.

“I’m starting to wonder if you have a jealous girlfriend.” As she spoke, Amanda kicked off her shoes, bringing her down at least two inches in height.

Dakota laughed. “Not a chance.”

“You mean she’s not jealous?” Amanda picked up a corkscrew with one hand and a bottle of wine with the other.

“She’d have to exist first,” Dakota countered.

“You must have had a girlfriend at some point,” Amanda pressed, popping the cork.

“Oh, sure but not for the past couple of years and never anything serious. Work takes most of my time.”

“It’s exhausting getting up with the chickens.”

“You’ve got that right.” Dakota laughed, loving that description of her job. She pointed to the deep red wine, which Amanda was pouring into two large glasses. “Is that the vineyard’s reserve Cabernet? That was voted one of the top ten wines last year.”

“For a chicken lady, you know a lot about fancy wine.”

“It’s a prerequisite or the other hens would kick me out of the coop.” Dakota was almost giddy at this vague teasing between them and hoped she could keep up her end of the witty banter.

As if to assure her, Amanda tossed her head back and laughed.

Damn if that wasn’t the sexiest sound Dakota had ever heard. Her body thrummed as she pondered what else would make Amanda let loose with a laugh like that. Dakota had an idea or two. Would she get the chance to try them out? Normally, that notion would be the stuff of her most insane fantasies, but alone in this room, somehow the impossible felt possible.

Amanda handed Dakota a wine glass, her deep brown eyes smoldering. “Would you like to check out the balcony? I seem to recall promising you a view.”

“Please.” It was all Dakota could do not to go weak in the knees as she motioned for Amanda to lead the way. She followed slowly so that she could take in the view—and by that, she did not mean the grapes. Though that purple satin dress was ugly as sin on its own, it was greatly enhanced by

being stretched across Amanda's tight ass as she strode across the room in her stocking-clad feet.

How the fuck did the DJ, even for a second, think this fine woman could possibly be a grandmother?

The man was a total nincompoop, yet Dakota had a feeling she owed him. If it hadn't been for his idiotic blunder, Amanda might never have stormed off, and Dakota might not have gotten this chance to be alone with her.

Besides, if the DJ's insult meant Amanda was burning with the need to prove her virility and physical prowess, Dakota was more than happy to afford her the opportunity.

Standing side by side on the balcony, glasses in hand, it seemed to strike both women at exactly the same moment that it was too dark to see anything. They stared into the blackness, sipped their wine, and broke into a fit of giggles.

"I swear there's a view," Amanda said, her shoulders shaking.

"Sure, there is," Dakota teased, gasping for breath. "I bet you say that to all the girls to lure them up here so you can have your wicked way with them."

"Do you think that would work?"

Dakota swallowed hard, a flash of heat lighting up her core as Amanda studied her suggestively. Hell yes, it would work. Was that what she wanted?

Deep in the crevice of her armpit, Dakota's phone vibrated yet again. She yelped at the tickling sensation, loosening her grip on the handbag, which clattered to the ground. With a sound approaching a growl, Dakota set her wine glass on the rough wood railing of the balcony, scooped up her purse, and ripped the phone from inside. She declined the call, blackened the screen, and slammed it down a few inches from her wine glass.

Amanda's expression shifted from one of seduction to a look that said she would get to the bottom of things if it was the last thing she ever did. Dakota had seen that same look on the woman's face hundreds of times during interviews but

never dreamed she'd be on the receiving end of it one day. It was terrifying, but also made her want to strip all her clothes off while encouraging Amanda to leave no inch unexamined.

"I'm sorry." Dakota's words were breathy, and her heart was pounding. "I promise it's not important."

"Are you a drug dealer?"

Dakota placed a hand on her chest. "Me? You clearly haven't seen me puke my guts out after smoking pot."

Amanda's lips twitched, but she continued her interrogation. "Are you on an organ transplant list?"

Dakota shook her head. "Nope."

"A secret agent, then?"

Unable to keep in her laughter, Dakota shook her head again.

"Just so we're clear"—Amanda set her glass on the balcony railing near Dakota's and drummed her fingers on the wood—"if something happened to your phone right now, there wouldn't be any life-threatening consequences?"

"Definitely not."

"In that case..." Amanda plucked the phone from the railing and held it up. Dakota grasped Amanda's forearm but not before the woman had managed to give it a vigorous toss.

Dakota watched in total shock as her phone sailed through the darkness and disappeared into the vines below. "Did you throw my phone away?"

"I..." For possibly the first time ever, Amanda looked like she had no idea what to say. "I think I did."

"That's what I thought."

"In my defense, young people spend entirely too much time on the phone. You're missing out on life, constantly being online." While her response was flippant, Amanda's eyes were wide, like she couldn't believe what she'd done. The effect was intoxicating. Amanda Morgan, wild and uncertain, was the hottest thing ever.

Dakota realized she was still holding Amanda's arm. Instead of letting go, which would've been the wise thing to do, she pulled Amanda close enough that the heat of their bodies radiated in the space between them. "So, what you're saying is you were doing me a favor?"

"Exactly." Though their fronts were virtually pressed together, Amanda didn't attempt to put any distance between them, not even when Dakota leaned closer still. A light breeze stirred the vines below, filling the air with a sweet, fruity scent, along with the hint of the spicy perfume Amanda had dabbed behind her ear. "What are you planning to do about it?"

Since she didn't have any plan to speak of, Dakota responded by doing the first thing that came to her. She planted her lips on Amanda's, threading her fingers in Amanda's warm, silken hair. Amanda responded by deepening the kiss as she slipped her hand around Dakota, slowly lowering the zipper of her dress.

"Is this okay?" Amanda whispered, tickling Dakota's ear with her lips while easing the zipper down another inch.

It was more than okay, but Dakota wasn't going to let something like the chucking of her new iPhone from a third-story balcony go completely unpunished, so she pulled back enough to cause Amanda's expression to flicker with doubt.

"That depends." Dakota smiled slyly, savoring this newfound power to hold her idol in a state of suspense. "I'd prefer if you invited me back inside first. Public nudity is illegal."

"You make a fair point." Amanda turned to the door, grinning over her shoulder as she slid it open. She stood in the opening, her expression becoming expectant as Dakota remained rooted in place. "Any other requests?"

"Let me think." Step after deliberate step, Dakota approached the door. Though it was open wide, she passed through at exactly the spot where Amanda stood, her nipples hardening as her breasts brushed across the woman's chest. "Since you asked, I think I'd prefer if you got undressed first."

CHAPTER THREE

AMANDA'S HEART NEARLY BURST FROM HER CHEST AS SHE swept her hair to the side in silent invitation. Was this really happening? She bared the back of her dress, exposing the thin line of shiny brass that held it closed.

Don't think about how insane this is.

There was a quick hum as Dakota worked the zipper open, followed by a rush of coolness as she eased the thick straps over Amanda's shoulders, exposing her skin to the air. The world around her froze in a moment of trepidation.

"I don't normally do this." Amanda angled her body to obscure her bare back from the scrutiny of Dakota's gaze. If she got a close look at Amanda's body bearing the subtle but unmistakable marks of age, would she lose the desire to go further? Such rejection would be a blow Amanda might not recover from.

"Neither do I." Dakota paused. She didn't move a muscle, devouring Amanda with her eyes.

Amanda's throat went dry. Images of Dakota's body against hers, those soulful eyes piercing hers as they came together, filled Amanda's thoughts, momentarily driving back the fear. Before she could talk herself out of it, she gave a little wiggle, allowing the hideous purple satin to slide off her body and pool at her feet.

Standing in the middle of the hotel room, Amanda held her breath. She wore only a black lace bra, matching panties, and a narrow black garter belt that held up sheer, flesh-colored

stockings. It was as naked as she'd been in front of another person since her divorce. Longer, really. Those last several years, she and Jen had rarely had sex and almost never with the lights on.

Utterly exposed, Amanda's heart thudded as she waited for Dakota to react.

What am I doing?

Did Amanda honestly think this young woman was going to be blown away by what she saw? Even if she did live on a chicken farm, Dakota had certainly had her share of lovers before. Ones much closer to her own age, glowing with the vigor of youth.

This is a mistake.

Dakota would hardly fail to notice the way Amanda's tummy refused to flatten anymore no matter how many sit-ups she did, the way her once-perky breasts drooped, or those weird creases that had shown up along her neck one day and were apparently permanent. God knew that was all Amanda could see any time she looked in a mirror.

It was for precisely this reason that the obvious hunger in Dakota's steely blue eyes as they roved Amanda's nearly naked body came as such a shock. It was like the woman was looking at someone else entirely, someone she obviously found appealing—arousing, even. Amanda could get used to being looked at this way, even if she couldn't begin to guess what inspired it.

“Damn,” Dakota whispered, her voice husky and deep. She looked ready to consume Amanda whole. “I've never seen stockings like these for real before.”

Dakota bit down on her bottom lip as she studied the garter belt, and then she licked the spot where her teeth had pressed in. Amanda's attention zeroed in on Dakota's soft and supple pink tongue. Oh, the things Amanda longed for that tongue to do to her. Even with her eyes open, her imagination flooded with delicious possibilities that scorched her cheeks and made her loins clench.

Stop gawking like you've never had attention from a woman before.

Jolted out of her trance-like state by a mix of embarrassment and raw desire, Amanda moved closer to Dakota. Amanda noted with a flash of annoyance that the woman was slightly taller than she was, and she wished she hadn't been so quick to take off her shoes. She had to crane her neck to see Dakota's face and raise herself on her tiptoes to get close enough so that their lips nearly touched.

Amanda intended to take no more than a nibble, hoping for the tension to ease from her before working up to something more. Dakota made this approach impossible. Before Amanda knew what was happening, Dakota met her with a kiss that started out hungry and quickly ratcheted up to all-consuming. Amanda was swept up in it, helpless to resist.

What was going on?

Amanda was usually cool and collected, yet here she was teetering on the edge as her thoughts swirled in an incomprehensible jumble. Amanda was never like this, not with anyone. It was terrifying, yet even so, she yearned to let loose for once, if only to find out what would happen if she did. Her trembling limbs were too unsteady to hold her, and she clung to Dakota's shoulders to keep from toppling to the floor.

"I want to feel you," Dakota whispered into Amanda's ear. "I want to put my hands all over your body and taste every inch of you."

Don't be so impulsive, argued the part of Amanda that always needed to maintain control, the part that expected the worst to happen at any moment, for everything she'd worked for to be gone in an instant. The protests faded into silence as she sank into the feel of Dakota's arms wrapping around her. Amanda felt herself growing wet at the images conjured by the woman's words. What was so wrong with a little spontaneity, anyway? It couldn't really be as bad as she feared to let loose now and then. Other people did it all the time and nothing bad happened to them.

Dakota nipped at Amanda's earlobe, sucking on it gently before teasing it with her tongue. "Do you want me to do that again? Maybe somewhere else? A few other places come to mind."

Amanda cleared her throat as she tried to keep her head above the waves of arousal that crashed over her. "That depends."

Dakota pulled back to look Amanda in the eyes, arching an eyebrow in obvious amusement at having her own words thrown back at her. "You have a list of demands?"

"I *always* have a list of demands," Amanda replied, summoning all the confidence she didn't feel. She was gratified by the spark of eagerness, mixed with the slightest hint of alarm, in Dakota's eyes.

She was Amanda Fucking Morgan, after all—even if this whippersnapper in front of her had no idea what that meant. Amanda was determined to give the woman a night she wouldn't soon forget once she got back to that chicken farm of hers.

"I did what you asked," Amanda purred, running her eyes up and down the gauzy green dress that clung to Dakota's lean figure, hints of silvery threads sparkling with every move. "Now it's your turn to get undressed. Let me help."

Amanda stepped forward, pressing into Dakota as she reached behind and eased the zipper down an inch at a time. If Amanda was dead set on acting like an impulsive fool, the least she could allow herself was to savor every second.

Dakota released a sexy sigh, as if she was in tune with Amanda's desire not to rush too much. She stood completely still as Amanda lifted the shimmering emerald garment over her head and placed it gently on a nearby chair.

"Your dress is nicer than mine," Amanda said. "It would be a shame to toss it aside."

"Like you did with my phone, you mean?" Though Dakota's lips twitched with humor, Amanda still couldn't believe she'd heaved the woman's phone over the balcony.

“I’ll get you a new one tomorrow,” Amanda promised, knowing that if the shoe had been on the other foot, she would have been livid. “It’s the least I can do. Deal?” She thrust her hand toward Dakota, offering it to shake.

With the quirk of an eyebrow, Dakota grasped her hand and lifted it to her lips, lingering much longer than was necessary before letting go.

Swallowing hard, Amanda took in the sight of Dakota’s toned muscles and the light pink bra and panties that had been hiding beneath the gown. Bare legs, she noted with a hint of disappointment. The younger generation had no appreciation for the finer things in life, like mastering the art of unclasping a garter belt with the flick of a finger. Perhaps that wasn’t completely true, as the black ribbons with their silver clasps were garnering Dakota’s full attention, much to Amanda’s delight.

“Need me to show you how they work?” Amanda traced her finger along one satiny black line. She took a step backward, stopping when her calves made contact with the edge of the bed. How convenient.

“I think I can manage.” Dakota grasped Amanda’s hips, sinking her fingers into the flesh with a possessiveness that got Amanda’s engines revving. At first, Amanda thought the woman wanted her to sit, but then Dakota sank to her knees and began working the clasps open with her soft fingers.

Amanda’s breath caught. How was it possible a chicken farmer could have hands that felt like they’d never done a day of hard work? She might have asked this out loud, only Dakota gave her a gentle shove, sending Amanda onto her backside on the downy mattress.

Still kneeling at the edge of the bed, Dakota rolled the stocking slowly down Amanda’s right leg. As each inch of skin became exposed, Dakota kissed and licked the spot, continuing all the way down to Amanda’s baby toe.

Amanda stifled a giggle. That was one region of her body that hadn’t seen any action, like ever. Forty-seven years and she hadn’t known what she was missing until now. Hadn’t

there been an episode of *Friends* where one of the characters said toes are an erogenous zone most men forget? She'd totally thought they were making that up, but Lordy, she'd been wrong.

Amanda giggled again, this time at herself. A *Friends* reference, of all things? Thank goodness she hadn't said anything about it to Dakota. The woman was so young she'd probably still been in diapers when the show premiered. After tonight, Amanda would never be able to accuse Valerie of robbing the cradle again.

If she had a shred of sanity left, Amanda would put a halt to this instantly, before it got any more out of control than it already was. But she didn't, because before she could do the sensible thing, Dakota started on the other leg, taking her time like she had with the first. When she reached the toes, Amanda nearly swooned. Did women her age swoon? She was too far gone to care.

Sure, she was much too old to get involved with someone so young, even for a fling or whatever this was they were doing. But maybe Dakota was an old soul. That was a thing, right? She knew good wine and had handled those stockings like a pro. There was a sharpness in her eyes, as if Dakota didn't miss much. Except recognizing who she was going to bed with, of course.

Shit.

If an intelligent, beautiful, and inquisitive woman like this didn't know who the fuck Amanda was—well, Amanda's contract negotiation wasn't looking good. It wasn't a secret that the head honcho of her network was creaming his pants to find fresh, young blood.

Amanda could've spent the rest of the night worrying about this—she certainly had on countless nights when she was alone in her bed—but she wasn't alone tonight, and her breath hitched as Dakota's mouth worked its way back up the inside of Amanda's right leg. The next thing Amanda knew, Dakota's mouth was teasing her clit through the silk of her panties.

“Oh, fuck. Don’t stop,” Amanda moaned, her contract negotiations forgotten.

Ignoring her outburst completely, Dakota continued up, rising from her knees and hovering over the bed as she skimmed her lips across Amanda’s bare stomach. With a deft move, Dakota straddled her, burrowing her hands behind Amanda’s back and unhooking her bra before tossing it aside like—well, like an intrusive cell phone, for lack of a better example.

Breasts now freed, Dakota planted an arm on each side of Amanda’s body and took a nipple into her mouth, teasing it with her tongue until it was as hard as a pebble. Pulling more of Amanda’s breast into her mouth, Dakota’s cheeks hollowed as she sucked deeply, sending a hot searing bolt of pleasure to Amanda’s core. Releasing her breast, Dakota grazed her teeth along Amanda’s nipple, biting down gently but with enough force that Amanda’s breath hitched.

“Dear God.” Amanda’s head tilted, her back arching.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been mistaken for God before”—a dimple dotted Dakota’s cheek as she cracked a mischievous smirk—“but it would be divine if you’d give me some help getting this underwear off.”

The need in those stunning gray eyes kicked up a thousand notches, but somehow Amanda managed to shake her head. “Uh-uh.”

Dakota pouted. “Why? Is it because of my terrible pun?”

“No.” Amanda could barely get the words out without laughing. “You need to be naked first. It’s one of my rules.”

“Tit for tat?”

“Yes.” Reaching up, Amanda plucked the pink T-shirt fabric of Dakota’s bra. “Until this comes off, you’ve benefitted more in the tit category, so hop to it.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Dakota unhooked the clasps and eased the garment off, tossing it aside. “Better?”

“Getting there.” Amanda crooked her finger. “Closer.”

Dakota leaned forward, allowing her full breasts to sway above Amanda's mouth. Seizing the opportunity, Amanda took a nipple into her mouth, coaxing a sigh from Dakota's depths so intense it made Amanda tremble. She ached to spread her legs and allow this woman, this stranger she'd only just met, to do unspeakable things to her. It was insane how desperately she needed it and how much she wanted to do those same things in return.

Dakota sat up straighter, her supple breasts once more beyond Amanda's grasp, and fixed Amanda with a saucy grin. "Now can I get you to lose the rest of your clothes? I promise I'll take mine off, too."

"A deal's a deal." Simultaneously hooking her fingers through both the garter belt and the waistband of the bit of lace that barely qualified as a garment at all, Amanda wriggled them off. By the time she'd finished, Dakota had stripped naked, too. And Amanda had missed it.

Oh well. Next time.

The practical part of her brain that had been tied up and locked in a dungeon for most of the evening tried to argue there wouldn't be a next time, but Amanda quickly tightened its gag and shoved it deeper into the blackness. She didn't need that kind of negativity tonight.

Dakota stretched her body on top of Amanda's, parting her legs with her own before settling between them. She traced a path along Amanda's neck with her tongue, across her jaw. Finally, their mouths met, their tongues dancing a tango almost as intricate as the one they'd done on the dance floor.

Amanda's anticipation bubbled. Too much longer and she might burst. She deepened the kiss, her fingers threading through Dakota's blonde locks. Even with her eyes half closed, she knew the color was the real McCoy. That shade of gold didn't come from a bottle. Amanda should know. She may have entered her forties with beautiful blonde tresses of her own, but now a highly paid, and highly discreet, stylist was tasked with maintaining Amanda's signature look. God,

getting older sucked. Everywhere she looked, there were reminders.

“Now, that’s a move.” Dakota glanced over her own shoulder, her expression a mixture of lust and awe.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re so... *bendy*.”

It took Amanda a second to realize she’d unknowingly wrapped her left leg around Dakota’s torso. “I’ve been taking ballet classes.”

With Misty Copeland, principle dancer of the American Ballet Theatre, but that wasn’t exactly the type of thing Amanda could slip into the conversation right now, all things considered. Not without sounding like an arrogant ass.

“Really? I was never very good at ballet.” Even as she spoke, Dakota’s palm drifted to Amanda’s thigh, lifting it even higher around her. The movement caused Dakota’s pelvis to press into Amanda’s southern region, making her toes curl against the slick sheets.

“It was suggested I take up a hobby,” Amanda explained through ragged breaths, “and a friend convinced me one is never too old to chase a childhood dream.”

“Your friend is very wise.” Dakota’s hips shifted, and Amanda gasped, even as she forced her own thighs wider to maximize the sublime contact of Dakota’s body against her throbbing flesh. The look in Dakota’s eyes left no doubt she knew exactly what she was doing and the effect it was having on the woman beneath her.

Amanda cupped Dakota’s breasts, giving them a squeeze that resulted in whatever else the woman had been planning to say fading from her lips in a little groan. While Amanda enjoyed the words coming from Dakota’s mouth, she had other uses in mind for that part of her companion’s body right now. So many ideas sprang to mind. And talking was way down on the list.

Amanda craved the feel of Dakota’s body enveloping her, needed it more than she’d ever guessed was possible. Seeing

her ex, and being thoroughly snubbed by her, had opened so many old wounds. Years of pain had flooded to the surface. The feelings of inadequacy, of never being enough because she refused to let her career ambitions take a back seat. Of being made to feel guilty for her success.

Amanda reached out to touch the strands of hair that had strayed across Dakota's forehead, brushing them back before trailing her fingers down the woman's flushed cheek, pausing to press against her dimple. "How did you end up here?"

"At the wedding?"

"In my bed."

"That's easy." Dakota's dimple deepened as she smiled in that playful way that made Amanda's spine tingle. "I have a real thing for purple satin evening gowns."

"Even if they make the wearer get mistaken for a grandmother?" Amanda challenged.

"Especially then," Dakota assured her, rising to her knees and scanning Amanda's body with an appreciation that made every inch of her skin burn with anticipation. "I can say this. From where I'm sitting, all I see is perfection."

Any other time, under any other circumstances, Amanda might've rolled her eyes at a line like that, but not now. Tonight, the thrill of being desired was giving her life. Amanda had finally seen the truth, clearly, and for the first time since her divorce. She'd been punishing herself for far too long. Her ex-wife was a bitter shrew, and Amanda should have recognized that fact and made peace with it long before. She should have allowed herself the easy pleasure of letting loose with a beautiful woman ages ago instead of letting Jen's criticism, and her mother's before that, get into her head and make her think she didn't deserve it.

And there was no denying Dakota was a beautiful woman, made even more so by the devotion and raw yearning that played across her face. Without recognizing Amanda's fame or looking to benefit from her connections, this woman simply wanted her. It was a feeling as intoxicating as it was freeing.

Amanda sucked in her breath as Dakota lowered her head and kissed a blazing path all the way down her stomach. She scooted backward, put her hands on the insides of Amanda's thighs, and spread her legs wide. Amanda's pulse raced.

The first touch of Dakota's tongue between her legs, that pink tongue she'd fantasized about all evening, made Amanda gasp. It was followed by one long, luscious lick that caused her to shudder.

Amanda squeezed her eyes shut, focusing all her concentration on the magic being performed between her legs as steady fingers parted her folds. The need for more hung in the air, and Dakota seemed to anticipate Amanda's every need and want, as if they'd been lovers for eternity.

Who *was* this chicken farmer?

Before she could waste another moment puzzling out the answer, Dakota dragged her thumb across Amanda's clit, the bundle of nerves pirouetting like a ballerina. Amanda swallowed, practically tasting her own desire.

Dakota's tongue flicked her again, stilling every thought in Amanda's head. The only thing that mattered was what was happening between the two of them. God, she needed this. So fucking much.

Dakota sank her fingers inside, plunging them deep. Stroke after stroke moved faster inside, teasing the promise of ecstasy. Amanda arched her back in invitation, her knees dropping to the sides to allow the woman as much access as she wanted.

Dakota increased the speed of her tongue and added another finger, bringing Amanda one step closer to bliss for the first time in much too long. When Dakota sucked Amanda's clit into her mouth, Amanda couldn't help but scream out.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God...”

Amanda came harder than she could ever remember doing, but Dakota wasn't satisfied. She worked quickly to bring Amanda back to the edge of bliss for several long seconds

before Amanda dove over the cliff yet again. All her inhibitions were gone, her insecurities forgotten.

Amanda Fucking Morgan was a new woman.

WHILE THE ROOSTER lady slept peacefully in the hotel bed, Amanda couldn't get her brain to stop spinning. She got out from under the covers as quietly as she could, startled at the realization she'd drifted off to sleep buck naked. How had she relaxed enough in that condition to fall asleep at all, let alone with a near stranger by her side?

Knowing she wouldn't be discovered, Amanda allowed her gaze to linger on Dakota, her hair tangled on the white pillow, one leg kicked out from beneath the sheets. Warmth stirred inside Amanda's chest, a memory of the pleasure they'd shared along with a feeling of affection for the woman.

Amanda wasn't sure why, but she liked Dakota. Not just in that she found her attractive and wanted to have sex with her, which were also true. But she genuinely enjoyed the woman's company. When she'd heard Dakota calling for her in the vineyard after the DJ's stupid blunder, the sound of her voice and her footsteps had brought a sense of calm to Amanda, a feeling of safety she couldn't explain. It was strange. Most of the women in her life had made her feel exactly the opposite.

Amanda tugged on one of the complimentary robes from the hotel closet, wrapping it close and tying the belt tightly at her waist. Sleeping in the nude was unheard of, but it was far from uncommon lately for Amanda to find herself wide awake at nearly 1:00 a.m. Was it the state of the world or the onset of perimenopause that had brought on her insomnia?

"Take your pick," she spoke to the inky night sky overhead as she slipped through the sliding door onto the balcony. Tonight, the answer might be simpler. Perhaps it was the fact that a stranger had rocked her world, and this behavior was completely out of character.

So many people envied her fame, but they never suspected how lonely it was. Always in the public eye and with a contract that was up for renewal every few years, Amanda couldn't afford a whiff of a scandal. This was one reason among many she never slept around. And why what had happened between her and Dakota should never have happened.

But, isn't there a rule? she mused silently. *What happens at a wedding stays at the wedding?* Kinda like Vegas. If there wasn't, there should be.

Settling into a lounge chair, she wrapped her arms around her knees. Music still blared from beneath the large white tent, where diehard wedding guests—all of them younger than thirty, no doubt about it—remained on the dance floor even though the DJ must've said at least three times that this was the last song. When this one finished, Amanda knew they would beg for one more.

Her phone beeped inside the robe pocket, letting her know she had a text. Amanda chuckled as she pulled it out. The habit to have her phone on her at all times was so ingrained she didn't remember grabbing it from the nightstand and putting it in her pocket to begin with. The text was from Gabe Hawkins, her longtime mentor and even longer host of the network's nightly news hour.

Opening the message, Amanda rolled her eyes at the photo he'd sent of a cylindrical piece of marble affixed to a base of polished chrome. It was his newly acquired Excellence in Broadcasting award, which she knew he'd received at a banquet in his honor the same night Amanda had been enduring Jen's slights at the rehearsal dinner. The trophy looked exactly like a glowing white phallus. And why not? Amanda couldn't think of a better symbol for such a thoroughly male-dominated industry.

"Nice dick pic, Gabe," she said when her friend answered her call. She hadn't had the patience for a drawn-out text conversation, and besides, at the age of seventy-two, Gabe was a member of the generation that still appreciated a phone call now and again. Plus, he would want to crow about his

accomplishment at length. In fact, she was amazed Gabe had mustered the restraint to keep himself from texting her the photo while he was still on the award stage. It was good to know he possessed enough awareness of others not to interrupt her only son's wedding, but apparently the wee hours of morning just after the event were fair game.

"Isn't she a beauty?"

"Stunning." Amanda's lips twitched at his use of a feminine pronoun for what was clearly a penis carved out of stone. "Was the dinner nice?"

"Rubbery chicken." Amanda could almost see the pout on his face. "How about yours? Did the caterers do a good job after all that money you spent?"

"The coq au vin was the highlight of my evening," Amanda lied, picturing the naked rooster lady asleep in her bed and trying not to burst out in a guffaw as it occurred to her it was a very different kind of *coq* she'd enjoyed eating that evening.

You're definitely going to Hell for that one, Amanda Morgan.

"I'm sending you a clip of my acceptance speech," Gabe said, having no idea how far off topic, and deep in the gutter, her brain had fallen. "Tell me what you think."

Amanda clicked on the link. The two-minute video confirmed what she already knew. As much as she liked the old codger, he was as self-centered as they came. The speech was all about him. "Didn't James Booth write and produce your winning segment? You didn't mention him."

"I did," he insisted. "Right in between the tape editor and the fact-checker."

"That's worse than not mentioning him at all," Amanda scolded. It was no wonder the staff on his show kept hinting at whether Amanda might be taking over for him soon. She had a reputation for being hard on her people, too, but working for Dragon Lady would be a walk in the park compared to Gabe. In truth, she'd wanted that job forever, but the suits in charge

of International Broadcast Conglomerate, or IBC, were the epitome of the old boys' club, and the thought of a woman anchoring the evening news gave them the vapors. "You know you have to handle your writers and producers with kid gloves, and James was both on that piece."

"Should I send him a fruit basket?" Gabe sounded half serious, leading Amanda to hope he was repentant. "I might need his help pretty soon. I got a whiff of something big coming down the pipe earlier today."

"Oh?" Amanda's ears pricked at the hint of a juicy story. "Tell me."

He gave a gleeful laugh, like a fisherman who knew he'd hooked a whopper of a catch. "You know who Marcus Brown is, right?"

"Of course." Amanda's answer was curt, but she hated that Gabe always assumed since she helmed the morning show, she didn't bother with politics. As if anyone didn't know Marcus Brown, the husband of Raymond Brown, who was weeks away from becoming the first openly gay man to accept the presidential nomination for the Democratic party. "What about him?"

"Well, you know how Marcus keeps insisting everyone call him Dr. Brown?"

"As well he should. He received his PhD from Whitlock University."

"You sure about that?" Gabe's smirk was almost audible through the phone as he delivered his zinger.

Amanda sat up a little straighter in the lounge chair, wincing at how the plastic strapping had left grooves in her bare thighs. "What are you getting at?"

"I'm looking at his transcripts right now, and he's short of graduation by three credits."

"How is that possible?" Amanda hopped up, pacing the tiny balcony as this revelation sank in. "The university itself touts him as an honored alumnus every chance they get. This doesn't make sense. How did you find this out?"

“Trusted sources, naturally.” The sudden defensiveness in Gabe’s tone set off more alarm bells in Amanda’s head, reminding her of her mentor’s weakness for skipping the tedious steps of double and triple checking facts when faced with the delicious prospect of being the first to break a story.

“I’m serious, Gabe.” Amanda scowled at the phone, as if that might make him more likely to heed her warning. “You don’t want this to explode in your face.”

“I’ve got a copy of the original transcript right here, Amanda.” Gabe was starting to sound testy. He didn’t like to be challenged.

“You’ve verified this? I mean, you dotted every I and crossed every T?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to, young lady?” Though he was clearly trying to make a joke, there was an edge to his teasing that hovered between anger and indignation. That was a dangerous place for a man with an ego as big as his to spend too much time in, and Amanda hastened to talk him down.

“I’m only saying, before you run with it, be certain.” Amanda employed the same soothing tone that used to work on Zach when he was younger. There wasn’t as much of a difference between hotheaded teenagers and overeager journalists on the verge of retirement as one might think. “Raymond Brown’s about to clinch the nomination. If you’re wrong, well, remember when Dan Rather went after George W Bush with those National Guard papers that turned out to be fakes—”

“I appreciate your input,” Gabe said, even though it was clear he really didn’t and had been counting on Amanda to high-five his brilliance with no questions asked. “I’ve done my due diligence. Trust me; the story’s airtight. I have three sources, two on record, not to mention the actual transcripts in my hand. Dr. Marcus Brown is a fraud, and it’s my duty to expose that for the benefit of the American public.”

Oh, boy. Next thing she knew, he’d grab a flag and get a marching band to strike up a stirring rendition of *God Bless*

America. The conversation was as good as over, but Amanda couldn't help adding, "Fine. My gut still says something is off, but if you say it's solid, okay. So, you're breaking this tonight?"

"No, not that soon," Gabe admitted, tipping his hand that he had more than his civic duty to the American public in mind and was looking to make as big a splash with this news story as he could. "I'm thinking mid-August. You know, to make sure I dot all those Is like you told me to."

"You tricky son of a bitch," Amanda said, but the call had already been ended.

She shook her head. That sneaky bastard was holding onto the story until the start of the Democratic National Convention, where it would make the biggest splash. Amanda stared once more at the photo he'd sent her of his penis-shaped prize. Gabe was a legend in the news, as good as they came, but the closer he got to the end of his career, the more he cared about getting accolades and basking in public attention. It was the reason he hadn't retired already and why Amanda had been stuck hosting *The AM Show* for fifteen years contrary to repeated promises that she was next in line for his chair.

Check your sources again, Gabe, Amanda texted. *This Marcus Brown story stinks like rotting fish.*

As she crept back into her hotel room to try to get a few hours of sleep, Amanda doubted her once-wise mentor would listen to her advice.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAKOTA ROLLED OVER IN BED, BUMPING INTO SOMETHING SOFT and warm. She cracked one eye enough to catch a glimpse of her golden retriever's silky fur on the pillow beside her.

"Hey, Riley," she whispered, reaching out to ruffle her loyal pooch's coat. Only as soon as her fingers touched it, she knew it wasn't fur.

Dakota's eyes flew open, her heart racing. She was not in her bed. This was not even her bedroom in the small apartment in the capitol of Illinois that she shared with her roommate, Grace.

That's because you're in a hotel outside Portland, at Valerie's wedding.

Dakota relaxed as the memory came to her, though it would've been nice if she'd remembered that detail before nearly giving herself a heart attack. While her body was wide awake due to the massive quantity of adrenaline pumping through her veins, her brain was clearly taking its sweet time this morning. If it even was morning.

This isn't your hotel room, and you're not alone.

Dakota's insides clenched. Was her brain seriously only now getting around to mentioning this? Then she remembered. She wasn't in her bed because she was in Amanda Morgan's.

Holy shit. That was real?

A quick sideways glance confirmed that yes, America's morning show sweetheart and her personal idol was, indeed,

sleeping beside her. Naked. The taste of her was still on Dakota's lips and tongue.

Life didn't get any better than this.

And to think Dakota had considered skipping her former college roommate's wedding because they'd lost touch over the years. She would never try to weasel her way out of another wedding invitation as long as she lived.

Just as she was about to close her eyes and fall back into a blissful, post-sex sleep, another hazy memory slammed into Dakota's sluggish brain.

Something about her phone.

The whole time leading up to them tumbling into bed, someone had kept calling her. Finally, Amanda had taken the phone from her and... tossed it over the railing? That couldn't have happened. Except, if she really thought about it, Dakota had to admit the phone scenario sounded a hell of a lot more likely than her having had sex with Amanda Morgan. Yet, here she was.

And, she had a problem.

There was only one person on the planet who would call that many times. Deke Collins. He was her executive producer at the *Cock-a-doodle Rooster Report*, and he was like a dog with a bone when it came to breaking news. He didn't give up. Hell, for all Dakota knew, wherever her phone had landed, it was still ringing off the hook right now. Which meant she didn't have a choice. She was going to have to call Deke and find out what was up.

Easing herself out of bed, Dakota studied Amanda's sleeping form, already regretting the decision to leave. It would be totally awesome to wake up together and watch the sunrise, but it would be significantly less awesome to lose her job because of it. The reality of the life she'd signed up for was simple, even if people outside the industry never understood it. Dakota was technically on vacation, but the news never stopped. If she didn't do it, someone else sure as hell would jump at the chance.

She cast one final glance at Amanda who was sprawled out naked across the bed, her guard dropped and not a care in the world. No one was calling Amanda in the dead of night. She'd made it to the top, and unless the literal apocalypse was going down, there were less important people to send. People like Dakota.

Better get to it.

After dressing in the bathroom so as not to disturb Amanda's rest—God knew after last night, that woman had earned uninterrupted sleep—Dakota edged out into the hallway. The minute the door clicked shut, her journalistic brain swirled into action.

It was still dark outside, so finding her phone in the middle of the vineyard would be next to impossible. That was why Dakota had a backup phone in her room. Not because she'd anticipated Amanda Morgan would toss her primary phone off a balcony, of course, but for any and all situations that could arise. It was a trick she'd learned from Amanda herself, from a TED talk she'd given on the principles and practice of good journalism. Dakota had gone out directly after hearing it and bought herself a spare phone, one of those burners you could get from a drug store with a pay-as-you-go plan.

When she made it back to her room, one glance at her spare phone told Dakota she was in for it. No one had this number except Deke, yet she had fourteen voice mails. She didn't bother wasting the time checking them. She dialed Deke's number and held her breath, preparing for a tongue-lashing. Whatever was going on, her executive producer was going to be angrier than a momma bear protecting her newborn cubs.

Deke answered on the first ring. "Where the fuck have you been?"

Fucking Amanda Morgan, Dakota answered in her head, but that wasn't a detail she planned to share with the man—or with anyone at all for that matter. As much as she might fantasize about being inducted into the celebrity freebie hall of fame, the truth was Dakota was a discreet woman with a deep

respect for privacy. After all the tabloids had done to Amanda over the years, especially with her recent divorce, she deserved some privacy.

“I was at my best friend’s wedding, Deke. We talked about this, remember? There’s no place in a maid of honor’s dress for a cell phone.” Okay, she may have stretched the truth about her relationship with Valerie and her own role in the wedding a smidge so that the powers that be would give her some rare days off. Dakota hadn’t gotten as far as she had by being dumb.

“I’ve been calling for nearly three hours,” Deke growled, but he sounded too exhausted to rip Dakota’s head off. “One of the nerds in tech support here at the station has been tracking a big chunk of space debris as it reentered the atmosphere. And, guess what? Just like he thought it might, the thing crash-landed smack-dab in the middle of a cattle ranch near the Oregon-Washington border, about ten minutes ago. Can you believe our good luck?”

“Space *what?*”

“Debris. Junk. A bunch of Einsteins shot a rocket into outer space without ensuring it wouldn’t break apart and crash to the earth.”

“Oh.” Dakota punched the speaker button on her phone and unzipped her dress to change into jeans, a T-shirt, and a *Cock-a-doodle Rooster Report* fleece jacket. “That sounds bad.”

“It ain’t good. We’re talking a twenty-ton booster falling out of the sky, and it’s not the first time it’s happened. Last time, one landed in the Indian Ocean, no harm done. This time, not so much.”

“Oh, no. Did people die? How about the poor cattle?”

“That’s why you’re going to head out there. Get answers.”

Dakota’s heart thudded harder at what Deke’s words implied. “You’re telling me there aren’t already news crews on the ground?”

“Nope. That’s the best part. As far as I can tell, nobody’s been paying any attention to this thing except a handful of space geeks on the internet. The location’s pretty remote, and it only just made contact. About the same time I started calling you, I got a hold of a local rancher I know to keep an eye out. As of right now, there’s not a soul around the site, and our crew’s already en route from Portland. That means we’ve still got a head start, even with your lollygagging. It’s—” Rustling sounded through the phone. “It’s a little after two-thirty in the morning where you are right now. I need you to get to the ranch by five-thirty to set up. We can go live with the footage at six sharp.”

“I’m in Oregon, Deke.” Dakota shook her head. While he’d lived in rural Illinois for years, the EP was originally from New York and never seemed to grasp that western states were a lot more spread out than the eastern ones of his youth. “Just because things are next to each other on a map doesn’t mean they’re close.”

“Save the lip, kid,” he scolded, though it was clear he’d settled down and wasn’t actually upset now that he’d gotten ahold of her and they still had a good shot at an exclusive. “I already looked it up, and the drive from where you are to the crash site is two hours and thirty-seven minutes. If I were you, I’d make it in two and a quarter. I’ll text you details and some reading material for when you arrive, hence why you need to haul ass.”

“Leaving now.” Dakota shoved everything she needed into her bag. Her finger hovered over the screen, ready to end the call. “I’ll talk to you when I get there.”

“Not so fast. Why are you on this phone? Where’s the other?”

Damn. Deke was obviously fully awake now and noticing everything. And by everything, Dakota meant everything. It was a trait that made him excel in his role but a pain in the ass for sticky situations.

“The battery died,” she lied.

“Don’t ever let that happen again. I don’t care if you’re dying. You always answer your fucking phone.”

There was dead air, meaning that was his final swipe about the situation. She’d better get a move on. When Deke said get there in two hours and fifteen minutes, what he meant was two hours or less.

Dakota shut her hotel door and left via the front entrance. A few floors above, in her fancy suite that overlooked the vineyard, Amanda continued to sleep, blissfully unaware of falling space junk.

Dakota felt a pang of conscience. They were both journalists, technically on the same team even if they didn’t work for the same station. Should she tell Amanda about the story before she left?

It took a nanosecond to realize something as trivial as space debris on a cattle ranch was way below Amanda’s pay grade. Besides, getting an exclusive on this could go a long way toward making Dakota’s career. It was the type of story countless stations across the country would pick up, gaining her tons of exposure. The younger version of Amanda wouldn’t even have let the thought of giving up an exclusive penetrate her brain.

Before dashing to her car, Dakota paused at the edge of the vines to call her phone, the one Amanda had tossed. Instantly, the screen lit up like a neon sign on the Vegas Strip. Luckily for her, it had fallen short of the grapes and landed on the soft, dewy grass. Dakota swiped it up and strode to the parking lot. Things were looking up.

TWO THINGS CAME as a surprise to Dakota when she reached the location Deke had sent her. First, the crash site was a large, smoking crater in the ground, glowing like the mouth of a volcano and sending waves of heat toward her like a desert wind. Second, there was another news crew onsite.

Damn.

There went *Cock-a-doodle*'s, and Dakota's, shot at an exclusive. That was how the news business went, of course, so she shouldn't have been surprised. How many times had Dakota set up at a scene to find hers was one of a dozen crews reporting on the same event? Still, she'd hoped Deke had been right that they were still ahead of the game.

Catching that break of a worldwide exclusive was almost as elusive as finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Even more so when you covered the agriculture beat. And they could've had it, if only she'd answered her phone. Yet, even knowing the lost exclusive was her fault, Dakota couldn't quite find it in her to regret what she'd done. Amanda Morgan had been worth it.

"Any idea who they're with?" Dakota hooked a thumb over her shoulder.

The camera guy shrugged. "No clue. They got here a little after we did. Not sure how they managed it. We only made it as quickly as we did because of Deke's inside scoop."

Double damn. It was rotten luck, but it didn't matter. Exclusive or not, Dakota had a job to do.

She put on her reporter's game face and stood still while a woman she'd never met applied some makeup. An intense man with a goatee, who introduced himself as Sean, a producer from a local affiliate station, was spouting off facts about the overabundance of space junk and how it was becoming increasingly dangerous for those on the ground.

"Two-point-one million farms and ranches in this country," Sean said with an intense sneer, "and even the politicians who represent them think of it as fly-over country. This is a disaster for a hard-working rancher, but the only reason anyone really cares is because it knocked out a major power line that's plunged half of Seattle into darkness."

"That explains the other news crew, I guess." Dakota cast a glance at the competition as she assessed the scope of this story. They may have been the only ones with their eyes on a random piece of falling rocket, but with the blackout of a major city, it was no wonder they weren't alone. Even as she

watched, two additional vans came screeching into the crash area. It would soon be overrun. There was more potential here than she'd realized, and she still had a few advantages. "You're the expert. Give me some more things the politicians *will* care about. If we can't be the only ones covering this, we can be the best."

"How about this? It could imperil future space travel"—Sean gesticulated for emphasis—"due to the amount of shit floating up there. Did you know each year, roughly one hundred satellites, rockets, and who knows what else are catapulted into space?"

"I never thought about that," Dakota told him, almost afraid the guy was going to smack her on the head for her ignorance.

"No one does." He'd gone red in the face, and Dakota wasn't sure if he was more likely to start crying or breaking things.

"I guess they will now," Dakota remarked, staring at the smoke that billowed from the massive hole in the ground. The heat was intense. What a mess. She wondered who would be responsible for cleaning it up.

"Just remember it's your job to make all that science gobbledygook sound interesting and doomsday-y enough to generate clicks. It's all about the clicks."

While Dakota was getting miked, she had to wonder if Sean and Deke were cousins because "It's all about the clicks" was her EP's favorite catchphrase. She'd heard from the more seasoned crew members back in Illinois that there had been a time when Deke had cared exclusively about hardcore journalism, but that had gone out the window as soon as he became executive producer and had to deal with the number crunchers every day. More clicks meant more advertising dollars, and that was the bottom line for any morning show.

Sean gave a hard clap. "Okay, let's get this done."

"How close should I get?" Dakota asked, eyeing the fiery pit warily. "Should I move in?"

Sean shook his head. “Stay where you are. The ground’s unstable the closer you get.”

There was a crackle in Dakota’s earpiece, followed by the count for when the live shot started. “Five. Four. Three. Two. One.”

“Good morning. I’m Dakota Washington.” The moment the camera was rolling, her voice morphed into the on-air version of itself, even as her expression settled into what her two younger siblings teasingly called her Reporter Barbie mask. “I’m coming to you live from eastern Oregon, where early this morning, a rocket booster fell from the sky and crashed onto the Wallowa Cattle Ranch. In addition to the giant crater you see behind me, it also caused major damage to the regional power grid, leaving thousands of Seattle residents in the dark on what is promising to be a blistering June day.”

Just as she’d begun speaking, the door to one of the other news vans opened, spurring Dakota to speak with more urgency. Nothing would stop her from making sure theirs was the first news organization to get all of the details out to the public.

“How’s it look out there?” Back in the studio, Shelly, who was filling in while Dakota was on vacation, lobbed a ridiculously easy question to her. Dakota could’ve done better, but now wasn’t the time to quibble.

“I’m not going to lie, Shelly. On the ground here, it looks like a big, blazing hole. There’s smoldering wreckage, and steam coming out of it, but there are also parts of the rocket poking up. It reminds me of the scene in Thor, when his hammer lands in the middle of nowhere. All that’s missing is S.H.I.E.L.D.’s special agents.”

Shelly laughed. There were dozens of more important questions to ask, but that wasn’t how the game was played. That was why Dakota had mentioned Thor in the first place. She knew Shelly was a huge fan of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and would be sure to react the way Dakota wanted her to. They spent the next minute exchanging movie jokes and trivia, because that was what morning audiences liked.

Serious news with splashes of humor to make it go down easier with their first cup of joe.

Just as Dakota signed off, the next news crew got their live shot ready. Dakota did a fist bump to her crew. “We got it first!”

That was when Dakota spied the reporter from the other station, stepping into place to begin recording.

It was Amanda Morgan.

The woman who had been naked next to Dakota earlier—and doing a lot of not-suitable-for-television activities with her a few hours before *that*—was standing with a mike in her hand, glaring at Dakota as if attempting to peel her skin off the bone with nothing but the power of her fury.

What the hell was going on?

Their eyes met, and Amanda stormed toward her, which was impressive in itself because no one should be able to walk with that much confidence in high heels in the middle of a rocky wasteland.

“I thought you were a chicken farmer!” Amanda seethed, her fists balled at her sides.

Dakota took a step back. “What?”

“Chicken. Farmer.” Amanda enunciated each word as she tucked her hands into her armpits, kicking at the dirt and making chicken sounds.

“Why would you think that?” This was utterly insane. Unless Dakota was crazy, the most famous news host in America was doing her best impersonation of poultry.

“Because you said so!” Amanda insisted, much to Dakota’s confusion. “You lied to me!”

“I did no such thing.” Dakota wracked her brain, trying to figure out how this miscommunication had taken place. “I said I worked for the *Cock-a-doodle Rooster Report*.”

“Cock-a-doodle what?” Amanda’s expression indicated Dakota might as well have been speaking in a foreign

language, which was kind of funny considering Amanda was the one who had just been clucking like a chicken.

“It’s a nationally syndicated, agriculturally-focused morning news show.”

“News?” Amanda’s eyes narrowed. “You little hussy. You slept with me just to get ahead in the business. I thought you didn’t know who I was.”

Dakota’s eyebrows shot up so fast they almost flew off her face. “You’re Amanda Morgan. It’s safe to say no one in America doesn’t know who you are, unless maybe they’re part of a cult that lives under rocks.”

Amanda shook her head, clearly not having it. “You lied, and you used me. I’ve never even heard of that little morning show you work for, but you can sure as hell believe that this is your last day on the job.”

Dakota reached out, desperate to set the record straight. It wasn’t even her job she was worried about, so much as knowing Amanda thought Dakota would do something so vile as sleep with her to get ahead. “Amanda, I—”

“Get out of the way. I have a show to do.” Amanda shoved past Dakota, waving a hand at her crew. “Move it up closer. I want a better shot of the wreckage.”

“Amanda!” Dakota shouted. “You can’t call me a liar and walk away like this.”

“I call them as I see them.”

Dakota pressed a hand to her chest as Amanda hurled one of her early journalistic mantras like an arrow to the heart. It stung like hell and was made worse by the fact that prior to this exact moment, hearing those words from Amanda’s lips had made Dakota think all sorts of things. The types of warm and racy thoughts no one shared out loud, not even with their besties. In other words, pretty much all the stuff they’d engaged in doing together the night before.

Back with her crew, Amanda pressed a finger to her ear. Dakota knew this meant she was listening to her control room back in New York. There was nodding, and Amanda backed

up for a better shot, much closer than Dakota's own team had decided was safe. Tapping a finger against her teeth, Dakota tried to make eye contact with Amanda to warn her the ground was unstable, but she didn't so much as glance in Dakota's direction. It was like Dakota had ceased to exist.

Dakota's stomach knotted. Was this woman, the most powerful woman in broadcast journalism, really going to torpedo Dakota's career because she hadn't heard clearly over the sound of a noisy DJ and drunk wedding guests?

It was a sick twist of fate that Amanda looked so smoking hot with her makeup and fancy clothes that Dakota's show couldn't afford. The woman had everything, but she thought nothing of ruining another person's life. Someone who had idolized her as a goddess. Not to mention someone who had given her no fewer than four orgasms. Yeah, Dakota had been counting.

I wish that steaming hole in the ground would swallow the bitch.

As if the universe was truly listening, Amanda took another step back, followed by another, until her impossibly high heels were less than an inch from the precipice. None of Amanda's crew was paying the least bit of attention, and Dakota was the first to grasp what was about to happen.

"Amanda!" Dakota dashed forward as Amanda began to teeter.

Amanda's eyes darted toward Dakota, her look of annoyance morphing into one of fear. Dakota doubled her speed, a blast of hot air from the crater searing her cheeks. She managed to snag Amanda's outstretched hand just in time to pull her away from the crumbling ground.

"I—" Amanda was speechless for a long second, a look of terror in her eyes as she clung to Dakota's hand.

"Are you okay?" Dakota's body shook like she'd gotten a jolt of electricity. If she hadn't reacted when she had, Amanda would have fallen into the hole.

After another shaky moment, Amanda smoothed her lips into a tight smile. “Yes. Fine.”

“Is there something I can do to help?”

“No. Thank you.” Amanda’s voice, which had been molten lava in the bedroom, was more like an iceberg now. “If you don’t mind, I have a show to do.”

Dakota skulked back to her van in a daze, each step like a stab to her heart. It was unbelievable. She had saved the star from possible death, not to mention making a complete ass out of herself in front of all of America. It didn’t matter. That tight-lipped smile said it all. Amanda was still going to take Dakota down. When she was done, Dakota’s only career choice might actually be chicken farmer.

“I guess this is why they say you should never meet your heroes,” Dakota muttered to herself. “They always let you down.”

She wondered what the experts said about sleeping with your heroes. It was probably not recommended.

“That was amazing!” exclaimed Little Deke, whose real name now escaped her.

Dakota jounced herself out of a trance. “What?”

He showed Dakota the clip of Dakota saving Amanda, the camera zooming in on that bitchy smile. “It’s already getting clicks.”

“You put that out on social media?”

“Yeah, baby!” He gave a loud clap, adding a *woo-woo* noise like he was in a stadium cheering for his favorite football team. “Deke is pushing it like crazy. By the time you get back to Springfield, I wouldn’t be surprised if the views are in the millions. And, you know what that means?”

Amanda being utterly humiliated for the world to see? Dakota’s head on a platter?

Dakota shrugged.

“I’ve got three words for you.” Little Deke grinned, holding up his fingers. “Pro. Mo. Shun.”

Dakota didn’t have the heart to tell him he was wrong. Under any other circumstances, yes, but not when you’d invited the wrath of a goddess like Amanda Morgan. This should have been the best day of Dakota’s career. Instead, she was terrified it would be her last.

CHAPTER FIVE

AMANDA FLIPPED THROUGH THE MESSAGES ON HER PHONE, paying no attention to the mostly deserted cityscape that whipped past the windows of the studio's black SUV.

Check out your summer memories, teased a notification that flashed onto her screen. It was the type of social media crap Amanda usually avoided, not to mention, thanks to the fallout from that damned space crater rescue debacle, it had mostly been a summer she'd rather forget. However, the smiling photo of Zach in the preview gave her pause.

Click.

A faint smile teased Amanda's lips as the slideshow presented her with a candid shot of her son and his wife. Even six weeks since the wedding, it was still almost impossible to believe her little boy was married. The next photo was a beautiful shot of the vineyard, taken at sunset. Then a bottle of wine. It all looked so restful, especially after the hectic hell that had been July sweeps.

Amanda sighed. One more day of work to get through and she would have two glorious weeks off. Her bags were packed, and her house in the Hamptons had already been prepped for her arrival. Just thinking about it elevated her mood to the point nothing could bring her down.

Except that.

How the fuck had a photo of her being yanked from the edge of a smoking crater by Dakota What's-her-name gotten into her feed? Amanda sure as hell hadn't taken it herself. The

red glow from the smoldering debris brought back in vivid detail just how terrifyingly hot it had been, how deep and treacherous that pit was that had nearly swallowed her whole. And afterward, everyone had laughed. Well, no wonder. That startled expression on her face was downright clownish if you didn't know how very real the danger had been. And God, did this camera angle make her look old. It had taken enough effort to put the unfortunate incident behind her. She didn't need to be reminded. If she had her way, every copy of this photo would be tossed into that gaping hole, never to be seen again.

The worst part was every one of Amanda's efforts to spin the situation in her favor had only made it worse. She'd been called a drama queen, among other choice names, and accused of staging the whole accident as a publicity stunt. But while she was ridiculed for making a big deal out of nothing, Dakota was praised like she'd been a superhero, snatching Amanda from the jaws of death. How could both be true at the same time? It wasn't fair.

There was no doubt about one thing. Dakota's star was on the rise, and there'd been nothing Amanda could do to stop it. Not for lack of trying, Amanda was somewhat ashamed to admit now that the dust had settled and her emotions had simmered down. Apparently, trying to get a young woman fired came across as vindictive.

If she had to be honest about it, Amanda supposed it was. The experience made her feel so vulnerable to think the young woman had slept with her to further her career instead of actual attraction. Under the double pain of rejection and betrayal, Amanda had become a little desperate. But the fact her inquiries were laughed off, or ignored completely, had shown her that her influence didn't stretch nearly as far as she'd thought. Now *that* had been a bitter pill to swallow.

Bottom line, she wasn't sorry Dakota had kept her job, but Amanda would have preferred if the matter had been more within her power to control. Did wishing that make her a terrible person?

“Here we are.” Joe, who had been driving her to and from Rockefeller Center for well over a decade, sought her eyes in the rearview mirror. “Give ’em hell, Amanda.”

Amanda smiled at the morning ritual, even as she shoved her phone, with its annoying memories, into her bag. “I always try, Joe.”

“That you do.” He chuckled. “That you do.”

Amanda stepped onto the sidewalk. The street was still shrouded in darkness, at least another hour to go before sunrise. There were a few people dashing to their early-morning jobs, but none of them gave Amanda a single backward glance. This was her favorite part of the day, to see the city before it teemed with tourists and suits, everyone pushing and shoving to get to their destinations, each with an attitude that conveyed they were the most important person on the planet.

A quarter to five in the morning was the only time she could stand on any street in Manhattan without a care in the world. How freeing it was not to have to worry about being spotted by a fan, or worse, by someone out to make a buck by exposing her in whatever compromising situation they could.

Not a sex scandal, although with the way women over forty were treated like sexless, invisible creatures, that might not be the worst thing to boost her image. No, what the paparazzi were after was plain, old-fashioned humiliation. Like the time she’d stepped in dog shit and made a face.

Yeah. A face.

Apparently Amanda Morgan wasn’t allowed to make a face like a normal human being. No, she always had to be perfectly put together, always on, even with dog shit on the bottom of her sneakers. No wonder her flaws—which Amanda didn’t deny having, like any other person on the planet—so easily became exaggerated in the media until they took on a life of their own. Anything less than perfection wasn’t allowed. It was like the entire world had turned into her mother, and Amanda was back to being the daughter who never quite measured up.

You chose this, she reminded herself. As she strode through the empty lobby, pausing a fraction of a second to nod at the night security guard before pressing the button for the elevator to the eighth floor. Yes, this was the life she'd dreamed of, but sometimes she struggled to remember why.

The minute the elevator doors slid open, Amanda's stomach clenched. Hannah, her executive producer, was waiting for her, wearing an expression that suggested she was preparing to march Amanda directly to the executioner instead of accompanying her on the short trip down the hall to the dressing room.

"Can I have a cup of strong tea before you tell me whatever terrible news you have to share today?" Taking a seat in the chair in front of the large makeup mirror, Amanda stared at the wall, its yellow paint failing to live up to its promise of being a calm and soothing tone. "What is it? Are they planning to push me out during November sweeps?"

The way Hannah's eyes widened said she hadn't considered that possibility, but now that it was out there, she couldn't discount it.

"Christ. That's actually it, isn't it?" This was worse than Amanda had feared. As the hunched shape of her new administrative assistant scurried past the dressing room door, Amanda bellowed, "Cyndie! Tea!"

"Amanda, we talked about this." Hannah shot her a scolding look that made Amanda shrink in her chair. "You've already had two assistants quit this year."

"Shit. I'm sorry." Breathless and a little queasy, Amanda pressed her fingers to the spot on each temple where her pulse pounded. "It's the stress that makes me lose it. How can this be happening? They kept Howard until he could barely remember his own name, but they want to throw out the perimenopausal woman like yesterday's trash so they can trade me in for a perkier model."

"That's not *necessarily* the case." Hannah pressed her fingers together, her hands forming a steeple beneath her chin.

“But?” Amanda raised an eyebrow. Hannah’s emphasis on the word *necessarily* spoke volumes.

“When Jada was in the office last night trying to clinch an interview with the owner of that dog who surfs, she overheard Franklin Senior use the phrase *Operation Titanic* while getting into the elevator with some of the other network brass.”

The part of Amanda that wasn’t terrified by the evil possibilities this revelation conjured rolled her eyes. Why was it a group of aging television head honchos imagined themselves to be more like CIA operatives? They were forever coming up with clever names for their treachery, like *Operation Hunchback* for last year when they’d forced out Howard—a delightful man who had stuck around into his eighties to coanchor the show because he was *that* dedicated to his job.

Okay, also because he’d wrecked all four of his marriages, none of his children spoke to him, and the only thing he had going for him was getting up and coming to the studio. He and Amanda got along swimmingly. They were very much alike, except for the worsening dementia over the past couple of years that had made everyone hold their breath any time Howard was given more than a minute of consecutive airtime.

Still, he’d made a stellar partner. Amanda really missed that old coot’s presence on the set every day.

“So, the captain must go down with the sinking ship?” Amanda crossed her leg to untie her right sneaker.

“I wouldn’t call *The AM Show* a sinking ship.” Hannah’s tone lacked reassurance, as it was clear she only meant she wouldn’t use those exact words, not that she disagreed with the basic premise the phrase implied.

“Let’s not sugar coat it.” Amanda removed her other shoe, wiggling her toes until the joints popped. One more day of high heels. After that, she was going barefoot for two solid weeks. “*The AM Show* is bleeding viewers in the coveted twenty-five to fifty-four demographic. Every 100,000 lost means a hit of ten million dollars in advertising revenue.”

“We’re being killed by *Hello, America*,” Hannah drummed her fingers against her thigh with a restless agitation that sent a pang of panic through Amanda’s belly.

“What is it you aren’t saying? Did we not get the surfing dog?”

“We got him. But Jada has lost out to *Hello, America* with three other guests this month. And it’s no wonder. They have edgier clips, saucier banter that’s passed around like a hot potato, and they act like they’re a true family. They’re not afraid to start off the show with quick bites: covering the cringeworthy news along with cute animal stories.”

Amanda shut her eyes as she swallowed. “That’s what America wants, after all. Salaciousness and really fat cats on treadmills.”

“In its twenty-seven-year history, *Hello, America* has yet to take the number one slot.” Hannah pointed out. “That’s *our* slot.”

“And they’re within striking distance to steal it,” Amanda countered. “By now, the brass will have realized their brilliant plan to bring aboard the boss’s dimwitted son to replace our beloved Howard wasn’t as effective as they’d hoped—maybe because the majority of American women are as tired of listening to mediocre Harvard grads as we are. Now they’re looking for a way out of their mess without having to admit it’s their own fault.”

“Unfortunately, Franklin Jr. is network royalty,” Hannah said, in case the “junior” portion of his name had escaped Amanda’s notice.

Cyndie arrived with a cup of tea. Amanda fought the urge to snatch the magic elixir from the woman’s hands. Amanda gave the assistant a smile, hoping it didn’t look hideous and semi-human, which frankly was how she felt until at least her second cup of Twining’s English Breakfast every morning. It wasn’t that she meant to be hard on her assistants, but she had certain needs. Like tea, black as sin, piping hot, and waiting for her next to her chair. If Amanda could drag her ass out of

bed at 3:30 a.m. five days a week, was it really too much to not have to beg for some goddamn caffeine?

“Thank you.”

“Uh, sure,” Cyndie stammered, eyes like saucers as she stood frozen for a second before diving through the dressing room door into the relative safety of the hallway. The action drove home for Amanda just how terrifying of a boss she must actually be, especially given the dragon lady reputation she proceeded her. Hannah was right. Amanda would have to do better.

“I knew I was in trouble before going to Zach’s wedding, but after the viral clip of me standing on the precipice of that stupid, steaming hole—” She could see the photo from her phone that morning clearly in her mind, but she brushed it aside with all her effort, along with the heat of the debris and the electric jolt that had traveled up her arm when Dakota had plucked her out of harm’s way. “It didn’t help I looked about a hundred years old.”

As if on cue, Cameron, the makeup artist, entered the dressing room and began studying Amanda’s face like it was a blank canvas. The way one corner of his lip curled upward told Amanda he did not disagree with her assessment of how old she looked.

The only saving grace was this man was a god when it came to making sure she never went in front of the camera looking anything less than radiant. Amanda closed her eyes as Cameron coated her face in a thin layer of magical goo that would make her wrinkles invisible to the camera. As much as she loved Hannah, if she could only keep one person from the crew, it would be Cameron.

“Remember last week when we did that piece on Dick’s Sporting Goods, and the graphics department had written *Dick Tips* on the chyron below me? You know that was done on purpose. Everyone is doing their best to sabotage me.” As Hannah let out a series of disbelieving noises, Amanda opened her eyes and swiveled her chair to face her, prompting a

grumble from Cameron. “Here are the facts. I’m the highest paid morning show host in the country, and I’m almost fifty.”

“Not for another three years,” Hannah said in a kind tone, but Amanda let out a snort.

“Three years in broadcasting time is equal to about five minutes. They think they can push me out and slide in any blonde bimbo to sit in my chair and look pretty for a fraction of the price.” Amanda stiffened as an unmistakable look passed between Hannah and Cameron. “Have they already hired the bimbo, then?”

“Not exactly.” Hannah’s eyes shifted to her clipboard, studying whatever was there like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

“So, what did they do?” Amanda prompted.

“Tonight,” Hannah mumbled, still looking down, “Charlene Evans is scheduled to appear on one of the late-night shows. As a guest.”

“They’re auditioning Graveyard Charlene?” When the women nodded, Amanda squeezed her eyes shut, earning her a reproachful cough from Cameron as he tried to smooth eyeliner across her lids. The show that came on before hers was technically called *The Early Bird Show*, but Amanda could never think of it as anything but the Graveyard Shift since you had to get up in the middle of the night to make it to work on time. “I thought she was on vacation this week and next.”

“They called her back for the late-night segment,” Hannah explained. “And they’ve got two or three candidates coming in to test for that open slot on *AM, Weekend Edition*.”

“Women?” Amanda asked, even though she knew the answer.

“Yes.” Hannah gave a weak smile.

“Young?”

Hannah nodded.

“Blonde, too, I’ll bet.” Amanda didn’t need a reply. “Damn it. They’re getting their little tin soldiers in a row to take me down.”

“There’s no way they would replace you with Charlene, though,” Hannah assured her. “It’s probably just a backup plan.”

But Amanda wasn’t fooled. The only reason the network would schedule a relative nobody like Charlene as a guest on a show in such a heavy hitting time slot was if they were considering her for a promotion and wanted to gauge how she interacted with a live audience. If she passed their stress test, they would replace Amanda with Charlene, slide one of the current weekend hosts—probably Trish because she was by far the prettiest and most well-endowed—onto the Graveyard Shift, and start training the next generation to do the whole thing over again when the time came for another coup.

I’m toast.

“You know they only hired her because she’s dating that hedge fund buddy of Franklin Jr.’s, right?” Hannah accompanied her gossip with a wicked smile.

“Really?” Amanda refrained from raising an eyebrow, but only because Cameron would kill her if she did so while he was working on them. “How’d I miss that little nugget?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s true.” Hannah’s tone was smug. “Her boyfriend and Franklin went to business school together, and I guess the guy called in a favor for his girl.”

“Which business school was that again?” Amanda paused a moment before joining Hannah in saying, “Harvard.”

“It’s easy to forget. He’s so subtle about it.” Hannah snickered. “As for Charlene, you know they stuck her on the 5:00 a.m. slot because she can barely string two sentences together.”

“Pretty sure she didn’t go to Harvard. But she has tits out to here”—Amanda approximated the size of said breasts by holding her hands a good foot from her own chest—“and

that's all anyone notices in the morning because they're still half asleep."

Cameron set down his brushes, his masterpiece finished for another day. Once the door clicked shut behind him, Amanda ripped the bobby pins that had held her curls in place out of her hair and tossed them onto the table. "If they want a war, they'd better be ready. No way will I bow out gracefully for a fresh face with a pair of non-sagging knockers. Charlene will get this job over my dead body."

"Let's not go that far," Hannah said with a shudder. "I'd prefer we kept you alive and well."

"Yes, well if there has to be a dead body"—Amanda crossed her arms and lifted her chin—"I'd much prefer it was Charlene."

WEATHERMAN STORM FREEZE—NOT his real name, no matter what he tried to make everyone believe—gesticulated in front of a green screen as Amanda waited for his segment to close so she and her cohost could say their usual goodbyes. "That's all from us, America. We at *The AM Show* wish you the happiest of days." *Blah, blah, blah.*

She could do it in her sleep and had a few times during those early months of her divorce when even she had to admit she'd been phoning it in. But no longer, which was why she needed a vacation so badly. As soon as she signed off, it was back to the dressing room with her, and then off to her Montauk beach house in plenty of time for a succulent lobster dinner on the patio overlooking the sea.

There was a crackle in Amanda's ear, but instead of an assistant giving her the go ahead to wrap up the show, it was Hannah's voice she heard.

"Guys," Hannah's voice wobbled through Amanda's ear piece. A sideways glance at Franklin Jr. told her he was hearing this, too. "We're getting a breaking news report, so we're going long."

Amanda tapped the table with her right index finger. She avoided unnecessary talking on set, so that was the sign she'd heard Hannah's instructions and understood what to do. Over at the weather desk, Storm continued his bizarre charade, pointing at nothing while the tech guys filled in the charts and maps behind him using the magic of television.

It was almost showtime, and if Hannah didn't have all the details when Storm wrapped up, Amanda would need to engage Franklin in mindless banter until the report came in. Franklin had the mindless part well under control. The banter would be her responsibility.

"Okay, here's what we're hearing. There's a private jet reported down over Long Island Sound." Hannah paused. "Oh, shit. They're saying it was Paul Kearns' plane."

Amanda drew a deep breath as her extremities went cold. Paul Kearns was one of the most well-known hedge fund managers in the city. This story had grown exponentially in importance. It was the type of high-octane story she lived for.

Amanda jumped as Franklin slammed his fist on their shared desk. She shot him a warning look, but he paid no attention, pushing his chair with such force that he rolled several feet backward. What the hell was wrong with him now?

"Franklin," Amanda hissed, but he didn't listen. Instead, he stormed off set.

"Amanda, we're back to you in ten seconds," Hannah warned. "Where's Franklin?"

"No idea." Amanda glued her eyes to the teleprompter in front of her, awaiting the script that was being typed by a writer in the control room at that very second. She'd have to read it live on air with no idea what it said, but that didn't worry her. In fact, this type of situation was where Amanda excelled. When it came to fast-breaking news, a level head did a lot more good than a large bra size. Luckily for the long-term viability of her career, Amanda had been blessed with both.

“No time to worry about Franklin now. You’re on in five... four... three...” Hannah’s voice faded away as Amanda completed the countdown silently to herself.

“We’ve just learned of some tragic news. A private jet registered to hedge fund mogul Paul Kearns has crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off of Long Island Sound. We’re going live to a reporter on the scene for the latest. Kenneth, can you tell us what you’re hearing from the authorities?”

“Thanks, Amanda,” the reporter replied. “Behind me, you can see the smoldering wreckage of the Gulfstream G650 that took off from East Hampton Airport approximately thirty minutes ago. Authorities are saying, in addition to the crew, there were two passengers on board. One of them was Paul Kearns, the famous Harvard whiz kid whose hedge fund company has become a household name. The other was a female passenger. We’re waiting for confirmation of her identity, but as you might guess from what you’re seeing here, there’s virtually no chance of survivors.”

Then, it clicked. Franklin’s bizarre reaction had to be because Paul Kearns was a friend. And why wouldn’t he be? All those Harvard business school guys were thick as thieves.

Oh, shit.

It had been one of Franklin’s business school buddies who’d called in a favor to get his girlfriend a job at the station. Amanda nearly choked as she made the connection. She knew who the other victim of the crash had to be.

Graveyard Charlene.

A sheen of sweat broke out on Amanda’s forehead. *Hi, God, it’s Amanda*, she thought as she pretended to listen to Kenneth while not giving into the urge to throw up. *Uh, you know I was kidding about that whole “over Charlene’s dead body” thing, right? You weren’t supposed to take me seriously on that.*

It was no use. She was going straight to hell.

If there had been any doubt left as to who the victim was, it evaporated as new words scrolled across the teleprompter,

stealing Amanda's attention.

“Kenneth, we'll come back to you in a moment, but we've had an update on the identity of the female passenger. I'm very sorry to say this news hits close to home. Authorities have confirmed that our very own Charlene Evans boarded the plane with Mr. Kearns this morning. Charlene has been the host of *The Early Bird Show* since the beginning of this year. Sources say she had been vacationing with her boyfriend, Paul Kearns, in the Hamptons and was headed back to the city to appear on *The Late Late Show* tonight.” Amanda swallowed hard as the final sentence on the prompter hit her in the gut. She pressed a hand to her cheek, her voice breaking as she read out loud, “Charlene Evans was twenty-five years old.”

The same age as Zach.

Amanda stayed on the desk for an extra hour and forty-five minutes, doing her best to walk the fine line between solemn and professional under these extraordinary circumstances. The entire time, all she could hear in her head was *I'm definitely going to hell for this.*

One minute, Amanda was swearing to destroy Charlene. Now, she was reporting on her death. Never one to believe in karma, Amanda tried to cleanse her mind, but keeping it from circling back was a constant battle.

By the time she finally tossed the show over to the next crew, all Amanda wanted to do was go to her dressing room and cry. She was about to take out her ear piece when Hannah said, “You're wanted upstairs.”

Of course, she was. They probably wanted to chew her out for her near breakdown when she'd reported Charlene's death. Never mind Franklin Jr. had stormed off set. It was Amanda who would be reamed for appearing unprofessional.

The mood in the boardroom was somber. Not that it had ever been a cheerful place, and especially not for the past eighteen months, since *Hello, America* started to chip away at *The AM Show's* lead. But today, the desperation was so thick Amanda could taste it in the air.

Franklin Senior sat at the head of a long mahogany conference table, a white-haired old man whose face suggested less of a personal grief and more like he'd lost a favorite toy. Flanking him on each side were his two top dogs. Ken Abrams was the executive in charge of the entertainment division, while Wyatt Bukoski was the head of the news division. And technically Amanda's boss.

"How are you holding up?" Franklin Senior asked, an unusual solemnity in his tone.

Huh. So, she wasn't going to get yelled at for that last report?

"It's been a sad day for all of us." Amanda paused a beat then added, "Please tell your son I'm so sorry for the loss of his friend."

"What? Oh, yes. Paul." Franklin bowed his head. "I will, but right now, we need to solve our problem."

"What problem is that?" Amanda wasn't very good at being coy, but she hoped the morning's events had clouded the old man's perception as much as she thought it had.

The truth was, she'd been summoned by Franklin Senior and his dark-suit posse many times, but this time felt different. Not only did she know what they had been planning with their *Operation Titanic*, but now their best hope to replace her was literally at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. May she rest in peace. If Amanda played it smart, she could use this to her advantage.

"I'll tell you the problem," Ken wailed, not waiting for his boss to answer. "Charlene Evans was made for television. I had such plans for an evening crossover reality show, and now they're ruined."

"Losing Charlene leaves a gaping hole in the morning lineup," Wyatt added with decidedly less drama than his colleague. "We need someone who's seasoned to step into her place Monday morning."

Amanda's stomach tightened like it was caught in a vice. Was she being shipped off to the Graveyard Shift? "What

about Trish? She's been on *AM Weekend Edition* for a while now."

"She's pregnant," Franklin Senior spat, with all the annoyance of a man who clearly missed the days when he used to be able to fire women outright for such an offense.

"As luck would have it," Wyatt said, "we already have a few candidates coming in as possible replacements for Andy on the Sunday shift. One of them might have the experience we need for *The Early Bird Show*."

Blonde hair and big tits, Amanda filled in silently, letting out a relieved breath as she realized she was not being roped into taking the demotion. It meant Amanda's head was still on the chopping block eventually, but she was safe for now. The tragic death of a young woman wasn't exactly the type of leverage Amanda had been looking for, but it did seem to her that she'd been tossed a lifeline. Franklin Senior wanted something from her, and to get whatever it was, he'd have to pay.

"How can I help, sir?" Amanda's voice was sweet and light. It was the same voice she used to convince America she was a delightful person, the one that made them choose to disbelieve time and time again all the rumors of how she was really a dragon lady behind the scenes with her staff. The truth, of course, was somewhere in the middle.

Franklin smiled in relief, as taken in by her ruse as the rest of the country always was. "I need you to get this woman to say yes. Wine her and dine her. Show her all the reasons to kiss the Midwest goodbye and move to the Big Apple."

"When does she arrive?"

"She's on the plane even as we speak."

"You want me to cancel my vacation to do this favor for you?" Amanda pretended to mull it over. "I suppose my agent could come up with a few ideas for how to make it up to me."

"Of course, of course," Franklin said, too happy to get his way to notice he'd been played. He grabbed a folder from the desk. "Here you go. This is the girl. Dallas Washington, or

something like that. I don't remember. Anyway, all her details are in there, along with an itinerary my assistant put together. I'm counting on you to bring her on board."

"Yes, sir."

Amanda spun on one heel and left the room. It was only when she reached the empty hallway that she opened the folder. On top of the stack of papers was a glossy, full-color headshot of this "girl," as Franklin had called her, who would apparently be the network's savior. And no doubt, someday soon, would be put forward as Amanda's replacement.

Her name was not Dallas.

The room spun, and Amanda leaned against the wall.

It was Dakota Washington. The woman who had already ruined most of Amanda's summer was now probably going to ruin her life.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PLANE BUMPED AND LURCHED AS ITS LANDING GEAR MADE contact with the runway. Dakota's eyes snapped open. Outside her window, the view was less than inspiring—miles of tarmac, hulking terminal buildings, and the occasional luggage cart zipping to or from baggage claim. Dakota palm-slapped her forehead. This was her first time flying into New York City, and she'd missed the good part.

You must get a window seat, she'd been told by anyone who had ever made the flight from Chicago O'Hare to LaGuardia as soon as they found out her travel plans. It was the second thing everyone said, right after asking if the big-time network would be flying her in a private plane for her interview, and being assured that no, they would not. The hotshot executives might travel in such luxury, but Dakota's ticket was economy class all the way.

Still, she'd been promised by those with experience that the view of the Manhattan skyline from a window seat, even one located in coach, couldn't be beat. She'd gone along with their suggestions when choosing her spot, instead of opting for the aisle for its fraction of an inch of extra leg room. And then she'd immediately fallen into a fitful nap for the entirety of the flight, thereby missing the whole show. She only half regretted it.

After getting to her tiny TV station in Springfield on what had been Friday morning only in the most technical sense—given that it was sometime very shortly after midnight—Dakota had already put in a full day of work to produce *Cock-*

a-doodle's final show of the week before she'd driven a single mile of the three-hour journey to Chicago. It would've been a tiring day even if she hadn't been forced to run through the airport in a very ill-advised pair of high heels, arriving at her gate mere seconds before they were going to slam the door in her face. It was no wonder sleep had held significantly more appeal to her than catching a glimpse of some tall buildings from the sky.

Even now, Dakota wanted only one thing—no, scratch that. She wanted *three* things, and in this exact order: hot shower, room service, and then bed. If she really let her imagination go crazy, Dakota might dare to hope for fuzzy slippers and a bathrobe, although she hadn't packed either, and given the no-frills flight she'd been booked on by the *AM, Weekend Edition* folks, she didn't have high hopes for the amenities at what was likely to be a very budget-conscious hotel.

It didn't matter. Slippers and robe or not, food followed by sleep was pretty much her speed for the night. If there was one reason to be grateful she wasn't an A-list celebrity, it was that no one had felt the need to put anything on her schedule until bright and early in the morning when the interview process would begin. No wining and dining, no pretentious night clubs with even more pretentious people. Honestly, no one really cared she was there. And that was the way she liked it. Fake attention not only grated on her nerves, but it made her feel like such a phony.

The job interview itself would be a long shot. Dakota had been shocked to get a call at all. *AM, Weekend Edition* aired on Amanda Morgan's network, which meant the only explanation was the morning show star who had very recently vowed to have her fired was not aware of the situation yet. Dakota had little doubt as soon as her former lover—if that was even the right term after the couple of hours they'd spent together—found out, Dakota would find herself on the next flight back to Illinois. Or possibly a Greyhound bus. Hell, she might be forced to hitchhike if Amanda had any sway in the matter.

Dakota's insides went cold at the thought of Amanda's name. Could an idol have fallen any further from her pedestal than that woman had? Every person Dakota had asked about her said the same thing. Amanda Morgan was sweet as a slice of apple pie in public but would burn anyone who crossed her to a crisp with one fiery breath. Not that anyone Dakota had talked to knew the woman personally. Venturing into the same city as her after the way they'd left things between them was a definite risk.

Even so, a chance to host a show based in New York City had been too tempting to pass up. Though Dakota was thirty-one years old with a steady job, she still lived with a roommate. As soon as people found out she was on television, they assumed she was rich, but in reality, television didn't pay the big bucks unless you went to either LA or New York. Considering her time on the air, Dakota still had zero media connections outside the Midwest. Even if she didn't get the job, which she wouldn't, it was worth the trip to get a few introductions that might come in handy down the road.

Dakota's pulse fluttered as they arrived at the gate with a final lurching stop. The captain hadn't removed the seat belt sign yet, but that didn't stop two douche canoes in the first-class cabin from popping out of their seats. Heaven forbid they have to wait.

"Douche canoes," Dakota muttered under her breath, unable to resist saying it out loud. It was such a fun phrase. The woman in the middle seat let out a disparaging grunt, obviously in full agreement. If Dakota did make it really big someday, she prayed she would never let it go to her head.

When the plane door finally opened, Dakota stayed seated. It wasn't out of restraint or because of any amazing reserve of patience. It was simply an acknowledgement of reality. There were thirty rows ahead of hers, each filled with passengers every bit as eager to scramble for their belongings and make their way off the plane as she was. Standing up prematurely would only make it harder to keep her cool. Besides, she was too tall and would have to hunch. She didn't want to risk earning the nickname Quasimodo with the crew in New York.

Fortunately, her suitcase was small enough she'd been able to stow it in the overhead bin, with a laptop bag under the seat in front of her. Once she got off the plane, only the length of an airport terminal stood between her and a cab to her hotel.

Shower. Food. Sleep. Dakota chanted this silently, a mantra to survive however many minutes it would be until she got what she wanted. *Shower. Food. Sleep.*

Stepping out of the gangway into the waiting area, Dakota's attention was caught by a large crowd pressed in front of a bank of televisions near the arrival gate. The reason for their attention was unclear, but every single device appeared to be tuned to a news channel. This struck her as odd. Usually during the summer, at least one would be airing a replay of a baseball game. Still, as it was not a shower, a meal, or a bed, she didn't really care.

As her foot connected with the beginning of the moving sidewalk, Dakota's phone rang. She hit the green button without bothering to look at the name. "Deke?"

"No, it's Roger. Your agent."

She quivered, barely registering the words. "What's going on?"

"Charlene Evans is dead."

"The young blonde on *The Early Bird Show*?" Dakota's mind raced to catch up as it tripped over this unexpected news. She'd spent the last three nights cramming as much information into her head on everyone who worked for the network as she could. "When?"

"I got wind of it shortly after your plane took off."

"Shit. Rumor had it she was going to take over for Amanda Morgan soon."

"Yes, that's what I'd heard." Through the thinnest veneer of sadness, her agent could barely conceal his glee. "And while it's obviously a terrible tragedy, this might be your big break, babe."

Dakota's heart raced as a terrible thought occurred to her. "I hope it's not a broken neck."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see? Amanda's the one with the most to gain from Charlene's death." Dakota pulled a quick one-eighty and attempted to head back to the television cluster.

"Are you saying you think Amanda Morgan had Charlene whacked?" Roger laughed, immediately snapping Dakota at least part way back to reality. "Did you know your brain goes all tin-foil conspiracy theory on you when you haven't slept?"

"It does not." Dakota knew she was pouting, and her agent was right. Probably. But while she might not be a killer, Amanda was a formidable woman and scary as hell. Just because the woman hadn't destroyed her yet didn't mean it wasn't in the works. It was better to be safe than sorry and watch her back. Also, a good night's sleep was definitely in order.

"I'm serious, kid. It's something you need to work on. Now, are you—" The phone cut out.

"Am I what?" Shaking the phone, Dakota realized that, due to the moving sidewalk going at the same speed she was walking but in the opposite direction, she hadn't moved a single inch closer to the TVs. "I can't hear you, Roger. I need to head outside to catch a cab."

"No, listen." Roger's voice crackled across the line, fading in and out. "Meeting you—"

"My first meeting is tomorrow."

Dakota flipped herself to face the correct direction, standing to one side to avoid being pummeled by a steady stream of sprinting people who clearly thought they were more important than she was. A man with a backpack slung over one shoulder jostled Dakota, nearly wiping her out. A vivid picture filled her brain of reaching the end of the sidewalk while still prone, her face repeatedly hitting the metal piece with the caution sign on it as the black surface of the walkway rolled underneath.

Would she be able to find the energy to pick herself up, or would she die right there?

“Change of plans,” came Roger’s voice, snapping her out of her gruesome daydream. “No cab. You’ll meet a driver out front with—”

After the silence lasted longer than the previous times, Dakota stared at the screen. It had gone black, the call dropped. It never failed. Airports and hospitals—the two places people really needed to make emergency calls—were the two worst locations on the planet for phone reception. She’d have to call Roger back as soon as she had more than a single bar on her phone. In the meantime, he’d mentioned a driver. Surely, she had the wherewithal, even in her exhausted state, to figure out something that simple, right?

After leaving the secured area, she entered a massive room where family and friends had congregated to greet the weary travelers. A dozen or more men and women in uniforms, holding signs with the name of their car company and the passenger they were meeting, lined one wall. Dakota scanned the signs for her name but came up empty.

“Flipping fantastic,” she murmured, too tired at this point to waste extra energy with proper swearing.

She dialed Roger’s number, but the call didn’t go through. Because, of course, it didn’t. Why would she need to place a phone call in an airport? Next, she tried to load the Lyft app she rarely used back home. All it did was spin like a frisbee. She was seriously considering giving up and pitching a tent on the floor so she could get some shut-eye when someone tapped her shoulder.

“Ms. Washington?”

Dakota wheeled about, moving just quickly enough on the smooth floor that her rolling suitcase darted away. The man who had tapped her shoulder grabbed the bag mid-roll and took it under his control without so much as a raised eyebrow to indicate this was out of the ordinary. Dakota’s face burned as she took back the handle.

“I’m so sorry. Yes, I’m Dakota...” She hastily added, “Washington, that is.”

“My name is Joe. Right this way, madam.”

Madam? That was a first. He’d said it so respectfully, too, with not even a hint of irony, despite her having done her best to appear fresh off the farm, which honestly, she almost was. Four years in Chicago for college and another seven in Springfield were hardly enough to turn a girl from a tiny ranch in an even tinier Colorado town into a city slicker.

A big, black SUV was waiting only a few steps on the other side of the sliding door that led from the terminal. Taking her suitcase from her again, Joe opened the back door and waved Dakota inside. The last of her strength abandoned her, and her eyelids were already closing as she sank into the soft leather seat. They remained shut as her bag was placed in the back of the car—or so Dakota assumed from the slamming, although if his driver’s uniform had been a ruse and he’d made off with it, Dakota didn’t think she could be bothered to care, as long as she got to stay exactly where she was.

A moment later, the driver’s door opened, and soon enough, the car edged away from the curb.

“Would you like a drink?”

The voice that rang in Dakota’s ear did not belong to the driver. It was a woman’s voice, and a familiar one, too.

It was Amanda Morgan.

“JESUS CHRIST!” Dakota jumped, her eyes flying open as she lurched up, ramrod straight, in the seat. In the row behind her sat a woman she knew all too well—in the Biblical sense of the word—her golden hair perfectly coifed, wearing head-to-toe black. Dakota’s heart pounded in her throat as her imagination lost all grip on reality. “I knew this was a setup. You really are here to whack me.”

“What are you talking about?” Amanda’s lips curved into a smile, which seemed oddly genuine for someone who was about to finish off her enemy in cold blood. “Do you think I’m here to kill you?”

“You’re dressed like a ninja. Do you have nunchucks?” Rambling, Dakota made a motion she hoped conveyed throwing ninja stars, though she feared it didn’t look quite right. Dear God, was she starting to hallucinate from stress and exhaustion?

“Let me see if I understand. In your estimation, I have the power not only to make a billionaire hedge fund manager’s private jet go down but then to commit murder with my bare hands in the back of an SUV with impunity?” Amanda tilted her head to one side, blinking at a clipped rate, clearly uncertain what to make of this spectacle. “I can’t decide if I should be insulted or flattered.”

“I didn’t mean to be insulting,” Dakota assured her, no longer having the faintest idea what she was saying. She was a small step from being comatose, and the last person she’d slept with was definitely the last person she’d expected to see. All she wanted was to stop talking and for everyone to forget she’d said a word.

“I’m wondering,” Amanda purred. And yes, a purr was the only way Dakota could describe it. “Where do you imagine I would dump your body?”

“Well, uh...” Dakota was utterly confused, but Amanda seemed visibly amused by their conversation and showed no signs of backing down, which was weird, because Amanda didn’t like her. So why did it kind of seem like she did? More importantly, why did this unexpected development make Dakota so happy? Maybe she’d already fallen asleep and this was a dream.

“Is Joe in on the plan? Have we already dug a hole in New Jersey?” Yes, Amanda was definitely getting a kick out of Dakota’s borderline delusional behavior. Instead of being annoyed by this discovery, Dakota mostly felt aroused.

“I haven’t thought through all of the particulars,” Dakota admitted, her cheeks tingling as a wave of embarrassment washed over her. She sounded nuts.

“That’s all right. I suppose if I was going to go on a killing spree, it would be up to me to figure that all out myself.”

As Dakota’s gaze drifted to the deep V of Amanda’s black top and refused to budge, it struck her she was making a fool of herself in front of a woman who still had the ability to turn her entire body to jelly through her mere proximity. How inconvenient.

“Look.” Dakota swallowed, finding her throat dry and scratchy. “All I know is this has been the longest day of my life, and no one told me you would be... here. I thought you were on vacation.”

“It was a last-minute development.” The pinched corners of Amanda’s eyes hinted at the turmoil the day’s tragic turn of events had wrought, but she didn’t elaborate. Suddenly, Dakota felt sorry for her. Perhaps Charlene had even been a friend. “I’ve been sent to wine and dine you.”

Dakota’s lips puckered. “Why? The last I knew, you were intent on destroying me. That is what you said out at the steaming hole, isn’t it? Or have you finally decided to believe that I had no intention of misleading you when we slept together?”

Amanda’s expression was hard to read as she said, “I’ve decided destroying you isn’t in my best interest at the present moment.”

“That’s a relief,” Dakota said, though some small part of her wondered how long it might be before that changed.

“As for the reason I’m here now, why does anyone ever wine and dine someone else?” There was something Amanda expected Dakota to grasp, but whatever it was refused to penetrate her foggy brain. Finally, Amanda offered a clue. “Because they want something from you. Or, in this case, the people I report to do.”

“But you don’t?” As soon as the question left her mouth, Dakota wished she could have reeled it back in. Considering all that had passed between them, and how topsy-turvy the past several minutes had been, it had the potential to become too intimate very quickly.

Amanda looked away, as if sensing the danger herself. “Let’s just say if I get them what they want, I get what I want, and everyone wins.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to.” Amanda grabbed a folder from beside her on the seat and held it up with a flourish. “I’ve been handed an itinerary. We’re heading to the Rainbow Room.”

“Where’s that, somewhere in Oz? It sounds like it’s made up.” Dakota stifled a yawn. She had no idea what this place was, but she doubted it would have a shower or bed. At least it might have food, preferably not of the rainbow variety. She was a steak and potatoes kind of gal and had no interest in eating glitter.

“It’s a private dining club at the top of Thirty Rock.” Amanda’s withering look suggested anyone with an ounce of sophistication would know this.

“Is it near my hotel?” Dakota smoothed a hand over her rumpled clothing, panic rising in the back of her throat. “I can’t go anywhere dressed like this, and I need a shower. No, I need like fifty of them.”

“You didn’t take a shower today?” Amanda scrunched her face.

“Of course, I did. You’re forgetting that for me, today started fifteen hours ago.” Dakota tugged her blouse away from her chest, her nose crinkling when the stench of onions wafted from the fabric. “But to make matters worse, there was a cooking accident on set this morning, and I didn’t have time to change before heading to the airport.”

“Where’s your hotel?”

Dakota pulled up the reservation on her phone and held it out for Amanda to see. As soon as the woman saw the details,

her expression morphed into one of pure pain.

“Thirty-Fourth Street? Are you serious?” Amanda pressed her fingertips to her forehead. “Do you know how many blocks away that is?”

“I have no clue.”

“About twenty too many. With the traffic tonight, we’re barely going to make our reservation for dinner as it is.”

“But—” Dakota tugged at her clothing again, another round of onions filling the car.

This time the smell must have traveled as far as Amanda’s nose because she made a gagging sound and called out to the front of the car. “Joe? A quick stop at my place, please.”

“You got it,” the driver answered.

Dakota gave her head a brisk shake, having heard Amanda’s words but not processing their meaning. “What?”

“I’m on West Fifty-Third, just around the corner from where we’re going. It will be fastest to shower and change at my apartment.”

“I couldn’t possibly impose,” Dakota argued, even as curiosity bubbled inside her over what Amanda’s apartment looked like.

“Your hotel is simply out of the question,” Amanda announced with the imperious tone of someone who does not expect to be questioned. “Not until the end of the night.”

“Dinner isn’t the end?” Dakota’s heart sank. Was she really expected to do more?

“We have quite the itinerary. I’m amazed they aren’t sending us to see a Broadway show. Franklin usually insists on tickets to *Chicago*, like anyone still wants to see that tired out musical.”

As a matter of fact, Dakota did want to see it. Not tonight but eventually. Apparently, that wasn’t good enough for the likes of Amanda Morgan. For years, Dakota had refused to

believe it, but now she saw clearly that her former idol was every bit the diva people in the industry accused her of being.

“Do we really have to do all this?” Dakota asked, struggling to keep the whining out of her tone. “I was told the interview didn’t start until tomorrow.”

“That all changed this morning the moment Charlene’s plane went down.”

“I don’t understand”—Dakota held up a hand before Amanda could reply—“and please don’t tell me I don’t have to. I deserve to know what’s going on, and even my own agent hasn’t explained. If you want to get whatever it is you need out of this, you’ll have to get me to cooperate, right? Considering the only thing I wanted to do tonight was shower, have room service, and go to sleep, I’m not sure I’m in the mood to play nice.”

Much to Dakota’s surprise, instead of growing angry, Amanda’s expression softened. “You’re right. You deserve to know what’s going on.”

“Thank you.” Frankly, Dakota was gobsmacked at how easy it had been to convince Amanda to see things her way. Was this a trick? Or maybe Amanda was a lot harder to figure out than Dakota had thought. Not that she was exactly firing on all cylinders right now. Whatever Amanda’s intentions, Dakota was pretty much helpless. This didn’t bother her as much as it probably should have.

As the SUV crawled through traffic, Amanda did her best to explain the devious machinations of IBC’s higher-ups. Though she could’ve done so easily, Amanda didn’t hold back the less flattering details for the sake of her own vanity and, instead, was upfront about the plot, known as *Operation Titanic*, to drive her out of her job. By the time Amanda had reached the end, Dakota seriously considered having the driver pull off the road so she could die right then and there.

“Me, host of *The Early Bird Show*?” Dakota’s body threatened to shake. “How could anyone expect me to take on a job like that with no experience?”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Amanda told her, not exactly like a pep talk, but more as a simple statement of fact. “The *Cock-a-doodle Rooster Report* is a nationally syndicated show, even if it is mostly confined to the farm belt.”

“I thought you’d never heard of my show.”

Faint pink roses bloomed on Amanda’s cheeks. “I may have looked it up after our last... encounter. As it happens, you’re by far the most qualified candidate we’ve got, at least on short notice.”

By now, Dakota’s anxiety was reaching a crescendo. The position on *AM, Weekend Edition* was a part-time gig, something to dip her toes into the water while maintaining her home base in the Midwest. Would she really be asked to drop everything and move to New York City full-time?

I’m not ready.

As big as her ambitions might be, Dakota had to be truthful with herself. She, the honest-to-goodness country bumpkin, hadn’t even realized the Rainbow Room was a real place, for fuck’s sake. She couldn’t move to a tiny apartment in New York City. She had a dog!

Dakota opened her mouth to explain all of this to Amanda, only before she could, they’d pulled over in front of the glitzy awning of a high-class apartment building, and Joe had opened her door. She climbed out without saying a word.

On the other side of a rotating brass door was a spacious lobby filled with artwork. A doorman greeted them with a nod, scrambling to press the call button for the elevator before they reached it. Dakota couldn’t help but think this was the type of place you saw in movies, the ones you knew weren’t actually real. Yet, here it was.

The ride to the fifty-second floor was dead quiet, the type of dreadful silence that made Dakota wonder what was going through Amanda’s head. Did she want Dakota to take the job, and if so, why? Only weeks ago, the woman had threatened to destroy Dakota’s life. Had Amanda been serious about that? It seemed moving to New York and taking a job at the same

network as her enemy was an incredibly stupid decision, no matter what kind of truce they'd seemed to have reached for the time being.

But what else could Dakota do?

They stepped out of the elevator into a long hallway with white marble floors, dotted with tiny black diamonds. Half a dozen elegant brass lighting fixtures hung at even intervals from the ceiling, illuminating several Picasso-like paintings on the walls. Given how each painting was protected behind thick glass, Dakota had the sneaking suspicion they might not be so much Picasso-like as, well, actual Picassos. Could that even be?

Dakota peered one way down the hall, then the other, spotting a door on either end. "Which one is yours?"

"They both are." Amanda strode toward the door on their right, opening it not with a key but with a code she punched into a keypad above the knob. They stepped into a narrow foyer with a parquet wood floor. "There's a guest room straight ahead. There should be shampoo and soap in the shower, and you'll find fresh towels in the cupboard."

"Okay." Fixing her eyes on the door Amanda had indicated, Dakota picked up her bag. The last thing she wanted was for its cheap plastic wheels to scratch the rich oak floor. When she stepped from the foyer into the main hallway, she spotted an additional door on her right and was surprised by the presence of a spiral staircase on her left. "You have a downstairs?"

"Yes." With that, Amanda disappeared through the door on the right, which Dakota assumed must lead to the main bedroom.

"Fancy." Dakota let out a low whistle. She didn't know much about Manhattan real estate, but she guessed a two-story apartment, with two bedrooms to boot, had to cost a pretty penny.

The guest room was surprisingly spacious, probably as big as Dakota's living room back home. It was neatly furnished,

though a little sparse, but the lack of decorative touches was more than made up for by the stunning city view visible through the nearly wall-sized windows. After testing three doors that turned out to be closets, Dakota located the bathroom and flicked on a light.

“This is the spare?” As Dakota took in the massive space, which was about half as large as the bedroom, her gaze was immediately drawn to an elegant clawfoot tub. Usually, that would have been the most dazzling feature of the room, but not here, because directly behind the tub was another floor-to-ceiling window. Outside, the sky was starting to glow that warm shade of evening pink, and all the lights on the surrounding buildings were illuminated. She had a clear view of Central Park. “People actually live like this?”

Knowing Amanda was waiting, Dakota rushed through a shower. After wrapping herself in the fluffiest towel she’d ever felt, she pulled out the dress she’d packed for her interview. It was the nicest thing she had, and she hated to risk getting it dirty, but what else could she wear? She would have to avoid ordering anything with sauce.

Stepping back into the hallway, Dakota hesitated. Should she knock on Amanda’s bedroom door or go down the stairs to look for her there? Shuffling toward the bedroom door, Dakota gave a tentative knock.

“Amanda?”

There was no answer, but the door shifted enough at her touch that Dakota realized it was unlatched. She could nudge it open, but what if Amanda, too, had decided to shower and change? Dakota might walk in on her. *Naked.*

Dakota swallowed as she squeezed her eyes shut against the very real memory of Amanda’s undressed body, her silky skin against Dakota’s fingertips and lips. Why did she have to think of that now, mere inches from Dragon Lady’s lair? Resolved to get as far from the woman’s bedroom as she could, Dakota headed down the curved marble stairs.

She’d expected to end up in the living room but, instead, found herself in a gallery at least twice as long as the one

where the elevators had been stretched out in front of her. The walls were covered in paintings, and once again, Dakota couldn't shake the feeling these were the real McCoy. It was like visiting a museum.

Her heels clicked as she walked the length of the room, poking her head through doors to what appeared to be a study, followed by a library, followed by a formal dining room large enough to seat sixteen. How big was this place?

“Hello? Amanda?”

Finally, Dakota reached the kitchen, where Amanda leaned across the center island, studying some papers or something that was stretched out in front of her on the dark green granite. Honestly, Dakota had no idea what Amanda was doing, being too busy fixating on the bare expanse of cleavage on display due to Amanda's position. It took every ounce of will for Dakota to drag her eyes upward.

Unaware she'd been ogled, or really good at playing it cool, Amanda looked up, fixing Dakota with an inscrutable expression in her sparkling eyes. “There you are. You ready?”

Dakota struggled to hold back a yawn. “Who are we meeting at this Rainbow Room place?”

“No one.” Amanda yawned, apparently not trying at all to hide it. “It's just us.”

Firmly convinced yawning was contagious, Dakota pressed a hand to her mouth to cover her own. “Does that mean if we skip out on the reservation, no one would be the wiser?”

Amanda yawned again. It was definitely catching. “Sorry. It's been an eventful day. Are you not hungry?”

“I am, but I couldn't help noticing you have an amazing bathtub. All I can think about right now is a nice, long soak.”

Amanda arched an eyebrow. “Is that right?”

Dakota's pulse ticked faster. She couldn't figure out Amanda's tone. Menacing? Playful? It was impossible to tell whether this woman was more likely to want to drown her in

the tub or join her. The thought of the latter option sent all sorts of problematic sensations zinging through her body. “A soak at my hotel, obviously. I didn’t mean—”

“Do you like lobster?” Amanda asked.

Of all the possible responses, that one had not been on Dakota’s list. “Sure. Who doesn’t?”

“Before all this, I was supposed to be leaving for a two-week vacation and had planned on eating lobster from the best place on the eastern seaboard at my beach house tonight.” Amanda straightened up, finally taking her ample bosom off display as she cracked her neck from side to side to work out the kinks.

“I’m sorry,” Dakota rushed to say. “My being here has completely spoiled your plans.”

“Not at all.” Oddly, Amanda sounded almost convincing. “How about I call the second-best place around, which happens to be a few blocks away, and have a couple lobster dinners delivered? I don’t have an ocean view to offer, but I do have two outdoor terraces to choose from with views of the city that are every bit as nice as the Rainbow Room.”

“That sounds heavenly.”

“In the meantime, you can have that soak you wanted. But you might as well do it in my tub. It has jets.”

“Really?” Dakota grinned. Relief washed over her at the prospect of being spared the ordeal of a fancy dinner and all that it entailed. She’d so much rather stay in and have a nice quiet night, just the two of them.

No, not like that. Just, er...

Amanda quirked an eyebrow, almost like she could hear what was going on in Dakota’s head. “Follow me.”

Dakota nodded mutely, hoping that mindreading thing was as much in her imagination as the ninja business had been.

Instead of going through any of the rooms Dakota had already seen, Amanda led the way past several doors, whose purposes were total mysteries, to an entirely different staircase

from the first one. At the top was another long hallway, which led to a private gym.

Dakota marched at double time to keep up. “Where the heck are we going?”

“My bedroom suite.”

“This is all yours?” Dakota huffed as Amanda increased her gait. “How big is this place? Are there more floors I don’t know about?”

“No. Just the two.”

“All to yourself?”

“Yes. The main entrance is on the fifty-first floor. The one we used earlier is more like a back door. Altogether, it’s about fourteen thousand square feet, give or take.” Amanda grasped the knobs of a set of double doors on the far end of the gym and flung them open to reveal what had to be the largest bathroom in the country. “Seven bedrooms, fifteen baths.”

“Fifteen?” Dakota’s jaw dropped as she took in the gleaming marble surfaces and the tub that could double as a pool.

“Not all of them are like this one, of course. Frankly, I don’t need even a quarter of the space, but I’ll admit this bathroom would be hard to give up.” Amanda waltzed to the end of the room where she opened an antique wardrobe, pulling out a fluffy white bathrobe and even fluffier slippers. “Here, you can use these.”

“I love you,” Dakota blurted, so caught up in the gloriousness of this heavenly bathroom that her mouth started running like the bathtub faucet before her brain could catch on to what was happening and shush it.

“What?”

“I mean...” Dakota tripped over her tongue as her stupid words echoed in her ears. Dear God, how could she have said that? “I only meant that on the flight, I kept fantasizing about a robe and slippers like these.”

“Well, I live to fulfill your fantasies.”

“Er...” Dakota’s brain disconnected from her mouth. She hoped she wasn’t drooling.

The wicked tinge of Amanda’s laugh told Dakota the woman knew exactly what she’d said and the effect it’d had. “You’ll be okay in here by yourself?”

“Huh?” Surely, she wasn’t suggesting a bath for two, was she?

“I mean, you don’t think I’m going to kill you or anything anymore, do you?”

“That’s to be determined.” If Amanda kept putting all these X-rated thoughts in Dakota’s head, she was definitely going to end up dead.

Amanda laughed. “Go. Enjoy your bath. I’ll order your last meal.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

AMANDA'S ALARM CLOCK TRILLED, AND FOR A SPLIT SECOND, as her hand connected with the snooze button, she thought it was Monday morning and time to prep for her show. She wasn't exactly a morning person, but she loved her work and, after fifteen years, had gotten used to the early hours. So why did she want so badly to pick up her alarm clock right now and smash it against the wall, repeatedly?

Because you're supposed to be on vacation.

Memories of the past twenty-four hours washed over her. *Operation Titanic*. Charlene's plane going down. Lobster dinner on the terrace. Too much wine.

Dakota Washington asleep on her couch.

It wasn't this final fact that made Amanda want to groan and pull the covers over her head so much as the recollection of how desperately some part of her had wished the woman hadn't slept there but in Amanda's own bed, instead.

She lied to you and tried to use you, Amanda reminded herself, but it didn't do any good. She no longer believed this to be true. It hadn't been Dakota's fault Amanda had gotten things wrong, and the sad fact was without her help, Amanda probably would've ended up at the bottom of a steaming crater, fused to a smoldering pile of space junk.

They want her to replace you.

That wasn't Dakota's fault, either, of course, but it was still true. And that put Amanda in an awkward position, indeed. They were undeniably rivals, yet for some reason she couldn't

put her finger on, she was inclined to help Dakota succeed. As far as IBC was concerned, both of them were pawns to move around and toy with at will.

Amanda Morgan was no one's pawn.

The alarm sounded again. This time, Amanda switched it off. Tossing the covers to the side, she padded down the stairs to the breakfast kitchen—there were actually three kitchens in her apartment, a fact that no doubt would blow Dakota's mind—to brew a pot of tea. And maybe some coffee, too. She wasn't sure which form of caffeinated beverage Dakota preferred.

As she passed through the living room, she spotted the young woman in question, asleep on the sofa with Cronkite, Amanda's massive gray cat, draped across her in lieu of a blanket.

"Scat, Cronky," Amanda whispered. The cat refused to budge, and the woman beneath him continued to snooze the morning away.

Despite Amanda's seven bedrooms, Dakota had refused to impose by staying in one of them. She'd been adamant about returning to her hotel, right up to the point where she'd fallen sound asleep on the sofa, mid-argument. Amanda hadn't had the heart to wake her, not even to move her someplace more comfortable. She looked so peaceful and sweet, which was quite a feat considering the twenty-plus pounds of purring fur on her back couldn't be comfortable.

"Dakota?" Amanda said in a low tone. Even without the benefit of a proper bed, the woman looked refreshed and rested. Ah, to be that young again.

"What time is it?" Dakota mumbled, her voice caked with sleepiness.

Amanda drew in her breath as an unexpected tingling hit her between the legs. That was an odd and troubling reaction. She was pretty sure Little Amanda had never stood at attention on account of a mere voice before.

“Time to rise and shine,” Amanda replied, pretending not to notice that edge in her own tone that tended to creep in when she wanted something and knew she couldn’t have it. She gave Cronkite a nudge, and he jumped to the floor, his tail swishing in annoyance. “Treadmill or elliptical?”

“Is this like a fuck, marry, or kill question?” Dakota rolled onto her back, stretching one arm and then her other, the T-shirt she’d slept in sliding up to reveal a generous expanse of bare midriff, along with the slightest hint of breast—enough to remove any doubt that she had not worn a bra to bed.

Stand down, Little Amanda!

“It’s more like, which exercise machine would you prefer this morning? I do forty-five minutes every day, without fail. I assume you do, too.”

“You know, not all of us have our own fully outfitted gym next to our bedroom.”

“How about the elliptical?”

“Fine.”

“Good. Coffee first?”

“Nah. I’m ready.” Dakota jumped up from the couch and did a boxing feint.

Dammit it all to hell, so did Little Amanda.

“Right.” Ignoring the part of her body that most definitely was not going to get its way, Amanda glanced longingly at the kitchen where her electric tea kettle should have been reaching a boil at that very second. Forget it. She wasn’t going to admit she was in dire need of caffeine. If Dakota could roll out of bed—or off the couch in this case—and be ready to go, so could Amanda. “Let’s get the exercise portion of the day done.”

Exactly forty-five minutes later, Amanda dispatched Dakota to the guest bathroom for a shower, while she retreated to her own. It had been the hardest workout of her life, but not for the usual reasons. Looking in the mirror after a semi-cold shower, Amanda tried to lay down the law.

“No matter what you do, you will not sleep with Dakota ever again. No matter how juicy her ass looks in a borrowed pair of yoga pants. It will not happen. You got that?”

She shook a finger at her reflection in the mirror and then, for good measure, down at Little Amanda, who was offering counterarguments that Amanda struggled to lock out of her head. It was no use. No matter how badly the network execs wanted Dakota in New York, Amanda couldn't risk it.

What she had to do now was move pieces around on the board, as if playing a do-or-die game of Risk. She might convince the young broadcaster to pass up the job or maybe get Franklin Senior to want someone else more. Whichever approach she took, she'd do it cleverly so that no one knew what she was up to. It was the type of challenge Amanda was born for.

“The car's here,” Amanda announced, her voice echoing through the hallway. “Time for us to leave.”

Dakota poked her head out of the guest room. “Won't people notice if we arrive together?”

“I'll let you go in first. Considering my reputation the past couple years concerning early mornings, no one will think anything of it if I come in a few minutes late. Besides, that'll give them something different to spread rumors about.”

“What about the driver, though? Won't he think it's strange I stayed here?”

“Joe? He'd never tell a soul. He's one of my most loyal friends.”

Slowly, Dakota emerged from behind the bedroom door. Her hair and makeup were done, and she was dressed in a sharply tailored suit that, as much as Amanda didn't want to admit, made her look like a million bucks. No way would the top dogs decide to keep fishing for someone else when they had such a pretty catch on the line already. She'd have to go with plan B.

“Loyal friend,” Dakota repeated. “Does that mean you pay him under the table?”

Amanda squared her shoulders, narrowing her eyes. “It means I treat him with the respect he deserves.”

“Sorry. I’d heard—”

“I know what people say about me,” Amanda snapped, noting with satisfaction the look of embarrassment on Dakota’s face. Keeping the woman off balance would work to Amanda’s advantage. But for some reason, she couldn’t take the victory without softening the blow. “You can’t be both a woman and a hard-hitting journalist without people saying you’re a bitch who eats live babies for breakfast. Just wait. You’ll see. But ninety-percent of that Dragon Lady stuff is utter bullshit. I’ve never eaten a single baby.”

“Not even ten percent of one?” Dakota teased, looking relieved. “Shocking news that the rumors have it all wrong.”

“Mostly wrong, not all. I’m not perfect, as I’m pretty sure you’ve already figured out.”

Dakota chuckled. “I did think the fire-breathing thing went a bit overboard.”

“You want to learn how I’ve made it as far as I have?” Amanda studied Dakota’s face, so fresh and sweet, hardly wanting to contemplate the road ahead of the young woman in what was still a ruthless and male-dominated business. “Lesson number one, never say anything unkind to those who are vital to your success.”

“So, your driver is vital, but what about all those assistants you’ve burned through?” Dakota challenged. “Or are those rumors exaggerated, too?”

Amanda’s cheeks grew warm. “I said I wasn’t perfect, remember?”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“That was about as sincere as a lion saying he wouldn’t kill a zebra.” Amanda made a show of rolling her eyes. “Lesson number two, if you can’t tell a convincing lie, don’t say anything at all.”

When they arrived at the studio, Amanda did as promised and allowed Dakota a ten-minute head start, hanging back inside the car and sipping a much-needed tea. It was going to be a long day. When she finally went inside, the war room was buzzing with activity. The executive producer, two junior producers, the head talent booker, executive assistants, and *The Early Bird Show's* remaining cohost, Allie, were all milling around, their faces tense and somber.

Jesus, who died? Amanda was about to ask but caught herself in time. It was one thing to have a reputation as a hard-ass, but quite another to act like an insensitive asshole.

“Good morning, everyone,” Amanda said, mustering all the sympathy she could as she set her bag down on the table. “I think I speak for everyone when I say how brave you all are to come in and soldier on under such unfortunate circumstances.”

“Thank you.” Jenny, the executive producer whose name Amanda only remembered because it was the same as her ex-wife’s, pressed her hands together, her eyes brimming with tears. “Your support of our show at a time like this means so much.”

“Of course.” Amanda nodded solemnly, counting to five in her head and hoping that was enough time to seem reasonably respectful before launching into work. It wasn’t that she didn’t feel bad about Charlene, but there were more important things to think about right now, like how in God’s name she was going to keep the only woman she’d ever indulged in a one-night stand with from moving to New York and complicating the hell out of her life. “Has Ms. Washington arrived?”

“Yes, about fifteen minutes ago,” Jenny said, confirming what Amanda already knew. “She’s meeting with hair and makeup.”

“Do you have a plan for how the day will go?”

“I was thinking we’d take it slow, ease into things. Unless you have any suggestions?”

“Actually, I was thinking the best way to start is to toss her right into the deep end to see if she sinks or swims.”

The EP’s eyebrows shot up. “Don’t you think that might scare her off?”

Ding, ding! We have a winner.

“Not at all.” Amanda smiled as she put lesson number two, lie convincingly, into full effect. “She’s a professional and will have to hit the ground running if she’s going to pull this off. It’s better to know right away if she can handle it.”

“Good point.” Jenny stroked her chin and turned to one of the assistants. “Marcy, let’s get Dakota on the desk.”

The assistant ducked out of view, emerging moments later on the set with a wide-eyed Dakota. She took her seat at the news desk, doing her best to seem like she belonged, but the poor girl couldn’t stop gawking at the elaborate set. With a twinge of guilt, Amanda stepped into view.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” As Dakota nodded, Amanda smiled encouragingly, gratified to see the worst of the dazed and terrified look seeping from the woman’s face. “Before they fired Janice, the host right before Charlene, they redid the set.”

“They fired Janice?” While this tidbit did get Dakota to stop staring at the set, some of the fear returned to her eyes.

“Yes, shortly after they fired one of her producers. That’s the standard approach for a show that’s sinking in ratings. One, redo the set.” Amanda held up her finger. “Two, fire a producer. Three, axe one of the hosts.”

“Uh...” Dakota’s face paled, showing Amanda her story, which was entirely true, had created the desired effect. If that stark insight into the world of morning television didn’t send the girl running back to the farm, nothing would.

“Relax, Ms. Washington,” Amanda soothed, speaking to her with a formality that suggested they’d never met before. “You have nothing to worry about.”

Dakota let out a breath, suddenly looking more relaxed. “I suppose since I haven’t been hired yet, at least I can’t be

fired.”

“That’s the spirit.” Amanda burst into laughter at this unexpected observation. Damned if it didn’t make her like the woman more.

Jenny stepped onto the set, addressing Dakota. “Right now, we just want to see if you can read a script. You may not know this, but everything said on the show is heavily scripted.”

“The key thing you have to learn is not to appear like your simply reading lines.” Amanda clapped her hands like a coach saying break to get everyone in their places. “Okay. I’ll leave you all to it, then. If anyone needs me, I’ll be in my dressing room, having tea.”

“Wait,” Jenny said, her eyes fixed on the empty chair next to Dakota. “Where’s Allie?”

A man who appeared to be a producer stepped forward, looking like a messenger tasked with delivering bad news to an emperor with a short temper. “She’s in her dressing room.”

“Well, tell her to come out,” Jenny replied.

“She’s...” The producer cleared his throat. “She’s crying. Someone mentioned Charlene, and she broke down.”

“I’ll do it.” While the look of shock on Dakota’s face was the true payoff, Amanda was every bit as surprised by her spontaneous offer. Why was she trying to help when her goal was to get Dakota as far from New York as possible?

“Are you sure?” The relief on Jenny’s face was impossible to miss.

“Yeah, of course.” Amanda took a seat in the empty chair. She could hardly back down now without looking like an idiot. When she turned toward Dakota, the woman was staring at her with an expression somewhere between confusion and hero worship.

“You start off with the teleprompter.” Amanda pointed to their right, drawing Dakota’s attention to the words on the screen.

Dakota turned her head, a shame, because Amanda could stare into those eyes all day, but the woman's profile wasn't a bad tradeoff. "Good morning, America."

"Slow down," Amanda said softly, unable to stop herself.

"What?"

Was she really going to give her rival advice? Amanda held in a sigh as she realized that was exactly what she was going to do.

"We tend to read faster than we talk. It's hard not to feel as if you need to rush. But you want to take it slow, make it fun and flirty."

"Flirty?"

Amanda cringed at her own choice of words. "Conversational. Act as if you're having coffee with a friend instead of reading the words off a screen. Got it?"

"I think so." Dakota swept her tongue along her lower lip, sending a shiver along Amanda's spine.

Amanda jerked her head away before anyone could catch her staring at that delightful, pink tongue. "Start again from the top."

On the fifth attempt, Dakota nailed it.

"Not bad," was all Amanda said. It'd taken Amanda months to get to the same point, not that she'd ever tell Dakota that.

After reading for thirty minutes, shifting gears from the daybreak news, to introducing a cooking segment, showcasing a fat cat, more news, and the outro, it was time to focus on the next item on the list.

"Okay everyone," Jenny announced in a booming voice. "Let's take a break from the reading. If this is going to work, we need to decide who the hell Dakota Washington is."

Dakota tugged at Amanda's sleeve, her earlier nervousness returning with a vengeance. "What does she mean?"

“What she’s really asking,” Amanda answered in a low tone, “is how to make you stand out. For example, what makes you different from Charlene?”

“I’m alive,” Dakota whispered, immediately slapping her palm to her mouth. “Oh, God. I hope no one else heard that.”

Amanda, who had doubled over to stop from bursting out in some extremely inappropriate laughter, straightened up. “What I meant was, how do we get America to fall in love with you?”

“Do they have to?” Dakota squeaked.

“Yes, but I’m not sure that’s going to be much of a challenge.” This should have been bad news from Amanda’s perspective, but somehow it didn’t feel that way. Dakota was a breath of fresh air. Why shouldn’t people fall in love with her?

Other people. Not Amanda. Obviously.

“We need to get her out of the pantsuits,” said Pedro, who was head of wardrobe. “Too harried office mom. She’s got good legs, but you can’t see them.”

The way the guy looked Dakota up and down with a lascivious gleam in his eyes made Amanda wish this was her show so she could fire him on the spot.

“I’ve been watching her clips,” offered Steph, the head booker. “Her hair color is too ashy. Honey gold would work better.”

Was Amanda hearing this right? Only a fool would want to mess around with the perfection that was Dakota’s shining golden tresses.

“Are you daft?” Amanda had lunged halfway across the desk before she reigned herself in. She sat back slowly, pretending her outburst had been totally rational. “What I mean is, why don’t you try another color on her before breaking out the peroxide. Maybe an emerald green.”

That dress Dakota had been wearing at the wedding the night they’d met was exactly the right shade. As soon as they

saw her in that color, Amanda had no doubt they'd see she was right about the hair.

You're getting in way too deep, warned a voice in Amanda's head. *It's like you want her to stay.*

Amanda felt a chill in her gut as she pondered this accusation. Did she want Dakota to stay? That was ridiculous. Especially now that she'd seen Dakota in action and knew firsthand the woman was talented enough to pose a real threat. Why did Amanda keep working against her own best interests?

Amanda sprung up from her chair. "I have a meeting this morning. I'll check back in later."

She was out the door before anyone could say a word.

HOWARD SAT beneath an umbrella on the sunny terrace, a tweed cap covering his white hair. A plump, cream-colored cushion made his chair, along with the empty one next to him, seem extra comfortable and inviting. Surrounded by pots of blooming plants, it was almost possible for Amanda to forget this wasn't her dear friend and former cohost's private balcony, but the common area of the city's top residential memory care facility.

"How are you feeling, Howard?" Amanda kissed his wrinkled left cheek.

"If that's your way of asking if I have control of my mind today," he grumped, "I'll have you know, it's kind of pathetic."

Amanda offered a conciliatory smile. "Still the same old Howard, I see."

"Of course, I am. Who else would I be?" After glowering for a moment, Howard leaned toward her, a conspiratorial glint in his eyes. "Actually, I did consider being Theodore Roosevelt for a bit, but that fellow over there already has him claimed."

Amanda caught sight of the portly man with the mustache at the table next to theirs and sniggered. “Pity. You’d make a great Teddy.”

Amanda settled on the cushioned chair next to him. It was a relief to know this was one of his good days because she needed a friendly ear. She motioned for the attention of one of the workers who was making the rounds with a pitcher of iced tea.

The woman poured glasses for both of them before moving on to the next group. Howard released a sigh as he ogled the woman’s retreating backside.

“That, my friend, is why it’s best you retired when you did.” Amanda wagged her finger at his naughtiness, even as she suspected she’d been guilty of very similar behavior all morning with Dakota.

Howard ignored her scolding. “What brings you all the way out here to Timbuktu?”

“The Upper East Side is hardly the far end of the universe,” Amanda assured him, even though the only reason she ever found herself as far away from Midtown as Eightieth Street was to visit Howard. “And your new place is lovely.”

“It’s full of old people!”

“And good-looking nurses.” Amanda’s gaze followed Howard’s to where another young woman pushed a resident in a wheelchair. “You could do worse. This place is every bit as luxurious as any condo you’d be able to afford, at least since all those ex-wives of yours cleaned you out.”

“I guess we both know a thing or two about that, although you were smart enough to stick with just the one. Unless...” Howard studied Amanda’s face with an eagle eye. “Ha! There’s a new woman in your life, isn’t there?”

“What are you talking about?” Until that moment, Amanda hadn’t realized her voice could even reach such a high register. “That’s your dementia talking, old man.”

“Now I know I’m right.”

Amanda crossed her arms. “How so?”

“Because if I were actually showing signs of dementia right now, you’d be too kind to point it out.”

“Me, kind?” Amanda hissed through her teeth. “I’m Dragon Lady. Everyone knows that.”

“Sure, because all dragon ladies take home a cat they don’t even like because they can’t bear to see him go back to the shelter when he’s the last one left after an on-the-air animal adoption segment.”

“Cronkite and I have an understanding. I get the upstairs bedroom and the kitchen. He gets free range of the other thirteen thousand square feet. It’s perfectly fair.”

“You’re telling me you never let him curl up at the foot of your bed on a cold night?”

Amanda pressed her lips together, unwilling to incriminate herself. “Does this place allow pets?”

“Why? You looking to offload your feline?”

“No. I’m thinking if Franklin Senior and his cronies get their way, I might be moving in here as your roommate.” Her airy tone masked the real concern hidden beneath the surface. The wheels of change were turning, and there was nothing she could do to stop them. Her sense of helplessness grew by the hour as the future of her career slipped from her control.

“Franklin Senior is an old fart,” Howard proclaimed. “He’s not half the leader his old man was, and his son’s a downright fool.”

“You don’t have to tell me.” Amanda tried to laugh, but she wasn’t in a laughing mood. “They want me out. I’m pretty sure they have me training my own replacement, too.”

“Not that young one with the big—” Howard mimed a pair of giant tits on his chest. “Charlotte, was it?”

He might not have heard about Charlene, and if he had, there was a good chance he didn’t remember, so rather than distress him with unpleasant news, Amanda simply shook her

head. “Her name’s Dakota, and she’s on a morning farm show. She’s in town auditioning as we speak.”

“She any good?”

“Way better than she should be.” Amanda took a much-needed tug of iced tea to combat the humidity that clung to her skin. “I mean she spends more time talking to cows and chickens than human beings, but one day into rehearsals and she’s a pro. The camera eats her up.”

“Sounds like you like her.”

“I’ll be damned, but I’m kinda cheering her on,” Amanda admitted. “She has presence.”

“Like you did when you were starting out. Do you remember our first run-through?”

Amanda groaned. “I thought I’d never get through the day.”

“You and me both, kid.” Howard chuckled over the memory. “Morning programs are like a good tennis match. It requires one host to lob the ball over the net to their cohost’s feet, but you preferred the kill shot, getting the last word in. It took months of training to get you to trust me.”

“It really did.” Amanda remembered those days fondly, even if she’d constantly thought every day would be her last on the show. “Believe it or not, Dakota’s already got that part mastered. Which is why it really pains me to have to destroy her to keep my job.”

Howard sat, unblinking, for so long that Amanda feared he’d had a relapse. “Do you still trust me?” he finally asked.

“I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

He harrumphed. “Because you have no one else to talk to.”

Amanda recoiled as the truth hit home. She’d cared about two things in her life, her family and her career. With her wife gone and her son grown, the job was all she had left. “I’m here because no one else knows what it’s like to face losing the one thing you love more than anything.”

“The camera. The audience. How I miss it.” A workaholic like Howard knew exactly what she’d meant. Amanda had given up everything for it. “You know as well as I do retirement is a death sentence. I need the attention, Amanda. It’s hell being off the air. Which is why I’m going to tell it to you like it is. You’re fucking this up.”

Amanda blinked as she tried to fathom how this was her fault. At least, that was what it sounded like Howard was saying. It wasn’t what she’d expected at all. “How? By being too nice to Dakota?”

“Oh, I sincerely doubt you’ve been all that nice to the poor woman, but that’s exactly what you need to do.”

Amanda whipped her head to him, hearing all the cracks in her neck. “What are you talking about? You’re making this sound like I have a say in things, when it’s clearly out of my control.”

“Is it? Or do they just want you to think that?”

“Who?” Amanda struggled to conceal her growing exasperation. If Howard knew what she should do, why couldn’t he enlighten her already?

“Those executive dumbasses, that’s who. You’re falling right into their trap.” Howard smacked a fist into his palm. “Yes, they want you out. Yes, they want this Dakota girl to take your place. Tell me this. Why are you fighting so hard to keep this job?”

“What do you mean by why? Isn’t it fucking obvious?”

Howard shrugged. “You have enough money to live a great life.”

Amanda stiffened. Had Howard listened to anything she’d said? “I don’t care about the money. If I wasn’t doing *The AM Show*, there’d really be no point to getting up every day. My job is as essential to me as breathing. Pathetic, perhaps, but the doggone truth.”

“You’re half right. Work is as essential to you as breathing. Me? I craved the limelight, but not you. It’s the news that keeps your blood pumping.”

“So, you’ve answered your own question. That’s why I’m fighting.”

“You’re missing my point. *The AM Show* isn’t what you love. You and I both know your ultimate goal has always been to anchor the nightly news. This could be your time to move on. What’s holding you back?”

Amanda narrowed her eyes. “Gabe still being alive and having no desire to throw in the towel, that’s what.”

“Bullshit,” Howard challenged. “There are other networks, and I know they’ve put feelers out before. So what is it, really? Is it fear that you can’t cut it?”

“It didn’t work out for Katie Couric.” That wasn’t exactly it, but Howard was getting closer to the truth than Amanda liked so she had to do something to divert him. No way would she admit how much damage her ex-wife and her mother had done to that soft underbelly she kept so carefully hidden beneath layers of thick armor.

“Couric?” Howard let out a hearty laugh that said he wasn’t entirely buying her answer. “That was over a decade ago. Things are changing. Take it from me, sweetie. The public is tired of listening to men.”

“From my viewpoint, men are still in control,” Amanda said with a sigh, “or are you forgetting about all the suits on the top floor who spend their time programming a show for female audiences and failing miserably. But will they see it’s their fault? No, it’s easier to shout *witch* and burn me at the stake.”

“I’ve always liked this paranoid side of you.” He chuckled, a look of fondness in his eyes like Amanda was one of his granddaughters. “But you can’t win the game by thinking everyone’s out to get you.”

“It seems to have served me well enough so far,” she shot back. “What do you suggest I do instead?”

“In my experience, setting up a sabotage results in your own demise. I should know. I tried to sabotage you, and look where that got me.” He waved to the grounds, as if being

confined to this assisted living facility was the direct result of his efforts.

Amanda's eyes widened. "You tried to sabotage me?"

"At first, yes. But then it hit me."

"What did?"

"You know the phrase keep your friends close but your enemies closer? You need to get close to her."

"Oh, I think I've already accomplished that, and then some." Amanda couldn't help but cackle as it hit her how literally she'd followed that advice. "I did that even before I knew who Dakota was."

"Okay, spill." Howard shifted in his seat, the cushion underneath him groaning in protest. "What tasty morsel are you not sharing?"

"I slept with Dakota the night of Zach's wedding."

"You go, girl!" Instead of looking horrified at her confession, he put a hand up for a high five.

Amanda gave her head a vehement shake, her eyes darting around to make sure no one had overheard. "No, Howard! That's not something to be cheering about."

"The hell it isn't. Trust me, when you get to my age—"

"You're a man. Of *course*, that's how you'd react." Amanda rolled her eyes, though she couldn't help being a little amused by his enthusiasm for her romantic exploits, inappropriate as they were. "It's not that simple from my viewpoint."

"Phooey! That's where you're wrong. Men, women, who cares? We're all the same, or so you gals keep telling me."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to say *gals*?" Amanda asked through gritted teeth.

Howard winked. "I was yanking your chain. Look, you slept together. So what? Happens all the time. Why, I can't even count how many—"

“La, la, la, la.” Amanda plugged her ears with her fingers. “I don’t need the gory details.”

“Point is you gotta let the past go. Focus on the present.”

Amanda lowered her voice to a near whisper. “How can I when all I want to do every time I’m in a room with her is rip her clothes off again?”

“Good.” Howard smacked his knee with his hand. “Use that energy. Viewers love sexual tension.”

“It’s not like we’ll be on the same show,” Amanda pointed out. “She’s doing the Graveyard Shift.”

“Not if you get Franklin Jr. tossed out on his Harvard-educated ass.”

Amanda arched an eyebrow. “And then?”

“Then do everything in your power to make Dakota your new work spouse. The one who would take a bullet for you. The one who would die for you. Like you were with me.”

“Oh, is that what you think?” Amanda turned her head so he couldn’t see how accurate his assessment had been. When his memory started to slip and no one but her knew, she’d done everything in her power to protect him for as long as she could.

“I know what I know,” he answered. “And I know this. I may have tried to take the easy way out and get rid of you, but I’m lucky I failed. In the end, you were the one who had my back when no one else did. If Dakota’s loyal to you, when the suits make their play, which they will, she’ll be an ally instead of a mortal enemy. It’s the only way to play the game.”

“That might be true for work,” Amanda said slowly, almost afraid of where her brain was going, “but what if that’s not the only game going on between us?”

“The *love* game, you mean?”

“Howard,” Amanda warned, but she didn’t go so far as to correct what he’d said. Not that she thought she was in any danger of falling in love with Dakota but still. She had reason to be concerned.

“That complicates matters, naturally, but it doesn’t alter your course.” Howard rested a hand on her knee and gave it a squeeze. “You need this Dakota woman on your side. Do what you have to do.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“JUST A MINUTE!”

Dakota’s hand was buried deep in the outer pocket of her suitcase when she heard the knock at her hotel room door. Where were those damn earrings? Her fingertip swiped a bumpy bauble, then a matching one. Success! She yanked the earrings from the bag and scurried to the door, poking the silver hooks through the holes in her earlobes as she went.

There was another loud tap, and Dakota yanked the door open, expecting Joe. It was Sunday morning, and he was supposed to give her a ride uptown so Amanda could drag her along for whatever wining and dining was on the schedule today. And there would be a schedule; of that much Dakota was sure. The minute the executives decided they wanted her as their new cohost, her trip to New York City had become as heavily scripted as *The Early Bird Show* itself.

Instead of the driver, Amanda stood in the budget hotel’s somewhat industrial hallway, looking like a fish out of water in a sharply tailored pantsuit and shiny black pumps.

“Hi.” Dakota glanced down at her denim capris and gray V-neck T-shirt. “Er...”

Amanda gave Dakota a quizzical look. “Why do you always seem surprised to see me? Unless it’s confusion. Disappointment, maybe?”

“Please—” Dakota didn’t know what else to say so she added a weird, wavy hand gesture that was not at all helpful.

“I see you’ve been working on your ninja skills in case I was lying about trying to destroy you, and you have to fight me off.” Amusement shone in Amanda’s eyes, softening her features so she looked less like a scary news anchor and more like the woman who had invited Dakota to her bedroom not so long ago.

Dakota swallowed. That was one direction her thoughts should not go. The two of them had reached a truce, and at times in the studio it had almost felt like Amanda was trying to be a mentor, but now that they would be working together at the same studio, that was as far as it could ever go. Getting an opportunity like this was right up there with winning the lottery. Dakota couldn’t afford to mess up.

The sad fact was, despite her degree from one of the most prestigious journalism programs around, Dakota knew people had a hard time believing she had much going on inside her naturally blonde head. Not like she got a lot of sympathy for it, but as an attractive young woman, she’d had to work extra hard to be taken seriously. No matter how tempting Amanda was, Dakota would die if people found out about them and started saying she was sleeping her way to the top.

“Before we head out, I want to run the itinerary by you to see if you’d like to scratch any items off the list.” Amanda handed over a small, black binder.

Pushing away any dangerous thoughts, Dakota gestured toward Amanda’s clothing, then her own. “Without even looking, I can tell one of us is not dressed for today’s agenda. Considering you’re the one who knows what we’re doing, I have a sneaking suspicion it’s me.”

Dakota flipped to the Sunday tab of the binder, her spirits sinking as she skimmed the page. Brunch at The Palm Court, the swanky dining room located at the iconic Plaza Hotel. Even Dakota had heard of *that* place, though she’d never imagined going there. After that, they were going to see a play, but not a musical like *Chicago*, as she’d hoped. Dakota had never heard of it, but judging by the number of unusual accent marks in the playwright’s name, she feared it might be

subtitled. Finally, they were to have dinner at a place that sounded very French.

No hop-on, hop-off bus tours. No hot dogs from a vendor cart. No trip to Coney Island for a ride on the Cyclone roller coaster. This was not what she'd had in mind at all.

"What's wrong?" Clearly, Amanda had picked up on Dakota's mood.

"Nothing." Dakota snapped the book shut. "Let's roll. After I change clothes, I guess."

"No, not until you tell me what's going on in that head of yours." Amanda put her finger on Dakota's chin and tilted her head downward until they were seeing eye to eye. Dakota's vision blurred as the combination of Amanda's penetrating gaze and the touch of her finger on Dakota's skin made her feel all wobbly inside. "If I haven't allowed a single person I've interviewed to lie to me, I don't know why you'd think I'm okay with you doing it."

"It's just super fancy." Dakota attempted a nonchalant shrug but was pretty sure she failed to pull it off since Amanda's close proximity was still doing a number on her. "This is my first time in New York, and when all I was doing was a preliminary interview for a part-time gig on *AM, Weekend Edition*, I'd fully expected to skip off on my own on Sunday to do the touristy things I've always dreamed of doing."

"I take it none of those things are on this list?"

"Look at this dinner menu." A printed copy had been included in the itinerary, because the person putting it together clearly didn't miss dotting any Is or crossing any Ts. "It's nothing but fishy things swimming in sauce."

"I thought you liked seafood." The way Amanda said it, she didn't sound particularly hurt by Dakota's rejection of the restaurant choice, only somewhat baffled. "You had lobster at my place."

"It was delicious," Dakota assured her, feeling suddenly guilty for complaining. But Amanda had asked for the truth.

“Notwithstanding the fact we ate it on the terrace at your two-story mansion in the sky, it wasn’t overly pretentious.”

Amanda’s lips tugged upward, but she quickly corrected. “So, nix anything pretentious. I’m not sure there’s going to be much left if we do that. What do you want instead?”

“I want fun.”

“Such as...?” Amanda waved for her to fill in the blanks.

“I want to ride one of the double-decker tourist buses or take a harbor cruise.” Dakota’s brain spun through the countless options available to them, her pulse quickening at the prospect of all the things they could do together. “What about going to the top of the Empire State Building? I’d like to wander through Times Square. I want my picture with the Naked Cowboy—”

“Unfortunately, he was recently arrested for panhandling in Florida, so I’m not sure we’ll be able to find him.”

“Seriously?” Dakota’s mouth fell open as she realized Amanda wasn’t teasing. “Well, geez. Okay, Elmo, then. Or Spider Man.”

Amanda was definitely trying not to laugh but failing miserably. If Dakota wasn’t mistaken, the twinkle in Amanda’s eyes was a big clue she was starting to look forward to this change in itinerary, even as she pretended to be horrified. “Is that all?”

Dakota couldn’t resist pressing the woman’s buttons a little more. “I’d love to go to the M&M store.”

“The M&M store?” A pained expression passed Amanda’s face, as Dakota had suspected it would.

“You don’t like M&Ms?” Dakota put her hands on her hips and stared in the same way she would have if Amanda had said she didn’t like puppies.

“Of course, I like them,” Amanda retorted. “I’m not a psychopath. It’s just I’ve lived in New York City for over twenty years, and I haven’t done any of the things you listed. Not a single one.”

“Don’t you think it’s time you did?” Dakota’s eyebrows lifted hopefully, thrilled at the prospect of both of them doing these new things together. She nearly put her hands on Amanda’s shoulders to give them an ecstatic squeeze, but pulled back at the last second as she remembered that would be a bad idea.

“One problem.” Amanda circled a finger in front of her face. “People recognize me.”

Amanda was right. That was a problem. But Dakota was unwilling to let her perfect day in New York City slip by when she was this close to victory. She tapped a finger to her lips as she tried to come up with a solution.

Hefting her suitcase from the floor to the bed, Dakota grinned. “I think I have a plan.”

“I can hardly wait,” Amanda replied, sounding anything but enthusiastic. Dakota was pretty sure it was all part of the act.

She unzipped the main luggage compartment and pawed through its contents until she located a white plastic shopping bag with a big red apple on it. Opening the bag revealed a white T-shirt with the ubiquitous *I Heart NY* logo on it. Dakota paired this with a spare pair of shorts.

“Ta-da!” When Amanda didn’t immediately appear to grasp the plan, Dakota explained, “If you go out all spectacular, looking like Amanda Morgan, of course, you’ll get recognized.”

“But I *am* Amanda Morgan.” Amanda’s expression dared Dakota to say otherwise, the type of look that made every inch of her tingle with longing.

Yeah, she was definitely Amanda Morgan, all right. Nobody else could do that to Dakota with a mere *look*. But if Amanda was issuing a challenge, Dakota would rise to it.

“Not today, you’re not.” Dakota shoved the change of clothes into Amanda’s arms. “We need to make you look like a typical tourist. If you leave here dressed like Martha from Duluth, no one will give you a second glance.”

“Martha, huh?” Amanda’s nose crinkled.

“Not a fan of the name? We could do Geraldine.”

“I’m not sure that’s an improvement. Got anything that doesn’t sound like I volunteered to roll bandages for the Great War?”

“Okay, we’ll work on the name. The important thing is”—Dakota waved a finger in the air—“no one will associate the real you with your TV personality.”

Amanda tilted her head slightly to one side. “You don’t think my TV personality is the real me?”

“I know it isn’t,” Dakota declared with confidence, adding a wink for good measure and being rewarded with a rapid intake of breath that said Amanda had not remained unaffected by it. “Over the past twenty-four hours, I’ve gotten some new insights into what makes you tick.”

“Do tell.” Amanda’s unblinking gaze might as well have been X-ray vision for as exposed as it made Dakota feel.

All of a sudden, Dakota had the sensation of being on uneven footing, uncertain how Amanda would take what she had to say. It was better to stay silent. “Maybe later. Right now, we need to deal with your footwear.”

“What’s wrong with what I have on?” Amanda stuck out her leg, twisting her ankle from side to side. “They’re from Bergdorf’s.”

“They’re great for a corporate dinner, but Martha from Duluth doesn’t have Carrie Bradshaw shoes. Even if she did, she wouldn’t wear them to go sightseeing.”

“Please, enlighten me.” There was that teasing sarcasm again. Damn, it was hot. “What would Martha wear?”

“Flip-flops!” Dakota produced two rubbery slabs from the depths of her bag. And just in time. Nothing cooled overheated blood like a pair of flip-flops. “They’re from Walmart. Now let’s get you changed so we can have an adventure.”

Amanda’s eyes narrowed as she surveyed the costume she clutched to her chest. “I never actually agreed to this plan,

FYI.”

“Remember what you said when you picked me up from the airport?” Dakota regarded this stunning woman, who, she reminded herself for the thousandth time, could never be her lover again, but had already proven a mentor of sorts. “You said you needed something from me. And do you recall what you said when we were at the vineyard?”

Amanda drew a sharp breath, almost as if the reminder of that time together had been an electric shock. “No. What did I say?”

“You said you always have a list of demands. Well, I’m a quick study.” Dakota folded her hands together in front of her chest, relishing this brief moment of control over such an uncontrollable woman. “I have a list of demands, too.”

“Go on.” Amanda actually licked her top lip, nearly causing Dakota to swoon right then and there.

Damn it. That little power play of Dakota’s was being turned on its ear. Of course, it was. Amanda was a master at taking control and playing any situation to her advantage. Dakota had been foolish to think for even a minute that introducing a pair of rubbery sandals would be enough to keep temptation at bay. She should probably call the whole thing off on the spot. But she wasn’t going to.

“I want you to cancel our itinerary, change into your tourist disguise, and take me out to enjoy the city the way I want to. The fun way.” Dakota flipped around, rummaged in her suitcase one last time, and tossed the blue hat to Amanda. “Don’t forget to put this on.”

“A Mets hat? Really?” Amanda touched a hand to her head like the mere mention of a baseball cap might defile her blonde locks. “Only tourists wear these.”

“By Jove, I think you’re finally catching on.” Dakota grinned from ear to ear. A baseball hat might not be a cure for out-of-control lust, either, but it was worth a try. “Let’s get cracking, Martha. I want to get to the double-decker early so we can get seats on top.”

“FOR ALL YOU *HAMILTON* FANS,” the tour guide’s voice boomed over the loudspeakers, “look to the left side of the boat to catch a glimpse of Weehawken, where Aaron Burr shot Alexander Hamilton.”

Dakota latched onto Amanda’s arm. “Can you believe we’re actually doing this?”

“No, I genuinely cannot.” Casting a suspicious glance at the other passengers on the tour boat, Amanda tugged on the bill of her Mets cap. “It’s a shame duels still aren’t a thing.”

“I know you’ve said you don’t want to kill me, but just so you know, comments like that make me think you might be planning—” Dakota made a gun with her fingers and mimed blowing off her head in lieu of finishing the sentence.

“I don’t think that’s how duels work.”

“That wasn’t exactly a denial.”

“If you’re that interested in Alexander Hamilton, I could’ve gotten us tickets to see the musical.”

Dakota crossed her arms, not out of annoyance but because her nipples invariably hardened when Amanda started teasing like this, and it would be embarrassing if they started to show through her shirt. “You’re missing the point.”

“I mean,” Amanda continued, blinking slowly—a telltale move Dakota had discovered meant there was sarcasm on the horizon, “if that Hungarian existentialist play wasn’t your thing, you could’ve just said.”

“Is a Hungarian existentialist play anyone’s thing?” Dakota razzed, bumping Amanda’s shoulder with her own while trying to convince herself she didn’t have any ulterior motives for lingering when their forearms brushed, too. “Admit it. You’re every bit as relieved not to be going to that production as I am.”

“I admit nothing.” Amanda’s silky voice practically purred in Dakota’s ear, making her shift on her hard seat to keep focused. Amanda must’ve caught on to what Dakota was doing with the shoulder thing, and payback was a bitch. “If anyone asks, I was dragged on this tour, kicking and screaming.”

“Oh, please. For journalists like us, learning new things might as well be a drug.” Knowing it was high time she started acting more like a professional and less like a horny teenager trying to flirt while on a school field trip, Dakota pointed to the buildings across the Hudson River that comprised the Manhattan skyline. “Like, did you know before today that every building in the city over six floors had to have water towers on the roof to supply floors seven and up? They still use them, too.”

“Truth be told, I had never heard that before this tour. It is kinda cool.” A breeze rustled the strands of Amanda’s hair that stuck out from under her hat, and Dakota had to fight her strong desire to smooth them down. “We’ve done the double-decker already, and the boat’s almost back to the pier. What’s next?”

“Times Square.” Dakota wiggled like an excited kid.

“I thought you were joking about that,” Amanda whined, but something in her eyes told Dakota she would be easily convinced once she got the complaining out of her system.

“Don’t you want to get your picture taken with one of the characters?” Dakota pressed.

“Why?” Amanda jeered. “I already spend my whole week sitting next to a cartoon.”

“Your cohost?” Dakota rubbed her hands together. “Oh, do tell.”

“I really shouldn’t.” Amanda’s wicked smile suggested otherwise.

“Come on. Give me the dirt.” Dakota couldn’t help grinning. Trying to pry some good gossip out of Amanda was the most fun she’d had all day.

“Let’s just say I’m not particularly fond of my current cohost.”

“That’s hardly a shock.” Dakota rolled her eyes as she recalled the recent clips she’d watched of the show. Franklin Jr. was a disaster. “He’s about as exciting as a rock.”

“You’ve noticed that?” Amanda made an *oof* sound as a passing woman’s large handbag caught her in the side. The woman didn’t so much as turn her head, which at least meant the Martha disguise was working. “But he’s the boss’s son, so there’s not much I can do.”

Amanda and Dakota were jostled as the other passengers fought to line up in front of the exit, some of them looking a little green around the gills.

Dakota’s blood pumped harder as she contemplated the indignity of a competent journalist like Amanda having to work with such a dolt. “Doesn’t that make you mad?”

Amanda shrugged. “A lot of things frustrate me, but I try to work with what I’ve got. It’s all about keeping your eye on the goal and getting into position. You have to know how to play the long game.”

“What do you mean by that?” A cold lump formed in Dakota’s stomach. Surely Amanda wasn’t implying Dakota would need to sleep with her—or anyone else, for that matter—to get ahead, was she? “I don’t play games, and I intend to earn whatever position I get on my own merit.”

“Settle down,” Amanda urged, her own pink cheeks suggesting she hadn’t been implying anything by what she’d said, and might’ve been a little shocked Dakota had taken it that way. “I only meant not to let the little ups and downs throw you. That’s all.”

Dakota nodded as they shuffled down the gangplank, feeling a tinge of embarrassment for her overreaction. “I think I get what you’re saying. It’s like, this weekend has been amazing but also terrifying.”

“Careful.” Amanda’s arm flew in front of Dakota, stopping her in her tracks as a cyclist zoomed past them in the bike

lane. “How has it been terrifying? Other than nearly getting mowed down by a maniac on a Schwinn?”

Dakota took a quick breath to steady herself as the aftershocks from the city traffic rolled through her. “When I got on the plane in Chicago, the most I was hoping for was a part-time gig in New York. I would keep doing my show and fly in now and then for the weekend bit. When I stepped off the plane in New York, everything had changed.”

“You got your big break,” Amanda said, as if she didn’t see any downside.

“Sure. Only now, I have to find a place to live and convince Riley to come with me.”

“Who the hell is Riley?” Amanda jabbed the crosswalk button like she was stabbing it in the gut. “I could’ve sworn you said there was no girlfriend in the picture.”

“Riley is my golden retriever.” Dakota savored the way Amanda had gotten all riled up, like she was jealous or something. It was frickin’ adorable.

“The city’s a great place for dogs.” As the light changed, Amanda stepped into the crosswalk like she hadn’t tried to murder the light post a second ago.

“Maybe, but mine’s a rescue, and he’s not big on change.”

“Cronkite was a rescue, too. He spent the first forty-eight hours hissing at me when he moved in.”

“In that case, maybe you’ll understand why I feel so guilty.” Dakota trotted after Amanda, amazed at how quickly she could walk in flip-flops. As shoes went, they were kind of ridiculous, which made it that much more hilarious that Amanda was wearing them. “He loves the park next to my apartment building. Plus, since my roommate is a nurse on the night shift, he’s used to someone always being home with him.”

“There are plenty of dog walkers for hire.” Amanda used a hand to guide Dakota toward West Forty-Six Street, toward the theater district.

“Yeah, if I can afford to pay them.” At the thought of all her looming expenses, Dakota’s stomach tightened. “Will I even be able to find a place in the city on my budget that’ll allow a dog?”

“Lots of places here allow them.” Amanda slowed her pace. “My building does.”

“Uh, yeah.” Dakota’s laugh came out as more of a cough. “A little out of my league. A friend from college lived in Staten Island when he moved here. Is that far?”

“Staten Island?” Amanda pulled Dakota off to the side of the street, tourists passing them on both sides. “While you’re at it, maybe you’d like to look for apartments on the moon.”

“I thought it was still part of the city.” Dakota ran a hand across her head, grasping the hair between her fingers and noting with curiosity how intensely Amanda watched the movement.

“Anything beyond Midtown is out of the question. There’s no way you can live farther and make it to the Graveyard Shift.”

As she digested this news, Dakota’s heart was truly thudding. “I’m not going to be able to afford that.”

Amanda’s eyes locked onto Dakota’s, almost burning into her. “Have any numbers been tossed at you?”

“Like, salary?” Dakota swallowed, running over the brief conversation she’d had with her agent the night before. “Roger said eight-fifty. I mean, it’s like eighty more than I’m making now, but New York’s crazy expensive.”

Amanda’s entire demeanor shifted in an instant as she scrutinized Dakota like she was an alien species. “You’re telling me they pay seven-seventy on a flipping farm show in podunk Illinois?”

“I…” Cringing from the hint of anger in Amanda’s tone, Dakota made a few calculations in her head. “I mean, they take out taxes, of course, and medical and all that. But I still end up with about twenty-eight hundred a month to take home. So, yeah, I think I did the math right.”

To Dakota's surprise, Amanda threw her head back, laughing until her body shook. When she finally settled down enough to speak, tears of mirth shimmered in her eyes.

"Oh, you sweet, simple child. Did you think they were offering you eight hundred and fifty dollars a week to host *The Early Bird Show*?"

Dakota twisted the hem of her T-shirt between her thumb and fingers. "Uh, yes?"

Amanda put one hand on each of Dakota's shoulders and gave them something between a squeeze and a shake. "You're being offered a cohost position on a national, New York based, morning news program. The very minimum they would offer is eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year."

"Eight hundred and..." Dakota's mouth dropped open, her tongue unable to form the rest of those numbers, never mind saying them out loud. Her stomach bottomed out at the very thought of so much money.

"Minimum. Which means if that's what your agent told you he'd negotiated, the man's a moron." Amanda's mouth curved like she'd been offered a three-day-old Bud Light instead of a more palatable beer choice. "No way should you sign for that. They'll go to one-point-five, easily. And a hefty relocation package."

"One-point—do you mean million?" Dakota's chest tightened like a vice, and she gasped for air. "You're not telling me this so I make a fool of myself and the network will ask me to go take a walk off a bridge, are you?"

"I promise you I am not." There wasn't even a hint of insincerity in Amanda's eyes. "I'm going to make a call when I get back home and get you a new agent. Not mine, but someone good, who will do this the right way."

"Really?" Dakota's voice came out like a squeaky hinge.

"Really." Amanda gave Dakota's shoulders one final squeeze before letting go. "I know you might not be ready to believe it completely right now given all that's gone on with us, but I hope eventually you'll see that you can trust me. I'm

not going to let any of those bastards take advantage or lowball you, got it?”

Dakota nodded, unable to speak. Her head was swimming in a sea of so many dollar signs, it felt like they were discussing Monopoly money. How could this be real? And Amanda was honestly going to help her and not try to screw her over? It was almost impossible to believe, but somehow, she did. She had to be the luckiest woman alive.

“Let’s walk along Ninth.” Acting like this extraordinary conversation hadn’t happened, Amanda motioned for them to hang a left. “It’s not as crowded as Times Square, but Hell’s Kitchen is trendy.”

Dakota giggled, giddiness welling up inside. Her very existence felt surreal. “Oh, how I wish Samantha and Carrie were here!”

“*Friends* of yours?” Amanda stressed the word friends with a hint of the same jealousy Dakota had detected when Riley’s name had come up.

“No, silly.” Dakota bit her lower lip as she grinned, loving this possessive side of Amanda. “Characters from *Sex and the City*.”

“Were you even old enough to watch that?”

“I streamed it last summer,” Dakota confessed, not wanting to mention she’d been about eight when the show had first started.

Amanda let out a tortured groan. “You’re one of those, then?”

“What is a *those*, exactly?”

“One of those people who watched shows set in New York City and felt compelled to move here.”

“Not exactly.” Dakota hesitated, feeling a little silly for what she was about to say. “I wanted to be Barbara Walters when I grew up.”

Amanda gave a sideways nod like that bizarre childhood fantasy made perfect sense. “I wanted to be Walter Cronkite.”

“I had a feeling, given your cat’s name.” Dakota’s stomach rumbled.

Amanda quirked an eyebrow, directing her gaze at Dakota’s midriff. “Hungry?”

“You heard that?” Dakota’s cheeks tingled. That rumbling had sounded about as delicate as a wild jungle beast.

“Pretty sure the experts are checking to see if we had an earthquake.” Amanda gave Dakota’s shoulder a playful bump. Heat rushed to Dakota’s cheeks.

“How about we eat here?” Dakota came to a halt in front of a place called Mom’s Kitchen. “Mother knows best.”

“Clearly, you’ve never met mine.” Amanda pulled a *yikes* face that left no doubt how she felt about her mother. Dakota wondered what the story was there, but before she could say anything, Amanda added, “Fine. We’ll give it a try. You’re the boss today.”

The place was packed, and Dakota thought for sure they’d strike out, but the hostess suggested seating them at the bar.

“Does that work for you?” Dakota asked, well aware Amanda Morgan wasn’t really a sit-at-the-bar kinda gal.

To her surprise, Amanda replied, “Sure.”

She didn’t make a single sarcastic remark, roll her eyes, or otherwise complain in any way. Maybe Dakota was finally wearing her down. It was an interesting possibility. Who knew how much fun Amanda could be if she let herself loosen up? Actually, Dakota already *did* know, and the sudden memory of how the woman had been when they’d first met made her empty belly turn somersaults. What were the chances Amanda would make an appearance today? Dakota had to press a hand to her stomach to gather herself.

They sat side by side at the bar, across from a white fridge covered with magnets and silver letters that spelled MOMS across the top. Dakota was grateful for the distraction. Maybe it was the lack of food, or maybe something else, but she was getting a little lightheaded. Yes, food was definitely a good idea.

“It’s a Bob Ross lunchbox.” Dakota pointed to the tin box holding napkins and condiments. “Look at the happy little trees.”

“You, Ms. Washington, are a complete nut.” But it kind of sounded to Dakota like maybe Amanda didn’t think that was such a bad thing.

Dakota clapped her hands together before grasping the laminated menu. “Okay, now for the most important decision of the day. What should I get?”

Amanda ran a finger down her own menu. “Yogurt parfait?”

“What do you suppose a mac and cheese pancake is?”

“A one-way ticket to the emergency room,” Amanda guessed. “Is that what you’re getting, for real? I wouldn’t be allowed to get off the treadmill for two days if I ate something like that.”

“It sounds good,” Dakota insisted. “And I’m on vacation. Sort of, anyway. Technically, you’re supposed to be, too.”

“Enjoy being young now,” Amanda muttered, “before middle age spread sets in.”

“Oh, please. You have nothing to worry about.” Dakota felt her mouth twist into a goofy smile as she recalled exactly how little Amanda needed to worry about her gorgeous figure. She really shouldn’t be letting her imagination go there, but she was weak from hunger and powerless to stop herself. It was a good excuse, anyway. “Order what you want.”

“Well, since I don’t have to be in the studio tomorrow, I guess I can do an hour and a half on the elliptical instead of forty-five minutes.”

“You really have no idea how to spend a vacation, do you? I wish you were going to be at the studio, though.” Dakota choked on her tongue, realizing she sounded pathetic. “I think I’ll go for pancakes and bacon.”

“It’s almost five o’clock. Is it really a good time for pancakes?”

“It’s always a good time for pancakes.” Dakota slapped the menu onto the bar, her mind made up.

“I’ll get the chicken cranberry salad.”

Dakota stopped her eyes from rolling and simply said, “Sounds yummy.”

“Let me guess. You’re not a salad person, either?”

“That’s something my mom would force me to eat.”

“We are at Mom’s.” There was a teasing smile that sent a tingle to Dakota’s toes.

“Should we get a starter? The buffalo mac & cheese balls sounded delightful.”

“And here you said I was trying to kill you, when clearly it’s the other way around.”

“If you say yes to the balls, we can skip Times Square and go for a walk in Central Park instead.” Dakota fixed Amanda with a sharp look, knowing the woman would try to wriggle out of this deal through any loophole she could find. “But you have to actually eat one.”

“Just one and no Times Square?” Amanda put her hand out. “You have a deal. But I might have an idea that’s better than a walk.”

Dakota took the soft skin into her own and gripped it long beyond any normal handshake, unable to let go. Dakota delighted in the stolen moment as she held her breath, expecting Amanda would pull away. She didn’t. Before she finally took her hand back, the briefest glimmer of something danced in Amanda’s eyes, an indecipherable something that filled Dakota with the yearning to learn every nuance of its meaning.

With a job offer to die for and more money than she could comprehend, all Dakota’s dreams were about to come true, but a problem loomed large. There was something else she wanted that she could never have. It was starting to sink in how much being around Amanda and not being able to have her might drive Dakota out of her mind.

CHAPTER NINE

AS AMANDA LED THE WAY TO CENTRAL PARK, THE SUN WAS dipping below the horizon, turning the sky a startling shade of pinkish-purple. The sidewalks were crowded with a combination of tourists, sunburnt and weary from sightseeing, and regular New Yorkers, dressed to begin a night on the town. Amanda was grateful for an excuse to walk single file. After such an unexpected day with Dakota, too many conflicting emotions swirled inside her to risk talking.

After her visit with Howard, Amanda had been certain of her plan. Forget Oregon. That one-night stand after the wedding? Never happened. The spectacle of being rescued from the space crater while live on-air? All in the past. What Amanda had to do going forward was simple. Befriend Dakota, keep an eye on her, and cultivate her loyalty for the inevitable moment when IBC would try to use the young woman to take Amanda down.

It was so easy. Except she couldn't do it. That night they'd spent together in the hotel room overlooking the vineyard was something Amanda couldn't simply stomp out of her memory bank.

Every time their hands brushed or their bodies were jostled closer as they navigated the busy streets, Amanda remembered snippets of the way their bodies had felt together in bed. Every time Dakota laughed, or arched an eyebrow, or did one of a hundred tiny things that were no big deal at all, desire pelted Amanda like the driving rain of a hurricane. But it wasn't just the physical sensations that tormented her. It was the emotions

the younger woman's company stirred up inside her, of being connected, safe, and accepted.

Usually isolated with few close friends, constantly on guard against those who wanted to take her down, Amanda found herself loosening up in Dakota's presence and being more truly herself than she had been in years. It was insane. She knew Dakota was the network's choice to replace her, but it didn't seem to matter. The woman's excitement brought out Amanda's own thirst for adventure, her silliness made Amanda feel carefree, like she didn't have to be anything more than who she was, and it would be enough. It was sublime. If Amanda wasn't careful, she would be swept away. Everything she'd worked her whole life for could be lost. And for what?

A tug at her sleeve pulled Amanda from her thoughts.

"Is that the park?" Dakota pointed to the start of the green space, her expression the very portrait of excitement.

"Yeah." Amanda tried to put on the bored facade of a real New Yorker, but her companion's enthusiasm was contagious to the point her own insides vibrated with anticipation of the surprise she had in store for them. Dakota was going to love it.

"Where should we go first?" Dakota's eyes darted, her head swiveling as if to take in everything at once.

"Let's cross here." The light at the corner turned green, and Amanda stepped off the curb, grabbing Dakota's hand to make sure she kept up and didn't get lost in the crowd. At least, that was why she told herself she was doing it, not for more self-serving reasons. Certainly not for the current that zinged through her at Dakota's touch, the one that made her feel like some internal battery was being recharged each time it happened. "Remember I said I had an idea for the park."

Dakota's steps slowed, her grip a weight dragging at Amanda's fingers. "I'm not sure."

"Why? I thought you wanted the full New York experience."

"I do. But I can't get over the feeling you might want to toss me into a lake or something." Dakota's eyes twinkled with

a hint of merriment but also gave Amanda a sense that the woman recognized the awkwardness of balancing a budding friendship with a professional rivalry and was struggling to make sense of it as much as Amanda was. “I mean, I probably would want to try to do away with me if I were in your position. Central Park is an awfully big place, and I’ve watched enough episodes of SVU to know people get killed here all the time.”

Stepping onto the sidewalk on the other side of the street, Amanda shook her head at the young woman’s overactive imagination. “You really need to stop thinking I’m going to kill you the minute your back is turned.”

“If you were planning to murder me, that’s exactly what you’d want me to do,” Dakota pointed out, making Amanda’s shoulders shake with laughter. “If you want to bump me off, your best bet is to distract me with whatever this great idea of yours is.”

“Do you want to know my idea or not?” She sure as hell better, because Amanda was dying to tell her.

“Hit me with it. I hope it isn’t an actual hit, like a contract killer waiting for me behind a bush.”

“Very funny.”

And it really *was* funny, even though she tried to make it sound like it wasn’t. Dakota’s quick wit made Amanda’s head spin, but she loved the challenge of keeping up with her and trying to pull ahead. Howard was the only other person Amanda had known who kept her on her toes like this. He’d been her work spouse for over a decade, and as his sharp intellect had slowly but steadily started to fade, the loss sucked the air out of Amanda’s lungs. Dakota made her feel alive again. Although, unlike Howard, Dakota didn’t just keep Amanda on her toes. Her scintillating presence made Amanda’s toes curl in the most delightful of ways.

The least Amanda could do was try to return the favor in some small way.

Coming up from behind, Amanda put her hands on Dakota's shoulders, turning her body so she could see the surprise in store. She leaned a little closer, speaking into Dakota's ear. "It's right over there."

"What—" Dakota started to speak but then stopped as her breath caught. "You mean the horse-drawn carriages?"

Across from them stood an impossibly tall horse with a shiny brown coat, attached to an old-fashioned carriage with red leather seats. As they watched, the horse stomped a foot and shook his mane, impatient to get this show on the road. She'd seen it a hundred times, yet this time, Amanda wanted to clap her hands and jump up and down like she was a five-year-old who'd scored the pink horse with purple flowers on a carousel.

"Well, what do you think? Too touristy?" Amanda teased.

Dakota's eyes were huge. "I have dreamed of riding in a carriage around Central Park my entire life."

"Somehow, I figured that." Reluctantly, Amanda took her hands off Dakota's shoulders, her chest feeling cold as the way-too-charming woman stepped away.

As they drew closer to the carriage, so did a man and woman in their sixties. The woman was dressed so similarly to the getup Amanda had been roped into wearing that she assumed she must be looking at the real Martha from Duluth. With his John Deere cap and jersey of a sports team Amanda didn't recognize, she guessed the man's name was probably Bob. While she and Dakota were still several yards back, Bob and Martha climbed aboard. There wasn't another carriage in sight.

Shit.

"Sorry, ladies," the man at the kiosk said as they approached. "This was the last one."

"For the whole night?" Amanda's hands tightened into fists. She'd gone all day without anyone knowing who she was, but if she wanted to take Dakota for a carriage ride in Central Park—which she did now more than ever, with a

ferocity that surprised her—she was probably going to have to use her celebrity card and ruin the magic of the day.

Before Amanda could open her mouth, Dakota pointed to the advertising poster on the front of the stand and asked, “What about a small one like that?”

The vehicle in question appeared tiny compared to the one in front of them and was a dazzling white with gold accents. Both the carriage and horse were bedecked with garlands of roses.

“I’m afraid that’s used exclusively for our honeymoon package,” the man informed them. Amanda’s heart sank as the carriage with Martha from Duluth and her husband Bob pulled away. Even if she could’ve used her celebrity status and a big wad of cash to bribe them to give up their seats, it was too late.

“What a happy coincidence!” Dakota slipped her arm around Amanda’s shoulder, leaving her too surprised as a shiver ran down her spine from the sudden closeness to ask what she was up to. “We’re actually on our honeymoon right now.”

Nice one, Dakota. Quick-witted didn’t begin to do this woman justice.

“Is that right?” The corners of the man’s eyes crinkled as he studied them. Amanda made a living being able to read people, and this guy wasn’t taking the bait.

“Yes, that’s right.” Sliding her own arm around Dakota’s waist, Amanda pulled herself to her full height—which still left the top of her head level with Dakota’s ear, damn it—and lifted her chin. “Do you have a problem with two women getting married? I’d hate to have to report your operation to the city for discriminatory practices. It would be such a shame if a bad review ended up all over the news.”

“No, ma’am.” The man’s face went as gray as his hair. “I don’t have a problem at all. In fact, a buddy of mine married his husband last year, and I went to the wedding and everything.”

“That’s so good to hear.” Amanda stared down the poor man, relieved that in lieu of outing herself as a famous morning show host, she’d simply had to channel her inner Karen. “So, we can have the honeymoon package tonight? Preferably before the sun’s set all the way, if you don’t mind.”

“Er, I mean,” the man wrung his hands, eyeing the darkening sky warily but clearly loathe to get into any more trouble, “it usually takes some advance planning to get it all together.”

“I’ll tell you what.” Amanda’s tone dripped honey. “Would double your usual rate make up for the lack of warning?”

“I think it might. Let me make a quick call.” The way his eyes immediately brightened, Amanda could almost see the dollar signs reflecting in them. After a brief conversation with someone back at the stables, he flashed a broad smile. “Got it all taken care of. Ahmed will be here in a minute with the carriage, and Kyle will meet up with you a little later.”

“Perfect.” Amanda glanced at the total bill, registering a dollar amount high enough for her to briefly wonder if they would get to keep the horse when they were done. Knowing a credit card with her name on it would ruin their disguise, Amanda tried not to groan as she counted out a sizeable stack of hundreds.

“You carry that much on you?” Dakota whispered incredulously. “Do you wanna get mugged?”

“It’s for emergencies,” Amanda explained with a half shrug. Her lips twitched as she added, “You know, like when you have to catch a horse-drawn carriage in Central Park on a moment’s notice.”

A minute or two later, a dappled gray horse arrived, pulling the same elegant carriage from the poster, right down to the rose garland, plus a little detail they hadn’t seen on the photo. On the back was a huge sign that read *Just Married*.

“Goodness.” Amanda cleared her throat, suddenly finding it hard to swallow. “You do think of everything.”

“Don’t you two worry about a thing,” the man assured them as he positioned a step stool beside the carriage and held out his hand to assist them. “Even with short notice, no detail will be overlooked. You have my word.”

“Thank you so much.” Dakota was gently shoving Amanda to climb aboard, presumably before anyone saw through their ruse and decided to cancel the deal. “You have no idea how much this means to us. Martha here has been wanting to do this forever.”

As she settled onto the tiny seat, which really wasn’t intended to hold two full-grown adults unless they were very cozy with one another, Dakota treated Amanda to a smile so alluring it instantly proved toe-curling attraction was a real thing. To think somewhere in an alternate universe, Martha would share a loveseat not much larger than this with her new wife while watching television at night and wake up to the sight of that gorgeous smile every morning in their little apartment in Duluth. Not that Amanda had any thoughts of ever marrying again or anything. Certainly not to someone she’d only recently met. Who was sixteen years younger than her. And made her wear flip-flops and a ball cap.

But, still, that Martha was one lucky bitch.

The man waved. “You two love birds have a wonderful ride.”

Once they were off, Amanda turned to Dakota and said, “Nice job with the cover story, but why do you keep insisting on giving me that hideous old lady name?”

“Because it’s kinda fun, and it gets your goat.” Dakota winked.

To avoid thinking about all the sensations that wink had set off inside her, Amanda crossed her arms, pretending to be in a huff. “Okay, Ethel.”

“That’s a good one.” Dakota nudged Amanda’s side with an elbow. “Would you like me to start calling you Ethel instead?”

“You’re impossible. You know that?”

“You are not the first to tell me that.” Dakota squealed as she spotted a silver ice bucket and two fluted glasses. “Look! Champagne.”

“Thank God.” Amanda reached for the bottle. “I could use a drink. You?”

“Yes, please.”

Their horse clip-clopped along the road at a slow but steady pace as city traffic whizzed past. The garlands of roses turned out to be plastic, and so there wasn't much to disguise the twin smells of exhaust and barnyard, yet somehow it was charming, nonetheless. Amanda thought she could finally sort of see the appeal of this anachronistic tourist trap. Or maybe it was the champagne talking or the particular company sharing it with her that made it worthwhile.

As the carriage winded its way through the park, Dakota's eyes swept the passing scenery, an expression of amazement on her face. “This is such a lovely place. I mean, look at all the green on the left and the asphalt jungle on the right. You have the best of both worlds in this city.”

A wind kicked up, and the horse let out a neigh as his mane blew about. Bits of Dakota's hair slashed across her face. Without thinking, Amanda swept the hairs out of the way, her hand cupping Dakota's soft cheek. The click of a camera caused her to freeze.

“Damn paparazzi,” Amanda muttered, yanking her hand away.

“No, keep doing that,” said a young man on a skateboard, who was rolling right alongside the carriage with a camera in his hands. “That's perfect.”

“Excuse me.” Amanda shot the interloper a withering look. “What do you think you're doing, intruding on our privacy?”

“What you're paying me to do,” the man responded affably, snapping another shot. “I'm Kyle, your photographer.”

“Photographer?” Amanda blanched.

“Of course, *darling*.” Understanding lit up Dakota’s face as she nestled against Amanda’s shoulder in a startling show of affection that sent a rush of heat all the way through Amanda. “The honeymoon package, remember?”

“Oh, right.” Amanda studied the photographer, not moving a muscle lest Dakota realize what she was doing and scoot away. “But, he’s on a skateboard. Is that really professional?”

“I think it’s so he can keep up with the horse,” Dakota pointed out, suddenly the practical one.

“Sure is,” Kyle confirmed, giving a firm kick to increase the board’s speed. “I should be able to get some great romantic shots up ahead when we hit St. Patrick’s Cathedral.”

“Lucky us.” Amanda gulped her champagne.

The small size of the carriage and Dakota’s close proximity were wreaking havoc on Amanda’s mental state, not to mention her physical one. Her nipples were rock hard beneath the ludicrous *I Heart NY* T-shirt, her skin on fire all along the bare stretch of leg that was pressed against Dakota’s as the carriage bumped and rocked. She felt like a horny teenager. All she needed now was a romantic backdrop to really set her off.

As they rolled along Fifth Avenue, the striking cathedral came into sight, mocking Amanda with its perfection. Why had she thought this ride was a good idea?

Please God, give me strength, Amanda thought, hoping the proximity to St. Patrick’s would increase the likelihood of her prayer reaching the intended destination. Any other woman and it might be different. But Dakota was off-limits, for too many reasons to list.

“Right, let’s get these shots,” Kyle said, rolling up on his skateboard, oblivious to the turmoil in Amanda’s head. “Lean in really close now.”

Was he for real?

Come on, God, Amanda begged as she glared at the cathedral, *it’s supposed to be “lead me not into temptation.”*

“Don’t pull away,” Dakota whispered. She wiggled in her seat, clearly getting caught up in the ruse. “Let’s play along. If we don’t, they’ll know we lied. Remember rule number two.”

The next thing Amanda knew, she was staring deeply into Dakota’s eyes. The sky was turning purplish black, and the lights in the buildings in the distance transformed the moment from slightly romantic to one of utter urgency. *If you don’t kiss this woman right now*, a voice in her head told her, *the moment will be lost forever*.

Should Amanda do this? That long list of reasons not to was suddenly nowhere to be found. Did that mean she had the go-ahead? The real question was could she stop herself? With no defenses left, Amanda’s head drifted toward Dakota’s, ever so slowly.

“Looking great,” Kyle encouraged, the camera snapping away. “Time for a smooch.” He made kissing sounds as if to cheer them on.

The entire thing was beyond crazy. Amanda Morgan, serious journalist and consummate professional, was being cajoled into a kiss by a young man on a fucking skateboard. And she was actually considering it. Surely, Dakota hadn’t lost her senses, even if it was clear Amanda had, right?

But instead of refusing outright, or laughing off the suggestion, Dakota grinned wickedly. “It is our honeymoon, after all.”

At that, it wasn’t only the physical attraction that overpowered Amanda. No, her very insides went gooey. Gooey! Who was she turning into, some romantic sap? But already, they were impossibly close. There was no turning back.

Their lips brushed against each other, softer than satin, as the camera whirled away. It was innocent enough at first, for show and not quite past the point of no return. Maybe Amanda’s silent prayer was working after all.

I can get through this, Amanda told herself, even as her lips continued to linger, flirting with fate. It would stop here

and go no further. Like when she'd started to fall into the space crater, but Dakota had pulled her back.

Only this time, Dakota didn't pull Amanda back. Instead, she deepened the kiss, and Amanda tumbled right into that smoking abyss, whipping toward impact at a million miles an hour.

"I want you," Dakota whispered in a voice so soft it was barely anything at all.

Something between a growl and a moan tore through Amanda's core, threatening to rip her body in two. She freed her lips just long enough to call out to the driver. "I'll give you two hundred dollars to take us home this instant."

IT WAS three blocks back to Amanda's building, but it felt like an eternity. Each kiss and touch between them sparked more longing.

"How are you doing this to me?" Amanda asked, breathless and panting. In the space between her thighs, she could feel herself swelling and growing wet. How could something so arousing cause such torture, and why did that only make her desire for Dakota rapidly escalate? She was beyond ready for everything and more.

"I can say the same to you." Dakota kissed Amanda again. Hard. Her cheeks were flushed, and there was a wildness in her eyes that left Amanda wishing they were already behind closed doors. Dakota's eyes devoured Amanda's breasts, and all Amanda could think of was the moment when her mouth would do the same.

The carriage rolled to a stop, the horse neighing as if knowing this wasn't the usual place to let passengers off, but Amanda didn't give a damn. She scrambled from the carriage, noting the doorman's shocked expression as they stumbled through the revolving door.

Maybe it was seeing the usually solitary penthouse resident with a disheveled guest in tow, or perhaps it was their means of transportation that had him gawking. Either way, it was fine. He'd be discreet. The only thing that mattered was to get Dakota safely inside the apartment before Amanda did the unthinkable and started stripping them both naked for everyone in New York City to see.

They were the only two people on the elevator, and once the doors closed, Amanda had Dakota pressed against the back wall. They'd been kissing so ferociously that Amanda's lips tingled, and she worried they might have started to puff out like a chimpanzee's mouth. Dakota's probably felt the same, but that didn't stop her from arching against the elevator's mirrored wall, moaning as if the touch of Amanda's lips was the most amazing thing she'd ever experienced. As for Amanda, her body was filled with endless aching only Dakota's touch could soothe.

When the doors slid open on the fifty-second floor, they tumbled out into the long hallway, still locked in an embrace as they maneuvered toward the same back door they'd used before. Conveniently, it was the one closest to three of the apartment's seven bedrooms. Once inside, they could take their pick.

Amanda gathered the scattered bits of her conscious thoughts together long enough to punch in the code and let the door swing open. Fumbling for the hem of Dakota's shirt, Amanda gave it an upward tug but was stopped when the woman unexpectedly pulled away as they reached the middle of the foyer, her brow etched with concern. Amanda tried to press her body forward, but Dakota's hands held her back.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," Dakota gasped, though her tone lacked conviction.

"Why?" Amanda was at a loss. If she, the more mature and levelheaded of them, had no qualms, what could possibly be giving Dakota pause?

"We're going to be on the same network now." Dakota bit her lip, wrapping her arms across her midriff. "We're

coworkers.”

“Not yet,” Amanda pointed out with deliberate slowness as she waited for her heart to stop racing. “Besides, it doesn’t matter as long as we’re not cohosts on the same show.”

“What do you mean? Is there a rule?”

“Standard part of the contract,” Amanda told her, hoping they could get through this conversation quickly and go back to kissing without getting bogged down in legalese. “No cohost fraternization. Anything else is fair game.”

“Anything?” It was clear from her expression how tempted she was, but Dakota continued to hold back. “I don’t want people to think I got this opportunity because of who I was sleeping with.”

“You and I both know it’s the exact opposite.” Amanda took a step toward Dakota, who didn’t back away. “As for anyone else, I have no intention of telling them. Do you?”

“No, of course not.” The hunger in Dakota’s eyes was unmistakable, the shield she’d put up between them cracking in about a million places. “It’s nothing serious anyway, right?”

“Right.” Amanda’s laugh was slightly too high-pitched to sound natural. She chocked it up to nerves. “How could it be?”

“Exactly. It couldn’t be.” Shutting her eyes, Dakota stripped off her T-shirt, tossing it over her shoulder. “Okay.”

“Okay?” It wasn’t exactly a love poem, but Amanda would take it. Before Dakota’s shirt had hit the floor, Amanda had already axed her terrible *I Heart NY* tourist shirt and flung it across the foyer.

Hesitation gone, their bodies crashed into each other, their bare skin searing into the other with the intensity of a branding iron. Amanda undid the hooks on the back of Dakota’s bra, easing one strap to the side. She peppered the creamy skin with kisses as the strap descended past the shoulder, down the arm. When she reached Dakota’s hand, Amanda sucked the pinky into her mouth, swirling her tongue around the tip.

Dakota whimpered, a sound so worth the effort. Amanda repeated the performance with the other strap, only slightly quicker this time. She ran her hands down Dakota's back, softly trailing her fingertips over the young woman's well-defined muscles.

Moving with a sinuous grace made possible by hours spent in the gym and Pilates classes, Amanda sank to her knees, barely registering the cold, hard marble. Her fingers reached for Dakota's capris, undoing the button and lowering the zipper before tugging them to the floor.

Amanda dispatched with the white cotton panties even faster, smiling at the irrefutable evidence this encounter was as spontaneous for Dakota as it was for her. If the woman had been scheming to get her into bed, she would've worn something less practical. The truth was, Amanda had a healthy respect for practical. She also had a healthy respect for her knees, which were starting to protest at the lack of cushion.

"Time to find the bedroom," she said, flicking Dakota's clit with the tip of her tongue before attempting to rise. The woman's legs turned into jelly, her hands planting against the wall to keep her from sliding all the way down.

"Can you make it to the bed?"

"Which one? You have seven." Dakota stared down with the sexiest smile, and for a moment, Amanda thought she might be the one unable to stand and make it to the bed.

"Take your pick." Amanda used the extra seconds she'd bought to get to her feet. "A guest room is the closest, but my bedroom has a better view."

"I don't plan to look at the view."

Heat spooled between Amanda's legs. "Right. The nearest guest room it is, then."

Since Dakota already knew the way, Amanda let her lead. When they reached the edge of the bed, Amanda shoved Dakota onto the comforter, falling on top and covering her with her own body as she urged Dakota's lips apart with her mouth.

The mood of the kiss began as persuasive, shifting to demanding as Amanda's tongue swept into Dakota's mouth and explored every inch. Dakota's hand cupped the crown of Amanda's head, fingers tangling in her hair.

Finally, Dakota eased Amanda off with a gentle roll, propping herself up on bent elbows. "Hold on a minute."

Amanda's spirits plummeted. "Second thoughts again?"

"No. This is a different type of problem." Dakota flashed a grin that made butterflies dance in Amanda's stomach. "You're overdressed."

The fluttering intensified at the prospect of being naked in front of Dakota again. It shouldn't be a big deal. Amanda had done it before. But she hesitated. How was it possible someone of Dakota's age could honestly crave a woman who was nearing fifty? This time, Amanda didn't even have the mystique of her garter belt and stockings to add allure to the encounter. It was just her. Would that be enough?

As if sensing the reason Amanda had gone still, Dakota came closer, rising to her knees and positioning herself beside Amanda, who had flopped onto her back and was staring up at the ceiling. The only light in the room came from the exterior lights of the building, but the wanting in Dakota's eyes was unmistakable, an all-consuming need with Amanda at its center.

Fingers trembling, Amanda unbuttoned her borrowed tourist shorts, lifting her bottom to wriggle out of them without sitting up. She didn't break eye contact for a second, the desire she saw reflected back at her boosting her confidence, even as it ignited a fire that burned between her thighs.

Now dressed only in a simple pair of black cotton underwear, Amanda arched a questioning eyebrow. "Better?"

"Still overdressed."

"Fine," Amanda practically growled as she hooked her thumbs beneath the elastic waistband of her panties and slid them down. "Have I met all of your demands?"

“That remains to be seen.” Dakota beckoned Amanda with a finger, urging her to sit up.

“You can be infuriating when you put your mind to it,” Amanda chastised, less because she meant it and more to take her mind off the bulges along her midriff that were sure to show as she hoisted herself up. “And here I was worried about your contract negotiation. I think it’s clear you can take control when you want to.”

“I can.” Dakota fell backward onto the pillow, throwing her hands behind her head in a gesture of complete surrender. “But right now, I think I’d rather learn from a master.”

Not wanting to waste another second, and fearful her brain would take over and get in the way again, Amanda draped herself over Dakota, smothering the woman’s mouth with her own. In that moment, she felt not only lustful passion but a wave of fierce protectiveness toward the younger woman.

Amanda had been in Dakota’s shoes—not that either of them were wearing shoes, their ridiculous flip-flops having been deposited in the foyer with so little fanfare Amanda hadn’t even really noticed it happening. But she’d been the up-and-coming ingenue herself once upon a time, the young star so many network big wigs would try to use to their own advantage. Well, that wasn’t going to happen to Dakota. Not if Amanda had anything to say about it.

With a knee, Amanda separated Dakota’s leg, rocking a hip into the wetness, causing both of them to moan in unison. She dragged her lips downward across Dakota’s slender neck, the skin supple and smooth, her hands walking up and down Dakota’s sides. Each time her fingertips made contact, Amanda had the sensation of being singed, like the marks would be permanently burned into both their flesh.

Now Amanda’s tongue trailed along Dakota’s collarbone, down the inside of her upper arm, before cutting over to a pinkish nipple that remained stubbornly soft. Amanda nibbled at the tiny bud, the nub continuing to resist until finally she clamped down hard enough to bring it to life.

“Oh...” The back of Dakota’s head sank deeper into the pillow.

Amanda continued to work the nipple, getting it harder and harder in her mouth, not wanting to leave it after the dedication it had taken. But this woman had the most amazing body it’d be a shame to stop her exploration. Delightfully, Dakota’s side was ticklish, and as Amanda kissed and licked her way down, Dakota writhed underneath, causing Amanda’s clit to spin.

The scent of desire filled Amanda’s nostrils, and her entire body thrummed.

At last. Amanda spread Dakota’s thighs wide, the moist flesh between them glistening. All of her was on display, and Amanda’s eyes raked along the woman’s body, staking claim to any areas that remained untouched. There weren’t many.

“You’re so beautiful,” Amanda said.

“I can’t believe this is happening.”

Neither can I, Amanda thought, but she couldn’t let herself voice even a hint of doubt. Not now, when she’d nearly conquered her weakness. She couldn’t afford for her brain to stop her when she was so close.

Amanda buried her face between Dakota’s legs, the slick folds a temptation she couldn’t resist. She drank in the intoxicating taste of pleasure, breathing in the wild scent of desire. Clinging tight to Dakota’s thigh with one arm, her tongue teasing Dakota’s clit, Amanda plunged her fingers deep inside. She continued pumping them in and out, reveling in the silken heat as her tongue continued to lap at a frenzied pace.

Dakota was close. So close. The thrill of bringing her this far had Amanda teetering on the edge herself, enthralled with the ability to instill such pleasure in someone else.

Knowing how little more it would take, Amanda pressed her fingers against the spot deep within that was guaranteed to ignite a flame.

Dakota gasped.

Electricity surged through Amanda's body as she felt Dakota get swept away. Already, Amanda was counting the seconds before they could start all over again.

CHAPTER TEN

“HOW MANY NORTHWESTERN T-SHIRTS DOES ONE PERSON need?” Standing amid a mess of half-packed moving boxes in Dakota’s Illinois apartment, her younger sister, Sierra, held a wad of at least four or five shirts in her hands.

Dakota grabbed them and tossed them in the keep pile. “You can never have enough.”

“I don’t think you’re understanding the goal here. We’re supposed to be purging, not hoarding. I didn’t drive all the way from Kansas to help you organize for your move to have you toss every single piece of shit you own in a box.”

“I appreciate you making time to come help me and see me off, but you’re being bossy.”

Sierra snatched up one of the shirts. “This one has a stain on the front. You will never wear it again.”

“It has sentimental value. That stain happened at my first football game. I have a lot of good memories attached to that shirt.” Dakota gazed at the cardboard boxes, the piles of treasured belongings—or total crap, if you asked her sister—and uttered a wistful sigh. “I still don’t think my brain fully understands what’s going on.”

“Your lifelong dream is coming true. That’s what’s going on.” Sierra sounded like she could be auditioning for the role of a fairy godmother in a Disney Princess movie.

“I know, but why is it happening?” Dakota threw her hands into the air. “I haven’t done anything to deserve it.”

“Yeah, except give up every hour of your life for the past nine years in pursuit of this exact goal,” her sister teased. “You’ve always needed big answers to everything, instead of taking things at face value. You worked hard; you got rewarded. With a little bit of luck thrown in.”

“You make it sound so easy.” Dakota massaged a knot in her shoulder, the pressure of her fingers digging into the muscle reminding her of another person’s hands on her skin, someone whose existence only complicated the hell out of all of this even more. “Are you saying if you flew to New York to interview for a part-time job, but ended up getting a one-point-five-million-dollar contract, a fancy apartment, and a new career, you wouldn’t wonder when the other shoe was going to drop?”

Sierra sat down on Dakota’s bed. “What’s really going on in that head?”

“I just told you.” Dakota dug her fingertips deeper and winced.

“Don’t try that with me. You’re wound up so tight you’re about to snap.”

“Moving is stressful.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve moved three times since graduation so that Matt could chase his dream of being a basketball coach. I know moving stress, and this ain’t it.”

“Just because you’re married, it doesn’t make you smarter than I am.” As if to prove her superior maturity, Dakota stuck out her tongue.

“You may be three years older, but you have to admit I have more life experience. Trust me, being with the same guy since sophomore year of college makes me an expert on the diplomacy front. If I hadn’t learned that, I’d be in prison for murder.” Sierra crossed her legs, leaning back on her elbows and fixing Dakota with a stare she couldn’t outrun. “What’s holding you back from doing that Mary Tyler Moore spin you’ve always done when something good happens?”

“I’m confused,” Dakota muttered as she wrapped a picture frame in paper.

Sierra’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “That’s code for woman trouble, but as far as I know, you haven’t been on a date in months.”

“I haven’t.” Dakota turned her back on her sister to put the picture frame in a box, secure in the belief she was being truthful. The wedding hadn’t been a date, and that sightseeing day with the carriage ride was technically a work function.

“You’re lying.”

“Nice try.”

“Turn around, and tell me to my face that there isn’t a woman at the bottom of your emotional turmoil about this move to New York.”

Dakota spun back around, her hands on her hips. “I need to get everything packed before I go to bed. I don’t have time for this.”

“Oh boy, it’s worse than I thought.” Sierra pulled on Dakota’s arm, dragging her to the bed to sit beside her.

“I told you I don’t have time for chitchat.”

“Who is she?” Sierra pressed, ignoring her sister’s protestations.

“No one. Trust me.”

“If there’s one thing life has taught me, it’s never believe anyone who says trust me.”

Dakota’s gaze darted to the ceiling. “What’s wrong with you? Why can’t you let me pack my excessive T-shirt collection in peace?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong. My big sister is lying to me. Do you really want to move to the big city with this lie between us?”

“Your mind games aren’t going to work,” Dakota warned, even as her sister’s melodrama was indeed chiseling at her resolve.

Sierra stared at Dakota, not blinking.

Dakota stiffened. “It’s creepy when you do that.”

“I also know it makes you wilt,” Sierra said, still wide-eyed. “The way I see it, you can talk to me, or we’ll spend the rest of the day in a stare-off.”

“I swear to God I’m gonna call Mom. This is why she likes me better.”

“Yeah, well, I’m Daddy’s little girl.”

“You’re so frustrating!” Dakota growled, turning her head so she wouldn’t have to look at those unblinking eyes for another second. “I may have slept with someone I shouldn’t have, and I think it might possibly have the potential to be career suicide.”

“Who?” Having won the competition and collected her prize, Sierra blinked several times with relief, or possibly in preparation for another bout of the sister stare down, and leaned back onto a pillow. “Who is this someone with the power or inclination to tank your career?”

Dakota swallowed. “Amanda Morgan.”

“Amanda—” There was more flapping of eyelashes followed by attempts to speak for several seconds as the bombshell sunk in. As soon as it had, Sierra sat bolt upright. “You slept with the actual Amanda Morgan? Your idol? The one you did your high school career day project on?”

“Yep. That Amanda Morgan.”

Sierra’s eyes grew impossibly wide. “Was it everything you imagined it would be?”

Dakota drew a breath. “Yes.”

Sierra squealed, bouncing on the mattress like it was an inflatable castle at a birthday party.

“And no.” Dakota smacked at Sierra’s hand as her sister punched her shoulder.

“Don’t pull these bullshit answers with me.” Sierra wagged her index finger beneath Dakota’s nose. “Words. Use

them. Let's start with why no?"

"Because for as long as I can remember, she hasn't been just another celebrity crush. I've wanted to *be* the next Amanda Morgan. I built up this fantasy in my head about what she would be like, and..."

"She's not what you thought?"

"She's kinda hard to pin down. It's not that it's bad, but she's just like the rest of us. Insecure, flawed."

"Your twin, then."

"It shouldn't matter. When we got together at Valerie's wedding, it was supposed to be a one-off, but when I went back to her apartment after the carriage ride in New York—there was no excuse."

Sierra put both her hands in the air, palms facing Dakota. "Hold up there, cowgirl. You've slept with her twice? I need way more details if you're gonna be dropping bombshells like that."

Dakota was in no mood to kiss and tell, so she plowed forward with the real thing bugging her. "If anyone at the network finds out, they'll think I'm another Charlene."

Sierra raised an eyebrow. "That's the dead chick?"

"Yes, and I don't mean to speak ill of her, but it's no secret she had a reputation as a ditz who only got the job because she was dating Franklin Junior's best friend."

"Could you lose your job because of it?" Her sister's face telegraphed concern.

"If you mean is it against network policy, no. She's not my supervisor, and we're not cohosts of the same show, so we'd be in the clear as far as that goes. But people will think I slept my way to the top." Feeling the need to move her limbs, Dakota hopped from the bed, went to the closest box that was full, and taped it shut. "I'm going to need more packing slips."

"If you didn't insist on bringing Riley with you in the car, along with his dog bed that's the size of a horse, you wouldn't have to ship all of your belongings."

Dakota's eyes drifted to the corner, where her sweet golden retriever slept peacefully on his bed with no idea his life was about to change forever. "No way am I leaving him behind."

"You know I'm not suggesting that," Sierra assured her. "But maybe you should have him shipped, instead of all this stuff. The drive to New York is going to be a nightmare."

"I can't do that. He's not a piece of furniture!"

"His bed is," Sierra pointed out, wrinkling her nose. "Not to mention it smells. Why not ditch it, and buy a new one when you get there? You can afford to."

"He's had that bed since he was a puppy." Guilt stabbed Dakota in the belly. "He doesn't like change."

Sierra folded her arms over her chest. "Amanda Morgan. Do you like her?"

Dakota's brow creased. "I thought we were talking about Riley now."

"No, we were taking a breather. Was that enough time for you to regroup?"

"I hate your mind games."

"Learned them from Mom." Sierra grinned, unrepentant. "I repeat; do you like her?"

"Uh, Amanda's not exactly the type of person you *like*. You know what I mean? On the other hand, when she lets her guard down and her true personality shines through, it's another thing entirely."

"I have no idea what you're talking about because you're not telling me enough to figure this out. Where's the sister who used to tell me absolutely everything?" Sierra tilted her head, almost pleading. "I was the first person you came out to."

"We're grown-ups now. You're married. I'm moving to New York."

"Which is why we'll have to try harder to be there for each other," her sister insisted, filling Dakota with a warm glow

despite the annoyance of having a family member prying into her life like she had a crowbar. “I’m guessing since you slept with her a second time you either actually like her, or she’s amazing in bed.”

“It’s possible both are true.” Dakota couldn’t hold back a smile.

“Score, Big Sis!” Sierra put her hand in the air for a high five, but Dakota shot it down with a look.

“You’re skipping over the other part. No one can know this ever happened, and I can’t let it happen again.”

“Why, because you don’t want it to, or you don’t like what other people might think?”

“Does it really matter?”

“Yes, it does. Because not too long ago, you couldn’t legally get married.”

“I’m not following your logic. I have no intention of marrying Amanda Morgan.”

“I’m not saying you have to. But if you like her and she likes you, change the minds of those you’re worried about instead of hiding from it. Once they see how talented you are, no one will think you didn’t earn the job all on your own.”

Dakota let out a weary sigh. “Why do you always think every obstacle can be conquered?”

“Because I have this amazing big sister whose shown me that nothing is impossible. We’re literally packing up all your belongings so you can fulfill your lifelong dream. If that isn’t proof you can do anything if you put your mind to it, I don’t know what is.”

DAKOTA STUDIED what was left of the giant rooster-shaped cake one of the production assistants had brought in for her going away party. It was red velvet with a tangy cream cheese frosting, and Dakota wanted a second piece. Possibly a third.

“What’s going on?” Deke barked, coming up behind her from out of nowhere. His voice nearly stopped her heart until she remembered he was no longer her boss.

“You don’t scare me anymore,” she informed him, even though her heart continued to clatter against her ribs.

“Oh, have another slice,” he told her, reading the situation with the practiced eye of a seasoned journalist. “You earned it.”

“Did I?” Dakota grinned at the rare praise as she slid a generous piece of cake onto her plate.

“Don’t make me elaborate,” said the man who’d given her a job right out of college when many others wouldn’t take the chance. His mentorship style usually consisted of being told to do better, no matter the situation. Deke wasn’t a feelings guy. “You get everything finalized with that contract?”

“I did.” Dakota still couldn’t believe she’d signed her name to a contract worth one and a half million dollars. That new agent Amanda sent her was a dream. “Oh, and the HR person texted me earlier that she’s found me a short-term lease on a one-bedroom apartment in a building that will take dogs.”

“Sounds like you got everything.” Deke held his hand up awkwardly for a moment before clapping it on her shoulder. “Good for you, kid.”

Dakota’s belly flipped, almost making her regret the cake she kept shoveling into it. “You’re not mad at me for leaving the *Rooster*?”

“Mad?” Deke chuckled, though his eyes had a hint of sadness in them. “Nah. I always knew you’d go a lot farther in this business than we could take you.”

It was getting late, at least by morning show standards, and the rest of the crew had headed out. Dakota scanned the empty break room with a sense of nostalgia. How many hours had she spent here with all of them over the years? And now she was off to a place where she didn’t know anyone, with the exception of one woman she really needed to stop spending time with.

“It’s gonna be weird not to be here anymore,” she confessed. “What if *The Early Bird Show* people don’t like me?”

“They’re New Yorkers,” he said in a joking tone. “They don’t like anybody. It’s part of the deal with the devil when you sell your soul to afford the place.”

“Deke.” Dakota gave her former boss a look that said she was being serious. For a minute or two, she needed him to do the same. “What do I do, bring them a cake?”

“You make ’em respect you. That’s what matters.” He laughed as she stuffed the last bite of rooster cake into her mouth with relish. “Cake wouldn’t hurt, though, I guess. Or donuts. I’ve never met a person who doesn’t love donuts.”

“Thanks, Deke. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.” Dakota swallowed, nearly choking on emotion, along with a few last crumbs that caught in her throat.

“Now don’t get all emotional on me,” he warned, looking like the thought of a woman starting to cry would make him run for the hills. “How ’bout a last drink at the Twenty-First Amendment, for old time’s sake?”

“I’d like that.”

The bar down the street from the station also happened to be the closest watering hole to the state capitol building. This meant instead of all the televisions being tuned to sports, the establishment was known for streaming every news channel, even C-span, twenty-four seven. It was a journalist’s dream, a way to pretend to relax after work while not missing a single headline. It was another place Dakota would miss terribly when she got to New York.

“What’ll you have?” Deke asked when they entered, reaching for his wallet.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Dakota swatted his hand away from his pocket, taking a quick look around the mostly empty room. If it was late for morning news people, it was early by politician’s standards. “You find us a spot to sit. The drinks are

on me tonight, and none of that Pabst Blue Ribbon shit you always order because you're a miserable cheapskate."

"Have it your way, Miss Moneybags," Deke teased. "As long as you're buying, I'll take a Manhattan, in honor of your new adventure."

"Great idea." Dakota grinned. "I think I'll have one, too."

After placing the order with a bartender whose face she recognized even if she didn't know his name, Dakota carried two martini glasses to the booth Deke had chosen, walking slowly so as not to let the cherries roll off the top. As she set the drinks on the table, she noticed Deke's face seemed pale, and his eyes were bigger than usual. He took the drink from her without so much as a blink, which freaked her out.

"What's going on?"

"Turn around and look at that television," he barked in his Deke-like way.

"Why?" Dakota stood her ground, nerves jangling. "What's happened? Please don't let it be a terrorist attack in New York. My parents will go insane. They want me to check in daily by taking a selfie with the front page of the newspaper."

"It's not that," Deke said, but his expression said whatever it was, it was a big fucking deal. "It's a different kind of bomb. The shit's hitting the fan at your new network."

Dakota flipped around so she could see the television. "What's going on?"

"Remember that hit piece Gabe Hawkins did last night on Marcus Brown?"

The volume on the TV was down too low to hear. Dakota frowned as she tried to put together what had happened from the garbled subtitles on the screen. "The one claiming he lacked the necessary credits to graduate and doesn't actually have a PhD?"

"That's the one." Deke ran a hand through his perpetually disheveled hair. "It sounded weird to me when I heard it, and it

looks like my gut was right.”

On the screen was a spokesperson from Howard University showing Marcus Brown’s transcripts as he explained the ones shown in Gabe’s report were forged and didn’t have the official watermark. In other words, Gabe Hawkins had fucked up, big time. Considering the Democratic National Convention was about to start and Marcus Brown was the husband of the soon-to-be presidential nominee, this was about as bad as it could get.

“Shit.” Dakota sank into her seat across from Deke. She grabbed her cocktail and took a sip to settle her nerves. “How did this get put on air in the first place? Forged documents are something a newbie would do.”

“That’s the million-dollar question.” Deke swallowed about half his Manhattan in one gulp, clearly as rattled as Dakota was. In their industry, this was about as bad as a scandal could get. “I know I don’t scare you anymore, but I hope you still value my advice.”

“Of course, I do. I trust you more than anyone.”

Deke nodded, the muscles in his face relaxing at her reassurance. “I’ve been in this business long enough to know this scandal is going to take people down. That means everyone will be terrified their head will be the next one to roll. People do stupid things when they’re cornered. Dangerous things.”

“I’m not even there yet,” Dakota argued, but the hand holding her drink began to shake. What was she going to do? Nothing like this had ever happened on the farm circuit.

“Forget the DNC. A television network is one of the most political places on earth. You’re basically moving into a war zone, with alliances forming that you might not understand.”

Dakota cleared her throat with a choking cough. “What should I do?”

“Keep your head down and your nose clean. Do not call attention to yourself in any way. You got me?”

Dakota nodded, a chill sweeping down her spine. She'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop, and it looked like this could be it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“DO YOU NEED HELP WITH THAT, MS. MORGAN?” THE doorman held the glass door open so Amanda could wheel two suitcases through instead of struggling with the revolving door. Beyond the cover of the building’s awning, rain pelted the pavement in a steady stream. The end of her beach vacation had come just in time.

“Thank you, Fred, but I think I can manage.” She steered the luggage with ease, regretting the puddles of water forming on the shiny tiled floor. “Sorry about the mess.”

“No worries, ma’am. Hope the weather was better for you on your trip.”

“Luckily, it was,” she answered. In fact, the ten days she’d eked out of what was supposed to have been two weeks in Montauk had been nearly perfect. Right up until the Marcus Brown debacle exploded and turned the world of broadcast journalism on its head.

Her eyes were already glued to her phone as she pressed the elevator button. The moment she’d hit her building’s WiFi network, the news alerts had started rolling in. Considering the gigantic vat of shit Gabe had managed to get himself into while she’d been enjoying lobster by the beach, each update had Amanda more on edge. She flicked through *The Washington Post* alerts, skimmed *The Times*, and was getting started on *The Wall Street Journal* when the elevator pinged, and the doors slid open.

Jesus, Gabe, she thought, counting no less than six headlines where either his name or the network featured prominently. Why didn't you listen, you stubborn fool?

“Could you hold the elevator, please?” Fred called out as the clacking of a dog’s paws rang on the marble floor.

Still so engrossed in the news that she barely registered what was going on around her, Amanda stuck her foot between the doors. The scent of wet dog assaulted her nostrils. A second later, the smelly beast plowed into the elevator, nearly ramming into the glass.

“Have you never seen an elevator before, buddy?” Amanda demanded. The soggy golden retriever didn’t reply, only wagged his tail as his owner—at least Amanda assumed that was who she was, given that the dog’s much-too-long leash was looped around her wrist—stepped into the small compartment, covered in a tent-like rain slicker and loaded down with a stack of packages so high her entire head was obscured.

“Thanks for holding the door,” came a voice from somewhere behind the boxes. “You’re a lifesaver.”

Why did that voice sound so familiar? Surely, it couldn’t be...

“You know the doorman could help you with those.” Amanda punched the button for the fifty-second floor as the doors slid shut, craning her neck to determine for certain if her new elevator companion was who she thought.

“Amanda?” The boxes jostled and the top two toppled off, narrowly missing the poor dog, who was still staring at the mirror and whimpering as if he expected his reflection to say hi to him. The forehead and eyes now visible behind the slightly shorter stack of wobbling boxes were unmistakable.

“Dakota?” Amanda grabbed the runaway packages, tucking them under one arm, while she reached out with the other to steady the rest of the pile before they could cause anyone injury. “What are you doing here?”

Dakota blinked, the shock in her expression so obvious it wasn't necessary to see her whole face. "I'm moving in."

"You're moving into *my* building?"

"This is your building?"

Perhaps the way Amanda had said it *had* kind of implied all fifty-two floors were hers, but nevertheless, she didn't appreciate the way Dakota's tone called attention to the slip. "Yes, you've been here before. Don't you remember?"

"Well, I thought it looked familiar, but honestly, I looked at apartments in half a dozen buildings all over the place, and all the lobbies and hallways looked exactly the same to me."

"You didn't notice it was the same address?" Amanda asked incredulously. Had Dakota moved in here on purpose to be closer to her?

"How am I supposed to know your address? It's not like I'm sending you postcards. Besides, I can't keep any of the numbers straight. There's Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street, but they're right next to each other. That makes no sense. Plus, all that east and west stuff. I never have a clue where I am."

"None of those are actually the address of this building. Are you certain you're in the right place?"

"Yep. I left bread crumbs on the way to the park so Riley could eat them on the return trip."

Amanda cast a glance at the dog, assuming this must be Riley. "The pigeons didn't get to them first?"

"That was a joke." Dakota cracked a smile, but it quickly fell. "I set the home address on my phone's GPS. Of course, I'm almost out of battery and I've misplaced my charger, so it's not a foolproof plan."

"You should check at the concierge desk to see if they have an extra."

"The concierge. Is that Fred? Riley loves Fred. He can be kinda picky about people. Riley, that is. I'm not familiar enough with the doorman yet to know what he's like."

Was it Amanda's imagination, or was Dakota rambling? Her cheeks had turned a little pink, too. Did she find being stuck in the world's slowest elevator with the woman she'd had sex with—twice—as uncomfortable as Amanda did? Because on a scale of one to ten, this unexpected encounter was awkward as fuck. It still beat reading news articles detailing all the ways her former mentor was single-handedly bringing down IBC—but not by a lot. Amanda was just better at hiding it.

“Fred's the doorman, not the concierge,” Amanda told Dakota, studying the dog so she wouldn't get caught staring into the owner's eyes. “But I think he might be as picky about people as Riley is.”

“Why? Doesn't he like you?” Dakota pressed her lips together, no doubt to keep from laughing.

“Very funny. He's been nothing but wonderful to me in the twelve years I've lived here, but my ex-wife swore he hated her.”

The elevator arrived at Amanda's floor, and it wasn't until the doors opened and Riley snapped to attention that Dakota realized she'd made a mistake. “Dang it. I forgot to press the button for my floor.” Her dog, however, did not seem to notice the error and went bounding into the hallway, tracking his muddy paws all over the pristine floor. “Riley, stop!”

With one eye on the commotion caused by Dakota trying to get control of her dog, Amanda punched in her door code. The second she opened it, Cronkite raced into the hallway. He came to a halt in front of the panting, drooling dog and stood with his back arched, hissing like he'd found a dragon. A moment later, one feline paw swiped the dog's nose, causing the injured creature to howl.

“Bad kitty!” Amanda reprimanded her grumpy cat, but it was of no use since Cronky had already hightailed it to goodness knows where as soon as he'd launched his strike at the invading force. Simultaneously, Riley made a break in the other direction.

Dakota tightened her grip on the leash, but this caused her to lose control of the remaining boxes in her arms. “Uh-oh.”

The boxes crashed down. Riley cowered in the far corner of the elevator, out of the way of the melee. As the doors began to slide shut, Amanda darted inside and hit the hold button. “I really hope none of those boxes had breakables in them.”

“Not in today’s batch. Just a shower curtain liner and some new towels. I have dishes and pots and pans on order, but I don’t think they’re arriving until next week.” Dakota coaxed Riley back into the hallway. Amanda followed, and the elevator doors closed behind her, leaving the woman and her dog trapped on the wrong floor. “Is Cronkite all right?”

“He’s the least of my concerns at the moment.” Amanda sighed as she looked from the muddy floor, to the dropped packages, to the suitcases she’d abandoned by the open door. “Let me get my luggage inside, and then I can help you two get wherever you’re supposed to be.”

“You don’t have to do that. It’s my fault for not hitting the button for my floor. I was shocked to run into you.” Dakota said the last part quietly, like she wasn’t sure she wanted to admit it. She really must have been feeling as out of sorts about the whole thing as Amanda did. But, why? Shock could be good or bad. If only Amanda knew which one Dakota was experiencing so she could interpret her own reaction to match.

Amanda grabbed her suitcases and rolled them inside the apartment before shutting the door. Then she went back to the elevator and pushed the call button. As they waited, Amanda hunched down to check out the damage to Riley’s face. “He’s got a tiny scratch on his nose. Does he need to go to the vet?”

“I doubt it.” Dakota ruffled the fur on the top of his head. “I’ll wash it with warm water, but from previous encounters with neighbor cats, I happen to know you can’t put anything on the wound because he’ll lick it off.”

“Was he attacked by another cat in this building?”

“No. This was back in Springfield.” Dakota gave him a scratch behind the ears. “Riley comes on strong, and he doesn’t understand any creature who doesn’t love him right away.”

“He really won’t know what to make of my cat then. Cronkite hates everyone and only tolerates me because I keep him in a never-ending supply of wet food. If it wasn’t for that, I’m sure he’d eat my face right off my skull while I slept.” Except, now that Amanda thought about it, Cronky had cuddled up against Dakota the first time she’d come to the apartment as if they were the very best of friends. Was he trying to send a message or just mess with her head?

As Amanda talked, Dakota stacked her boxes from largest to smallest, so when the elevator opened, she was able to scoot them inside with her foot.

“Floor?” Amanda asked, her finger hovering over the panel.

“Seven. Thank you.”

When the door opened at the correct floor, Dakota repeated the maneuver with the boxes, this time sliding them into the hallway. Unlike Amanda’s floor where there were only two doors, both of which led to opposite ends of her penthouse apartment, this corridor was longer and had several doors to choose from, each no doubt leading to a different unit.

“I’m at the end of the hall on the right,” Dakota said, seeming to pick up on Amanda’s hesitation. “If you take Riley, I can manage the boxes.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve been doing this several times a day since I got into town,” Dakota replied, putting on a brave smile as Amanda followed her down the hall with the dog in tow. “Usually, it’s been without Riley, but today I thought I’d risk it. Lesson learned. Also, I didn’t know Amazon delivered multiple times a day, so I wasn’t anticipating so many packages to carry up.”

As soon as she’d put her key in the lock, Dakota reached for the leash. “I’ll take him. I’m sure you have no interest in

seeing my messy little hovel.”

“It can’t be that bad.” In fact, Amanda had not intended to linger. She had unpacking to do, Gabe’s scandal to catch up on, and a hot bath with her name on it upstairs. But now that Dakota had made a big deal about her not coming in, Amanda was dying to see the place. As for Gabe’s scandal, there was nothing new to be learned. Did she really need to read yet another opinion piece rehashing the whole the fiasco? She had plenty of opinions of her own, all of which could sit on ice a while longer. “I bet it’s a palace compared to my first apartment in the city. I’d love to take a peek if it won’t be intrusive.”

Dakota thought for a moment before nodding. “Honestly, I’d welcome a little human company. I still don’t have cable hooked up, and I can’t stand silence.”

Amanda grinned. “In that case, I’d be happy to entertain you.”

The apartment door opened into a narrow entryway, with a small powder room immediately to the left and a galley kitchen to the right. Beyond that was a combination dining and living room, though it was mostly piled with moving boxes.

“Considering you just moved in,” Amanda said diplomatically as she looked around, “it’s not bad at all. I love your chaise.”

Dakota eyed the only piece of furniture in the room, an overstuffed chair with a built-in ottoman, and wrinkled her nose. “I thought I was ordering more of a loveseat size, but apparently this is what they call a chair and a half. It seats one person comfortably, or two if they’re chummy. There’s a full-size sofa that will match, but it’s back-ordered, so I won’t get it until after Labor Day.”

“Well, I think it’s charming.” Amanda spun around to take it all in, nostalgia warming her chest. “Being here really does bring back some memories. If you think this is a hovel, you should have seen my first place. I moved up here from DC to work as a production assistant on the nightly news, and I had this shitty place on the Lower East Side. The roaches were so

big I would've made them pay rent, but I was afraid they'd gang up on me and take me down."

"Wasn't that a long commute? I thought you told me anything outside Midtown was off-limits."

"How do you think I gained all that wisdom I so freely shared with you?" Amanda shook her head as she remembered the stubborn young woman she'd been. "That was the only place I could afford without a roommate, and I was so excited to finally feel like a grown-up with a real job."

"This is my first place without roommates," Dakota commented. She might as well have plunged a dagger into Amanda's heart. Talk about feeling old. When she'd moved into that studio on Orchard Street, it had technically still been the twentieth century.

"How about the rest of the tour?" Amanda asked, clearing her throat and pushing thoughts of her advancing age to the back of her mind.

"This is pretty much it," Dakota said with a sheepish expression. "The bedroom's through that door, but all I have is an air mattress."

"Please tell me you have a real bed on the way." Amanda's lower back groaned from the mere mention of sleeping on an air mattress.

"Yes, but it, too, is back-ordered. Naturally. You probably saw the half bath and kitchen on your way in. That narrow, galley-style setup is going to take some getting used to." Dakota moved to stand in the entryway, casting a glance at the small cooking space like the thought of stepping inside made her feel claustrophobic. "I was actually going to brave making dinner in there tonight."

"I thought you didn't have your pots and pans yet."

"I have one sauce pan I brought from Springfield, along with the only knife that didn't belong to my roommate," Dakota explained. "And someone from the network stocked my fridge and cupboards with the essentials, so I have groceries, although I have no idea what I'll make. Grilled

cheese and spaghetti are about all I have skills for, but I'm so sick of takeout."

"Tell you what." Even as Amanda felt her lips start moving and heard her voice speaking, she wasn't entirely sure what she was going to say or why. "How about I help you cook your first meal?"

Yeah. That was kind of what she'd suspected she was going to say. Damn it. So much for the quiet, relaxing evening of reading the news by herself, not tempting fate in any way. As for the why, it was simple. Amanda was a glutton for punishment. Or maybe being alone for two weeks in Montauk without a single shred of sassy banter to keep her on her tiptoes hadn't been as much fun as Amanda told herself it was.

Dakota tilted her head to one side. "You want to spend the evening making dinner? I thought I heard a rumor that you hated doing those cooking segments on your show."

"Doesn't mean I haven't picked up a thing or two while doing them. Why don't I run upstairs and grab a couple things we might need?" The young woman's eyes devoured Amanda as she walked to the door, making Amanda question what was more likely to be on the menu for the evening, food or her. Yet another reason to nip this terrible idea in the bud. Instead, she paused in the hallway and smiled. "I'll be right back."

IN HER MAIN KITCHEN—AS opposed to her breakfast kitchen or the one used exclusively by the catering company she hired when she hosted a party—Amanda quickly spooned out some wet cat food into Cronkite's ceramic food dish. It was the fancy fish stew with cheese sauce he loved, her way of saying sorry to her cat for the unfortunate run-in with Riley, even if it was all his fault for bolting outside of the apartment.

After grabbing a reusable shopping bag, Amanda opened a cupboard and gathered some kitchen essentials. A large skillet. A freshly sharpened chef's knife. Her favorite Microplane

grater. A bottle of the good sesame she got at the Asian market, not that cheap stuff from the supermarket.

Okay, so after fifteen years of gritting her teeth doing cooking segments on *The AM Show*, it was possible her definition of cooking essentials had become skewed.

“Am I high maintenance?” she demanded of her gray floof of a feline, who himself was the very definition of the phrase. “I live in a fourteen thousand square foot penthouse. She sleeps on an air mattress and doesn’t have pots or pans. What can we possibly have in common?”

Cronkite gave a slow blink, as if to say yes, he knew exactly which *she* Amanda had been referring to. Frankly, it came across as a little judgmental, considering he spent most of his day licking his own butt. What did he know about women?

After a quick trip to the bedroom to change into loungewear—comfortable, but hopefully a little more fetching than sweats—she grabbed the shopping bag and added a bottle of wine and a box of dog treats that had been sitting in her kitchen since Christmas because one of the suits at the network was absolutely convinced she had a dog. At the last minute, remembering Dakota’s comment about her phone charger, Amanda grabbed an extra and tossed it in with the rest.

As she waited for the elevator, Amanda fluffed her hair. Then she rolled her eyes. “Get a hold of yourself, old woman. You’re not prepping for a date.”

She had no idea what the hell she *was* doing, but it certainly wasn’t that.

When she reached Dakota’s door, Amanda gave it a tentative tap, as if even her own knuckles weren’t quite sure what she was up to. Having determined, repeatedly, that anything beyond a pleasant coworker relationship between her and Dakota was a terrible idea, why take such an unnecessary risk? When it came to showing restraint, the two of them didn’t exactly have the best track record.

“Come in,” Dakota called out from inside, making it impossible for Amanda to do the smart thing and race back upstairs. “It’s open.”

Standing in the entryway, because the kitchen seemed a little small for a second body, Amanda held out the box of dog biscuits. “A get-well gift from Cronkite.”

“Does your cat cause so many injuries that you have to keep dog treats on hand as bribes?” Dakota shook the box, and Riley’s head popped up from a dog bed that was easily large enough for two human adults. As the dog trotted toward them, Dakota handed Amanda a bone-shaped treat. “Here, you give him one. He’ll be yours forever.”

“I take it he’s a spoiled pup,” Amanda commented, holding out the biscuit while the dog sniffed her hand with his wet nose. “He has a better bed than you do right now.”

“I won’t allow him to suffer,” Dakota said, like the explanation should be obvious. “It wasn’t his choice to move.”

“I suppose that’s fair.” Amanda wouldn’t readily admit it, but she would do the same for Cronky, no matter how annoying he could be. Remembering the rest of the items she’d brought, she held out the bag. “A few dinner supplies, and I brought you a spare phone charger. I remembered you said you couldn’t find yours.”

“You’re better than a neighborhood welcome wagon.” Dakota plugged in the charger right away, jiggling it a few times to make it stick before placing the phone on the kitchen counter. “I’m afraid I still have no idea what to cook.”

“Let me take a look.” After a moment of hesitation, Amanda squeezed into the kitchen, taking a place beside Dakota to peer into a reasonably full pantry. “The shopper did a good job. I’m sure we can come up with something.”

Amanda rifled through the cupboard’s contents, pulling out a package of ramen noodles, a jar of peanut butter, and an assortment of plastic condiment packets from a recent Chinese takeout order. “Any vegetables?”

Dakota swung open the refrigerator, her body so close to Amanda's in the small space she could smell the light floral fragrance of her shampoo or body lotion. Amanda did her best to ignore the heavenly scent as she took a sideways step to avoid a direct collision with Dakota's backside.

"I've got baby carrots," Dakota announced. "I think that's it."

"I can work with that." Amanda did some quick mental planning and then pointed at the shopping bag. "I'll need the grater and the skillet, plus a saucepan filled with water and set on the stove to boil."

"I think I can manage that." Dakota reached for the items in question as she and Amanda began a delicate dance of maneuvering together in the small space. "The water's on the burner. Do you need a bowl?"

"I was just about to ask. Could I also get—" Amanda stopped mid-sentence as Dakota handed her the cutting board she'd been on the verge of requesting. "Perfect. If you can grate the carrots, I'll check the pantry for a can of vegetable stock."

Soon, the kitchen was operating like a well-oiled machine, Dakota anticipating Amanda's needs and fulfilling her requests while Amanda used her creativity to improvise a meal. Within half an hour, she was dishing out two servings of peanut sesame noodles onto paper plates with the aid of a couple of plastic sporks.

"How did you learn to make this?" Dakota asked, marveling at the contents of her plate. "I didn't know you could do anything with ramen but pour boiling water and a flavor packet over it and pretend it's soup."

"It wasn't hard." Amanda shrugged. "I learned the basic recipe from that pioneer cooking lady, and I substituted a little of this or that for what you didn't have."

"It's almost a shame you're too rich not to have to live off ramen anymore," Dakota pointed out, grabbing both plates and

walking into the living room with Amanda trailing behind her. “You’d totally rock being a college student again.”

As Dakota struggled to decide where to put the plates, Amanda grabbed Riley’s oversized dog crate and a big piece of brown paper that had been used for padding in one of the moving boxes. She spread the paper over the crate to make a table and then tossed the two accent pillows from the chaise onto the floor to serve as seats.

“Ta-da!” Amanda gestured to her creation like she was a gameshow host showing off a prize. “Now you have a dining room.”

“You’re surprisingly good at this for a woman who has a mahogany paneled library and a jetted tub with a view of Central Park,” Dakota teased. She put the plates on the table and sank onto one of the pillows with a slight groan that made Amanda feel much better about the way her own muscles and joints were protesting as she tried to take a seat. “Did you have your butler give you a crash course on dining with the peasants?”

“I’ve never had a butler, for the record. And I haven’t always had all that other shit, either. You should’ve seen where I lived right after college, when I was a new reporter covering Capitol Hill in DC.” As Dakota tucked into her food, Amanda closed her eyes, letting her memories play like a projector on the backs of her eyelids. “There were four of us sharing what barely qualified as a house. It had bars on the windows, and whenever anyone turned on a faucet, it sent the mice scurrying inside the walls.”

When Amanda opened her eyes, Dakota had put down her spork and was giving her a funny look, like something Amanda had said was unexpected. “You almost sound like you were fond of the place.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” Amanda leaned forward, enjoying excitement that sparked in Dakota’s eyes at the prospect. “I am fully aware of how ridiculous my apartment is. Nobody needs that much space, especially not a single woman with a cat.”

“It almost sounds like you don’t like it.”

As Amanda’s eyes darted around the small room, she was shocked by the pang of jealousy that shot through her. How magical it was to be in the stage of life Dakota was in, that exciting and chaotic time when everything seems possible. “I’ve gotten used to it.”

“How did you end up there?”

“My ex.” Amanda sighed. “I’d been hosting *The AM Show* for about two years when we started dating. I was renting a two-bedroom condo at the time, which was perfect for me but not ideal for her, especially with Zach. I’d been thinking of buying, and then the real estate market tanked, and it would’ve been stupid not to at that point. We looked at some smaller places—”

“Which would be basically every other piece of real estate in Manhattan,” Dakota interjected, making Amanda laugh.

“You’ve got that right. But Jen wanted it, and the price they were asking was a steal. To be fair, it has been a great investment.” Amanda paused, overcome by a wave of melancholy. Things sure had turned out differently than she thought they would back then. “You don’t know how lucky you are right now, with everything ahead of you.”

“I don’t know about lucky,” Dakota said, scraping the last of the noodles from her plate. She’d inhaled her food, while Amanda had barely made a dent. “I do know I’m pretty much terrified to go to work tomorrow. This has all happened out of the blue, and I feel so unprepared.”

“You know what might help with that? Wine.” Amanda clapped her hands together as she realized the bottle had been left in the kitchen. “I’ll go get it.”

“No, I’ve got it.” Dakota hopped to her feet and grabbed her empty plate. Riley scrambled up, wagging his tail, but Dakota gave him a sad look. “Sorry, bud, but it’s all gone. I even licked the sauce.”

Riley uttered a pathetic whimper before settling onto his bed again. A moment after Dakota disappeared into the

kitchen, her head was back in the doorway. “Shit. I don’t have a corkscrew.”

“It’s a screw top,” Amanda confessed with a grin.

“No way!” Dakota put on a shocked expression. “Ramen noodles for dinner and wine with a screw cap? I really feel like I’m back in college now. I hope you don’t mind, but I’ll be pouring it into plastic cups.”

“Seems appropriate.” After taking a few more bites, Amanda rose and carried her plate to the kitchen. As she passed the giant dog bed, Riley’s head shot up, and he trained his eyes on her leftovers like he was trying to win first place in a begging competition. It took about three seconds before she relented, bending down with her plate. “Okay, but if your mom gets mad at me, I’m blaming you.”

Riley gobbled down the noodles in one big, messy gulp. His tail thumped against the floor as he licked his mouth clean, as if conspiring to hide the evidence. Amanda gave him a pat on the head before moving on.

Inside the kitchen, Dakota had just finished filling two red cups with wine.

“I hope you’re not insulted by the lack of cork.” Even though Amanda knew it wasn’t an issue, she still felt the need to apologize, as if bringing a cheap bottle of wine was beneath her. It was something Jen would probably have thought and made a big deal over.

Dakota, however, gave her a look like she’d sprouted a second head. “Are you kidding? It’s probably still better than what I usually get. And I did a whole segment on the wine industry last year where I learned screw caps can be better sometimes, depending on the wine.”

Amanda let out a relieved breath, amazed at how quickly the tension flowed out of her with Dakota’s easygoing acceptance. “I always tell people that, and no one believes it. Honestly, price has little to do with quality. When it’s only me, I go for simple. This is one of my favorites.”

“It’s a good choice,” Dakota said, turning the bottle and studying the label. “This one made the Top Twelve of Summer list last month, if I remember correctly. Although I have to admit I’m more a craft beer kinda gal myself.”

“Are you?” Amanda’s eyebrows jumped up. “I wish I’d known. I love the stuff, especially a good porter or stout. In fact, I’ve got at least half a dozen different ones upstairs right now. I guess I assumed, since you seemed to know a lot about wine back at the wedding, that was your preference.”

“I know it sounds weird,” Dakota said, her cheeks turning a faint pink that Amanda thought might have come from mentioning their shared time at the wedding, “but wine falls under the agriculture beat. We covered it on the *Rooster Report* quite a few times, and I have a good memory. That’s all.”

Amanda took one of the plastic cups and held it up to clink against the side of Dakota’s. “Cheers.”

“The good news about plastic cups,” Dakota pointed out with a mischievous look on her face, “is you can fit half a bottle in each one. Cheers.”

Amanda took a slow sip. As the deep red liquid burned the back of her throat, she knew she should head home. The only problem was, she had no desire to go. “I have an idea. Why don’t we sit in the living room and watch some clips of the graveyard—I mean, *The Early Bird Show*? I can talk you through them, help you feel more prepared.”

“Would you?” Dakota’s face lit up, though whether it was more because of Amanda’s offer or the prospect of not ending their evening together so soon, Amanda wasn’t certain. She shouldn’t care. But part of her hoped it was the latter. “I don’t have a TV, but we can sit on the chaise, and I can prop up my laptop on our makeshift table. I might still have some M&Ms in my computer bag.”

“You and M&Ms,” Amanda teased.

“What?” Dakota’s posture and tone grew defensive. “They’re the perfect candy for a summer road trip. They’re

practically guaranteed to melt in your mouth, not in your hands.”

“They’re chocolate. If it gets hot enough, I’m sure they’d melt.”

“Okay, honestly, they usually don’t last long enough for me to test the theory, but do you know what happens to gummy sharks in a hot car?”

“I’m not sure I want to,” Amanda replied, stifling a laugh. Dakota’s expression softened into something sweet but inscrutable, making Amanda knit her brow. “What is it?”

“Nothing. It’s just I’m really glad we’re both able to be mature enough to put our past behind us and spend time together as friends. It makes moving to a new place a little easier.”

Friends? Amanda nodded like it was no big deal, but after Dakota left the room to retrieve her laptop, a lump settled into Amanda’s stomach. Was friendship something Amanda even knew how to do? Her closest confidants were Gabe and Howard, a couple of old guys with whom she shared a passion for news.

Amanda and Dakota certainly shared much more than that, but that was half the reason to be concerned. The passions they had in common could be their undoing, and they were about as easy to control as the incoming tide.

Become friends with Dakota? It sounded lovely. There was only one catch. She might have sixteen years on this woman, but Amanda had serious reservations as to whether she possessed the maturity necessary to pull off such an impossible feat.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IT TOOK LESS THAN TEN SECONDS OF SITTING SIDE BY SIDE ON the chaise for Dakota to realize that when it came to keeping things *just friends* with Amanda Morgan, she wasn't nearly as mature as she'd wanted to believe. The slightest brush of her hand across Amanda's thigh, completely innocent and unintentional, sent her body into a flurry of excitement that was becoming all too familiar.

"Do you want me to look online for the clips?" Amanda offered, shifting closer to the computer, her hip pressing into Dakota's. "Oh, sorry."

"No problem. It's fine." Dakota turned her head, knowing the surge of heat that had started in her nether regions was already making her cheeks flush.

As Amanda busied herself with finding the video, Dakota stole a glance at the back of her neck, her fingers itching to trace its graceful lines. She wanted to caress Amanda's shoulders, slide her hands down her arms until their fingers were tangled together. As she breathed in, she could almost smell the perfume Amanda had been wearing the night they'd met, even though Dakota was pretty sure she wasn't wearing it tonight. The memory of it was torture.

"Here it is." Amanda clicked the play button before settling against the chaise's soft back. They were shoulder to shoulder, and Dakota held her breath, not wanting to call attention to this fact in case it inspired Amanda to move.

Just friends, she reminded herself. Yeah, right. Who was she kidding?

“Is that Allie?” Dakota pointed to the screen, trying to focus her attention on the task at hand instead of letting her mind wander to the dangerous places it wanted to go. “I don’t think I recognize the cohost.”

“Janice,” Amanda supplied.

“The one who got fired.” Dakota’s pulse fluttered, her stomach tightening. “What if the same thing happens to me?”

“Janice broke one of the cardinal rules of being a female in broadcasting. She turned forty. Then her plastic surgeon botched a job. Like, cat woman bad.” Amanda drew closer, running her fingertip along Dakota’s cheek. Dakota’s breath hitched. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“Not yet, anyway.” Instead of moving away, Dakota’s face inched closer until she could almost taste Amanda’s lips on her tongue. The seconds stretched into an eternity, but neither pulled away. At this rate, a kiss was nearly inevitable. “We’re doing it again.”

“I noticed.” It was worth noting Amanda did nothing to put distance between them.

“What should we do about it? Because there are arguments for and against.”

“Are you suggesting we should hold a formal debate to decide whether we kiss again?” Amanda tilted her head to one side, her mouth twisting into a smirk. “Okay. I’ll start. On the arguments against, we work together.”

“I would counter that argument by pointing out we’re not cohosts, so we wouldn’t be breaking any rules.”

“True,” Amanda allowed. “That is a key distinction.”

“Of course, we’re not hormonal teenagers, either.”

“Speak for yourself.” Amanda waggled her eyebrows, thereby winning the argument by virtue of turning Dakota’s brain into mush.

“There’s just one thing,” Dakota said, “before we take this any further. No one can know. I don’t want people to think I got my job because I fucked Amanda Morgan.”

“I thought this was a debate about kissing,” Amanda teased.

“Uh…” Dakota’s mouth went dry.

“I wouldn’t want anyone to think that, either.” Amanda swept a lock of hair behind Dakota’s ear. “But you know that, thanks to Gabe’s stupidity, the powers that be will be studying everyone and everything under a microscope for quite some time.”

“Meaning it won’t be easy to fly under the radar.” It was no longer the thought of hosting a national network morning show in a few hours’ time that made Dakota’s head spin. It was the prospect of kissing Amanda right now.

“No, it won’t be.” Amanda’s eyes radiated intensity, her breathing shallow. Was she frightened or really turned on? “Give me a reason why we should risk it.”

There was Dakota’s answer. If Amanda was asking to be talked into something this ill-advised, she was definitely turned on. Dakota found she was happy to oblige with as many reasons as she could to advance the argument. “For one thing, I’m no longer freaking out about my debut tomorrow.”

“That’s a good reason. Mental health is important.” Amanda cupped Dakota’s cheek.

Dakota leaned into it, only able to coo in agreement.

“What if we decide right now that this will be the last time?” Amanda proposed.

“The last time kissing?” It was Dakota’s turn to tease.

“No, we’d have to do more than kiss, I think.” Amanda ran the tip of her tongue across her bottom lip. “We’d have to really get it out of our systems, not stop until we’re both completely spent.”

That sounded heavenly, except…

“Then never again?” Though it shouldn’t have been, the thought of such finality was like a dagger to Dakota’s heart.

“It was just an idea.” Amanda’s voice wavered, and there was a flicker of doubt in her eyes.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be so hasty in setting firm limits.” By now, they were no more than a whisper apart. Dakota’s body trembled. “Don’t you think?”

“Honestly, I’m having a hard time concentrating when all I want to do is—” Amanda captured Dakota’s mouth with her own. The kiss was soft at first but built rapidly in intensity until, without thinking, Dakota forced Amanda onto her back on the chaise. Amanda gazed up into Dakota’s eyes, sending her temperature soaring.

“I can’t think at all when you look at me like that,” Dakota confessed. “I can’t seem to stop myself when I’m around you, either. I want to—” Dakota nibbled on Amanda’s earlobe, dipping her tongue inside, bringing forth an excited whimper.

“What else?” Amanda urged.

“This—” Dakota unbuttoned Amanda’s shirt, claiming every inch of exposed skin with her mouth. Not wanting to figure out the logistics of getting Amanda’s bra off in such a cramped space, let alone waste precious seconds, Dakota pushed Amanda’s bra upward, giving her access to an already very excited nipple. Beneath her own shirt, Dakota knew she was the same. While they’d indulged in debating, their bodies had known the outcome from the start.

Clamping her mouth onto Amanda’s breast, Dakota sank her teeth into the hard nub. They both moaned in something approaching ecstasy.

“You could do that all night,” Amanda said, the look in her eyes revealing this was nothing but the truth.

Dakota took it as a challenge, plying the nipple with her tongue, hardening it to the point where it might burst. Since she didn’t want the other one to feel left out, Dakota licked and nipped her way to the lonely nipple and repeated the process.

Amanda pressed her head deeper into the corner of the chair, her face sinking out of view under the throw pillow. While it was clear she was enjoying every bit of what they were doing, her gyrating hips said she wanted more. Dakota was ever so willing to give Amanda what she wanted.

Moving along Amanda's stomach, Dakota marveled at how intoxicating this woman's body was. How could anyone expect her to keep her hands off this divine creature? This might be their third time together, but Dakota already knew she wanted a thousand more. Actually, even that wouldn't be enough.

Dakota maneuvered to the side to tug the clothes that were truly an obstacle to fulfilling the need that increased exponentially with every tick of her heart. Amanda lifted her midsection, and Dakota's body clenched with anticipation. It wasn't the first time she would taste Amanda, but she never knew if it might be the last.

Better make it count.

Dakota's mouth edged closer and closer to the money spot, her brain memorizing as much as humanly possible to replay this moment for the rest of her life, because she was absolutely certain of one thing.

She would always want Amanda Morgan.

There was something else she was starting to understand, just a hint, but it was there. This wasn't simply lust but something deeper. The more time she spent with the woman, the harder it was to imagine not having her there. They got along beautifully, fell into easy conversation at the drop of a hat. There was a danger to getting so close that they might accidentally push things too far. Dakota usually kept her heart locked safely away in situations like this, but the way things were going, it wouldn't be long before Amanda figured out the combination to open it wide. What then?

Dakota didn't want to think about it now. That wasn't what tonight was about.

When her tongue flicked Amanda's clit, every part of Dakota's body lit up with excitement. Tonight was about trying to work this out-of-control attraction from their systems so they could avoid putting their careers in jeopardy. Even so, Dakota would have to make sure to triple-check that lock on her heart before things got more complicated than they already were.

"Fuck!" Dakota bolted upright. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"What's wrong?" Amanda tossed out her arm, patting the chaise in several spots before landing on Dakota's leg.

"I fell asleep before I could set my alarm." Dakota's heart was racing so fast she could barely tell where one beat ended and the next began. "What time is it?"

"I'm a woman of many talents," Amanda said, her voice thick with sleep, "but having a clock in my head isn't one of them. You'll have to check your phone."

Tugging her hands through her hair, Dakota padded into the kitchen. She flipped on the light, squinting as her pupils contracted to the size of pinholes. When she tried to unlock her phone, nothing happened. "Fuck!"

"You already said that." Amanda came into the kitchen, studying her with a bemused look. "A few times."

"My phone's dead." Dakota jiggled the cord of the charger Amanda had loaned her. After a few tries, a picture of an empty battery lit up the otherwise blank screen. "The connection was loose last night, but I thought I got it."

"Hold on. Let me find mine."

It wasn't until Amanda returned to the living room and bent over to retrieve her pants in order to check the pockets that it truly dawned on Dakota's sleepy brain that the woman was naked. Dakota glanced down. So was she. They'd done it again. Somehow, every time she and Amanda were alone in a room for more than a few minutes, they ended up having sex.

“It’s 3:00 a.m.,” Amanda announced, standing upright and giving her neck a crack.

“Oh, no. I’m supposed to be meeting Joe downstairs right now to head to the studio.” Dakota thought she might hyperventilate. Her first day on the job, and she was making a total mess of it. “I don’t even have enough juice in my phone to send him a text that I’m running late.”

By now, Amanda had slipped back into her shirt and pants, though she hadn’t bothered with the underwear or bra. “I’ll let him know.”

“You can’t do that,” Dakota argued. Now that Amanda was no longer naked, Dakota’s brain seemed to be functioning slightly better, enough to know there were red flags waving all around her. “Won’t that look... bad?”

“From my viewpoint, it looks pretty scrumptious.” Amanda grinned, which was when Dakota realized she was still completely naked.

She whacked Amanda’s arm. “Be serious. If you send Joe a text from your phone on my behalf, he’ll know something’s up.”

“Please trust me about Joe. He’ll never tell a soul. Now, why don’t I go make some coffee while you dig around for something to wear?”

“You’re a lifesaver.” There was no need for digging. Dakota had chosen the blouse and slacks she planned to wear on her first day before she’d left Illinois. They were hanging in her bedroom closet, and she put them on in record time. When she emerged, Amanda greeted her with a coffee. “Did I say lifesaver before? I meant goddess.”

“You look nice.” It was the simplest of compliments, but even so, it made Dakota glow from the inside.

“Thanks.” Dakota sipped her coffee, closing her eyes as she inhaled the heady aroma. “I know they’ll have clothes for me, and someone to do my hair and makeup, but I didn’t want to show up looking like a slob.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m nervous,” Dakota admitted. “My old show didn’t have anywhere near the same audience size. And after the network promoted my debut all last week, I keep thinking, what if I suck?”

Amanda took both of Dakota’s hands into hers. “Remember, your audience is the size of one. You’re simply having a conversation with a friend at a coffee shop. Be yourself, and it’ll go great. The worst thing you can do is think too much about the stuff you can’t control. Just be you, Dakota Washington. Most will tell you I’m a difficult woman, but you’ve won me over a few times now.”

“Only a few?” Dakota winked.

“Yes, channel that energy. Pretend you’re talking to me.” Amanda let go of her hands. “Are you ready to go? Joe will ring in—there he is.”

“Tell him I need two seconds.” Dakota dashed into the bathroom, swiped her toothbrush across her teeth, and sprinted to the front door. “Okay. I think I’m ready.”

“You’ll do great.”

As Dakota opened the door, Riley jumped up from his bed and trotted to join her. Dakota’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh God. I haven’t fed him or taken him outside to pee.”

“Where’s the leash?” Amanda scanned the hallway, her eyes landing on the leash that hung from a hook near the door. “Never mind. I see it. You get going. I’ll take him down in a minute. Is his food in the kitchen?”

Dakota nodded, feeling like the worst dog mom in the world. “His kibble bowl is almost full, but he usually gets a can of wet food in the morning. Maybe I should—”

“Go. You should go.” Amanda put her hand on Dakota’s back and steered her out the door. “Is this your spare key hanging next to the leash? I’ll take care of Riley and lock up when I’m done.”

Standing in the hallway, Dakota pulled Amanda into an embrace and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I’m pretty sure even *goddess* doesn’t cover it now.”

The black SUV from the studio was waiting in front of the building when Dakota got downstairs. As Joe opened the car door, he simply said, “A lovely start to the week.”

Is he being friendly, Dakota wondered, or is there a hidden message? She would have to trust Amanda that he wouldn’t say a word. Blocking those worries from her mind, Dakota closed her eyes. She tried to focus on the upcoming workday, but so many delicious thoughts of the previous day flitted behind her eyelids that she barely registered Joe saying they’d arrived.

Jenny, the executive producer on the show, greeted Dakota at the elevator.

Dakota’s heart skipped a beat. “Is something wrong? Am I in trouble for being late?”

“Of course not.” The EP steered Dakota to a dressing room where a sheet of paper with her name printed on it had been taped to the door. Beneath it, Dakota was pretty sure she could make out Charlene’s name. “I know you’re probably nervous for your first day, but I’m here to tell you everything will be A-OK.”

“Great. Thanks.” The knot in Dakota’s stomach tied itself a little tighter. She knew Jenny was trying to reassure her, but all it did was cause every worst-case scenario to scroll through her brain. When it came to possible methods of failure and self-destruction, she’d had no idea how imaginative she could be.

There was a tap on the doorframe, and Dakota looked over to see her new cohost, Allie, standing in the open doorway. The woman, who was already fully dressed with hair and makeup done, gave her a wave.

“Hey, there. We didn’t really get a chance to talk when you were in the studio for your interview, so I wanted to stop by first thing and say hello.”

“That’s so sweet.” Recalling how distraught Allie had been at their last meeting, Dakota added, “How are you holding up? This must’ve been such a difficult time for you.”

“It has been. The whole Charlene thing was quite the shock. But we’re like a family here at *Early Bird*, and we’re all getting through it together as best we can.” After a brief pause, Allie asked, “Do you have plans on Friday?”

“Not that I know of. Why?”

“A bunch of us are going out for drinks. Jenny, Marcy, Pedro, Steph, and a few others. Want to join us?”

“I’d love to.” Dakota beamed. As worried as she’d been about not fitting in, it appeared to have been for nothing. She’d have to let Deke know her new cohost and crew were welcoming her with open arms.

“Before I forget, I’m really sorry I wasn’t much use for you when you came into town. Being forced to spend so much time with Dragon Lady could not have been fun.”

“You mean Amanda?” Dakota tensed, wondering where this conversation was headed.

“She’s notorious,” Allie replied, not bothering to lower her voice. Clearly, she had no fear of repercussions from being overheard.

“Who is?” asked Marcy, the production assistant Dakota had met when she’d come to interview.

“Ms. Morgan.” The way Allie said it left little doubt she was not referring to Amanda this way out of respect.

Marcy shuddered, like she’d had a sudden chill. “Notorious is right. We had a new assistant start last week, and she’s already heard every single horror story from the rest of the admin pool about working for *you know who*.”

Geez. Marcy might as well have referred to Amanda as *She Who Shall Not Be Named*, like the villain in the Harry Potter series. Dakota was tempted to tell them Amanda had been nothing but kind, giving her advice and such, except her memory flashed back to waking up naked beside the woman in question, and she decided it wasn’t in her best interest to comment.

“Just be glad your time with her is over,” Allie said in a conspiratorial tone. “You won’t have any reason to interact with her again.”

“Does she not come down to the set?” Dakota asked, not sure whether she wanted the answer to be yes or no.

“She’s not the type to roam the halls giving pep talks to the little people.” Allie snuffled, as if the very idea of Amanda doing such a thing made her laugh. “Hell, she was barely in the building long enough to do her own job for a while, let alone care what anyone else was doing.”

“Oh?” Dakota knew all about this but raised an eyebrow inquisitively, as if all this gossip was news to her.

Allie took the bait. “Two years ago, when her wife left her, she was phoning everything in. I thought for sure they were going to fire her, but in the end, poor Howard got the axe instead.”

An interesting take on it. Considering how bad the old man’s memory had gotten, even those who weren’t avid fans of the show knew why Howard had to go. He’d literally caught himself on fire during one of the cooking segments. Dakota found it fascinating that Allie would overlook those details and almost imply Amanda was responsible for her cohost getting fired.

In other words, if Dakota knew what was good for her, she should never even hint that she and Amanda had a past together that wasn’t strictly professional in nature.

“I checked out your outfit for today,” Allie said, apparently tired of bad-mouthing Amanda for the time being. “I have to say bravo to wardrobe. You’re going to look incredible. I wish I had your hair color. No matter how hard my stylist tries, I can’t be that shade of blonde.”

“Oh, thanks.” Dakota almost felt dizzy at how quickly the conversation had turned from gossip to flattery.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Allie rattled on. “I’ve started seeing someone recently. It’s kinda hush-hush, and I know it’s

early days, but he's taken me out for dinner almost every night since Charlene. How sweet is that?"

"He sounds like a keeper." Honestly, Dakota wasn't sure what to say. This woman was exhausting with all her chatter, as if they were the best of friends going back years. Thankfully, Dakota was rescued from a blow-by-blow of Allie's new relationship when the makeup person arrived to perform his magic.

"I'd better let you get ready. See you on set!"

Much to Dakota's relief, Allie left the dressing room. But maybe this was part of preparing to host the show together. Think and talk about nothing in particular to get into the friend zone so America would believe the schtick. Aside from the comments about Amanda, Dakota thought she and Allie could probably become friends. And the rest of the crew seemed great. Maybe Dakota would fit in here, after all, despite her panic earlier.

Sooner than she would have liked, Dakota walked onto the set. Marcy showed her to a seat at the news desk, right beside Allie's. There was a hustle as everyone took their places. Dakota could see the show's new intro playing, the one with her name and face where Charlene's had been.

In her earpiece, she heard a woman's voice—Jenny, maybe—doing the countdown for when they were live. "Five, four, three—"

Dakota counted along in her head. *Two. One.*

"Good morning, America. I'm Allie Day, and I'm excited to introduce you to my new cohost of *The Early Bird Show*, Dakota Washington."

Right as Dakota was about to speak, Amanda stepped into view off set. Seeing her so unexpectedly, Dakota's brain shut down. Try as she might, the letters on the teleprompter wouldn't form recognizable words, and even though she'd run through this bit ad nauseam every day during the past two weeks, Dakota couldn't recall one word of what she was supposed to say.

Instead, she opened her mouth and issued a loud and painfully realistic *cock-a-doodle-doo*.

It was an impression that would rival a prize-winning rooster, and Dakota should know, because she'd gone head-to-head with ten roosters at the Illinois State Fair last year. The only problem was, she was no longer hosting the *Cock-a-doodle Rooster Report*, which meant this sudden outburst of hers had to make her look like a mental patient.

Shit.

She might not have turned forty or had a botched face-lift like Janice had, but Dakota was pretty sure she'd figured out a darn good way to get herself fired her first day on the job.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“AND, WE’RE OUT!”

As soon as Amanda heard the magic words through her earpiece, she bolted from her chair, intent on hightailing it to her dressing room before anyone could waylay her. It had been a hell of a first day back, made all the more stressful because she’d unexpectedly had to carry the show all on her own. Apparently, her idiot cohost had decided showing up for work was optional.

“Ms. Morgan?” Her assistant, Cyndie, was headed toward her with an expression Amanda couldn’t place at first. When she realized it was pure terror at having to talk to her, Amanda stopped in her tracks, a sudden sense of shame overtaking her. What would Dakota think of her if she happened to walk in and saw someone looking at Amanda like that?

“What is it, Cyndie?” Amanda softened her tone as much as she could, taking extra care not to snap at the woman as she so often had done in the past. The effect on her assistant’s demeanor was instant, her fear disappearing, replaced by a spark of confidence Amanda hadn’t suspected the woman possessed. It made Amanda feel like even more of a jerk.

“I’ve been told to let you know you’re wanted upstairs.”

“When?” Amanda struggled to keep her tone neutral in the face of the unwanted news. She needed to check on Dakota, who no doubt was still mortified over that “crowing like a rooster” incident because goodness, as hilarious as Amanda had found it, the woman *had* crowed like a fucking rooster.

Who did that? Lucky for Dakota, social media was eating it up.

A tiny bit of fear crept back into Cyndie's eyes. "I believe *yesterday* was the exact word that was used."

Amanda swallowed the harsh words she had been about to let loose, instead drawing a deep breath. "Any idea why?"

Cyndie gave an apologetic shrug. "I'm just an admin. Nobody really pays much attention to me."

Including me, Amanda reprimanded herself. She knew full well she'd been terribly hard on all her assistants, to the point of churning through them at a rate of one per quarter. For some reason, the possibility of having Dakota witness such behavior was like having a bucket of ice water poured over her head. *I can—no, must do better.*

Changing course, Amanda bypassed her dressing room and went directly to the elevator. When the doors slid open, there stood Dakota, looking shell-shocked. That cock-a-doodle-doo blunder had hit her even harder than Amanda had suspected.

"Just the person I wanted to see." Amanda stepped inside, a cheery smile on her face, preparing to recite the pep talk she'd been rehearsing in her head since witnessing Dakota's less-than-stellar start to the morning.

"Are you going to escort me to my execution?"

Amanda raised an eyebrow at Dakota's dramatic interpretation of what was little more than a minor faux pas. She should know, since Amanda nearly fell into a space crater on live TV. "What do you mean?"

"I've been called upstairs." Dakota twisted a handful of her pant leg between her fingers. "That can only mean they're going to fire me. What else would they want to talk to me about?"

Amanda hunched her shoulders as the back of her neck tingled. "You've been called upstairs right now?"

"According to the messenger, I was wanted yesterday."

“I got the *exact* same message.” Amanda’s muscles clenched as her mind raced to find an explanation. There was only one that made sense. She whispered in a barely audible voice, keeping her expression neutral and trying to not move her lips, “Someone’s spotted us together and informed on us.”

Dakota’s face went white. “I knew Joe—”

Amanda put a finger to her lips and then jerked her head to where she suspected a camera was hidden. “Not here or anywhere in the building.”

Dakota swallowed, her eyes growing wide. She didn’t say another word until the elevator reached the top floor.

The usual suspects were assembled in the boardroom when they arrived, with Wyatt and Ken flanking Franklin Senior as they always did. Amanda also couldn’t help but notice how both department heads, wearing identical dark suits, resembled eager vultures waiting on the sickly beast between them to finally kick the bucket. It was hardly a secret they were both after the top dog’s job, but somehow it was even more pronounced today.

“Please, sit.” Franklin pointed to the chairs on the other side of the table.

“I’m really sorry about the rooster thing,” Dakota blurted as she pulled out her chair, unable to hold it in even long enough to sit. She looked so anxious Amanda made a silent prayer the woman wouldn’t cock-a-doodle-doo again.

“Are you kidding me?” asked Ken, slapping a hand on his thigh. “That made for great television.”

“You’re not mad?” Dakota stuttered.

“Mad?” Ken looked like a kid at Christmas. “This morning’s clip already has a million hits. That rooster thing was bloody brilliant!”

Dakota slid her eyes to Amanda and then back to the suits, like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Amanda shouldn’t have been surprised at how delighted Ken was. He was the entertainment guy. When it came to the news, his primary question was whether they could do it in the nude.

“This isn’t about that,” Franklin said, looking even more dour than normal. “I have some bad news...” His voice trailed off, and for a second, both of the department heads seemed to show a flicker of sympathy. Franklin cleared his throat and pressed on. “Junior’s had a, uh... car accident.”

“My God.” Amanda pressed her hand to her mouth. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Wyatt waved it away like it wasn’t a big deal. “He’s fine.”

“His Corvette, on the other hand...” Ken winced. The cavalier attitudes of both executives hinted there was more to this story than was being told.

Franklin Senior’s jaw hardened. “He’s going to be taking... Uh, he’s going to Malibu for rest. Try to soothe his overwrought nerves.”

Bingo. The combination of Malibu and the word *rest* translated to exactly one thing: rehab. Whatever had happened to Franklin Junior and his Corvette, there had to have been a chemical component to it.

“I see.” Amanda maintained a passive tone, but in her head, she did a quick calculation of recent calamities.

In the past few weeks, one prominent member of the news team had been killed in a plane crash, another had gone on a bender serious enough to wreck his car and send him to rehab, and a third had put the network at risk by running an easily disproven and totally bogus news story about the husband of a man who might soon be President of the United States. No wonder Wyatt and Ken were licking their lips with an air of frustration, not quite able to take their first bite of Franklin Senior’s bloated carcass but counting the days until the inevitable happened.

“Which means we need a new cohost for *The AM Show*.” Franklin pasted on a brave face, though he must’ve reached the same conclusion Amanda had. He was a dead man walking.

Please don't say Allie was the only thought that entered Amanda's head. That woman traded gossip like baseball cards. If she got so much of a whiff of Amanda and Dakota's dalliances, it would spell disaster. Anyone else would be fine, but not her. Hell, Amanda would rather host the show alone until Franklin Junior's return. She was about to say as much when Wyatt spoke up.

"What do you say, Ms. Washington?" His tone was jovial, but there was an odd tightness to his lips.

"Huh?" Dakota's jaw dropped, and she looked like she'd barely recognized her own name. "What do I say about what?"

"Given Dakota's stunning debut today," Ken jumped in to explain, "we felt she was a natural fit. Plus, viewers loved it when Dakota pulled Amanda from that smoking crater a while back."

In other words, Ken had decided a million clicks on a woman crowing like a rooster was an untapped goldmine, and he'd talked the old guy into seeing it his way. Amanda studied Wyatt a little closer, becoming even more convinced of it. He appeared to want nothing more than to shove his fist into Ken's ear, as if maybe that would get through to the man who only cared about social media buzz.

"Come on. Say you'll do it," Ken encouraged.

"Me?" Dakota squeaked.

"Yes." Franklin nodded, shooting an approving look to Ken. It was further proof that Amanda's take on the situation was correct. "It's unusual to promote someone to the major leagues on their first day, but we have to do something. I don't think I need to tell any of you Tim Ross is pissed."

"Who's Tim Ross?" Dakota whispered.

"He's God," Amanda whispered back.

"Mr. Ross owns the parent company that owns the network," Wyatt explained. "He mostly stays in the shadows, but—"

“If we don’t turn this place around,” Franklin Senior’s tone was ominous, “all of our heads will roll.”

Well, *his* certainly would. But given how little respect she had these days for either of the two suits in line to take his place, Amanda wasn’t certain whether to cheer on Franklin’s demise or try to stop it. Wyatt was somewhat of an ally, even if he had been promising her the nighttime news desk job for over a decade without lifting so much as a finger to deliver on it. Ken, on the other hand, was the kind of guy who, if put in charge of the network as a whole, would do his best to incorporate wet T-shirts and hot tubs into the evening news.

The three men rose from the table simultaneously. Wyatt held out his hand to Dakota.

“Welcome aboard,” Wyatt said, assuming Dakota would take the job, even though she had not, in fact, accepted.

“Thank you.” Dakota looked even more shell-shocked than she had earlier, if such a thing were possible.

“When is she starting exactly?” Amanda asked, since so far no one had bothered to share that detail.

“Tomorrow,” Franklin Senior said, turning to leave the room through the far door. He stopped after a few steps and turned back around. “Oh, before I forget, you both need to schedule a time to speak to the internal affairs investigators.”

“What investigators?” Amanda’s heart raced. Had someone reported her and Dakota after all, and they were only now getting around to mentioning it? Of course, they weren’t cohorts at the time, so they hadn’t broken any rules.

Tomorrow, that would be a different story.

“It’s about Gabe,” Wyatt said, casting his eyes from side to side, almost as if he was afraid someone was listening in. “It appears those fake documents he relied on for his report were an inside job.”

“He was set up?” Amanda’s insides turned to ice. This was infinitely worse than being reprimanded for her sex life. A traitor inside the network was a big fucking deal.

“Appears that way.” Wyatt looked like he wanted to throw up, and Amanda couldn’t blame him. Whoever was responsible, as head of the news department, he would be blamed. “Everyone will be questioned.”

Amanda sensed Dakota’s eyeballs, but this wasn’t the time to answer any questions. Instead, Amanda simply replied, “Yes, of course. Anything you need.”

With that, the meeting ended, and Amanda and Dakota headed for the elevator. When the doors closed, Amanda whispered, “We’ll discuss this later, when we’re outside the building.”

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, as Amanda and Dakota were being shown to a table at the little-known Italian restaurant they’d chosen for dinner—an out-of-the-way place in Brooklyn where they wouldn’t risk encountering anyone they knew—Amanda’s brain and heart were duking it out. To say the morning’s surprise announcement that Dakota would be joining *The AM Show* had thrown a wrench into the works was putting it mildly. A cohost, even a temporary one, was off-limits. Amanda’s self-preservation had sounded the warning Klaxon immediately, telling her to duck tail and run.

But her feelings were another matter.

Not that she was falling in love with Dakota or anything remotely that unreasonable. They’d only just met. Besides, after watching Gabe and Howard make disasters of their personal lives time and again, not to mention a failed marriage of her own, Amanda had learned the hard way she could have a career or a relationship, not both. She’d chosen her career once and for all the day Jen left two years ago, and it was far too late to change course now.

But Amanda wasn’t made of stone, and just because she knew she shouldn’t have something didn’t mean she knew how to stop herself from thinking about it. Or wanting it.

She liked Dakota. They had fun together. Ever since Dakota had come crashing onto the scene, Amanda's life had become less predictable and more enjoyable. She had someone she could talk to, who intimately understood the world she inhabited. Going back to her solitary, pre-Dakota days held little appeal.

And that was *before* taking any of their bedroom activities into consideration.

Seeing as how her eyes were stuck to Dakota's backside like they'd been put there with superglue, it was safe to say Amanda's libido was fighting hard for its vote to be counted, making things even harder to process. But process she must and quickly. Dakota was about to become her cohost, and that changed everything. Both their careers were riding on them figuring out a way forward they could live with.

Amanda would have to get Dakota to see reason. The sex had to stop. They'd be better off as friends, anyway. If Amanda told herself that another thousand times, she might even believe it.

"I'm sorry for making you come all the way out here this evening." Amanda waved for Dakota to choose a seat. "But I'm not exaggerating in saying that every part of our building at work could be bugged."

"Why would it be?" There was a healthy dose of skepticism in Dakota's question.

"Because there's paranoid, and then there's Franklin Senior." Amanda held her hand at eye height, raising it above her head to indicate the big boss's over-the-top level of suspicion. "He once called his office from a beach in the Caribbean to tell the cleaning staff not to over water the ficus next to his desk. Turns out he was watching them on a hidden security camera while on vacation."

"That's extreme, but I don't know." Dakota offered one of her killer smiles, causing Amanda's clit to weigh in with a protest vote of its own. "Given that you dragged us all the way to Brooklyn for dinner, you may still be in the running for best tinfoil hat conspiracies."

“Unlike Franklin, I don’t think everyone’s out to get me. Only some people. I’ve had a lot of experience with the network over the years. It’s taught me who to trust and who not to.”

Like Wyatt Bukoski, who had always appeared to Amanda to have a firm grasp on the invisible strings he used to get Franklin Senior to do things his way. Until this morning. Promoting Dakota had obviously been all Ken’s idea, meaning the entertainment division was gaining influence fast. What would this mean for Amanda, whose best shot at another five-year contract had always seemed to include keeping the head of the news division on her side?

The server took their drink orders, and Amanda surfaced from the swirl of work worries long enough to recommend the spaghetti and meatballs, the house specialty.

“Sounds good. I’m in.” Dakota handed over her unopened menu, the sudden exhaustion on her face suggesting that having to put any more thought into her order would push her over the edge.

“You okay?” Amanda’s voice came out much softer than she intended, her own concerns evaporating as she turned her attention to Dakota’s wellbeing.

Dakota let out a long breath. “Let’s see. I forgot to set my alarm, crowed like a rooster on live television, and, in lieu of getting fired, somehow, I got promoted to the most sought-after position in morning news. Then I find out the network is hunting down everything and everyone as part of some massive internal investigation. Oh, and Riley needs a dog walker.”

“Did he have an accident while you were at work?” Amanda grimaced at the thought of pee stains on Dakota’s lovely parquet floors. There would be no quick solution for the rest of Dakota’s troubles, but the dog issue was one Amanda might be able to fix.

“No, he didn’t, but he practically tackled me as soon as I walked through the door to feed him before heading over here. He needs more exercise, and I have the feeling this new

assignment is going to leave me with even less time than before.”

“I know someone who might be able to do it. I’ll send her a text.” Amanda picked up her phone and did just that. Moments later, it pinged with a reply. “Looks like she can start tomorrow.”

“First a new agent, now a dog sitter. I can’t decide if it’s more likely you’re secretly a fairy godmother or you have mafia connections.” Dakota’s eyes wandered the interior of the Italian restaurant, as if the empty chianti bottles hanging from the ceiling might represent all the enemies Amanda had put hits on.

“Kenzie is not part of an organized crime family, I assure you. She’s a fourteen-year-old who lives a few floors down and likes to earn some extra money taking care of dogs and cats.” Amanda frowned at the look of surprise on Dakota’s face. “What?”

“I didn’t expect someone like you would be friendly with the neighbors.”

“Because of my reputation as Dragon Lady?” Amanda wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer. The more she thought about how the gossip about her must sound to someone as naturally, well, *nice*, as Dakota, the more embarrassed Amanda became over how many times she’d landed on the wrong side of the line between tough boss and raging bitch.

“No, more because you live in the penthouse. I guess I assumed you never came into contact with the rest of the residents on the lower floors.”

“Normally, I suppose I wouldn’t.” Amanda leaned across the table, cupping a hand beside her mouth as if about to confide a dark secret. “But Kenzie’s my dealer.”

“Drugs?” Dakota’s mouth gaped.

“Thin Mints.” Amanda smirked. “I met her and her little sister a few years ago when we were doing a segment on a tutoring program for homeless youth that’s funded by proceeds

from the annual cookie sale. Finding out they lived in my building was a happy coincidence, and one I've taken advantage of ever since."

"Wow. I even have a cookie connection now, thanks to you." Dakota laughed. "I'll have to hit her up next cookie season."

"Don't do that." When Dakota raised an eyebrow, Amanda added, "I have a standing order for fifteen hundred boxes that gets delivered to the shelter connected with the tutoring program. Every year, I tell Kenzie I only want one box of Thin Mints for myself, and every year she brings me three of every variety. You would be doing me and my waistline a huge favor if you'd take them out of my sight."

"After all you've helped me with, stealing your cookies is the least I can do," Dakota teased. "If only all our problems were this easy to solve."

"Yes." Amanda's shoulders slumped at the reminder of why they were there. There was no avoiding it any longer. The ballots had been counted, and it was time for the results. Amanda couldn't shake that same sinking feeling she'd had last election cycle as she'd watched *The New York Times*' election night needle swing farther away from her preferred candidate. "I know we joked last night that it might be our last time together, but it seems fate has stepped in and made the final decision."

"No more hanky-panky." Dakota seemed as dejected as Amanda was, despite having received the promotion of a lifetime.

"We're cohosts now. And you and I are alike in at least one regard. Neither one of us wants to risk doing anything to harm our careers. The job comes first." As soon as she'd said it, all of Amanda's traitorous body parts flooded her with a million arguments for why she shouldn't give up too quickly and should maybe consider putting them first, just this once.

"You're right."

Shit. Amanda's heart sank. She didn't want to be right. "I guess we can try looking at the good news. The network focus group loved our interaction at the handover this morning. According to the *experts*"—Amanda made quote marks in the air—"we have great chemistry, we're flirty and fun, and people trust us."

From across the table, Dakota gave her a disbelieving look. "They got all that from a thirty-second clip?"

"That, plus the incident at the crater that went viral." Amanda shifted in her chair, still uncomfortable with the memory of that stupid blunder.

They were interrupted by the return of their server, who poured wine into their glasses with one hand behind his back.

After he left, Dakota said, "I agree with the focus group. I can't help feeling we were meant to sit side by side."

"I couldn't agree more. We'll make a perfect on-air team. But what about, ya know..." Amanda waved for Dakota to fill in the blank with what working together would no longer allow them to do.

Dakota arched an eyebrow. "I don't think that's something we should do on the air, no matter what the focus groups say."

Amanda burst into laughter. "You're terrible."

And adorable. Why did Dakota have to be so adorable? It made this whole situation a lot harder.

"Sorry." A faint pink blush appeared on Dakota's cheeks. "That's what I do when I'm nervous. Make jokes."

"Are you nervous? Here? With me?"

Dakota looked to the side, biting her lower lip. "Yes."

"Why?"

"I tend to say or do something stupid when you're around, or are you forgetting about the rooster incident?"

"That's my fault?" Amanda crossed her arms in mock indignation. "I don't see how it's fair to blame me."

“You distracted me,” Dakota insisted, her eyes flashing but not with anger. No, her expression was one of the many that immediately made Amanda want to take Dakota into her arms and find out exactly how distracting she could be.

Amanda crossed her legs to gain control over what that look in the woman’s eye was doing to her. “I personally found the rooster impersonation oddly endearing. So much so that I think it should be your thing.”

“It’s already an internet meme,” Dakota said with a groan. “What more do you want?”

“I don’t know.” Amanda tapped her index finger playfully against her chin. “Maybe you could record it for me so I can use it as my alarm sound?”

“Wouldn’t you rather have me in your bed in the morning to do it live?”

May Day!

Considering they’d just agreed they couldn’t do this, Dakota was playing with fire. The look on her face told Amanda she was fully aware of that fact and had no remorse. As for Amanda? The truth was she was getting too damned old for regrets. She wished she knew which of the choices before her would leave a bigger scar, putting on the brakes or going full steam ahead into what, at least on the surface, appeared to be a very bad decision. But appearances could be deceiving, right?

“That’s an interesting proposition.” Amanda found herself falling into the depths of Dakota’s eyes, as dangerous as any steaming space crater could possibly be. In all her working years, never had she considered taking such a risk with her career before. But the desire coursing through her veins told her it would take little more than a batting of those long eyelashes to make her throw two decades of caution to the wind. “What about the rules?”

“Oh, hey.”

Amanda’s neck snapped up at the sound of a voice behind her, heart galloping like a racehorse as she turned to see Allie

Day, Dakota's erstwhile cohost and biggest gossip on the planet, staring at her and Dakota with a curious expression that suggested her brain was working overtime to piece together exactly what was going on between them.

"Uh, Allie," Amanda stuttered. How much had the woman heard?

"What a wonderful surprise." The smile on Allie's cherry red lips didn't quite reach her eyes. "What are you two doing here?"

"Business meeting," Dakota answered, smooth as silk and not at all flustered, which was amazing considering Amanda's heart was currently throbbing in her throat. "Have they told you the news about Franklin Junior?"

"Yes." Allie pressed her lips together, her eyes narrowing. She'd heard the news all right, and though she hid the expression almost immediately, Amanda could tell she was less than pleased at the network's choice of replacement. "Congratulations."

Shit. If anyone was going to read something unsavory into Amanda and Dakota having dinner together—and then be inclined to run and tell everyone who would listen—it was Allie. This was beyond bad.

The server approached the table with two steaming plates of spaghetti, but Amanda's appetite had all but vanished with the realization that even if she and Dakota decided to behave like absolute angels from here on out, Allie could still destroy them both if she wanted to.

And why wouldn't she want to?

As senior host of *The Early Bird Show*—along with having a journalism degree and a solid resume as a reporter with a local news program, if Amanda remembered correctly—Allie would've had every reason to expect to be tapped as Amanda's replacement someday. Yet the suits had clearly passed her over in favor of Charlene. Now they'd done it a second time, choosing Dakota instead of Allie to fill in during Franklin Jr.'s absence. If Amanda were in her shoes, she'd be out for blood.

“There you are.” Though Amanda couldn’t see the face of the man who’d spoken, Allie stiffened as his arm snaked around her waist, then withdrew instantly as he seemed to become aware they weren’t alone. “Oh, hello.”

Amanda kept her lips from twisting into a triumphant grin as she made eye contact with James Booth, the head writer and producer on the nightly news. Who was definitely married, and not to Allie. “Hi, James. What are you doing here?”

“Business meeting,” he replied, taking a generous step away from Allie as it seemed to dawn on him he was much too close to her for this cover story to ring true.

Dakota’s eyebrows went up at this familiar refrain. “Us, too.”

“Goodness.” Amanda shifted her gaze from Allie to James and then back to Allie. “I had no idea this little place was becoming so well-known, but it must be getting awfully trendy to draw you two all the way out to Brooklyn.”

If she hadn’t already guessed they were having an affair, the twin expressions of terror on their faces left no doubt. Though she’d grown up during the height of the Cold War, it wasn’t until this precise moment that Amanda fully understood the meaning of the phrase *mutually assured destruction*.

But in the face of almost certain disaster and scandal, that was exactly the gift that had fallen into Dakota’s and her laps. If Allie breathed a word of having seen Amanda and Dakota together, she would be guaranteed to have her own dirty laundry aired all over town.

“Well, it was great seeing you, but our ride is waiting out front.” Booth motioned to the door, through which he and Allie promptly disappeared.

Amanda didn’t let out a breath until the restaurant door closed. “That was close.”

“Too close,” Dakota agreed, visibly shaken by the encounter. “I thought you said no one from the network came out to Brooklyn.”

“Apparently, I overlooked one reason they might.”

“Which is?”

“Not wanting anyone to know you’re on a date with someone other than your wife.”

Dakota pressed her fingers to her mouth, sucking in her breath. “I remember Allie saying she was in a new relationship that was hush-hush. I thought the guy was famous or something.”

“Famous?” Amanda let out a laugh. “He wishes.”

“What do you mean?”

“Booth’s the type who thinks he’s the only smart person in the building. But he works for Gabe, who has an ego as broad as the side of a barn, so he rarely gets much credit.”

“Sounds like a recipe for a Napoleon complex.” Dakota glanced around as if expecting every illicit couple in the greater New York area to waltz by on an endless runway of shame. “Do you think we should go?”

“And, miss the best meatballs you’ll ever have? Not a chance.” Now that she was assured they were in the clear, at least for now, Amanda’s appetite had returned with a vengeance. Her muscles felt weak, trembling as if she hadn’t had protein in days. Fear of discovery can do that to a person.

“Maybe it’s a good thing we ran into them. Before they arrived, I admit I could’ve been tempted...” Dakota’s voice trailed off as she poked at a meatball with the tines of her fork. “We’re agreed that the risk is too great to carry on the way we have been?”

“Definitely.”

On paper, it was the right choice, but the answer left her feeling like crap. There wasn’t any relief at all. Wasn’t doing the right thing supposed to make you feel better? Well, it didn’t.

Amanda twirled some noodles onto her fork and popped them into her mouth. The taste wasn’t as good as she

remembered and left her feeling flat. She ate a few bites, anyway, though her enthusiasm waned with each swallow.

This is how life is going to be now, huh? Fucking fantastic. If it wouldn't have drawn unwanted attention, Amanda would have hurled her fork at the wall.

Dutifully, she continued to eat. Silence descended on the table. Perhaps Dakota was just as miserable, but Amanda was afraid to look up from her plate long enough to find out. When she'd sucked up the last, long strand, she felt Dakota's eyes on her lips. She had no choice but to risk a glance now and was met by an unmistakable hunger in those deep blue eyes. Amanda swallowed, nearly choking on the spicy marinara. All her zest for life seemed to rush back in an instant, but it had nothing to do with the food.

"I was thinking. Want to come over to my place after dinner tonight and watch a movie? As friends, of course." Dakota focused on her plate, as if that would make it harder for Amanda to see through that last part.

But Amanda wasn't a fool. Since when had the two of them ever managed to be in a room alone together for longer than fifteen minutes and not ended up having sex? Never, that was when.

A light sweat broke out on the back of Amanda's neck as she answered, "Sure. I'd love to."

After all, they wouldn't officially be cohosts for another twelve hours.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DRUMMING HER FINGERS SILENTLY ON THE NEWS DESK AS SHE waited for rehearsal to wrap up, Dakota cast a glance at Amanda. In her signature black suit, blonde hair pulled back in a loose chignon—the type that gave the impression it might free itself from its final pin and come cascading down her shoulders at any moment but, in reality, would hold that way through a category four hurricane—Amanda was the picture of calm professionalism as she practiced her voiceover for the opening.

Meanwhile, Dakota was distracted beyond all reason imagining the myriad of ways she could ruffle the woman's composure. A nip of the earlobe. A squeeze of that sensitive spot about three inches up from the knee. What Dakota wouldn't give to see Amanda come undone at the news desk the same way she did when they were alone together. Sitting so close for hours on end and not being able to run a hand along her back or place a gentle kiss on her neck was a torture that had only increased in intensity with each passing moment. Just because Dakota knew she had to behave didn't mean she wanted to.

It was Friday, Dakota's fourth day as cohost and the last before the weekend, but somehow it felt like she'd been working nonstop for a year. Everything about this gig was like her old show on steroids. For Dakota, one of the trickiest technical aspects of her new job was what Amanda was doing now. Unlike on the *Rooster Report*, where both the audio and video for featured segments were recorded together ahead of

time, *The AM Show* producers preferred to do whatever they could live.

While video was often shot days ahead on location, the commentary was done by the hosts in the studio as the segment aired. This meant that with only a few minutes to spare before showtime, she and Amanda had to learn to pace each word to fit the precise length of the video. It was enough to make Dakota want to pull her hair out, but not Amanda. After a single attempt, she gave a quick nod, saying she was ready to move on.

“Time to go out and greet the adoring public.” Amanda gestured toward the wall of windows behind them, through which Dakota could see the crowd that had already gathered on the plaza so they could watch the outdoor segments that were always planned for the Friday show. They’d been packing in behind the security barriers since well before dawn. Knowing she had an audience on the other side of the glass, watching every move inside the studio, gave Dakota the uneasy feeling of being in a fishbowl. How did Amanda do it? The woman acted like she didn’t even know they were there.

“Dakota,” the executive producer’s voice crackled through the earpiece, “can we run through that segment on the squirrel maze again? You were still almost a full second slow last time.”

“Sure thing, Hannah.” Dakota sighed. She gave Amanda an apologetic smile. “I guess I’ll meet up with you on the plaza as soon as I get this right.”

If I ever get it, she added silently. The voice of doubt, Dakota’s near-constant companion all week, reared its head again. Amanda made this whole thing look effortless when it was anything but. Dakota was convinced that any minute, the powers that be were bound to catch on that she was completely in over her head and would show her to the door.

“Hey, sugar.” As Dakota waited for Hannah to run the squirrel tape, Cameron approached her with a makeup brush the size of a potted palm. “Let me get some of the shine off that cute button nose of yours.”

“Have I told you yet today how much I love you?” Dakota sniffled as the powdery brush tickled her nostrils. “Seriously. You make me look like a movie star.”

“You give me plenty to work with,” Cameron gushed as he stepped back to admire his work. “You’ve got a whole glow thing going on today. Did you know that?”

“Oh no.” Dakota raised her hand to her face. “Is it really oily? I’ve been too distracted this week to pay attention to my skin care.”

“I meant that inner glow.” Cameron winked. “You and Miss A have some smoking chemistry.”

“What?” Dakota sat rigid, her heart hammering. Was it that obvious? “We’re not... I mean, there’s not...”

“Relax.” Cameron patted Dakota’s shoulder reassuringly. “I didn’t mean it like that. Trust me. I’ve been here long enough to know a sweet thing like you would get eaten up by Dragon Lady, and not in a good way, if you catch my drift.”

“Right.” Dakota’s laugh was shaky and way too high-pitched as her body betrayed her with vivid memories of the *good way*, her thighs tensing as if they held Amanda’s head between them at that very moment. “No. Definitely not.”

“She can be a scary one.” Cameron leaned in as if to tell her a secret. “Never to me but the stories some of her assistants tell? Woo-boy. I’m surprised Cyndie’s still here.”

“That’s Amanda’s assistant?” It was time to steer this conversation back to the safe zone. Dakota’s heartrate had yet to return to normal levels after the twin threats of possible discovery and an overly sensual imagination.

“For now, poor kid. But don’t worry.” Cameron patted Dakota’s shoulder again, giving her nose one more touch with the brush before sliding it back into the tool belt he wore to house his on-set emergency kit. “From the rumors I’m hearing, folks at home are loving the two of you. They go gaga for the sexual tension stuff. Keep up that flirting, sugar.”

“Yeah. I... Thanks.” Dakota’s head spun as Cameron departed.

Sexual tension? Smoking chemistry? It was all well and good that the audience at home was happy, but if the makeup guy was picking up on the vibe between her and Amanda, how long before the rumors started to fly all around the studio?

That gleam of excitement in Cameron's eyes as he'd dished the dirt about Amanda's assistants had spoken volumes, and he was far from the only one Dakota had met who lived for juicy gossip. If any one of them so much as thought there *might* be something real between the two of them, anything remotely more than the on-screen banter they were paid to engage in, that speculation would circle the building faster than a supersonic jet.

Dakota took in the controlled pandemonium around her and inhaled sharply. What should she and Amanda do? With so much at stake, Dakota was nearly panicked with the need to talk to Amanda. She had to be reassured this was going to be okay.

On the other side of the giant window, Amanda worked the crowd, shaking hands and posing for selfies. Dakota's heart clenched as she was seized by the desire to grab Amanda and retreat to some secluded place where no one could see them. What seemed like a million eyes stared into the studio, watching every move.

Dakota had been fooling herself. There was nowhere for them to hide, especially not behind the semantics that provided flimsy coverage for their flagrant breaking of the rules. They may have agreed to keep things platonic once they started working together, but they'd done a piss poor job of it so far. Monday night it had been "we're not cohosts *yet*." On Wednesday, they'd gleefully concluded that making out for an hour and a half on Dakota's tiny couch didn't actually violate any clauses in their contracts because they'd kept their clothes on. Most of them, anyway. And tonight? Tonight, Dakota was supposed to have dinner at Amanda's, their rationale being there was no law against a couple of friends sharing a meal, after all.

Yeah. Friends. *That* old gem. How many minutes would they last before ending up in bed together, declaring that

surely the weekends didn't count? And when that wasn't enough, they'd probably decide to refrain from sex except on the days of the week that ended with the letter y. It didn't help that being just friends was exactly the last thing Dakota wanted. When it came to willpower, it wasn't like Amanda was any better.

Fuck the network brass and their stupid rules, anyway. If only it was just Dakota's professional reputation on the line, instead of her actual job, and Amanda's, too.

Dakota's spirits nosedived. She'd really thought they could pull it off and keep up their relationship without getting caught, but who was she kidding? From where Dakota was sitting, right in the middle of a fucking fishbowl in Rockefeller Plaza, she was one careless move away from a full-blown scandal. She wanted Amanda more than anything, but how was she supposed to handle the pressure of a job that overwhelmed her, make the fans at home happy, and keep tongues from wagging at work? She wasn't Wonder Woman. She'd been in over her head all week, and the flood waters kept rising.

"YOU OKAY?" Amanda asked, barely moving her lips, when Dakota finally joined her outside on the plaza.

"Yep," Dakota assured her, hoping all those summer theatre camps she'd attended as a kid would pay off in making that single-syllable answer sound convincing. It was a tall order. Half of her was overcome with relief to be next to Amanda again, reassured by her presence. The other half was terrified. In other words, she was about as far away from *yep* as she could get.

"I was afraid you wouldn't make it in time. Skye Blue's just arrived."

"Is that a color?"

"That's a singer. Skye was one of the most badass rockers of the nineties, thank you very much." Amanda looked at her

askance, and Dakota suspected she was trying to calculate exactly how old Dakota had been in the nineties. Though rarely an issue anymore, this was the type of thing that brought the difference in their ages front and center. “She’s a goddess. She’s also our first musical guest this morning.”

Shit. Dakota had known all of that. The roar of the crowd had made her mind go blank for a second. She was so far off her game it wasn’t even funny.

Recovering as quickly as she could, Dakota flashed a smile like she’d been teasing all along. “Why, Miss Morgan, are you fangirling right now?”

There wasn’t time for an answer, because all of a sudden, the cameras were rolling and they were live on the air. The plaza echoed with cheers as recorded music blasted from the surrounding speakers, and Amanda took the lead as a tall woman with waist-length jet-black hair approached, a guitar strapped across the back of her fringed leather vest.

“Damn,” Dakota said under her breath as she took measure of the woman, who was maybe five years older than Amanda and every bit as stunning. Well, almost as stunning. Amanda remained number one on Dakota’s list. “Skye’s still pretty badass.”

Perhaps it was best Amanda hadn’t caught a word Dakota had said, but there hadn’t been much danger of that happening. The unflappable Amanda Morgan was too busy gushing over their rock star guest, grasping the woman’s hand like she planned on taking it with her as a souvenir. “I really can’t believe I’m standing here with you, right here on my plaza.”

Her plaza? Dakota resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Next thing, Amanda would be claiming all of Midtown as her personal domain. At least the good news was Dakota was no longer fretting over their coworkers finding out about their little affair. She was too busy fanning the flames of jealousy that had sprung up all around her the minute Skye fucking Blue had come strutting onto the scene.

It occurred to Dakota to wonder what number Skye occupied on Amanda’s celebrity freebie list. The second the

question crossed her mind, she would've done anything to have never thought it. Now it was lodged in there like a popcorn kernel in a back molar. She'd have to poke at it all day to get it to come loose.

Amanda turned to Dakota, who, for as little genuine attention as she was being paid, might as well have been a tree. "I know you weren't around, Dakota, but Skye Blue was an absolute legend, ever since winning new artist of the year in 1992. I was a freshman in college that year."

Dakota's eyes narrowed as Amanda batted her lashes. "I was two."

Skye tossed her head back and laughed. "That's adorable. Can I just say it's a lifelong dream for me to be here on this show with someone I can only describe as another absolute legend?"

Skye was clearly not referring to Dakota, whom she'd dismissed as adorable. Like a frickin' puppy.

The camera had turned to Dakota, who was definitely supposed to be saying something right now, but the way Amanda's expression was telegraphing exactly how much she would give for five minutes alone with Skye threw Dakota for such a loop that she forgot her line. "I-I... remember my mom listening to your music."

For a fraction of a second, the expression on Skye's face made Dakota fear the woman was going to punch her. Then it cleared, and the rock star tossed her hair and laughed.

"Kids today," Amanda joked, but the amusement stopped well short of her eyes.

Fuck! They think I'm being rude on purpose.

Dakota had to do something to salvage things, to show them—and America, too—that she was an idiot, not a monster. "Are you going to play that one song—shoot, you know the one."

"She has a lot of songs, Dakota." There was a not-so-subtle warning in Amanda's tone.

Dakota snapped her fingers, hoping it would spark her memory. “It was the anthem for the hottest show of last century.”

Amanda stiffened, and Skye’s mouth dropped open ever so slightly.

Oh, God. Dakota had not just said that, had she? Not only had she forgotten the name of this mega star’s hit song, and also the show it was the theme song for, but then she’d tossed in the words *last century* like Skye and Amanda were living historical artifacts. What the hell was wrong with Dakota?

“No, I hate that song.” Skye’s lips were smiling, but her eyes were as cold as stone. Though as soon as she turned to Amanda, her temperature thawed considerably. “I’m going to test out a new song that I haven’t played live yet.”

The fawning crowd on the plaza whooped and hollered from behind the metal barricades. One woman held up a handmade sign that read, “Skye, I want to have your baby!” That was when Dakota remembered their guest wasn’t just a superstar but an LGBTQ superstar. Which was perfect. Since Amanda would never want to speak to Dakota again after today, it would be easy for her and Skye—a couple of badass legends—to ride off into the sunset together.

Mercifully, as Skye took the guitar from her back and strummed the first chord of her new song, the cameras finally turned away from the completely red-faced Dakota. Maybe before they returned for the next segment, she could convince one of the nearby manhole covers to open up and swallow her.

Amanda stepped off to the side, readying herself for the next live shot. Dakota made a move to join her, desperate to explain her terrible behavior. Cameron’s gossip, the massive crowd, her fear of failure... Amanda flagged down one of the show’s producers, deliberately turning her back before Dakota could get close enough to say a word. At least, it sure felt deliberate.

“That’s a wrap,” came Hannah’s voice in Dakota’s ear some time later, after who knows how long of stumbling

through the remaining segments of the show like a zombie. “Excellent job, ladies.”

“Dakota, can I have a word?” There was a crispness to Amanda’s tone that made Dakota’s vision go a little black at the edges. No wonder they called her Dragon Lady. Without waiting for a reply, Amanda strode toward her dressing room. Dakota followed, bracing for the worst.

When they were both inside, Amanda shut the door almost all the way, leaving it cracked open just enough to avoid the appearance of trying to be alone, as they’d agreed to always do. Habit, surely. Dakota was pretty sure she had not been called into this private meeting to engage in a quickie on top of the lighted vanity table.

“Dakota.” Amanda whirled to face her. Anger or embarrassment—or maybe both—had lit a fire in her eyes that threatened to burn the place down. “What the hell was that?”

“I... I can explain,” Dakota stuttered. But before she could make an attempt, Hannah burst through the door.

“Good, you’re both here.” The executive producer was holding several sheets of paper in her hand, looking so pleased her buttons might pop. She must not have seen the final half of today’s show. “What a week, huh?”

Amanda opened her mouth, most likely to order the woman to fire Dakota at once. But she, too, was unable to speak before the door swung open again. This time it was Ken, the suit from upstairs who’d been instrumental in bringing Dakota on board in the first place. She couldn’t decide if this was a good development for her or bad. How likely was it this guy would take his own kill shots?

“There they are.” Ken pushed his way into the room, draping one arm over Amanda’s shoulder and the other over Dakota’s, and somehow managing to rope Hannah into it, too, pulling all three of them into an awkward embrace. “How’s our new dream team, huh?”

Amanda looked like she wanted to vomit, but Hannah beamed as she asked, “Have you seen the numbers, Ken?”

“On fire!” Ken released his hostages and headed back out the door as quickly as he’d come, calling out, “Keep ’em smokin’!”

“Honestly, we’ve never had an introductory week like this.” Hannah ran a hand over her sleeve to smooth the wrinkles Ken had left behind.

“What does Wyatt think?” Amanda’s lips were a thin line across her whiter-than-usual face. It seemed like Amanda thought the head of the news division might’ve had a different assessment of things, and Dakota feared she was right.

“Management is thrilled across the board. Do you remember all the viewer comments about Frankie when he joined the show?” Hannah’s eye roll suggested this had been a rhetorical question. “There’s some room for improvement, naturally, but from my viewpoint, this week has been one of the best in years. You two should meet sometime soon to go over everything.”

“I was planning on it.” The steel in Amanda’s tone told Dakota that despite the universal praise heaped upon them by the higher-ups, she was not off the hook over the Skye Blue incident. Not by a long shot.

“Well, great,” Hannah replied, oblivious to the death threat toward Dakota that had surely been hidden in Amanda’s words. She handed her papers to Amanda. “Focus group numbers. For your meeting.”

“Thanks.” Amanda waited for Hannah to leave.

This time, Amanda shut the door with a click. Dakota braced for the worst, but the fiery wrath in Amanda’s eyes had disappeared, replaced by a look of hurt and betrayal like nothing Dakota had ever seen. Amanda stood there as the seconds ticked by, saying nothing.

Why wasn’t Amanda yelling at her for nearly ruining the Skye Blue segment of their show? Or for being a stupid, jealous ass? Dakota was ready to be yelled at. She *wanted* to be yelled at. This silence wasn’t what Dakota had prepared herself for. It was so much worse.

“Amanda, I’m so sorry.” Dakota choked back tears. A few hours before, she’d been ready to end it, but she had no memory of that now. She couldn’t let Amanda slip away.

Because the universe was apparently out to destroy her, there was yet another knock on the door. Before either Dakota or Amanda could react, it swung open, and Allie stuck her head inside.

“Dakota, there you are. Cyndie said I’d find you in your dressing room.”

Note to self, Dakota thought. Just because a door is closed does not mean it is safe to start fooling around.

Amanda regarded the interloper with a chilly gaze. “Actually, this is *my* dressing room.”

Cancel that note, Dakota thought again. Pretty sure fooling around is nowhere in my future.

“Amanda,” Allie said with a hint of surprise and a healthy measure of respect, “I apologize for barging in. I wanted to remind Dakota that she’s still invited to today’s pub crawl with the *Early Bird* crew.”

“Oh—” Dakota had completely forgotten about the invitation, which had been issued Monday when she was still on the other shoe. It felt like years had passed since then, instead of days.

“I hope just because you made it to the big league, you won’t forget about us little people.” Allie smiled broadly, a smile which dimmed a watt or two in brightness as she added, “Amanda, you’re more than welcome to join, too. If you want. We leave at noon, and it usually goes pretty late.”

“That would be lovely,” Amanda said unconvincingly, “but I have plans tonight.”

“Oh, too bad,” Allie replied, even less convincingly. “You’re still coming, aren’t you, Dakota?”

Amanda had said she had plans that evening, which Dakota knew was true. They had planned to have dinner together on Amanda’s very secluded penthouse balcony, where

no one else would be able to come stumbling in on them at exactly the wrong time. Did this mean those plans were still on, despite the mess Dakota had made? Her spirits lifted at the opportunity for some actual privacy in which to explain her temporary idiocy and set everything right.

“You should go, Dakota,” Amanda said, the softness of her tone at odds with the crushing impact her words made.

So, their plans were canceled. Was that just for tonight, or was this Amanda’s way of ending things once and for all? Maybe all it had taken for Amanda to return to her senses was for a certain rock and roll icon to remind her there were plenty more fish in the sea. Ones that wouldn’t get her fired. Of course, Skye’s presence had a very different effect on Dakota, igniting an unquenchable jealousy that made it painfully clear that as far as she was concerned, there was no one else like Amanda in the entire world.

What rotten timing.

Dakota’s head swiveled so she could search Amanda’s countenance for any clue as to what this new development might mean. Was Amanda furious? Sad? Was this a test to see if Dakota would choose Amanda over Allie? It was impossible to tell.

This was what it felt like to be on Dragon Lady’s bad side.

Dakota forced a smile as she turned back to Allie. “I guess I’ll see you later today, then.”

“Great,” Allie answered, either unaware of the strained atmosphere between the two women in the room or choosing to ignore it. “I’ll text you the deets, ’kay?”

Once Allie was gone, Dakota moved to speak before someone else could interrupt. “Amanda, I know we really need to talk. I can bail on this thing tonight with Allie. I can’t even begin—”

Amanda cut Dakota off with a pointed glance to her watch. “I’m sorry, but it’ll have to wait. I do actually have somewhere I need to be right now.”

Was Dakota hearing this correctly? Amanda had been the one who wanted to talk, and now she had somewhere to be and was going to leave Dakota hanging without saying a word? The nerve!

Dakota was still fuming as Amanda sailed out of the dressing room and down the hallway toward the extra dressing rooms that were used for guests. Dakota's heart plummeted as Amanda stopped directly in front of the door with Skye Blue's name taped to it. Was that the somewhere better she'd needed to be? Dakota held her breath as Amanda raised a fist and tapped. The door opened, and Amanda disappeared inside.

Well, fuck me.

Had Dakota really been worried earlier that day about possible rumors that she and Amanda were having an affair? What irony. It hardly seemed like that would be an issue anymore. If she wasn't mistaken, Dakota had witnessed the world's fastest rebound. Amanda had gone straight into the lair of what almost certainly had to be the top slot on her freebie list and left Dakota in the dust.

It was cold comfort indeed for Dakota to know she would no longer have to be concerned about anyone accusing her of sleeping her way to the top.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AMANDA STOPPED IN THE HALLWAY ABOUT A YARD AWAY FROM Dakota's apartment door, trying to decide what to do. To say things had not gone well between the two of them after the show was like saying the Titanic's maiden voyage had been a little choppy. While Amanda had known working with someone she was secretly in a relationship with would have its challenges, she'd never anticipated anything like this. Something had to be done to put things right.

The trouble was Amanda wasn't sure how to approach things, in part because she didn't understand what had gone wrong. One minute, the look in Dakota's eyes had suggested she was seconds away from ripping Amanda's clothes off at the news desk. The next, Amanda had feared Dakota wanted to rip her throat out. What the hell had caused the shift? After half a dozen texts throughout the day had gone unanswered, she'd been reduced to trying to ambush Dakota in her apartment. It was humiliating.

As Amanda considered her options, she smiled slightly at the memory of the single bright spot of this terrible day. What had Dakota called it? Fangirling? That was a good description. Amanda had barely had the presence of mind that morning to grab up the copy of Skye's debut album she'd bought at a concert at the beginning of her freshman year of college, right before Skye's career took off into the stratosphere. As of today, it was an autographed copy. How was that for one big check mark on the ol' bucket list?

Skye had been gracious about it when Amanda approached her in her dressing room. And she'd been an even better sport about Dakota's bizarre behavior. What had gotten into Dakota, harping on Skye's age like that? It was the last thing any woman needed at the start of launching a major comeback tour. But Skye hadn't let it bring her down, proving she had a lot more confidence than Amanda, who'd sworn she could feel the crow's feet burrowing in around her eyes with each new biting remark.

In fact, it had been Skye who suggested, ever so gently, that perhaps Dakota's sour mood had been a result of jealousy. "I think she has a crush on you," Skye had said. The observation had nearly landed Amanda on her ass in the middle of the rocker's dressing room.

It had honestly never crossed Amanda's mind that Dakota would feel threatened at all, and especially not by the type of harmless banter their job demanded. It came with the territory. When a guest came on the show, they had to feel special. A little flattery was the best way to get them to open up and share those special moments with the audience that kept people tuning in morning after morning. Having been at it for fifteen years, Amanda could successfully flirt with a wombat.

But one aspect of Skye's observation troubled Amanda even more—that she was able to make it at all. Amanda had thought she and Dakota had done a better job of staying on the right side of the line between innocent and dangerous where their public interactions were concerned. She hadn't expected an outside observer to make the leap to anything romantic so quickly. Professional jealousy would've been fine, but a crush? That was a problem.

Maybe it was only because Skye had vast personal experience when it came to woman trouble that she'd developed an almost extrasensory ability to pick up on it in others. Maybe it was invisible to everyone else.

But, maybe not.

"What do I even say to her?" Amanda fretted as she drew close enough to Dakota's door to knock. Amanda knew the

problem, but not the solution, and she hated starting a conversation with questions she didn't already have the answers to.

Fist poised, Amanda paused before making her presence known. The sting she'd felt when she'd left Skye's dressing room after fifteen minutes and Dakota was nowhere to be found was as fresh now as it had been that morning. For the first time in her life, she was being ghosted.

Dakota had chosen to go out with the *Early Bird* folks. Everyone on that show, from the hosts to the crew, was young and hip. They thought nothing of staying out until all hours, partying and having fun. Unlike Amanda, whose idea of a good time was Netflix and a cup of hot herbal tea.

"She's probably not home yet," Amanda muttered, unreasonably annoyed that a woman in her early thirties would dare be out later than 5:30 p.m. on a Friday night.

Amanda tapped on the door. She paused before knocking again. No answer, naturally. From what she'd heard, those *Early Bird* pub crawls could go on all night. Not that she'd ever gone. Or been invited, with the exception of Allie's painful attempt that morning.

Amanda was turning to leave when something thudded repeatedly against the other side of the door. "Dakota, is that you?"

The thudding stopped, and a moment later, a pitiful whimpering sound filled the hallway. There were several loud yips, after which the thudding started again.

"Hey, Riley," Amanda called out, realizing the source of the noise. "You all alone in there, buddy?"

Riley responded with a series of the most pathetic wails ever heard. Somewhere down the hall, a neighbor opened their door and gave Amanda a death stare before shutting it again. Riley doubled down.

"You gotta stop that," Amanda pleaded with the desperation of a cat owner whose pet never uttered more than a single meow in a week. Dakota might not get home until

midnight, and by that point, the entire building would probably revolt. As Riley refused to listen to reason, Amanda did the only thing she could think of and pulled out her phone.

“Hi, Kenzie? It’s Amanda. Could you possibly check on Riley and maybe take him for an extra walk? I think Dakota’s going to be out late, and he’s bothering the neighbors with his barking.”

“Sorry, Amanda,” the girl replied, “but I’m leaving for a sleepover soon. I could get him and bring him up to you, though.”

Amanda wanted to say no, but by this time it sounded like Riley was on his hind legs, scratching at the door. And as much as she hated to admit it, this was her fault for knocking when Dakota wasn’t home. She told Kenzie to bring him up. Then she retrieved a scrap of paper from her handbag and scribbled the following note, which she folded and stuck in the crevice of Dakota’s door:

I have your dog.

Amanda

She felt like she was leaving a ransom note. Hell, maybe kidnapping Riley was the right move. Anything to get that exasperating woman’s attention at this point was fine by Amanda.

A short time later, when Amanda was upstairs in her apartment, her front door opened. Kenzie handed over Riley’s leash as the exuberant dog dashed into the apartment with such eagerness Amanda knew she’d made the right choice.

“The door code for his apartment is 2468, if you need to bring him back,” Kenzie said before she left.

“Even numbers. Are you kidding?” Amanda muttered, shaking her head as she guided Riley toward the kitchen. That was like using *password* as the password for your bank account. She was going to have to talk to Dakota about the need for stronger security.

Riley nuzzled his wet nose into her hand, reminding her that as a guest, his needs should come first.

“Poor you. Stuck inside all alone. You hungry?” Since the answer to that question was an enthusiastic tail thump, because dogs are always hungry, Amanda regretted not asking Kenzie to bring up a can of food, too. “Ugh. Sorry, pooch. I’m afraid I don’t have any dog food.”

Riley let out the saddest whimper ever created in the history of canine kind.

“Oh, no. Please don’t do that.”

There was another cry followed by eyes brimming with the pathetic sorrow only dogs possess. Manipulative little buggers. The thought of going back downstairs to grab a can of food felt daunting. Plus, even though Amanda now knew Dakota’s door code, she didn’t feel comfortable using it without permission.

“Let’s see what I’ve got in the fridge.”

Amanda studied a sea of takeout Chinese containers, briefly pondering if lo mein was an appropriate meal for a dog, until her eyes landed on a foil packet that had been folded into the shape of a swan. It was salmon left over from a fancy corporate lunch she’d attended the day before. Perfect.

As soon as Amanda transferred the fish to a plate and set it down on the floor in front of him, Riley scarfed every morsel like he’d never eaten before.

“Now that your tummy is full, what am I going to do with you?” Amanda groaned, realizing the major flaw in her dognapping plan. “I don’t think Cronkite will appreciate me bringing you here. I’m amazed he hasn’t attacked you already. And me, too. I guess I’d better take you home.”

If Amanda thought his earlier whimpers were soul-crushing, this next one broke her.

“Fine, you can stay a little while longer, but if you get another cut on your nose from Cronky, you’ll only have yourself to blame.”

He placed a paw in her hand. It felt as if he’d understood the deal and was ready to shake on it.

“You really are sweet, aren’t you?”

He rubbed his head against her leg.

“Okay, let’s head to the living room.” She slowly swung the door open, calling out a warning to her cat, in case he was lurking somewhere nearby. “Cronk, I need you to be mature about this. Riley is all alone tonight. We need to welcome him. Remember when you were alone? Try not to be an asshole.”

Amanda wondered what fans of her show would think if they heard her trying to rationalize with a grumpy cat, demanding him not to be, well, grumpy. She didn’t have long to ponder this, because as soon as Cronkite spied Riley from his perch on the back cushion of the sofa he let out a vicious hiss.

Riley hid behind Amanda’s legs. When the cat hissed again, instead of fighting back or running—both excellent choices Amanda would have fully supported—the dog laid down on his back.

Cronkite shot Amanda a look like *what the hell is this idiot doing* and then refocused his attention on the golden retriever as he edged closer, no longer hissing.

“I knew you had it in you,” Amanda said encouragingly. She leaned down to pat the cat’s head, which turned out to be not the best choice. While he had decided not to attack the dog, Cronk apparently didn’t want to tarnish his reputation beyond repair because he swiped her hand with his claws, drawing blood. “Ouch! You son of a—”

Cronkite left the room, tail stuck in the air, before she could finish the sentiment.

“Don’t you worry, Riley. It can only improve from here.”

She’d just finished washing her finger in the sink at the wet bar in the corner of the living room, putting Neosporin and a Band Aid on the wound, when the doorbell rang. Amanda locked eyes with Riley. “Is that your mom? Maybe she got home early from her night on the town and decided to hang out with us.”

The flutter of excitement in Amanda's belly was confusing as hell. She was annoyed with Dakota for her behavior and, if she had to be completely honest, for being so quick to toss aside their plans just because they'd had a bumpy day at work. Not that telling her to go had been a test or anything.

"It was a little bit of a test," Amanda admitted as she padded across the marble-floored gallery to the main door with Riley by her side. But while Dakota had failed the test, Amanda was the one paying the price. Going an entire Friday night without Dakota seemed impossibly lonely.

After checking her image in the entryway mirror, Amanda opened the door. Her smile froze as she realized it was not Dakota who had stopped by. "Gabe? What are you doing here?"

"I didn't know where else to go." Gabe had the rumpled appearance of a man who wasn't taking care of himself and had no one to do it for him. Honestly, if Amanda didn't know better, she might have thought he'd spent a night or two sleeping on a park bench. As he passed by her while coming through the door, the smell of alcohol that emanated from him enhanced the impression.

"What's happened now?" Amanda tailed him into the living room, where Riley looked at the newcomer, or more specifically at his crotch, with keen interest.

Gabe cocked his head and put a hand down, whether to pat Riley's head or protect the family jewels, it was hard to tell. "When did you get a dog?"

"I'm dog sitting."

"When did you start dog sitting?"

Not wanting to go into anything remotely specific, Amanda countered with, "Why are you here at six o'clock on a Friday night? Pretty sure the evening news goes on the air in thirty minutes."

"It does but not with me."

"Oh, Gabe." Amanda sank onto the couch with a heavy sigh. Riley curled up at her feet. "Have they let you go?"

“Temporary leave, for now. At first, they were going to wait for the results of the internal investigation, but the advertisers were growing restless and threatening to pull sponsorships.” Gabe flopped onto the other end of the sofa with a dramatic sigh. Under any other circumstances, she might’ve called the behavior exaggerated, but Gabe lived for his job, so this development had to be killing him. “This is a fucking mess.”

Amanda’s first impulse was to shout *I told you so*, but there was no point pouring salt into Gabe’s wounds. Instead, after a moment’s pause as she briefly considered how much he might’ve already had, she went with the always popular, “Can I get you a drink?”

“God, yes. The hard stuff. None of that craft beer shit you like.”

Amanda rose, walked to the wet bar, and poured the man a glass of whiskey. She hoped he wouldn’t get so drunk he would need to stay the night. Sure, Amanda had rooms to spare, but she already had a houseguest—Riley, who was staring at her from the couch like he wondered when she was coming back and what she might be bringing him—and he’d already eaten most of her food.

When she returned with the drink, Gabe downed it in two quick gulps. He set the empty glass on the coffee table, leaned forward, and cradled his head with both hands.

“My professional reputation was the last shred of dignity I had left,” Gabe moaned. “My kids hardly talk to me. My ex-wives don’t want anything to do with me, except on the fifteenth of every month when their alimony checks get deposited.”

“You weren’t exactly faithful to any of them,” Amanda pointed out. She couldn’t let him wallow in self-pity completely scot-free.

Gabe pouted, which made him look like a seventy-two-year-old toddler. “Count yourself lucky you only have one ex. Although, you still have some time. You might acquire a few more by the time you reach my age.”

“A few?” Amanda shook her head. “No, thank you. I’d rather be alone until I die than go through that again.”

“No. You wouldn’t.”

The sudden pain in Gabe’s eyes caught Amanda off guard. The self-pity was gone, replaced by something deeper, more honest. For as long as they’d known each other, she couldn’t remember ever seeing him this vulnerable. Amanda pressed her lips together, uncertain what to say.

“You’re smarter than I am, Amanda. That’s hard for me to admit, but it’s true. Hell, it was you who tried to warn me about this whole Marcus Brown business. Someone screwed me good, but I sure did make it easy for them.”

“Why didn’t you check your sources?” Amanda asked, silently adding, *you foolish old man*, with affection and sorrow.

“I wanted to go out on top.”

“Were you really planning on leaving?” Amanda asked, grateful for a chance to pivot the conversation firmly back to work. Discussing personal matters with the likes of Gabe, or even Howard, had always made her itchy. Maybe because, even though she was more than thirty years younger and female, it was too easy to see how much like them she was. “You’ve been threatening to retire for a decade, but I figured the only way you’d leave the news desk was in a body bag.”

Gabe laughed, but there was little humor in it. “That’s probably true. You know why I’ve stayed?”

“I always assumed it was because you still had space in your trophy cabinet for a couple more of those penis statues you like to collect,” Amanda replied dryly.

“It wasn’t always like that for me. When I was a kid, the news coverage of the Vietnam War was like background music, always on the TV.” Gabe’s eyes misted. “I was a freshman in college when the Tet Offensive happened. I wanted to be over there so bad. Not as a soldier, mind you, but as a reporter. Joe Galloway was my hero, the only civilian to be awarded a medal of valor in that war. Of course, even back

then I had an ego. I wanted to be center stage, which is how I ended up going the television route instead of the newspapers.”

“You’ve had an amazing career, Gabe,” Amanda told him softly, touched by this unusual moment of honest humility.

“And I pissed away my legacy for one last shot at glory.” Gabe was a handsome man, due in no small part to his excessive vanity, but it seemed to Amanda that he was growing older and more haggard with each new word. “Don’t let yourself become me, Amanda.”

“What do you mean?” She swallowed hard as Gabe reached across the sofa cushion between them to cover her hand with his.

“The reason I kept chasing all those accolades these past years was because my work is literally the only thing I have in my life that matters. And that isn’t enough. I don’t know why I ever thought it would be.” Gabe eyed his empty glass like he wished it had magically refilled itself, but refrained from asking for more. He sighed, long and ragged. “I never cheated on Rita, my first wife. I’m not expecting sainthood for that, but I want to set the record straight. I was just never there for her. Every time I had to choose, work won. With the others, I think I was unfaithful mostly to try to prove to myself that Rita leaving me hadn’t done the damage it did. I never let myself really fall in love again.”

Oh, no. Amanda squirmed in her seat at the renewed threat of talking about feelings, to the point Riley jumped to his feet as if to ask her *What’s up, human?* The dog’s presence was an unwanted reminder of the messy situation with Dakota, the solving of which seemed to acquire a sense of urgency as a result of Gabe’s lecture. But Amanda still didn’t know how to fix it, so she turned her focus to something else, a messy situation that maybe she did know how to fix.

“This Marcus Brown scandal won’t be your legacy, Gabe. I promise you that.”

Gabe frowned, wearing a look that said he wanted to believe her but wasn’t sure what she could do to make it go

away. “How can you be sure?”

“Because someone set you up. I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but there’s an internal investigation going on even as we speak. They’re planning to interview everyone in the division, so they clearly have reason to believe those phony documents were an inside job. A colleague bringing you down with malicious intent is a much bigger story than a journalist making an honest mistake, any day of the week. To get you off the hot seat, we just need to find out who did it and turn the focus on them instead.” She hopped to her feet as though she was going to run out and get started that very second.

“Are you sure you can find out who was behind this?” Hope sparked in Gabe’s eyes, piercing Amanda’s heart.

“We’re journalists.” Amanda clasped her hands to his shoulders, giving them an encouraging squeeze. “This is what we do.”

After showing Gabe to the door and sending him off with a heartfelt embrace, Amanda wandered back into the living room. Riley had shifted position and was now curled up on Cronkite’s cat bed, with the persnickety feline snuggled up next to him and not looking the least bit murderous.

Amanda stopped in her tracks and raised her hands, palms upward, as she asked, “What is this, some kind of message?”

First Gabe, unbeknownst to him, had weighed in on her Dakota dilemma, and now the pets seemed to be doing the same. It was too much for her overtaxed emotions to bear for one night.

“Come on, Riley.” She clapped her hands together as she headed into the entryway and grabbed the dog’s leash. “Time to take you home.”

As she headed for the elevator with Riley in tow, Amanda checked the time. It was almost eight o’clock. Yawning in sudden exhaustion, she sent out a fervent request to the universe that Dakota would still be gone when they got downstairs. The two of them needed to talk but not tonight.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“WHAT CAN I GET YOU?” ASKED A FEMALE BARTENDER AT THE fifth—and, dear God, please let it be the final—stop on the notorious *Early Bird* pub crawl.

Ordering another drink was a terrible idea, but that didn’t stop Dakota from saying, “A craft beer that will knock my socks off.”

Dakota held the edge of the bar, rolling onto the backs of her heels, stretching her legs out as she cast an incredulous glance at the rest of her group. They’d been at it since noon, and it was now approaching eight o’clock at night, nearly bedtime for Dakota, yet even though they’d all been up even earlier than she had, no one else showed any signs of slowing. They honestly did this every week?

“I know just the beer for you, and it’s possible it might knock off a bit more than your socks.” The bartender—who managed to ping Dakota’s gaydar even in her semi-exhausted and decidedly tipsy state—winked in a most audaciously flirtatious way, causing Dakota’s cheeks to burn with embarrassment. But after the way Amanda had fawned all over Skye Blue today, Dakota would be lying if she claimed it didn’t give her a much-needed boost in the self-esteem department.

No, Dakota warned herself, *I’m not going to think about that right now*. Dwelling on Amanda, and what she may or may not have been doing going into the private dressing room of a rock star who was definitely on her celebrity freebie list, brought up all sorts of unpleasant sensations that even day-

drinking like it was an Olympic sport couldn't completely dull. Anger. Hurt. The desire to tell herself *I told you so*. The even stronger desire to curl up in a ball and cry.

Maybe one more beer wasn't such a bad idea after all. Good thing, since the bartender was handing it to her.

After paying for her drink, Dakota took it to the table in the back where the work gang was gathered. Even from a distance, she could tell Gabe Hawkins's abrupt and unexplained absence from the evening news desk that night was all any of them could talk about. And no wonder. Gabe had been the face of the evening news since before most of them, Dakota included, were born.

"It seems unfair," Marcy was saying, apparently trying to bring Brenda, the new administrative assistant who had joined the team that week, up to speed on the developing scandal.

"What's unfair?" Dakota stood at the table, eyeing the empty seats and trying to figure out where she belonged. It reminded her of the cool kids' table in high school. There was definitely a hierarchy, with top-ranking folks like the executive producer and head booker on Allie's end, administrative assistants on the other, and everyone else jockeying for position in between.

"The way Gabe's being treated," Marcy replied, the copious amount of alcohol she'd already consumed raising her volume considerably. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing since it was a noisy pub, but Dakota was pretty sure they'd heard her in New Jersey. It would be a good idea for everyone if this night of drinking and debauchery wrapped up soon. It could get embarrassing, and her day had already been shitty enough.

"Don't feel bad for that old goat." Allie waved to get Dakota's attention. She pointed to the seat right next to her with eager insistence. It appeared to have been saved especially for Dakota, which made her flush with pleasure at being included in the inner circle. "I've heard rumors Gabe Hawkins is a real pain in the ass to work with. He's rude, egotistical, and should've retired ages ago."

Dakota had a hunch she knew where those rumors had come from. Amanda had told her that James Booth, Allie's married boyfriend, was one of the head writers and producer on the evening news.

Experiencing a pang of guilt that made it clear she wasn't cut out to be a gossip girl, Dakota grabbed her beer and took a swig. Knowing Allie's secret made her feel like she had done something wrong herself. Given the reason she'd been in Brooklyn that night, it did make sense she'd feel that way.

Amanda and I weren't cheating, Dakota reminded herself. They were only sneaking around because their relationship would look bad to other people. It wasn't inherently wrong. Of course, Dakota didn't know for certain that Allie and Booth's relationship was, either.

During the eight hours they'd spent pub crawling together, Allie had been nothing but nice to Dakota. It was hard to reconcile this intelligent and motivated woman with someone who would sneak around with a married man. Could Amanda have made a mistake? Maybe Booth was divorced, or separated. There had to be a reasonable explanation, if only Dakota could inquire without it being awkward.

"Do you think they'll replace him with Amanda?" Marcy asked, this time addressing Cyndie, who had tagged along at Brenda's invitation after helping with some new-hire training. "You're her assistant. You must have the inside scoop."

"I don't really know anything," Cyndie said.

"That's not a surprise, honey," Allie told her. The admin's cheeks pinked, as if being noticed by someone like Allie was the highlight of the evening. "You're lucky you've survived this long working for Dragon Lady."

Pushing her chunky black-framed glasses up her nose, Brenda spoke up. "She can't be as bad as you make her out to be."

"She's fired three assistants over the years for not prepping her tea to her exact liking," Allie said. "At least, that's what I heard."

Brenda looked shocked. “How would HR allow that?”

“Because the stars run the show around here. One wrong move and it’s—” Allie made a slicing motion across her throat. “They can be brutal, and management does nothing to rein them in.”

It was almost like Allie had forgotten that she, too, could be considered a star. Maybe it was because *The Early Bird Show* wasn’t on the same level as the bigger shows, but it seemed to Dakota that Allie had a bit of an inferiority complex. It was little wonder. Allie had a good education in journalism and a solid resume—probably stronger than Dakota’s in many ways. Yet she seemed to get overlooked whenever the chance for a promotion came along. First Charlene, now Dakota. No wonder Allie had a chip on her shoulder.

“I thought we were trying to reassure the new hire, not scare the crap out of her.” Cyndie shot Brenda an apologetic look.

“That’s okay,” the admin assured her, not seeming overly frightened, which Dakota admired. “I’d rather know what I’m getting into. Tell me more.”

This could get interesting. Now that the gossip spotlight was shining on Amanda, Dakota wondered if she would learn anything useful. Like, did Amanda have a reputation for sleeping with guests? Rock stars, for instance?

Was Dakota still upset about what had happened that morning in the plaza? Hell yes. Just because she wasn’t a hundred percent convinced that she and Amanda should continue seeing each other didn’t mean it was cool for Amanda to run off with someone else—someone way more sophisticated and badass than Dakota could ever hope to be—before they’d even had the chance to talk about it and cry for a day or two.

Oh God. Just the thought of not being with Amanda anymore had kicked off a clawing sensation in Dakota’s chest, a mixture of panic and desperation that was making it harder to breathe with every passing second. This had to stop.

Dakota chugged more of her beer and settled in for the dishing of dirt. *Come on, guys. Tell me why I shouldn't care if I never see Amanda Morgan again.*

“There was that time when I snagged an interview with Felicity Zimmerman,” offered the woman who was in charge of booking guests for *The Early Bird Show*, whose name Dakota couldn't recall, “and Amanda stole it right out from under me.”

“Don't you mean *The AM Show's* booker stole it?” Dakota asked. She had only been on the show four days, but she was pretty sure Amanda wouldn't have had the time or the inclination to chase this down herself. Dakota wanted to hear the skinny about Amanda as much as anyone, but as a newsperson, she valued accurate reporting.

“Well, maybe technically,” the woman agreed, “but I'm positive Amanda was behind it. They scared Felicity into thinking that our show was planning a hit piece, but that Amanda would go easy on her.”

Dakota nodded hesitantly, remembering the interview in question. It had been fair, but tough. If that was Amanda going easy on someone, she couldn't imagine what it looked like when the gloves came off.

“I'm not surprised,” Allie chimed in. “It's like all she has to do is snap her fingers, and the A-list celebrities come running.”

“Isn't that a good thing?” Brenda asked, which was a question Dakota had been thinking as well. The whole point of morning news shows was to get the big names to entertain viewers at home while they had breakfast. How could Amanda be blamed for doing her job? Dakota had wanted reasons to despise Amanda, but she was starting to dislike her present company instead.

“It's okay to poach people when it's a rival network, sure, but your own network should be family.” Allie's bottom lip protruded in a pout. “If it had been up to me, I would have agreed to a joint interview with Felicity.”

“Yeah, right.” Dakota’s eyes widened as she realized the words had popped out of her mouth before she could stop them. But, it was true. No newsperson, and especially not one as ambitious as Allie, would be that generous.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Allie’s eyes narrowed. A hint of something hard shown where only friendliness had been, and Dakota’s stomach tightened.

“I only meant,” Dakota backtracked, “that the news is a cutthroat business, not a summer camp where everyone holds hands and sings around a campfire. I’m really not hearing much to justify Amanda’s terrible reputation.”

“Or maybe you’re too close to Amanda to see the truth,” Allie shot back.

Dakota froze. That hint of hardness had turned into something more menacing, especially considering the restaurant incident. Was she really going to go there? “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, nothing.” Clearly, Allie had only intended to remind Dakota of what she had seen, not share it with everyone else. Yet. “You’re cohosts now. You’re bound to be loyal to her, like you would’ve been to me, if we were still working together.”

There was a transactional quality to Allie’s observation that gave Dakota pause. Had she been counting Allie as a friend? That might’ve been premature. The hairs on the back of Dakota’s neck stood up in the same way they might have if a lioness had sauntered into the bar. The last thing she wanted was to become prey. More and more, it felt like being here was a mistake.

The confusion on Brenda’s face suggested she didn’t know what to make of any of this. The poor woman was probably rethinking her job choice right about now. Dakota could hardly blame her. “Amanda can’t be all bad, can she? I’m sure someone must have a good story about her.”

“Well...” Cyndie chewed on her bottom lip, looking torn. “She’s actually been a lot easier to work for lately. And she did adopt that fat cat no one wanted.”

“She probably drowned it,” Allie said with a sneer. “No one has seen it since, have they?”

Everyone laughed, but Dakota balled her fists beneath the table. That was a damn lie, and a mean one, too. Amanda loved Cronkite. Even though Amanda wasn't there to hear it, Dakota couldn't stand that anyone would pick on her in such cruel ways. But as desperately as she wanted to, Dakota couldn't come to Amanda's defense without calling more attention to their relationship. It was obvious Allie despised Amanda, and if their queen bee thought that way, so would the rest of the crew. That put Dakota in a dangerous position. If one decided to sting her, they all would.

Why had Dakota been so eager to be liked by these people? The person whose opinion really mattered to her was Amanda, and Dakota would much rather have been watching a movie with her than engaging in drunken gossip any day of the week, no matter what their relationship status was. Why hadn't she told Amanda that when she had the chance instead of letting her go off to Skye's dressing room without lodging a single word of protest? Dakota was miserable, but she'd mostly brought it on herself.

The maddening thing was her companions were not only being unfair, they had it all wrong. It wasn't just the crack about Cronky, either. What about all those Girl Scout cookies that got donated every year? Amanda had a soft spot for kids and animals, but no one at the table seemed to understand that side of her. Probably because she kept those things hidden so people would think she really was a dragon lady, when she was nothing like that at all.

Dakota could set the record straight. And despite having her own reasons to feel less than charitable toward Amanda right now, Dakota really wanted to shout out the truth and let them know how wrong they had it.

But, who was she kidding?

The only things this group was thirstier for than beer were rumor and scandal. Dakota feared if she so much as uttered a

word to contradict them, they'd be whispering by morning that she had slept her way to the top.

Which was especially annoying now that she almost certainly would never be sleeping with Amanda again.

Shit. She'd let her brain go there, and those words were going to be playing on an endless loop in her head for the rest of the night. No amount of alcohol was going to fix that, and so it would be best if she were alone.

"It's getting late," Dakota announced. As soon as she was standing, she already felt a little better. She was as eager to bring the night to a close as she was to protect herself from being the focus of office intrigue. "I think I'm going to head home."

IT WAS after ten o'clock by the time Dakota dragged herself through the door of her apartment. She'd expected Riley to be whining at the door, desperate for company, but he was curled up on his giant dog bed, completely content.

Weird.

"Hey, Ry-Ry. I didn't mean to be out so late." Dakota gave the dog's head a scratch. "Did you have a good night without me?"

He thumped his tail, an enthusiastic answer of yes. As Dakota took him downstairs for a quick pee before bed, part of her wished he was mad at her. All things considered, she wasn't sure she deserved the unquestioning adoration he so willingly gave.

Back in her apartment, Dakota kicked off her shoes. She sighed as she made her way to the bedroom, stripping off her clothing as she went, eager to throw on a night shirt, brush her teeth, and go to bed. The emotional ups and downs of the day had left her exhausted. "You won't have to worry about me going out again anytime soon."

Every muscle ached from exhaustion, and her belly hurt from too much beer. Who thought an all-day pub crawl was a good idea? It was like *The Early Bird Show* people were still in college. Strike that. The level of maturity they'd displayed with all their scandalmongering was more like high school. As much as Dakota had been eager to make new friends and fit in, she preferred a quiet night in, watching movies with Amanda.

And you won't have that again, either, the voice in her head told her. It had been taunting her the whole trip home, reminding her of all the ways she'd screwed up, and all the reasons it wouldn't have worked anyway. Dakota was tired of hearing from that voice. She was tired of just about everything. One week of living the dream in New York City, and she was ready to go back to the cornfields, where at least she understood what was going on and didn't feel like she was in over her head.

As Dakota slid under the cool sheets, Riley hopped onto the bed. He snuggled next to her with a contented sigh and closed his eyes, instantly relaxed. Dakota wished she could do the same, but despite how tired she was, her stomach continued to churn. It wasn't just because of the alcohol.

"What am I going to do about Amanda?" Dakota whispered, wishing Riley could weigh in. The person she really needed to talk to was Amanda, but when it came to matters of the heart, it was a lot easier to talk to a dog. "If only I'd cleared the air this morning, I wouldn't be dreading it so much now."

Riley yawned, as if to say *no duh*. But he hadn't been in the studio that morning with all those eyes staring in through the windows. He didn't understand the terror of navigating a building full of gossips who would tear her reputation to shreds because they were jealous.

Dakota let out a whimper that would rival any one of Riley's. There was still no excuse for how rudely she'd behaved toward a guest on the show, and even less to justify the way she was hiding from confrontation like a baby. It was just that if it would've taken a simple wave of a hand to clear

the air that morning, it was going to require a jet engine now. Dakota wasn't convinced she was up to the task.

She cast a glance at the phone on her nightstand, guilt squeezing her gut. There were at least half a dozen texts waiting from Amanda, all of them unread. Even a newborn could've handled this with more bravery, but Dakota couldn't bring herself to look at them. Memories of her behavior in the plaza that morning assaulted her, making Dakota want to bury her head under the covers. Why had she been so stupid, rude, and insecure?

No wonder Amanda had chosen Skye over her.

There was little doubt in her mind that Amanda was trying to reach her to tell her it was over between them, for good this time. No way would Amanda want to risk her career to be with such an idiot. Not when she had rock stars at her beck and call. Dakota couldn't blame her, but she didn't think she was strong enough to hear the words.

The phone buzzed with another incoming text, sending a wave of fresh dread through Dakota as she reached to see who it was from.

Not Amanda.

Dakota's muscles unclenched as she read the text from Valerie, extending a last-minute invitation to meet up the next day during her unexpected layover in New York. Dakota smiled faintly before sending her acceptance. It would do her good right about now to see an old friend, someone who could be trusted not to have a knife at the ready to stab Dakota in the back.

As she set the phone down, Amanda's texts glared at her in bold letters, like they knew they were being ignored.

"Tomorrow," she mumbled as she turned off the light, feeling like a coward. "I'll deal with it tomorrow."

Riley came closer, resting his head on top of her chest. Dakota breathed in, convinced for a moment that she could smell Amanda's perfume. It had to be her imagination, but it was enough to bring tears to her eyes. Just days ago,

everything in her life had seemed so perfect. How could she have messed it up this badly? She had everything she wanted, but it hardly mattered if she couldn't have the person she wanted most.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FOR WHAT FELT LIKE THE MILLIONTH TIME, AMANDA CHECKED her phone for any messages, not finding one. Not even a text from her dentist about an upcoming cleaning. Of course, it was Saturday morning, so it was unlikely the dentist's office was open. Not that she was dying to hear from her dentist, but at least it would've confirmed the phone still worked.

Except, Amanda was pretty sure that wasn't the issue. The problem was simply that Dakota was ignoring her. And she had no idea why.

"I guess that's the way it is, right Cronky?" Amanda made cooing sounds at her cat, who turned his back and swished his tail at her face. Amanda was not deterred. "It's just you and me in this world. You're my dearest friend, and I'm lucky to have you in my life."

If anyone doubted cats understood English, Cronkite's expression was all the proof needed. It pretty much declared, "Fuck you, human, if you're not going to give me any treats." To drive the dagger in farther, he left the room without so much as a backward glance.

"That hurts, you little jerk," Amanda called after him. "My heart's not made of stone, no matter what anyone says. I bet Riley would understand. If I bring home a dog, it's your own damn fault."

There was a slight chance that being ignored by Dakota for twenty-four hours was causing Amanda to lose her mind. Seriously, she was yelling at her cat for acting like a cat.

Everyone under the sun knew cats didn't give a crap unless they got something in return. As for trying to bribe him into being more affectionate by comparing him to a rival dog, there was no way it would work. Cronkite would probably retaliate by suffocating her with his twenty pounds of fluff while she slept, and he'd have no qualms about snacking on her body when he was done.

If she were to be completely honest, that was one of the traits she liked best about him. He was nothing if not honest. *Never change, Cronk. You old fur ball.*

Her phone vibrated, and Amanda pounced with the desperation of a convict awaiting a pardon from the governor.

But the incoming text wasn't from Dakota. It was from her son.

"Zach!" Amanda hadn't bothered to text back before calling. That was how much she wanted to hear a human voice. "How are things in Portland?"

"I'm not in Portland," he replied. "Val and I got a last-minute flight to spend Rosh Hashanah with her grandmother in Connecticut."

"You're in Connecticut?" Amanda's pulse quickened as she realized her son was within a short drive. Surely, Joe would drive her to Connecticut if she asked nicely.

"Even better. We're in Manhattan until tomorrow morning."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Amanda clucked, immediately entering mother hen mode. "Do you need a place to stay? I can have your bedroom ready for you in a jiffy."

"We were on standby, so I didn't know for sure when we'd get in. I've already reserved a room at a hotel."

"A hotel? I won't hear of it. You shouldn't waste your money when you have a perfectly good room right here."

Zach let out a good-natured laugh. "No offense, but sleeping with my wife in the bed I used to jerk off in to pictures of Jamie Lynn Spears gives me the creeps."

“And being let in on that disturbing tidbit of personal information is going to give me nightmares,” Amanda said in retort. “I have five other bedrooms, you know. All of them empty.”

Because I live a lonely and meaningless existence in my sky mansion, she thought but didn't say.

“Next time, I promise. For Val's and my first time in the city together, I wanted to do something special. I booked us into The Plaza.”

“The Plaza? At least let me pay,” Amanda insisted, but Zach was already arguing, as if he'd anticipated the offer.

“Not only are you not paying for the hotel, you're going to let us treat you to dinner tonight. Anywhere you want.”

“How about The Halal Guys?” Amanda suggested, naming the cheapest place that came to mind.

“That's a food truck. What about Capitol Grille?”

“No way. I'm not letting you pay over fifty dollars for a steak.”

“Too late. I'm already reserving a table on their website. How does seven o'clock sound?”

“Like I'll fall asleep in my soup,” Amanda joked. “You know with the hours I work, I'm half dead by eight.”

“Five-thirty, then. I'll see if we can get an early bird menu,” Zach teased.

“Don't forget to ask for the senior discount,” Amanda said, laughing at the old joke as the call ended. Zach had always called her an old lady for the early hours she kept. Lovingly, of course, which was why it never bothered her the way it would've had anyone else dared to say it.

There were still a few hours before the reservation, but Amanda started getting ready by taking a soak in the tub. She'd overdone it on the treadmill earlier, and her lower back was on the brink of seizing. She'd learned the hard way with age to nip any back trouble in the bud. Drying off after the bath, she hesitated before applying a palmful of Bengay.

“Smells like shit,” she muttered, wrinkling her nose at the pungent ointment, “but it works.”

Not like she had a hot date.

And no. Dakota had not texted while Amanda was in the bath.

It was only two blocks from her apartment to the restaurant, so Amanda donned as nondescript an outfit as she could find and put on her walking flats. It wasn't quite Martha from Duluth, but it was close. Maybe Mildred from Milwaukee. Dakota would like that one.

Amanda pressed her hand to her chest, trying not to acknowledge how much it hurt not to be able to share it with her.

When she got to the restaurant, Amanda spotted her son instantly. She ran to him and tossed her arms around Zach's neck, giving her best mom hug. “Hey, you! Where's Valerie?”

“Oh, I love these hugs.” Zach said it in an exaggerated way, like the air was being squeezed from him, but Amanda couldn't help noticing he hugged back equally as tightly. “Val's going to join us in a little bit. She's waiting in the lounge to say hi to a college friend who recently moved to the city.”

“Oh, that's nice.” A twinge in Amanda's lower back made her grimace.

“Your back again?” Zach's face filled with concern.

“No big deal. I need to move my next massage up a few days.”

“Did you put ointment on it?”

“Can't you smell it?” Amanda laughed as her son inhaled, making a face. “When did you start acting like the parent?”

“I'm all grown-up, remember?”

“How could I forget?” Though she said it as lightly as possible, Amanda's chest felt heavy at the reminder.

The hostess soon showed them to their table. After they took their seats and ordered a bottle of Malbec, Amanda asked, “So, Rosh Hashanah with Val’s grandmother, huh? Sounds like a big deal.”

“You’re telling me.” Zach reached for the menu. “It’ll be my first one. I feel like I’ve been cramming for a final exam. My vaguely Unitarian upbringing did not prepare me for this.”

“That was your mom’s doing. If it had been up to me,” Amanda admitted, “you wouldn’t even have had that.”

“So, how are things going with Franklin Joker?” Zach asked, using his nickname for Amanda’s least favorite coworker. “He still driving you bonkers?”

“You haven’t heard? Joker’s in rehab. Wrapped his car around a lamppost, high as a kite.”

“That’s terrible,” Zach deadpanned. “I hope the poor lamppost is okay.”

Amanda chortled and wagged a finger at her son. “The fact you didn’t know this tells me you haven’t been tuning in to the show.”

“Guilty, I’m afraid.” Zach offered her a sheepish grin. “Married life is keeping me pretty busy. I did hear about Gabe Hawkins, though. You gonna finally get his chair on the evening news?”

“Too soon to tell,” Amanda said, unwilling to get her hopes up. It had happened too many times before. “He may bounce back from it yet.”

“I know you two are friends, but I don’t want you to end up like him.”

“What do you mean?” Amanda’s heart beat a little faster. Gabe was past his prime, and his work had grown sloppy. Her brow furrowed. Did Zach think the same about her? “Are you saying you don’t think I can handle the evening news?”

“Nah, I didn’t mean work. Of course, you can do it,” Zach rushed to say, filling Amanda with instant relief. “They’d be

fools not to give it to you, and I'd be so proud. I meant more like personal life stuff."

"Personal life?" Immediately, some of her tension returned. This conversation was veering into uncomfortable territory once more. Gabe had gone through wives like they were pairs of socks. Was Zach hinting that he was unhappy she and Jen had gotten divorced?

"Look, I know I was just a kid and didn't know him like you did, but Gabe never seemed happy to me. I mean, how many years did he come to our house for Thanksgiving instead of spending it with his own family? He was always by himself, and I don't want that for you."

"I'm hardly ever by myself," Amanda assured him, which was true. She'd been spending every minute of free time with Dakota. But Zach wasn't supposed to know that, which is why the sudden look of excitement on his face sent her stomach through a loop. He was way too smart not to pick up on what she wasn't saying.

"That's great. Does that mean you're dating?"

Amanda's eyes widened. "I'm pretty sure you aren't supposed to ask a woman that question."

"You're thinking of weight. Or age. Love life is fair game."

"Not when you're talking to your mother, it isn't. As a parent, one does not have a love life. Didn't you know that?"

"Aw, man. Everything I learned about how babies are made was a lie." Zach grinned as Amanda bopped his head with the menu. "Come on. I know it was rough after you and Mom split. She blamed you for everything, which was colossally unfair. I hope you know I get it."

"Get what?" Amanda couldn't help sounding a little suspicious, wondering where he was going with this. She hated to imagine the kinds of things Jen said about her when she wasn't around.

"That you two grew apart. It was nobody's fault, especially not mine. All that stuff."

“You’re very wise.” Amanda let out a breath. Knowing her ex hadn’t poisoned Zach against her was a huge relief, but that didn’t stop a little voice in Amanda’s head from reminding her that Zach’s comparison to Gabe wasn’t as far off the mark as she’d like. She’d put her work first, just like he had, with a similar result. Was she doing it again? Could that be what was going on with Dakota?

“I’m glad you think so because my advice is you should get back out there and try again. And don’t laugh this off like you usually do.” He laser locked his eyes onto hers. “I want you to be happy. Two years is a long time to be alone.”

“I am happy,” Amanda said, the same way she always did if anyone asked, but this time she was surprised to find it wasn’t a lie. Not entirely, anyway. Up until the past twenty-four hours or so, when Dakota had started ghosting her, Amanda had been happier than she’d been in years. “Don’t worry about me.”

“I’m not worried, Mom.”

Amanda’s heart skipped a beat, as it always did in the rare times Zach called her that. It used to make Jen mad, so he stopped unless she wasn’t around. Hearing it was music to her ears, a reminder of what really had value in life and that had been absent from hers for too long. Amanda knew she couldn’t keep making the same mistakes, or she really would end up like Gabe. Somehow, she had to put things right with Dakota before whatever was bothering her had a chance to fester.

“What about you, Son?” Amanda asked, ready to shift the spotlight away from her. “How are you doing?”

“I’m doing great.” As if he could feel Amanda’s eyes trying to drill into his skull to see if this was the truth, he added, “Married life is better than I ever imagined it would be.”

“No regrets?” Amanda continued to watch her son’s face for any sign of distress, but all she got was a goofy grin.

“Are you kidding? My only regret is I didn’t marry Val the day we met.”

“That would’ve been pushing it, kiddo,” Amanda shot back. “Six months was fast enough.”

“Fine, but I really did know from that first day.” Zach’s eyes glistened with tenderness, making it clear just how over the moon in love he was. Any lingering doubts Amanda might’ve had about the strength of their marriage fizzled away. “Have you ever met someone and from the first second, it’s like you’ve known them your whole life, and you just know you’d do anything to never have to be without them again?”

“Uh...” Amanda choked back sudden tears as Dakota’s face flashed into her head. Yes. Yes, she had.

“I just want you to know, whatever you decide to do, you have my blessing.” Zach studied her for a moment, one eyebrow lifting. “So, is there someone special in your life?”

“Well—” Shit, what was wrong with her? Her answer should’ve been a firm no. But she could never lie to Zach. Unfortunately.

Zach clapped. “I thought there was a glow about you!”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “I’m not glowing, and I’m not saying another word. A journalist protects her sources.”

“Tell me about her.” He rested his chin on interlaced fingers, completely ignoring her vow not to talk about it.

“God, you’re like a dog with a bone. You would’ve made a good reporter, or maybe a sorority sister.” As he bobbed his head back and forth in anticipation, Amanda snorted with laughter at her son’s unflagging eagerness for her to spill the beans on her love life. She just wasn’t sure she was ready. “Sorry to disappoint, but there’s not much to tell.”

“I doubt that.” With a flick of his hand, he motioned for her to continue. There would be no getting out of this conversation until he was satisfied, and Amanda knew it. He’d learned from the best. “Where did you meet her?”

“Work.” Okay, apparently, she could lie when she had to. There was no way she was going to admit to having a one-night stand at his wedding. “It’s all kinda complicated.”

“Why? I mean, if you like her—”

“Come on, Zach. You know better than most that everything gets more complicated when you’re in the public eye. There’s an age difference, for one thing.”

“So? Valerie’s six years older than I am, and it’s worked out just fine.”

“It’s a little more than six years,” Amanda mumbled, her eyes shifting to the tablecloth. Zach was going to be horrified. “Or, a lot more.”

Sure enough, her son’s mouth dropped open. “Is she, like, a hundred?”

“Very funny, but out of the two of us, I’m the one closer to a hundred,” Amanda admitted, feeling a sudden rush of heat. Was this embarrassment, or had the universe decided to send her a hot flash to remind her how fucking ancient she really was? If anyone at work found out about her and Dakota, they were going to think she was like one of those creepy old guys who tries to seduce all the young interns. That was even worse than getting fired.

Completely unfazed, Zach grinned. “Way to go, Mom. There’s nothing wrong with a younger woman.”

“Maybe not, but”—she shifted in her seat, not wanting to continue but unable to stop—“it’s technically breaking some rules.”

“Geez, Mom. She’s over eighteen, I hope.”

“I’m not a pervert, Son. She’s younger than I am, but she’s older than you.” *By a few years, anyway*, Amanda refrained from saying. “I was talking about my contract. It prohibits romantic relationships with certain people on the staff.”

Zach’s expression said he was waiting for more, but that was as big a hint as Amanda felt comfortable sharing, even with him. She wasn’t ready for Zach to figure out Dakota’s identity.

“But you get along?” he pressed. “Despite the age difference?”

Amanda's lips curled into a smile. "When we're together, it's the easiest thing in the world. We click. We did right from the start, so much so that it scares me because I don't want to fuck it up, and I think I may have already."

"You think so because you did something?" Zach's tone was skeptical. "Or is this another one of those times where you blame yourself for stuff even though it had nothing to do with you?"

"I don't do that."

"Are you forgetting that when you were married to Mom, I lived in the house, too? You took the blame all the time. If you'd been around when I was a baby, my first words would probably have been *I'm sorry*."

Amanda slumped under the weight of Zach's *cut the bullshit* stare. "Okay. I guess I did do that."

"At least you're not apologizing to me for it now. That's progress."

"No, but maybe I should," Amanda countered. "I hardly ever said I was sorry because I thought I was wrong. I did it because it was the quickest way to smooth over your mom's temper. If we'd actually talked about our problems and worked them out instead, it might not have ended the way it did."

"You're doing it again," Zach told her. "You're blaming yourself for what was clearly just as much her fault as yours. Is that what's happening now, too?"

While they'd been talking, the wine had arrived, and Amanda paused for a sip. She took a shaky breath as she set the glass down, suddenly aware of how deeply she'd internalized the blame when her marriage failed. If only she knew how not to make the same mistakes with Dakota. "The truth is, I don't know what's going on this time. Not even an inkling. Everything was fine until yesterday morning. All of a sudden, she started acting weird, and she left before we could talk about it. She's been ignoring my texts ever since."

"It sounds like you need to talk to her, for real. Not just saying sorry and taking the easiest way out. I'm sure if you

two really do click, you can get to the bottom of whatever happened and actually work it out, instead of smoothing it over until it comes back twice as bad.” Zach tasted his wine, smacking his lips. “Not bad. I bet Nick would hate it. Not nearly snooty enough.”

“All the more reason to drink it.” Acting on her own advice, Amanda took another sip. “As for working things out, even if that happens, that doesn’t solve the issue with my contract.”

“Can’t you renegotiate? I thought you had to do that like every year anyway.”

“Every three to five, but you’re right. It’s coming up again. Until then, though, I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t a risk. You know IBC is always on the hunt for excuses to put me at a disadvantage.”

“You said your contract prohibits romantic relationships with certain members of your staff. I assume that only applies to people who work for your show. It’s not a network-wide policy, is it?”

Amanda shook her head. “No, you’re right. It’s just *The AM Show*.”

“So it seems like the answer is pretty simple.” Zach paused, and Amanda motioned for him to keep going, curious to hear his solution. “Leave *The AM Show*.”

“Quit my job?” Her son had to know how much her job meant to her. That couldn’t be his only solution, could it? “I have to work. It’s important to me.”

“Not quit.” Zach shook his head vigorously. “Level up. You’ve been wanting to get out of morning television for years, and you’ve only played nice because they kept dangling the carrot that you’d get Gabe’s job when he retires. Well, Gabe’s out now. Make a play for the evening news. It’s your time to shine.”

“You really think I can do it?”

“Hell, yeah.” Pride blared in her son’s eyes, melting Amanda’s heart. “You can do anything.”

Amanda wished that were true, but it lifted her spirits that Zach thought so. “Look at you. Dishing out career *and* relationship—” Amanda stopped before she could finish her sentence, because she could’ve sworn she’d seen Dakota enter the restaurant.

Zach followed Amanda’s eyes, and before she could process what he was doing, he lifted a hand and waved. “There’s Val. It looks like her friend’s finally arrived.”

Amanda drew in a sharp breath as both her daughter-in-law and Dakota headed toward them.

“Is everything okay?” Zach gave her a worried look.

Amanda’s first impulse was to hide under the table. Since that wasn’t exactly the mature way to handle things, she briefly contemplated bolting from the restaurant. By now, Dakota had spotted her at the table and looked like she’d seen a ghost.

“Wait, you two know each other?” Zach asked quietly, seeming to pick up on Amanda’s shift in mood.

“You could say that.”

Zach studied her for a moment. Then it clicked. “Her?”

“Amanda!” Valerie arrived at the table, bubbling over with enthusiasm and completely unaware of what was transpiring between her mother-in-law and her friend. She threw her arms around Amanda’s neck in greeting, tweaking the sore spot in her back and prompting her to let out a muffled cry. Bouncing giddily, seemingly unaware of Amanda’s sore back or the general state of shock she’d been thrown into, Valerie turned to Dakota, whose eyes had doubled in size. “Oh my God. I *knew* you would love my surprise. This is my mother-in-law, Amanda Morgan.”

“I didn’t know...” Dakota’s expression was one of pure shock and maybe some guilt. “I shouldn’t interrupt your family time.”

“Nonsense,” Valerie told her before looking at Amanda, who was fighting back a rising panic. She and Dakota needed to talk but not here. “Dakota is such a huge fan of yours. When

I found out she'd moved to New York, I had to get you two together. I felt so bad not introducing you at the wedding."

Oh, God. The wedding. All I can think about is how we had sex at my son's wedding. And he's sitting next to me. I might die.

"Dakota, why don't you sit down and join us for dinner?" Zach offered.

He had shot a look at Amanda to see if this was okay, but she hadn't been able to respond in any way. It was possible that, similar to Medusa, looking at Dakota had turned her to stone.

Amanda tried to swallow, but her tongue was clogging her throat. Did she want Dakota to sit down? She wasn't sure. Her brain was malfunctioning like a faulty toaster. Pretty soon she'd have smoke pouring out of her ears.

It didn't matter what Amanda wanted, anyway, since Dakota didn't sit down. Her eyes were dull, and she looked like she wanted to be anywhere but here. It was like the sight of Amanda had sucked the joy out of her, and Amanda had no idea what to do.

"I should go." Looking like a frightened animal fleeing a highway, Dakota made a break for it, cleaving Amanda's heart into two.

Amanda closed her eyes, afraid of what they'd show. The pain of knowing Dakota didn't want to talk to her, or be around her, was overwhelming. It was worse than when Jen had declared their marriage over. At least that one Amanda had seen coming. This time, the rug had been pulled out from under her, and Amanda had no clue what she'd done.

"Mom," Zach said, his urgency snapping her out of her trance. "Go after her."

"What about dinner?" Amanda trembled from head to toe, desperation rising to the surface as she watched Dakota walk away. What if this was it, and she was never coming back?

"Are you nuts?" Zach raised his hands, looking at Amanda like he was certain she'd lost her marbles. "I love you, but we

can have dinner another time. You need to talk to her, right now.”

“But I hardly see you.” Amanda’s head was in a fog. Or maybe it was smoke. Did it smell like burnt toast? Shit. Wasn’t that a sign she was having a stroke?

“We’ll be back for Thanksgiving. We’ll even stay at the house with you.”

“You will?” Amanda barely knew what Zach was saying, let alone what nonsense she was babbling.

“Hell, yeah. I wouldn’t miss Gabe’s marshmallow sweet potatoes for the world, so you’d better invite him again this year.” Zach made a shooing motion with his arms. “Come on, woman. Do you not watch rom-coms? This is the part where you run after the girl or lose her forever. Go!”

Spurred into action, Amanda did as she was told, leaving behind a bewildered Valerie. Amanda would leave it to Zach to fill her in. Right now, she needed to catch up to Dakota.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“DAKOTA, WAIT!”

Dakota’s desire to plug her ears with her fingers was overwhelming. Her goal was in sight. After speed walking two city blocks with Amanda in hot pursuit, the safety of the elevator was steps away. Even so, Dakota slowed her pace to glance behind her.

Big mistake.

Dakota’s heart lurched as Amanda doubled over, clutching at her back as she huffed and puffed in the lobby of their apartment building.

Almost instantly, Fred dashed out from behind his desk. “You okay, Ms. Morgan?”

“I’m fine,” Amanda groaned, apparently trying to pretend nothing was wrong but doing a horrendous job of it.

The elevator dinged, but instead of getting in, Dakota was halfway across the lobby, rushing to Amanda’s side. She stood beside the doorman, paralyzed by helplessness in the face of Amanda’s pain. Dakota needed someone to tell her what to do. “Amanda? What happened?”

“I tweaked my back on the treadmill,” Amanda said through gritted teeth. “Spasm!”

“I told you treadmills were the tool of the devil,” Dakota scolded, hoping for a smile but not getting one. She turned to Fred. “I’ll help her upstairs. Can you call the elevator?”

“Sure thing, Ms. Washington.”

“I don’t need help,” Amanda grunted.

“Fine. I’ll leave you here.” Dakota took a step to show she meant it. Stubborn woman. Considering the emotional humiliation Dakota was opening herself up to by stopping to help someone who was most likely planning to shatter her heart into a million tiny pieces, the least Amanda could do was not fight her over something silly.

“No, wait.” Even now, it was obvious that swallowing her pride was taking every remaining ounce of Amanda’s strength. “I guess I do need help.”

Dakota held out her arm, taking Amanda’s weight and walking slowly beside her until they reached the elevator. “Thanks, Fred. I’ll get her up to her apartment safely.”

“Why have you been avoiding me?” Amanda asked as soon as the doors slid shut.

Dakota willed herself not to break down in tears. “Because I couldn’t bear to hear what you had to say.”

“Which was?”

Dakota kept her mouth zipped, not answering as the elevator whizzed toward the top of the building.

“I’m still waiting...?” Amanda shifted to look Dakota in the eyes, or as close as she could come without being able to stand all the way upright. When Dakota dared to return her gaze, she was shocked to be met with trepidation. What could Amanda have to fear?

The elevator stopped at the penthouse, sparing Dakota from the need for an immediate response. She helped Amanda into the hallway, wincing at each step the woman took.

“Let’s go in this door. It’s closer to the couch.”

Dakota eyed the entrance she’d never used before. “I need a key.”

“In my handbag.”

As she went to retrieve the key, Dakota’s hand accidentally grazed the side of Amanda’s breast. It was the briefest of

contact, but the frisson was undeniable. Why did her body have to betray her like this? Unable to stop it, a tear snaked down Dakota's right cheek.

"What's wrong?" Amanda sounded miserable.

"I don't know how to do this."

"You don't know how to unlock the door? You young people and your reliance on technology." Amanda shuffled closer, putting her hand out. "Let me do it."

"I wasn't talking about the lock." Despite this denial, it took three tries for her shaking hand to open the door. "Let's get you inside. Do you want me to take you straight to the couch?"

"I want you to tell me why you're crying."

Dakota sniffled. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Clearly not." With a Herculean effort, Amanda made it to the couch. Her cheeks were flushed, and sweat had broken out across her brow. "What kind of stupid place is this that the living room is the length of a fucking football field away from the door? It's times like this I wish I still lived in a studio apartment."

Dakota wrung her hands, "Can I get you medicine? Or a pillow?"

"No," Amanda barked but almost instantly thought better of it. "Actually, yes. There's a bottle of prescription pain pills on the kitchen counter. I don't like taking them, but this is an emergency. If you wouldn't mind bringing me two of those first, I'd appreciate it. After that, we need to talk."

There it was, the most dreaded phrase in the English language. *We need to talk*. Whatever followed was never good.

Making her way to the kitchen, it was all Dakota could do not to hyperventilate. She wasn't ready to have this conversation, but she couldn't avoid it any longer. She had to be brave.

"Here are the pills and a glass of water," Dakota said when she returned. After handing the items to Amanda, she perched

on the edge of the sofa cushion, steeling herself for the worst. “Before you say anything, let me tell you this. I understand about Skye.”

“The sky?” Amanda’s brows scrunched in apparent confusion. Was she playing coy?

“I understand why you went to Skye Blue’s dressing room after the show.”

“Look, I’m sorry I had to run off so quickly, but she had a tight schedule, and I really wanted to mark that off my list.”

Well, that was direct. Dakota blinked several times, as stunned by Amanda’s casual admission as if it had been a physical blow. She wasn’t even trying to deny what had happened. Then again, Dakota supposed that was the whole point of the freebie list.

“Just, uh... At least tell me what number she was.” Dakota hated how much her voice was shaking almost as much as she hated asking the question, but for some insane reason, she thought it might make her feel better if Skye had at least been number one on Amanda’s list, like Dakota suspected.

“It’s possible the pain in my back might be messing with me right now,” Amanda said cautiously, “but I’m really not following.”

“Your celebrity freebie list.” Dakota was getting a little annoyed at having to spell it out. “What number was she?”

“My...” Amanda’s face suddenly had the same look on it that Sir Isaac Newton’s must’ve had when the apple bonked him on the noggin. “You think I used my hall pass?”

“Oh, is that your name for it?” Without warning, the dam broke, flooding Dakota with tears and anger. “I can’t fucking believe this.”

“Neither can I.”

Amanda was the one being indignant? Only, that wasn’t actually the way it had sounded, and come to think of it, the way Amanda was staring at Dakota felt off. Even as she gulped for air, Dakota’s nerves pinged. There was something

going on that she was missing. She tried to speak, but instead of words, the only sound she could manage was a squeaky hiccup.

“Don’t try to talk. Just nod your head.” Amanda was remarkably cool under pressure. No wonder people called her Dragon Lady. “Did you ignore all of my texts this weekend because you thought I used a celebrity hall pass to sleep with Skye Blue?”

Slowly, Dakota nodded. After two more hiccups, she managed to get out, “You said so yourself.”

“You are not making any sense. You didn’t take a couple of my pain pills yourself, did you?”

“Amanda, you just said it a minute ago.” Dakota smacked the sofa cushion with her hand. “You said you were sorry for ditching me, but you needed to mark her off your list.”

“My *bucket* list, Dakota.” Amanda’s shoulders trembled like she was holding back laughter. “I’ve wanted Skye Blue to sign the CD of her debut album for me since I was in college. She promised to do it after the show, but she had a flight to catch, so I had to hurry.”

Dakota’s heart felt suddenly lighter. “That’s all?”

“Of course.” Amanda winced as she shifted position, sucking air through her teeth. “I can’t believe all this was because of a celebrity hall pass, or freebie list, or whatever you want to call it. I mean, my God, Dakota, those are a total fantasy. Aside from the fact it’s still cheating, and so I couldn’t condone anyone ever doing it, no one ever actually has sex with someone on their celebrity list. It just doesn’t happen in real life.”

“I did.” Dakota’s face grew hot as she made her confession. It was so humiliating to say it out loud, like she was some sort of groupie.

“When? Who?” Amanda spluttered.

“Who do you think? You.” Dakota shriveled inside, knowing how immature this revelation made her look. “I’m

surprised Valerie never told you about her college roommate who plastered pictures of you all over the wall.”

“You had pictures of me in your dorm room?” Amanda seemed flabbergasted. “Where did you even find them?”

“You’re Amanda Morgan. There are pictures.” It was hard to read Amanda’s reaction, but Dakota thought it might be amazement. Almost like it had never occurred to her that anyone would think to put up her picture, let alone add her to their celebrity freebie list. “I can’t be the first person who’s told you this.”

“I promise you are. I don’t even know what to say.”

“You think I’m an idiot.” Dakota hid her face behind her hands. “You’re wondering why you were ever with someone as unsophisticated as me when you could have a rock star like Skye Blue.”

“Me?” Amanda giggled, chortled, and finally dissolved into a full-blown fit of laughter, which caused pain to shoot through her back, igniting a vicious pain-laughter cycle that Amanda was powerless to control.

“Why is that funny?”

“Because,” Amanda replied, still gasping for breath, “I had a poster of Skye Blue hanging on my dormitory wall. I still remember my mother seeing it and telling me to take it down. She was afraid it made me look like a lesbian.”

“That’s terrible.”

“So’s my mother, but now is hardly the time to get into that topic.” Amanda twisted hesitantly at the waist, making a face as she tried to stretch her back muscles. “I can’t get over the idea that you thought about me the way I thought about Skye back in the day.”

“How could I not? Look at you.” Dakota waved her hand at Amanda, as if that would make it easier for the woman to see what Dakota did. “You’re one of the most successful journalists on the planet. You do your job so perfectly it looks effortless. And you can stand in front of a crowd of hundreds

of people on the plaza and be so calm and collected, it's like they're not even there."

"Is that honestly how you think of me?"

"That was what I thought *before* I met you."

"And now?" Amanda bit at her lower lip, like she was nervous to hear what Dakota would say.

"Now I know you're kindhearted and generous, but you'll never take credit for half of what you do. You'll go on adventures with me, even when you think they're ridiculous—and you'll have fun in defiance of your grumpiness." A gnawing desperation in Dakota's chest grew with each word. "I know that I would rather spend a day with you doing absolutely nothing than doing anything with anyone else in the world. And I know I'm going to end up getting my heart broken because some network lawyers decided to make it impossible for us to be together."

"It's not impossible." There was determination in the set of Amanda's jaw.

Dakota held her breath, stunned, as the full meaning of her outburst, and Amanda's response to it, started to sink in. "It's not?"

"I won't let it be." Amanda seemed to choke a little as she said this, like her words were catching in her throat.

Dakota's heart thudded in her ears. This was so far from what she'd expected to hear that she could hardly make sense of Amanda's words. "Why?"

"Because I know all of those things about you, too." Amanda's fingers fidgeted in her lap but her voice remained steady and sure. The intensity of her gaze sent chills down Dakota's spine, but warmed her the same time, from the inside out. "And I know you're bold and more fearless than I could ever hope to be."

"Me?" Dakota shot her an incredulous look. It was all she could do not to laugh at such a preposterous suggestion. "Yesterday, I was so overwhelmed by how much I suck at

everything that I had a complete panic attack and freaked out in a jealous fit on live television.”

“Is that what was going on? I thought—” Amanda let out a breathy laugh, like Dakota’s admission had caused her enormous relief. “Never mind. We all have those days. I was having one the night we met.”

“You?” Dakota crossed her arms. It was impossible to imagine Amanda Morgan suffering from an attack of insecurity.

“Big time. I felt fat, hideous, old, and irrelevant.”

“I...” Dakota didn’t know what to say. The woman from the poster on her dorm room wall would never have felt that way. But the real Amanda Morgan was fragile and sensitive, full of doubt and far from perfect—which somehow made Dakota love her that much more. “I didn’t know the extent of your thoughts.”

“Well, no, because you came along and pulled me out of it. Very handily.” Desire flashed in Amanda’s eyes, conjuring up vivid images of that night that threatened to make Dakota swoon. “You played it so cool that I’m only now finding out I’m on your celebrity list. That blows my mind. I mean, I can fake it for the cameras, but do you know when I went to get Skye’s autograph on my CD, I was so nervous I forgot my own name?”

“Seriously?” Surely, Amanda was just saying that for Dakota’s benefit.

“I’m not joking. She asked me what to write, and I couldn’t remember.” Amanda’s expression became incredibly tender as she held Dakota’s gaze. “You’re special. And what we have is, too. It would be a shame to let that go.”

Though Dakota’s heart wanted to take off for the clouds, her head weighed her down. “But our contracts...”

“I don’t care. If I wouldn’t let my mother tell me who I could fall in love with in college, I sure as hell am not going to let a bunch of suits tell me who I can be in love with now.” As Amanda’s passionate speech reached a crescendo, she sat up

tall and slammed her fist against a throw pillow. Then she cried out in agony. “My back!”

“Amanda!” Dakota leapt up and threw herself to her knees beside the injured woman, grabbing spare pillows wherever she could find them. “Here. Put these behind you. Like this. Is that better?”

“Getting... better...” Amanda’s breathing was rapid and shallow, reminiscent of a woman in labor. “I’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure?” Dakota’s eyes darted around the living room as she hoped a magical cure for the pain would present itself.

“It’ll stop soon.”

“Amanda?”

“Uh-huh.”

Dakota tilted her head. “Did I imagine it, or did you say you’re in love with me?”

“Yes.” Amanda moaned as another spasm hit.

Dakota waited for it to pass before prompting, “Which one?”

“What?”

“Did I imagine it, or did you say you love me?”

“Dakota.” Amanda lifted one hand to Dakota’s cheek, slowly so as not to set off more pain. “Of course, I love you. Isn’t it obvious?”

Laughter bubbled out of Dakota, lifting all of the worry and angst that had been weighing her down. Only when Amanda started to look alarmed, like maybe she’d have to hobble to wherever the phone was in her giant house and call the people at the funny farm to come take Dakota away, did she manage to get it under control. “We’re quite a pair.”

“I think we are.” Amanda cocked her head as far to the left as her bad back would allow. “Was that it, or was there anything else you wanted to say?”

“What do you—oh!” Dakota clasped her hand over her mouth as she realized her faux pas. “I love you, too. And I don’t know exactly how we’re going to make it okay with the network, but I trust that we will because I can’t imagine walking away.” Dakota wanted nothing more than to throw herself on top of Amanda and kiss her senseless, but she didn’t want to send her to the hospital, so she leaned in slowly and placed the gentlest of kisses on her lips.

When they parted, Amanda smiled. “I think I know what we need to do.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting sex right now,” Dakota told her. “Not in your present condition.”

“Sadly, no.” The slightest repositioning brought pain to Amanda’s face. “I’ll need a raincheck on that. I was talking about work. Assuming I’m able to walk come Monday, I think I should go upstairs and have a talk with Franklin Senior.”

“You’re going to tell him about us?”

“Absolutely not. The man’s as trustworthy as a hungry shark. But I was talking to Zach earlier about it—”

“You were talking to your son about us?” Dakota sucked in her breath as a horrifying thought hit her. “You didn’t tell him about us hooking up at his wedding, did you?”

“That secret is going with us to the grave. No, we were talking about this thing with Gabe. Zach suggested, and I agree, that it’s time I asked outright for the head chair on the evening news.”

Dakota nodded at the simple brilliance of the solution. “If we aren’t cohosts, we’re not breaking any rules.”

“Bingo.”

“I wish the world could see you the way I do.”

“A slob with a bad back who can’t get up from the couch?” Amanda made a face.

“I don’t mean like this,” Dakota said with a small roll of her eyes. “I mean this vulnerable side of you, the one you keep hidden so people will think you’re a fire-breathing dragon.”

“Being Dragon Lady has gotten me through a lot of tough times over the years,” Amanda pointed out. “You know it’s not easy, doing what we do.”

“I know, and I understand,” Dakota assured her. “But it’s a shame. This side of you is what I noticed that first night, before I even realized who you were.”

“What do you mean before you realized?”

Dakota laughed. “Do you honestly think I have the balls to walk right up to someone on my celebrity freebie list and start talking? I only managed it because it was too dark to see who you were.”

“Well, it was still brave.” Amanda paused, her eyes narrowing. “Wait. You said *one* of the people on your list. How many are there?”

“Oh, no.” Dakota shook her head. “No, I’m not going there. I’m pleading the fifth.”

“Dakota,” Amanda said sternly.

Grinning, Dakota cupped Amanda’s cheeks. “It’s only you. It’s only ever been you.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WHEN AMANDA ROLLED OUT OF BED AT 3:05 A.M. ON Monday morning without a trace of the searing pain that made her wish she'd been born an invertebrate, she knew it would be a fantastic day. By the time the alarm went off at 3:30 and a groggy Dakota, sporting an impressive case of bedhead, stumbled into the bathroom to stand beside her at the mirror, Amanda's mood was so good, she was actually humming.

"You're chipper," Dakota said accusingly before stuffing a toothbrush into her mouth.

"Why wouldn't I be? I woke up next to the world's most beautiful woman," Amanda ruffled the plume of hair that stood straight up on one side of Dakota's head, "and I'm finally going to get the job I've been dreaming of for the past fifteen years."

"Nervous?" Dakota asked after spitting out a mouthful of minty foam.

"A little," Amanda admitted. "I'm not looking forward to the possibility of a showdown with Franklin Senior."

Dakota laughed. "What would people think if they knew how much Dragon Lady secretly hates conflict?"

"That's why it's going to remain a secret," Amanda reminded her, swooping in to plant a kiss on the side of Dakota's neck. "I mean, I'll do what I have to do to get Gabe's old job, but it's not like I wanna walk around New York City all day, breathing fire at anyone who crosses my path."

“I don’t suppose I could convince you to breathe fire under a coffee pot while I take Riley out?” Dakota lifted a hand to her head, a look of utter confusion on her face as she surveyed the countertop beside the sink. “Do you have—”

“A brush?” Amanda slipped the desired item into Dakota’s hand, having already anticipated her request. “And there’s no need to abuse Dragon Lady’s powers. I have a pot of coffee already brewing in the breakfast kitchen.”

“I still can’t believe you have two kitchens.” Dakota winced as she dragged the brush through her hair.

The sound of knots being pulled made Amanda want to cry. She took the brush from Dakota’s hand and carefully smoothed the woman’s blonde hair, sparing it from further destruction. “Actually, I have three.”

“Three kitchens?” Dakota’s face was the picture of shock. “For real?”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to mention it.”

“I can see why you hesitated. It’s ridiculous.” Dakota’s lips twitched, and it was clear she was trying not to laugh. “Do any of them have a toaster?”

“All three of them, in fact.” Amanda chuckled. It really was as ridiculous as Dakota had said. “Although only the breakfast kitchen has bread and jam.”

“In that case I’ll meet you in that one once Ry-Ry and I return.” Dakota raised Amanda’s hand for a kiss.

After a quick breakfast, and a not quite so quick kiss in the hallway before boarding the elevator, Amanda and Dakota were on their way to work. At precisely 4:30 a.m., they were walking out the main door of their building, Amanda clutching the sides of her pants to keep herself from reaching for Dakota’s waist and pulling her close.

Not in public. At least, not yet. But if everything went as she hoped it would, they wouldn’t have to keep their relationship secret for much longer. Amanda was counting the seconds, and not just because she wanted to shout from the rooftops how lucky she was to have a woman like Dakota by

her side. She was also ready—no, more than ready—to leave morning television behind her so she could meet the evening news head-on at last.

The black SUV was parked where it always was, and the moment Amanda's foot touched the sidewalk, Joe was out of the vehicle and opening the rear passenger door.

“Morning, ladies.” He didn't say a word about the fact they'd arrived outside at precisely the same time, but Joe was no fool. He knew what was going on. The nearly imperceptible nod he gave Amanda before he shut the door spoke as loudly as if he'd given her a high-five and shouted, “Yas, Queen.” She and Dakota had Joe's blessing.

While she was on the air, Amanda's total focus was on the news, but as soon as the show ended, the butterflies swarmed her stomach. Amanda undid her mike, gave Dakota a *now or never* look, and pushed back from the desk. It was precisely 9:01 a.m., which meant if she wanted to catch Franklin Senior before his day got too busy, there was no time to change first.

“Good luck,” Dakota said, keeping her voice low enough that only Amanda could hear.

During the elevator ride to the top floor, Amanda started humming again, but instead of the happy little ditty from earlier that morning, this time it was *The Imperial March* that played in her head. Something about Darth Vader's theme song felt appropriate when heading upstairs to talk to the suits.

A receptionist sat at the desk in front of the hallway that led to the boardroom and the offices of the network president and his two righthand men. Her head snapped up as the elevator doors opened. “Amanda. That was fast.”

Amanda didn't say anything in response, possibly because her nerves were strangling her vocal cords by this point or because she was suddenly aware how rude it was that she couldn't remember the woman's name. It wasn't entirely her fault. The three top executives burned through assistants even faster than she did. Still, it was something to improve.

“Ms. Morgan has arrived,” the woman said into an intercom on her desk as Amanda sailed past. It was odd she hadn’t stopped Amanda first to ask why she was there, but Amanda didn’t think too much of it. The woman was new.

“Take a seat,” Franklin barked when Amanda entered his office. “Close the door first.”

Amanda frowned as she noticed Wyatt was also in the room, standing behind Franklin, who was seated in the leather swivel chair behind a desk of heavy, carved oak. It was the type of desk that belonged in a museum, probably made for some Gilded Age captain of industry. No doubt Franklin Senior had chosen it because he thought it made him look intimidating.

He wasn’t wrong.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt your meeting, but the girl—I mean, administrative assistant—out front didn’t tell me to wait. I can come back when you’re done.”

“I asked him to be here,” Franklin said.

This set off a shockwave of confusion in Amanda’s skull. How could the old man have invited the head of the news division to a meeting that wasn’t on his calendar? Amanda hadn’t told him she was coming. “It’s just as well, since this involves Wyatt, too.”

“Sit down,” Franklin repeated, harsher this time, cutting off the remainder of Amanda’s words.

Swallowing hard, Amanda did as she was told, a sinking feeling in her gut. The meeting hadn’t yet started. How was it already so far off script?

Wyatt folded his hands together and cleared his throat. “The investigator has completed the internal audit and concluded definitively that the bad intel on Marcus Brown that Gabe used in his report did indeed come from a source within IBC.”

“That’s terrible.” Amanda hadn’t expected this opening. Talk about a wrench in her plans. Would they see reason, or was the old boy’s club going to circle to protect one of their

own? “Even so, Gabe’s credibility has taken a hit. Surely, you’ll abide by your decision to keep him off the air.”

“I bet you’d really like that, wouldn’t you?” Franklin blustered, and Amanda wondered why being ambitious and female at the same time seemed to be such a crime with this guy. “Come on. You can stop pretending.”

“I’m not following.” Amanda looked to Wyatt, who was tapping his finger on a folder in front of him, refusing to look Amanda in the eye. With a mounting sense of dread, she realized it was starting to feel less like she had initiated this morning’s meeting, and more like she’d been summoned. “Wyatt, what’s going on?”

“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen the proof with my own eyes. Everything Gabe did for your career, and it wasn’t enough to satisfy you.” Wyatt’s tone was sorrowful, like he was giving a eulogy for his dog. “You couldn’t wait patiently for your turn.”

“I’ve never seen someone stoop so low.” Franklin’s jaw clenched.

“Both of you are talking gibberish right now.” Amanda’s blood simmered. “I’ve spent fifteen years waiting my turn, as Wyatt so nicely put it. You act like it’s a crime to want to further my career.”

“No, Amanda. That wasn’t your crime.” Wyatt slammed his fist onto the folder, his eyes aflame. “Falsifying documents and sending them to Gabe was.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Amanda’s insides had frozen at Wyatt’s wild accusation, but the more she was able to process what he’d said, the hotter she was becoming as her dragon side started to wake. “No way will I take the fall for this. I did nothing wrong.”

“None of us wants to play games, Amanda. Not after everything.” Far from the indignation he’d shown earlier, Franklin looked beaten. Was he going to cry? “The network can’t take another hit... not after everything that’s happened this summer.”

“That’s why we’ve come up with an arrangement that works out for everyone.” Wyatt sounded about as believable as Satan telling her he was giving her a good deal for signing over her soul.

“I’m not interested in an arrangement.” Though Amanda’s exterior remained calm, inside she was starting to crack as alternate waves of anger and panic rocked her core. After all her years of hard work and loyalty, not to mention her unimpeachable ethical standards, could they really think she would do something so vile? “I’m going to say this one more time. Whoever torpedoed Gabe’s career, it wasn’t me.”

“The investigator says otherwise.” Wyatt picked up the folder from Franklin’s desk and gave it a shake. “It’s all here in the report.”

As he slammed it down, some of the papers splayed out. Amanda strained to see what they said, but it was no use, and she doubted Wyatt would hand it over. It didn’t matter. Whatever he had in there was a lie. “I don’t know what proof you and your investigator think you have, but whatever it is, it’s as bogus as the documents that were sent to Gabe.”

Franklin clapped his hands, completely overwrought. “By God, you have no shame!”

Wyatt shushed Franklin with a hand on his shoulder, taking back control. From what Amanda could tell, the head of the news division was already acting as the de facto head of the network, but Franklin wasn’t ready to give up the ghost yet. That should have been a good development for Amanda. Wyatt had always been on her side, until all of this. It was like Amanda had stepped out of the elevator into an alternate universe.

“This is how things will play out.” Wyatt fixed Amanda with a level stare that obliterated any spark of hope that this was all some sort of misunderstanding. If he’d intended it to make her wither away, he was in for disappointment. If anything, it stoked the flames of Amanda’s anger until the room around her turned red. “You will continue in your

current role as cohost of *The AM Show* for the next two weeks
—”

“Frankie will be back by then,” Franklin interjected, once again refusing to see reality where his son was concerned. “He’s doing much better after his stay in Malibu.”

Was he really that blind? With Franklin Junior in the lead, *The AM Show* would go down in flames. The man was a train wreck in the making.

Wyatt continued as if the old man hadn’t said a word. “When Franklin comes back, you’ll announce your retirement.”

“Retirement!” Amanda’s jaw dropped. She clenched her fists so hard her arms shook. If she had to take any more abuse from these fools, she might spontaneously combust. “I’m only forty-seven. No one is going to believe I’m retiring. And why do you think I’m going to fall on my sword simply because you told me to?”

“Because, like Gabe, you value your legacy.” For once, Franklin Senior had actually gotten something right about her. Damn him. “You ruined his reputation, but you won’t be so quick to ruin your own.”

This observation was just astute enough to bring her rage down one notch from a full boil. Losing it completely right here and now might do more damage to herself than Amanda was anticipating. The knowledge that she could make things worse was the only thing that helped her hold her tongue.

“Two weeks,” Wyatt said, stepping out from behind Franklin’s desk and opening the door. Clearly the meeting was over. “If you don’t cooperate, the full report from the investigator will go public. Trust me when I say you don’t want that.”

When Amanda stepped out of the elevator at ground level, she was shaking with a mix of shock and anger. Just outside the building, she could see Dakota waiting for her next to a planter. How could Amanda explain what’d just happened? Hell, Amanda wasn’t sure she even understood it. Her head

was reeling. She'd gone upstairs thinking the world was her oyster, and now everything had gone to shit.

The minute Amanda stepped outside, Dakota started to ask how it went, but her lips sealed shut as she seemed to become aware that something was very wrong. Amanda poured it all out, every last detail she could remember. When she finished, they'd made it to the entrance of Central Park, and Amanda was nearly consumed by the flames of righteous fury.

"Can you believe that bullshit?" Amanda's fists were clenched so tightly her arms shook. "I swear to God I want to burn that whole place to the ground!"

Putting a hand on the small of Amanda's back, Dakota steered them to a nearby bench. "Totally justifiable. But before you pour the gasoline and toss in a lighted match, maybe we should come up with a different plan."

"Like what?"

"One that doesn't involve you going to jail. This isn't the time to go full Dragon Lady."

"This seems like the perfect time to me," Amanda muttered.

"If you thought that mother of the groom dress was bad, imagine yourself in a prison jumper. Orange isn't your color." Amanda started to protest, but Dakota held up a hand to her face. "We did not commit to this relationship only to see it reduced to conjugal visits. I have a better idea."

Amanda waited expectantly, but Dakota hesitated. "Are you planning to share?"

"You're not going to like it." Dakota filled her chest with what had to be a fortifying breath and said, "My idea will bring down those who are involved, but you may have to eat some crow to get it done."

Even without knowing all the details, Amanda's first impulse was to run. "Why does everyone have it out for me today? Even you?"

“I don’t, and honestly, it’s time you did what I’m about to suggest, anyway.”

“Which is?” Amanda tensed as if Dakota’s words might cause physical pain.

“Make nice with the admins.”

That was unexpected. She’d assumed Dakota’s plan would involve donating a kidney or something. “Why?”

“For one, it’s the right thing to do.”

“But, I have been being nice,” Amanda argued, only to doubt her words the second they came out of her mouth. Had she ever actually followed through on any of those impulses, or had she only intended to be nice?

“Let’s be real.” Dakota gave her a look that said it was probably the latter that was true. “You’ve terrorized enough of them that you’d have to buy out every florist in Manhattan to do your apology justice. But there’s also a good chance they can help.”

“How?” It wasn’t that Amanda thought Dakota was wrong. She was honestly curious what talents she had overlooked where the admins were concerned. Maybe that had been part of her problem all along.

“Think about it. Every show and every department has admins. They have access to email passwords and calendars. They know when mail gets delivered. They attend meetings with all the top brass. They see way more than Franklin Senior’s spy cams, and people—especially people like you—pay them even less attention. What’s the one thing we know from the investigator’s report?”

Amanda stroked her chin, trying to tease out an important kernel of truth from the nonsense. “Whoever did this made it look like it was me. Which means it had to be an inside job.”

“Yes.” Dakota’s eyes sparkled, and Amanda could tell the woman’s keen journalistic brain was starting to hum, even as Amanda’s own was. “Whoever brought down Gabe works inside the network, and there’s a good chance they were trying

to get rid of you, too. We have two weeks to figure out who that person is.”

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Amanda stood in her living room. She plumped a throw pillow, tossing it onto the couch and surveying the result with a critical eye. “Ladies, I imagine you’re wondering why I’ve invited you all here tonight.”

Entering the living room, Dakota raised an eyebrow. “That’s your opening speech? It sounds like you’re the detective in a dinner theater murder mystery.”

Amanda switched the pillows around again, but it was no use. The problem wasn’t the room’s accessories but what they said about her.

“Stop fussing.” Dakota set a platter of cheese and crackers onto the coffee table. “Everything looks fine.”

“Everything looks pretentious. What are these women going to think, coming into a place like this? Especially when I’ve treated them like nothing but a bunch of tea wenches.” Amanda squeezed her hands together until her fingers started to ache. “Not only are they not going to want to help me, they’ll probably want to roast me on a spit.”

“Oh, stop. I seriously doubt any of the administrative assistants are secretly cannibals.”

When her phone buzzed, Amanda’s stomach plummeted. “Joe just pulled up out front.”

“The tea wenches are in the building.” Dakota squinted at Amanda with a look of concern. “Just a tip. Once they get here, don’t utter the phrase *tea wench* if you want to get on their good sides.”

“Gee, ya think?”

“Another tip, don’t do sarcasm. Just act natural.”

“Sarcasm is natural for me.”

“It can also be off-putting,” Dakota advised. “To get them on board with helping, you need to open up to them. Treat them like family.”

“You clearly haven’t met my mother.”

Dakota’s nose wrinkled. “That reminds me. Now that we’re officially a couple, will I ever have to meet this mother of yours?”

“I highly recommend against it,” Amanda said, not the least bit sarcastically. “She’s even better at breathing fire than I am, in case you were wondering how I developed my crispy exterior. Any parts she didn’t singe, my ex-wife made sure to get.”

A loud knock sounded, shattering whatever little inner peace Amanda had managed to gather.

Dakota took both of Amanda’s hands. “It’s going to be okay. We got this.”

“Welcome!” Opening the front door, Amanda motioned for Cyndie, Marcy, and Brenda to come inside.

She led them through the long marble gallery that housed her sizable art collection, trying not to take their slack-jawed expressions and saucer-like eyes to heart. Of the three, only Brenda didn’t seem to notice much about her surroundings. She was too busy casting surreptitious glances at Amanda. Since they’d never been formally introduced, Amanda guessed the woman might be awestruck to be in the same room as a famous morning show host. Yet another hurdle to overcome in gaining support.

When they reached the living room, Amanda waved at the snacks and said, “Please, help yourselves.” She’d put out brie and an herb-crustèd chèvre alongside the standard cheddar and Swiss. It had been meant to convey respect, to say, “I think you’re worthy of the good cheeses.” But given how overwhelmed they’d been by the entryway, Amanda feared it would look more like she was showing off.

Or, she was really overthinking this.

“Amanda, offer them a drink,” Dakota whispered.

“Yes. It’s high time I repaid all those times you’ve fetched me tea.” *I didn’t say tea wench*, Amanda thought defensively as Dakota shot her a warning glance.

“That sounds great,” Marcy said. “I take mine black with a tablespoon of honey, raw and unfiltered honey.”

Right around the time Amanda realized that was how she took her tea, Cyndie burst into laughter. Amanda’s cheeks went up in flames, but she laughed along. “Good one, you guys.”

“Is it really true you fired that one male assistant you had for using the wrong honey?” Brenda inquired, seeming not to know whether she should laugh, too.

Reaching the bar where the tea and coffee had been set up, Amanda cocked her head to the side. “I can’t believe that’s one of the rumors going around about me. People think I fired Xander because of honey?”

“I’ve heard it from more than one source,” Brenda confirmed.

“Me, too,” Cyndie added. “I almost quit the first week when I heard that one.”

As she focused on pouring tea into cups, Amanda began to understand how detrimental her poor reputation could be. “The truth about Xander is I asked him never to let Howard wear his blazer during the cooking segments. He forgot, and Howard caught himself on fire.”

Cyndie sucked in a sharp breath. “I remember that episode. The camera cut away so fast I thought I’d imagined it.”

“No, it really happened.” Still upset by the memory, Amanda had to steady her hands before handing out the cups of tea. “I probably could’ve handled it better, but... I was upset. And scared. Howard was my rock for many years, and seeing him fade the way he was tore me apart. Plus, I was going through my divorce. I simply couldn’t handle everything in my life being turned upside down.”

Bracing herself for ridicule, Amanda fought the urge to run into the kitchen and hide. She was amazed when the assistants

responded with sympathetic looks and reassuring smiles. Instead of being turned off by Amanda's weakness, Dakota had seemed almost proud of her, nodding with encouragement throughout the story. It was the exact opposite of what people in her past had led her to expect.

"And the other admins you fired? Were they also for good reasons?" Marcy asked.

"I won't go that far." Amanda gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I'm not a monster, but I'm also not called Dragon Lady without reason."

Everyone burst into laughter.

When it subsided, Brenda said, "What is it you need from us? I may be new, but I have a feeling you're not in the habit of inviting assistants over for a tea party."

"Frankly, I'm in trouble," Amanda confessed. "And even though I know I haven't done much to deserve your help, I really need it."

Amanda filled them in on the details, noting the undercurrent of anger these women displayed toward the old boys' club mentality that was so pervasive at the network. She was far from the only one affected by it, and if anything, this seemed to increase their willingness to help.

"If I've got it right, the story started when Gabe received a copy of Marcus Brown's Whitlock University transcript," Marcy said, getting down to business with the same focus a seasoned reporter might show. "Do we know if it came by email or regular post?"

"He received a printed copy in an unmarked envelope," Amanda replied. "If he was following protocol, he would've reached out to someone at the school to verify the information and send another copy of the transcript to compare."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Cyndie said with a snort. "I worked in the registrar's office at a community college, and even there we couldn't give out anything. Not unless we checked ID or had written authorization. The CIA doesn't keep data as secure as a college."

“In that case,” Amanda said, “he certainly should’ve handed it all off to Booth at some point for a final round of fact-checking.”

“I can probably find out quick enough if there were any emails about it between those two,” Marcy said. “I have the passwords to most of the accounts in that department.”

“Aren’t those supposed to be kept private?” Amanda asked.

“Yep.” Marcy bit into a cracker, tossing in a chunk of cheese as a chaser before adding, “Realistically, though, the illustrious Gabe Hawkins can barely tie his own shoes without help, and Booth isn’t much better. Just yesterday, Mr. Boy Genius had to ask me how to split up a PDF.”

Amanda nodded in what she hoped was a thoughtful manner, one that didn’t make it obvious that she, too, had no idea how to do whatever it was Marcy had just said.

“It’s possible the document itself was printed or photocopied using office equipment,” Cyndie pointed out, “in which case my friend Tanya, who works in the business office, could check the records and see if we can narrow it down to a department.”

“That would be great,” Amanda said, “but do you think she’d be willing to help? I mean, she doesn’t even know me.”

“Once she hears the way all these men are trying to railroad you to cover over their own mistakes, she’ll want to help,” Cyndie said with conviction.

“They may not care who did this, but I certainly want to know,” Brenda added.

“They’re fucking with the sisterhood now,” Marcy proclaimed, conjuring up an image in Amanda’s mind of an all-girl gang made up of administrative assistants on motorcycles. “That shit isn’t going to happen on my watch.”

Dakota, who had been silent throughout the exchange, made eye contact with Amanda from across the coffee table. She brought her tea cup to her lips and took a sip with an expression that nearly screamed *I told you*. She looked like the

human embodiment of that Kermit the Frog internet meme, which was lucky for her, because it meant she was too cute for Amanda to get mad.

As for Amanda, if she had ever doubted this plan would work—which frankly, she had—she'd never been so happy to have been proven wrong. If this worked out, she was going to owe these ladies a lot more than some fancy cheeses.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BY THE TIME SHE ARRIVED AT WORK THE FOLLOWING MONDAY morning, Dakota could barely summon the energy to push the elevator button, let alone step inside when the doors opened. Far from having enjoyed a relaxing weekend, the network had worked her like a dog to prepare her for taking over for Amanda when Franklin Junior returned.

The thought of having to sit beside what amounted to an overgrown frat boy each morning was repulsive. It also represented a major career hazard. It was a dirty little secret at the network that Franklin's presence on the show was toxic for viewership. Unfortunately, when the fuckup at work was also the boss's son, Dakota knew it would only be a matter of time before the fingers of blame were pointing at her. Yet another reason Amanda needed to be kept in her job.

This was why every minute Dakota did not spend working was being used to coordinate a fact-finding mission that seemed on par with the ones police used to catch serial killers. They even had their own suspect board. The only thing it lacked was a ball of red yarn to string all over the place.

Note to self, Dakota thought as she finally dragged herself into the elevator and reached for the button for the eighth floor, *buy red yarn*.

"Hold the elevator, please!"

Dakota's instincts kicked in, and she stuck her hand on one of the closing doors to prevent them from shutting completely.

The physical effort involved nearly made her break down in tears.

Add vitamins to shopping list. And cake.

Allie, looking much fresher than any human had a right to at this hour, bounded in with extra pep in her step. Dakota was certain this meant the secret that Amanda's head was on the chopping block had started to leak out and spread through the building like black mold. No doubt Allie assumed she would be next in line for a promotion.

"Isn't it a beautiful morning?" Allie sang. It was still dark outside, leaving whatever beauty there may or may not have been entirely up to one's imagination, so Dakota simply grunted in acknowledgment. "I see someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed today."

Allie took a sip of coffee from a chrome travel mug that was clutched in her hand. At least, Dakota assumed it was coffee. Based on how unnaturally cheerful the woman was, perhaps it was something more powerful, like the lifeblood of innocent children.

While the elevator made its way upward at an even more sluggish pace than Dakota was moving, she found herself staring at the shiny chrome mug, her eyes going in and out of focus.

So shiny.

Eventually, the letters printed across it arranged themselves into a recognizable word. Dakota's brain whirred into action, sending her pulse racing. What were the odds?

"I didn't know you went to Whitlock University," Dakota commented as breezily as possible.

"Me?" Allie placed a hand on her chest as if Dakota had accused her of something terrible, like murder, or wearing white shoes after Labor Day. "I went to Columbia."

"Oh." Dakota's brain started to home in on the important piece of evidence. "It's just, your mug—"

“It’s my sister’s.” Allie’s tone was like the audible version of an eye roll. “She left it with me, along with several boxes of her shit, when she went into the Peace Corps. Of course, if she’d bothered to finish her doctoral program first, she might’ve gotten a real job.”

Before Dakota could respond, the doors slid open, and Allie exited, her mood decidedly more subdued than when she’d entered. Frankly, Dakota figured she’d done the world a favor. Meanwhile, her own spirits had gotten a burst of renewed energy the moment she’d laid eyes on that mug. She grabbed her phone and sent out a group text, calling an emergency meeting at Amanda’s apartment for noon, when everyone would be done with work for the day.

It was torture getting through the show that morning, made worse by not being able to give Amanda a single hint. By the time the group was seated around the white board in Amanda’s living room, Dakota was about to burst.

“What’s the big news?” Amanda asked, seeming hopeful, but like she didn’t want to give into it in case it was a false lead. Dakota didn’t blame her. They’d had several.

“Should we wait for Marcy?” Cyndie asked, her head swiveling to take in the assembled group.

“I didn’t include her,” Dakota said. “You’ll see why in a minute.”

“Marcy had something to do with this?” Brenda asked.

“No, but I bumped into Allie in the elevator this morning —” Having rushed all of that together like it was a single word, Dakota paused for breath.

Amanda stared, aghast. “You didn’t tell the network’s biggest gossip anything, did you?”

“Quite the opposite. She told me an interesting fact. Her sister was enrolled in a doctoral program at Whitlock University.” Triumphantly, Dakota scanned the faces of the four other women, waiting for them to catch up. “What’s more, she didn’t graduate. That’s quite the coincidence, isn’t it?”

“My God, of course.” Amanda let out a cackle. “It makes perfect sense.”

“It does?” Cyndie asked. Neither she nor Brenda appeared to have figured out what was going on yet, but that was because they didn’t have all the facts.

“The reason Gabe was fooled by the fake transcript,” Amanda explained, “was because everything checked out. The course numbers and dates were correct, the watermark was there. It was identical in every way to a real one.”

“Because it was a real one,” Dakota added. “Allie would’ve had access to it because her sister left her personal belongings at Allie’s place before leaving for a Peace Corps assignment. All she had to do was figure out a way to switch the name on it from her sister to Marcus Brown.”

Cyndie’s eyes lit up with understanding. “Everyone knows Allie has had her eye on Amanda’s job for ages. It gives her the perfect motive for setting Amanda up to take the fall. Now I see why you didn’t invite Marcy today.”

“Exactly,” Dakota said. “I doubt she had anything at all to do with this, but Allie’s her boss. It’s better to leave her out of it until we know for sure.”

“Hold on a minute,” Brenda said. “I understand Allie dislikes Amanda, but if that was her motive, she should’ve sent the fake transcript to her. Why would she target Gabe?”

“Maybe because she knew Amanda wouldn’t be sloppy enough to report it without digging deep enough that she’d figure out it was bogus,” Cyndie suggested. “People say a lot of bad things about Amanda but never about her investigative side.”

“I appreciate that,” Amanda said, beaming as if she’d received a compliment. “As for why she’d drag Gabe into this, I have a theory. Gabe accepted a big industry award back in June. When he gave his speech, he was a real ass and failed to properly thank his team. Especially James Booth, his head writer and producer. Those fake transcripts showed up only a few days later. Booth had worked with Gabe long enough to

know he'd ignore red flags because the temptation to drop a bombshell like the Marcus Brown story would be too great to resist."

Brenda mulled over this new information, but still looked less than satisfied at the explanation. "I take it there's a connection between Allie and this James Booth guy, and I'm not aware of it because I'm new."

Cyndie shrugged. "Not that I've heard."

Dakota looked at Amanda, who gave her a slight nod as if to say, "Go ahead and tell them."

Dakota inhaled a steadying breath. "We're pretty sure Allie and Booth are having an affair. Amanda and I stumbled into them at an Italian place in Brooklyn last month."

"Brooklyn?" Cyndie asked. "Who goes all the way to Brooklyn for dinner?"

"People who don't want to be seen sneaking around, that's who. Booth is married, and not to Allie." Only after she'd said it did Dakota realize what else she may have given away with her response.

"We can't jump to conclusions. We need stronger confirmation before making accusations." Brenda said, and while Dakota was grateful the conversation was moving on, she was a little annoyed, too. All through the week, Brenda had been the one insisting every shred of information be triple and quadruple checked. Being a journalist, Dakota was all in favor of fact-checking, but sometimes it had felt like they were working for the FBI.

"Considering a gossip queen like Allie never told a soul she bumped into Dakota and me that night, I'd say that's all the proof we need." Amanda seemed to tense, like she was holding her breath. And no wonder. They were bound to figure this out any second now.

"Wait." Cyndie's eyes narrowed. "What were the two of you doing there?"

There it was. Right on schedule.

Dakota looked to Amanda, who simply shrugged. Dakota dreaded revealing their secret and exposing herself to the judgment she'd feared from the start, but it was too late to hold anything back now. "We were there because we didn't want anyone to know we're dating."

"You two are dating?" Cyndie's eyes tripled in size. Dakota's muscles clenched, anticipating a look of condemnation from the admins as they inevitably began to question whether this was why Dakota had been promoted so quickly. But instead of disapproval, Cyndie let out a gleeful squeal. "How cool is that? It's like Mika and Joe on MSNBC. Why didn't you tell anyone?"

Because I didn't want to ruin my reputation, Dakota thought, although based on the positive reactions their revelation was getting, she may have been worried over nothing. Before Dakota could respond, Amanda chimed in to say, "Because we have different contracts from Mika and Joe. Ones that prohibit fraternization with our cohosts." Though she'd made a full confession, Amanda didn't sound repentant.

Cyndie made a disgusted face. "That's a stupid rule. You and Dakota are two of the most talented people on morning television. The network should be grateful to have you, not worried about who you're sleeping with."

"Does this mean even if we clear your name, you'll still lose your job?" Brenda asked, looking thoughtful.

"I suppose it could, but at least I'll have my reputation and my happiness. As long as I avoid a scandal, I can find another job." Amanda slipped her hand into Dakota's, sending warmth like a burst of sunshine radiating through Dakota's chest. "I can't find another Dakota."

"Aww. Now I really regret every time I called you Dragon Lady behind your back," Cyndie teased.

"Don't beat yourself up over it," Amanda said. "I probably deserved it."

As Dakota joined into the general laughter, she couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction at the way Amanda was

heeding her advice. She really seemed to be bonding with the administrative staff, and the other women in turn seemed more than willing to offer their loyalty in return.

“Still,” said Cyndie, “if Allie was the one who set you up, we’ve gotta do our best to ensure she gets what’s coming to her. Any idea how?”

“I think Brenda’s right about needing confirmation,” Dakota said, hating to admit it. But to get anyone to listen, they needed something that would stand up to scrutiny. “Amanda, did you ever get the original document from Gabe?”

Amanda grabbed her bag, rummaging through it until she pulled out a bright yellow envelope the size of a sheet of paper. She handed it to Dakota. “Here. Gabe said it came interoffice mail. That’s the original envelope.”

“Too bad it wasn’t US mail,” Dakota said, handing it to Cyndie to look at next. “That would be a federal offense.”

“Unfortunately, Allie’s too smart for that,” Amanda said.

“If we needed more proof of how smart, this definitely came from our department. See all the signatures?” Cyndie held up the envelope and pointed to a column of lines, each one signed with a name Dakota recognized as belonging to crewmembers of *The AM Show*. “She definitely intended to make it look like Amanda did it.”

When they were finished examining it, Dakota opened the envelope, removed the transcript, and handed it to Cyndie. “You said you worked at a college. Can you see anything here that would help us?”

Cyndie took the document and inspected it closely. “Okay, with the system we used at the community college, each transcript would have a number on it, almost like a serial number, that corresponds to the student and the date it was issued.”

“Does that one have something similar?” Dakota made a conscious effort to hold back so she wouldn’t snatch it from the assistant’s hands.

After a few seconds of complete silence, Cyndie tapped the bottom righthand corner. "I think this is it."

"Now that we have it," Dakota asked, "what do we do with it?"

"Well, I can call the Whitlock registrar and fish for details," Cyndie offered. "I make these kinds of calls all the time as part of my job anyway."

"Great idea. Should we call from here?" Amanda asked.

"No," Brenda replied. "They'll have caller ID. You'll want it to come from a phone at the network to make it more believable. I'm sitting in for Ken Abrams's assistant this week. Ken's in Los Angeles, and the whole place is like a ghost town. We can use the phone over there."

"Let's go," Dakota said, feeling like a general commanding the troops.

Fifteen minutes later, Dakota, Amanda, Cyndie, and Brenda were squeezed into a cubicle in the entertainment division. Putting the call on speakerphone, Cyndie dialed the number for the Whitlock University registrar's office.

After several rings, a woman rushed out a, "Hello!"

"Good afternoon," Cyndie began in the most professional voice Dakota had ever heard. "This is Cyndie Clark. I'm calling from the president's office of the International Broadcasting Conglomerate in New York City."

"Uh-huh," the woman sounded suspicious and not the least bit inclined to help, dimming Dakota's hope.

Undeterred, Cyndie bit her lip, continuing in a softer, almost conspiratorial tone. "I'm in a bit of a jam, actually, and I'm hoping you can help me out. I'm supposed to be checking the credentials of three candidates for a job, but I spilled my coffee on one of the transcripts, and now I can't read the name. My boss is going to kill me. I was really hoping you could help me figure out whose transcript it is."

"It's against policy to release information without an ID or written consent," the woman recited as if by rote.

“I totally get it. I just...” Cyndie glanced at Dakota and then at Amanda. A second later, her face crumpled as if she was about to burst into tears. “I was late to work this morning because my baby is colicky, not that my boss cares.”

“Oh, no,” the woman said, her voice caked with regret.

“And, I just found out from the vet that my kitten needs surgery—” Cyndie actually started to cry—“and if I lose this job, I don’t know how I’ll make it. I’m a single mom...”

“It’s going to be okay. Don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry,” Cyndie wailed. “I just can’t stop.”

“Oh, goodness. I’m really not supposed to give out personal information about a student over the phone,” the woman said, but something in the way she said it hinted at a crack in the armor.

“Oh, I understand. But, maybe...” Cyndie sniffed loudly. “What about the number at the bottom of the document? If I give you that, maybe you can confirm the name. That’s all I need. I mean, if I hadn’t spilled coffee on it, I would be able to read the name myself, so you’re not really telling me anything I wouldn’t already know, right?”

“I’m not sure—”

“I can’t let them put my sweet little kitten...” Cyndie let out an Academy Award worthy sob to complete the thought.

Finally, the woman relented. “What’s the number?”

Cyndie read it.

“Okay, give me a second.”

Clicking keys could be heard through the phone. Dakota looked around, and every single person was holding their breath.

“Here we go. Do you have a candidate named Roberta Day?”

“Day, you said? I sure do.” Cyndie pumped a fist in the air. “You’re a lifesaver!”

After the phone call had ended, Brenda muttered, “Well, well, well. That was something.”

“Cyndie, you were amazing.” Dakota turned to Amanda, giddy at how well that had gone. “Is that enough to clear your name?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I can get Franklin and Wyatt to see reason without something stronger.” Amanda tapped her finger against her chin, and Dakota could tell her brain was working overtime. “I think we need to get a confession if we want this to stick.”

“How, though?” Dakota felt a pang of guilt as she looked at the two assistants who were risking so much. “We can’t explain any of this without dragging Cyndie into it, and Brenda, too.”

“I have an idea.” Brenda’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “What if we get someone to impersonate an investigator and have them question Allie?”

“That sounds completely unethical,” Amanda said, and Dakota wished she hadn’t shot it down so quickly.

Brenda shrugged. “I don’t know about ethical, but apparently it’s legal as long as they don’t actually claim to be a cop. I was reviewing some reality show pilots for Mr. Abrams the other day, and they did it there. That’s what gave me the idea.”

Amanda continued to scowl, but Dakota was willing to try anything at this point. “Does anyone have, like, a cop or a security guard in the family?”

“I don’t know a real cop,” Cyndie said slowly, “but a friend of mine has a uniform that looks pretty legit, and I’m sure he could pull it off. We’re both in the same improv theater group.”

Dakota laughed. “Now I understand how you were so brilliant on that phone call.”

“You really were,” Amanda agreed. “If you vouch for his skills, that’s good enough for me.”

Suddenly, Brenda's eyes lit up. "I have an even better idea. Those cameras they use for the reality shows are so easily hidden she'd never know it was there. What if we got the whole confession on film?"

"You mean as evidence?" Dakota liked the sound of this.

"Plus, it would be ratings gold," Brenda pointed out. "It could help IBC kick the competitions' butts for days."

Dakota looked sharply at the new assistant. "Are you sure you've only been working in TV for a couple weeks?"

"Long enough to know where to find the contact details of the camera guy Ken uses for this type of thing." Brenda turned to Cyndie. "Do you think your actor friend would agree to do it and sign a contract?"

"For a chance to be on TV?" Cyndie grinned. "Hell, yeah."

WAITING in the lobby for the elevator to the executive floor, Dakota's eyes were glued to a television screen on the wall where a condensed version of the Allie Day confession video was playing on a loop, capturing her smugness when the interrogation started, resulting with Allie collapsing to her knees, burying her face between the man's legs, sobbing she was too pretty to go to jail and would end up being a prison wife. Right at that moment, Allie yanked on the pant legs, causing them to break away and completely fall off.

The elevator doors opened, and Amanda stepped inside, but Dakota remained rooted in place.

"Aren't you coming?" Amanda asked, holding the door with her hand so it wouldn't close.

"Yeah, sorry." Dakota snapped out of her trance and joined Amanda inside. "I could watch that a million times."

"I think you already have. Then again, since Gabe aired the segment on the evening news last night, it's been about the only thing on television."

“It never gets old.” Dakota chuckled as she replayed the rest of the scene in her mind.

Amanda wasn't as amused. “I wish Cyndie had mentioned her friend with the cop uniform was a stripper.”

“Oh, come on.” Dakota gave Amanda a nudge with her elbow. “That was the best part. I mean, the confession was perfect, but when his pants tore away... I hear Ken was giddier than a chipmunk hopped up on crack when he saw it.”

Amanda's mouth twitched a couple of times, but her expression quickly grew serious. “Yes, but Franklin Senior can't be thrilled with yet another scandal rocking the network. As for Wyatt, he takes the news division seriously. I doubt he appreciated the humor in that little stunt. I'm afraid that's why we've both been summoned upstairs.”

“As Deke at the *Rooster Report* used to say, any click is a good click,” Dakota countered. “That clip is blowing up all over social media. You're getting your job back this morning. I can feel it. I'm sure being summoned upstairs is for a good reason this time.”

“I'd like to hope so, but I don't know,” Amanda said. “Every single time I've entered that boardroom in the past three months, something bad has resulted. I really don't want to face the wrath of the suits again. Ken might be on my side now, but I've probably made an enemy of Wyatt for good.”

When they arrived at the executive offices, a different woman sat behind the receptionist's desk.

“Already cleaning house, I see,” Amanda whispered into Dakota's ear. The woman motioned for them to continue to the boardroom, but Amanda stopped in front of the desk and stuck out her hand. “I don't think we've met. I'm Amanda, and this is Dakota.”

Surprise flickered on the receptionist's face as she shook Amanda's hand. “I'm Sophie. And I have to say I'm such a big fan of your show.”

“That's really sweet,” Dakota said.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sophie,” Amanda added before grabbing Dakota’s arm and urging her down the hall.

“Great job back there,” Dakota told her with genuine admiration for how thoroughly Amanda had learned her lesson. She doubted her girlfriend would ever take an assistant for granted again. “Here goes nothing.”

When they stepped inside the boardroom, neither Franklin nor his two righthand men were there. Instead, a lone woman sat at the far end of the long table.

“Ladies, I imagine you’re wondering why I’ve invited you here today,” the woman said.

Amanda’s head whipped toward Dakota, a pout forming on her lips. “That’s what I was going to say the other day, and you wouldn’t let me. But it sounded awesome just now.”

Instead of acknowledging Amanda, Dakota squinted at the woman as recognition dawned. Though her brown hair was pulled back in a severe bun, and she wore a designer suit that left no doubt who was in charge, the thick black glasses were all too familiar. “Brenda?”

“Yes,” she said, “but that’s not my real name. I’m Rebekah Ross.”

Dakota wasn’t following, but apparently, Amanda was, because the moment she heard the name, she gasped.

“Tim Ross’s daughter?”

Dakota was about to ask who Tim Ross was, but then she remembered that she’d asked that same question before, standing in exactly this spot.

Holy shit. It’s God’s daughter.

Brenda—er, Rebekah, stood and approached them, explaining, “This network has been a dumpster fire for years, but when I approached my father to put me in charge, he laughed, saying it was no job for a woman. I set out to prove him wrong.”

“By going undercover?” Amanda guessed.

“I got the idea from a TV show, which another network owns the rights to, damn them.” Rebekah’s expression became distorted with disappointment for a moment before her features softened ever so slightly. “Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. I got a job as an admin so I could try to figure out from the inside how to right this foundering ship.”

“Did you figure it out?” Dakota asked as enthralled with the story as if it were a television episode.

“Did I ever,” Rebekah assured her. “Fire the whole lot of ’em. Franklin Senior was easy. No man his age would turn down the kind of golden parachute I offered. Daddy put up a fuss about Wyatt at first, but come on. What kind of news guy would buy that bogus story about Amanda sabotaging Gabe? Pathetic.”

“What about Ken?” Amanda asked.

“Ah, Ken.” Rebekah chuckled. “I have to confess, working for the guy for a few weeks, I got to like him. I’ve sent him to LA to head up the west coast entertainment office. He’s wanted to get out of New York forever. But, yeah. Long story short, I now run the network.”

“That’s wonderful,” Dakota said, not entirely because she believed it, but because she and Amanda had yet to learn their fates, and not-Brenda was giving off some serious *mad queen on a power trip* vibes. “What about us?”

“Gabe will be stepping down from the evening news at the end of the year,” Rebekah explained. “Amanda, you’ll be getting his spot. But until then, I need you to continue hosting *The AM Show* with Dakota.”

Much to Dakota’s surprise, Amanda shook her head. “I can’t. My contract makes it clear. I can’t be in a relationship with Dakota, but I am. And I intend to continue. That’s non-negotiable.”

“Oh, yes. That.” Rebekah let out a sigh that bristled with disgust. “I had never heard of such a clause before, so I pulled up Dakota’s contract. That one was done in such a rush they

simply copied Franklin Junior's contract, swapping the names and salary details. And, guess what?"

"I think I know where this is going," Amanda muttered.

"There's nothing about fraternizing with cohosts. Not one damn word," Rebekah confirmed. "This led me to check all of the contracts across the network. None of the men had this clause. Only the females."

"Meaning the guys could do whatever they wanted, but if the women gave in and got caught, they got all the punishment." Amanda blew out an angry breath. "For as long as I've worked here, it's been nothing but double standards. Did you know Franklin and Wyatt thought nothing was wrong with asking me to retire at forty-seven? Apparently, viewers must think I'm geriatric."

"Are you joking?" Rebekah scoffed. "I have it on good authority *People Magazine* is considering you for sexiest news anchor of the year, so I don't think we need to worry that viewers think you're old."

"*People Magazine*?" The renewed confidence in Amanda's expression made Dakota hope her girlfriend would finally stop worrying about being past her prime.

"Women in their forties are hot," Rebekah said so emphatically that there was no arguing with her. "I should know. I'm forty-nine. Also, I'm in charge, so you have my word that all of this patriarchal bullshit ends today. Amanda, you'll have a new contract by the end of the business day. And Dakota, you'll have a new contract because they offered you a fraction of what Franklin Junior was making, contrary to the fact he was a complete failure in his role. In case I hadn't mentioned it, I fired him, too. So, how does that all sound to you both?"

"Like music to my ears," Amanda said.

Dakota couldn't have said it better herself if she hadn't been rendered speechless by this rapid turn of events. Only a month ago, she and her sister had been packing Dakota's life into boxes. All she'd been able to see were the challenges

ahead, how hard the road to the top would be, the sacrifices she would have to make—with any chance for a relationship with Amanda being impossible. But Sierra had been so full of faith in her, convinced her big sister could conquer any obstacle in her path. Dakota hadn't believed her, but she should've, because here she was at the summit, with Amanda by her side.

EPILOGUE

A COOL BREEZE RUFFLED AMANDA'S HAIR AS SHE STOOD ON the deck of her Montauk home. Gentle waves rolled onto the white sand just beyond a patch of tall sea grass as fluffy clouds floated across an azure sky. It was August, the first day of a two-week vacation, and Amanda could feel the pressure and tension of work falling away with each deep breath of salty air.

Coming up behind her, Dakota wrapped her arms around Amanda's waist. "I can never get enough of this view."

Amanda turned around, placing her arms around Dakota's shoulders. "This is the view I can't get enough of."

"Such a sweet talker." Dakota's eyes flickered, reflecting a sudden nervousness Amanda hadn't seen before. "Do you still mean that? It's been over a year since we met. Are you sure I haven't lost my sparkle?"

"Not possible." Amanda tightened her grip on Dakota, never wanting to let go. "You almost ready for our day out?"

"Are you sure you want to leave when we have the best view and all the privacy we could want right here?" As if to give a preview of what they could do with that privacy, Dakota nuzzled Amanda's neck.

"Humor me." A quick nip of the earlobe was almost enough to weaken Amanda's resolve, but she held firm. If they didn't get out of the house for at least an hour, the surprise would be ruined. "Just a quick walk around town to stretch the legs."

“Fine.” Dakota planted a kiss on Amanda’s collarbone, sending a shiver of delight zinging down her spine. “But when we get back, I don’t plan on leaving this place for the remainder of our time together. I already have to share you with the world fifty weeks out of the year.”

“I do get weekends off,” Amanda pointed out, grabbing up a pair of sunglasses and a broad-brimmed hat to keep the shade—and the prying eyes of the public—at bay. Fortunately, Montauk was crawling with so many celebrities during the summer that neither of them needed to don a more elaborate disguise, or what she and Dakota now referred to as “the full Martha.”

“You keep claiming you do,” Dakota said, “but in reality, the last time you took two full days off in a row was sometime in May.”

“Do I work too much?” Amanda’s stomach tightened, her body tensing for a fight before she remembered this was Dakota, a woman who shared and understood her passions. Immediately, she relaxed and gave Dakota a playful nudge. “Look who’s talking. You leave the house every morning before the sun’s up.”

“Someone’s gotta keep the morning audience entertained now that you’ve moved on to bigger and better things, Ms. Evening News.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “Come on. The sooner we get our walk in, the sooner we can come back to the house and do all that nothing you’ve been looking forward to.”

“As long as we can do it naked, count me in.”

As she closed the door on their way out, Amanda spied the van from Lou’s Lobster Shack parked at the end of the street, just as she’d arranged. As soon as he saw her car leave the driveway, Lou and his crew could go inside and start setting up the surprise.

Amanda folded back the top of her powder blue convertible Beetle, giving it a loving pat before sliding in behind the wheel. One of the best parts of summer was taking

this baby out on the open road, far from the congestion of city traffic, and feeling the wind whip past her face.

Dakota hesitated a moment before getting into the passenger seat. “It’s so weird seeing you drive.”

“I’ve had a license as long as you’ve been alive,” Amanda pointed out.

“Yeah, but you never use it with Joe taking you everywhere you need to go. Are you sure you remember what to do?”

“I think I can manage,” Amanda responded, her teasing tone matching Dakota’s. “I am a grown woman, ya know.”

“Oh, I’m well aware.” Dakota’s voice was thick with lust, her sultry gaze enough to bring Amanda to her knees if she hadn’t already been sitting down. “I don’t think there’s a single part of your body I haven’t explored.”

“Are you sure? I think this spot”—Amanda tapped a patch of skin behind her ear—“might be undiscovered.”

“Really? Let me check.” Dakota leaned over, licking the spot with the velvet warmth of her tongue. Amanda’s body was ablaze, her mind flooded with all the other ways that tongue could be put to use.

So tempting.

If it hadn’t been for the careful plotting of the surprise, Amanda would never have pulled out of the driveway at all.

AFTER AN HOUR SPENT STROLLING along Main Street, past storefronts festooned with red, white, and blue bunting and restaurant patios dotted with brightly-colored umbrellas, Amanda got the text she’d been waiting for.

Everything was ready.

“You ready to head home?” Amanda asked, fighting to keep her tone casual and not let on about the beehive that had

been let loose in her stomach as she anticipated what was to come.

Dakota frowned. “Don’t you want to grab dinner first? I thought lobster from Lou’s the first night was a vacation tradition.”

“Why don’t we grab a bite at home tonight?” Amanda gave an exaggerated stretch, capping it off with a yawn. “Frankly, I’m beat.”

“Not too beat for me to revisit that spot behind your ear, I hope.” Dakota’s gaze penetrated all the way to Amanda’s core.

“There and everywhere. As long as you do most of the work,” Amanda added with a smirk.

“Deal.” Dakota grabbed Amanda’s hand and tugged. “What are we waiting for?”

The crew from Lou’s had left as soon as the table was set and dinner was ready to serve, but when Amanda pulled into her circular drive, there was a car parked in front that she didn’t recognize. “Are you expecting anyone?”

“No.” Dakota shot a perturbed glance at the interloper. “If that car belongs to Hannah, I’m going to kill her.”

“I’m positive it’s not someone from work.”

“How are you so sure?”

Amanda stepped out of the car, noting the lack of a driver and the presence of a back seat filled with luggage. A tag with the initials PDX indicated they’d come from Portland, Oregon. “Call it a journalist’s hunch.”

Amanda spun through the instructions she’d given Zach and Valerie, certain they’d agreed on arriving tomorrow morning. As much as she was looking forward to their visit, this was going to put a wrench in the evening’s plans.

As soon as they stepped through the front door, Zach rushed toward them, with a smile so wide Amanda couldn’t help but toss her arms around her son’s neck.

“Hey, Mom,” Zach said. “I hope you don’t mind, but we got in early and let ourselves in.”

“About twenty-four hours early,” Amanda said, returning his squeeze and giving one to Valerie, too. “But I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you both.”

“Hold that thought, because we’re about to make you even happier.” Zach flashed a mischievous grin. “But first, should we go out onto the deck? I’ve been promising Val I’d show her the view.”

“Hold on a minute,” Amanda screeched. She sounded nuts, but if they went onto the deck now, it would spoil everything. “What’s going on?”

“No questions. Just follow my lead.” Zach slung a backpack over his shoulder and marched toward the glass door that led outside. Valerie and Dakota followed, and Amanda was powerless to stop them.

As soon as her son saw the deck, the smile froze on his face.

In the short time they’d been away, Lou’s crew had transformed Amanda’s deck perfectly to her specifications. Vases of Dakota’s favorite flowers were everywhere. Rose petals had been strewn beneath their feet. A bottle of champagne sat chilling in a silver bucket. Classical music played softly from hidden speakers. And in the place of honor was a table set for two.

“Oh, fuck.” Zach stumbled backward, nearly tripping over a deck chair. “I really should have called ahead.”

“What are you talking about?” Dakota’s eyes widened as she took in the scene. “Val, is this part of your surprise?”

A stunned Valerie shook her head.

Amanda threaded her fingers through Dakota’s, giving them a tender squeeze. “This was me.”

“Oh, man.” Zach’s face had turned as red as a summer tomato. “We should go and, uh, come back tomorrow.”

“Nonsense.” Amanda shot an apologetic glance at Dakota, who gave her a little shrug that said it was fine. Amanda was once again reminded how lucky she was to have found a woman who could go with the flow. “Our plans always include you, Zach. Let’s pull up a couple more chairs and sit down so you can tell us whatever it is you’re bursting to share.”

“Are you sure?” Zach looked like he wanted to melt into the deck and disappear.

Amanda wagged her finger at him. “Don’t make me play the mom card.”

“Just do it, Zach,” Dakota urged. “You know it’s no use arguing with her. I see there’s champagne. Shall I go in and get two more glasses?”

“No. None for me.” Valerie broke into a grin.

Amanda was still puzzling out the meaning of this statement when Dakota squealed.

“No way!” Dakota grabbed her friend’s hands as she bounced up and down. “Holy shit!”

“What’s—” Suddenly, Amanda caught on. Her mouth fell open as she turned to her son. “Zach, are you... Does this mean...”

In the end, it was Dakota who delivered the news. “You’re going to be a grandma!”

There might have been a time when that word would have made Amanda cringe, but seeing her son’s happiness swept away any silly concerns about her age. “Zach, is this true?”

“Yeah.” Zach unzipped his backpack to reveal a bottle of sparkling cider and four plastic cups. “I kinda had a whole thing planned. I was trying to get you out here so we could break the news and have a toast, but I think I screwed up. I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Don’t be crazy. This is possibly the best news I’ve ever had. In fact, there’s only one thing that could make tonight better.” Amanda motioned to the table, where two silver domes protected plates of the best lobster on the eastern

seaboard from growing cold. “I kinda had a whole thing planned, too, but fuck it.”

Amanda pulled a box from her pocket, the one she’d been clutching from time to time to ensure it hadn’t been lost.

Valerie squealed, and Zach’s jaw dropped.

Dakota stared at the box, not saying a word.

The silence was deafening, and Amanda’s heart raced as she contemplated what she would do if Dakota said no. Then she realized she hadn’t actually asked anything yet. Popping the lid open to reveal the antique diamond ring inside, Amanda cleared her throat.

“I’d get down on one knee, but—”

“You’d throw out your back, for sure,” Dakota supplied. Her eyes glistened. Even though Amanda hadn’t finished what she was going to say, Dakota continued by asking, “If this is what I think it is, and I say yes, does that mean I’ll be a grandma, too?”

Amanda grinned. “You’ll be the sexiest grandma on the planet.”

Laughing, Dakota tossed herself into Amanda’s arms, nearly knocking the ring into the sea. Rescuing it before it could escape, Dakota took the ring from the box and slid it onto her finger. “Looks like we *both* will be.”

A HUGE THANK YOU!

TB HERE. First, thanks so much for reading *The AM Show*. This book gave me another opportunity to work with Miranda MacLeod. She’s the type of friend who sticks by your side through thick and thin, and the older I get, the more I appreciate having such a wonderful friend.

Being such good friends makes the arguments we have, because we do bicker when writing together, not so explosive but funny. Actually, the entire writing process is enjoyable, and we take jabs at each other a lot. Like, when I forget something like a character's name, Miranda will tease me about my forgetfulness, and I'll shoot back with, "Whatever, old lady." Miranda was born seven weeks before me, and we were born in the same hospital. That's how far back we go.

Where she truly shines, though, is when we need a plot twist. Miranda never settles for the obvious one and makes us dig deeper. Sometimes in the moment, I get frustrated because it usually involves some reworking of earlier scenes, but, and I hope Miranda never reads this section, she's always right. Yes, it's killing me to put that in print.

Moving on, if you enjoyed the story, we would really appreciate a review. Even brief reviews help immensely.

I've published more than twenty novels, and I still find it simply amazing people read my stories. When I hit publish on my first book back in 2013, I had no idea what would happen. It's been a wonderful journey, and I wouldn't be where I am today without your support.

If you want to stay in touch with me, TB, sign up for my [newsletter](#). I'll send you a free copy of *A Woman Lost*, book 1 in the [A Woman Lost series](#) (just in case you don't have it yet), plus the bonus chapters and *Tropical Heat* (a short story), all of which are exclusive to subscribers. And, you'll be able to enter monthly giveaways to win one of my books.

You'll also be one of the firsts to hear about my many misadventures, like the time I accidentally ordered thirty pounds of oranges, instead of five. To be honest, that stuff happens to me a lot, which explains why I own three of the exact same *Nice Tits* T-shirt. In case you're wondering, the shirt has pictures of the different tits of the bird variety because I have some pride.

Here's the link to join: <http://eepurl.com/hhBhXX>

And, if you want to follow Miranda, sign up for her [newsletter](#). Subscribers will receive her first book, [Telling Lies](#)

Online, for free. Also, she runs monthly giveaways, including paperbacks, ebooks, and audio, that her readers love. For cat fans, she shares adorable photos of her recently adopted kittens, who are sisters and tag team to destroy everything in Miranda's house. Their first Christmas was a particularly trying time, and only about half of the ornaments survived. Luckily, they're adorable. Seriously, you don't want to miss out on Miranda's heartfelt and funny newsletters. Here's the link to join: <https://mirandamacleod.com/list>

THANKS again for reading this celebrity age-gap romance. It's because of you that Miranda and I are able to follow our dreams of being writers. It's a wonderful gift, and we appreciate each and every reader.

TB & Miranda

Not ready to say goodbye just yet? Amanda Morgan makes a cameo appearance in our #1 best selling romance *The Love Project*. Keep reading for a preview!

PREVIEW OF THE LOVE PROJECT

CHAPTER ONE

The envelope was thin, much too skinny to contain a signed contract, yet clearly too important for an email. That meant only one thing.

Here we go again.

Joni's heart clenched when she spotted the return address for the *Kansas City Ledger*. Losing this one would sting even more than most, as the Ledger had been one of the earliest newspapers to pick up *Help Me Henrietta* after her mother's now iconic column offering relationship and family advice had first entered syndication four decades before.

Cancellation or renegotiation? Joni wondered as she turned the envelope over and slid her trembling finger beneath the flap. She held her breath as she tore it open, praying for renegotiation. Less money for the same amount of work wasn't exactly ideal, but it was better than no money at all.

"Dear Ms. Fisher," the letter started, the salutation alone provoking a nervous groan. Fans always addressed their mail to Henrietta, even though the name was fictional. Correspondence from friendly editors usually referred to the mother-daughter writing team by their first names, Clara and Joni. But Ms. Fisher? Formality was never a good sign. At least they'd used the word *dear*. If it had started *To Whom it May Concern*, Joni would've lost all hope immediately.

She skimmed past the pleasantries until she came to the crux of the matter, taking in the news with relief. It was better

than she'd hoped, not an outright cancellation or even a renegotiation of their rates. They wanted to shift the column's frequency. Downward, naturally. As always, the letter writer expressed terrible regret, emphasizing it was that or cancelling altogether.

Joni glanced out the window of her one-bedroom apartment, which occupied an airy, loft-like space above the garage of her parents' home in the heart of Amherst, a quintessential college town in western Massachusetts. In fact, there were five colleges in the vicinity, with Joni's father the soon-to-be retired chair of the psychology department at the oldest of them, located a stone's throw from their quiet dead-end street in the middle of town where her parents had lived since before Joni was born.

Her mother was out in the garden on this early June day, tending to her beloved rose bushes while wearing a loose linen dress, her shoulder-length silver hair pulled back with a wide black headband. She'd looped a basket of blooms over one arm, her dreamy smile making it clear that Clara was in her element. Joni did not relish the prospect of breaking bad news. As manager of *Help Me Henrietta's* global media empire—or what remained of it, anyway—this was her least favorite part of the job. In fact, Joni had long ago settled on the approach of avoiding the task whenever possible. She let her mom bask in the Henrietta glory days while Joni quietly watched her own income dwindle a little more each year.

Joni had taken on the bulk of the business's daily operations about five years before, part of a semi-successful effort to slow down an aging mother who refused to admit she could no longer do everything on her own. Letters like today's had already been arriving back then, but only a slow trickle. Lately, newspapers had been writing in a steady stream to cancel or downgrade their contracts, prompting Joni to wonder how much longer the Henrietta ship would stay afloat.

What Joni needed to do was march right out and get it over with, but then again, maybe she could sneak out the back and run a few errands this morning, put off telling her mom about Kansas City until later in the afternoon. Or tomorrow. Or

never. Just then, her mother looked up, waving as she spotted Joni staring out the window. Damn. There would be no avoiding her now. The problem with living in the backyard and working in the main house was it left her with no place to hide.

At almost thirty-five, Joni felt too old to be living with her parents, even if it was in a separate apartment. She dreamed of buying her own home nearby, but with their shrinking syndication base and the way college students had driven up the prices, Joni would be lucky to save up first and last month's rent plus a security deposit on an apartment, let alone enough for a down payment on a house. The high monthly rent her father demanded of her to live above the garage didn't help, either.

If things didn't turn around soon, well, Joni had replied to more than her fair share of letters detailing the devastation bankruptcy wrought. She had no desire to experience it firsthand. Something had to change and fast.

The clock ticked over to nine in the morning. Time to head to the office. Joni bolted the rest of her coffee, her fourth cup, and clutched the letter with a hand whose shaking was due only in part to too much caffeine.

Stepping into the backyard, Joni glanced up at the sun, bright and pleasantly warm. The heady scent of wild roses wafted over her, and birds sang out, blissfully unaware of Joni's dark mood. How would any of *them* feel, she wondered, if they had to deliver truly terrible news to their aging mother? *Bet they wouldn't be singing so cheerfully then.*

How had it even come to this? *Help Me Henrietta* was a slice of Americana as big as a homemade apple pie. Everyone was aware of the column, even if they claimed to never read it. For heaven's sake, Johnny Carson used to joke with celebrities all the time that they should send letters to *Help Me Henrietta* to sort out their love lives.

Of course, Johnny Carson had been dead for about a billion years, so that might've been part of the problem. Late night shows weren't the unifying national force they used to

be, and newspapers were going the way of the dinosaurs. For *Help Me Henrietta* to succeed in the digital age, they'd need a radical approach. Joni had nearly zeroed in on the solution, too. All she had to do was convince her mother, a woman whose fear of modernization ran so deep she refused to own a smartphone, to go along with the plan.

Joni made her way across the flagstone patio, each step an exercise of will. Maybe she should've been more honest with her mother all along. What effect would it have on her, finding out how bad things were? The woman had lived and breathed *Help Me Henrietta* for almost fifty years. This might kill her. Aside from loving her mother, obviously, Joni didn't want to be responsible for killing an American icon.

"Good morning, darling," her mom trilled like she did every morning. "I'm doing a bit of dead-heading to encourage new blooms. Isn't it a glorious day?"

Not really, Joni thought. "The roses look great, Mom."

"Is it already time to start the workday?" Her mom glanced wistfully at her rose bushes, which she loved caring for as much as dispensing her sage advice to the public. Possibly more. It had not escaped Joni's attention that her mom seemed to arrive at her desk later with each passing day, and she'd stealthily disappear well before quitting time.

"There's no rush." Joni shifted the envelope, hoping to keep it out of sight, but somehow, despite not being able to see a darn thing without trying at least three different strengths of reading glasses, her mother caught the movement with an eagle eye.

"What's that you're holding?"

Joni resisted the urge to stomp her foot into the grass. "It's from the *Kansas City Ledger*. Look, Mom—"

"They haven't signed the contract yet, have they?"

"That's what I wanted to talk—"

"Because I've been thinking we should make some changes," her mother carried on, seemingly unaware she was interrupting.

“Well, as a matter of fact, they were thinking the same—”

“I realize they were one of my first papers, and I do owe them a debt of gratitude for that, but they’ve enjoyed a sweetheart deal on their pricing for far too many years.”

Was Joni hearing this correctly? Did her mother honestly think they could charge *more*? Joni held her breath and let it out through her teeth like a hissing tea kettle. Holy smokes, this was going to be even harder than she’d expected.

“I’m not sure we want to raise rates in the current economic climate,” Joni carefully waded into the morass. “Maybe we should discuss this inside over coffee.”

Perhaps they could add a few shots of whiskey to the coffee. It couldn’t hurt and would soften the blow. Of course, her mother didn’t drink, but that was okay. Joni was willing to have enough for the both of them.

They entered the main house through the back door, crossing the mudroom into a kitchen outfitted with cherry cabinets, top-of-the-line stainless steel appliances, and dark green granite countertops. Like every inch of the turn of the twentieth century house, it seemed poised for a *Better Homes and Gardens* photoshoot. Clara Fisher didn’t just give advice on how to live a better life; she tried to lead by example.

While Joni leaned against the counter, her mom pushed some buttons on her fancy Italian coffee maker, setting off a whirl of grinding beans followed by a hiss of steaming water. A minute later, she handed Joni a mug of perfectly brewed coffee with exactly the right amount of cream. “Shall we get started?”

Before answering, Joni guzzled what now made her fifth cup of coffee that morning, savoring it like it was her first. Even though she had the same brand in her own kitchen, hers never had the magic her mom’s had. Just because she was about to ruin their day didn’t mean she couldn’t take a few moments to enjoy a simple pleasure. Her mother had preached that in the column enough times, and now Joni was finally listening.

Her mom raised her mug to her lips, blowing into the steaming liquid before setting it down again, apparently judging it to be too hot to drink.

“The Kansas City deal happened before you were born, so I don’t expect you to know about it,” her mom began, even though Joni had committed the details of all their major syndication partners’ files to memory. “Back when the column was first starting out, it took a little bit of cajoling to get papers to sign on. The *Kansas City Ledger* was one of the first, along with the *Toledo Chronicle* and the *Mayo Free Press*. We might want to look at their contracts, too, come to think of it.”

“We can’t.”

“Why not? Millions of people read the column, and it’s only fair that every paper that carries it pays their share.” The steely determination that had led to success in business, not to mention helped her survive almost fifty years of marriage to Joni’s prickly father, took over her mother’s face. This was not a woman who believed in the word no.

“Because they’re both shuttered, along with countless other small papers in the past few years.” Joni wanted to curl up in a ball for saying it so bluntly, but it was the only way to chisel through the stubbornness. Her mother wasn’t a child, but she’d been in denial about the state of the newspaper industry for far too long. “*The Kentucky News* folded a while back. Same with San Antonio, Santa Fe, Boise, and about three dozen more.”

Her mom’s eyes widened, and she froze mid bite into her marmalade smeared toast. “Oh, dear.”

“About twenty of our remaining ones want to renegotiate.”

“For less money.” She said the words slowly, as if letting them sink in. Her expression darkened. While Joni’s mom always tried to see the bright side of a situation—one reason her column struck a chord with so many readers—she wasn’t an idiot. The pieces would be clicking into place right about now, in all their ugliness.

“I’m afraid so.”

Her mother set her toast down, fighting back some tears. “Is it over?”

“No, Mom.” Joni reached across the table and laid her hand on top of her mom’s. “Not if I can help it.”

Her mother drew a deep breath, plastering the determination back onto her face. “So, what do we do? Do we answer more letters each day? There are so many. I’ve never been able to respond to them all.”

Joni shook her head, deciding not to mention that the volume of letters they received had decreased at least twenty percent since she’d come on board five years ago, nor to point out her mom had only been answering one or two a week, tops, for months, while Joni did the rest. “That won’t work. The remaining papers don’t just want to pay less for content; they want to run fewer letters per week to free up space for fresh voices.”

“Then what can we do?”

“I think we need to modernize the business.”

Her mother frowned with obvious confusion. “We already get the majority of our letters via email. Is there a more modern way than that?”

“I was thinking of something else.” Joni gathered her nerve, which took exactly three sips of coffee and two bites of toast, before she said, “I’d like to start a web series.”

“Web series?” Her mother blinked, her face devoid of understanding.

It was clear her mom had no idea what Joni was talking about, which wasn’t surprising since her mom was a digital dinosaur. While it was true they now got most of their letters via email, what her mom had failed to mention was the full year during which she’d put her foot down and refused so much as to open an email account, claiming it wouldn’t be the same, because she needed to see a person’s handwriting to gain deeper insight into their situation. That year had been 2014.

Joni would have to take this in baby steps. “A web series is like a television show.”

“Like Johnny Carson?” Her mom’s eyes brightened. “He interviewed me once, you know. But if we’re not making money now, how would we pay for a studio, and all the sets, and the equipment? I’m sure it would be awfully expensive.”

“Our web series wouldn’t be like *The Tonight Show*,” Joni said gently. “No studio, no audience. In fact, no crew.”

“Next thing you’re going to say is no television.” Her mom chuckled at her own joke, clearly not understanding she’d hit the nail on the head.

“Well, right.”

Her mom tilted her head. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s on the web, Mom. The internet.”

“Who puts it there?”

“We do.”

“But we don’t know how to do that.”

Joni bit the inside of her cheek, reminding herself that losing her temper would get her nowhere. “You don’t, but I do. I’ve bought a dozen books on starting your own YouTube channel. I know what editing program to use, what rigs are best for my iPhone—”

“Now you’re saying one of those smart alec phones will be involved?” Her mom waved her hands in front of her. “Oh, no. Count me out. You know I don’t like those newfangled things.”

“A phone is essential to record episodes, cheap but effective. Everyone says so. And I know how to do it, so you won’t have to go near it.” In fact, Joni planned to keep her mom as far from her phone as possible. Until things turned around, she simply couldn’t afford to buy a new one if her mom broke it. Which she inevitably would, followed by her trademark *Oh dear*.

“I don’t know, Joni.”

“Can I at least tell you my idea?” Joni persisted. “I thought we could call it *The Love Project*.”

“Not a bad name,” her mom admitted. “Kinda catchy. But what’s the project?”

“We would go through all the love advice letters we’ve received recently and select a particularly hopeless case. Then we’d invite them here to be on the show for a few weeks and fix them up.”

“Fix them up, like on *The Dating Game*?”

First Johnny Carson, now *The Dating Game*. Geez, no wonder the column was becoming so out of touch. Joni wondered how long it would be before they hit the trifecta with a Mary Tyler Moore reference.

“Not a game show, Mom. It would be like an advice column, but in the form of a reality series. I’d work with them over the course of several episodes to build their self-esteem, or whatever is holding them back from finding love.”

“You’re not a qualified therapist, young lady.” Joni’s father entered the kitchen, his booming voice causing every muscle in her body to tense in a classic fight-or-flight response. With Dr. Alexander Fisher, flight was rarely an option. If you chose to engage, you could pretty much count on a fight. “You only have a bachelor’s degree. In communications.”

The embarrassment evident in those last two words was on par with him announcing his daughter had run off to become a circus clown or was a convicted felon, either of which he might have found preferable to the obvious humiliation of his only offspring choosing not to follow in his illustrious footsteps.

“I know, Dad.” Joni gritted her teeth as she turned to face her father, whose presence brought a dark cloud to any room. In fact, he actually looked gray today, but that might have been because of his sweater. It was one of those drab, old man types with buttons down the front and leather patches on the sleeves. Joni was sure he’d chosen it because it made him look academic. He wore it in every season, despite the weather. She

wanted to tell him she'd spent enough time in therapy because of him that she might as well have a PhD, but she held her tongue.

"Joni has an idea for a new television series, dear," her mom said, using that ultra-sweet *let's keep the peace* tone she reserved for conversations with her husband, who had never been physically violent but whose temper and cutting sarcasm were both legendary. It must have been hell to have been married to such a grouchy snob for so many years, and Joni wondered for the millionth time why her mother hadn't bolted ages ago. For a woman who could give such amazing advice on solving everyone else's troubles, her mom had a blind spot the size of a Mack truck for her own.

"Sounds like an expensive waste of time," Joni's father grumbled into his coffee. "Good thing our daughter's rolling in the dough now that she's taking all the Henrietta profits."

Joni threaded her hands around her mug, staring daggers at her father's back as he left the room. This was another point of contention between them. While her mother had amassed a sizable nest egg from the years she'd run the column solo, she'd insisted Joni keep all the proceeds of the business once they became partners in the endeavor. As much as he hated any association with *Help Me Henrietta*, Joni's father had never turned up his nose at spending the money, and he clearly resented Joni for taking what he considered rightfully his. Of course, neither of her parents knew the truth about the column's finances or her own.

"Is it very expensive?" Her mom's face clouded. "Now that you've told me about the newspaper contracts, I fear you might not be earning as much as I'd planned when we made that deal."

It was painfully true, but Joni would rather die than admit it, especially if her father was still within earshot. "Don't be silly. I'm doing fine."

"In that case, love waits for no one." Her mom forced a cheerful smile. "Let's get to work."

Though she'd gotten what she wanted, Joni felt hollow inside as she eased herself into her office chair. The interaction with her father had spoiled her mood and reminded her yet again what a total crock of shit falling in love really was. What was the point?

If her mother hadn't fallen for a certain handsome young teaching assistant in college, she would've continued on her original path of majoring in psychology and becoming an actual therapist. Instead, she'd dropped out to get married with less than a semester to go. And what had she gotten out of it except years of being belittled and under appreciated by a total grump?

At least Joni knew she would never make the same mistake. Sure, she could delude herself into thinking that females of the species were easier to get along with than males, and the fact she preferred romantic relationships with women would somehow mean she would have better luck, but she knew that was nonsense. Experience had taught her women were terrible creatures too, and pursuing a lifelong commitment with one was a recipe for certain misery.

Grasping her mouse, Joni clicked on the *Help Me Henrietta* file and watched the computer screen fill with new emails from the desperate and lovelorn, all begging for her help. Time to find her perfect candidate for *The Love Project* to fix their issues and help make all their romantic dreams come true.

Poor unsuspecting sap.

End of Sample

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

TB Markinson is an American who's recently returned to the US after a seven-year stint in the UK and Ireland. When she isn't writing, she's traveling the world, watching sports on the telly, visiting pubs in New England, or reading. Not necessarily in that order.

Feel free to visit TB's website (lesbianromancesbytbm.com) to say hello. On the *Lesbians Who Write* weekly podcast, she and Clare Lydon dish about the good, the bad, and the ugly of writing. TB also runs *LHeart Lesfic*, a place for authors and fans of lesfic to come together to celebrate and chat about lesbian fiction.

Originally from southern California, Miranda MacLeod now lives in New England and writes heartfelt romances and romantic comedies featuring witty and charmingly flawed women that you'll want to marry. Or just grab a coffee with, if that's more your thing. Before becoming a writer, she spent way too many years in graduate school, worked in professional theater and film, and held temp jobs in just about every office building in downtown Boston. To find out about her upcoming releases, be sure to sign up for her mailing list at mirandamacleod.com.