

A black and white photograph of a man and a woman in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The man is on the right, leaning towards the woman on the left. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting their profiles. In the top left corner, there is a pink geometric graphic with the Harlequin logo and the word 'DARE'. The title 'THE LAST AFFAIR' and author 'A.C. ARTHUR' are printed in pink and white at the bottom.

HARLEQUIN

DARE

**THE LAST
AFFAIR**

A.C. ARTHUR

The book cover features a black and white photograph of a man and a woman in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The man is in the foreground, his face close to the woman's. The background is dark and moody. A pink geometric graphic is in the top left corner. The text is in pink and white.

H HARLEQUIN

DARE

**THE LAST
AFFAIR**

A.C. ARTHUR

A.C. Arthur is an award-winning author who lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with her husband, three children, grandson and English bulldog named Vader. An active imagination and a love for reading encouraged her to begin writing in high school and she hasn't stopped since.

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A.C. ARTHUR

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CHAPTER ONE

*Aurora Mountain Ski Resort
Finger Lakes Region, New York*

DESTA HENNER WALKED into the main hall of the ski resort like a boss. That is, her shoulders were back, her chin held high, her steps assured, and nothing but confidence radiated from her body. That's how her assistant, Nessa, described the way Desta entered any marketing meeting. Even thousands of miles away from the office, the same energy applied.

Check-in to the Dear Lover weekend retreat had taken fifteen of the longest minutes of her life, possibly because she'd confirmed her attendance and made reservations at the last minute. Now she wore her name badge proudly and walked past all the people she didn't know, giving nods and smiles before coming to a stop at the farthest corner of the room.

This might be a mistake. Some things were better left unchanged. Especially good things, which was precisely what she'd had for the last three months. An online connection with an intelligent thirty-three-year-old man who shared her love of R&B music and foreplay. Who would've thought a virtual relationship could've brought her so much joy and fulfillment? More importantly, after all she'd been through, who would've thought she'd crave any of those things with a man again? Certainly not her, but she'd taken a chance when she'd signed up for the Dear Lover app. Tonight, she'd meet Dear Lover 1687 for the first time face-to-face.

"Hello, beautiful."

She spun around, barely noticing the trip in her pulse at the sound of a deep and alluring male voice.

"Hello." He was taller than her, so she tilted her head to meet his gaze.

“Why’re you standing all the way over here by yourself? This is Mix ’n’ Mingle time.” She supposed he meant to highlight those words with the waggle of his eyebrows, but it just came across as weird. Besides, she knew what time it was. She’d read the agenda that had been emailed with her confirmation a couple times already.

“I just arrived after a very long drive from the city.” Not exactly true. She’d gone to her room after checking in, taken a shower and changed for the welcome party. In addition to being tall, the man had an athletic build, sandy-brown hair cut low and neat, sea-green eyes and a charming smile.

Was this Dear Lover 1687?

Dear Lover offered full anonymity; all posts went through their message board so personal email addresses were hidden. User identifications were numbers instead of some variation of the person’s name or nickname. And when couples linked up, they were strongly advised not to reveal any personally identifying information. So, she and Dear Lover 1687 hadn’t discussed anything outside of world news, favorite foods, dream vacations and, of course, every sexual position, fetish and/or fantasy they’d ever had. None of which were helpful in figuring out if he was the guy standing in front of her.

“Well, it’s Friday, and I don’t care what my watch says. It’s five o’clock somewhere, so we’re having a drink.” He snagged two champagne flutes from a passing server’s tray and offered her one.

Accepting the glass with a slow smile was polite, but she needed to cut to the chase. “What’s your user number? Aren’t we supposed to wear them so we can meet up with the one we’ve been talking to?” After all, that was the purpose of being here. While the Dear Lover app was advertised as just a social networking site for adults, private events were held for their members four times a year. Attendance was voluntary.

Before answering her question, the cheerful green-eyed guy put the glass to his lips, emptied the contents and then stuck a hand in his pocket to pull out a badge.

“This is a long weekend, baby. We’re not confined to one meetup.” Again with the pet names he probably thought were cute and the strange eyebrow wagging. This time, after she’d peeped the number on his badge, both actions were registering as creepy.

Plus, he wasn’t Dear Lover 1687.

“I only came to meet one person.” In case he didn’t understand the words, she shook her head so vehemently it almost caused an instant headache.

“But it’s time to mingle.” No doubt hunting for another drink or possibly another meetup, he searched the crowd before returning his attention to her. “And you look hot in that dress. We can keep each other company until our matches arrive.”

“I’d rather not.” She knew it sounded snippy and probably a little uptight, which were words she’d heard used to describe herself before, but it wasn’t intentional. “To be honest, I’m kind of nervous about this first meeting, so I’d really like to get it over with.”

Had she just admitted to a stranger that she was nervous? She had, and that was unusual, but it didn’t stop her from walking away from Mr. Green Eyes. Desta didn’t share her emotions or her personal life with people she’d just met. Butterflies did a quick tango in her stomach, and she took a gulp from her glass. It was great champagne; she might need another one very soon.

By the time she finished the drink, she’d walked halfway across the room to another quiet spot near a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. The breathtaking views immediately calmed her. Straight ahead was a light wood deck that seemed to stretch the length of the building. Farther out were snowcapped mountains, rolling hills covered in more white fluffiness and a series of smaller buildings that resembled this one in wood coloring and modern rustic design.

“Champagne?”

She managed a genuine smile for the server who'd appeared on her left. It took less than a second to tip her head back and empty the current glass. An additional few moments and she'd traded for another drink and took a sip. Yes indeed, they could keep the champagne coming all night and she wouldn't mind. Her high tolerance for alcohol had always been a source of contention with her five older brothers, who met a drunken stupor three to four drinks in, but tonight it might just come in handy.

As she stared out the window it occurred to her that she was hiding, and that wasn't acceptable. Invitations for this event had flooded her inbox, and eventually she'd decided that signing up for the app and chatting online was no longer enough. If she were really going to reclaim all of her life, she had to take the next step. Standing in a corner downing champagne was a far cry from the fun and exciting weekend the Dear Lover meetup had promised.

She took a deep breath and another sip of champagne to restart her boss mode; then she relaxed her face into a welcoming smile and turned to face the crowd. Suddenly, her breath caught. She gripped the stem of the glass and began to choke.

What the hell was *he* doing here?

"You okay, hon?" came a voice nearby.

As Desta struggled to keep from gagging on a combo of shock and champagne, a woman approached and began patting her back.

"I'm...fine. Just—" Desta cleared her throat. "Fine."

"Okay. We wouldn't want you collapsing on the floor before the fun can begin." The woman's hand was still on Desta's back, even though she was no longer coughing.

"Really, I'm fine. Just went down the wrong way, I suppose." Or she'd seen someone she shouldn't have seen. This room was full of people, how was it possible that she'd zeroed in on him immediately? Her heart pounded in her chest

as she chanced another glance in his direction. His gaze shifted and she immediately turned away. Dammit! It really was him.

The woman nodded, her big bouncy curls in a fiery shade of red brushing over her shoulder with the action. “I’m Kelli, with an *i*. This is my second Dear Lover event. How ’bout you?”

Second? Had she struck out with her first match?

“I’m Desta.” She resisted the urge to add *with an a*. Instead she said, “This is my first event.” And in a few minutes it was going to be her last, because if *he* didn’t leave, she would.

“Oh, then you’re really lucky I stopped by to keep you from choking to death,” Kelli said. “I can show you the ropes, and if it’s not a good face-to-face matchup for either of us, we can just hang out this weekend and ditch the full agenda.”

That would certainly bring Desta great joy. A weekend with a woman she didn’t know.

“Actually, I may just head back to the city tonight. I have so much work to catch up on at the office.”

Yesterday was Thanksgiving, and the office was closed from Wednesday to Monday. Ronald Gold Fashions might be one of the top fashion houses in the world, but it was also a family business, and its owner and head designer, Ronald Gold Sr., was all about spending time with family. As Desta didn’t have any family on the East Coast, holidays were the best time for her to catch up on emails and research.

Admittedly, she probably should’ve remained focused on work from the start. Then she wouldn’t be in this position—torn between meeting her match and being spotted by the one man who’d tease her relentlessly for being here while making it impossible to separate this private weekend from her professional life.

“Nonsense.” Kelli waved a hand with silver rings on each finger. “Look, we’ll exchange numbers and keep in touch via text throughout the night. If it looks like our meetups are a miss, we’ll gather at the bar and drink till we can barely make

it up to our rooms. And in the morning, we'll hit the slopes!" Kelli talked while retrieving her phone from her leather purse.

There was no need for a number exchange if she wasn't staying the weekend. But wouldn't that be running, something she'd promised herself not to do again? With her thoughts still in a jumble she dug into her RGold clutch and pulled out her phone.

About a minute later, Kelli was all smiles once more as she dropped her phone back into her purse. "There, now we're all set. Remember, keep in touch, and I'll see ya in a bit."

Desta's response was a nod and another smile before "Okay. See ya in a bit." Those words didn't even sound right coming from her, but Kelli's upbeat personality was easy to follow.

He laughed, and Desta froze. She knew that chuckle, which started in the depths of his gut and eventually burst out so anyone hearing it would fall into laughter as well. He had a very infectious personality. Maybe he was Kelli's match?

It didn't matter who he was here to meet: he couldn't see her here.

Desta started to move, heading for the door. She didn't bother to pinpoint his location in the room now. He had to be close if she could hear him laughing. Kelli would get a text from her when she got in the car, but now she had to get out of here. No way could she be seen by Maurice Gold. Her boss's son, her coworker and the guy she routinely beat in poker when she visited his parents' house. How totally weird would that be? Having Maurice—the consummate practical joker—find out she'd resorted to an app like Dear Lover to have a social life would definitely create awkwardness at work.

Her exit path had been clear at first, but there was suddenly a slew of people in her way, one of which was a server Desta collided with in her attempt to sidestep the crowd. She dropped her empty glass seconds before everything around her shifted into slow motion. The server's wide-eyed shock morphed into dread as his arm shook from the impact and the tray full of champagne flutes wobbled. Mortification lodged in Desta's chest as she watched the golden liquid sloshing over

the rim of those glasses. And as if that weren't enough to prove she'd made a mistake coming here, there was Maurice's concerned face as he reached for the tray and easily plucked it from the server's hand.

Slow motion switched to real time, and Maurice's brow furrowed. "Hey, Des. What're you doing here?"

* * *

For the first time in the five years he'd known her, Desta didn't have a quick response. In fact, from the way she was blinking repeatedly, with her lips drawn in that straight line, which usually meant she was annoyed about something, he'd say she was either as shocked to see him as he was her or she was pissed that he was here at all.

"I'll take that," the server snapped before repossessing the tray Maurice had rescued.

"Sure, no problem. Glad to be of assistance." The guy's frown was about as much of a thank-you as he figured he was going to get. Maurice wasn't sorry to see him go.

He was, however, still trying to figure out why Desta—the marketing director at his family's fashion house and the most composed woman he knew—was here at a weekend meetup that, despite its advertising, was sure to be full of frolicking and fetishizing.

"You look really great in that dress." Actually, she looked phenomenal in the short, off-the-shoulder design that could've been made to fit her curves specifically.

"Thanks. You look nice, too." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, holding her purse in front of her body with both hands. "And I could ask what you're doing here as well."

She could, and that would be just like Des—always ready with questions at any meeting or runway show and expecting quick answers. For a moment Maurice wondered how he should respond. Should he just come out and say he was there to meet the woman who'd had him jerking off in his bed too

many nights to count in the past few months? Or should he come up with some other entertaining story about why he was at this ski resort, in this room, wearing the same badge...she was wearing.

“Are you registered with Dear Lover?” The surprised chuckle that followed the question barely had a chance to bubble free when he reached out and lifted her badge from where it was clipped to the top pleat of her dress.

Dear Lover 1288. He knew those numbers very well.

When he dragged his gaze back up to her face, she was directing her eyes to where his badge was boldly clipped to the lapel of his smoke-gray sports coat.

“No.” The one word came in a whisper as she finally looked up at him. “This is a joke, right? You’re playing one of your goofy practical jokes on me, and I swear to you, Maurice Silas Gold, my revenge is gonna be epic!”

She spoke the last through clenched teeth, and a part of him wanted to tell her she was right. He could easily throw his head back and laugh like he was watching a Kevin Hart stand-up, and she’d believe he’d constructed this elaborate hoax as one of the annual pranks he pulled on her and his siblings. That would’ve gotten him out of the very uncomfortable spot he was experiencing at this moment.

A variety of emotions went through him, and *uncomfortable* was the least of them. First and foremost, there was the physical reaction—lust, pure and simple—as he recalled all the messages they’d exchanged and how aroused he’d become reading them. Connecting each word from those emails to the sexy-as-hell woman he was staring at now was a little jarring and a lot exciting. But he couldn’t have been lusting after Des like this for the past few months. Her calm and controlled personality wasn’t his usual type, not to mention the whole coworker situation. In fact, she was more than just a coworker, thanks to his parents always inviting her to their family events because she had no family of her own in New York. Eventually, he’d come to see her as another sister.

Well, that certainly was no longer the case. The woman who'd been at Thanksgiving dinner with his family last night now collided with the woman who'd given him an in-depth explanation of why she loved the doggy-style position during sex. No way was he ever going to look at Des the same now. "Maybe we should go someplace private to talk about this."

She closed her eyes at his suggestion, her long, curled lashes dropping. When they lifted again, she stared back at him with resolution.

Her answer was to turn and start walking toward the door. He followed, letting his gaze drop to the easy and very tempting sway of her ass. She had the age-old and much-coveted Coca-Cola-bottle shape, and from this view, it added to his already growing erection. This was something Maurice had long ago noticed. Des was a great-looking woman. She was dangerously smart, fiercely independent and competitive as hell. Any man would be lucky to have her.

This time yesterday, he would've sworn he was not that man. Yet, here he was, wondering how it was possible that she was the sexy vixen who'd coaxed him to jerk off for the first time since high school?

In less than two minutes they were in the lobby of the ski lodge, going to a far corner where couches were positioned in a cozy square facing a huge open fireplace. Des sat on the end of one couch, and Maurice sat at the end of another a couple feet from her.

"You're the one who's been messaging me all this time?"

Leave it to Des to dive right in before anyone else in the room could talk. It's what she did at meetings. Particularly when someone in a meeting was acting like she didn't exist. He'd always admired her talent in the business arena and counted her as a very valuable asset to their company. Now, he had to consider if also being insanely attracted to the woman behind all the sexy words was worth jeopardizing the company's biggest marketing asset.

"*We've* been messaging *each other*." He wanted to make sure she accepted that they'd both created this scenario.

“Why? You can get a date by snapping your fingers. Why in the world would you go to a dating app?”

“First, it’s not technically a dating app—it’s a social networking app.” At least that’s what he liked to remind himself. The app certainly didn’t market itself as a dating app.

Her lips turned up in a familiar look that said he should know better. “With definite sexual undertones that begin with the name *Dear Lover*. That’s a marketing tactic they’re using. If they don’t say they’re a dating app, they don’t have to advertise like one and be lumped in with all the other apps claiming to help people find a happily ever after.”

She was right about that. *Dear Lover* didn’t promise clients anything more than an opportunity to socialize in a private setting. The privacy part had been the deciding factor in him joining.

“I signed up because I wanted someone to talk to, not to go out on the town with. Or be photographed with.” Or even to sleep with, because—as she’d alluded to—there was no shortage of women willing to fall into bed with him. No, he’d simply wondered if he’d enjoy talking to someone who didn’t know who he was or how much money he had. The answer to that was *hell yes*. He’d enjoyed conversing with her immensely.

Desta’s hands covered her face as she shook her head. “Okay.” A deep inhale followed by a huff of breath, and her hands fell away. “Well, we’ll just take off these badges and walk out of this resort. There’re a couple hundred people in that room so they won’t notice two are gone. We’ll go back to the city and act like this never happened.”

It was a good suggestion. Efficient, to the point and effective. Probably exactly what they should do. But Maurice wasn’t known for doing what he *should* do. He was the most reckless and unruly of the four Gold siblings—the one who was exactly as the media portrayed him when it came to lovin’ and leavin’ women. Except *lovin’* only meant sex; there were no emotions other than lust involved with him and any of the women he dated. He probably should just agree with Des and

get out of here, but nothing they did from this point on was going to erase from his mind the words they'd already shared.

“Or we could stay for the weekend and act like those two adults who've been exchanging their deepest and most coveted sexual cravings. The two people who've been looking forward to this time together to explore each other's bodies in all the ways they'd described.” His pulse pounded with the realization that he was totally flying by the seat of his pants right now. How was the transition from friends to lovers going to work here? And was that what he really wanted? Did he want to have sex with Des? And why hadn't he figured that out before tonight?

She offered a bemused smile. “You're kidding, right?”

“No.” He touched her knee. “This is the part where I tell you how much I enjoyed our exchanges these last three months. It's where I ask if you enjoyed them, too, and if so, what's stopping us from going further?” Because the reasons he was giving himself to walk away seemed awfully flimsy right now. Why couldn't two consenting adults have sex? Why did having sex have to ruin a business relationship, or a friendship, as long as they both knew what the limits were?

When she didn't immediately respond, he continued. “It's the part where I confess that all week I've been thinking about this woman who I'd never met face-to-face and how good it would feel to experience some of the things she and I had discussed. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought you'd be that woman. But here we are, and to be honest, I don't think there's any way I can forget what we've shared now.” She licked her lips, just a quick swipe of her tongue, and he knew there was no turning back. “I can only admit that finding out that you're Dear Lover 1288 makes me even more interested in spending this weekend with you.”

CHAPTER TWO

MAURICE WAS RIGHT. There was no going back now. Her core throbbed at his words, and she closed her eyes with the second punch of lust to hit her since he'd arrived. But what was the right way forward? Was it spending this weekend with him, possibly exploring all the things they'd written about doing? Or was it walking away and, come Monday morning, trying to work together amid the intimate knowledge they now had of each other? Reclaiming her life had suddenly become more complicated.

"How would this weekend even work?" Because her body was sending signals that didn't coincide with her brain's advice to get the hell out of here.

Maurice shrugged. "We can either go back in there and mingle like everyone else. Or we can get dinner and then head to our rooms. Tomorrow's agenda begins at nine with Morning Sex Mania and Make-Up and Mimosas at eleven."

She leaned back on the couch, resisting the urge to sigh. Being frustrated about how things had turned out wasn't going to change a damn thing. This was the hand she'd been dealt, and now she needed to figure out how she was going to manage the situation. "I mean, what happens on Monday morning when we walk into the office together?"

"You get to work way too early in the morning for me, so there's zero chance we'll be walking in together."

Narrowing her eyes at him did nothing to kill the goofy grin he was wearing. "Don't play, you know exactly what I'm talking about."

"I know you're taking this too seriously."

"You're not taking it seriously enough." When it came to any type of interaction with men, she always took things seriously. She had no other choice. She'd been caught off guard before, and she wasn't about to be in the position of having no control again.

Maurice shook his head quizzically. “Why should I? So what, we chatted on some message board for three months. That’s our private business, and we don’t have to answer to anyone for what we do in private. If we want to take those conversations to another level, same goes. It’s our decision.”

“I work for your father,” she said as if he didn’t already know. “And you’re just three steps shy of being called a manwhore across all media outlets. If anybody caught wind of the fact that we spent a weekend having freaky sex at a ski resort, we’d both be in for a whole lot of scrutinizing and questions. Is that what you want?”

His smile vanished and was replaced by a pensive look she rarely saw on him. All things considered, Maurice was a really good, down-to-earth guy. He was a fine-ass millionaire with an MBA in business and public relations, who loved his mother—and his whole family—profusely. Laughing was his favorite pastime, and hot ’n’ spicy was his favorite food group. They’d worked well together, which was great because a lot of times their roles at RGF in marketing and PR overlapped. Even knowing all that, there’d never been a day or a moment that she’d ever considered sleeping with him.

Until now.

“You know me better than that, Des. I’ve never moderated my steps to appease anybody, and I’m damn sure not starting now. You’re the woman I’ve been having very intimate conversations with. That makes you the woman I want to spend this weekend getting to know a whole lot better.” His tone remained serious, his gaze holding hers. “What we decide to do on Monday morning will be our decision, and that’s it. An option that’s not on the table is keeping secrets. Now, I’m not saying we take out a front-page ad describing what we’re doing, but I’m not going to hide from the world the way Riley and Chaz tried to do.”

Riley Gold was the chief executive of market research and product development at RGF and Maurice’s younger sister. Chaz Warren was the social-media guru turned brand manager at King Designs, RGF’s biggest competitor and former rival. Earlier this year, they’d hooked up in Milan for a hot weekend

and returned to New York intending to keep their affair a secret. Long story short, word got out and drama ensued. Desta would reluctantly have to side with Maurice on this one: a secret affair wasn't the way to go.

“You never stay with a woman past three dates, anyway.” The words sounded much saltier than she'd intended and implied that she'd paid more attention to his personal life than she had.

“You're not a woman I would've ever asked on a date.”

That was a sharp retort, and for a few seconds she wondered how she should reply. “Because you know I'm not as gullible as the women you date, and I would never fall for that *now is now and later is whatever I say it is* speech you like to give them.”

He raised his gloriously thick and well-maintained eyebrows, giving her a barely amused look. “Stating my terms up front is safer for all involved.”

This man really was way too handsome and charming for his own good. His tawny-brown complexion was just a shade darker than her own creamy, light brown skin tone. His thick wavy hair was jet black, cut close on the sides, and his walnut eyes had the power to assess with scrutiny or melt with desire. She was somewhere in the middle of those sensations right now as he stared at her.

Her gaze didn't waver even when she leaned forward again. “Then, I'll be the one to state my terms first this time, so there'll be no confusion.”

With a smirk he raised open arms and said, “Be my guest.”

Smug and sexy was a deadly combination.

“We've paid for this weekend and come all this way, so we might as well stay. Participation in any of the items on that agenda have to be discussed and mutually agreed upon. Before we leave on Sunday, we'll talk about next steps. I don't make it a habit of flaunting my personal business at work, but I've never been one to hide my truth, either.”

The latter wasn't totally honest. There'd been a time—way too long ago, now that she thought back on it—that she'd lost herself and hadn't known which way to go to save whatever part of her was left. But that time had passed, and she'd be damned if she'd start down that road ever again. To prove that point she'd decided to spend this weekend with Maurice, but that decision was in no way acquiescence to his wants. She fully planned to call the shots concerning whatever they did for the next two days. If she wasn't feeling it, she wasn't doing it, no matter what Maurice said or did. She wasn't operating under his thumb anymore, doing whatever he said just to keep the peace or to keep him from... With an inner shake she reminded herself that Maurice wasn't her ex-fiancé.

“Sounds good to me.” A nod followed his quickly spoken words. “You wanna know what else sounds good? The BBQ ribs and homemade potato salad I saw on the menu for a little restaurant just down the road. We can be there in ten minutes.” He stood as if he were about to get his coat and head out, with or without her.

Desta stood, too. “I could eat.” She'd worked right up until leaving her house a little after three this afternoon. It was almost seven thirty now.

“Then, let's go, Dear Lover 1288.” Offering her a bent elbow, he smiled bright like he'd just won the lottery.

She certainly wasn't worth millions of dollars, nor did she like thinking of herself as any type of prize, but she did hook her arm in his. “I think we know each other well enough to forego those usernames now.”

“We probably know each other better than any of those people in that room.” He'd started walking toward the coat-check desk.

“I guess you could say that.” Maurice moved quickly, turning to face her, cupping a hand to her chin.

His gaze held hers as if they were both searching for something they'd never seen before. A tingle began at the base of her neck, moving quickly throughout her body until she felt alive in a way she never had before.

“I might not know the exact odds of this happening, but I’d say they were definitely in our favor.” He moved in slowly, like he wanted to give her time to decide if she wanted what was certainly coming next.

Did she want it? And from him, no less?

Her answer was to remain still, to wait and see how this would play out. It began with a warm brush of his lips over hers, and the desire she’d felt upon first seeing him expanded. It flooded her mind and her body until she couldn’t help but lean into him. His eyes remained open and fixated on her as he eased back slightly, then came in again, touching his lips to hers once more. This time there was no retreat. He slipped his tongue inside next, and all thoughts of odds, words and champagne flutes fled her mind.

* * *

He’d planned to wait. Tonight was supposed to be for getting to know Dear Lover 1288 better on a face-to-face basis. Did she fidget when she talked? Was she as pleasant in person as she’d been via email? Did she talk while chewing? That kind of stuff. But then, when he’d learned it was Des...well, he was counting that as a win. He already knew she had perfect table manners, almost to the point of being annoying, especially when she dabbed her napkin at her lips so daintily. She was always composed, so no fidgeting. No tripping over her words, just concise statements, eye contact and an air of confidence that he admired. All of that meant there was no need to wait a polite amount of time before getting his hands—and lips—on her.

Especially not when she’d laced her arm in his, standing so close the heady sophisticated scent of her perfume permeated his senses. Coupled with all those words they’d shared via email, it was a wonder he hadn’t actually pushed her dress up and buried his face between her legs the way he’d written he was going to do.

For now, the kiss was enough, especially since she’d leaned into him with as much anticipation as he felt swirling around

the pit of his stomach. Craving more of her, he let his hands slide until they were at her waist. Then he eased them down to grip her hips and hold her steady against his unabashed erection.

“Well. Well. Well. There goes my bar partner.” Rousing laughter accompanied with clapping had Des breaking the kiss.

“Kelli? Hey.” She stepped back from Maurice, touching her fingers to her lips before dropping her arms to her sides.

“Hey, girl.” The redhead came closer, her giddiness still apparent in the way she looked from Des to him. “Here, rub my hand so I can have the same luck as you.” Never taking her gaze off him, the woman reached out so Des could touch her hand.

Des—in a move that was way too similar to what he would’ve done—ignored her hand. “Yes. This is my meetup, so I won’t be joining you at the bar tonight.”

Kelli, who obviously didn’t mind Des not playing along with her, returned that hand to prop on one hip. Her gaze was hungry and assessing, and Maurice felt uncomfortable only because his dick was hard but not for her.

“I don’t blame you at all.” Kelli was very open with her appraisal of him, but it was nothing Maurice wasn’t used to.

“If you’ll excuse us, Kelli, we’re going to have dinner,” he said. What would happen after the meal was completely up to Des, but he was leaning toward them sharing one room instead of returning to their individual spaces for the evening.

Kelli’s smile was agreeable and knowing. “Sure. Dinner. Okay, well, I guess I’ll see you two around.”

Glancing over her shoulder she winked at Des before giving Maurice one last head-to-toe look of appreciation. “Have fun, y’all.”

“You sure made friends fast,” he told Des after Kelli was gone.

Still staring after the woman with an incredulous scan, Des shook her head. “She approached me, but I get the impression she’s harmless. This is her second Dear Lover meetup.”

“So she’s experienced.”

“That or she’s unlucky in the guys she’s choosing to socialize with.”

They fell into step again, this time without him touching her. Another public display like the one Kelli had just interrupted wasn’t a good idea, and while he didn’t make a habit of hiding from the media like his siblings—he couldn’t in his line of work—he wasn’t game for his private life being on display unnecessarily.

Stanley, the guy at the coat-check desk, was quick to accept their tickets and return. He also made no secret of how he hated the moment when Maurice helped ease Des’s long wool coat over her shoulders. Normally, Maurice didn’t feel any type of way when another guy looked at his date. He was drawn to beautiful and attractive women—that was no secret—and he subscribed to the *look but don’t touch* model where other men were concerned. Stanley’s look toward Desta was nothing short of lustful, and Maurice felt a little twinge of annoyance at that.

They bundled up in coats and gloves, and Des even pulled on a fur-trimmed hat before they began walking down the road. “Why Dear Lover instead of a traditional dating app?” she asked.

While there was snow all around, the sidewalks were impeccably cleared, which worked out well since Des wasn’t wearing boots but instead had on a pair of the sexiest, strappiest black heels he’d ever seen.

“You already said I don’t need help finding a date.” Agreeing with her knowledge of his dating life had never bothered him before, but now—considering how his reputation might look in her eyes—there was a spark of regret. “Besides, the app promotes the socializing aspect much more than hard-core dating. Just like you pointed out before, there was no

jargon about finding your perfect match or testimonials from couples who'd met up and married afterward."

"True. That's part of the reason I signed up. I'm not really into computers playing matchmakers for anything long-term." She crossed her arms over her chest against the bitter chill in the air.

He considered moving closer, putting an arm around her shoulders to offer a little more warmth, but decided against it. Usually he could control himself under any circumstances. He was finding that a little more difficult now. The same woman whose description of giving perfect head had made a mess of his sheets a few short weeks ago had also sat across from him at a poker table just last weekend, wearing a tight sweater and smug smile as she claimed the winning hand.

"You're not really looking for anything long-term, are you?" He didn't think she was, or at least she'd never given that impression before.

The Des he knew was selective in the men she dated, private and a bit noncommittal in his estimation. As far as he knew, there hadn't been anyone serious for her in the time she'd worked for the company.

"Been there, done that." It was a dry statement, one he sensed held a lot more weight than the flippant way it'd rolled off her tongue.

"And you're not willing to do it again." Phrasing it as a statement instead of a question was his way of not prying.

"I'm not willing to be in the situation I was in before. And don't ask what that was. It's irrelevant to whatever this is that we're doing."

There was the Des he knew so well. The cut-you-off-at-the-knees-when-required woman who also managed to look damn hot while she did it. He chuckled. "Wasn't gonna ask because I know the tactic well." No lies or jokes there. Not wanting to repeat a mistake from the past was his mantra. Everything he'd done and said since his sophomore year in college had been

based on an occurrence that both rocked his world and forever changed the trajectory of his personal life.

Upon arriving at the restaurant, Maurice opened one of two doors in the same wood that seemed to have been used on every building in this upscale ski village. The host was pleasant and quick to take their coats, then guide them to a cozy booth near a fireplace.

“Thank goodness. I was about to turn into a popsicle out there.” Des rubbed her arms and shivered as she stared happily at the roaring fire.

Easing out of the booth, he removed his sports coat and leaned closer to wrap it around her shoulders. “That dress is serving its purpose of enticing every man who’s lucky enough to see it, but I’m not surprised it isn’t keeping you warm.”

For a second, she looked startled by his action. Then she shrugged, pushed her arms into the much bigger sleeves of his sports coat and wrapped it tightly around her. “Good thing I packed plenty of warmer serviceable clothes than this little black dress.”

Returning to his seat, he mourned the loss of seeing the entrancing cleavage pressed above the top of her dress. A server came offering coffee, tea or hot chocolate, and after taking their drink order he left menus that they read in silence. Minutes later the server returned with a heavy cream-and-sugar coffee for him and green tea for her. They placed their orders—the ribs for him, hearty beef stew and corn bread for her—and settled back to wait for it.

Des broke the silence. “I never would’ve dreamed it was you.” She stared at him over the rim of her mug before placing it back on the table.

He kept his hands around his mug, enjoying the warmth from the liquid inside as it mingled with the heat of arousal currently swirling through his body. “Same. You were the last person I expected.”

“And yet here we are.” She took another sip of her tea.

“Here we are.” Maurice didn’t drink again for fear that the hot coffee mixed with desire burning brighter than the fire a few feet away would be explosive. “Are you nervous?”

This time when she set the mug down, she pulled her arms from the table and let them rest in her lap. “Nervous about what? Having dinner with a man I’ve treated like a brother for five years, or having wild, passionate sex with that man?”

Again, with her instinctual candor. Normally, he wasn’t averse to brash talking, especially when it concerned sex, but coming from Des, he’d have to get used to it. “Well, since we’ve had dinner together plenty of times before, the latter, of course.”

Her tongue eased between her lips, brushing over them in a way he prayed it’d brush over his dick at some point. He sucked in a breath, not even realizing he was holding it until she spoke.

“No. I wouldn’t say nervous. I mean you’re right, we’ve had dinner together before. We’ve shared working lunches and have even spent a good amount of recreational time together. If you count the days during the summer when your parents have cookouts and I sit by the pool watching you and your brothers threaten to toss Riley in.” She held his gaze and took a slow breath. “It makes sense that we address the possibility that we may have sex this weekend.”

“How do you feel about that possibility?” Because he was feeling mighty anxious about eating this meal as quickly as he could and then getting back to the hotel with her.

“I’ve had sex before.” She tried for a casual shrug, but the intense look in her eyes told him this was anything but routine for her. “Of course, I’ve never thought of you in a sexual way.”

“Wow. Okay, well, don’t take any pity on my ego.” He tried to laugh it off, but that stung just a bit.

“Did you not hear the comment about me thinking of you as a brother?” She shook her head. “Tell me you thought of me as a date.”

He couldn't tell her that. "Touché. I've obviously noticed that you're an attractive woman. I'd have to be blind not to, but yeah, I never really put you in that category."

"Well, that's probably a good thing considering how you treat your dates," she quipped and then looked at him as if she wanted to take back that comment.

There was no need. The truth was the truth. "But now that's all changed. The way I thought of you before realizing you'd written those emails is long gone."

Reaching a hand up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, she nodded. "Same. Now I can only see you as a man. A very attractive and alluring man."

His dick took that compliment and throbbed with pride. "A man that you're considering having sex with this weekend." A statement and a question all rolled into one.

She hesitated briefly. "A man I'm *seriously* considering having sex with this weekend."

CHAPTER THREE

“WHAT’S YOUR ROOM NUMBER?” he asked. After finishing dinner, they’d shared a sort of slow walk—but with a hurried mentality—to get back to the resort.

The subject of sex hadn’t come up again, but it had been there, hovering over them as they discussed the food, the area and any other thing they could think of while at the restaurant. They stepped into the warmth of the resort and crossed the lobby, walking toward the bank of elevators. He’d decided that he wouldn’t ask, guide or try to influence in any way. As he’d told her a while ago, everything had changed. This was no ordinary date for him—he knew that even while his body tried to convince him otherwise. No, tonight, he would let Des lead the show.

“Three twenty-seven.” She stepped onto the elevator and stood toward the back of the car.

He followed her inside, standing as close to her as he possibly could without touching her. “I’m in three thirteen.” Which meant his room was on the same side of the floor as hers, but they would get to his first.

Neither of them spoke for the next few moments, and when the elevator doors opened, he waited for her to step out first. Taking the few steps to the proverbial fork in the hallway, she hesitated a brief moment, before turning to the left and saying, “We’ll go to your room.”

He followed her lead, then let them into his room, taking his time to close and lock the door once they were inside. Watching her walk deeper inside after she’d found the light switch were the strangest few moments of his life. Desta Henner was in his suite, where, just through this sitting area and down a narrow hallway, there was a king-size bed.

“Do you want a drink?” It seemed like a normal question to ask as she took off her coat, hat and gloves and laid them on the couch.

“No.” A quick and simple answer spoken succinctly when she turned to look at him. “We don’t have to go through any pretenses. This is what we came here to do.”

He was removing his jacket when her comment stopped him cold. So they were really going to do this? Considering the circumstances—and if he were staring at any other woman but her—he would’ve asked that question aloud. Making sure he and the women he got involved with were of one accord every step of the way was something he was fanatical about. But Des never said anything she didn’t mean.

That’s why he didn’t speak another word. He simply took her hand and walked them back to the bedroom. She released his hand when they were a few steps from the bed and turned her back to him, lifting her hair from her neck in a signal for him to unzip her dress.

Her hair was all black now. A few months ago, it had been frosted with some type of honey color. Why he was thinking about her hair now, he had no idea.

“There’s no going back once we start down this path.” She sounded calm, her voice just a little husky.

“We’ve pretty much started walking the path, anyway. Knowing what I know about you now, even without touching you, is something I’ll never forget.” It was the truth. He’d barely been able to stop staring at her during dinner because the memories of all their late-night messages continued to roll through his mind. Yet, he didn’t reach to unzip her dress.

She loved back rubs that led to kissing down her spine and sex from behind. It was her favorite way to be wakened in the morning. He flexed his fingers and wondered if that’d be the first thing on their personal agenda for tomorrow.

“You’re right.” She took a deep breath and released it. There was nothing about her stance that said she was nervous, and she’d already admitted she wasn’t but turned to face him. He kept his gaze focused on her, a light coat of the pink lip gloss she wore was still visible on her pert lips. “Then, we should discuss safety.”

Des would want a full safety discussion first. She wouldn't wait and remind him to put the condom on moments before he entered her. He almost grinned at the fact he'd already known that about her. "My last physical was six months ago in May. Clean bill of health."

Lifting her hands as she spoke, she pushed them through her hair, which fell in waves to her shoulders. "My last physical was in January. I'm clean, too."

A hush fell over the room. "It doesn't have to be tonight. We can just chill for a while and get started with the workshops in the morning. There's no rush," he said.

She sighed. "This shouldn't be difficult. It's what we both planned when we decided to come up here. We were anticipating it. Your last message even said..." Pausing, she looked at him and then toward the window.

He closed the distance between them and cupped his hands on both sides of her neck. "I said I couldn't wait to get my hands on you. To feel your soft skin beneath my fingertips and my tongue."

The pressure of her leaning into him was the best feeling, and his body immediately reacted.

"And I replied I couldn't wait to feel you deep inside me. I wanted my legs wrapped around your waist and your thick length pumping hard in and out of me." Her voice had grown husky as she said those words, like she was transitioning from the woman standing before him into the woman who'd written all those erotic emails. Arousal pumped through his veins at the sound.

As if anticipating his reaction, she moved her hands between their bodies, wrapping his dick in a layer of warmth.

"*Thick and long*," she whispered. "That's what I wrote, even though I'd never seen it before. I knew you'd be thick and long." She was pleased; he could tell by the tone of her voice and the way she cradled him in her hands as if he were a prized possession.

“And hard as steel for you.” If his throat felt raspy with those words, it was fine because his dick felt fuckin’ fantastic in her hands. His mind was overwhelmed by the perfection of this moment.

Her eyes closed and opened slowly again. “It is.” That beguiling tongue of hers made another appearance, sliding sinuously over her lips, and the urge to have her turned to frantic need.

Dipping his head, he touched her tongue for a moment before sucking it into his mouth. She moaned, her fingers tightening over his erection, her breasts pressing into his chest. Had he told her they could wait for this? He had, but it had been a lie. He’d waited three months for this. Dreaming of her each night after reading her messages, wondering how every act she described would feel, how she would fit beneath him, over him, around him. There was no question that he wanted her...now.

Hungry didn’t quite describe this kiss. *Greedy* might be more like it as he took a deep dive, thrusting his tongue against hers now, tilting his head one way while hers went the other until they were both gasping for air. His hands moved from her neck down to her shoulders, which he gripped before turning her around so that her back was now facing the bed.

She unzipped his pants, hurriedly pushing her hand inside the slit of his boxers until she was skin-to-skin with his rock-hard length. He sucked in a breath, and she took that moment to pull her mouth away from his just enough so she could look down at what she now held.

“Delicious.” The word tumbled from her mouth, and his dick jumped in her hand. “That’s the first thought that came to mind. You look delicious.”

Her fingers were steadily stroking him, her thumb and forefinger rolling over the sensitive slit in his tip. The words were like honey gliding over his ego, but nothing surpassed the warm touch of her fingers along his dick.

“Look, touch...do what you want.” It was permission and begging all rolled into one, and he didn’t give a damn. He

wasn't taking it back. Whatever she wanted to do to him at this moment he was certain he'd love. In fact, he might explode if she didn't do something, anything more to bring him pleasure.

“Do you remember the night I wrote about the art of giving good head?”

For the love of every deity ever prayed to, of course he recalled that conversation. He may or may not have printed it out and framed it for future reference.

“Yeah, I remember.” Strained words coming from him weren't the norm, but there was nothing normal about this social-media meetup, nothing at all.

“I said the first step was to adore the dick. If there's no adoration, there can be no pleasure.”

He clenched his teeth, adoring every damn word that was coming out of her mouth as she began to lower herself in front of him. Closing his eyes, Maurice bit back a curse of pleasure, deciding complete concentration was needed to keep from coming in her hands in the next few seconds. He opened them again when she was on her knees. She unbuttoned his pants and was now pushing them, along with his boxers, down his thighs.

“I like a long, thick, heavy dick. The way it feels in my hands and the way it looks like it's barely holding back every second I'm near it.” And she was certainly near it. She'd moved her head closer, until the warmth of her breath whispered over his vulnerable skin each time she spoke. “I like yours very much.”

If he never received another compliment, Maurice would be fine with this one emblazoned on his brain. Snapping out of the blissful trance, he pushed his fingers through her hair again, this time grasping tightly so he could tilt her face up and look into her eyes.

“There's no pressure here.” He felt the need to reiterate this fact. Part of his policy on being clear about the ground rules. There hadn't been too many misunderstandings with women before, and he highly doubted Des would be one of them. Still,

old habits died hard. He loosened his grip on her hair. “None at all. We can just spend a normal weekend on the slopes if that’s what you’d prefer.”

He sucked in a breath the moment she lowered her face to him and touched her tongue to the tip of his dick before saying, “I’d prefer you not interrupt me.”

* * *

Marking another first for her, Desta closed her eyes to the stark pleasure of sucking him deep into her mouth. So deep she had to relax her throat muscles and hold him there for a few seconds to adjust. His fingers raked over her scalp, and she moaned, pulling back slightly while her tongue pressed against the underside of his dick.

She’d never given head on a first date. And to be clear, this wasn’t even a date. It was a hookup that may have been considered a booty call if Maurice had personally summoned her to this resort. Whatever it was called, she was in it now, and she couldn’t say she felt bad about that. On the contrary, she’d decided during dinner while they’d talked that this was going to happen tonight. There was no use in putting it off because it was what they both knew they wanted. As for how she was going to deal with the fact that he was a coworker come Monday morning...she didn’t want to think about that right now. Instead, she let herself surrender to the warm and tingly sensations coursing through her as her mouth closed around him again. Bobbing her head up and down over his length had her heart thumping and her pussy pulsating. She was wet, dripping as she felt moisture on her inner thighs. Her breasts were heavy with desire, nipples already puckered.

She pulled back, allowing his dick to plop free of her lips, then sucked in a breath as she used both hands to continue working him. Stroking from his base to his tip, she watched as pearls of pre-cum seeped from his slit before ducking her head to devour them.

“Enough,” he whispered. It was more like a strangled moan, but she heard the word and felt his hands going to her

shoulders as he guided her up to a standing position.

“You’ve had enough of me already?” How vulnerable had that sounded? She couldn’t take it back no matter how much she wanted to.

His brow furrowed as a completely confused look covered his face. “Never. I’d just like you to experience some pleasure, too, before I make a complete fool of myself and come all over the place.”

He grinned so she smiled, even though a slow trickle of insecurity had already dared to creep onto the scene. It was ridiculous. This was a different time and place, and Maurice was unlike any man she’d ever met before. Hell, this situation was unlike anything she’d ever experienced. The past had no business here. She’d remind herself of that whenever necessary.

“I really like your mouth,” he said, running a finger over her lip line. “Really, really like it.”

Before she could reply, she was being turned around and Maurice unzipped the dress, pushing it past her shoulders and down to the floor. When she stepped free of it, he ran his hands up and down her outer thighs, his breaths coming faster as he was the one kneeling now.

“There was a night we stayed late at the office. When the Golden Bride line first launched. You were wearing these black pants with gold-zipper pockets at your hip. And I wondered, what if those zippers went all the way down your long legs, and would the material fall from your body if they did?” His face was awfully close to her ass, the warmth of his breath fanning over the skin left bare there thanks to the black lace thong she wore.

“You thought about me sexually?” That had never occurred to her before. She and Maurice snipped at each other competitively. Never out of anger, but as friends, or even family. There was definitely a one-upmanship going on between them that most days she found entertaining.

Maurice was funny and totally self-absorbed at times. But he knew his job like no other PR exec she'd ever met. He handled everything that came at RGF, from the scandal with Riley and her first fiancé to just recently when a reporter attempted to undermine the partnership that Major—Maurice's twin brother—had with Nina Fuller, the owner of a fashion app. Maurice was a whiz at crisis management and totally invested in his family's fashion house. Yet, there'd never been a time she thought of him as just a man. Now, before anything else happened between them in this room, she knew she'd never think of him as anything less again.

“It was just that one time, and I cursed myself every second for the rest of that evening, swearing I wasn't some type of sick bastard for thinking of you in that way.”

Because they hadn't considered each other that way. Until they'd met anonymously online and got to know each other as man and woman. Dear Lover 1687 was the kind of man she'd longed for; he knew her in ways she'd just begun to know herself.

“And now we're making our relationship awkward.” Doubt that hadn't been there moments ago when she'd had him in her mouth now circled her mind like rain clouds.

He stood now, turning her so that she faced him again. “No. We're making it better. Otherwise, all that pent-up desire we were able to release on that message board would remain locked up inside of us. We both deserve better.”

With those words he wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting until her feet were off the floor and he could ease them back to the bed and lay her down. His movements from then on were methodical. Long fingers undid the clips holding the garters to her thigh-high black stockings. He unhooked the garter belt and her bra, tossing them both aside. When all she still wore were the thong, nylons and shoes, he stared down at her, passion alight in his dark eyes.

“You're not beautiful.”

The walls around her immediately closed in until she had to gasp for breath. Memories came flooding back, and she rose

up on her elbows, ready to push him away, get dressed and leave him in that room alone. A featherlight touch of his finger to the line of her jaw held her still.

“That’s not enough to describe you. It’s too ordinary. Too cliché.”

The rich timbre of his voice saying exactly what she needed to hear made her too hot.

“I don’t need flattery.” Although it was welcome, she’d resigned herself to not accepting it if it wasn’t sincere, which oftentimes it wasn’t. Really, that excuse had become a security shield to prevent her from the opposite: demeaning criticism.

“You deserve it.” He tilted her chin and leaned in to place the softest kiss against her lips. “Now, lie back and let me reminisce on something I wrote.”

She did as she was told. “You mean, you’re going to kiss me all over, stopping only when I beg.”

He’d already eased down until his mouth hovered scant inches over her nipple. The look he gave her—arched brows, mischief in his eyes and a quirk of his lips—was the most devilishly sexy expression she’d ever seen.

Maurice gave no verbal response, but he did suck that nipple into his mouth, gorging on it as if he’d been starving for years. She arched into the pleasure seizing her senses. The assault continued when he palmed her other breast, tweaking her other nipple until pleasure and pain had her gasping. Who would’ve guessed he’d have such a phenomenal mouth? Every spot of skin his tongue and lips touched they tortured. From the sensitive area beneath her breasts that she’d never considered an erogenous zone down to the spot just above her hip bone where his tongue traced lazy circles until her head thrashed against the bed. She was close to begging, and the wicked grin he gave when he lifted his head and spread her thighs wide said he knew it.

The fire that had been brewing between them for the last three months via email was now an inferno as her body craved every touch from him. Desta knew what was coming next.

She'd received good oral before and was poised for Maurice to bring no less passion and desire than he'd already shown her. Nothing could've prepared her for the jolt of delight that shot so quick and hot through her body the second his tongue touched her clit. She almost leaped up off the bed. He'd patiently placed his palm on her lower abdomen, holding her steady as his other hand parted her pussy and he licked her again.

She huffed and grabbed the comforter.

He licked her repeatedly as if she were some new flavor of ice cream, and her thighs quivered. Sucking each lip into his mouth was another sweet torture, and Desta breathed out heavily before biting down on her lower lip. It was the only way to keep from yelling out and insisting he get inside her immediately.

"You can let go, lover." His words were hot and teasing. "Just tell me when you're ready, and I'll lead you there."

In other words, *beg for more*. No. She wasn't begging, at least not yet.

Her nonresponse led to an arrogant chuckle from him, and she continued to hold onto those sheets. It didn't work, and in the next minutes she would learn just how quickly her resolve could crumble.

In quick succession, Maurice sucked her clit, thrust into her opening, then flattened his tongue over her pussy in a way designed to drive anyone on the receiving end of such delightful torment absolutely crazy. Her body buzzed with need, her breaths came in quick pants, and she was certain all the sheets had been ripped from the mattress at this point.

"Say the words," he whispered over her damp skin. "Say it and set us both free, lover. Just say it."

Desta was strung so tight she barely wanted to move for fear she'd spontaneously combust. Dragging her hands away from the comforter, she pushed them through her hair and tried to catch her breath. Tried to think coherently. Then he blew over

her clit, a very soft, very warm, extremely erotic breath that sent her teetering over the edge.

“Now, Maurice. Now. Please, now!”

CHAPTER FOUR

MAURICE HAD NEVER stripped out of his clothes faster than he had tonight. His dick was hard, her essence was still warm and spicy on this tongue, and she was lying on that bed totally naked, like a dessert prepared especially for him.

She watched him as he stood at the end of the bed, smoothing the condom down his length. Her eyes were fixed on him, her heated gaze zeroing in on his dick, making it jump in anticipation. When did she start to look better than any pinup photo or adult-movie star he'd ever seen?

He climbed onto the bed, still watching her watch him. Her hair was down around her shoulders, brushing over her lovely golden-brown skin—skin he wanted to run his fingers and his tongue over. First, he was going to kiss that spot at her throat, right where her pulse beat as wildly as his heart was at this very moment. She spread her legs as he continued his trek toward her.

“This isn't going to be slow.” The thought just occurred to him that this was their first time, and women often liked the first time to be slow. So they could commemorate or recall it later. He'd had no idea, but he'd recalled hearing that a time or two from someone he couldn't remember at the moment. “I promise it'll be good, but not slow. Not this time.”

When he was close enough, he slid his arms beneath the backs of her knees, lifting her legs to rest on his shoulders.

She reached her hands between them, cupping his dick in her palms once again. “Did I ask for slow?”

That question, coupled with the feel of her hands on him and the look of sheer wantonness on her face, just about drove him over the edge. In the next second he was sliding his dick inside her with one deep thrust that had them both moaning and gasping for their next breath.

As promised, he wasn't slow. He grabbed her ankles, held onto her and pumped fiercely. She was so wet he slid in and

out of her with such ease and pure delight. He clenched his teeth to keep from crying out. The rush of pleasure had his eyes closing as he continued to rotate his hips, pull out and then thrust back in. When he cracked his eyes open, it was to see her palming her breasts, squeezing until only the dark brown of her nipples was noticeable between her fingers. They puckered as if they were staring at him, trying to tell him something, to entice him, to drive him insane.

“Yes,” she moaned, licking her lips quickly. “Yes. More, more, more.”

He gave her exactly what she asked for, holding tight to her ankles as he pushed her legs away from his shoulders, spreading them into a wide V. Her mouth gaped, and her eyes widened as he rotated his hips again, much slower this time. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, biting down on it as she stared up at him. The guttural groan that rumbled from her chest was like a reward.

“You want more of this? How much more can you take?” He wanted to pump harder, to go deeper, to release all the desire that had built up in his mind every time he’d read one of her emails. He wanted to feel each one of the words, to make them come to life in every thrust and push of his dick inside her.

“All. I want it all.” She’d spoken so clearly and so decisively he’d almost grinned, because for a moment she’d sounded like she was in the boardroom. Except he’d never seen Des naked before. He’d never even imagined her body would look this great without clothes or that she would be so warm and wet. So damn perfect.

Aiming to please, he eased one of her legs down to the bed, still keeping the other one pressed up against his chest, working in and out of her from a new angle. The groan that erupted from his chest with how good that first deeply penetrating stroke felt made his throat feel raw. Her fingers clenched the already-mussed sheets as she mumbled his name.

His name.

Maurice.

Said in the throes of pleasure, in Des's voice.

It was his turn to bite down on his lip as his dick was so deep inside her warm heat he thought he would surely drown. If so, it would be with a smile on his face. But he wasn't finished. Not until she was. To shift positions again, he eased out of her, immediately missing the feel of her tight muscles gripping his dick, milking him. She moved without instruction, as if she knew what she wanted, rolling until she was on her hands and knees.

"Yeah." He grinned and repeated the one word. "Your favorite position."

When he smacked both hands to the plump cheeks of her ass, she sighed and wiggled that ass in invitation for another smack.

She hissed this time as he'd put a little more sting into the second slap. "You know why this is my favorite position?"

He already knew because she'd told him...in a very lengthy email message. "Tell me, lover. Tell me exactly what you want me to do while I'm back here."

"Hard," she whispered. "I want it hard and fast. Make me come, hard and fast."

No sweeter words were ever spoken. Flattening his hands on her butt cheeks again, he speared his dick into her, settling into the space he'd missed in those few moments away. Then pulled back and gave her exactly what she'd asked for.

* * *

She screamed. Grabbed the pillows, buried her face and screamed again, because she'd never come so hard it left her shivering all over. Her legs and arms were shaking as Maurice moved in and out of her slowly, no doubt letting her recover from the intensity of her release.

When had he gotten so thick and long and deeply embedded inside of her? Probably when she asked him for just that. Damn, this was good. Even now as he picked up speed, as the sound of her release mingled with his thrusts echoing

throughout the room, all she could think of was how good it felt.

His hands were spreading her cheeks apart, so she was sure he was watching his dick enter and retreat. The thought of what that must look like caused another tendril of pleasure to slip down her spine, until she shivered again and bit down on the pillow.

“So good,” he was mumbling from behind her. “You look so good. Feel so good. Des, this is...”

He didn't need to finish; she knew what he was going to say because she was feeling it, too. So. Damn. Good.

When he repeated her name again, his fingers tightening on her butt, she knew he was taking that tumble that had just flattened her. She wasn't a big fan of a guy making loud annoying orgasm sounds, overreacting or in some way trying to prove his own prowess. Maurice grunted and moaned low so that the deep timbre moved over her skin like a warm massage. He gripped, then released her ass, gripped and released it again, until she felt like he was worshipping it. His body had gone rigidly still, except for a couple last, stilted thrusts and the pulsating of his dick still buried inside her.

Moments passed, and she finally turned so that her cheek rested on the pillows and she could thankfully catch her breath. It didn't bother her that she was still on her knees, ass still in the air and in his hands. As far as she was concerned, she could die just like this and it would've been a reasonably good life. But he eventually pulled out and eased her down until she was flat on her stomach.

“Be right back,” he said before dropping a quick kiss on her left butt cheek and moving off the bed.

The sound of the bathroom door closing had her thinking she should probably get up, get dressed and head to her room before he returned. But when she flopped onto her back, the itchy feeling easing over her skin signaled a warning.

If she left, would that seem like running?

Admittedly, that had been the ultimate deciding factor in agreeing to this weekend with him. Of course, she hadn't said that to him, nor had she really allowed herself to dwell on it, but now here it was, manifesting itself in physical reactions that her therapist advised was her body's external warning system. Folding her arms over her chest, she ran her hands up and down her biceps, trying desperately to ease the discomfort.

She wasn't running, not again. That wasn't the answer to whatever was making her feel the need to bolt—it wasn't totally clear to her what that was yet. It couldn't be fear of anyone finding out what she and Maurice had done, because he'd been on point when he'd vehemently declared it was none of anybody's business. On the other hand, she wasn't the one in the media spotlight on a daily basis. Still, if he could push that obstacle to the side, she could, too.

Going back to her own room would give her space to reason with all these thoughts, to sort them out and get a grip on what was happening before tomorrow morning. She wasn't going to run out on the weekend: she'd already agreed to stay, and she wanted to stay. But space, yeah, that might be good, and when she saw Maurice again, she'd be in control of her thoughts and her body once more. She was just sitting up, about to throw her legs over the side of the bed and get moving, when the bathroom door opened.

“You need anything? Something to drink, maybe? There's a fully stocked fridge over there.” He came out naked, talking and walking around the room until he found the boxer briefs he'd been wearing.

She watched him push each leg through and pull them up over muscled thighs. When they covered his still semi-erect dick, she licked her lips. “Yeah. Um, I'm a little thirsty.”

Thankfully, his back was to her by now, and he couldn't see her thirst went well beyond the *I need a drink* stage. Since a stealth getaway was obviously out of the question now, she slid off the bed and tiptoed around until she found her underwear. She pulled on her lace panties and grabbed her bra, hurriedly fixing the clasp. Just as she was about to turn the

matching lace material around and slip the straps onto her shoulders, he was there.

“Here, take this and let me help you with that.”

The heat circling her body at his proximity was weird. She’d stood next to Maurice a kazillion times at the office, at a runway show, during last night’s dinner at the Golds’ house. Her body had never reacted to him this way before.

“I got it.” She didn’t step away from him as she wanted to, but she did continue situating her bra, the way she did every day of her life without his help. Turning to face him then, she accepted the canned soda he offered. “Thanks.”

She opened the drink, took a deep gulp and then reminded herself she was cutting down on her soda intake. He had a can, too, but his was beer and he chugged away, just like she’d done. Apparently, he was thirsty, too.

“Normally, I’m a go-all-night kinda guy,” he started as soon as he’d finished his beer and tossed the can into the trash. “But I was up late last night and then early this morning to take care of a few things before jumping on the road. So I’m gonna crash. You’re welcome to join me.”

He’d walked past her while he talked. He seemed to be moving a lot. She wasn’t totally sure what that was about, so she took another drink. “Or I can go back to my room? Is that the option you’d prefer?” Because his offer sounded like it wasn’t really an offer, rather like it was something he’d say to one of the women he could take or leave. Why that irritated her she wasn’t sure.

In bed already, he pulled the sheets up and folded his arms over his bare chest. “Honestly, it’s been a very long time since I’ve slept with a woman. I mean, actually lay in a bed all night and slept with her.”

Well, there was her answer. “I understand.”

He didn’t want her to sleep in here with him tonight. Turning, she went to grab her dress. She wasn’t dealing with the garter and nylons again, so she just pushed them into her purse. She gathered the dress in her hands so she could slip it

over her head, but she gasped when he also grabbed hold of it, now standing in front of her.

“This weekend will probably be the first of a lot of things, for both of us,” he said, staring at her intently. “We might as well start with sleeping in the same bed.”

She could tug on the dress, and he'd let it go. He'd watch her put it on and walk out the door without trying to stop her, because that's the type of guy he was. Maurice didn't push, not even at work. He stated his case, proved his point and moved on. For those smart enough to follow his lead, it paid off. For others who still doubted him, well, it maybe didn't work out so well. Tonight, she was in the position of having to make that decision. Did she follow his lead, or should she walk away?

Walk by her own choice and not from any type of fear or demeaning words, which she'd been so used to in the past. But not run because the pain and disgust had become so unbearable. She wasn't giving in; she was standing for what she wanted. Because deep down she knew she wanted to sleep in that bed with Maurice tonight.

“I'll stay.” She let go of the dress. “But I sleep on the left side, closest to the window, and I like more pillows than covers, just in case you like to hog the sheets.”

He grinned and tossed her dress onto the chair with her coat and purse. “I'll try my best to accommodate you.”

CHAPTER FIVE

IT HAD ONLY been his goal not to take all the sheets last night. Rolling over and staying plastered to the back side of her body wasn't what he'd thought would happen. That's when it occurred to him that maybe he should stop planning and assuming what would happen between them this weekend; so far, he'd been wrong on two accounts.

Maurice wondered what time it was when he opened his eyes and inhaled the sweet scent of whatever type of product she used on her hair. He could've moved a little, lifted his body up to see over her to the alarm clock on the nightstand, but he was really comfortable where he was. His arm draped over her waist, her butt cradled against his morning arousal.

He knew it was morning. They hadn't closed the curtains all the way last night so about six inches of light peeked through. It slashed across her shoulder, giving her skin a shimmering glow. Without thought, he placed a soft kiss on that spot. Then another before telling himself he was being ridiculous.

Tender, romantic, thoughtful—he could be all those things when he wanted to. But he hadn't wanted to in a very long time. He wasn't an ass: he knew how to pour on the charm—it was actually part of his natural personality—and he knew how to say all the right things. The latter was pretty much common sense. Besides, the women he dated didn't require much. They already wanted him. If they hadn't made that perfectly clear right from the start, he probably wouldn't have pursued them. If they weren't looking for flowers, candlelight dinners and gifts on Valentine's Day, then they definitely weren't looking for love—which kinda went hand in hand with all that romance stuff. They could focus on a good time otherwise.

The real point behind his methodology for dealing with women was simple: India Frazier. He'd loved India, as much as an nineteen-year-old could love someone. But his love or infatuation or whatever it could be called had left India paralyzed and him forever scarred. For months after the

accident he'd been on the brink of an emotional breakdown, repeatedly going over in his mind the moment he made the decision to pick India up in his new car and ultimately put her in harm's way. Besieged with guilt over the situation he'd so callously put the person he'd loved in, he vowed it would never happen again. He'd never fall in love or put his emotions over common sense again.

Des didn't seem the type to need all those material proclamations, anyway. And, like him, she wasn't looking for anything permanent. She did, however, demand respect and honesty—which he could definitely do.

“What time is it?” She lurched up in the bed, her shoulder slamming into his mouth, which was still pretty close.

Pride kept him from crying out when he thought he might be tasting a little blood from the collision. Instead he pressed his finger to his lip as he reared back, and a hasty glance at his hand provided relief when there was no blood to be seen. “Not sure. Just woke up.” She didn't need to know he'd been enjoying the quiet and the feel of her closeness for a few minutes now.

“Oh no!” She rolled out of his grasp and reached over to the nightstand to grab her phone. “Why didn't my alarm go off?”

He wasn't a morning person at all, so he lay back on the pillows and dropped an arm over his eyes. “What time is it?” He knew she was a morning person because she was in the office by seven every day of the week. Weekends he wasn't sure, but since today was Saturday and she was obviously freaking out, it was a good bet that she woke up at the crack of dawn every damn day.

“Oh no! It's nine forty-five. I should've been up by now.” He lifted his arm and peeked out to see her fingers moving busily over her phone. “I can't believe all the messages I've missed. I'm usually up by now checking and...ugh, I just don't know how this happened.”

He did, and he tried like hell not to smile. “Well, you know what they say about good sex?”

She glared at him over her shoulder, that slash of sunlight casting her face in an ethereal hue. “No. I don’t know what they say.” Her lips were tilted upward in the cutest smirk he’d ever seen, and he tried not to grin.

Losing the battle, he replied, “Good sex’ll put you to bed right.” He laughed so hard at his own joke he didn’t see when she reached for the pillow and threw it at his face.

“Nobody says that, you goof.” He could hear the smile in her voice, so she wasn’t angry. “And I’m serious. I’m usually up by now. Plus, and I’m sure this will interest you, we missed the first activity on the agenda this morning.”

He did sober, just a little, at that statement. Enough so that he leaned over to see her phone screen. “What was the first activity? Something about sex, right?”

“Everything this weekend is about sex, Maurice.” She didn’t bother to grace him with a look this time, just kept scrolling through her emails. “I don’t know what it was, I just remember it started at nine.”

“You have your inbox open. Just find the welcome email and click on the agenda.”

“I’m checking my work emails.”

“The office is closed on Saturdays. And this weekend is a holiday, so you don’t need to check any of that stuff.”

“Work isn’t just relegated to nine to five, Monday through Friday.”

“Yeah, it is. That’s why it’s called the weekend—the week’s end, get it? Because it’s time for you to rest.”

Now she did give him that smirk again. “You’re ridiculous, and I know you better than that. Besides, I do sleep in until around six on Saturdays.”

“You call getting up at six sleeping in?” That alone should be a criminal act. And her looking as pretty as she did with her hair mussed and her cranky attitude was a little more on the sexy-as-hell side.

“Yep. I’m normally up at four.”

The sound he made reflected the pain he felt at simply hearing such an insanely early hour in the morning.

She shook her head. “The early bird gets the worm.” Her tone was light, her attention still set on her phone. “That’s what my grandmother used to say, and living in a house with five older brothers, it was true. My mom’s a nurse, and she worked the night shift for the pay differential. My grandmother was at home with us most of the time, and she got up with the chickens, cooking us a big breakfast every morning. If I wasn’t first at the table, my greedy brothers would scarf everything down before I got a plate.”

He’d never heard Des talk about her family before. He knew she had one because his mother had mentioned it at some point, but there’d never been a reason for the two of them to have a real conversation about it. “You’re from Chicago, right?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Why don’t you go home to be with your family?” Because for the last few years she’d been at his family’s house celebrating Thanksgiving with them.

“I’m busy. They’re busy.” She shrugged.

Her clipped responses told him she didn’t want to talk about that subject anymore, and he was happy to oblige. She already knew about his family, and still, if she’d started asking about them while they were lying partially naked in this nice warm bed on a Saturday morning, he wouldn’t want to discuss them, either.

Deciding she wasn’t going to pause checking work emails to look at the schedule, he rolled over to his side of the bed and grabbed his phone off its charger. Scrolling to the welcome email and agenda only took a few seconds.

“Morning Sex Mania,” he announced, unable to hide the rise in excitement from his voice. “That’s what we missed. Damn, we could’ve gotten some tips on great morning sex.”

She didn’t budge. “I don’t need any tips on good morning sex. All you need is the morning and a great partner. Boom.

Done.”

With that said, he dropped his phone, rolled over again and scooted his very hard dick up against her ass, which was barely covered by those black lace panties.

“Well, we might as well get started.”

* * *

It had been Desta’s idea to forego the morning sex. This time she did need to go to her own room, for a shower, clean clothes and a breather. He’d been right about why she’d overslept, even though she’d never in a billion years admit that to him.

The sex had been great. That orgasm had clearly knocked her ass out for more than ten hours. She rarely ever slept that many hours straight. And then there was waking to the touch of his lips on her shoulder. That had felt too good. And too intimate, which was why she’d bolted up out of bed on her partially exaggerated quest to figure out the time. This weekend wasn’t about intimacy, it was about sex. Very good sex, if last night was any indication.

After showering and slipping into fitted gray pants and a matching turtleneck, Desta pulled on black knee-length boots. Working in the fashion industry had obviously worn off on her, because she was at the mirror applying makeup and styling her hair for the next twenty-five minutes. Diamond-stud earrings she’d purchased for herself as a birthday gift last year were quick to affix, as were the three silver charm bracelets she favored with her casual attire. A spritz of perfume and she was walking across the room to grab her phone and Dear Lover ID badge. Her cell buzzed as soon as she picked it up.

Meet me at the elevator in 5 min. We don’t want to miss Make-Up and Mimosas!

Initially, she grinned at Maurice’s text—he couldn’t be that anxious to get free mimosas. But then her body tensed in an all-too-familiar way as she stared at the text and the directive

he'd given. Gordon used to give concise directions and expected them to be followed without hesitation. How many times had her snappy comebacks, honed from growing up with bossy brothers, led to heated arguments with her ex and him tossing out her favorite perfume or cutting her nice blouses into shreds? Too many to count. She didn't want to recall any of that right now. With a shake of her head, she decided she was being foolish. She slipped her phone into one back pocket and the ID and room key card into the other, then headed for the door.

"Right on time," Maurice said, tapping his watch when she approached the set of elevators on the far end of the floor.

"We could've taken the stairs." Ignoring another ping of distress, she tried to keep things light. That was the key to this weekend, light and simple. Just the way their email exchanges had gone. If she didn't let all the reasons they shouldn't be doing this together flood her mind, these next couple days would go smoothly. The incessant pricks from her past were another matter, but she'd been able to push them aside for years so far. This weekend wasn't going to test her.

"Let's skip the stairs. I like the R&B station they have playing in the elevators." He winked as the door opened, and waved a hand for her to step inside the car before him.

She did, giving him a playful jab to his gut as she passed by. "You're at the gym every day. Don't slack just because it's the weekend."

"Not all of us are as diligent as you, Des. I go to the gym every morning because there's one in our building. When I travel, I cut back on workouts." He stood right next to her in the elevator, which wasn't necessary since they were in the car alone.

He smelled good. It was the same fragrance with hints of sandalwood she always smelled on him, but today it seemed more prominent, more alluring. His boots today were chocolate brown, pants a shade lighter, and his button-front white shirt showed the RGF emblem on the right-hand side of his chest.

“You’re not going for anonymity, huh?”

When he stared at her quizzically, she nodded to his shirt. “Your face is familiar enough, but you could always lie if someone called you out. Wearing an RGF shirt so openly just connects more of the dots.”

He glanced down at his shirt and then back up to her when the elevator door opened. Again, he signaled for her to walk ahead of him before stepping out to join her in the bustling lobby.

“The key to not alerting people to who you are is to mingle like you don’t care. Besides, as you might recall, every guest attending this weekend was required to sign that nondisclosure agreement.” With that he looped his arm in hers and led them through the crowd of people either dressed to hit the slopes or heading to the resort’s restaurant for breakfast. A sign next to the front desk showed the Dear Lover logo—a white pen in hand centered inside a gray heart—and the words *Morning Sessions* right next to an arrow.

“We’re this way,” he told her and led them in that direction.

Five minutes later they were inside another room with wall-to-wall windows and a breathtaking view of the mountains lined with snow. There were crimson-colored beanbag chairs in pairs around the room. On one wall was a long dark wood table filled with mimosas. At the center of the room was a podium and microphone, and behind that was a projector screen.

“Badges?” a petite woman asked before they could fully enter the space.

Maurice pulled his from his pocket and held it up, while Desta was so busy looking around the room, he had to nudge her before she reached into her back pocket to show her own. He’d been right to remind her about the NDA they’d signed. It was part of the registration process, and she’d read it a couple times before affixing her signature. She thought it was a good extra layer of privacy offered by Dear Lover. Of course, it hadn’t occurred to her that someone as notable as Maurice would be a client. Not considering millionaires, celebrities or

other well-known people would be searching for companionship may have been naïve on her part. At any rate, this weekend was a private event, so in essence whatever happened in the Finger Lakes stayed in the Finger Lakes. Still, while that form was meant to be reassuring to all Dear Lover's clients, she knew firsthand that rules were often overlooked for the sake of a good story.

They were directed to the side of the room closest to the windows to find a seat. "You okay?" he asked, pointing to an empty set of beanbags.

"Yeah. This is, uh, not what I expected."

"What'd you think it was going to be, desks and chairs? Pencils and paper for us to take notes on the lecture?" He plopped down way too happily onto his bag, then looked up at her with a toothy smile.

She went down a little slower, not because she thought she might fall but because her fitted pants were more fashionable than practical. Bending to sit just about on the floor wasn't what she thought she'd be doing this morning. "Oh come on, you gotta admit this is a different type of setup even for you."

"Yeah," he said, moving around in the chair like he was a kid trying to feel every bean inside the bag. "But it's kinda fun."

With a roll of her eyes, she shook her head and turned her attention to the scenery. The sight of fluffy snow draped over the mountains was like a balm to the turmoil riling in her stomach. Her efforts to combat the memories of Gordon that insisted on flooding her mind were proving unsuccessful. It was strange because this wasn't the first time she'd dated since walking away from him. Of course, she'd never been with a coworker or a man who was the face of an international fashion house, but that was just a small detail. Right?

"You wanna ski after this?"

"Huh?" She returned her attention to Maurice with a start.

He pointed to the window. "You're looking out there like you can't wait to hit the slopes. When this is done, we can

change and go out if you want.”

“Oh. Sure. I haven’t really been anywhere outside the city in a while, so the scenery is pretty nice.”

“How haven’t you been out of the city? There’s a mandatory four-week vacation rule at the company.”

“I know. I just prefer to do staycations.” Actually, she preferred to save face in front of her family, but Maurice didn’t need those details.

“And that means you just sit in your house for four weeks?” Of course, he couldn’t believe that she found comfort in solitude and actually enjoyed being in her private space, since he was the party-going, fun-loving Gold sibling.

Thankfully, an athletically built man interrupted them. “Good morning, Lovers.” He was standing at the podium with the brunette woman who’d been guarding the door.

“Hush, they’re starting.” And Desta was glad. The last thing she wanted, after blurting out her family situation to him earlier, was to have him asking more questions about her personal life. It was none of his business for one, and besides that, it had nothing to do with what they were doing here this weekend.

“Okay, we’re sure none of you have had a knock-down, drag-out fight yet,” the male speaker said. “At least, we hope not.” Now that she was staring at him, Mr. Athlete looked more like a hot sports model with his cool blue eyes and blond hair. The crowd of about forty chuckled at his remarks, and he gave a dazzling smile in return.

“But just in case you do this weekend, or sometime later, we want to make sure you’re prepared with the best make-up sex tips,” said his sidekick, who was almost as attractive as he was. “And oh, we have mimosas!”

Desta leaned over to whisper in Maurice’s ear. “Are they really about to give us sex tips?” Of course they were. Wasn’t that what this weekend was all about? It was much easier to accept that when she hadn’t known who her Dear Lover was.

Maurice's grin was back, beaming at her as he turned so their faces were only inches apart. "We probably don't need 'em, but let's play along, anyway."

The quick kiss to the tip of her nose was a surprise, and the uncertainty she'd been feeling momentarily dissipated.

"So, the thing about having a fight is that all the anger you were feeling during the argument makes you really hot." Ms. Congeniality—that's what she was calling the woman—fanned a hand in front of her face. "I mean, physically hot."

"Right, so once you've given in and apologized...guys, this is usually us, especially if we know what's good for us." More laughter. Mr. Athlete obviously had jokes. "It's time to get turned on. The feeling you get when you're angry and when you're turned on is very similar. Body heat rises, and shortness of breath ensues. It's no big deal to just switch that around from anger to what could possibly lead to bliss."

"And it can all start with a touch," Ms. Congeniality said. "So guys, touch your lover. Just something light but arousing at the same time. Assure them that even in the midst of this argument, they're still the one for you."

Maurice was right on task. Desta had leaned back over to the privacy of her own beanbag chair, but now he was invading that privacy. Easing his body over to her, he reached out a hand and cupped her cheek. It was a soft touch, one that didn't necessarily have to be intimate—damn, she really had feelings about that word. Still, she had to resist the urge to jerk back in surprise or pull away after the surprise settled.

"Good. Now, how did that touch make you feel?" Ms. Congeniality continued. "Does it make you want more? Does it make you hotter? Ladies, it's your turn to respond. He's sorry now for whatever he did to piss you off. Don't you want to make him pay by getting him so turned on he can barely see straight?"

No. That was never how she'd felt when she and Gordon argued. Not after the first time when he'd put his foot through their patio door and warned she would be next if she didn't get it together.

But at this moment, at Maurice's touch, a heated flush draped her body. She told herself it was involuntary. While her mind was still trying to keep this class and what was expected of her in perspective, her body was all in and ready to do what she was told. And since she'd agreed to spend this weekend with Maurice, leaning into his touch was simple. His thumb rubbed over her cheek, brushing past the edge of her lips, and a quick spurt of desire took over. She swiped her tongue over his thumb.

His eyes instantly went darker, and before she could speak, he was moving from his bag to hers. Now their bodies were flush against each other, and he was exchanging his thumb for a finger that she promptly sucked between her lips. After all, her payback to him for any argument was supposed to be to drive him wild with desire. The sexual heat that morphed from anger, which Ms. Congeniality was currently describing in detail, was accurate as hell. Wearing a turtleneck today hadn't been the best idea, because Desta was burning up. When Maurice began moving his finger in and out of her mouth, her breasts swelled with the need to be touched, and a tiny moan escaped her throat.

Maurice gasped at the sound, his gaze dropping to her mouth as she continued to suck on his finger with the same fervent hunger she'd had last night when it was his dick in her mouth instead. Why did this feel so good, and how in the hell could she be thinking of stripping out of her clothes so that he could dive deep inside her while they were in this room full of people? None of this was what she'd ever imagined herself doing. But she didn't want to stop.

"That's right, go with it. Let the making up and making out begin," Mr. Athlete said, and she almost expected to hear the crowd cheering him on.

Except the crowd was moaning and groaning instead. She didn't want to glance away to see what anyone else was doing, especially not when Maurice was pulling his finger from her lips, leaning in closer to trade it for his mouth.

His lips were warm against hers, his tongue slipping inside to tangle with hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck,

pulling him closer. Obliging, he rolled until he was on top of her and the kiss deepened.

What in the entire hell?

She felt like she was forgiving him for something and repledging herself to him. Giving her all to this kiss, pressing her body against his, while his hands moved up and down her back in a way that conveyed compassion, longing, need.

Before she could figure out what was actually happening, a bell sounded loudly throughout the room. Maurice jerked away from her, and when she looked around many of the other couples looked equally confused.

“I know it’s just getting good,” Mr. Athlete crooned. “But there’s more. Now, there’re bound to be instances when the argument you have with your partner is warranted, and a real discussion needs to be had about whatever that issue is. But sometimes, fights can be about something dumb. Maybe someone forgot to clean the shower when they were done *and* didn’t empty the dishwasher in the same day, and the other is fed up.”

Maurice had settled back, still on her beanbag chair, his arm now wrapped around her shoulders.

“But here’s the thing,” Ms. Congeniality chimed in. “You love him. You most certainly love the way he goes down on you.”

Oh, hell no! She was definitely not spreading her legs in this room with all these people so that Maurice could put his mouth on her already damp pussy the way he had last night.

At the sound of appreciative murmurs from the crowd, Mr. Athlete nodded and grinned. “Yeah, you know he brings it home every time he sets his mouth on you. So when it’s a little disagreement, it might be a better use of that energy to let him prop you up on the kitchen counter and have you for dessert.”

Desta pressed her thighs tightly together, then eased them apart when she thought Maurice might’ve seen her reflexive reaction.

“I’d love having you for dessert.” The words sounded so husky and so hot coming from him she almost came right then and there.

Instead, she focused on the steady movement of his hand on her shoulder, so strong and possessive. That last word gave her pause. But then his other hand moved to her thigh, resting there with a punch of searing heat.

“You ever have make-up sex that made you forget what the argument was even about?” he asked. “I mean, sex that just took away every coherent thought from your mind?”

Why was he doing this? Why was he making this so difficult for her?

“No,” she said after inhaling a shaky breath. “I haven’t had a lot of make-up sex.” Gordon’s apologetic gestures came in the form of a delivery guy handing her a gift—a diamond necklace, a pair of Louboutin pumps, an Yves Saint Laurent bag. “Sometimes people should have to work harder for forgiveness.”

She shouldn’t have said that last part. When she looked at him, it was to see him giving a knowing nod. But he didn’t know; he couldn’t. She’d never told anyone what had truly happened between her and her ex-fiancé, not even her family.

“I don’t get a lot of make-up sex, either. Disagreements rarely arise when you make your position clear right off the bat.” That’s right, he wouldn’t have a disagreement about not doing the dishes because he never stayed with anyone long enough to dirty dishes in the first place. “But I’m beginning to think I’d like making up with you.”

Okay, this wasn’t going well for her. The volleying back and forth between her past and these new and strange feelings his presence was evoking in her were going to drive her nuts.

“Whew! That was something for the first round. Let’s take a break before anyone starts to get naked.” Ms. Congeniality offered a smile that Desta wanted to smack right off her cute face. “Go grab yourselves a mimosa, and we’ll move on to the next round in a few minutes.”

“Thank goodness,” Desta mumbled, forgetting Maurice was still close enough to hear her.

He chuckled. “You thirsty?”

She shook her head. She was horny and confused. “Not really, but I could use a break. This session is giving a lot of information that I don’t think I’ll be forgetting anytime soon.”

“Really? My kisses are that memorable, huh?” He was smug and arrogant, and too damn sexy when he was being both.

“Hush up and go get us a drink.” She really needed some space from him, even if for just a few minutes, to clear her mind.

“Cool. I get it if you need a few minutes to gather yourself after that great kiss.”

“Don’t kid yourself, it wasn’t that great.” Of course, she was lying. “But that line’s getting longer for the drinks.” His kiss had seared a hole straight through her soul and made the insistent memories of Gordon during this time even more puzzling.

Maurice didn’t believe her, anyway. She could see it in the mischievous twinkle in his eyes. But he did get up and walk away, and she watched him go, all the while wondering what she’d gotten herself into and how the hell she was going to train her body not to respond to his touch come Monday morning.

CHAPTER SIX

SOMETIMES PEOPLE SHOULD have to work harder for forgiveness.

Did she know about India and the guilt he carried for months after the accident? She couldn't have. No charges had been filed, and as soon as India was out of the coma, her parents had flown her to some hospital in Switzerland for extensive therapy. As far as Maurice knew, she'd never returned to the States. Which meant he would never have the chance to tell her how sorry he was, again.

No, he was fairly certain Des had no idea of just how reckless he could be. After the accident, he'd spent the remaining years in college—and all of his adult life—trying to forget that night had ever happened. And in doing so, he'd created a totally different persona, the one that was too carefree to look for love...because he didn't deserve to find happiness after what he'd done.

If Des wasn't talking about his past issues, she had to be referring to her own. Had someone done something to her that she couldn't forgive? Or had she, like him, done something unforgivable? It was more than likely the former. Des wasn't reckless, nor was she selfish or inconsiderate. Watching her with staff and his family, whether at his parents' home or when they were out at work functions, she was always the same—calm, cool, compassionate and sometimes funny.

“Okay, I think I've got it this time,” she said, and he directed his full attention to her again. He tried to shake off the memories that had crept to the surface. It was a beautiful afternoon on the slopes, and he was helping Des with her skiing.

The white pants, jacket and matching boots she'd changed into after the Make-Up and Mimosas workshop made her look like a sexy ski goddess. Whatever she wore looked great on

her, and after years of being surrounded by beautiful women, he knew that meant something.

“You just want to keep your feet firmly planted, bend your knees a little and then...” He paused, watching her blink repeatedly as she tried to take in every word he was saying. Deciding it’d be much better if he showed her, he dragged his feet in his skis until he was standing right beside her. “Like this.” He demonstrated the way he wanted her to stand and waited while she mimicked him.

“I’ve skied before,” she said while adjusting the poles in her hands and trying to line her knees up with his. “It’s just been a while.”

“It’s just like sex. Once you’ve done it, you never forget how to do it.” The last words were exaggerated, but he chuckled, as he often did whenever he cracked a joke, because the people around him rarely appreciated his sense of humor. He was caught off guard when she leaned in to nudge him with her elbow and instead turned her leg and subsequently the ski.

He had seconds to reach out and grab her, then try to resituate them both before catastrophe struck. His attempts were a failure, and they tumbled over, falling onto the snow-covered ground with a thump. Both sets of skis clanked together as they rolled a couple times before stopping by a tree.

“Well, I guess my sex comment put some thoughts in your mind, huh? But if you wanted to have sex outside, I’d suggest it not be on the slopes. I don’t do too well in arctic temps.” She wiggled beneath him, but she wasn’t smiling when he stared down at her. In fact, her brow was furrowed, lips pursed in irritation. Sort of how he’d caught her looking a few times during the workshop.

“Hey, it’s okay. Everybody falls sometimes. I mean, it could be that I’m not that good of a ski instructor. But you don’t have to share that with anyone.” Still trying to keep things light, he watched her warily, waiting for the tension to melt away from her features and the stiffness from her movements.

“No. I’ll get it.” She pushed at him again. “Just let me up. I can do this.”

Maurice rolled off her and sat on the ground as he watched her get to her feet. He could’ve gotten up first and helped her, but instinct told him to let her be. When she was upright and he followed, she adjusted the sticks in her hands once more. He stood close enough to help if she fell, and just far enough away that she didn’t have to give him one of her *you’re workin’ my nerves* looks.

Adjusting her hood, she stared straight ahead. Determination was clear in the serious lines of her face as she bent her knees, planted the poles a short distance in front of her and pushed off. At first all he could do was watch, admiring her tenacity, before finally following her down the rest of the hill. She’d been doing fine until she tried to stop and swerved her body a little more than was required. When she toppled over this time, he wasn’t close enough to catch her.

She got up cursing.

Maurice moved in to help her. “Doesn’t have to be perfect every time, Des. You did good coming down.”

Once she was up on her feet, she pushed his arms away. “Don’t talk to me like I’m a child.”

There was no mistaking the anger that laced her tone nor the definite scowl she was giving him now. He was used to attitude—Riley gave it to him all the time. He knew independence and confidence were really important to both his sister and Des, especially in the workplace. But this was different. Des was always in control at work, and whenever she was angered, her responses still came calmly, laced with deadly accurate aim. He’d never seen her react to anything or anyone in this way.

“Are you okay?” Because this wasn’t just about being rusty at skiing.

She glanced away, then stabbed her poles into the snow and shook her head. “I apologize,” she said, returning her gaze to

him.

He didn't want her apology; he wanted to know what was going on with her. "Tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help?"

"You can't."

"You won't know until you trust me enough to tell me."

Shock filled her gaze now, and he realized he'd just said the T word, which could sometimes carry as much weight as the L word.

"It's not a big deal. And you're right, neither is skiing perfectly. It's not like I'm trying out for the Olympics." Her lips curved in a tentative smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Let's just head back to the hotel. It's getting cold."

It had been freezing since they'd come out here an hour and a half ago, so he knew that wasn't the only issue here. But he shouldn't push. It was only fair that she have her secrets. After all, he had his.

* * *

On Saturday evening, Desta touched a hand to her stomach and closed her eyes as she stood at the door of her room. Just a few minutes more, some quiet time to get her thoughts in order, that was all she needed. Breathe in, breathe out. Slowly. Count down from twenty. Start again, this time from fifty.

She had to get Gordon out of her mind. Truth be told, she wasn't sure why memories of him were popping up left and right during this trip. It had been a long time since she'd thought about him and what had happened between them, and it was irritating as hell to have it coming back now like a tidal wave. But she could do this. She could get over him, just like she'd done before. All she had to do was focus on Maurice and the reason they were here this weekend.

That was so much easier said than done. First because, for whatever reason, so many things Maurice was saying or doing were direct leads to specific memories about Gordon. Like the elevator. For the second time, Maurice had sent her a text telling her to meet him at the elevator. Gordon always gave her

instructions: be dressed at seven; have dinner ready at six; call me as soon as you get in the house. So much so that after a while she'd started to feel as if he were a drill sergeant and she was a soldier he had to keep in line at all times. *Demeaning* didn't begin to describe how that made her feel, even now. And while she knew this wasn't Maurice's intent, it still opened the window to those damn memories.

Second, if she just set her mind to having sex with Maurice every second of every day they were at this resort, she'd also go crazy. There was a hunger when she was near him now, a sensation she hadn't felt before, but that was definitely awakened now. A part of her had wanted him to tear her pants off and touch his mouth to her waiting core again, just like they'd mentioned during the Make-Up and Mimosas session this morning. Of course, she hadn't wanted him to do it right there in front of everybody, but the thought of him going down on her again had her pulse increasing and her pussy pulsating. She could have him as much as she wanted this weekend, of that she was certain. It was more how or if they were going to keep this momentum going when their weekend was over.

At any rate, she couldn't think about any of this anymore right now. She needed to get going so they wouldn't be late for the PJs, Dinner and a Movie event. She was starved, and Maurice probably was, too. Finally opening her eyes, she took another steadying breath and left the room.

She stepped out into the hallway wearing a cappuccino silk pajama set. Staring down at the ensemble, she told herself for the hundredth time that choosing to wear the pants instead of the shorty-short-shorts that also came with this set was a smart idea. The top was long sleeved and had a belted waist instead of buttons, and on her feet were her favorite Ugg Cozette leopard-print slippers. She frowned and wiggled her toes because these were the slippers she wore when she was at home. She'd meant to order a pair of more sedate-looking slippers for the pajama party, but she'd had gotten busy at work and forgot. With a shrug, and because the clock was ticking, she continued down the hallway.

Maurice was punctual, and so was she, which was why she told herself that any recollection of Gordon around Maurice was a mistake. This wasn't the same. In fact, it couldn't be more different than what she'd gone through six years ago.

“How is it possible that you make even pajamas look sexy?” The twinkle in Maurice's eyes as she walked toward him was alluring. She'd noted that long ago, which was why she never questioned how so many women were swept away by him, even though they knew he'd never commit to any of them. “I mean, you're not showing a bit of skin. Well, except for your toes, which are mighty cute with that yellow nail polish.”

“Sexy Is a Complete Package,” she replied, coming to a stop beside him.

“Ahh.” He grinned and nodded. “Last year's Women of the World Collection slogan. That was brilliant then, and it's still relevant now.”

She couldn't help feeling the flush of pride wash over her as he recalled one of her most recent marketing campaigns. RGF's Women of the World Collection—which featured both upscale business and business-casual wear as well as budget-friendly designs—had given career-minded women more fashion choices than any other line across that season, and she'd been in charge of getting the word out to the world about it. It was one of her favorite projects.

“Skin doesn't always mean sexy. You should know that by now,” she told him.

The elevator came, and they stepped inside.

“Why? Because the women I date all show a lot of skin?”

His response seemed defensive and was a little off topic. “I meant because at RGF, we're not all about showing off a woman's body with revealing clothes. We cater to the entire style of a woman.”

The look on his face said he was rethinking his words. It should've been the look of someone realizing they'd put their foot in their mouth, but that wasn't Maurice. While he could admit when he was wrong, it was always on his terms. He

remained silent for the duration of their ride, and she stepped off the elevator first when the doors opened again.

She already knew which direction to go without the help of the signs and arrows the resort had put up to assist them in getting around. Besides that, she could smell the food coming from the resort restaurant and her stomach churned in response. She was actually following her stomach's lead.

"Hey, there! I sent you a text this morning after the mimosas session, and you didn't respond." Kelli came out of nowhere, stopping Desta in her tracks.

"Oh, hi. Yeah, sorry about that. We went skiing and then I came back and took a nap. Didn't know the slopes could be so exhausting." That was a lie. After all her tumbles and the emotional upheaval of too many trips down memory lane, she'd gone straight to her room when they were done and taken a hot shower. She'd felt better after that, and she'd checked and answered emails until it was time to get ready for tonight's festivities. She gave Kelli a tentative smile. The woman returned it with a beaming one of her own.

"I'll just bet you were exhausted." With a wink and a chuckle Kelli glanced over Desta's shoulder. "Guess your match is working out?"

"Yes. Yes, we're...working out just fine." *For the weekend*, she wanted to say for clarification. One more day and they'd be back in the city working on something other than turning each other on. "Um, Maurice, this is Kelli. Kelli, this is Maurice."

"Oh, you don't have to tell me who he is." Kelli stared at Maurice, accepting the hand he'd already extended for a shake. "I know exactly who Maurice Gold is. The elusive fashion mogul who loves the ladies but not enough to settle down with one. I recognized him as soon as I saw you in his arms yesterday."

If Maurice felt as uncomfortable with what Kelli just said as Desta did, he didn't show it. In fact, his most dashing smile was in place as he shook and released Kelli's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Kelli. Did you have a chance to link up

with your match this weekend, or are you just hanging out solo?”

Desta had wondered that, too, since Kelli had not only sent her a text this morning but had also sent one late last night. Desta had responded to that one after she'd left Maurice's room this morning.

“Oh no, I found my guy. He's right over there getting us a table. Hey, why don't you two join us? We can have a double date.” Kelli didn't wait for their response but immediately turned and fast-walked over to the restaurant entrance, where a guy wearing gray sweatpants and a matching T-shirt was speaking to the host.

“We should get out of this,” she said to Maurice the moment they were alone.

“Nah, then we look like we've got something to hide. And we don't, so let's just go.”

“We don't? Are you sure?” She couldn't help but question him here. “How's it going to look that two RGF employees were caught spending the weekend at a sex retreat?” Because when it came right down to it, regardless of any of the names they slapped on it, that's exactly what this weekend was turning out to be.

Maurice easily took her hand in his and said, “It looks like two consenting adults decided to do some adult things.”

Unable to hide her exasperation with his unbothered attitude where the media was concerned, she sighed. “Look, I know you like to believe that you've got everybody eating out of the palm of your hand all the time, especially the media. But this time I'm attached, too. My career's on the line, and unlike you I'm not related to the bosses. I could lose my job.”

He stopped, dropped her hand and turned so that they were now face-to-face. “I'm damn good at my job, Desta. No matter what the media prints or says about me, RGF is always at the forefront of my mind. So don't throw my family in my face as if I can afford to be reckless because of them.”

She wanted to snap back, but creating a scene wasn't going to help make her point. Besides that, she'd never seen Maurice look as serious as he did right now.

"I'm just saying we should think about this."

"You can think about it. I'm going to have dinner." With that, he left her standing there.

She felt like an idiot as that itchy sensation rippled over her skin again. She closed her eyes, intending to start her breathing exercises to calm herself down, but stopped. She opened her eyes again. Maurice was right: now was not the place to fall apart. If Kelli was going to run to the media with this tidbit of information, Desta's reaction to it would just add fuel to the fire.

Pasting on a smile, she pulled out her phone as she began to walk after Maurice. If it looked like she was reading a message or something, maybe it wouldn't seem like they'd had a disagreement and he'd just walked away from her—something she wasn't going to forget he'd done.

Kelli was waving wildly from a table that was thankfully toward the back of the restaurant. Maurice hadn't turned back to see if Desta was behind him, but when he arrived at the table, he pulled out the chair closest to the wall and waited until she took a seat. Offering him one of her practiced smiles, she sat across from Kelli and glanced at Kelli's guy as Maurice sat down.

Kelli's match had cocoa-brown hair that was long and curling on top but close-shaved on the sides. Glasses, gray eyes and a full goatee filled out the rest of his face. She'd already noted he was tall and built like a basketball player, and when he smiled as she stared at him, she got the impression he was friendly.

"Hi, I'm Travis." Because she'd been caught staring and she really needed to get herself together if she was going to make it through this meal, she accepted his hand for a quick shake.

"Hi, Travis, I'm Desta. And this is Maurice." She prayed Kelli wouldn't mention his last name.

“Maurice’s family founded the largest Black-owned fashion house in the world. I know you’ve heard of RGFashions,” Kelli announced amiably, and Desta’s hopes were quickly dashed.

“And Desta’s head of our marketing department,” Maurice added.

Good thing she’d pulled her hand back from the shake with Travis and let it rest in her lap with the other one. Now she could clasp them together tightly in frustration without anyone else seeing them.

“Really? So are you here this weekend for work or pleasure?” Travis asked, probably because she wasn’t wearing her ID badge.

Glancing over at Maurice in his fitted black T-shirt and black basketball shorts, she noticed he wasn’t wearing his badge, either.

Of course Kelli answered the question for them. “No, silly, they’re Dear Lovers, too.”

“Oh? Wow. How does that work? Were you surprised to find each other here?” Now, all on board with Kelli’s excitement, Travis was the inquisitive one.

“No,” Desta spoke up. “We knew we’d both be here, and once our matches didn’t pan out, we just decided to stay for a relaxing weekend.” Where that lie came from she didn’t exactly know, but it felt right. The less these two—and possibly, at some point, the world—knew about how she and Maurice actually came to be here together, the better.

“Yeah, but it was quite a coincidence,” Maurice added easily. “With the disappointment of not hitting it off with my match, it was an unexpected comfort to see Desta here.”

This was the second time he’d used her full name. Since about a month after she’d begun working at RGF, Maurice had called her Des, and because she’d liked him from the start—in a strictly platonic way—she hadn’t bothered to correct him. It dawned on her in this instant that he was the only one who called her that, and she liked it.

“That’s so cool.” Kelli had leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. She stared at them as if they were a couple on a reality-television show she was obsessed with. “So, how’s it going so far? What’d you think about Make-Up and Mimosas? I only saw you two walking out, but I couldn’t catch up with you.”

“It was definitely informative.” Maurice was sure to answer first this time. “All those tips on how to shift the anger from the argument to sexual desire were quite interesting. Makes you want to pick an argument just for the sake of getting to the make-up sex.”

Travis grinned and nodded at Maurice. “I was thinking the same thing, man.”

“No,” Kelli answered quickly. “No arguments over here, at least not yet.” She giggled. “It’s too early to say for sure if they’ll end with make-up sex or a complete block from my email and my phone.”

“That’s certainly an option,” Desta added. Even though, for her, it really wasn’t. If this thing they’d agreed to went south, she had no idea how the work relationship between her and Maurice would turn out.

She couldn’t tell if Maurice was thinking along the same lines, and the conversation quickly turned when the server came to take their orders. Cheeseburger sliders, hot wings, fries and beers all around came to the table in the next fifteen minutes. From there, the chatter went to the food, the beer and guesses as to which movie they’d be watching tonight.

Desta managed to relax at some point, and when Maurice put his arm around the back of her chair after they finished eating, she didn’t give it a second thought. A stranger walking by might think this was a normal double date, with four friends laughing and talking about things like sports and how many times Desta fell on the slopes in comparison to how many times Kelli had done the same.

Nobody would know that a war was going on inside her—one in which she wished she could actually have this sense of normalcy. Only, the smarter, more experienced side of her

knew it was an impossibility. Things could seem good one moment and change completely the next. And because of that, she would never willingly take a chance on a relationship again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MAURICE HAD GUESSED they'd be watching something like *Iron Man* or some other Marvel movie, because it would've certainly taken the sexual edge off all the other planned events for the weekend. He'd been sorely mistaken.

Twenty minutes after they'd finished eating, he found them a set of beanbag chairs in the far-left corner of a room that had been designated their movie theater for the evening. It had taken a little dodging to unravel them from Kelli and Travis after leaving the restaurant, but he knew dinner had been stressful for Des. When she wasn't eating, she'd been wringing her hands so much he was certain she'd caused bruising.

And he needed to make up for losing his patience with her earlier. He wasn't going to apologize because she'd been out of line throwing his family into the reason why he had job security, especially since she of all people knew that wasn't true. If there was one thing his father, Ron Gold Sr., didn't tolerate it was insubordination on the job, and if his dad for one minute thought something Maurice was doing was jeopardizing the image of the company, he would fire him personally. Admittedly, on the surface, he could see how his philandering ways might be a stain on RGF's otherwise impeccable reputation. But he'd always been the charming Gold brother, a trait which aided in his job as the head of PR. The media reps loved him, which more often than not worked to his advantage. If that meant the media also took a considerable interest in his personal life, he'd been willing to deal with that.

"We're pretty much out of sight back here," he said when Desta only stood next to the pair of beanbags. He had no idea why the organizers of this event thought these were a cute idea. While he got a kick out of them, Des definitely wasn't a fan.

“And we can still see the screen,” she added, even though she made no attempt to sit.

“Of course, as soon as they turn the lights down and get started it’ll be just like being in a movie theater.”

“Without the comfortable reclining seats.” Glancing over at her, he saw her tentative smile.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.” He plopped down onto one of the bags. Actually, since they were in the back, their seats had been pushed farther into a corner, putting a little more space between them and the next couple. It was actually a pretty ideal spot for privacy.

When she was still standing, he reached out and pulled the other beanbag closer to his, until the faux leather material touched and they looked like one big blob. “I like it. C’mon, sit down. The movie will be starting soon.”

He was certain she wanted to say something else, to make another remark about how she didn’t understand why they didn’t have real seats, but she declined. Giving up on that argument was a task for her, he knew—Des loved to get her point across. She sat down beside him, moving a little more in the seat than she had this morning. “You okay? Do you need me to find you another seat?”

“No. It’s not that.” She continued to move until finally settling herself into a groove. “Guess I’ll make a note that silk pajamas don’t really go with beanbag chairs. I’ll probably be slipping and sliding around throughout the entire movie.”

Only because the lights went out at that moment, signaling the movie was about to start, did he bite down on the remark about possibly enjoying her slipping and sliding around as long as she ended up beneath him again.

Someone came by with cartons of popcorn and a choice of bottled waters or sodas. Des took a water and popcorn. He only took a water. For the first twenty minutes of the movie they shared the popcorn and sipped on their drinks, both watching the screen with mild interest. It was when the lube,

blindfold and whip were revealed that all thoughts of eating or drinking disappeared.

Des's eyes were plastered to the screen, and there was no look of surprise or disgust on her face. For that reason, Maurice turned his attention back to the movie and waited to see how the scene would play out.

The man explained things like safe words and complete submission, pleasure and dominance, all while removing the woman's clothes slowly, one item at a time. Maurice imagined his fingers brushing over Des's smooth skin as he untied that belt at her waist and slid the top from her shoulders. There was a spot right at the hollow of her collar bone that he'd kissed last night and had been thinking of kissing again. His dick jumped, and he thanked the heavens that he'd had the good sense to wear loose-fitting shorts. Even if she looked over right now she probably wouldn't notice his growing erection.

He felt it, though, along with the rush of warmth throughout his body as he continued watching the scene. The actress licked her lips, the same way Des had done last night when she'd been standing in his room staring down at his dick. After Des had done that, she'd been on her knees, taking him into her mouth, and he'd been certain he'd died and gone straight to heaven. When the actor on-screen touched the pad of his finger to her tongue and the woman proceeded to lick around the digit, Maurice sucked in a breath. A glance over at Des and he could see her tongue stroking her bottom lip.

It took a few seconds for him to calm himself enough to not roll on top of her—they were in a room full of people, after all. The Dear Lover staff were crafty and very good at creating a sexually charged atmosphere, he'd give them that. But what was he supposed to do now?

Des had brought up the issue of Kelli telling the media about them being there together. If that were the case, or if anyone decided to phone in an anonymous tip, him reaching over to touch Des would possibly give more ammunition. Then again, it was pretty dark in this room and they were sitting in a semi-secluded spot. Before he could ruminate on it any further, Des's hand moved from where she'd had it resting

in her lap up, until it brushed over her breast. The nipple was already hard, and Maurice cursed before extending his hand to touch it.

She jumped when he touched her and then their gazes locked. “Tell me to stop.” It was a plea, and he wondered if he should follow that up by giving her a safe word like the guy on-screen had done. “Please, just say the word.”

Otherwise he was going to continue to circle his finger around her nipple.

Her lips parted, and she inhaled deeply, releasing the breath slowly before blinking. “It feels good.”

That didn’t sound like *stop* to him, and in the next instant he palmed her breast, squeezing it in his hand until her head fell back against the beanbag. A tiny gasp escaped through her lips.

His gaze was now focused on her breasts, the one he held in his hand and the other that had a pebbled nipple, as well. She had great-sized breasts, a little more than a handful, high and perfect for suckling. If he closed his eyes right now, he’d see them in his mind—delectable mounds with big dark nipples that beckoned him. Reaching his other hand out, he cupped them both, kneading them until the top of her pajamas began to slide open. He already knew she wasn’t wearing a bra, and he wanted to curse his phenomenal luck.

“More?” Asking for permission was a must every step of the way in this precarious situation. There was no plan for what he was doing. He was just following his body’s reaction to her, trusting that hers would respond.

“Yes.” It was a faint whisper, but he’d heard it and he dipped his head. With his chin he eased the material to the side until he could put his mouth on her bare mound.

Was he really doing this? Right here and right now? The answer was a resounding yes.

And from the sounds of moaning coming from the screen, and some he was certain from right in this room, he wasn’t the only one. In all his life he’d never imagined himself doing

something like this, never even considered that he might be into an orgy-type scenario, but this was making him hot as hell!

When she slapped a hand to the back of his head, holding his mouth over her breast, he moaned. His dick was so hard, tenting his shorts as it ached to get inside her.

“Can’t believe this,” she murmured. “Can’t stop. Feels so good.”

Yeah, he couldn’t speak right now because he’d moved to the next breast, but she was absolutely right, it did feel damn good. And he didn’t want to stop.

He did, though, at least after a few more moments of sucking on the tautest nipples he’d ever tasted. Lifting his head, Maurice eased over so that his body was just about on top of hers. He cupped her cheek, turning her face into his, and touched his lips to hers. Their tongues instantly dueled as if they’d each been waiting for this exact moment. Again, her hand was on the back of his head, holding him in the position she wanted him.

It was an aggressive move, a dominant act, and lust soared through his bloodstream like a drug. Kissing Des was unlike kissing any other woman he’d ever met. Her lips were so sweet, her tongue so masterful as it stroked his until drops of pre-cum seeped from his dick. He needed to be inside her right now.

“Des,” he whispered when he was able to pull back a few inches from her mouth, “we gotta...”

“Yes,” she moaned and then pulled him down for another kiss.

This time there was a fevered pitch to the way their tongues moved. She sucked his deep into her mouth, and he moved his hands to bury them in her hair. He was going to climb on top of her and fuck her right here in this room with this damn movie playing and at least twenty other couples watching.

That was an insane idea. No way could he let it go that far. He had to stop. They had to get out of here.

Calling on every ounce of control he possessed, Maurice pulled his mouth away from hers. She didn't try to hold him still; instead she dropped her hands to her side as if touching him had somehow injured them.

"We can't do this here," he said, his whisper husky with desire.

She licked her lips again and nodded. "I know."

"Let's get out of here."

"Yeah," she replied and cleared her throat. "Now."

* * *

"I need to feel you."

Desta could hear the urgency in his voice. She felt it in the moment they were in the elevator alone and he pushed her against the wall of the car. His lips were on hers again, and she couldn't think about anything else but falling into the kiss. She'd been trying to reconcile this madness in her mind since last night. How was it that they'd gone from friends and coworkers to insatiable lovers in such a short span of time?

The answer was his hand slipping beneath the band of her pajama pants, going farther, past her panties, until she could feel his fingers pressing against her mound.

"Just gotta touch you." His words came on pants for air that they were both taking between the heated kisses.

Desire surged through her like a raging storm, making her feel as if her heart might leap right out of her chest it beat so fast. She was limp against the wall, held up by the arm he'd wrapped securely around her waist. When his fingers inched lower, parting her, sliding easily inside her, she gasped. Her head fell against the wall, back arched, eyes closed.

"Maurice." His name was a whisper. A breath she had to breathe in the midst of this tumultuous wanting.

Two fingers—she was almost positive that's how many he used—pressed inside her, and she clenched her teeth so hard flashes of light sparked behind her still-closed eyes. He didn't

give her a second to acclimate herself to the feel of him stretching her but instead began pumping his fingers quickly in and out, while his lips fastened over her neck.

Desta held him tightly, her low-cut nails digging into his back through the T-shirt he wore. She lifted one leg and wrapped it around him.

“Hell yeah. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” His words tumbled over her as he thrust faster and deeper now that she’d given him even more access.

Her hips moved now, meeting his thrusts and silently begging him for more. How could this feel so good? It wasn’t his dick penetrating her and yet the feeling was almost as intense as if it were. Her body was taut with anticipation, her nipples so hard she wanted to reach up and rub them herself.

“Need you to come for me. Right now, just please come.”

She’d never been begged to come before. On a few occasions she’d pleaded with her body to simply cooperate so that things would go smoother, but she knew that didn’t count.

Her eyes fluttered open as she panted. “Please don’t stop. Please. Just. Wait.” Pleasure ripped through her so fast and so intensely that it rendered her speechless.

Maurice moaned, holding her even tighter, his fingers slowing inside of her but not stopping.

The elevator, however, did stop on their floor at that moment. A light dinging sound told them the doors were about to open, and Maurice hurriedly pulled his hands from her. She let her leg slide down and was ready to walk out of the car as soon as the doors slid apart. He followed her off, grabbing her by the hand.

“Hurry” was all he said as he continued in the direction of his room.

She stopped, shaking her head when he turned to look at her quizzically.

“My room tonight.” She didn’t say anything else but turned to walk in the opposite direction. He would follow her; she

knew without having to turn around and check.

Her fingers shook a little as she found her key card in the side pocket of her pajama pants and walked into the suite. The door had barely closed before Maurice was grabbing her and pushing her back up against it. He blinked quickly, a look of shock or maybe apology on his face.

“It’s okay, I can take a little roughness.” In fact, she liked it. Even though she hadn’t before and had sworn she’d never allow it from another man again. But this was different. There was no anger, no need to scare or intimidate. No, this, with Maurice, was pure desire. It was mutual, and rising so fast and potent between the two of them she reveled in the rush of anticipation.

A hungry groan was how she’d best describe the sound coming from him just before he ordered, “Off!” Meaning her pajamas, she surmised by the way he pushed the top of the pajama set off her shoulders. She remembered the belt and tore at that until it was loose. That piece of silk hit the floor in seconds, leaving her breasts bare to him.

He palmed one in each hand before bending down to take a nipple into his mouth. Then, moving quickly, he switched sides. All the while, she squirmed with the desire building inside her once again. This time she made the next move, reaching for his shirt and forcing him to stand up and release his hold on her breasts so she could remove it. His top fell to the floor, as well. He pushed her pajama bottoms and panties down past her hips, and she stepped out of her slippers, then eased each leg out.

Mimicking his motions, she pushed his shorts and boxer briefs down while he hastily stepped out of the leather slipper moccasins he wore. Now they were both naked, her body quaking beneath his in-depth perusal.

“I never imagined you naked,” he said while shaking his head. “I don’t know why. I should’ve known.” His hands were moving up and down her torso now. “I just should’ve known.”

Then he was pushing her against the door again, hiking up one of her legs to latch around the back of his waist. She

pulled him to her, running her nails along his back as she waited with anticipation for him to sink deep. “Wait. Condom.”

The litany of curses that tumbled from his mouth at that moment would’ve seared any other person’s eardrums. If that other person hadn’t grown up in a house of crude brothers who thought swearing was a measure of their manhood.

Maurice backed away as if he’d been scorched, and she frowned when he dragged his hands down his face.

“Condoms are in my wallet.” If this were a cartoon, now would be the moment when question marks popped into the air. “My wallet is in my room.” That statement settled around them like a lead weight.

“Oh.” That didn’t seem like much of a response, but then—“Oh! Wait! I have some!” She shot across the room, not giving a damn what body parts jiggled as a result, and went straight to the duffel bag she’d brought with her in addition to her suitcase. Digging inside she found the box and stood holding it in the air like it was the prize of the decade. “I have some!”

He did a fist pump in the air and then paused. “You always carry a whole box of condoms when you travel?”

“No.” She frowned and tossed the box at him. “Only when I’m coming to meet the guy who talked about making me come numerous times a day.”

Maurice didn’t respond. He was too busy ripping the box open, dropping the torn pieces of cardboard onto the floor. When he plucked one packet out of the box, the box met the floor as well. A moment later so did the condom wrapper as he hurriedly sheathed himself.

He reached for her and lifted her off her feet. With a gasp she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

“This is gonna be fast again,” he growled and then walked them to the nearest wall—which was actually the bathroom door—and pushed inside her.

“Yes!” The one word was loud and echoed throughout the room. “That’s what I want, hard and fast and so good. So damn good.”

Mutual gasps echoed through the air at their joining as she took him in deep. There were no more words, no more quips from either of them as only the sound of their bodies pounding into each other resonated throughout the room. He was driving into her so hard and so fast that her back slammed into the door, her mind whirling around the delicious thrill of this heated taking.

“Sorry,” he groaned and thrust inside her once more before his body stilled. “So. Sorry.” Two more of those stiff thrust-and-stop movements and she was shattering around him again.

Her eyes closed and her head tilted back, her fingers still digging into his skin as her muscles contracted around his pulsating dick.

“Dammit.” Moaning, he dropped his forehead to rest at her neck. His body jerked with his release moments after hers, as she continued to tremble.

“Tomorrow,” he whispered after a few minutes of them both trying to catch their breath.

“Tomorrow?” That was a weird word to use after sex.

He nodded. “Yeah. We’re gonna take it slow, tomorrow.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAURICE GRABBED TWO towels from the closet by the bathroom door and dropped them on the end of the soaker tub.

She was still standing in the doorway, a sheet from the bed wrapped around her body, and her arms folded over her chest to hold it in place. When he'd suggested they take a bath, the languid after-sex sensations that had been filtering through her body switched places with a clammy feeling that now pricked her skin. This was different and yet it was the same, even her body could get that message right.

Maurice was not Gordon, and this wasn't a real relationship—that much was clear in her mind. But taking a bath was intimate, and intimacy blurred the lines. She needed those lines, the barriers she'd carefully built around her in the years since the worst breakup she'd ever experienced.

Unfortunately, she didn't see a way of wriggling out of this that didn't make it seem as if she were overreacting or, worse, weak.

"I'm not gonna bite. It's just a bath. After all the falling we did on the slopes this afternoon and the other, um, very vigorous activity we just enjoyed, I figure a nice soak will do us both good."

"You sound like an old man," she quipped and then figured, the hell with it, and stepped completely into the bathroom.

"Nah, not old, baby." He stepped into the tub and lowered his body into the water. "Just a ski coach whose student couldn't grasp the idea that the skis remain on the ground, not her pretty little ass."

Rolling her eyes at his smug smirk and keeping a lid on how irritated she'd been earlier today on the slopes, she dropped the sheet and walked over to the tub. Definitely large enough for the two of them. It was positioned close to a window that, when open, boasted another glorious view of the mountain scenery. She'd closed the electronic blinds when she'd been in

here getting dressed earlier. Going to the opposite side of the tub, she hurriedly stepped in and sat down. Not because she was modest about him seeing her body—they'd obviously been there and done that. She just didn't want to chicken out at the last minute.

“You aren't the best at everything,” she said once she was settled in the pleasingly hot water. Maurice was a tall guy, six feet two and a half inches, to be exact. She knew how tall each of the Gold siblings were because she'd seen their measurements on a spreadsheet during a show where the family were all wearing specially designed outfits. He sat with his legs spread open and pressed against the edge of the tub. She sat with her legs between his, her cheery yellow painted toenails almost hiding his crotch area. A bubble bath might have been a better idea.

“Never said I was. But the things I am good at I like to boast about. Just in case there's someone who needs to know.” His juvenile grin relaxed her. It also made her look around for something to throw at him. “Besides, I can't help it that you're a perfectionist and it annoys the hell out of you when you can't get something right on the first try.”

Only because in the past whenever she messed up, she paid for it dearly. “I'm not arguing with you about this.” She leaned back, letting her neck rest on the lip of the tub. If she closed her eyes and focused solely on the water, she wouldn't have to stare at him and his naked body, a stark reminder that they'd totally changed the dynamic of their friendship.

A few moments passed in silence. Moments when she knew he was watching her, and she told herself not to feel uncomfortable about that.

“Why'd you sign up for Dear Lover?”

Hadn't they already talked about this? No, not really. She sighed and lifted her head so she could look at him. “It was something to do. I saw the ad one night when I was doing online research. It was just there on the side of some website I was on, and the name caught my eye, so I clicked on it.”

“You weren’t looking for an online hookup?” He was staring at her skeptically, his eyes narrowing. Damn, when did he start looking so sexy?

From his tawny skin tone to the thick dark eyebrows that were so naturally neat that she couldn’t help but envy them to the low-cut goatee and his perfectly tapered fade haircut, he was quite possibly the handsomest man she’d ever seen. And that was just from the neck up.

“Were you?” She shot the question back at him because her mouth was going dry.

“No.” He rubbed a finger over his chin and then shrugged. “Like I told you before, I wanted to try something different.”

“But how did you know about the site?”

Again, his eyes narrowed, but this time it was as if he were contemplating what he should say.

“I searched dating sites online. And before you ask again, no, I wasn’t looking for a date. I just wanted someone to talk to.”

“Wait,” she said sitting up so that water sloshed with her movement. “Were you lonely? *The Maurice Gold* was lonely.”

Now he shook his head. “Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t act like the rest of the world. You know me. You knew me before this.” Moving a hand back and forth between them signaled what *this* was. “You know I’m not the way they paint me out to be.”

He was right; she did know. Which was why she sat back again and decided to give him a better answer. “It can be hard to figure out who you can trust enough to just be yourself with. I think that happens to everyone who reaches a certain level of success, because with it comes notoriety and expectations. You don’t always know where you fit into the mix.”

“That’s exactly it.” He nodded. “Major’s married, and Riley’s in a committed relationship. And here I am, still dating the flavor of the month, according to *FYI Update*.”

The tabloid he spoke of was one of the worst, and their reporters had a fixation with the Gold family. A few months ago they'd run a malicious piece claiming Major's wife, Nina, had left her father to die in a nursing home so she could come to New York and marry into money. In truth, Nina's father lived in a facility Major had found nearby and would be spending Christmas with the Golds in a few weeks.

"If it's any consolation, RJ's still happily single." Bringing up the oldest Gold sibling was sure to invoke a bit of levity into a conversation that had taken a weirdly serious tone.

Maurice's soft smile only made him sexier. "RJ's going to die single. Do you know, one day he said he'd rather lie naked over hot coals than even consider getting seriously involved with another woman again."

She chuckled. "Yeah, I think I was there when he said it."

"Right." He was nodding and grinning now, too. "Come to think of it, you've been around a lot."

"I work for your family's company." As if that needed to be said.

"No. I mean, you've been around in my personal life a lot. Linking up with you on that app has to be some kind of strange coincidence."

"Fate. That's what my grandmother would call it. She doesn't believe in coincidences." And Desta no longer believed in things happening for a reason. If that were the case, what the hell was the point in all she'd gone through with Gordon?

"You miss her. I can hear it in your voice. I heard it this morning when you mentioned her, too. But you don't want to go back to Chicago and visit her. That's odd."

Not liking where this conversation was going, Desta reached over and snagged one of the loofah sponges from a gold-wire basket on the back edge of the tub. "Not as odd as the two of us sitting in this tub."

He shrugged again. "I don't know, I'm kinda liking the two of us sitting here together."

“You would,” she said with a roll of her eyes. The water was growing warm, so she grabbed the bottle of liquid soap and was about to pour it on the sponge, when he moved.

“Let me do that for you.” He didn’t wait for a response but took the bottle and loofah from her hands.

Scooting closer and causing water to slosh over the rim of the tub, he chuckled. When the sponge was lathered up, he reached for her.

“This is crazy. You know that, don’t you?” It was crazy good, she could admit that to herself the moment he touched the sponge to her chest.

“Yeah, I know. And no, I don’t know how it’s going to turn out, but right now I’m gonna wash you up and put you to bed. Is that okay with you?” Asking a question while he dragged a soapy loofah ever so seductively over her nipples was a trap if ever she’d heard of one.

Still, all Desta could do was smile. “Yeah, that’s okay with me.”

* * *

“This is gonna feel so good.” There wasn’t much that didn’t feel good where Des was concerned.

“I take it you’re used to getting massages.” She was sitting on the bench beside him, her body covered by the plush white robe they’d each been handed five minutes after walking into the spa area. It was midafternoon on Sunday, and they’d signed up for the Relax and Relate session.

There were two other couples sitting in chairs across the room. The guy carrying a clipboard who seemed to be in charge of the schedule had just left the waiting area with another couple.

“I used to have a monthly in-home appointment.” Maurice paused a moment recalling Hannah, the masseuse who’d turned into a date that went disastrously wrong. The memory made him frown. “But it’s been a while.”

“Did she quit or did you fire her for the new flavor of the month?” Normally, coming from Des, that question would’ve been presented as a joking jab or just a flippant remark, but the way her face paled before she glanced away implied she was feeling something different today.

Which made sense, because he wasn’t feeling his normal nonchalance, either. Instead, he was sure his cheeks had heated at her words in what he could only describe as embarrassment. Did Des really see him as a callous philanderer? It appeared that way, considering her question. The thought made him feel like crap. That wasn’t the impression he wanted her to have, and he wasn’t ready to explore why the hell it mattered at all.

“Oh hey, y’all!” Looking toward the door he saw Kelli walk in, Travis right behind her. “You guys sure do sneak out of a room fast. We couldn’t find you at all last night after the movie. We wanted to have nightcaps and discuss the show. But I guess you two had better things to do.” She giggled.

Yes, giggled like a teenager before looking over her shoulder at Travis, who did not giggle. Thankfully. The guy did, however, look at Maurice with a nod and partial smile for a greeting.

“So you decided to do the Relax and Relate, too.” Des’s voice was less than enthusiastic, and he knew why.

After sleeping in this morning—his idea, not hers—they’d decided to once again go off script of the retreat’s agenda. They’d opted for breakfast in her room and had then headed out to visit some of the souvenir shops in the quaint little ski town. Considering all the other Dear Lover workshops and exercises, they’d assumed the couples’ massage session might be the least attended one. In any case, it didn’t seem like something the gregarious Kelli and Travis would consider doing.

“Of course,” Kelli said, happily taking a seat on Des’s other side. That made Des move over, closer to him.

He didn’t mind, but since Travis was also going to try and squeeze onto the bench with them, Maurice scooted down until one side of him was at the edge and the other was pressed

against Des. Her hair smelled like vanilla ice cream. It was the oil he'd watched her squeeze out of a small bottle and rub into the center of her palms before smoothing over her thick bouncy curls this morning.

"We're trying to take advantage of everything we can this weekend and figured we'd squeeze in the massage, too. This morning's sessions were a little physical." Kelli nudged Travis.

He looked slightly uncomfortable at the implied meaning behind her words, but he smiled and nodded again.

"What did you two do this morning? I didn't see you in any of the sessions. What are you doing after this one? We're going to the Sweet Talk Tasting because I hear they're having a dessert bar, in addition to the open bar." This time Des was the one Kelli nudged. "Nothing like free drinks, right?"

"You plan on drinking at three in the afternoon?" Des asked her.

Kelli waved a hand, shaking her head so the ponytail she wore bopped back and forth. "Girl, please. It's five o'clock somewhere, and I did say free."

Clipboard Guy came from the back and called the next names on his list. Maurice hoped they were next because Des wasn't going to last very long sitting with Kelli. He'd had a hard time trying to figure out why Des had given the woman her number in the first place. Kelli was the exact opposite of the type of person Des would normally tolerate.

"We're probably not going to attend that session," Des told Kelli. "We were thinking about maybe doing a little more sightseeing and then going out to dinner."

That was partially their plan. What they'd actually talked about was dinner in the room and renting some movies to watch if there was nothing on TV.

"Oh wow, you two are just like a real couple already. Aren't they, Travis? Don't they look like they've been in love for years and years?" Kelli was looking from Des to him and back again.

“Years and years,” Travis echoed, now with a big grin on his face.

“Dear Lovers 1687 and 1288.” Clipboard Guy was back.

Maurice jumped up, and Des followed right behind him. “That’s us!”

“Follow me.” They did as the organizer said without looking back at Kelli and Travis and chuckled when they finally walked into the private room.

“That’s your friend,” he said to Des when she stood next to one of the massage tables shaking her head.

“Oh no, as soon as I leave here tomorrow, I’m blocking her number. We’re definitely not going to be friends. Nessa is the most cheerful person I know, and she’s not even as bad as Kelli. That’s probably why I can deal with her, at least during work hours.”

He nodded at the mention of her assistant and wondered if that was the only friend Desta had. While it had never occurred to him before, he realized now that he’d never seen Des with anyone outside the office.

“You can both climb up onto the table,” Clipboard Guy said. “The object of this exercise is to encourage open communication between couples. You’ll be receiving a Swedish massage and can talk freely about anything you wish, just so long as you’re sharing, becoming closer.”

Maurice climbed onto the table after making sure Des got up all right on her own. Not that she wasn’t capable, but after yesterday on the slopes he had a new protective instinct where she was concerned.

“You’re encouraged to let the relaxing of your muscles coax you into opening up with your fellow Lover. Releasing all anxieties or inhibitions to freely be together. You may remove your robes.” Clipboard Guy finished softly and moved closer to the table where Des was, immediately pulling a sheet up over her body so that she could remove the robe and still retain privacy.

Maurice was already lying facedown with his robe off, and he'd pulled his own sheet up to his waist by the time the man turned to him.

“Well, all right, then. The masseuses will be in momentarily. And don't fret, they've also signed NDAs with Dear Lover. Nothing you say in here during the session will ever be repeated.”

“Does this feel like forced communication to you?” she asked as soon as they were alone in the room.

He turned his head so they were staring at each other. “Definitely.”

They both laughed. The beds were about three feet apart, and the only light in the room came from two lanterns on a table in the corner. The golden haze was weirdly comforting, and the faint sound of a waterfall added to the ambience.

She reached back and grabbed her hair, pulling it away from her face. “What do you want to talk about? Because we might get in trouble if we don't cooperate.”

He knew exactly what he wanted to talk about; it had come to him the second she asked the question. His response had to wait because their masseuses entered. It always took him a few minutes to become totally relaxed in a massage, so he didn't speak until the woman's oiled hands were moving expertly over his shoulders and toward the center of his back where most of his tension seemed to rest.

“Why don't you go home for vacations?” he asked when he thought she'd had enough time to relax as well.

There was no immediate response. In fact, she took so long he wasn't sure she was going to answer him at all.

“I don't want my family to see me.” Her voice was quiet, and he slowly opened his eyes to glance over at her.

She had her eyes closed while the second woman worked her shoulders.

“You don't want them to see how successful you've become?” He was almost positive that wasn't what she meant,

primarily because it didn't make any sense, and Des was one of the most sensible women he knew.

"No. I don't want them to see how badly I messed up." She opened her eyes then. "I didn't listen to my mom's and my grandma's advice."

"They told you not to come to New York because you might get lost in the big city," he joked.

"Chicago's a big city, too," she replied with a half smile. "They told me not to move to Denver with Gordon, my boyfriend from college."

Those last three words had his gut clenching, more from his own personal memories than any sort of unwanted jealousy. Then there was the guarded look on her face, as if she were wondering if she could continue while knowing it was too late to stop.

"Tell me about it," he said in as even a tone as he could manage. Never, ever had he had a conversation with one of his dates about their former lovers or boyfriends.

"His name was, or is, Gordon Thomas." She closed her eyes again, but this time he suspected it was because her masseuse was applying kneading strokes up and down her back, a move he knew could be particularly relaxing. "He was the star of the basketball team in college, leading our school to the NCAA Championship two years in a row. I tutored him during our sophomore year."

That last sentence explained a lot because he definitely hadn't pictured Des as the star athlete's girl. He knew from reviewing her CV when she'd been hired at the company that she'd graduated summa cum laude in undergrad and went on to be in the top five percent of the class to achieve her master's degree. She was a brilliant marketing strategist.

"To make a long story very short, we fell in love and when he was drafted to the NBA, I went with him to Denver. My mother and my grandmother weren't thrilled with the idea of me packing up to go follow some man's dream, but in the end, they respected my decision. He played professionally for one

season before sustaining a foot fracture that benched him.” She’d had her arms down by her sides, but now she moved them to fold under her head before resting her cheek on them. During the movement, he’d seen that her hands were shaking.

His arms were by his sides, and his hands fisted. If she was getting ready to say what he was thinking she was going to say...he wanted to find Gordon Thomas and punch the bastard in his face.

“I gave him six years, four of which were hell on earth. Exactly when he’d gone from the attentive, loving guy with the great smile to the controlling maniac who’d taken his injury and subsequent fall from the NBA out on me in all the worst ways possible, I have no idea.” She took a deep inhale and released it so slowly he could see her entire body vibrating with the action.

It took every ounce of control he possessed to keep still on that table. Des wouldn’t want pity, and that’s exactly how she’d take it if he went to her now and tried to console her in any way.

“Anyway, when I finally decided to leave him, I didn’t go home to Chicago, and when my mother asked what happened between him and me...” She paused.

“You didn’t tell her because you didn’t want her to know you’d been in an abusive relationship.” Finishing the sentence for her was one of the hardest things he’d ever had to do. Saying those words in relation to Des had a ball of hot fury resting in the pit of his stomach.

“I didn’t want my family to know that I’d been weak and foolish. I especially didn’t want either or all of my brothers hopping on the first plane to Denver and catching a murder charge for putting Gordon out of his misery.”

Which was exactly what Maurice was contemplating at this moment.

He’d almost forgotten they were getting massages when the woman lifted his left leg, bending it at the knee slowly and pulling it back. Clearly there’d be no jumping off the table

now, so he extended his arm between the tables to her. Waiting a beat for her to release her arm and accept his hand was like holding his breath just over the two and a half minutes Major had clocked him doing when they were kids.

“You’re not weak or foolish.” He hoped those words were enough. There was more he could say but not while he was feeling such insurmountable rage.

“I know I’m not. At least, now I do. But my mother was a very no-nonsense woman, which is why she remained a single mom. My father was an alcoholic, and she took no pity on him or the disease he suffered when she still had six kids to take care of. My grandmother had been a single parent as well, passing on that same strong Black-woman pride and resilience to my mother and supposedly to me. There’s no way I could tell them all that Gordon had done to me.”

He understood. No, dammit, he didn’t. He’d been furious when he’d read the vicious lies Riley’s ex had given the media when they broke up years ago, and now that rage seemed to triple as he thought of Gordon physically harming Des.

“You’re a brilliant woman, Des. That’s indisputable. And he was trash.”

She smiled. It was quick and put the light back into her eyes, so he smiled, too.

“You’re right, he is trash.” Then she moaned. “And this feels sooo good.”

He agreed. As if both masseuses knew from the heavy topic of conversation they’d been having that it was time to step up the massage, it soon became too much for either of them to speak. But he didn’t release her hand, and she didn’t do anything to change that.

CHAPTER NINE

HAVING DINNER IN her room wasn't running. It didn't mean that she was in the midst of a situation she couldn't control. But Kelli's recognition of Maurice and them being seen together so much this weekend had her feeling cautious. When she'd suggested a quiet dinner tonight after last night's interlude, Maurice hadn't pushed the point.

"You're really not afraid of anything the media says, are you?"

Maurice sat across from her at the small table by the window. He'd changed out of the gray polo shirt he'd been wearing earlier and now wore a black T-shirt that fit tightly against his muscled chest. She hadn't expected him to go to his room before dinner and show up at her door with his duffel bag in one hand. His only comment before walking around her and into the room had been that it was pointless to keep going back and forth. He was right.

After taking another swig from the bottled beer he'd ordered, he lowered it to the table and sat back in the chair. "I can't control the media."

"But you can control what you feed them." Why this was bothering her this weekend, when it hadn't in the years that she'd known him, Desta had no clue. Maybe because now she was attached to him in more than a work capacity. Just like she'd been attached to Gordon. Once the media had learned of his injury they'd dogged him unmercifully and when his anger about being cut from the team began to spill over into brawls at the club and rumored affairs, she'd been looped right into the headlines.

Maurice shrugged, lifted his hands up in exasperation and then let them fall to his lap. "What am I feeding them? Do I call or email them every day with a story?"

His mood had been on the edge of agitation since the massage that had been meant to relax them. Part of that was

probably her fault since she'd dropped the details of her messy past on him, but she hadn't felt like dodging his questions about her family again. That was the first time she'd told anyone the truth about what had happened in Denver.

"No. But every time you step out of your house, you know they're watching you. Every date you pick up and take to a restaurant, a Broadway show, a Knicks game and then to a hotel, you know they're right there taking notes. So basically, you're giving them all this ammunition to write stories about you."

"And what would you suggest I do? Not go on dates? Stay locked up in my house?" He sucked in a breath, holding his lips together tightly before letting it out on a whoosh. "I learned a long time ago that I can't control everything, that sometimes things just happen—and I adjusted my life accordingly. That's the extent of any changing I plan to do for the sake of anyone else." Dragging a hand down his face, he pushed back from the table and stood.

This wasn't how she'd meant for their dinner to go. It was the end of their fun, sex-filled weekend, after all. But something had changed, and if she wasn't oblivious to that fact, she knew Maurice wasn't, either.

"You're not the only one with painful stuff in your past."

His comment shocked her because she'd thought by walking away he was finished with the conversation. Desta turned in her seat and looked at him.

"I guess college must have been the time to mess up, because that's when I invited my girlfriend, India, out for a ride in my new car. She'd just graduated from high school, and I was home for the weekend. I figured it was a great time for us to celebrate." He stood near the window with his back to her.

"What happened when you went for a ride?" A sense of dread had already begun to lodge itself in the center of her chest, but she waited.

“Long story very short,” he repeated her earlier words with a smirk, “I was speeding, and so was the eighteen-wheeler that came around that bend and smacked into us. I got twenty stitches for a gash in my leg, had a mild concussion and some bruised ribs. India was paralyzed from the waist down.”

She gasped. “I didn’t know.” Sorrow for what he and India had gone through slammed into her.

He turned slowly, slipping his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “How could you? It was before the press took an interest in me.” The partial smile and choked chuckle couldn’t hide how shaken he now appeared. “The bottom line is I could’ve not been speeding. I could’ve taken India to dinner and brought her right back home. The accident didn’t have to happen, and I own my part in it. It took me a long time to shake the guilt, but I own it now. And I swore I’d never put anyone else I cared about in danger that way again. So I don’t get involved past a few dates. I keep it casual, no emotions, no recriminations. If the media wants to continually use my choice as their headline, then that’s their business. I only deal with the things I can control.”

Hadn’t she decided to do the same after walking away from Gordon? Only have dealings with other men on terms she could control, only focusing on doing her job well because she could order those steps as well.

“We make a perfect couple.” The words were out before she considered them, which was unlike her. “I just mean that we both carry these loads from our pasts like backpacks.”

“Not tonight...” he said softly. “Can we just drop those backpacks and leave them by the door for tonight?” As if in answer to his question, his cell phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket, glanced down at the screen before turning it off and tossing it onto the chair by the window. “Just for tonight, can we leave everything else behind?”

Desta stood and crossed the room, closing the space between them. Reaching up, she touched her palm to his cheek and warmed all over when he turned slightly to press his lips

against her skin. “We can have tonight,” she whispered because that’s what they both needed.

Just one more night to be in each other’s arms in the way they wanted to, on the terms they’d created. It was what they both deserved.

Stepping closer, she tilted her head until her lips touched his. Nothing else, just the touch of her lips to his as she stared at him and he stared at her for what felt like endless moments. When he touched her hair, pushed his fingers through the curls until he was clutching the back of her head and holding her to him, she whimpered. Not a favored sound coming from her, but a moment of relief, of letting go and giving in to this moment and all that she was feeling in it.

“We were just coworkers,” she whispered as his other arm slipped around her waist. “Just friends.”

“Not anymore,” he answered before thrusting his tongue into her mouth and dragging her into the swirl of emotions that had started to churn in the pit of her stomach.

This kiss felt different from the others. His voice was different, the feel of his hands on her was...different. She laced her arms around his neck, tilting her head to deepen the kiss. He was holding her so tightly, and she was leaning into every part of his embrace. Her legs would most assuredly give out if she didn’t lean on him, but she’d never leaned on anyone before. She’d decided not to give that part of herself again.

Before that thought could take hold, he was easing his mouth away from hers, moving until he had her scooped up in his arms. She almost protested, almost told him he was being unnecessarily silly. But she remained silent, and he calmly walked her over to the couch and gently put her down like she was the most precious thing in the world. She knew they were entering new territory.

“I’m gonna take your clothes off, slowly,” he said staring down at her.

She didn’t know how to respond to that, and as it turned out, no response was necessary. He sat on the edge of the couch

beside her, his fingers going to the buttons of the pale pink blouse she wore. Easing up from the couch so he could completely remove it seemed more sensual than anything she'd ever experienced before. It was the touch of his fingers on her skin—light, there and then gone, purposeful, not intentionally sexy but still erotic as hell. The rest of her clothes went in the same fashion as he moved methodically but not rushed, until she was lying naked on the couch, every part of her body—and she feared a part of her soul—open for his perusal.

She watched him undress in the same way, with gradual and deliberate movements he had to know were torturing her at this very moment. “What are you doing?” He was naked now and had taken a condom from his wallet and set it on the back of the couch.

“Adoring you.” She wasn't expecting that reply nor the punch of something much more powerful than lust.

The kisses came next and not just the fevered and sensual ones to her lips that she'd come to enjoy. No, his mouth was apparently on the same mission that he was, moving with unimaginable tenderness over every part of her body. Down the line of her neck to her shoulders, over her breasts where his breath whispered above each puckered nipple. Down, down, until she was breathless with arousal as his tongue moved masterfully over her tender flesh, dipping inside her just as her release exploded from her.

Then he was over her, no words, no preamble, just the motion of his very toned body, his actions paused for the seconds it took him to tear into that condom package and smooth that latex over his thick length.

“In me. Now.” Her lips trembled as she spoke. “Now. Please.”

He obliged, lifting her legs and propping them onto his shoulders before angling his dick and driving into her with one smooth stroke.

* * *

She took his breath away.

Everything about her, from the way she looked chewing her food at dinner tonight to the pensive gaze she'd had when she questioned him about his intentions toward the media and finally to that look of pure delight that washed over her face, flooding her cheeks with color the second he pushed into her.

Now her eyes fluttered, naturally long lashes fanning out with each blink. The amber color of her eyes went darker with every stroke in and out of her. She was so responsive, her muscles tightening around his dick, pulling him in deeper and holding him there. Tongue snaking out the swipe over her lips before that sexy little whimper escaped from her throat.

He'd been right about what he'd said a little while ago. There weren't just friends or coworkers anymore. That ship had sailed, leaving behind this delicious connection that was draining him of every ounce of his resolve.

"I won't stop wanting you tomorrow." The words tumbled free even as he turned his face to kiss her ankle, circled his hips and pumped deep into her again. "Or the next day or, dammit, even the next." It was the simple truth.

Coming here to this resort in search of the woman who'd intrigued him from the first moment she'd responded to his email had been the beginning of the end.

"I know." Her hands were moving over her breasts, gripping them, squeezing until her taut nipples poked between her fingers. "I won't stop, either."

He didn't want any of this to stop and so he kept moving, continued with the circular movement of his hips and buried himself and his emotions even further into her. His hands tightened on her ankles as he spread her legs apart. In and out of her, that's all he could think about. The warmth, the wetness, the weightless feeling of falling. He accepted it all, holding onto it for dear life because for the first time in a really long time, that's exactly what it felt like. After all this time, he was living when he was with her, alive, breathing, feeling, and only with her.

She came again with a gasp before arching up off the couch, arms falling to her sides. It was a surreal sight to see pleasure take over her body so completely and to know that pleasure was wrapped up in him in what they'd shared not only this weekend but over the last three months of emails, and even before that in the years they'd been just friends and coworkers. That thought, coupled with the clench of her walls around his dick, pulled his release from him in a powerful surge that had him cursing and yelling her name.

It was a long time before either of them returned to normal breathing. "This couch is terribly uncomfortable."

He agreed and eased out of her. "Sorry." Standing now, he grabbed his underwear and was going to head to the bathroom when her words stopped him.

"Don't be." She sat up and let her legs fall to the floor before standing. "There's no need for either of us to be sorry about anything that's happened. In our past or right now."

He really needed to get to the bathroom before he made a mess on this terribly uncomfortable couch, but he moved to her once more, leaning in to kiss her. "You're absolutely right."

On his way to the bathroom, he glanced at the chair where he'd tossed his phone and cursed. He'd turned it off when he didn't want to be bothered while they were together, but he never kept it off for long. For family and business purposes, he knew the value of being reachable. Grabbing it, he turned it on while he was walking but stopped upon seeing the multiple text messages and email notifications on the screen. He swiped the first one titled *Urgent*.

"Is something wrong?" He looked up from the phone to see she'd already collected her clothes from around the couch and was holding them in a bunch in front of her. Probably waiting to get into the bathroom as well.

"Uh, no, not wrong. Just surprising." When he noticed the guarded look on her face, he added, "Riley's getting married."

CHAPTER TEN

One Week Later
Gold Mansion

“DON’T BE NERVOUS.”

“Are you saying that for my benefit or yours?” Desta asked when they stood on the top brick step a few feet away from the double white doors of the Gold Mansion.

Maurice smirked. “Don’t be funny.”

Lifting a hand, she gave him a salute. “Yes, sir.” She hadn’t given the words or the action any thought, but the moment she saw concern flicker in his gaze, she chuckled. Nervously. Damn him. “I’ve been to Sunday dinner at your parents’ house before, Maurice. It’s silly to feel any type of way about being here now.”

She’d been to lots of functions at this house. In the beginning, turning down invitations had seemed rude and quite possibly career suicide, so she’d attended one Sunday dinner and then a cocktail party, a cookout, Ron Gold’s sixtieth birthday party and eventually more Sunday dinners and poker nights. Before long, she’d begun to feel as comfortable around the Golds as if she were an adopted part of their family. So much so she’d recently chanced turning down some invites, claiming she had other plans. Unfortunately, that wasn’t going to work tonight.

“We hadn’t slept together all the times you’d been here before.” He was right about that.

And they had been sleeping together—a lot—in the last week since returning to Manhattan. In fact, Maurice had stayed at her place three out of the past five nights. Her queen-size bed was no match for the king-size they’d slept in at the resort, but she’d kind of liked the feeling of him that close throughout the night. Exactly when they’d decided to continue

whatever it was they were doing, she wasn't sure. Neither of them had said anything definitive, nor had they stopped.

“Well, there's no sticker on my forehead saying we slept together, so if nobody asks that particular question, they'll never know.” He arched a brow, and she sighed. “You're not helping.”

“It's going to be fine. We're not hiding anything.” When she shivered from the cold, he rubbed his gloved hands up and down her arms.

He wore a black leather bomber jacket over a navy-blue sweater and turtleneck combo. His pants were dark gray, cuffed at the ankle, black leather loafers on his feet.

What he'd just said made perfect sense; they hadn't been trying to hide anything. The nervousness she'd had about them being seen together at the Finger Lakes hadn't surfaced here because being together here could easily be connected to their jobs. From the time they'd returned after driving back from the Finger Lakes late Monday afternoon, until early Friday evening, they'd walked in and out of the office together more than they ever had before. They hadn't offered any explanation, nor had anybody asked. But they'd never arrived at his parents' house together. This affair they were having could backfire, and losing her job would be the consequence of acting on emotion and not common sense.

“You're worried about what they'll say, too, aren't you?” she asked.

He frowned and, as if to quiet her discomfort, leaned forward to drop a light kiss on her lips. “It's freezing out here. We're going in.”

But before he could turn his attention to the door, it opened. “I thought I saw your car.” Major stood just inside the foyer, a wide grin on his face. “Hey, Desta.”

Her heart was beating frantically, but she managed to move like she was as unbothered as Maurice was, stepping toward his twin brother and walking inside. “Hey, Major. Nice jacket.”

He wore a deep burgundy velvet sports coat over a black shirt and pants. Commenting on his outfit was what Desta would've done on any other occasion. Of all the Gold brothers, Major was the least interested in switching up his black, blue, gray and brown color palette, so whenever she saw him in other colors—which had come more and more after he'd met Nina—she was sure to notice.

“Thanks. Nina picked it out. She said it's festive.”

Desta had walked past him and was removing her coat. When she turned back to face Major, he was brushing a hand down the front of the jacket.

“It's not Christmas yet,” Maurice added when he came into the house.

Major closed the door and laughed. “You two teaming up on me? Wow, that's cute.”

Was it? Were they? Had Maurice told Major about them? In addition to being twins by birth, these two were thick as thieves in life. Maurice was insistent about not keeping their affair a secret, and she was on board with that decision, but had he hurried home to tell his twin about their weekend rendezvous?

Kemp, the Golds' long-time butler, came into the foyer at that moment. “I'll take your coats.” The very slim, older gentleman with smooth almond-toned skin appeared as fit as any of them, even though she knew from Maurice he was in his late seventies. He'd been with the Golds for decades.

“Hi, Kemp.” She gave him her coat, but her attention was still attuned to Major, who was staring at her with an odd look on his very handsome face. Even though they were fraternal twins, there was a close resemblance between him and Maurice.

Since Major no longer worked at RGF full-time—he and Nina ran their own company, the Gold Service, on the outskirts of the city—she hadn't seen him this week.

Yet, the grin he was giving Desta right now was definitely a knowing one.

After Kemp took Maurice's jacket, she leaned over and whispered in Maurice's ear. "Does Major know about us?"

Maurice's response was a glare in Major's direction and dismissive shake of his head. "No. But come on inside, we might as well get this over with."

Yes, they might as well—as in this was going to be a very long evening.

"Oh, this is gonna be good." She heard Major's comment from behind them and refused to look back.

The Gold twins could be quite an annoying pair when they were together. Normally, she wasn't bothered by their inside jokes or suspicious looks during their monthly poker games, but tonight she wasn't in the mood for the tag-team effect. It was going to take all her practiced calm to get through the always-scrutinizing gaze of Marva Gold.

"There you are, Desta. I was wondering when you were going to get here. I told Riley you're never late." Speaking of the matriarch of the Gold family, Marva came toward her the moment Desta stepped into the family room.

Wearing winter-white trousers, a shimmering rose-colored blouse and nude pumps, the woman was the fashion industry's Black royalty. Impeccably dressed, pleasantly composed and timelessly beautiful. She had the same tawny complexion as Maurice, and her thick silver-streaked hair hung in big neat curls to her shoulders while diamond earrings glittered at her ears.

"No, ma'am, I would never be late for your Sunday dinner. I had a few reports to finish up before I left, and there was some traffic." Her words died as Marva embraced her.

The woman always smelled fantastic, no matter the fragrance she chose. Marva was such a contrast from Desta's mother, who usually smelled like the hospital where she still worked twelve-to fourteen-hour shifts four days a week.

"I want you to stop working so hard. You're too young and too pretty to have your face buried in papers and that computer all the time."

Not used to extra attention from Marva, Desta quickly glanced around the room. She could see RJ—or Ronald Jr.—standing near the classic grand piano, a drink already in hand. Ron Gold Sr., RJ’s older and wiser look-alike, sat astutely on one of the two ivory-colored couches in the room, while Nina and Riley were already parked in the taupe side chairs. Riley’s fiancé, Chaz, stood near her, holding a drink that looked to be the same as RJ’s. So, the gang was definitely all here.

“Are you all right, Desta?” Marva asked, the hint of concern in her tone so noticeable, just about everyone in the room paused their conversation to look in her direction.

Major came around at that moment, talking as he made his way across the room. “She’s fine, Mom. Stop hovering. After driving all the way out here with Maurice, she’s probably just a little windblown. You know how he likes to speed through traffic.”

If she were closer she would’ve punched him in the arm. Not only was she certain Major knew something about her and Maurice—even if Maurice hadn’t confirmed it—but his remark about Maurice speeding immediately touched a nerve with her now that she knew about the car accident with India. She pasted on a smile. “I’m good, Mrs. Gold, really. Just trying to get back in the swing of things after being away last weekend.”

“Oh,” Riley said, her tone a bit too perky, “you were out of town last weekend, too? When I finally heard from Maurice last Sunday night, he said he was away on a ski trip. Where’d you go?”

Wishing for a hole to open up in the floor right now and swallow her was probably too much to ask for, but Desta wasn’t looking to Maurice for help. Brushing the strands of hair she’d flat-ironed a couple hours earlier behind her ears, she squared her shoulders and looked Riley directly in the eye. “You know, it was the strangest thing. I had this brochure for a luxury ski resort in the Finger Lakes and realized it was getting closer to the end of the year and I hadn’t gone anywhere yet. With our busiest season coming up, I figured a long weekend was my best bet.”

“So, you went skiing, too?” Riley asked.

Maurice moved from where he’d been standing right behind her, leaning in to kiss his mother on the cheek. “We ran into each other at the ski resort. Seems the place is extremely popular this time of year.” He spoke as casually as if he’d just said, “Hey, Ma, what’s for dinner?” She clearly wasn’t as aloof as Maurice about all this.

“Dinner is served,” Kemp announced before anyone else could speak.

The questioning gazes coming from everyone in the room spoke volumes, but Desta followed Maurice’s lead and walked toward the dining room.

Tonight’s catered meal was an array of fresh salads, lemon pepper chicken, curry rice, sautéed string beans and buttered rolls that smelled heavenly. Hungry and determined to get through this evening, Desta took her seat between the twins where—coincidentally—she always sat. Ron said the grace and bowls began passing between everyone. Same as usual. Inwardly, she was relieved.

Five minutes after they began eating, RJ dropped his fork to his plate with a clatter. “When I called and texted you repeatedly on Sunday to tell you about Riley’s engagement, you were at a ski resort...with Desta?”

Maurice and Desta both looked at RJ, but neither had a chance to answer before Riley asked her, “Wait, you knew before I called you on Monday?” The accusatory tone in Riley’s voice made Desta feel like crap.

It had been almost six Monday evening when Riley had called, brimming with excitement about her engagement. Desta had thought it best to act surprised, especially when Riley quickly continued to discuss business and announcing the engagement.

“I didn’t want to take any of the joy that was so apparent in your voice away.” Desta’s throat was suddenly dry, so she lifted her glass of wine and took a gulp. “By the way, my team and I have already laid out all the preliminary steps to

marketing the engagement in the same way we did Nina and Major's."

"Yeah, Desta filled me in on the details of that new strategy," Maurice said. "You sure you want to invite the media into your personal life in that way? I mean, inviting them to the engagement party and into the wedding planning?" Maurice was so calm, and Desta gritted her teeth in frustration. Another gulp from her glass should help her feel more in control.

Riley blinked, probably confused by the shift in conversation. Or possibly annoyed. But she continued with a nod. "Chaz and I discussed it, and it makes the most sense. The media was going to be poking around trying to find out all that they could, anyway. So, why not give them a certain amount of access during the planning? The wedding itself will be private."

Chaz added, "We don't even want the location known. They can have all the pictures of dress fittings, cake tastings and parties that they want, but it stops there."

"Have you decided on the venue yet?" Nina asked.

"No, actually we're considering a destination wedding," Riley said cheerfully.

For the next twenty minutes the conversation was all about the wedding. Who would and shouldn't be invited, who Marva wanted to cater it, what Ron and the other guys didn't want to wear. It all seemed so normal and at the same time so foreign. Desta hadn't thought about getting married in a very long time, even though her grandmother mentioned it almost every time they spoke. Why, Desta still couldn't figure out. It wasn't as if Edna Bell's marriage had been successful. To the contrary, she'd caught her husband and their neighbor in the backseat of his truck at a drive-in movie.

Her mother hadn't fared much better, but Sheryl Henner had appeared genuinely happy on that long-ago spring weekend when Desta and Gordon had gone to Chicago to announce their engagement. As the conversation around her continued, Desta's skin began to tingle at the memories it evoked. She'd

started to plan her own wedding. A venue, bridesmaids, groomsmen and a date had been selected. Her dress search had been taking longer than expected, and she'd been online searching designers the night she got the call that Gordon had been hurt.

"You okay?" She startled at Maurice's voice. He'd leaned over to whisper in her ear, and when she turned to him, he grasped her hands.

She hadn't even realized she'd dropped her hands to her lap, linking her fingers together and holding tight. His hand covered hers now, warm and familiar.

"Yeah," she sighed. "I'm good. Just taking in all the details." He didn't believe her. She could tell by the set of his jaw, the gentle squeeze of his hand and the way his eyes had grown dark with concern. "I'm good." If she said it more than once, maybe he'd believe her. Maybe she'd believe it herself.

"You know what might be a cool idea?" Major's voice seemed a bit louder than it had been, and Desta forced a smile as she turned in his direction. "What if Riley and Chaz get married at the same ski resort Desta and Maurice stayed at?"

Desta held her breath because in that moment she was totally sure Major knew, and he was having a good time teasing.

"That's probably not a good idea," Nina immediately replied.

"It was a really nice resort," Maurice said. He still had a hand over hers beneath the table, and when she pulled one away to reach for her glass again, he laced his fingers with hers. "With a terrific view. Once Des and I realized we were both staying there, we spent the weekend together exploring the little ski town and enjoying the slopes. There's a wonderful restaurant at the resort, but the place within walking distance has more of a selection. Des and I thought their food was great."

It was the way he'd said *Des and I* followed by the curious stares that had her picking up the glass and emptying it of

every drop of wine. She was tempted to reach for the bottle but stopped when Maurice lifted their entwined hands from beneath the table, resting them atop the white linen tablecloth for all to see.

“Well,” Marva said after a brief silence, “it seems things just keep changing around here.” She used a napkin to dab at the corners of her mouth before sending Desta a luminous smile.

“I knew it! You owe me ten dollars,” Major said to Nina, who smiled at Desta before shaking her head at her husband.

Ron had been holding a butter knife in one hand, a roll in the other. Now he pointed the knife from Maurice to Desta. “You two? Spent the weekend together, as in *to-gether*?”

Desta sat motionless, waiting for him to say she was fired. She kept her shoulders squared and her eyes on Ron because if that was how this was going to play out, so be it. What was done was done, and she wouldn’t undo it now if she could. The wine was definitely beginning to kick in.

“Yes, we’re together.” She was glad Maurice didn’t mimic the way his father had said the word.

“It just happened last weekend,” she added. It shouldn’t matter, but she knew for certain there wasn’t enough wine in this house that would make her comfortable explaining this had really started via an online-dating site.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Nina added. “You two make a great-looking couple.”

“Well, at least now the sexual tension that was always brewing between you two can finally be resolved.” RJ looked bored and immediately changed the subject to who would be traveling to each of next year’s Fashion Weeks.

* * *

“Sexual tension brewing between us? Where’d that come from?” Maurice had been holding that question in, waiting for the moment he could get his brother alone to ask him about it.

They weren't technically alone now, but since the women had all gathered in the living room to discuss wedding plans, the men had retreated to his father's study where there was a full-scale bar on one side of the room and a large-screen TV on the other. There was a massive cherrywood desk in the center of the room, and across the space were more leather chairs, high-backed and deep-cushioned. They circled a glass table loaded with classic magazines that noted high points in RGF's history as leaders in the industry.

RJ shook his head and propped his ankle up on his knee. "It came from all those meetings I had to sit through with you two barely being able to stop snipping at each other."

"We did not snip at each other during work meetings," Maurice insisted.

"Yeah, you did. And during poker games," Major added. "I just thought you'd have the good sense to get over whatever thing you had for her, considering how close she is to the family. But when I saw the two of you leaving her office the other day, I knew something was going on."

"Wait, what exactly did you see?" He'd been to Des's office so many times throughout the past week. Not all the visits were work-related, but he'd been pretty sure they kept it G-rated, at least when the door was open. No matter how hard he'd tried to stay away from her, the effort had proven futile, especially since being with her helped to take his mind off the non-work-related stress he'd been experiencing this week.

"Yeah, but you don't usually leave with your arm around that person's waist, so low it could've been considered on her butt." Major grinned with that announcement as RJ rolled his eyes.

"See, that's the part I'm stuck on," Ron said to his son. "Not your hand inappropriately on her in the office. But the fact that she's been around us for all these years like she was a blood relative. And you, in your position at RGF, work particularly close to her. I'd have thought you would steer clear, as well."

"Love chooses," Chaz interjected. "Not business dealings, family relations or any of the other social trappings we tend to

get into.”

“Whoa. Wait a minute. Hold up.” Maurice was shaking his head vehemently. “Nobody said anything about love.” He certainly hadn’t. And he wasn’t thinking it, either.

“You’ve never brought a woman home to meet the family before.” The corners of Major’s mouth wavered as he fought off another grin.

“I said we spent the weekend together. And okay, we were together a lot this week. But that’s it, we’re just having fun.” He shook his head because he didn’t like the sound of that, like what they were doing was trite and inconsequential. It wasn’t. “I mean, we’re just dating. Casually.” As opposed to seriously—something he’d sworn never to do again.

“Well, I’m not saying you can fall in love in that span of time. You know I don’t give a damn about love, anyway. All I’m saying is it’s about time. Now we can move on to more pressing matters.” The director of sales at RGF, RJ was always about business. As driven as every member of the Gold family was, the company was all RJ had, especially after the infamous proposal so long ago.

Chaz got up and went to the bar to refresh his drink. Riley had been bringing him to as many family dinners as he would attend over the past year since they’d been together, so he was already used to moving around the house. “A relationship can easily jump from sexual desire to love in the blink of an eye. Especially if that connection was already there in the form of a friendship. Or even an opposing relationship.”

He was referring to the feud that had since been squashed between the Golds and Tobias King, the owner of King Designs and Chaz’s uncle. Despite the companies being in direct competition—and Ron’s and Tobias’s refusal to speak to each other for more than thirty years—Riley and Chaz had started a secret affair that had grown into a relationship and now an engagement.

“No!” Major said and pointed a finger toward Chaz. “We are not going to mention you and my sister in the same conversation as sexual desire.”

RJ closed his eyes and shook his head. “Yeah, I agree with that one.”

“I definitely agree with that one,” Ron said. “We’ve accepted you into our men’s club, Chaz, but there’s a line that can’t be crossed, and it starts with my baby girl.”

Chaz chuckled. “All right, I get that. But for real, I’m speaking from experience here. It’s not about time or duration, it’s always about the depth of the feelings.”

RJ made a gagging sound. “Spoken like a guy newly strung out by a woman. That’s why you bought that ring and are about to have a billion-dollar wedding on your tab.”

“It’s cool,” Chaz said coming back to sit down with drink in hand. “I can afford it.” In addition to working with his uncle at King Designs, Chaz was also owned a multi-billion-dollar company.

“No, young man, paying for my daughter’s wedding is my job. Always has been and always will be.” Ron was a proud man. He could be hard at times, was tough as nails when it came to his company but was all about love and his family underneath.

Maurice was uncomfortable with this entire conversation. In fact, this was turning out to be one of the weirdest family dinners he’d ever attended. As much as he’d tried to assure Des that everything was going to be fine, he hadn’t been totally sure of that himself. He’d been the one to make the obvious clear to his family, but that was because they were asking so many questions. He should’ve anticipated that, but he honestly hadn’t thought he and Des had been giving off any signs. It’d only been a week since they’d started a physical relationship—how could so many people notice that so soon? And why did any of this even matter? His temples throbbed.

“All right,” Maurice began, “I don’t know what we’re doing. There, I said it.” Admitting the problem was the first step to recovery, or so people said. But what was he trying to recover from? He liked being with Des. He liked it a lot. There shouldn’t be any problems with that, nor should there be any

other questions or concerns. And yet, he was full of questions and concerns right now.

“That’s usually how it starts,” Ron said with a nod before sticking his cigar between his teeth.

“He’s right,” Major added. “I started out thinking Nina and I were just working for the company, and the next thing I knew I was buying her a ring.”

“Your mother had me going to concerts where men sang nothing but love songs. She smelled like fresh-picked flowers and, man, I couldn’t get that scent out of my mind to save my life.” Hearing his father talk about falling in love with his mother made Maurice respect his parents and their marriage even more. Once upon a time, when he was very young and mostly stupid, he’d thought that was what his adult life would look like.

It was a good thing he’d grown up.

Almost getting India killed in that accident had been a sobering and maturing experience. While hooking up with Des online was something akin to fate, if he were prone to believe in that type of thing. All he knew for certain was that this thing with Des was unexpected and tempting as hell. What if it continued? What if they ended up in love or engaged, or... could he even allow himself to think like that?

No, he couldn’t.

No matter how good it felt to be with Des, he knew he couldn’t risk it. After all he’d been through, he couldn’t get entangled like that again.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. Standing, he pulled it out and read the message. He felt a boiling rage at seeing the message for the tenth time this week. It must’ve showed on his face, because Major noticed.

“What is it? One of your exes trying to come back for seconds?” his twin asked.

“Now, that’s gonna be his biggest issue. Turning down all those women he still had waiting in line for their chance with him.” At that, RJ laughed.

“Maurice, man, you all right?” Chaz asked.

“Is there a problem at the office, son?” Ron chimed in when it seemed like something serious was going on.

Maurice heard all their questions, but it sounded like they were traveling through a tunnel. His ears had begun to ring, and he clenched his teeth as he read each word again. Now was not the time for this. His sister was getting married, his brother had just celebrated his first holiday with his new wife, and his mother was elated about him and Des.

Des.

How would she react if she found out about this?

When his father called his name again, Maurice looked around the room, noting all the people he was closest to in life. If there was nobody else in the world he could trust with this, he could trust these men, and he knew that unequivocally.

“I’m being blackmailed,” he said solemnly. “Twenty million dollars or they go to the press with a paternity scandal that could derail the entire plan we’re putting in place for Riley’s wedding.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ON TUESDAY, DESTA sat at her desk looking at the digital ads her team had composed using pictures of Riley and Chaz. She had until four this afternoon to decide on one to send to *Infinity* magazine in time for their special holiday edition. She'd reviewed all five designs at least twenty times in the last hour.

"Knock, knock." Not moving her hands from the keyboard, she glanced up at the open door to her office to see Nina walking in. "Hey. You ready?"

Dressed in black jeans, knee-high boots and a leather jacket, Nina looked more like a classy biker than the co-owner of a multi-million-dollar tech company.

"Hi. Ready for what?"

With a sigh and half smile, Nina came to the edge of Desta's desk. "Lunch. We scheduled a lunch date Sunday before you left the house. Today's the day, and I'm just about on time." Nina checked her watch. "With five minutes to spare."

"Oh crap!" She'd totally forgotten about that, even though she'd seen it on her calendar this morning. The slipup was slightly embarrassing, and she shook her head. "I'll be ready in five minutes. Just let me shut this down and grab my purse."

Nina laughed. "Girl, no rush. I'm free for the rest of the afternoon so I can get some of my Christmas shopping done."

Groaning, Desta shook her head and minimized the open tabs on her screen before locking her computer. "Don't even talk about it. I haven't done any shopping yet. Well, that's not totally true. I got a few seasons of *Murder, She Wrote* for my grandmother. She loves that show."

When Desta stood, Nina was shaking her head. "I was going to ask what that was."

"Oh yeah, a television show from the eighties and nineties. I grew up watching it with her." Desta grabbed her coat from

the chair she'd tossed it on this morning, and they headed to the elevator.

Twenty minutes later they were seated in a Manhattan restaurant with two mountain-size steak salads in front of them.

“So, we've talked about work, Christmas shopping or lack thereof and the wedding.” Nina used a napkin to wipe her hands before taking a drink from the glass of soda she'd ordered. “Now, let's talk about you and Maurice.”

Desta knew she couldn't have been lucky enough to get through this entire outing without Nina broaching that subject. There'd been a few questions while she, Nina, Marva and Riley had sat in the living room after Sunday dinner, but mostly that conversation had revolved around Riley and the details of her destination wedding. Now, she figured Nina thought it was time for her and Maurice to be in the spotlight.

Throughout her life, Desta had never had a lot of girlfriends, so this should've seemed odd. She and Riley were coworkers and friendly, but like Desta—at least before earlier this year—Riley hadn't been the girlfriend type, either. Nina, on the other hand, had sisters and so was more inclined to close female friendships. Besides that, Nina wasn't a blood member of the Gold family, so Desta felt a certain kinship to her. And to be honest, she needed to talk. So much had been going through her mind in the days since that dinner, having a sounding board would be a blessing.

“We're seeing each other,” she said as if that had to be announced.

Nina laughed. “I think I got that much. How long have you been seeing each other? Major really did guess that you two were involved, but I swear I never saw it coming. Was it really just the run-in at the ski resort?”

“No.” It was the truth, and she needed to say it out loud. “I'm starting to think it's been brewing for a long time. As I look back over my time here at the company, I've been around Maurice the most, and whenever I was at the Gold mansion we were always together. I guess I never paid much attention to

that at first.” She hadn’t been able to get it out of her mind in the past few days. “The ski resort was a shock to both of us, but then things just sort of clicked.” With the help of three months’ worth of very graphic emails, but still, Desta knew there was much more to it than that. There was no way she would’ve done the things she did with Maurice in the Finger Lakes with a guy she’d just met face-to-face for the first time. Sex, sure, but being so open in those sessions, sharing those private parts of herself and then giving herself the way she had each night... No, that was all because she’d known Maurice for so long.

“Like a real-life friends-to-lovers story. Oh, this is so sweet. You know, you usually only see this stuff in movies.” Nina had started poking her fork into her salad again.

“I guess.” Desta wasn’t hungry now. She was conflicted or confused, not sure which.

Nina paused before taking another bite. “You don’t sound so sure. Are you in love with him?”

That word rendered her still. Her mind was freezing as it wrapped around the sound of those four letters together. She couldn’t be in love with Maurice. It was too soon, and Desta had never been a believer in insta-love. But hadn’t she just recalled how close they’d been for the last five years? What if her true feelings for him were just manifesting? “I wasn’t looking to fall in love.” Then, what had she been looking for? To reclaim control of her life? Well, she’d done that by being successful in her job. What else was there to claim? Her heart, she thought with a gasp. All this time, harboring the anger and resentment toward Gordon was like letting him keep her heart.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I don’t think Maurice was, either.” Nina chewed the forkful of salad she’d put into her mouth and then shrugged. “Neither were Major and I. And from the stories she’s told me, I’m positive love was the last thing on Riley’s mind when she and Chaz hooked up.”

“What are you saying?” Desta played with her food while Nina took another drink from her glass.

“I’m saying that nobody ever plans love. That’s not how it works.”

No plan meant no control. Desta had experience with love, and she hadn’t liked it. How was this situation any different?

An hour later she was back in her office, trying her best to stop thinking about the conversation with Nina and all its implications. The new Mrs. Gold was quite smug in her assessment of Desta and Maurice’s relationship, and if she weren’t so close to the truth—at least where Desta was concerned—Desta might’ve had the nerve to be pissed off at Nina’s presumptiveness.

It was close to four, and she still hadn’t made a decision on the mock-ups, so Desta was extra irritated when her cell phone rang.

Taking a deep breath before answering, she pushed the button and said, “Hey, Ma.”

“Hey, Dessie.” Once upon a time this had been the only nickname Desta answered to. Now, her heart warmed each time Maurice called her Des. “Didn’t get a chance to talk to you over the Thanksgiving weekend so I thought I’d call now. Mama said she talked to you and that you’d had dinner with your boss’s family.”

“Yeah. I worked right up until it was time for their annual dinner, so I just joined them, and then I went away for a weekend.” She knew that was a mistake as soon as she’d said it.

“You went away, but you didn’t come home?”

She didn’t know how to answer that.

Sheryl moved on just fine without a response. “I want you to come home for Christmas. No excuses, Dessie. It’s been too long.”

What was it, Slap Desta in the Face with All Her Truths Day? It *was* time for her to go home. Truthfully, she’d been foolish to stay away for so long. Her family loved her; they wouldn’t have judged her. But she’d judged and blamed herself for something she knew hadn’t been her fault.

“Yeah, Ma. I’ll come home for Christmas.” Saying the words lifted a weight from her she hadn’t known she’d been carrying. Desta wondered about those other words she and Nina had discussed. She considered the possibility that she might be falling in love with a guy who’d been her friend for the last five years. More importantly, she wondered how that guy was feeling about her.

* * *

“Thought you’d still be here.” She hadn’t heard his voice all day. Not since they’d stepped off the elevators this morning and walked in different directions to their offices.

Glancing down at her watch, she sighed. Once she’d finally decided on the picture and sent it off, she’d jumped right into the next project to be completed. She sat back in her chair and looked at him. “Lost track of time.”

“I see, back to your usual pace.” Pushing away from the doorframe where he’d been leaning, Maurice closed the door behind him and made his way into her office.

She recalled watching him dress in the heather-gray suit, light blue shirt and tie this morning. When he’d gone to his place and grabbed a change of clothes yesterday, she’d had no idea. But after last night’s dinner meeting with Parker Donovan to discuss the exclusive articles on Riley and Chaz to be printed in *Infinity* over the next six months, they’d gone directly to her apartment. And straight to bed like an old married couple, because they’d both been working nonstop since seven that morning. Now he walked his sexy self across the floor of her office as if he totally belonged here.

“You’ve got nerve. You’re still here at seven thirty at night, too,” she pointed out.

Normally, when he came to her office, he’d sit in one of the guest chairs positioned across from her desk. Tonight, he came around the side and perched a hip on the corner by the sleek speakers she’d purchased last year during a Black Friday sale. “We’re both workaholics. There’s a remedy for that, though.”

She rested her hands on the arms of the chair, settling into the comfortable ease they'd had around each other for years. "Yeah? What's the remedy?"

"I'd say another one of those massages we had at the resort. But for tonight, a hot bath. Order-in dinner. Football game on TV, or in your case one of those sappy holiday movies you bribed me into watching the other night." Even taking a deliberate jab at her, he was charming. From the even tone of his voice to the sexy grin that punctuated his words and the casual way he lounged his toned body on her desk as if that were the only place in her office for him to sit, his allure was incomparable.

"I've got a better suggestion," she said, and he raised a brow in question. "I'll pick the takeout, and you pick what we watch on TV."

His nod of agreement came quickly. "Your place or mine?"

Maurice had a very nice and spacious apartment in the NoHo neighborhood of Manhattan. She'd been there twice—once to drop off files from work and another time to pick up a painting she'd won from him in one of their monthly poker games. He hadn't invited her there since they'd returned from the Finger Lakes, and she hadn't minded. Her place was her comfort zone. It offered her complete control over when the date would end. Or at least, that was how it'd worked on the past few dates she'd had.

"Don't overthink this. It's not that big a deal," he said, tapping the lines she knew appeared on her forehead when she was deep in thought. "We'll go to your place. Did you drive today?"

"No." She rarely ever drove her car to work. The subway was easier than fighting traffic.

"Then, gather your things, and we'll get ready to leave." While the Golds all used the company car service for transportation to and from work, Maurice always drove his car. He called it an extension of his daily routine and noted he'd be lost without Sweet Sally—the name he'd given his black Porsche 718 Boxster.

She didn't move when he eased off the edge of her desk and started walking toward the door. She couldn't—the sense that something was crawling just beneath her skin had started again, and she clenched her teeth in an effort to ease the discomfort.

“You okay?” She heard him ask through the haze of emotion swirling around her.

“No.” A lie would've been easier, and then she could've pushed past the occurrence and told herself she was making progress. She had been, at least during the past week. Between work and spending her evenings with Maurice, she hadn't thought about her past, until today during her conversation with Nina about falling in love.

“Hey.” He was back, circling around her desk this time, grabbing the back of her chair and turning it so she faced him when he knelt in front of her. “What's going on? You were drifting away like this on and off at the resort. Is it about your ex?” A muscle twitched in his jaw.

There was concern in his tone and sincerity in his eyes. She knew those eyes, had known them for a long time. They'd never made her feel the way she was feeling right now, though. The change was a bit disconcerting.

“It's this. Us. What we've been doing since the trip.” There, she'd said it. The thing that was stopping her from fully grasping all that Nina had talked about earlier. He was right: it had been right there between them from the moment she'd spotted him at the resort.

“I don't understand.”

He wouldn't, and not because he didn't have the capacity to. That would be leaning on that reputation he'd carefully constructed. She knew him better than that, especially now after he'd told her about the accident with his first girlfriend.

She flattened her palms on her thighs, rubbing them back and forth. He gently placed his hands on top of hers, ceasing their movement and turning them over so that he could lace his fingers through hers. “This is me, Des. Not Dear Lover, not

the guy in the tabloids, it's just me. Tell me what's on your mind. Please."

"I'm not comfortable taking commands from men. Being controlled to suit their needs, directed to do only the things that please them. It just doesn't work for me." A flush went through her body, and she shivered against it. "It probably sounds silly to you, but it's a very real thing for me."

"What do you need me to do, or stop doing?" That was it? All it took was for her to tell him what not to do. Why hadn't that worked before?

"It's so natural for you to lead and control. It's the way you were brought up, and you don't use it in an aggressive way. I've always known that about you." So why couldn't she stop this foolishness? "You think I'm controlling, bossy, and that might be true on some level, but it's because I've had to be. Like Riley, I have very domineering brothers, so I always had to stand my ground." She'd also had Gordon, but she didn't want to bring that up again. Telling him about that very dark time in her life had been a huge step for her, but what she'd told him hadn't been everything.

It didn't matter whether she said it or not, the sorrowful look in his eyes said he was thinking it, anyway.

"I won't ever try to make you do anything you don't want to do. You know that. If you don't want to have dinner tonight, that's fine. Just tell me what you want."

She shook her head and cleared her throat. "You're right. I know that." Giving his hands a light squeeze, she took a deep breath and then stood.

He stood with her, still holding tight to her hands. "I'm always here to listen whenever you need to talk. That doesn't change when or if we decide it's time for this new aspect of our relationship to end."

He didn't wait for her to respond, just released her hands and headed for the door again. She thought he might walk through it and not look back, but he simply waited for her to decide what would happen next.

She wasn't running. Never again—that's what she'd told herself when she'd finally come through the darkness after the breakup. But Maurice wasn't Gordon, not in looks, demeanor or any other aspect that mattered. It took her a few minutes to save and close her documents, shut down her computer and grab her briefcase and purse.

"I'm starving. There's a great restaurant near my house. They have the best spicy seafood pasta. It's like a British-Jamaican cuisine, but I know you like spicy food." She talked while she walked to the door to meet him. "I have the menu saved on my phone."

He waited until she passed him before replying, "You know me too well. I'll even trust you to pick something off the menu for me."

They chatted amiably about the menu and the Netflix movie his assistant suggested he watch called *The Holiday Calendar*. By the time she was seat-belted in the passenger seat of his sporty little convertible, her skin irritation had subsided, and that comfort that she normally had with Maurice had returned. They debated whether radio stations should play Christmas music all day so early in the season, and for the first time today, she relaxed and let her mind clear of all worries and doubts. She let herself just be with the man who was steadily becoming an even bigger part of her life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DESTA MOANED LONG and deep. Her head fell back against the pillows on her couch, where she'd stretched out, her feet in Maurice's lap. He repeated the motion that elicited such a pleasing sound from her, pressing his thumb into the ball of her foot.

The movie had gone off about twenty minutes ago, and they were still stuffed from the delicious dinner. The jerk chicken wings with a side of sweet plantains she'd ordered for him was fantastic, and he'd had her text him the name and number of the restaurant for future use. The local news was on now, and Maurice wasn't ready to leave.

"You like that?"

"Oh. My. Goodness." She enunciated every word, her eyes still closed as he continued to massage her foot. "Don't ask silly questions."

He grinned, satisfied with the relaxed and appreciative tone of her voice. She'd rebounded from the episode in her office, talking through dinner and watching the movie as if nothing had transpired between them. As if she hadn't compared him in some way to her ex. Giving himself accolades for taking it so well, he'd continued throughout the evening as if the struggle he'd seen so clearly etched over her face earlier didn't still bother him. That situation managed to override the blackmail issue he was still dealing with, so maybe he should take it as a partial win.

"Next," he said as he moved from one foot to the other.

"Do you charge for this service? 'Cause, damn, I'm sure you'd make a killin'." She lifted her head and stared at him from beneath hooded eyes. *Lovely*. That's the word he'd use to describe how she looked at this moment.

When they'd walked into her apartment, the first thing she'd done was take off the heels she'd worn to work. They'd both removed their coats and walked farther into her home. It

wasn't a big place, but the building had been expertly renovated. And she'd made it a comfortable space, filled with things that represented who she was.

Paintings on the wall, including the one of the jazz musicians she'd won from him last year, statues of angels and a multitude of peach-and cream-colored pillows on her couch. *Cultured, feminine, complex*—all words he'd use to describe Des.

“Seriously, though, if you're doing this to all the women you sleep with, I'm confused as to why they take your end dates so easily.” Running her hands through her hair, he couldn't help but continue to stare at her. Even when he wanted to ease her feet from his lap, get his coat and go home.

The problem was, he couldn't blame her for that comment or others like it that she'd made. A few months ago if she'd said something like that to him, he'd have given some blithe response and gone on his merry way. But something had begun to change in him in these past weeks, even before he'd gone to the ski resort and found out he'd been sending erotic emails to his coworker.

Looking away from her to stare at the TV screen, he continued rubbing her feet. “Never gave any of them a massage like this.” He'd never even thought about doing it.

“Oh.” Did she have to sound so shocked?

“Ask your next question.”

“How do you know I have another question?” she asked.

“Because I know you, Des. I think we keep going round and round with that fact. Let's face it right here and now. I knew you pretty well before I ever sent a Dear Lover email.”

“I don't argue that fact. I know you as well as I know my brothers—probably better since I haven't seen them in a while.” Clearing her throat, she continued. “Okay, I was going to ask why you never did this with them. Actually, no. I *want* to ask you why you were with so many of them. Did you really think it was necessary to keep your guilt at bay, or was

part of it ego?” She was more interested in this part of his life than he would’ve preferred.

He shook his head. “None of those women meant enough to me to stroke my ego. And for the record, I didn’t sleep with every one of them.” He held up a hand because he knew he hadn’t fully answered her question. “Every woman I’ve ever gone out with intrigued me on some level. Some more than others, and those were the ones I slept with. Dating, socializing, *partying* as some would say, it was a good distraction. If I was out with them, I wasn’t sitting in my apartment thinking about what happened to India.”

“Do you still love her?”

He hadn’t expected that question, but after a few moments, he could understand why it seemed that way. “On the contrary—it’s because I’ve been so afraid of ever feeling that emotion again that I’ve used all those women. I know they like to judge me in the tabloids, and that’s fine. Why shouldn’t they? Even though I’m not doing anything wrong now, I did before.”

“So destroying your personal reputation, or rather building a false one, is your penance for an accident that you didn’t cause.” She sighed. “That’s just as ridiculous as me blaming myself for what Gordon did to me.”

He clenched his jaw upon hearing the man’s name, and because her words were partially correct. He didn’t mind the press bashing him, mainly because if his name was in circulation, so was the name of the company. And since the worst they could do was call him a playboy, it didn’t negatively affect RGF. But he didn’t see the life he’d chosen to live as doing penance. He saw it as taking responsibility in a way he’d failed to do so long ago. “I think we’ve already discussed how well-matched that makes us.” Were they really well-matched? If he were on the outside looking in, he wouldn’t have thought so. And now he wondered how that thought made him feel.

“Well, we’re certainly two of a kind.”

He looked away when seconds ticked by with neither of them speaking.

“Maurice?”

He looked over at her again. “Yeah?”

“What comes after the foot rub?”

* * *

Maurice carried her into the bedroom. Another first for him. He'd responded to her question by turning off the TV and lifting her into his arms. When she looped her arms around his neck and stared at him with a look hot enough to sear his eyeballs, he'd tried like hell not to run in.

Tonight, unlike too many of their nights together, he wanted to do things differently. Probably because things between them had begun to feel different, even more than their last night at the ski resort. As if this thing between them was taking steps, moving from one level of involvement to another. If so, what step were they on now?

It was dark in the room when they entered so when he set her down, she went to the nightstand beside her bed and switched on the lamp. Now that the space was cast in a golden glow, he walked to her, cupping her face in his hands before leaning in to kiss her.

His lips touched her tonight as if for the first time. The warm connection came as an easy prelude, and he dropped another lingering kiss on her closed mouth. Her hands came up to clasp his biceps, and he took the kiss a step further. This time he swiped his tongue over her lips. She sucked in a breath, the action parting her mouth so he could slip his tongue inside. They played a game with their tongues, delving deep, pulling back, needing the connection again, so going in once more.

Eventually his hands moved, fingers slipping through the silken strands of her hair. She slid her hands down from his biceps to his waist, gripping his shirt between her fingers as she tilted her head and opened her mouth wider. His body had grown warm all over. Not an instant flash of heat but a slow fever of satisfaction that began at his feet and rose slowly with a tender sweetness.

When they both needed to take a breath, he pulled back, still gradually, letting his hands fall from her hair and down to the buttons on the pale gray blouse she wore. Undoing one button at a time, he watched the inhale and exhale of her breathing, the rise and fall of her chest. When he was done, he pulled the blouse from where it was tucked into her skirt and pushed it off her shoulders, his gaze rested on the blushing mounds of her cleavage.

Wait.

The word was a gentle whisper in his mind. An instruction he was determined to follow. Letting the blouse fall to the floor, he reached around her, pulling her body flush to his. She gasped and wrapped her arms around his waist while he worked the zipper on the back of her skirt down. When he stepped away from her to push it over her hips, she pulled the tail of his shirt up and undid the button and zipper on his pants. The feel of her fingers lightly grazing over his already-stiff erection was pure bliss, and he momentarily closed his eyes to enjoy it.

She left his pants undone and went to his shirt, unbuttoning it before pushing it down off his shoulders. The undershirt he wore went next, and her hands immediately went to his pectoral muscles to squeeze.

With her hands on his chest, she pushed him down to the bed where he removed his shoes and socks. As he angled up toward her, she nudged his shoulders again until he was lying back on the bed. She removed his pants and boxer briefs, rubbing her hands along his legs and brushing a kiss over his hard dick. She eased away from him then, going to find his wallet where she retrieved two condom packets that she tossed onto the bed before straddling him.

“Okay, you can have a bit of control, Ms. Des.”

She smiled, a slow lifting of lips, a glimpse at straight white teeth and that light he loved to see rising in her eyes. “I like the sound of that.”

Yeah, he was sure she did. Des was definitely a woman who liked control—he’d known that from the first day he’d met

her. Tonight he'd learned that she needed the control to keep from believing she'd lose herself if she didn't have it.

Coming partially off the bed, he reached around her back and undid the black bra she wore. All that was left was a slip of lace that was supposed to be her panties—but was more like the bane of his existence at the moment. She reached for a condom packet then and eased off him while tearing it open.

He knew what was coming next, and still his mind exploded with pleasure as soon as she wrapped a hand around his dick. Expecting her to glide the latex down over his length, he almost passed out when she moved quickly, covering his tip with her mouth instead.

“Shit!” She had a perfect mouth. There was nothing else he could say about it, and no other words were coming out, anyway. Only the moans and groans that coincided with just how good it felt when her tongue swiped over his slit, then slid down his length like she was enjoying a favorite lollipop.

“You gotta stop that,” he murmured when it felt like his eyes were going to get stuck as they rolled to the top of his head. “Please, Des. You gotta stop.”

She pulled her mouth from him with a plopping sound that had him groaning one more time. “Payback’s gonna be a bi—” The word was cut off as she came forward and kissed his mouth.

This may have been the hottest kiss he'd ever experienced, with full open mouths, twisting tongues, and her hand still wrapped around his dick.

Wait.

There was that damn word again. He was getting pretty tired of it right about now. Flipping her over easily, he ran his hands down her torso when she was on her back. Climbing between her legs, which she eagerly spread wide for him, he dipped his head and took each puckered nipple into his mouth for a quick suck. He freed them with a sound reminiscent of the one she just made when she'd released his dick.

“This is killin’ me,” he grumbled and lifted her legs until her ankles were on his shoulders.

She didn’t have a chance to respond because in the next second he was burying his dick inside her.

* * *

What the hell was she doing?

Was she falling for him? For Maurice?

The way he eased in and out of her so excruciatingly slow, his dick hitting every spot deep inside that made her shiver in delight. The way his hands held her legs tightly against him while staring down at her as if he could see straight through to her soul. The way he whispered her name as he circled his hips and continued to dive in, pull out and then dive in again.

What would happen if he wasn’t falling for her? How would she survive that?

But then he was spreading her legs wide, easing out of her, and then moving ever so slightly so that when he sank in deep again, it was from a different angle, pressing against a different spot that had her biting her bottom lip with the same urgency. Why was he doing this? Why was he stroking her, spending time with her, understanding her, acting like this was more than just sex?

And why did him doing all those things feel so good? He was filling a space in her she’d purposely left empty, making her feel alive again in a way she’d sworn she’d never do.

The urge to give him something he’d never had before filled her with desire. She wanted him to feel what she was feeling. “I want to ride you,” she said. The unexpected push and tug of an unnamed emotion bubbled in her chest. The eerie sense that this was where they both belonged. It was foolish, it had to be. This was exactly what she’d tried not to do again.

“I want you to ride me.” The raspy growl came just as he began moving their bodies once more.

When he was on his back and she over him, she went still and just stared down. His muscled body made her bed seem smaller. The splatter of dark hair over his much lighter skin was sexy as hell, especially as it narrowed into a line that disappeared just before his navel. Her mouth watered again as her gaze rested on his dick, thick and long and waiting for her. With a light touch she ran her fingers over the line of hair at his groin, then moved up his abs until she was circling his nipples. He grabbed her wrist then, bringing her fingers to his mouth where he sucked each one. Her legs trembled, her nipples hardened to painful peaks, and she sighed.

As she angled her hips, positioning herself over his length before he pistoned into her, all she could think of was that this was perfect. This night. This man. This moment. It was absolutely perfect.

Circling her hips, she began moving over him, lifting her hands to cup her heavy breasts.

“Lovely.” He was staring up at her. “That’s what you are, Ms. Des. You’re absolutely lovely.”

That wasn’t a word she heard every day. It wasn’t even a word she thought men used, yet the sound of it coming from him had a light flutter rising and settling in the pit of her stomach.

Leaning forward she flattened her palms on his chest and began to work herself over him, bouncing her ass up and down, until he couldn’t speak any other words except *damn*, *so good* and some other indecipherable things.

Rising, she leveraged herself on her knees this time. Desta continued to stroke him, feeling the fever pitch toward climax mounting with each move. He reached up then and grasped her breasts, kneading them. On a ragged moan he let his hands move down her torso until he was holding her hips, guiding her motions to meet his thrusts.

“Come for me,” he said, his throat hoarse with desire. “Come for me, Des.”

She couldn't speak. She wanted to, but her head had rolled back, her eyes half-closed, and her body was in that place drifting steadily toward release. That was all she could focus on, all she could think of. And when he eased a hand down between her legs, pressing the pad of his finger to her clit and circling it, she screamed. As if all the life drained from her with the blast of pleasure shooting through her body, she screamed his name more times than she could count.

“That’s my baby. Come all over this dick. Yes.” He made another sound of satisfaction, but all she knew was that she felt as if she were falling apart. Had exploded into a billion pieces and was just fracturing from delight.

“C’mon, baby, let me get back there.”

He was moving them again. Her body was so pliant she hardly had to expel any effort to ease off him and remain on her knees. But Maurice was behind her now, grabbing her hips before sinking deep into her once more.

Now his grunts were loud, with each thrust of his hips his dick pressed harder into her, the sound of their bodies meeting a clapping sound that reverberated throughout the room. Then he stopped moving, holding himself planted fully inside of her, his fingers dug into her hips, and he came.

* * *

Desta had no idea how much time had passed since Maurice eased out of her and lowered both their bodies to the bed. She barely recalled what day of the week it was.

“Bathroom,” he groaned the one word but only fell to his stomach on the bed beside her.

She rolled over onto her back, her legs still partially spread, every part of her body on display and not a pinch of modesty. A sound buzzed through the room. It took her a second to realize it was a phone—Maurice’s. He got off the bed where he’d presumably been gathering his strength to get up and go to the bathroom. Grabbing his boxer briefs and jeans in one hand, he used the other to dig his phone out of his pocket.

Her eyes drifted closed after that, her mind still floating in the aftermath of what was arguably the best sex she'd had in her entire life. The sound of Maurice cursing ripped her from that pleasurable thought. With his phone and clothes in hand, he disappeared into the bathroom. For endless moments she simply lay there staring at the door, convincing herself that there was no reason for her to think anything other than he'd gotten a message he didn't like.

That didn't mean the message was from a woman. But he'd never rushed out of a room with his phone before. Not like Gordon had.

She sat up on the bed. Maurice wasn't Gordon. Desta knew that without a doubt, and she refused to let any more thoughts of her past invade the happiness she'd finally found.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DESTA'S HEART DID a quick flutter and start the moment Maurice walked into her office on Wednesday morning. Today's suit was a rich cranberry hue, paired with a caramel turtleneck. The smile he gave her after stepping inside and closing the door made her want to leap out of the chair and wrap her arms around him.

The fact that she was at work, wearing another long pencil skirt—this one a yellow and gray African print—with four-inch heel boots, held her still. “Good morning,” she said as he passed behind her desk to where she sat.

He turned her chair, dropped a hand on her desk, and threaded the other through her hair, pulling her closer to him. “Mornin’,” he whispered just before his lips touched hers.

It never failed, that twist that happened in the pit of her stomach the exact moment his tongue tangled with hers. She reached a hand up to slip behind his neck, holding him to her in the same urgent way that he was holding her. Could this be sustained? This feeling, his scent, his touch, this moment? Could it stay like this forever?

She didn't know, and the not knowing was driving her crazy.

“Missed you last night,” she whispered the moment he eased his mouth away from hers. It was what she'd been thinking all last night after he'd left and she was alone in her bed.

For six years, since the day she'd walked out of that house she'd shared with Gordon, she'd lived alone and slept alone. Dates that turned into sex never turned into overnights at her house or theirs. Until Maurice, who'd slept beside her for the majority of the nights since the ski trip.

“Missed you this morning.” His smile was intoxicating.

With a grin of her own, she tapped a finger to his chin. “Why, because I’ve become you’re personal alarm clock?”

“Hey, you can’t blame a guy for enjoying when a woman like you straddles him at four o’clock in the morning.”

She had been doing that, after vowing she could make up for the workshop on morning sex they’d missed during the Dear Lover weekend. And she’d been enjoying it just as much as he had. So why had he left after getting that message last night?

“Obviously you didn’t enjoy it too much. You opted not to stay last night.” Did that sound too controlling? Clingy? Needy?

Maurice backed away from her then, moving around her desk and taking a seat in one of the guest chairs. She tried not to take that as a bad sign. “Had some things to take care of at home last night, that’s all. No big deal. But I want to cook for you tonight. Are you available?”

“You? Cook?” She laughed. “This I’ve gotta see. Sure, I’m available.”

“Oh, don’t act like you don’t know I’ve got skills in the kitchen. You remember those pizza bagels I brought in for that birthday luncheon for Betty down the hall.”

“I remember they were overcooked and actually tasted a little store-bought.”

He clapped a hand over his heart. “You wound my tender pride. I definitely pulled those out of the box and added extra cheese and oregano for a home-cooked touch.”

“You’re definitely a goofball.” And she was unequivocally falling for him. “Your mother was amazed that I’d ever see past your silliness to be attracted to you.”

His face contorted. “What? You talked to my mother about me?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Briefly on Sunday when you and the guys were closed up in Ron’s study, the women talked to me about you.” That had been the first family girl talk she’d

had in a long time. Since she was a teenager to be exact—that was the last time she, her mother and her grandmother had spent an evening talking, drinking lemonade and eating popcorn.

Maurice waved a hand distractedly. “I don’t want to know what else was said during that little discussion.”

He wasn’t looking at her. He was much more consumed with whatever he was reading on his phone. Just like last night.

“Listen, I gotta run. Just wanted to stop in and see you before I got started with my day.”

Shaking herself free of the questions looming in her mind, she smiled when he stood. “Well, thank you very much for the visit.”

He leaned over the desk now, and she came up out of her chair to meet him halfway. “No thanks necessary,” he whispered before one quick kiss. “I’ll talk to you later.”

She nodded and went in for another kiss, this time tracing her tongue over his lips. “Yeah, I’ll talk to you later.”

With a grin he backed away and headed for the door. Desta watched him leave, resisting the urge to follow him. With an irritated shake of her head, she wondered when she’d decided reclaiming her life meant falling right back into her worst nightmare?

She didn’t like feeling this way. Wanting to be with Maurice all the time, needing to hear his voice, to feel his touch. It was insane. And it was the beginning of a very slippery slope. Like the one she’d slid down when she’d thrown all of herself into her relationship with Gordon, only to be shocked later when he’d wanted to keep her in a cage, doing his bidding and punishing her whenever she rebelled. Just when she’d convinced herself this was different, that Maurice was different, doubt eased back into her mind. But she didn’t have time for this. Whatever was going to happen with Maurice would happen whether she spent the next few minutes

worrying over it or not. There were better things she could do with her time. Work, for instance.

It was after four when Desta was able to tear herself away from her desk long enough to grab herself a bottled water and a bag of trail mix from the lunchroom. An impromptu call with the Donovan brothers had morphed into talks with their sister, who was a TV producer and had expressed interest in a reality show featuring Chaz and Riley. Normally, Desta's job didn't take her into the world of TV, but she was in it now. Back upstairs, she chewed a handful of trail mix and finished her email to RGF's legal department with all the questions she needed answered before going further with the discussions.

Nessa, her assistant, came through on the line. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I know it's late and you don't have anything on your schedule for the rest of the afternoon," Nessa began. Desta was less concerned with the woman's cryptic words and more concerned with why she was whispering through the phone. "But there's a woman here. She says her name is Kelli Boston and that she needs to see you about a personal matter."

Kelli Boston? Did she know someone by that name? Oh wait, yes, she did. "Yes, send her in."

Grabbing a tissue from the box on the other side of her desk, Desta wiped her hands of the trail mix and closed the bag just in time to watch Kelli walk into her office with the same cheerful smile she'd given her when they'd met.

"Hi!" Kelli said, waving as she came closer.

"Hi," Desta responded with less enthusiasm as questions pressed in. "How'd you know where I worked?"

"Oh, well, once Maurice said the two of you were coworkers, it was a no-brainer."

She was right about that, so Desta relaxed a bit. "Well, are you from New York? We didn't really get a chance to get to know each other during that weekend." The times they had been together, Kelli had done most of the talking, and truth be

told Desta hadn't gone to the Finger Lakes to make another female friend.

“Oh no. I'm originally from Louisiana, but my parents moved to Miami when I was sixteen. Then I went to college in Delaware and ended up in Virginia.”

None of which explained why she was sitting across from Desta right now. She didn't know how to say that without being rude.

“But the ski resort was so nice, I decided to stay on another week after the event ended. And then when I saw this while I was on the road, I knew I just had to make a detour and come make sure you were all right.” Kelli had been pulling her phone out of her purse while she talked. Now, she was leaning over to hand the phone to Desta.

For endless moments Desta just stared at the woman wondering what in the world was going on. She didn't know Kelli well enough for her to be sitting in her office, hadn't even known her last name until Nessa said it a few minutes ago.

“I find it hard to believe you'd see something on your phone that warranted a detour from Virginia to come here and show me.” Yet, Desta reached for the phone and pressed the Play button at the center of the screen.

It started with music, some slow, dramatic orchestra piece, and then the words *Breaking News* scrolled across the screen in bright red letters. She was about to ask what type of foolishness this was when the first picture of Maurice appeared on-screen. He was helping a woman get out of a car, taking her by the hand, then bringing that hand up to his lips to kiss. The music faded, and a woman's voice she didn't recognize began talking about the night she'd met Maurice Gold. For the next two minutes and twenty-seven seconds, Desta's heart slowed to an almost nonexistent beat.

Throughout the video there'd been many pictures of Maurice with other women, but the clincher was the pictures of *her* with Maurice, which had been taken during the ski trip. Her chest constricted, and she struggled to remain calm as the

woman speaking on the video continued to narrate. “I’m taking this time to share with the world the type of man Maurice Gold really is. He’s the father of my child, yet he refuses to acknowledge it. That’s the man these women are dating. That’s the man selling clothes to you and smiling at you, mesmerizing you through a camera.”

Desta dropped the phone, and it clamored across her desk. “What the hell is this? And why would you come all the way here to show it to me?”

“I thought you should see it before the rest of the world does.” Kelli picked up the phone and looked down at the screen. “Well, I guess that might be a little late because it’s had half a million views already. Traffic was really tight on the highway today.”

In the next seconds Desta recalled how Kelli always seemed to pop up where she was during the Dear Lover retreat. When Kelli had admitted she knew who Maurice was, Desta had been alarmed. But when she’d tried to tell Maurice they should be careful about being seen together, he’d dismissed her concern. Now she wondered if that’d been a mistake. “Who are you?” she asked before standing.

Kelli smiled sweetly. “I’m your friend, Desta. Looking out for your best interests. You wouldn’t want to get tangled up in another very public love triangle, would you?”

Desta’s heart pounded, her hands fisting at her sides. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said through gritted teeth. But she knew exactly what Kelli was referring to. The question was, how did Kelli know about the press conference in Denver when Gordon was officially cut from the team after his affair with the coach’s wife?

“Come on, now. I know you’re too smart to play dumb with me. I really am just here as your friend. But I see you’re not really welcome to that idea.” Kelli reached for her phone and shrugged. “That’s a pity. Anyway, all you need to know now is that this could’ve been avoided. Maurice could’ve saved you, his family and this company the embarrassment, but he chose not to.” She was walking to the door now, still smiling

brightly. “Oh, and when you see him, because I know you’re gonna run right to his office and tell him about this, tell him I said hello!” With a wave of her hand Kelli walked out of the office, and Desta struggled to breathe.

After a few moments of thinking she might actually hyperventilate, she picked up the phone and dialed Maurice’s extension.

“Yeah, I can’t talk right now. I’ll get back to you.”

“What? No. I need to talk to you. It’s serious.”

“Okay. Okay. We’re meeting at my place at six. We can talk then.”

“Maurice, I mean it. We need to talk now.”

“I can’t right now. I’ll see you at my place.”

The sound of him hanging up on her sent Desta into a tailspin. Her hands shook as she tried to put the phone back into its cradle. She swayed as the room seemed to tilt around her, and she finally dropped down into her chair to keep from collapsing. So many thoughts were going through her mind right now, so many questions. All she could do was drop her head in her hands and close her eyes.

What was she doing? Was she really reliving everything that had happened when she was back in Denver?

She wasn’t naïve—she’d known what she was getting into by continuing to date Maurice. His entire job was based on being the public face for this company. He knew reporters and photographers by name. There were always pictures of Maurice with women in the tabloids, so seeing some of them in that video wasn’t what had shocked her. It was the pictures of her and Maurice taken while they were at the ski resort that caused alarm. Despite not trying to keep their relationship a secret, having it revealed that they’d been on a dating app meet ’n’ greet wasn’t something she wanted the public to know.

What had made her entire body tremble was hearing that unknown woman talk about Maurice fathering a child. She’d never imagined him as a father, and the thought of him being a

father to someone else's child sent a quick jab of annoyance and pain through her chest.

Sitting back in her chair now, she let loose a nervous chuckle. She couldn't make this stuff up: her life might read like a movie script, but it was real. And now she needed to get home and change for this dinner with Maurice, where she'd have to tell him that their secret was not only out, it was exploding for the entire world to see on social media.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“YOU MISSED THE DEADLINE? I thought you said your guy was going to have the IP address of the blackmailer this morning and you’d have this wrapped up by the end of the day.” RJ slammed the door to Maurice’s office a few minutes after five that afternoon.

Major was already there standing across from Maurice’s desk, and Chaz was in the far corner talking on his cell phone. RJ was technically late to the party.

“He had some kind of tech failure this morning, so I called Major and Chaz. They’ve been working all day to track the IP address and get us the name of the owner.” He was trying to keep the cool he was known for, trying to let this play out the way it needed to so he could get to the desired result. It was hard. He wanted to punch somebody, but he didn’t know who, and then he wanted to scold himself for making the same mistake over and over again and not listening to anyone who’d tried to warn him about the way he dealt with the press. His jaw hurt from clenching it so tight each time he thought about how insane this situation was. The woman mentioned in the blackmailing emails and who he suspected was narrating that video—which he now knew had been viewed over a million times—was a liar. He’d definitely dated her. There were pictures of them in the video that could prove it, but he’d never slept with her—a fact she wasn’t thrilled about in the end. He wasn’t the father of her child.

“We found the IP address, and Chaz has his people working on getting us the name and location now,” Major said.

“So all we can do is wait? This thing is spreading like a virus. You’re gonna have to make a statement. Tell them about the blackmail attempt and that the paternity thing is all a lie. Dad’s already called the lawyers, so they’re standing by ready to go after whoever’s behind this.” When it came to family scandals, RJ was just like their father. He went into action

immediately, doing any and everything he could to protect his family first, the company second.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Maurice said, dragging his hands down his face. And of all times for it to happen, why now? Why when he’d finally realized the player lifestyle he’d adopted because he didn’t think he deserved real love and happiness was a total mistake? When he’d just found Des.

Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes and tried to ignore the pressure in his chest at the thought of how she’d react when she got wind of this. How long before she saw the video and came storming down to his office to curse him out?

“Okay, let’s just all calm down. We’re actively working on the situation. As soon as we get a name and an address, we’ll be able to get the ball rolling toward prosecution. And this will all blow over just like the other failed attacks against us,” Major interjected.

Opening his eyes and sitting up straighter in his chair, Maurice nodded. He believed every word Major had said, but those weren’t his only worries. “I gotta tell Des.”

“You mean you haven’t told her about this yet?” The stunned tone in RJ’s voice caught his attention, and he looked over to where his older brother stood. “I thought that was some kind of code for you people in love, that you had to tell each other everything.”

“I never said anything about being in love,” Maurice countered, but his temples throbbed as if to reject the words. He stood from his chair and started to pace, something he never did.

Major shook his head. “Did you think you had to? You haven’t been like this with a woman since India.”

RJ slipped both hands into the front pockets of his pants, his brows lifting. Chaz was still in the corner of the office with his back turned to them while he talked on the phone.

“If you’re not in love with her, why risk sleeping with someone so close to all of us with the intent of walking away from her like you do every other woman? What’s going to

happen when this is over? How are the two of you going to continue to work here?” RJ asked way too many questions.

“Des isn’t every other woman, and how we deal with our relationship is our business.” After this, he prayed they’d still have a relationship. Hadn’t he been trying his best to show her he wasn’t like her ex? He’d told himself a million times that he’d never hurt her, not the way he knew that guy Gordon had. Now, because of him and his reputation, she was part of a paternity-suit scandal gone viral.

“It is your business, but you’re our brother,” Major told him. “What happens to you happens to us. That’s why we’re all sitting here now.”

“Got it!” Chaz yelled, clapping his phone in the palm of his hand. “IP address is out of Virginia and belongs to a Travis Milhouse. I called the detective who helped us out with that ex-employee who helped steal designs, and he’s doing a search on the name right now.”

“See, we’re going to get to the bottom of this,” Major said.

Maurice walked back behind his desk. He didn’t sit in the chair but placed his hands on the back of it, squeezing as he continued trying to hold in his rage.

RJ moved from where he was standing close to the door and stopped beside the chair Major sat in. “Good. Now, it’s time for damage control.”

“I’ll make a statement.” Maurice nodded. “A written one for now, and we’ll get it out to all outlets. A presser can come later.”

“I think we should probably do the presser sooner, Maurice,” RJ said. “We have to get ahead of this. Think about our stocks. The customers. The overseas buyers. Riley’s wedding.”

Maurice pushed his chair back and stood, rubbing his hands down the back of his head as impatience rushed through his body.

“I’ve already got my team working on getting the video taken down from all social-media venues. It might take a few

hours, but they're good, and they can get onto the Dark Web, too, if need be. It'll be gone by tomorrow," Chaz said. "And as far as a press conference, what if you make the written statement now, and tomorrow morning we do one without you." When nobody spoke immediately, Chaz looked around the room. "A united front, remember. What better look of unity is there than the brothers standing in for him, even the brother that's coming from the outside."

Maurice was liking Chaz more and more every day. "It's a good angle."

"Yeah, it is," RJ said.

"Then, we'll make it happen. Your assistant knows how to get the press conference rolling. I'll go out and talk to her."

When Chaz was gone, Major clapped a hand on Maurice's shoulder. "It's going to work out, man. Just go home, talk to Desta, and chill for tonight. We'll handle this."

Hearing Major say her name again had him glancing at his watch. Cursing because it was almost six, he pulled his chair back and sat down. "I gotta type this statement up."

"Good. We'll get out of here so you can take care of that," his twin said. Maurice was already pulling up a blank document on his computer, preparing to compose a statement to the world about how he'd been a reckless playboy who'd set himself up for this type of false paternity claim and how he'd regret his decisions forever because of the pain and embarrassment he was sure this video had caused his family.

Desta.

Had she seen it?

He cursed again, slamming his hands down on his desk. It was RJ who came to stand beside him this time. "Look at me," he said. When Maurice didn't, his brother clasped his shoulder and gripped it until he did.

"You're better than this. I know it, and you do, too. Don't you ever think I was saying you weren't. You're my brother, and I've got your back no matter what. You understand?"

Staring into RJ's intent dark brown eyes was something Maurice had been doing all his life. He'd looked up to both his brothers and his father, and he'd never wanted to disappoint any of them. Tonight, he was afraid he had, again.

"Now, handle your business here, and then go home like Major said. We'll do the rest."

"I'd never walk away from my child, RJ. No matter what other mistakes I've made in my life, I'd never do something like that."

"I know, man. You didn't have to tell me that."

Maurice shook his head. "I had to say it."

And he needed to say it to Desta, too. So the moment RJ left his office, Maurice typed his statement. He read it over three times before emailing it to his assistant, who Chaz was discussing next steps with. From there he went straight to the elevator and down to his car. He was running really late now, and he needed to get home to see Desta.

Forty minutes later Maurice was still sitting in his car, stuck in traffic. He'd started calling Desta immediately after leaving the office, but she hadn't answered. It was ten minutes to seven now, and he'd sent her four text messages as well, but still no response. Slamming his hands on the steering wheel he cursed. To say he was having a bad day was an understatement.

Finally he was a block away from his house. He was just about to turn the corner when he saw flashing lights from police cars and fire trucks.

"What the hell?" His speed had slowed because traffic was backed up here due to the accident up ahead.

While he waited, he tried calling Desta again. Still no answer. His phone was loaded with text messages and missed calls, but none of them were from her. Another ten minutes passed before he was able to edge his car closer to the street he needed to turn down, but before he could do so he glanced over at the three cars involved in the accident. His breath

caught at the sight of the gray Volvo. Desta drove a gray Volvo, and she was supposed to meet him at his house at six.

The next few minutes passed by in a blur as he jumped out of his car toward the crash. He pushed past bystanders and was finally stopped by an officer when he tried to get close enough to the car to see if it was hers.

“My... She’s my—” He tried to speak but his chest was full of white-hot pain. “I think this is my—” His head throbbed, their conversation this morning replaying over and over again in his mind.

I want to cook for you tonight... Just wanted to stop in and see you before I got started with my day.

That’s what he’d said to her this morning. She’d looked so beautiful sitting behind her desk. He’d told her to come to his house and she’d agreed, just like India had agreed to go for a ride with him that night.

“Sir, we need you to get back in your car and move along,” the officer yelled.

Now it hurt to breathe. The sound of the police sirens echoed so loud his ears began to clog. “No, you don’t understand,” he said, each word laced with the sting of guilt circling back to him once again. “I think this is...my...my girlfriend. This is her car.” It *was* Desta’s car. He knew it without having to get closer, and he sank to the ground with the weight of guilt and grief.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“HEY, MAN! WHERE’VE you been?” Maurice turned at the sound of Major’s voice as he was walking toward the elevators on the first floor of the hospital.

“I had a few things to take care of.” He didn’t want to talk to Major right now. He only wanted to see Desta.

“It’s been three hours since you called to tell me about the accident. I expected to find you here pacing or yelling at the staff when I got here.” By the sound of his voice, Major was irritated about that.

Maurice was doing a good job of pissing people off today. He took a deep breath and released it. “I came here straight from the scene, but they wouldn’t let me see her.” He’d been tempted to run through the doors separating him from where she was, damn the consequences. But at the last minute he’d thought better of that idea. “She was being evaluated, so I knew that would take a while. I figured if you and Nina came, at least she’d have a friendly face if I wasn’t here.” Because he might also be the last person she wanted to see right now.

“A friendly face? Not the face of the man she’s in love with?” His twin sounded agitated, but before Maurice could reply, Major continued. “Mom, Dad and Riley are up there in the waiting room now. They’ve called her mother and grandmother, and Dad sent the jet to pick them up. So, you’re welcome for having us take care of your girlfriend.”

Desta *was* his girlfriend. He’d told the police that at the scene of the accident.

A muscle twitched in Major’s jaw, and Maurice knew he was angry. He had that same telltale sign when he was upset. His twin was probably thinking Maurice had screwed up again today. Not long after they’d found the idiots trying to blackmail him, he’d caused Desta to be in an accident and then left her at the hospital alone. He could definitely see how that

would piss off Major and probably the rest of his family. Being the Gold family screwup wasn't fun.

"I called every thirty minutes for a report," he told Major. "I knew she wasn't awake yet. Or is she? What happened?" Fresh fear coursed through him.

"Why the hell wouldn't you just stay here with her, Moe? Is this about India? Are you still guilt-tripping over that at a time like this?" Major shook his head with exasperation. "You're acting like such a jerk about everything lately. I don't even know what's going on with you."

His brother's nickname for him, coupled with those harsh but true words almost sent him reeling. But he knew now was not the time to fall apart. Major was right: he'd been messing things up lately, and he didn't fully understand why. All he knew now was that making sure Des was all right was his first priority.

"I know what you're thinking and where you probably thought I was." He locked gazes with his brother. "I did go back to the house, to my room." Where he'd locked himself for days after India's accident. "But I know what happened to India wasn't my fault. I know, Major. So, I left there and went straight to Desta's place. I had to show the landlord a billion forms of ID, then prove that she worked at our company, convince him that she was in an accident, and then, finally, I thought to call Nessa who had a key to her place so I didn't need to deal with the landlord anymore. I wanted to make sure she had things she was familiar with when she woke up."

Major looked down at the duffel bag and the pillow he had stuffed under his arm as if just seeing those things for the first time. "You went to her house to get her things?"

"Yeah. Because India and the guilt from my past aside, I still hate that Desta was in an accident on her way to see me." She was hurt and while there was nothing he could do about that physically, he would do whatever possible to make sure she had everything she needed and was comfortable. "So I'm gonna go up and see her now. Is that all right with you?"

Major gave him a half smile before shaking his head.

“What’s so funny?”

“You, man. You’re funny.” Major continued to stare at him.

“That’s a wonderful thing to say to your brother after the day I’ve had.”

Major put his arm around Maurice’s shoulder and walked him onto the elevator when it opened. “If you think this was a day, wait until you let yourself realize you’re in love.”

He was in love. As he’d sat in his childhood room thinking back to that night he’d come home from the hospital—while India had been going in for her first surgery—he knew what he felt for Des was totally different. He’d been so young when he was with India, and the trauma from that night had blemished his soul from that point on. But the moment he’d begun that anonymous email exchange with Des, everything changed. The way he thought about his life, all the women he was dating, how his behavior affected his family, the more he’d realized he had to change. Des had been that change, the second he saw her at the ski resort.

“And to top that wonderful news off, we found out that guy, Travis Milhouse, is a freelance reporter looking for his big break. He tried to sell the paternity story to the *New York Post*, but his girlfriend was the one who came up with the blackmail idea.”

Maurice didn’t know who Travis Milhouse was, and right now he didn’t care. He just wanted to see Des. He needed to see the woman he loved and to tell her how sorry he was, for everything.

* * *

Desta had a terrible headache. That was her first thought when she opened her eyes. Her second thought was to quickly close her eyes again because opening them hurt far too much.

“Just take it slow, sweetheart.” A woman’s voice and a hand over hers soothed some of the edges around the blinding pain, but not all. “Did they give her something for the pain? It seems like she should have some type of medication?”

“Relax, Mom. They will. They wanted to wait for her to wake up first so they can check all her vital signs again.”

She knew that voice and took a chance on cracking her eyes open slowly once more.

“Hey, there,” Riley said, waving a hand.

The action made Desta moan as memories floated back into her mind, and she saw Kelli with her goofy grin.

“Maurice.” It hadn’t hurt to say his name, but damn, the light in the room was causing all kinds of tingles to shoot from her temples down to the rest of her body. “Turn out the light. Where’s Maurice?”

Riley looked to someone, but Desta wasn’t going to risk turning her head because she had a sinking suspicion that would only cause more pain.

“He’s on his way, dear. Do you need something to drink? Do you want to sit up?” She knew now the voice belonged to Marva, and Desta sighed slowly, accepting her motherly presence.

“No,” she finally managed. “Where am I?”

“In the hospital. There was a three-car pileup about a block away from Maurice’s house. You were car number one so you got the least amount of the damage.” Riley shrugged. “Even though that still landed you here with a concussion.”

“A concussion.” She moaned because saying the word triggered more spikes of pain.

“Yes, dear. The doctor said you’ll need to stay here at least for tonight. So Ron and I thought it was best that your mother and your grandmother be here with you. They should be arriving soon.”

Oh joy, Edna and Sheryl were on their way to New York to see her lying in a hospital bed. That was going to be a treat.

“My car?”

“The good news is you’re awake and talking and your prognosis is good,” Riley said and waited a beat. “The bad

news is your car's totaled.”

She groaned, fully expecting the pain that followed. The doctor and a nurse came in soon after that, poking and probing, and asking her all sorts of questions. They said she was going to be fine, before finally giving her something for the ferocious headache and leaving the room.

There were a few minutes of silence, when nobody was in that room with her, that Desta simply lay there thinking about all that had happened. The accident had occurred so fast. She'd been waiting for Maurice to arrive one moment and then the next she'd been thinking that maybe he'd stood her up.

Recalling those moments made her irritated, and she frowned when she looked up to see him walking through the door.

“You hung up on me.” That's the first thing she thought to say, even though the warmth rolling over her skin indicated she should probably say something else.

He came closer. “I'm sorry.”

“I had to tell you something really important.”

Dropping the bag he was holding on the floor, he came closer to the bed. “I'm sorry.”

How was it possible that he looked worse than she felt? His eyes seemed a little puffy, like maybe he'd been crying, and his shoulders were slumped, like he was carrying a heavy weight. “I waited for you, and you didn't come.”

He shook his head. “I was late, and I'm so, so sorry.” Leaning over her when she thought he would've kissed her, he eased the pillow he'd been carrying beneath her head instead.

Then he went to the duffel bag and took out her phone charger and the unicorn figurine that sat on her nightstand. “You went to my house?”

“Nessa let me in.” When he set her favorite tumbler with the bright blue straw on the table beside the unicorn, she wanted to cry.

“I have to apologize now.”

“No, baby. There’s nothing you need to apologize for. I was late. If I’d been there when I said I would, you wouldn’t have been in the accident. And Des, I need you to know I’d never do anything to hurt you. I’d never be careless with you in any way. I didn’t father a child and walk away, and I’m not interested in dating multiple women anymore.” He’d taken her hand and was holding it tightly. She could feel his fingers trembling in hers.

“I thought I had to be that way after the accident with India so many years ago. I felt so bad about what happened to her that I didn’t believe I deserved to be happy or in love again. I messed up back then, and I messed up again today. But I want to do better, I want to be better.” He kissed her fingers before looking up to her again. “I’m better when I’m with you.”

How could he be breaking her heart and filling it at the same time? She ached for the pain he’d carried all these years. It was foolish of him to think he had to be punished for an accident that wasn’t his fault. Just as it was foolish of her to hold what had happened with her and Gordon so close that it spilled over into everything she did. Once again, the fact that they seemed to be a perfect match was not lost on her.

She tried to lift her free hand up to his face, but the effort was painful, and she winced. He immediately leaned over so he was closer, and her palm finally met his cheek for a slow stroke. “We’re quite a pair, you and I. Walking around here acting like martyrs, holding our feelings back because of some nonsense in our past.” She shook her head. “Last night, when you left, I thought back to when I found out Gordon was cheating on me. And then after I saw that video I remembered when the owner of the team Gordon had played on held a press conference to announce that Gordon was being released from the team after sleeping with the coach’s wife.” She took in a shaky breath, forcing herself not to cry over events that didn’t deserve any more of her tears. “I felt like it was happening all over again, but this time the pain was surreal.”

“Des—” She shook her head to stop him from speaking.

“No. I know that this is different. You’re not Gordon, and I’m sorry for comparing what we have to what I had with

him.”

“I would never intentionally hurt you. Not ever,” he insisted.

“I know.”

Revisiting her life with Gordon was tough, but it was also cathartic, because in that moment she looked into Maurice’s eyes, she knew deep down in her soul that he’d stand by his word.

“I would never treat you badly. Next to Major, you’ve been my best friend these past five years.” He was shaking his head now. “I didn’t realize that until now.”

“Well, you may rethink that when you find out I was responsible for that video going viral.” She figured he had to know about it by now. He was in charge of PR at the company, so someone would’ve reached out to him once they saw it.

“What are you talking about? When did you see the video?” He looked as perplexed as she’d felt when Kelli had walked into her office. But after telling him about that entire exchange, his look of confusion shifted to pure rage.

“Dammit!” He released her hand and stepped away from the bed, turned his back on her and then ran his hands over his face. “That’s where I knew that guy’s name from. When Chaz first said it, I didn’t make the connection.”

“The connection to what?” Despite the pain meds her head was still pounding as she tried to process everything.

He turned back to face her and shrugged. “It seems that Dear Lover was responsible for bringing us together and was almost responsible for tearing us apart. Travis Milhouse was the one who sent me the blackmail messages I started getting that Sunday while we were still at the resort. He and Kelli must’ve concocted the plan once they figured out who we were. And if I wasn’t the consummate playboy, they wouldn’t have had the opening.”

“Oh no, you’re not about to accept the blame for that, too. I knew Kelli was a little off when I met her.”

“Nah, I’m not taking the blame for anybody but myself at this point. I just can’t believe we had to go through all of this...just to realize our friendship was meant to be more.”

“Is it more for you, Maurice?” It was a brave question, one she’d been struggling with asking him all day long.

When he walked over to the bed again, this time brushing his knuckles over her cheek and bending down to drop the softest kiss on her forehead, her skin rippled once again with warmth. It traveled throughout her body now, comforting and calming.

“Yeah, it’s definitely more now.”

EPILOGUE

Three Months Later

MAURICE HELD HIS cards tight, watching as Major decided what he was going to do. Chaz and RJ had already folded, leaving their money to add to the hefty pot up for grabs. Desta was sitting prettily with her cards facedown on the table. She'd already added her bet to the pot.

He watched her while he waited, recalling all they'd been through in the past several months. After she'd left the hospital, they'd both given statements to the police about meeting Kelli and Travis at the ski resort. With their lawyer beside them, they hadn't needed to go into too much detail about why they'd been there in the first place. Arrests had occurred about a week later, and Maurice had done a press conference explaining the falsehood to the media.

Desta, along with the legal department and a talent agent they'd hired, had negotiated a lucrative reality-television special deal for Riley and Chaz. The new development kept her busy for the bulk of her days, but the nights were reserved for him. Just after they returned from spending Christmas with her family in Chicago, they'd decided that her place was just too small for both of them. He'd wanted her to move into his place, but she'd insisted on them searching for a place where both their names could be on the lease. He respected her need to maintain her independence while being part of a relationship.

Maurice had been in a relationship for three months now. Not three dates, but three months. Who would've ever thought he'd change his ways so drastically and so quickly? Who would've ever thought his best friend would turn out to be the woman of his dreams?

"Damn, Major, quit studying the cards. Make a bet or bow out," RJ complained, and he wasn't even in the game anymore. He was getting grouchier, and the family hoped

traveling to the private island they'd booked for Riley and Chaz's wedding in June would relax him a little.

"All right! I'm out." Major had been taking a long time deciding, but Maurice was patient. At least, he'd been telling himself that for the last hour and a half.

"So it's just you and me," Des said from across the table. "Or are you about to concede to my superior poker skills like the rest of them?"

He loved her smile. He loved the way she didn't take any mess from him whether at work or at home. And he especially loved the way she loved him completely as he was.

"Oh, I'm in," he said and then set his cards down on the table to reach into his pocket. When he knew everyone in the room was expecting him to pull out more cash to toss into the already large pot to bet, Maurice instead removed a little black box.

He opened the box under the table and stared down at the three-karat pear-shaped diamond ring sitting against the cushioned interior. Taking a slow breath and releasing it, he extended his arm across the table, sat the box on top of the cash pile and waited.

* * *

Desta looked down at the black box and the brilliantly shining ring inside. She struggled for a moment to catch her breath, yanking her hands from the table for fear she might touch it and it wasn't meant for her.

"What's going on?" That may have been a silly question, but it was the first thing that popped into her mind.

"I love you, Des." Maurice stood up and walked around to the side of the table where she was sitting. "I think I've loved you since I've known you. It just took me a while to figure that out and act on that love."

"A long while," Major joked from the sidelines, and Chaz chuckled.

She couldn't believe this was happening, and on poker night of all nights!

Maurice knelt down on one knee, taking her hands in his. "I love everything about you, even the fact that I know in my heart you're a cheater when it comes to playing poker."

Now everyone chuckled, even her while her eyes filled with tears. Her heart was beating so fast, and her hands were shaking. Until he lifted them up to his lips and kissed each finger.

"But what I love most about you is the way you love me. Everything you've given me has taught me how to love you in return. You're my world, and I don't want to continue on without you. So will you please marry me?"

The tears fell—there was no use trying to hold them back. "I love you. I love you so much for showing me it was okay to love again. You're my best friend."

There was a pause and then, "So is that a yes or a no?" RJ asked.

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

"I mean, if all of you want to be married, that's fine by me," RJ continued with a shrug.

"Yes!" Desta answered without waiting for anyone to say anything else. "Yes, Maurice Gold, I'll marry you."

"Well, all right, then!" Major yelled and began to clap along with the others.

Maurice stood, pulling her up with him and wrapping his arms around her for a tender kiss. When the kiss broke, she laughed nervously. "Oh, I forgot about the ring and the rest of my winnings."

Releasing her, Maurice took the box off the table and removed the ring. He lifted her left hand in his and slid the ring onto her third finger. "I'm the biggest winner in this room tonight because I've won you."

Staring through tear-blurred eyes at the man she was going to marry, Desta wrapped her arms around him for another hug.

“And I’ve won you.”

* * * * *

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The Love Cure

by Cara Lockwood

CHAPTER ONE

LIAM LANGE JUST wanted this damn day to be over already and it was barely five. He rolled up the sleeves of his canvas work shirt as he slid onto the peeling leather barstool in the dark dive bar in Hoboken. The blinds were down so he didn't have to stare at the silver cityscape of Manhattan, his least favorite place on earth.

He ordered a cold Pabst Blue Ribbon to try to cool his temper, still simmering from the run-in he'd had with the foreman on the condo build he'd worked on down the street. The foreman—all mouth and no brains in Liam's opinion—micromanaged his work on the roof all day—from the ground. As if he could tell anything from down there. It had taken all of Liam's patience to finish the job, which thank God was now done.

Liam's lower back ached, since he'd been working double time to get out of there, and he could feel the sting of a sunburn on his neck. The mid-May sun had been unforgiving all day, but it was nothing that a cold beer or two wouldn't fix. The bartender opened a longneck and slid it to him, and he took it with a small nod of his head and drank deep.

No. His real problem had nothing to do with the sun or that moronic foreman. Or his aching muscles. It had everything to do with that damn message on his phone.

Hey, brother. Happy Birthday. WL.

WL for Wilder Lange. As if he wouldn't know that this unlisted, blocked number would be his asshole half brother's. It doubly irked because his full brothers, Seth and Stuart, hadn't yet acknowledged his birthday. They were still pissed off about him taking Mom's side against them in the last run-in with Wilder, clearly. Well, they could be pissed all they wanted. They were the ones who'd picked the wrong side.

He took one more look at the text, his finger hovering over the reply button. What could he even say?

How's the money grab going? Stolen all of our father's money yet? Want to bleed me dry, too? Ha, sucker. There's nothing you can take from me.

That's where Liam had already won. He'd walked away from the Lange Communications fortune long ago. Nothing but vipers and vampires hanging around hoping to get a drop of their dead father's power and money. All Liam had to his name was a few thousand dollars, and whatever this last job would pay—if the foreman didn't dock him like he'd threatened. What he needed to do was save all his money and head south. Florida, maybe? Somewhere away from Manhattan and New Jersey, which on days like today just seemed populated with the world's worst assholes.

Liam was halfway through his PBR when the door to the dive bar slid open, letting too much of the late afternoon sunlight in. He squinted, annoyed at the flash of light in the otherwise shuttered and darkened bar, light that seemed not to be waning. Some idiot was holding the door open. He could feel the blast of hot air from outside on his back. Liam turned, half expecting to see that asshole foreman, as he'd be the kind of guy who'd swing open a door wide to a darkened bar.

Instead, he saw the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his whole life, ringed in a halo of light. She was delicate and blonde, her hair gleaming like spun gold. She wore an airy white sundress, which, backlit with the sun, showed her amazing thighs in nearly perfect detail. She kept her elegant hand, nails painted a shell pink that matched her soft bow lips, on the door as if wondering whether or not to come in. This kind of bar was not the place for a woman as gorgeous as that. Her white linen dress wouldn't stay white long against these faded and peeling barstools. Her delicate strappy-heeled sandals would no doubt find it hard going on the pitied concrete floor. It's no wonder she looked so uncertain, so confused, as she let in the summer heat.

“Hey, in or out! You're gonna melt us over here,” one of the less than savory characters on the other side of the bar yelled,

his Jersey accent as thick as his belly. He was almost entirely bald except for a wisp of dark hair he'd tried unsuccessfully to sweep over the center of his head. Liam scowled at the man. He wasn't wrong, but still, that was no way to talk to a woman. Liam glanced over at her, sure she'd exit the place, realizing her mistake, but instead, she stepped inside, letting the door swing shut behind her.

Interesting. So she was going to double down on her mistake. She either had guts or lacked the sense to turn around and leave.

"Hey, sweetheart. Come sit by me!" the man called out, clearly turning in time to realize he was yelling at a gorgeous model. Liam scowled again. Okay, so he was going to be a problem. And the bartender wasn't doing anything about it. He had his head buried in the ice at the end of the bar, ignoring the ruckus. Liam stretched his neck, its joints popping. He wouldn't mind getting into it with some jerk. Might help him work out the day's stress.

"Leave her alone. She can sit where she wants," Liam said, voice low but steady. "Let her decide." The man saw Liam for the first time and seemed prepared to pop off. But then Liam stood, to his full height of six-three. He was also a wall of muscle, a benefit of working with his hands all day. The man suddenly found something interesting to look at on his phone.

Uh-huh. Thought so.

The woman's gaze darted from Liam to the man and back again. Maybe this was the time she'd choose to bolt. Instead, she moved closer to Liam, and laid her hand hesitantly on the ripped stool next to his.

"Mind if I...?" she asked, her voice sweet like honey. Her clear blue eyes held his a minute. Damn, they were pretty. Fringed with thick dark lashes. Liam wasn't exactly in the mood for company, but there was no way he could say no to that voice, to those small, pink, rosebud lips. Whatever the lady wanted, she'd get.

He nodded at the seat, and she perched on it, the hem of her sundress inching above her knee. He tried not to stare at her

legs, which she crossed at the knee. The hem rode up a little farther, giving him just a glimpse of pale thigh. She set her small straw clutch purse on the bar.

“I’m Cecily,” she said, holding out a dainty hand with those perfectly pink nails. He dragged his focus away from her legs with difficulty.

“Liam,” he replied, taking her hand, which seemed childlike in his. He worried she’d shrink from his calloused paw, but she shook it gamely.

“Nice to meet you.” She flashed him a dazzling white smile that nearly blinded him. God, the woman was even prettier close-up. Barely wore a stitch of makeup, and had a few freckles across her nose, but otherwise, her skin was flawless. Her clear blue eyes, like a gorgeous calm day on the Atlantic, stared at him, and seemed...friendly. It had been a while since a woman this pretty had been this interested in him. Not that it didn’t happen, but normally, he attracted the punk chicks with the smoky eye shadow and heavy liner, with extra piercings and tattoos, the ones who didn’t mind his calloused hands. Beautiful blondes who looked like they ought to be shopping on Fifth Avenue with limitless platinum cards typically didn’t go for him.

“Can I buy you a drink?” she asked, nodding to his now, near-empty longneck. He almost choked on the last sip.

“*You* want to buy *me* a drink?” He had to laugh. Who was this woman? First, she strides into a dive bar where she clearly doesn’t belong, and then she offers *him* a drink? Every man in here would buy her two or three or ten.

“Is there something wrong with that?” A playful—even flirty?—smile crossed her lips.

Clearly, Cecily was a woman who flaunted convention. Well, that worked just fine by him. He didn’t care much for convention, anyway.

“Nothing at all wrong with that,” he said.

“Good,” she added, and signaled the bartender, ordering him another PBR, and her one, too. When the bartender put

the bottles before them, she clinked her neck against his. “Hell with this day. Here’s hoping it turns around.” She took a big swig from the bottle and he wondered what could ever go wrong for a beautiful woman like this. He always imagined gorgeous women got pretty much whatever they wanted.

“You had a bad day, too?” he asked her, a bit of amusement in his voice.

“Sure did. I mean, did anyone *in here* have a *good* day?” She indicated the few grumpy patrons around the bar. Liam had to laugh at that.

“I bet not,” he agreed. People didn’t come to this dive to celebrate.

“So, how about you? Your day...was it bad...or the worst?” She seemed actually interested.

“The worst,” he admitted.

“Well, then, we’d better add Jameson shots to these, or we’re never going to get anywhere.” She signaled the bartender as Liam laughed then, despite himself. He liked this woman. She leaned over the bar to talk to the bartender and Liam noticed a flash of smooth skin at her neckline, the hint of cleavage visible. One of the straps of the dress fell down her left shoulder and she absently tugged it up again. He studied her shoulder, wondering if her skin was as soft as it looked. He felt want in him stir. *Down, boy*, he told himself. *Not the right time*.

The bartender set the Jameson shots in front of them, and the woman handed over her credit card for an open tab. Liam shook his head. He’d have to argue with the bartender later about who was paying for these drinks. He couldn’t very well let this beautiful woman carry him tonight.

“What should we drink to?” she asked him, blinking fast.

“Well, it is my birthday.”

Her pink lips parted. “Your birthday? Seriously?” She looked joyful, as if he’d just given her the best news. It had been a long time since anybody had cared about the day he was born, and probably longer since they’d been happy about

it. He had a flash of his older brother Wilder scowling at him, the day the two nearly tore each other's heads off, the last day he'd ever stepped foot in the Lange family mansion. "Well, then, to you, Liam. On your birthday. Sorry it's been the worst."

She gently clinked her shot glass against his, and their fingers touched as she did so. Was it just his imagination or did a current run straight up his arm and right to his groin? She put the shot glass to her delicate lips and drained it, then thumped it on the bar with a clunk. Damn, the woman was sexy. Liam followed suit, the Jameson sliding down his throat with only the slightest twinge of a burn. His eyes never left her. Part of him thought she was just a mirage and she'd disappear if he didn't keep an eye on her. He still couldn't believe she was sitting next to him, her exposed knee inches from his own. He probably should try to talk to the woman, but he kept thinking if he opened his mouth, she'd fly away, like a beautiful songbird.

"So, tell me, Liam," she said, leaning forward. "Why's your day been so bad?"

Terrible boss. Worse brother. A family feud that he'd long since grown tired of managing. And the fact that this day marked two occasions: his birth and his father's untimely death. Where to start? "Birthdays aren't really great for me," he admitted.

"Why not?" Her blue eyes studied him with real concern. She seemed to actually care.

"My dad died. On this day, years ago." Liam glanced down at the bar. "So, every day, I'm reminded that I was born, but he's not here."

Cecily's face crumpled a bit. "Oh." She bit her lip. "I'm so very sorry."

Liam had been barely a teenager when his father passed, when he'd gone from being incredibly wealthy to having next to nothing nearly overnight. His oldest brother, Wilder, took over the company, mostly cut out his mother and his brothers.

He'd listened to his mother complain bitterly about this for years, and he knew it wasn't fair.

"I'm not talking to most of my family." Liam shrugged. "After my dad died, well, my half brother kind of became a prick. And..." Liam couldn't believe he was even getting into this. And with a perfect stranger. He never talked about Wilder. Never talked about the Lange dynasty. The millions, no billions, stolen from its rightful heirs. "Well, we disagreed on what should happen with Dad's...uh...belongings. Wilder thought he should get most of it. I thought Dad would want it split between all four of his sons and his wife."

Liam remembered trying to argue with his grown brother. He'd been just a kid, really. He never would get any traction. Then, his older full brother, Seth, and Liam's twin brother, Stuart, they'd all just bought into Wilder's lies. Took his side. Against him. Just because they were happy to take Wilder's meager payouts. Liam felt the rest of the family deserved more. Much more. There wasn't much point in staying in the family after that. As soon as Liam hit eighteen, he was gone. All he'd taken with him was a voting seat on the board of Lange Communications. Wilder had offered him millions for it. Liam had taken great joy in telling him to go to hell.

"Your brother took it all?" Cecily looked aghast.

"He took all that mattered." Liam stared at the label of his beer bottle. "He took the valuable stuff." As in, taking over Lange Communications, the cash cow and divvying up the tiniest of cash and stock payouts for the rest of them, which wasn't nearly enough for his mother to live on or to pay for Liam's private school tuition. His father never would've let that happen. But Wilder was a different story.

Wilder said Dad wanted him to take over the business, but Dad never mentioned that to Liam. Or anybody else. So, as far as Liam was concerned, Wilder could've simply made it all up. Liam was the one who'd convinced the board he was the natural choice to lead the company. And knowing his eldest brother, the control freak, the bossiest brother of all time, it was simply a straight-up power grab.

Cecily put her hand on Liam's. The soft touch startled him.

"I'm sorry," she said, eyes full of empathy. "That had to be terrible, fighting with your brother, especially after you just lost your dad."

"Half brother," he corrected. But Liam couldn't stop staring at the woman's delicate hand on his. There seemed to be more than comfort there. Something more like...an invitation. But was he imagining it?

"But grief does terrible things to people. Maybe he didn't mean to do the things he did."

Liam studied Cecily. She was a woman, he decided, who just tried to see the best in people. And maybe that was because people always put their best faces on around her.

"You're being kind to him, but he doesn't deserve it." Liam waved a dismissive hand. Some people were just rotten. There was no helping them.

"Well, we can all use a little kindness, right?" She beamed at him, undeterred. "So, what can we do to cheer you up today? Nobody should be sad on their birthday." She flashed another brilliant smile at him. Suddenly, all he wanted to do was have her naked in his bed. That would set things right. Maybe for all time.

He took a swig of beer to distract himself from those thoughts. She was too good for him. Too pretty. Too sweet. He hadn't even showered from his day of sweaty outdoor work, and he was thinking of taking this lovely princess to his bed? His cramped Hoboken apartment with a stunning view of the brick building next door would *not* impress.

"It's okay. Besides. I'm not the only person who's had a bad day. Didn't you say you were having a rough one? How come?"

Unease flickered across her face. "Yeah. I had a pretty rough day." She bit her pink lip, as if trying to decide how much to share. He almost worried she'd blurt out something about a powerful rich husband. But, glancing at her left hand,

he saw no ring. Nor, even, a white imprint of one she used to wear. “I got some bad news.”

“What kind?”

She studied him for a second, her resolve wavering. “I...uh. Lost my job. And my health insurance.”

“Seriously?” What crazy person would fire this gorgeous, sweet woman? A fool. That’s who. “Who would fire you? You’re...you’re...so...” Perfect. “Nice.”

“Aw, thanks, Liam.” An appreciative smile tugged at her mouth. “It was just layoffs. Nothing personal. It’s just about the corporation’s bottom line. I worked in HR for Yancy’s. The big department store chain?” Liam nodded. He knew it. Everybody knew it. They had a store at every mall, and in every downtown in America. But retail had taken a hit lately, especially with the economic downturn.

“Or, I guess I should say, *worked*.” She stared at her own beer bottle then, as if it were a crystal ball. “I can find another job—probably. It’s losing the health insurance...” She trailed off, as if the words had become lodged in her throat.

“Oh, you’ll be fine,” he told her. “Bet you get a new job and new insurance in just a month or two.”

She sent him a brave smile. “Yeah. Probably.”

Liam didn’t know what he’d said, but now she seemed sad. Despondent, even. *Great job, man. You’ve brought her down somehow.* But didn’t he always bring the mood down? Wasn’t that his specialty?

Why do you always have to be such a problem? Why do you always have to push everyone who cares about you away? Wasn’t that what Wilder had told him, the last fight they’d had face-to-face?

“I’m headed to the bathroom,” Liam said, standing. He glanced at Cecily’s pensive face. He figured he’d just give her time to slip out of the bar, and out of his life. She already had one mental foot out the door anyway, he could tell. Besides, she was out of his league. Way, way out of his league. The longer he sat next to her, the more likely he’d be to start

getting his hopes up. And the way this day was going that was just a recipe for disaster.

“Oh? Okay.” She watched him as he headed back into the even darker parts of the bar and walked to the small, narrow hallway with the old bathroom sign on the wall and an arrow pointing to the basement downstairs. He barely made it to the basement, his work boot hitting the ground floor when he felt a soft touch on his elbow.

He turned then to see Cecily there, big blue eyes wide, pink lips parted. His brain didn't understand what she was doing there, didn't understand why she hadn't taken the opportunity to sneak out the dive bar and be on her merry way. His brain didn't get it, but his body seemed to instinctively understand exactly why she was standing on the steps above him, the extra height still not quite making her taller. She studied his eyes, then his lips. No explanation came. No reason why she'd followed him down this dark staircase.

But he knew then, suddenly, exactly why she'd come. The realization dawned just as she closed the distance between them and pressed her soft lips against his.

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The Last Affair

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