



Billion Dollar Enemy

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LINNEA MAY

Billion Dollar Enemy

by
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CHAPTER 1

Madison

This is exactly what I need after the week I've had. I slam the car door shut and turn around to face the dojo while deflating with a deep sigh. The building stands tall in the evening sun, a large sign reading *TENSHO Jiu-Jitsu* above the entrance. The faint sound of slaps and kicks against mats can be heard from inside. It's like music to my ears.

But I should be careful today. I'm bubbling with fiery frustration and I can't let my emotions get the better of me. Not again—and never on the mat.

This week has been one of the roughest ever since I took over the family company after Dad's death. My idiotic uncle and I haven't seen eye to eye on a lot of things, but the decision we're battling over right now is the biggest we have ever faced. And I'm not giving in to his will. Never. He may think I'm just a stupid little girl, not capable of leading the company and honoring my father's legacy, but I will prove him wrong.

I will prove *all of them* wrong.

After changing into my workout clothes, I head towards the mat, where people are starting to line up. My eyes wander around the room, scanning the faces for potential opponents. Usually we wear a gi, the traditional heavy cotton uniform of the jiu jitsu practitioner, but today is a no-gi class. That means I can't tell people's level of expertise based on the color of their belt, but I know most of the regulars, and spot a few guys who should have no problem handling my fury.

And then I see *him*. A new guy. Very athletic, dark brown hair in a crew cut, shaved at the sides and a bit longer on top, and a tattoo peeking through from underneath the elbow-length sleeves of his rashguard. I can't make out what it is, but it seems to be rather big and cover most of his upper arm. He has a strong jawline, and his lips are pressed together, while his dark eyes are narrowed to complete the stern expression on his face.

His presence is oddly captivating, and I catch myself momentarily lost in admiration. Tall and broad-shouldered, he exudes confidence with a hint of arrogance. His dark hair contrasts with the pure white rashguard he's wearing, and his piercing eyes seem to hold a hint of excitement mingled with determination. I have never seen him here before, but based on the way he moves and his sculpted body I can tell he's not new to this sport. He could even be a brown belt, like me.

Quickly snapping back to reality, I mentally scold myself for getting distracted. I need to focus, and so I prepare for class by stretching and warming up. But I catch myself looking back in his direction again and again, a nervous flutter stirring within me every time I lay eyes on him.

Does he look familiar? Do I know him? Is that it?

No, I'm sure I've never seen him before. I don't think I've *ever* seen anyone *this* handsome before.

More people are stepping into the room, filling up the space between us. I find myself glancing back at him—and before I know it, our eyes meet when he looks up from his kneeling position while stretching one of his hamstrings. Instantly, I feel the heat of embarrassment rush into my cheeks.

Get a grip. He's just a handsome guy. There are plenty of them all

over L.A., and this dojo is no exception. Why am I acting like a silly schoolgirl?

And why does my ribcage feel like a garden of butterflies, every time I look at him?

I need to calm down, I decide, shaking my head as if that could clear my frazzled mind.

“Alright, guys, let’s get started!” Raymond, our sensei, walks into the room clapping his hands in an effort to get everybody’s attention. “Line up!”

We do as we’re told, lining up in a random but orderly fashion, while collectively facing Raymond as he places himself in front of the large row of floor-to-ceiling windows.

“We have a new addition to the group today,” he says, waving to the new guy, who is standing at the other end of the group, pretty much as far away from me as possible.

“Would you mind introducing yourself quickly, Chase?”

The guy—Chase—responds with a quick nod, before he comes forward and turns around to face the group.

“Hi! Name’s Chase,” he starts, and a quick smile flashes across his face, before he returns to his serious expression. “Been doing Jiu-Jitsu for a couple of years. Enjoying it a lot, but I’m just a blue belt, so, I guess, some of you may have to go a bit easy on me?”

With that last sentence, he’s casting his acknowledging looks in all the wrong directions, picking out the biggest and strongest guys in our group without ever looking at me, one of the very few brown belts around. I’m one of the strongest grapplers here tonight, but he’s oblivious to that fact.

“Looking forward to getting to know all of you,” he concludes—and this time, he looks straight at me. His gaze feels like a punch to the chest, and I have to force myself not to take a step back in intimidation.

“Thanks, Chase,” Raymond says, gesturing for Chase to step back. In keeping with our etiquette, the newcomer gives a subtle bow in Raymond’s direction, before rejoining the group.

Class starts with a few repetitions and warm up sequences, before we are asked to pair up to roll together. The new guy, Chase, is far away from me, and I hate the surge of jealousy that spreads through my chest as I watch him pair up with another girl, Amy. She’s a blue belt who was lucky enough to be standing right next to him when Raymond asked us to find a partner.

Or maybe it wasn’t luck, and Amy made sure to be in the right place at the right time. I wouldn’t be surprised, because he’s just so...

Oh my God, I’m being ridiculous.

Why do I care? I’m here to roll, to let off some steam, and turn my anger into sweat.

I focus on finding that healthy outlet as I grapple with opponents of varying skill levels. But every now and then, I steal glances at the new guy, catching him executing techniques with precision and grace.

When he’s teaching us a new technique, Raymond always makes sure that we roll with as many different opponents as possible. We’re asked to pair up anew after each grappling bout. And I find myself looking for *him* every single time, but while we seem to be moving closer to each other, we never end up together as the class goes on. I can barely focus on my own grappling and experience a tinge of

embarrassment when Peter, a blue belt, manages to make me tap out with surprising ease.

“You okay?” he asks, as he jumps away from me. “Are you hurt or sick or something?”

Honest concern graces his face when he looks at me.

“No, no,” I insist. “Just not on my best form today, I guess. Good job, though!”

He smiles with pride before he turns around to find a new partner for the last session of the day.

Before I can do the same, I feel the touch of a finger on my shoulder, just as I get back up on my feet.

My heart almost stops when I turn around and find *him* standing right in front of me. Chase towers before me, a mix of determination and a hint of a smile playing on his lips, as if he was mirroring my own feelings.

“You up for this?” he asks, jutting his chin forward.

He’s even more attractive up close, so much so that his presence renders me speechless.

Well, shit.

A mute nod is all I can come up with as a response, and I’m suddenly feeling very, very dizzy.

I hear our sensei’s voice in the background, sharing observations and giving last minute pointers to some of us, but his words are muffled and far away. I can feel my own heartbeat and a sense of unnerving excitement coursing through my veins.

“Alright, shall we?” Chase asks, pointing toward the mat and raising an eyebrow.

I don't like the condescending tone in his voice, or the way he looks at me—but I can't help the nervous flutter that rushes through my core at the sight of his muscular arms stretching the thin fabric of his rashguard as he gestures for me to come closer.

But I know one thing: Nervous flutter or not, I will not let him get off easy.

Chapter 2

Chase

I should have known better, but I just couldn't stop myself. I'm here to check out a new dojo, or rather, its sensei. Raymond Souza is a well-known Jiu-Jitsu trainer. He only accepts a few private clients a year, and I need to be one of them. Supposedly, he's one of the best.

The world may try to apply the brakes on my professional growth right now, but I'm still in control of my personal growth. And Raymond and his vigorous training are just what I need to excel in this area. Today, I came here to check him out and see his dojo.

I did *not* come here to flirt.

But my gaze keeps gravitating back to her, the tall and lean figure that moves through the training area with an almost feline grace. Her long, straight hair is neatly tied back in a ponytail, revealing the elegant curve of her neck and the fierce determination etched across her features. It's a blessing that today is a no gi class. It means I get to see that much more of her irresistible body in those tight leggings and the equally tight fitting rashguard.

I sense her eyes on me at times, a subtle acknowledgment that we're both acutely aware of each other's presence. But it's not just her physical prowess that draws my attention. It's the fire in her eyes, the fierceness that laces her expression as she tackles her opponents.

The battle inside my mind rages as I inch closer to her, the pull of attraction mingling with the knowledge that this is neither the time nor the place to indulge in flirtation.

But now here we are.

She hasn't said a word since I approached her, and her eyes shy away every time I try to catch her gaze. I can't blame her for being intimidated by me—most people are, on and off the mat. I'm used to it. But seeing a girl like her react to me in this way, is a special treat for sure.

“Don't worry, I'll go easy on you,” I promise as we move to a corner of the room that provides enough space for us to roll.

She raises an eyebrow when she looks at me now. “That's... you don't need to worry about me.”

“Alright then,” I retort, unable to suppress a chuckle at the sudden shift of attitude in her.

“I'm serious,” she insists, looking at me through narrowed eyes. “No need to hold back—unless you're afraid?”

She smirks at me as she plants herself on the ground and gets into position.

Okay, apparently sweeping is not her strong suit, and she prefers to start on the floor. Just like me.

My promise to go easy on her was nothing but a half-hearted attempt to mask my curiosity about her abilities. She nods, and a smile is dancing at the corners of her lips when Raymond calls for the final session to start.

As we begin to grapple, it becomes evident that my assumptions about her prowess were far from accurate. She moves with a fluidity that belies her strength, and her control is impeccable.

Usually, I'd have no problem keeping my cool and focusing on the athletic aspect of this encounter, but it proves to be impossible with

her. Her body feels oddly familiar under my touch, constantly sliding away and freeing herself from any hold I try to maintain. I've rolled with a lot of women, but none were as skilled as her.

And none of them ever felt this good in my hands. Despite the intimate contact that is inherent to this sport, I never perceived these encounters as anything sexual—until today. The alluring way in which this girl moves her body around mine makes it almost impossible for me to focus. I'm bathing in her sweet scent and try not to be distracted by the touch of her firm boobs against my chest as she slides up along my body.

But it's too late.

I feel a shift in the dynamic between us as she fights her way out of my grip. Her technique is solid, her movements precise, and it's clear that she's well-versed in this sport.

And then it happens.

She transitions with a swiftness that takes me off guard. Her legs wrap around my head, and suddenly, I'm ensnared in a deadly triangle choke—with my head locked between her legs. Her thighs squeeze together with a vice-like grip, locking around my neck as her foot presses against my hip. The sensation is immediate, a constriction that threatens to cut off my oxygen supply, while my face is pushed into her crotch with surprising force.

My heart races as I assess my options, convinced that I can find a way out. I grit my teeth, pushing against her thighs, my fingers searching for an opening.

But the more I struggle, the more I realize the gravity of my mistake. Her technique is flawless, her pressure unyielding. With each passing

second, the darkness encroaches on the edges of my vision, and the realization sets in—I'm trapped.

In a last-ditch effort to salvage my dignity, I raise my hand and tap against her thigh, the sound a muted admission of defeat. She releases her hold in an instant, and as I gasp for air, she smirks down at me, her voice dripping with playful mockery when she says: “That was almost too easy.”

Confusion swirls in my mind, mingling with a newfound respect. I underestimated her, and gravely so.

With a rueful smile, I nod in acknowledgment, still catching my breath. “Fine, I’ll admit it, I underestimated you.”

“Most men do,” she mutters, and her expression darkens for a moment as if a shadow was cast over her. There is a sadness on her face that wasn’t there before, which makes me think that there is a lot more behind those words than she lets on.

She clears her throat and scoots over, while I get up to sit next to her. I’m still feeling lightheaded after almost losing consciousness between her legs. And of course, she notices.

“You should have tapped sooner,” she reprimands me. “I was beginning to worry.”

“I’m fine,” I lie, blinking as I fight to at least *appear* fine. “That was a fluke. I’ll know better next time.”

“Next time?” she asks. “I don’t think we have—”

The sensei cuts her off, “Okay guys, that was it for the day—for those who want to leave.” He’s standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by people drenched in sweat and the sound of heavy breathing filling the air. “This was today’s last class, but I’m still gonna

be here for a while, so please, stay for another roll or two if you want.”

My eyes find hers in an instant, and she nods before I can say a word.

“Looks like you’ll get another chance right now,” she says. “If you’re up for it?”

She doesn’t even try to hide the taunt in her voice, and the way she looks at me is tempting me more than it should.

“Oh, most definitely,” I say, as I place myself in position.

I will not go easy on her this time.

Chapter 3

Madison

I don't know what has gotten into me, but I know I don't want to leave yet—and I don't want him to leave either.

“Five minutes?” he asks as he sets his watch.

“Should be enough,” I retort, throwing him a defiant look.

No wonder you haven't had a boyfriend in ages. I can practically hear my friend Max's voice inside my head. He was a first-hand witness to the consequences of my unleashed temper and ill-considered behavior when both of us got booted from a party back in college. Another student—who was probably just trying to flirt with me—and I got into a very loud argument after he teased me about my “uninspired major” in economics. And the saddest part about this: I was attracted to the guy. I just couldn't handle his attention and reacted in the worst way possible.

Just like now.

Men don't like to be taunted, and they definitely don't like losing to a girl. My need to prove myself at any cost always turns too loud and vile when I lose my temper—and that happens all too easily.

Sadly, provocative banter is all I can come up with when I find myself rattled by someone like Chase. At least he doesn't seem to be fazed by my brazen attitude. So far, at least.

“I agree,” he says. “I shouldn't need longer than that to put you in your place.”

Something about ‘being put in my place’ by him sounds awfully

intriguing, but I try to ignore the surge of excitement that flares up inside me.

He is two belts below me, but he is a man. A strong guy, whose upper arms are almost as thick as my legs. I'm no match for his strength, no matter how much better my technique may be. I could only submit him this easily during our first roll because he underestimated me.

He almost looks angry when we get into position, and he regards me with a visible line between his brows. It's evident that he has no intention of holding back this time.

Our bodies begin to move, a dance of controlled strength and strategy. I can feel his eyes on me, his determination palpable as he seeks to even the score after my previous victory.

I seize the opportunity and attempt a Guillotine Choke, hoping to catch him off guard. But this time, Chase is quick to react, his well-practiced defenses coming into play. The sensation of his body against mine is electrifying. I can feel his effort to escape my hold, his breath warm against my neck as he counters my move. The feel of his hard muscles tensing under my touch makes my head churn and I'm thrown off balance when his intoxicating scent envelopes me.

I can't help the heat rushing to my cheeks when I'm pressed against his rock-hard chest and my right hand gets stuck right at his crotch, firmly caressing his bulge. Squished in his grip, I try to free my hand, forcing me to slide it along his undoubtedly impressive length. Startled by the sensation, I lose focus for a second, which is just enough for him to turn the tables.

In an instant, he's on top of me. Our faces are just inches apart, his

intense gaze locked onto mine. Our breaths synchronize, the rhythm of our efforts creating an unspoken connection.

The timer's abrupt chime breaks the charged atmosphere, signaling the end of our five-minute round.

“Almost,” he lets out a menacing whisper, and I feel his hot breath dance across the sensitive skin above my upper lip.

A smirk plays at the corner of his mouth, and I swear he must feel my heart beating against his chest, considering the force with which my pulse is galloping at the moment. He holds me in place with his weight, as if we were still rolling, not making a move to let me go—while my body is turning to jello beneath him.

“You didn’t submit me,” I remind him, relieved that my voice is not trembling as much as I feared it would.

“That’ll come, don’t worry,” he vows.

There’s a sinister promise in his voice, and for a moment I get the feeling he’s not talking about jiu jitsu.

I have to stop this. This is neither the time nor place.

He rolls off of me when I begin squirming underneath him, and we separate, catching our breaths.

As I look at him, sweat-damp hair clinging to his forehead, I can see the fire in his eyes. The humiliation of his previous defeat still lingers, and yet, there's something deeper in his gaze—an acknowledgment of the growth that comes from such challenges. And it just makes him even more attractive.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“Madison.”

“Nice to meet you, Maddie—”

“No, Madison,” I cut him off. “I hate it when people call me Maddie.”
He chuckles. “Fine, *Madison*. How long have you been doing this?”

“Longer than you I presume,” I reply, evidently unable to answer his question like a normal person. “You’re a blue belt, right?”

“Correct,” he responds instantly. “You?”

“Was just promoted to brown,” I say, adding a wink that belies my fluttering nerves. “Told you.”

“Congrats! I’m not gonna lie, it’s a relief hearing that.”

“It is?”

“Yeah, no shame in being submitted by someone who is two belts above you, right?” he explains. “I’m not gonna let it happen again though.”

Now he’s the one winking, and I—of course—react like a nervous teenager, by averting my eyes and hoping to God that he doesn’t see the shades of red blossoming on my face.

“Have you always been at this dojo?” he asks, gesturing around the room. We’re not the only people left, but there are only a handful of other people around, most of them still engaged in a strenuous roll.

“I didn’t get started here, but I’ve been coming here for a while,” I tell him. “Today is your first time here?”

He nods. “Heard a lot about that Raymond guy and came here to check him out. I hear he takes on a few private clients, and I wanted to see if he’s as good as they say.”

“He’s very selective.”

That doesn’t seem to impress him at all, and he just shrugs in response. “Doubt he’d say no to me, I can pay.”

I shake my head at his arrogance. “Money isn’t all that matters.”

“It is, in my experience.”

I’m not sure whether he’s trying to impress me, but if he is, it’s not working. On the contrary, it makes me want to get up and leave. This city is full of arrogant alpha dudes like him. Guys who think they own the world and everybody in it, just because they’re sitting on a successful business or an otherwise accumulated mountain of wealth.

His eyes are latched onto me as I get back on my feet, awkwardly balancing around him.

“I have to go,” I announce. “Guess I’ll see you around?”

I’m trying to play it cool, unwilling to let him know how much his presence unravels me. But while I was able to display a level of confidence in my voice, the same doesn’t hold true for my ability to walk straight, and I almost trip when I try to pivot on my toes.

“I guess you will,” he responds, looking up at me with a poised expression.

For a moment, it looks like he wants to say something else, but he closes his mouth before the words can leave his lips.

And he doesn’t try to hold me back when I walk away.

Chapter 4

Chase

I should have said something. Right then and there, I should have stopped her and asked her out. She would have said yes—they always do—and I could have my way with her, without having any limiting rules or clothes between us.

If I'd done that, I wouldn't be plagued with this ongoing chatter inside my head, telling me to go after the first—and last—girl to ever submit me on the mat.

I can't stop thinking about her when I leave the training room. Her taunting smile haunts me as I shower, and her coy remarks echo inside my head while I'm getting changed. And that attitude of hers. How much fun it would be to spank that out of her...

My cock rises to attention at the thought of it, and I realize that I have to divert my thoughts to something less enthralling.

Raymond is still around when I'm ready to leave, but instead of walking up to him to ask about his private lessons like I had intended, I find myself glancing at the women's changing room as I walk toward the front door. She may still be in there or she might be long gone. I'm hoping to see her lingering outside when I push the door open, and I can't suppress a solemn sigh of disappointment when I don't see her around.

I consider walking back inside to talk to Raymond as planned but decide that this conversation can wait. I'll have to return to the dojo anyway if I want another chance with that Madison girl.

As I head toward my car, a gleaming, expensive vehicle catches my eye in the parking lot when someone opens the trunk and the evening sun is reflected on the shiny metal, piercing right into my eyes. A black Bugatti. It stands out among the other cars on this lot, as this is not the kind of neighborhood that's inhabited by people who can afford a car like that. People like me. I'm a visitor in this neighborhood and was careful not to drive my Maybach when I came here but opted for my much more sensible BMW instead.

My steps slow and I crane my neck to see who is standing behind the car, loading something in the open trunk. I don't have to wonder for long, as the trunk gets closed just a few moments later, revealing the driver of this magnificent vehicle.

It's Madison.

She's a sight to behold, her lean and tall figure now wrapped in tight-fitting leggings in a blinding pink and a black off-shoulder shirt that reveals her delicate collarbone on one side.

I pause as I watch her, a mixture of admiration and intrigue dancing in my thoughts. She's a few yards away and I would either have to call out or run over to get her attention. She's moving to the driver's seat with wide and bouncy steps, her long hair now cascading down her back and dancing in the breeze around her shoulders.

An unexpected twist of suspicion creeps into my head. A car like that isn't something you'd expect someone still in the early stages of their career or training to be driving. And she's young, probably younger than me.

Young and pretty.

My mind begins to wander down a path I didn't intend to tread. A

thought lodges itself firmly in my mind. I doubt that many people do the kind of research that I've been doing before deciding to drive all the way over here, simply based on the reputation of the local sensei. This is not one of the wealthiest parts of town, and most people who attend this dojo probably do so because they live nearby. I'm sure the same holds true for her, which means that it's very unlikely that she bought this car herself. She might not even own it.

The words "gold digger" cross my mind, a term that gets thrown around a lot in this city, and especially in my circle. I frown, frustrated with myself for letting my thoughts wander into such territory. It may not be true, but if it is, she's already committed to some wealthy douchebag, which would make things a lot harder—but not impossible.

And if it's not true...

She opens the door to the driver's seat, and as she's about to get into the car, I finally make up my mind and set my feet into motion. But just as I finally take action, my phone erupts with a tedious ring and stops me in my tracks.

Diverted, I reach into my pocket and answer the call, while I watch Madison from afar, as she fastens her seatbelt.

Fuck, it's too late now.

"Man, you wouldn't believe the shit I have to put up with," my friend Logan bemoans from the other end of the line. "These Vanguarders are a real pain in the ass."

"Told you! A loaded bank account is not enough to convince those motherfuckers," I retort absentmindedly, my eyes still locked on her. "I don't even understand why you're so desperate to join their dumb

club.”

Madison is still getting settled in her car, checking the mirrors and looking down at her phone, before she places it somewhere next to the steering wheel.

“I’m not desperate,” Logan insists.

He has been trying to become a member of an illustrious douchebag club—the Vanguard Society—for ages because he thinks that joining them will clear his name from its association with his family’s dirty business. A business that he never liked to talk about, even among our close group. The Plutus Boys is what we used to call ourselves back in college.

“Even if you do get in, you’ll still be a Reid,” I remind him after listening to another round of his ranting. “Unless you marry and take your wife’s name.”

Logan scoffs, and I think about our little get together a couple of weeks ago. We all met up in Boston to celebrate the thirtieth birthday of Aston, the oldest in our group. The occasion was important to all of us because it marked a major milestone for a goal that each of us declared during college: To become a billionaire by the time we turn thirty years old. We all made it—and then drunkenly made another pact, that might be even more ridiculous.

I can hear Madison starting her car across the parking lot, and her vehicle starts moving a moment later.

“Hey,” I say, “you know what? Why don’t you just do that? Find a wife! You remember our pact, don’t you? Just kill two birds with one stone.”

“Solid advice,” he laments. “But you know I have no intention of

hobbling myself with a nagging wife.”

“Get one that doesn’t nag, then!” I reply—as I watch Madison leave the parking lot in her gleaming black Bugatti.

She’d be a nag for sure, and a stubborn one at that. *Not wife material*, I decide.

Which is fine, because I sure as hell am not looking for a wife, pact or no pact.

Chapter 5

Madison

“See, *this* is what you need!” Max exclaims, twirling his hand in the air.

The soft glow of the chandeliers casts a warm ambiance over the plush, velvety seats of this place. Mirrored panels reflect the golden hues, creating an illusion of an endless space, and amplifying the sense of luxury. The scent of aged wood and polished brass lingers in the air, mingling with the faint hum of conversations and the gentle clinking of glasses.

Max and I are sitting at the bar, two martinis resting elegantly in front of us, a perfect picture of after-work relaxation—at least he is. Me, not so much. I’m struggling to pull my shoulder down from my ears and relax the tight clamp of stress that’s stifling my body.

“Drinks, atmosphere, me! What more could you want,” Max goes on, raising his martini to me.

We clink glasses and I take a sip of my drink, the crisp taste of the gin offering a momentary distraction from the whirlwind of thoughts that have been racing through my mind all day.

“I’m trying,” I assure him. “I really am... but after the week I’ve had, it’s just...”

“Okay, so, spill,” Max encourages, his tone light and teasing. “What’s got you all riled up now?”

I exhale a long sigh, my fingers tracing the rim of my glass, as I wonder where to start. Maybe not with the handsome, yet flustering

stranger at the dojo? Leave the best for last, isn't that what they say?

I decide to start with something a little less thrilling, letting out a long sigh while I can already feel my pulse accelerating just thinking about the last conversation I had with my uncle.

“My uncle just won't let it go. He's still insisting on selling. The company my father built from the ground up and then entrusted to me. Apparently, this all means nothing to Walter. I've tried to reason with him for weeks, but now he informed me that we have a potential buyer, and we're supposed to meet him next week,” I gush. “I said no, of course. I'm not talking to any buyer, ever. Why can't he take me seriously? None of them ever do. I feel like I'm tilting at windmills, and I'm just so... exhausted by all of this.”

Max looks at me with a concerned expression on his face and places a consoling hand on my shoulder. “Is there really nothing you can do to stop this?”

“Walter has the same amount of shares as me. 37.5 percent, to be precise. Dad wanted us to hold a majority between us, so no major decisions could be made by Mr. Wahlon, who holds the remaining 25 percent,” I reply. “He thought my uncle and I would always see eye to eye. He never wanted for us to argue.”

I feel my voice breaking and pause to have another sip of my drink. The warmth of the alcohol soothes me a little, but it fails to mute the angry turmoil inside my head. And it does even less to help with the sting of pain that still aches inside me every time I think about my father. It has been almost a year since he succumbed to cancer and followed my mother into the grave. I never really got to know her, because she died when I was still an infant, so I never grieved her

death the way I grief his.

We all knew it was coming for a long time, and Dad spent his last living months preparing me to fill the role as his successor. He was the only man in that harsh business environment who never belittled me. The only man who took me seriously, who talked to me like a peer and not like a little girl who was visiting her daddy on ‘bring your daughter to work day’. I never lost my temper with him, because he never gave me a reason to.

He would hate what my uncle is trying to do right now, and he clearly didn’t see it coming.

Max’s hand lands on mine, offering a reassuring squeeze. “This fucking sucks, I’m so sorry,” he says in a low voice. “But nothing is set in stone, right? And it’s not like he can do anything without you being on board. You are the CEO, after all.”

“He might, if he convinces the other investor to go along with it,” I say. “But from what I gather, this is supposed to be an all-or-nothing deal. So, yes, they do need to convince me.”

“Which they never will!” Max declares. “You got this, Madison. Your father knew you would, that’s why he appointed you the CEO, and not your uncle.”

I scoff. “Maybe that was just because he knew that my uncle was ready to retire soon anyway... I mean, I’m just—”

“Don’t,” Max interjects, pointing at me with his index finger. “Don’t you dare to downplay your own worth, Miss Hailey. Don’t listen to the assholes out there. You are a badass business bitch, who knows her shit. MBA from an excellent school, years of experience, brains, determination, coura—”

“Max, please,” I cut him off, chuckling as I place my hand on his shoulder. “Okay, okay, I get it.”

I know he’s right and I should listen to him.

“What do we always say?” Max implores.

I sigh. “Never let them dim your fire.”

“Never let them dim your fucking fire!” he repeats. “Damn straight. Can’t believe I’m the one who has to remind you of that.”

We share a laugh, and I smile at him as Max brings his almost empty drink up to his lips. Years ago, I was the one who came up with that saying, when I encouraged him to live his truth. A truth that entails earrings, and make-up, and dresses, and heels, if that’s what he’s into that week.

Today, at first glance he looks almost boringly normal, dressed up in a black shirt and black pants, black shoes, black everything. His subdued attire allows for the golden glitter above his eyelids to shine even brighter, standing out against his raven hair and brows. This is a rather nice bar, so I fixed myself up as well, wearing a silk blouse in coral and a black mini skirt with matching heels. But I still feel bland and boring next to Max. I always do.

“You know what you need, right? To relax and chill. Stressing about it won’t solve anything,” he says, as he catches the bartender’s attention to order another round for us.

I roll my eyes playfully, the corners of my lips twitching upward. “Yes, Dr. Max. I’ve been trying. I thought a little exercise would help, but...”

An exasperated sigh leaves my lips as I think about yesterday’s encounter on the mat. That guy, Chase, has been occupying what little

space is left in my head far more than I'm willing to admit.

"Buuut...?" Max probes.

"Ugh, it's... this guy—"

"A guy!" he erupts, almost falling off of his barstool. "We have been sitting here for almost an hour and only now you mention that there's *a guy?*"

We're shortly interrupted when the bartender exchanges our empty glasses for two new martinis, but I can feel Max's eyes on me the entire time, anxiously waiting for me to elaborate.

"It's nothing like that!" I insist as we clink glasses anew. Even I know I'm lying, as I go on. "His name is Chase. He's new at the dojo. Tall, ridiculously good-looking—but that's not the point—arrogant, incredibly condescending. You know, the kind of guy who thinks he's God's gift to the world or something."

The smile on Max's face widens with every sentence I speak, and I know why. He can read me like a book.

"I submitted him!" I hurry to announce. "We were paired up to roll, and he's all 'Oh, I'm gonna go easy on you, little weak girl', you know, thinking I wouldn't stand a chance against him. It didn't even occur to him that I may be better than him, that I am in fact *two whole belts* above him."

"You guys aren't wearing your belts during class?"

"No, only for gi classes. This was a no-gi class."

Max nods. "Okay. So he had no way of knowing."

"He could have asked!" I say.

"Maybe he wanted to be put in his place by a girl," Max suggests, winking at me. "Some guys are into that, you know."

I shake my head. “No. He was just a presumptuous douchebag. I mean, he was strong; all muscles, and agile, and surprisingly quick. And he put up a good fight, we even stayed after class ended and—”

“Oh, *now* you’re talking!” Max inserts, arching his eyebrows seductively. “You stayed after class? To do what?”

“It’s not what you think. We stayed for another roll,” I tell him—and he chuckles.

“Oh, no, that is exactly what I was thinking,” he says, visibly amused. “You two, rolling together.”

Max’s lips twitch, a knowing glint in his eyes.

I roll my eyes at him, feeling the heat creep up my neck. “Oh, shut up. It’s not like that. He’s just... annoying as hell.”

Max leans closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Uh-huh. Annoying. And totally not your type, right?”

I meet his gaze, my eyes narrowing as I try to play it cool. “Please, Max. I’m not interested in him like that.”

“Sure,” he says. The expression on his face lets me know that he doesn’t believe a word I say—and I can’t blame him. Max is the last person on the planet who I could ever lie to.

“You know, it’s no shame to be attracted to other people,” he says, almost sounding like a well-meaning aunt.

“I don’t have time for a boyfriend,” I argue.

“Well, since you bark at every man who ever dares to come close to you, I’m sure we don’t have to worry about that, do we?” he asks, raising a reproachful eyebrow at me. “But there’s no shame in simply having a little fun,” he goes on, and a wicked smile appears on his face. “Not everybody has to be a boring Mr. Monogamous in a long-term

relationship like me.”

“You’re definitely not boring,” I argue.

“Well, I’m definitely getting laid more than you,” he retorts. “I mean, when was the last time you had a little fun? I know you’re not a fan of one-night stands, but a little fling? No harm in that!”

“Not with someone from the dojo!” I object. “It would be too awkward. Way, way, way too awkward, trust me.”

He sighs and rolls his eyes at me.

“What a pity,” he says.

And a part of me wants to agree.

Chapter 6

Madison

The morning sun streams through the tall windows of the office, casting a warm glow across the polished floors. I've always appreciated these quiet moments before the chaos of the workday descends upon me.

Today, however, that tranquility is short-lived. As I settle into my office chair and start scrolling through my emails, Ann-Marie, my usually unflappable assistant, storms into my office, her brows knitted in annoyance.

"Madison, there's a meeting scheduled for this morning," she says, her voice edged with frustration. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I look up, surprised by her reaction. "A meeting? I didn't schedule any meetings for today."

She crosses her arms, her confusion palpable. "Well, neither did I. I just found out about it myself, and I had no clue you were in the dark, too."

I furrow my brow, my concern deepening. "What kind of meeting? And when?"

"Pretty much right now, at nine thirty." Ann-Marie shrugs, her confusion mirroring my own. "I don't know what this is about. I only got a vague notification about it from your uncle's assistant. It's in the conference room."

I know right away that something isn't right here. There's only one reason why my uncle would schedule a last-minute meeting without

telling me about it and without giving me any time to prepare for it. And it wasn't a good one.

"Do you want me to call her back and ask?" Ann-Marie wants to know.

My mind races as I stand up, my chair scraping against the floor. "No, thank you. I'll go and see for myself."

She nods, her expression still slightly miffed. "Let me know if you need anything."

I stride down the hallway, the heels of my shoes clicking on the marble floor. My thoughts are a whirlwind of frustration and suspicion. I've been steadfast in my determination to keep my father's legacy alive, to protect the company he built from the ground up. I know my uncle sees things differently, but I never expected him to stoop so low as to arrange a meeting without my knowledge.

As I reach the conference room, the door looms in front of me like a barrier to secrets I'm not prepared to face. I take a deep breath, my hand gripping the handle as I push the door open.

The scene that greets me, however, is not what I anticipated. I only find my uncle's assistant bustling about, arranging documents and setting up the room for the meeting.

My brows knit in confusion. "Where's my uncle?"

The assistant, a middle-aged woman named Margaret, looks up from her task and offers me a sympathetic smile. "Madison, I'm so sorry you had to find out like this."

I can feel her eyes on me as I reach for a pile of documents on the table in front of me. My fingers tighten around the document I'd picked up, my eyes scanning its contents. "What is this? *'Up-and-*

coming 3D printing technology? This doesn't make sense. My uncle has always opposed investing in 3D printing. We have been arguing about this for months. And now, he suddenly arranges a meeting about this, without telling me?"

Margaret sighs, her gaze sympathetic. "I know this must be a shock to you. But your uncle has been having discussions behind the scenes. He's considering this offer seriously."

"*Offer?!*" I'm almost screeching at this point. "How can there be an offer? I never agreed to any of this!"

My confusion deepens as I glance around the conference room, the pieces of the puzzle not fitting together. "Did he really think he could go through with this without telling me?"

Margaret's expression grows rueful. "He gave me strict instructions to not let your office know until this morning. I'm really sorry, Madison. You know I wouldn't just—"

"No, of course not, it's not your fault," I hurry to assure her.

Margaret has always been a sweetheart to me, and she loved my father. It must be hard for her to be put in the middle like this.

I lower my head to look at the document in my hands again. The irony isn't lost on me. My uncle, who'd always criticized my ideas about 3D printing, is now secretly considering a deal centered around that very technology. A bitter taste rises in my mouth as I realize the extent of his deception.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Margaret asks, already standing by the door and ready to leave.

"Thank you, Margaret," I say with a nod, my voice tinged with frustration. "I'll handle it from here."

She offers me an apologetic smile before quietly leaving the room. As the door closes behind her, I'm left alone with my thoughts and the documents that hold the key to this unexpected turn of events.

Sinking into a chair, I read through the papers, absorbing the details of the potential deal. It's a lucrative offer. Very lucrative, in fact. Under any other circumstance, I would praise my uncle for being able to bring such a generous offer to the table. But this is not about money.

I check the time and realize that the meeting will not start for another ten minutes. Just enough time to confront my uncle and possibly bring a halt to all of this before it even begins.

I tuck the documents under my arm, my mind set on confronting my uncle, and I storm out of the conference room. But as I try to turn left, to head for my uncle's office, I'm stopped dead in my tracks when I bump right into a large, suit-wearing individual.

The pile of documents falls out of my hand, gently floating down to the ground and piling up around my feet as I stare up in disbelief.

Standing before me, in a dark gray suit, sporting an annoyingly charismatic smile while he crosses his strong arms in front of his chest, is the pesky but sexy stranger from the dojo—Chase.

Chapter 7

Chase

Once again, I have rendered her speechless. But this time, she's not the only one fighting for words. Her presence in this hallway is the last thing I expected. The sterile fluorescent lights overhead cast a stark glare on the polished linoleum floors of the office building, almost blinding me as I try to make sense of the sight of her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" The question escapes my lips before my brain registers how confrontational it sounds.

Her appearance commands attention in the most unassuming way. She's dressed in a business chic ensemble, a fitted pencil skirt that accentuates her graceful figure, and a blouse that radiates an air of confidence. The soft ivory hue of her top contrasts elegantly with the black of her skirt, a juxtaposition that's both refined and striking.

She blinks, caught off guard by my abruptness. "Excuse me? I could ask you the same thing." Her tone is equal parts confusion and irritation. "What are *you* doing here?"

I'm starting to realize how obnoxious my question might have been, now that she's throwing it back at me in the same aggressive manner.

"I have a meeting with the CEO," I explain, my voice tinged with a hint of defensiveness.

Her eyes follow mine as I gesture towards the conference room door she just walked out of. There's a brief moment where her gaze sharpens, as if she's assessing my credibility. Then she turns around and looks back and forth between me and the door, her expression a

mixture of skepticism and surprise.

Her chestnut hair is swept up into an updo, the intricate twists and pins revealing the meticulous attention to detail she's poured into her appearance. The updo highlights the graceful curve of her neck, drawing my gaze to the delicate line where her skin meets the edge of her blouse.

"With the CEO? Here?" Her words come out as a soft murmur, almost as if she's trying to process the improbable information.

I nod, confirming her suspicion. "Yes, right here."

"At nine-thirty?" There's disbelief in her voice, a pinch of incredulity.

My affirmation seems to baffle her further.

"That's correct," I say, unable to hide a faint smile. It's intriguing how much her reaction has shifted from annoyance to astonishment.

Suspicion begins to dawn on me. Could she be part of this meeting? Is that why she's here? The thought adds a layer of complexity to this already bewildering interaction.

She looks at me, her brow furrowed, and I can't help but notice how her eyes narrow slightly when she's trying to figure something out. She's beautiful, even in her confusion, and I can't help but be captivated by the intensity of her expression.

"I can't believe this," she whispers, more to herself than to me. Then, she looks up at me, incredulity lining her face when she asks: "Who are you?"

I'm taken aback at her question, and just shake my head in confusion.

I decide to lighten the mood, my lips curving into a playful smile.

“Well, considering we met a few days ago at the dojo, I’d say my name is still Chase.”

She rolls her eyes at me and crosses her arms in front of her chest, inevitably drawing attention to her cleavage as her tits get pushed together under the thin fabric of the silky blouse.

She manages a small smile, the tension between us slightly easing. But her curiosity doesn’t wane, and she’s quick to pry further. “Okay, Chase. Why are you here, and who are you meeting with?”

“I just told you, I’m meeting the CEO,” I repeat. “Why is this so hard to believe? Do you think I’m lying?”

“The CEO of Medinex Solutions?”

“That’s the one.”

I’m starting to get irritated at her behavior, and she only makes it worse with her next question.

“And you don’t know that person’s name?”

She pierces me with a stern look, her eyes narrowed and the hint of a line between her brows, while she waits for me to speak.

“Hailey,” I respond. “His name is Mr. Hailey. I feel like you should know that. Don’t you work here? Are you his secretary?”

I only venture a guess at that last part because she knows about the meeting and I saw her coming out of the conference room just now, which would indicate that she was getting the room ready for her boss’s meeting.

She sighs and rolls her eyes even harder, before pinching her nose, as she lowers her head.

“That is just so—”

“Mr. Keaton!”

A man in his late sixties is marching toward us, followed by a middle-aged woman in a brown pantsuit. Atop his head, a well-polished balding crown reflects the overhead lighting as he comes to a halt in front of me.

“Walter Hailey. It’s so nice to finally meet you in person,” he says, stretching his hand out for me to shake.

He stands with a slight stoop, his demeanor a mix of authority and experience. His tailored charcoal gray suit drapes his slightly rounded shoulders and his more rounded belly, softened by years of hearty meals.

I’m just about to follow his invitation and reach out to shake his hand when I’m interrupted by Madison, who steps between us in a sudden and surprisingly fierce motion.

“You!” she yells, pointing at him with her index finger. “How dare you do this! How did you think this could ever work?”

“Good gracious, Madison,” Mr. Hailey says in a low voice, casting me a quick side-eye. “This is no way to introduce yourself to—”

“Are you seriously going to lecture me about how we do things around here?” she interrupts him. “You know I’m not on board with this! You know I don’t want to sell, and you definitely know that I have no intention whatsoever of talking to a potential buyer. Because: *We. Are. Not. Selling!*”

Her voice raises by more than a few decibels, causing the other woman to take a step back, while her hand flies up to her chest and her lips part with a shocked gasp.

“Madison, control your temper,” Mr. Hailey snaps back at her, while casting a worried look in my direction.

He has every reason to be worried, because I sure as hell am very confused and angry right now.

Madison's nostrils flare, her anger unfurling like a storm. "Control my temper? You arranged this meeting behind my back!"

What? What the fuck is going on here?

He scoffs, his voice dripping with condescension. "You have no idea what's best for the company. This is a strategic move."

I can't believe what I'm looking at right now. I've had my fair share of wild business encounters, and I knew this meeting wasn't going to be easy sledding, but I did not see *this* coming. In fact, I still don't know what exactly this is.

But I do know that I can't help but admire the fire in her—her heated temper coloring her cheeks with an endearing blush and making her blue eyes stand out even more. My lips curve into an appreciative smile as I step forward to place a hand on her shoulder.

She flinches under my touch but doesn't shy away. Instead, she turns to look up at me, fire still burning and eyes narrowed to slits. Her lips are trembling, and once again, she's struggling to find the right words.

"I'm sorry, but could someone enlighten me as to what exactly is going on here?" I say in the calmest manner possible.

"Oh, I'm very sorry about this," Mr. Hailey says.

I notice the way his eyes flit to my lingering hand on her shoulder, but he doesn't say anything about it. Instead, he glances at me with an apologetic smile.

"This is my niece, Madison," he says—and I remove my hand from her shoulder.

“Your... niece?” I repeat in disbelief.

If she is this man’s niece, that means...

“And the newly appointed CEO of this company,” Madison concludes.

Of course she is. I’m too baffled to hide my surprise at that revelation, and she is visibly enjoying the look of astonishment on my face, apparent from the winning smile that emerges on hers.

“*You* are the CEO?” I blurt out, sounding like an idiot.

“Well, like she said, Madison’s newly appointed and still learning—”

“Which doesn’t mean I can be excluded from the planning of a meeting like this,” she interjects—and I have to agree. If what I’m hearing right now is true, Madison has every reason to be furious at her uncle’s behavior. That man made me believe he was the person in charge, overruling the CEO’s voice of this company.

“He planned all of this behind my back, probably hoping I would change my mind about selling,” she explains to me, pointing an accusing finger at her uncle.

“I’m still on the board, Madison, and until recently, I was the one in your chair, so—”

“But you no longer are!” she yells at him, startling Mr. Hailey’s seemingly mute assistant anew. “I am in charge now, and I say we don’t sell!”

“That is not how things work!”

The tension in the air is palpable, the anger in Madison’s eyes clashing with her uncle’s stubborn resolve. And as the exchange between them threatens to escalate, I decide that there is nothing to gain by watching them argue like this. I really want this deal, but not

like this—and I don't want to spend another second in this man's vicinity. He clearly doesn't respect Madison the way he should and uses dubious tactics to get what he wants. She is the only person that matters, the only person I need to talk to.

"There has obviously been a great misunderstanding here," I interject. "I think it's best for me to come back another time."

"Mr. Keaton, please," Mr. Hailey tries to soothe me. "Please excuse my niece's behavior, she doesn't know what she's talking about."

I can see her gasp for air from the corner of my eye, but I get in between, before she gets to erupt again.

"To be honest, Mr. Hailey, I don't feel comfortable attending a meeting that has been arranged under these circumstances." My eyes find hers for a split second, and I see her shoulders relax a little. "If the CEO has not been informed about this meeting and has had no chance to prepare, there is very little point in talking today. I can't work like this."

Mr. Hailey sighs and flails his arms in disappointment while casting his niece an aggravated look, as if to say, 'See what you did now?'

"Have a good day," I say, nodding at him first before I turn to her. "Madison."

She's smiling when she nods me goodbye, though I'm hoping it's not because she thinks I'm going to let the opportunity go this easily. I've had an eye on this investment for a long time, and I will get what I want. I always do.

Just not today. And not like this.

Madison complicates things, but with a little luck, I can kill two birds with one stone here: Get her into my bed, and her company into

my hands.

Chapter 8

Chase

It doesn't take long until I hear her footsteps approaching from behind. I've reached the elevator and I'm just about to push the button to go down when she calls to me behind my back.

What a good girl.

"Chase!" Her voice carries through the hallway, a note of desperation beneath its firmness.

I pause, my hand lingering near the elevator button. I knew she would do this. I knew from that subtle smile that she would want to talk to me without her uncle present.

She reaches me, her breath slightly uneven from her hurried pursuit. "I'm sorry," she says, her voice softer now, contrite. "I didn't mean to blow up like that. And I'm sorry for wasting your time."

I meet her gaze, her eyes a storm of emotions. It's clear that her argument with her uncle has rattled her, but there's also an undercurrent of vulnerability that she's trying to conceal.

I shake my head, a faint smile playing on my lips.

"Doesn't look like he takes you very seriously," I offer.

She runs a hand through her hair, her frustration still palpable. "You have no idea. We have been arguing about this for weeks. I can't believe he did this."

I can't help but empathize with her frustration, even though I don't like hearing that she's this adamant in her stance not to sell.

"Neither can I," I offer. "That was highly unprofessional—and

disrespectful toward you.”

Her eyes widen, and she parts her lips, seemingly in awe. “Well... um, yes. Yes, it was.”

She looks positively surprised at my acknowledgment of her struggles. Great. This is exactly what I was hoping for. I can only imagine how tough it must be for someone like her to hold her ground in a world that is dominated by older men and assholes like myself. To most of these idiots, she’ll never be more than a little girl who doesn’t deserve to be taken seriously.

And I’ll be the knight in shining armor who gives her the respect she deserves, the one and only man who doesn’t make her feel like a little kid at a grownup party.

A small sigh escapes her lips, and she glances away as if trying to gather her thoughts. “Are you just a representative or are you the CEO of Keaton Care Solutions?” Her question is straightforward, but I sense an underlying curiosity.

I raise an eyebrow, mildly surprised by the question. “I’m the CEO.”

The response seems to catch her off guard, and a flicker of realization crosses her features.

“So, you really are the guy who wants to buy my father’s company,” she says. “I have researched you, or, well, your company. You have a reputation for aggressive acquisitions.”

Hearing that fills me with pride, and I’m sporting a wide smile as I nod. “Best way to grow, wouldn’t you agree? That’s what you’ve been doing for the past year, too. I’ve been quite impressed by your achievements, Madison.”

I know she won’t be able to resist my charm, and convincing her to

sell will be so much easier once she finds herself in my bed, properly fucked, pleased and content in my arms. I will no longer be the asshole who wants to take her company away from her, but instead I'll be her confidant, a person she trusts with her life—and her business.

The expression on her face tenses. “What do you want with Medinex Solutions? Why are you so keen to make us part of your so-called empire?”

“You're the best when it comes to prosthesis technology, and I hear you're planning to adopt a new 3D printing method, soon?”

She really is the best. I don't even have to beguile her cute little head with lies.

But Madison just rolls her eyes. “Well, yes, if my uncle doesn't boycott that plan. He doesn't get it. He thinks that investment is a waste because he doesn't trust 3D printing. He never even did his own research. He's just against it because he has prejudices against things he doesn't understand, things which are new.”

“But the same is not true for you?”

Her brows curl into an angry grimace. “What do you mean?”

“Why are you so against selling?” I ask. “I'm planning a collaboration with the army, to provide soldiers with orthoses for combat injuries. A worthy cause, don't you think?”

“Oh, yeah, right, because *that's* why you're doing it,” she retorts. “Don't spin your bullshit here. You just want to expand and grow your own wealth like everybody else.”

“I'm not like everybody else,” I tell her. “You'll realize that soon enough.”

She actually blushes when I add a coy wink to my words. I can't

believe how well this is going.

“And it’s true that I want to grow, but I can’t do that without you,” I insist. “Yes, this buyout would be profitable for me in the long run, but it would also help to build something truly awesome. I believe in 3D printing just as much as you do.”

“We’re not selling,” she mutters. Her lips are pressed into a thin line when she looks up at me. “I think you should leave.”

She’s tough. Because she has to be. I can tell by the little tremors in her shoulders, how hard this is for her, and how much weight she is carrying, and how much all of this is stressing her out. I’ll have to be careful not to turn into another source of stress in her life.

“I agree,” I say, finally pushing the button for the elevator.

She’s still standing next to me as the doors slide open, her arms crossed in front of her chest and an intense look on her face. Even under the circumstances, I can’t get over how fucking beautiful she is, so strong and determined.

And she’s obviously very smart and capable. She had to be if her father decided to leave the company in her hands, despite her young age.

She is making things a lot more complicated than I had expected.

Luckily, I enjoy a good challenge.

Chapter 9

Madison

I'm still riled up from our conversation, my thoughts tangled in a web of frustration and conflicting emotions. The memory of his confident smile and his piercing gaze lingers in my mind. It's infuriating that he thinks he can just waltz into my life and my company, acting like he has the right to dictate its fate.

But beyond the anger, there's something else I'm struggling to admit—the fact that I can't stop thinking about him. I've never been this flustered by a man's presence. I've worked so hard to act practical and level-headed, and allowing myself to be attracted to someone who's set on buying my father's company is anything but practical.

He left when I told him he should, but his departure didn't feel like a final goodbye. That's fine with me; there's a twisted part of me that wants to see him again, to unravel the enigma that is Chase. As dangerous as that path may be.

Thank God, he's not here today. I looked for him when I entered the dojo, as if I wanted him to be here today. Which, of course, I don't. If anything, I need a break from him.

I've been submitting one guy after another, barely giving them a chance to even react to my vicious attacks. I know I should go easier on blue belts like the one I'm grappling with right now, but the thought of having to tame myself just enrages me even more.

“Dammit!” the guy hisses underneath me, his face pressed against the mat, while he manages to tap the floor with his one remaining

hand. His other arm is locked in a tight and unforgiving hold in my hands.

We're both breathing heavily when I let go of him, and he regards me with an annoyed look while climbing back into a seated position.

"Madison," I hear Raymond's voice behind me.

He's standing a few yards away and gestures for me to come closer. I get up on my feet, send a quick nod to the guy I just spared with, and walk over to Raymond.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his voice gentle but probing.

His expression is a mix of concern and understanding. It's like he can read my thoughts, sense the turmoil beneath my exterior.

I take a moment to gather myself, the intensity of the training session has stirred something within me. "Yeah, just blowing off steam."

Raymond nods, his gaze unwavering. "That's what I feared. You know this isn't the place for that, Madison. I've seen you go at it before, but today was different. Something's bothering you."

I hesitate, the weight of his words settling on my shoulders. He's right, of course. Chase's presence and his proposition have shaken me more than I'm willing to admit.

"It's just work stuff," I reply, trying to play it off as nonchalantly as I could. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't let it out on the mat."

It's not just work, though. It's so much more than that. My father's legacy, my dangerously stubborn uncle, our third shareholder, Mr. Wahlon, and his vague interests—and Chase. The man who gave me more than one reason to not stop thinking about him.

"No, you shouldn't. Not like that." Raymond studies me for a

moment, his eyes somehow filled with wisdom beyond his years. “Sometimes, physical exertion can help clear the mind. But other times, it’s a mask, a way to avoid facing what’s really bothering you.”

He places his hand on my shoulder, but luckily doesn’t seem to expect me to say anything to that. An encouraging smile is all that follows before he lets me be.

I sigh, as my tired gaze travels through the room. The class is still going, but I no longer feel the need to exert myself like I did before. It feels like that desire has been muted and pushed aside by shame about being scolded—and rightfully so. I could have hurt someone, and I don’t want to gain the reputation of being the crazy bitch who breaks people’s bones when she’s in a bad mood. I’m already dancing close enough to that reputation as it is.

Maybe Max is right, and I just need to find other ways to relax and let off steam. Easier said than done, though.

Especially as long as this Chase guy keeps haunting my mind.

Chapter 10

Chase

Three days have passed since that failed meeting, and I haven't heard a single word from Medinex Solutions—or Madison.

I expected to hear from Mr. Hailey, as he's the person I've been communicating with for weeks now, trying to get this deal gone. He was so persistent before, and he said he would call me again, but he hasn't. If I don't hear from him today, I'm going to take matters into my own hands. He still has a few hours to call before the day is over.

Did Madison really talk him out of it? After all, she's the one who holds the reins in that company.

I bet she hasn't even looked at the offer. She has no idea how rich this would make her. Why is she fighting me so stubbornly if she doesn't even know what's on the table? Why does she have to be so difficult?

I can't suppress a deep groan as I ponder the implications of the silence while my fingers tighten around the whiskey tumbler. Why is it so hard for me to get her out of my head? The plan was to come out here and have a drink and relax while I watch the sun set on the horizon.

I'm sitting out on the patio of my house, facing the ocean, and watching the waves crash as they meet the land. Venice Beach has been my home since I left college more than seven years ago. Living here was something I'd dreamed of ever since I could remember—but no one believed it was in the stars for me.

I wasn't as lucky as my peers, especially the three other Plutus boys. I grew up poor, without a father—he was a drunk who was in and out of my life for years until one day he disappeared completely—but with a devoted mother who more than made up for it. I wasn't the only one who worked his ass off to get here, she did, too.

She did everything for me, and sometimes more than needed. Worked several jobs, helped me with my studies and did everything that she could to get me into the best schools. Without her, I never would have gotten that much-needed scholarship to an Ivy League university. Without her, I wouldn't be where I am today.

My mother was the first person who benefitted from my growing success because I bought her a house as soon as I could. A nice cozy house in Newport, Rhode Island, where I grew up. My mother is still as modest and frugal as she was when she had to be, despite having all the money in the world now.

I fly over to the East Coast as often as I can and just came back from another visit with her and her boyfriend a couple of weeks ago. It was a little nauseating to see how fucking adorable they are together, I'll admit. And she threw me that look again. That '*do you really want to die alone?*' look, that's nothing but a question about my 'disappointing'—as she put it—personal life.

It's true that I've never had a real girlfriend, even though I have dated and fucked my fair share of beautiful women. I'm fine with that. Always have been, always will be. A relationship would take away too much of my time, and women never understand my drive for success. All they want is to 'hang out' and chill. That kind of life would drive me crazy. It would feel like being put in a cage, a way too small cage for a

predator like me.

I jerk up in surprise when my phone yanks me out of my solitary musings with an incoming call. It's not Mr. Hailey, but my old college friend Gabe, a Plutus boy.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Mr. Boulder," I greet him.

"How's it going, Chase?" he asks.

"Good, good," I respond languidly. "Just hanging out on the patio right now, taking it slow tonight. The weather is too nice not to."

"The weather is always nice in LA," he reminds me. "When did that ever slow down your hustle before?"

I detect a hint of jealousy in his voice. Unlike me, he still has to deal with the chilly East Coast weather.

"Touché. You're right, it doesn't," I admit. "But yeah, honestly, I needed a break from the office today. It's been a bit stressful lately. And all that traveling wore me out."

'All that traveling' was not much more than meeting my mother and one business associate who I used to work with when I helped Gabe start a legal technology platform years ago. I also met with him, while I was there, and advised him not to get back involved with his ex-girlfriend Ella. I'm pretty sure that was a futile attempt, but I don't want to ask him about that now. It would only make me angry.

"Your life is always stressful," he adds.

"Yeah, but not like this," I argue. "I'm trying to acquire another company for their technology, but they're fighting us for no apparent reason—led by the most infuriating bitch I've ever met."

That's a strong word to use, and I can't deny the little sting that pokes at my chest when I talk about Madison in that fashion. *Shit, I'm*

not getting myself in trouble here, am I?

“Doesn’t sound like something you can’t handle,” he says. “Especially in your position.”

“True, but man, that woman gets under my skin. Such a fucking snake,” I seethe, trying to ignore the stabs at my conscience. “At least she’s hot. Nice ass, nice lips, so there’s that. Eye candy always helps.”

He pauses, and I can sense that he is about to reprimand me before he even starts.

“You’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?” he inquires.

“What do you mean?” I retort. “You mean like... fucking her?”

I’m sure that’s exactly what he means, and I can’t believe that *he’s* the one warning *me* about doing something stupid after that bullshit he’s pulling with Ella.

“Fuck no, man! I’m not an idiot!” I burst out. “Never shit where you eat, remember? We’ve all seen what happened to Aston.”

Aston is the goody-goody of our group, but he’s the only one who ever got into trouble because of a woman. He was dumb enough to get caught dating one of his students. At least that’s what the rumor said, he always insisted that there was nothing to it and nothing ever happened, at least not while she was still enrolled. He was declared innocent after it came out that the girl in question was most likely lying, but shit like that sticks.

Gabe is right to warn me about dipping my pen in company ink, but I won’t give him the satisfaction of agreeing.

“Glad to hear that,” Gabe says.

“Besides, I haven’t forgotten about the pact,” I remark, mostly to tease him. “Not sure how serious you are about it, but I heard Logan

has something going on. Looks like he met someone.”

I know I’m getting Logan in trouble right now, but I don’t care. He would do the same to me, and there’s a good chance that Gabe knows more about what’s going on with him than I do. Gabe, Logan, and Aston all still live in the New England area or close to it, and they see each other way more often than I see any of them.

“What do you mean?” he asks, sounding surprised. “Last I heard, he said that pact thing was just a joke to him.”

Oh, that Goddamn pact. A pact for all of us to find a woman, get married, and produce an heir to our respective wealth. It was just a silly joke, something we said when we met on Aston’s 30th birthday.

“Sounds like he lied to you,” I maintain. “We talked briefly yesterday, and he mentioned there’s someone very special in his life now.”

Logan did mention a girl, and that she was helping him with something, but he wouldn’t tell me with what. Did he actually listen to me about finding a wife to get into that dumb club? I can’t imagine that.

“That’s impossible!” Gabe insists.

“That’s what I thought, too!” I agree. “Maybe he’s lying—or he’s taking this pact thing a lot more seriously than us... or me, at least. Don’t know about you?”

I shake my head violently, adding a dismissive scoff—as if that could stop Madison’s face from emerging before my inner eye.

“No, man, I have other things on my mind. We were only joking about that anyway, weren’t we?”

I hear another call coming in, which brings an abrupt end to our

conversation. This could be Mr. Hailey.

“I’m getting another call, sorry, this could be important—can we talk later?”

“Sure, no problem,” he replies—and I breathe a quick “thanks” and “bye,” before I hang up.

And it’s a good thing I did, because the call is in fact from Mr. Hailey.

Chapter 11

Madison

I promised my uncle that we would sit down and talk about what happened, now that I've had some time to calm down from our encounter.

I doubt that it will be enough, though. Things have not become easier since the introduction of a potential buyer who keeps turning my head. I haven't seen or talked to Chase since that day, but his presence inside my mind has been uncomfortably loud nevertheless.

It's ten o'clock in the morning and I'm waiting for Walter in my office. I told him that this is where I would see and talk to him. A total power move, I know. It's something a man would do, intimidating his counterpart by inviting them to his own territory. This used to be his office, which he shared with my father when he was still alive and working. He got all buddy-buddy with Dad, even though they had never been close before.

My uncle makes his own power move by showing up late. It's almost ten minutes past our agreed meeting time when his face appears in my open door.

"Sorry," he starts, barely looking at me as he hurries to the seat opposite me. "Traffic was insane, you know how it is."

He looks every bit the successful businessman, dressed in a tailored suit with an air of authority that always manages to unnerve me.

I take a deep breath and gather the strength to say the things I have to say.

“Uncle Walter,” I begin, my voice steady but cautious. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior the other day. I shouldn’t have lost my temper and yelled at you like that. It was unprofessional and disrespectful.”

He leans back in his chair, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He seems pleased by my apology, but I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing me cower.

“I appreciate your apology, Madison,” he replies, his tone measured. “It’s important to control your emotions in a professional setting. Your impulsiveness really is a weakness you need to address.”

I nod, acknowledging his words without revealing the internal struggle that led to my outburst. But I don’t want this conversation to be about me or my behavior, so I decide to change the topic before he continues lecturing me.

My fingers clench around the armrest of my chair, but I maintain my composure.

“I promise it won’t happen again,” I assure. The smug smile that emerges on his face challenges me to keep my promise. “But we have to talk about this. And you have to listen to me—”

“Oh, *I* have to listen to *you*?” he interrupts. “So my seat on the board and my shares mean nothing? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” I say through gritted teeth. I know he’s just trying to rile me up again. He wants me to explode and make me look like a hysterical bitch.

I’m not going to give him that satisfaction.

“But you have been fighting me on every step along the road, ever since we took over.” I pause, before I correct myself. “Before *I* took

over.”

He shakes his head as if I just suggested turning the entire operation into a Barbie theme park.

“Innovation is not foolishness, Uncle Walter. It’s necessary for our growth and competitiveness. We can’t stay stagnant while the world moves forward,” I lecture him. “Adapting 3D printing technology for our prostheses is the right step for—”

“How do you even know if it’s done right?” He cuts me off again. “Do you even *understand* what you want us to invest in?”

I can feel my heart beat with urgency, and I notice the slight tremble of agitation in my fingers when I lift my hands from the armrest of my chair.

Don’t let him get to you.

He leans forward, his eyes narrowing. “Do you even understand the risk? We’re already big enough to sell and make a handsome profit.”

“It’s not about the money for me,” I assert, my voice unwavering. “It’s about Dad’s legacy. He worked hard to build this company, and I won’t let it stagnate or be sold off like a commodity.”

My uncle rolls his eyes, a dismissive gesture that lights a fire in my chest. I can feel anger boiling up inside me, fueled by years of being belittled and undermined.

“Madison, don’t be naïve,” he sighs, a condescending tone creeping into his voice. “You’re still just a girl. You don’t understand the complexities of running a company like this.”

The words hit me like a slap to the face, and I can feel my control slipping away. How many times do I have to prove myself? How much longer do I have to endure being treated like a child?

I snap, my voice rising, “I am not a little girl, Uncle Walter! I am fully capable of running this company, and I won’t stand here and let you belittle me!”

The look on his face reveals that this is going exactly as he planned. The fury inside of me is almost physically painful, but I try to breathe myself to a calmer state, before I let myself speak again.

“We’re not discussing this,” I maintain. “The fact that you talked to a potential buyer and arranged a meeting behind my back shows how little you respect me. But it won’t work. I’m not giving in.”

“Not even to *this* buyer?” he probes. “Did you even look at his offer? This guy is swimming in money, Madison. His offer is above what I could have imagined, and I’m sure we could get him even higher if we —”

“I don’t care!” I cut him off. “I don’t care how much money Cha—Mr. Keaton throws on the table. He would kill everything my father accomplished. And you know what? I’m pretty sure I’m not wrong about anything.”

I lean back, enjoying the perplexed expression on Walters face a little too much.

“I saw you even highlighted it in the documents you prepared for him,” I go on. “So, you’re basically using my innovation to leverage this buyout, while telling me that it’s a bad idea? I’m so sick and tired of men dictating to me what to do! Cha—Mr. Keaton won’t get his way and neither will you!”

There it is. I’m screaming again. I couldn’t help it. I never can.

My uncle slowly shakes his head and rises from his chair, his patience clearly worn thin. “Your outburst only proves my point,

Madison. You're not ready for this responsibility. Maybe it's time you step aside and let someone more experienced take the reins."

His words hit me like a sucker punch, and I feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes.

He's won. Again. I watch as he turns and leaves the room, the door closing softly behind him.

Alone in my office, I sink into my chair, my hands covering my face as tears stream down my cheeks. I'm a failure. I couldn't even control my temper when it mattered most. Why is it so damn hard for me to stay level-headed when I need to be?

Everything has gotten so much harder ever since that Chase guy entered my life. He flusters and upsets me in a way that makes it impossible for me to think straight. And to keep my goddamn act together.

This is all his fault.

Chapter 12

Chase

My muscles are still humming from the intensity of the training as I walk out of my first private session with Raymond. He really is as good as they say.

Visiting the Tensho comes with a little extra excitement because I know there's a chance I'll run into Madison. After my phone call with her uncle a couple of days ago, I'm even more fixated on solving the conundrum that is her. Mr. Hailey was kind enough to provide me with some information about Madison that could help me get closer to her.

Since I didn't want to leave things entirely up to chance, I arranged for my private lesson to be scheduled right before Raymond's 'blue belts and up' class of the day, which I know Madison is most likely to attend.

And as luck would have it, I walk right into her when I leave the building and step out to the parking lot.

She's walking toward the entrance, and looks at me with a sardonic smile, her lips curling in a way that simultaneously riles me up and piques my interest.

"Wanna get your ass kicked by a girl again?" she teases, her tone dripping with a mix of challenge and amusement.

I can't help but chuckle at her audacity. She's got fire, I'll give her that.

She's wearing athletic clothes that emphasize her fit figure. Her long

hair is tied back in a sleek ponytail, giving her an effortlessly put-together look that contrasts with the chaos she seems to radiate whenever we're around each other.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," I retort, my grin matching hers in its playful edge.

She rolls her eyes but doesn't deny the fact that I've caught her attention.

"So, are you stalking me now, Chase?" Madison asks as she comes to a halt right in front of me. Her tone is teasing, but there's an undercurrent of suspicion there.

I scoff, playing it off with an air of nonchalance. "Don't flatter yourself. Do you think I have nothing better to do than to run after you?"

She swallows dryly and adjusts the bag hanging over her shoulder in an awkward manner.

"Certainly looks that way," she murmurs, without looking at me.

I can't stop thinking about what her uncle mentioned during our last phone call. He made it clear that Madison was more than just the typical heiress. She's the one responsible for the company's innovations, the future-minded thinking that's driving it forward. I'm more impressed by her the more I learn about her.

"Then why are you here?" she probes, an eyebrow raised at me. "Doesn't look like you'll be joining us for class."

"No, I'm just leaving," I say. "I told you about my interest in private lessons with Raymond. We just had our first one."

She doesn't respond to that, but just looks at me, piercing me with a cautiously expectant look on her face.

“I’ve been reading a bit more about Medinex Solutions. Looks like you’re quite the force behind all those innovations,” I say. “You’re definitely more than just a pretty face.”

She raises an eyebrow, a mixture of surprise and skepticism in her gaze.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” she asks.

“I’m just being honest, Madison. Forward-thinking is something I can get behind. It’s exactly what makes your business so competitive.”

“Try telling my uncle that,” she laments. “And stop calling me by my name, I know what you’re trying to do.”

“Is that so?” I ask, and she takes a visceral step back when I come closer. “What do you think I’m trying to do?”

Her cheeks darken, and I notice her knuckles turning white, as her grip on the strap of her bag tightens. Then she sighs, and for a moment, the walls seem to drop between us. There’s a genuine curiosity in her eyes, a glimpse of something beyond the tough exterior she wears like armor.

“If you think you can charm your way into this buyout, you’re gravely mistaken, Mr. Keaton,” she says—and the way her voice carries my name gets to me in a way I did not see coming.

This girl is fucking trouble, I knew it. I can’t keep my head straight when I’m faced with her.

She doesn’t retreat this time when I get even closer to her, minimizing the distance between us until my face is so close to hers that our lips almost touch. Her breathing turns erratic, and I can sense her delicious fight for composure.

“Why do you think that’s what I’m trying to do here?” I say in an

ominous whisper. “Business is business. I’m just exploring new opportunities. And trust me, I know when I find a good one.”

She studies me for a moment, seemingly assessing the sincerity of my words. I can almost feel the wheels turning in her mind as she processes this information, while I slowly withdraw from her.

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Did you talk to my uncle again?”

I hesitate, then admit, “Yes, I did.”

Her eyes widen, as she sucks in a sharp breath of air, but before she gets to explode on me, I add, “But only to let him know that I’m not going further with this without including you, the CEO. In everything. I agree that what he did was wrong, and—quite frankly—unprofessional.”

“Yes, it was. And you should know that he’s not the one who has the last word in this.”

“I’m aware of that now,” I tell her. “I wasn’t aware of a lot of things coming into this, but I am now.”

I know I’m not going to convince Madison by upping my offer or anything like that. Money is not what she’s after. Which is why I have to gain her trust in other ways. And after what her uncle told me about her, I now have a pretty good idea of what my next step should be.

She will look at me through different eyes when my plan is enacted. I’ll no longer be the evil asshole trying to take her father’s legacy away from her. She will be at my feet, just like every other woman who piqued my interest in the past, and soon enough, her affection for me will cloud her mind and impact her decision-making in my favor.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she wants to know, a deep line separating her brows.

“You’ll see,” I retort, already taking a few steps away from her. “I think you have a class to get to.”

I wave her goodbye, relishing the flustered look that spreads across her pretty face, as she watches me walk away.

Chapter 13

Madison

The luxurious fabric of the evening gown drapes around me as I step out of the changing room, my reflection in the full-length mirror revealing a sight that looks foreign, even to my own eyes. The long, soft champagne-colored dress clings to my curves in all the right places, the intricate beading shimmering under the store's warm lights. Yet, it doesn't feel quite right.

I look at Max, who's sipping champagne by the dressing area with an appraising grin on his face.

"Nice one!" he purrs, his eyes shining with approval. "Quite sparkly. Looks good."

I spin around, the dress swirling around me, and I can't help but feel a surge of incredulity. This dress is a head-turner, sparkling, like Max said. But is it a little too flashy?

Then I remember that this is Max, my brutally honest best friend who won't hesitate to tell me if I look like a disaster if I ask for his honest opinion. And his first assessment wasn't overly enthusiastic.

I narrow my eyes at him. "You're not just saying that to make me feel good, are you?"

Max feigns innocence, placing a hand over his heart in mock sincerity. "Madison, would I ever lie to you about fashion?"

He pauses to scan me again from head to toe, before he concludes, "But yeah, I think we can do better."

I smirk at his theatrics before disappearing back into the dressing

room to try on the next dress. This one is more demure, a deep navy with delicate lace detailing. When I step out again, I notice the hint of disappointment in Max's eyes.

"It's too tame, isn't it?" I sigh, glancing at myself in the mirror.

Max takes a thoughtful sip of his champagne before speaking. "It's not that it's bad. It's just... a tad boring for you. You've got a fierce event to attend. You need something that screams '*I'm here to conquer the world!*' But, you know, without being too flashy. We don't want to appear tacky, do we."

Max tends to speak like a well-meaning grandma sometimes. It's one of the many things I love about him. I chuckle, appreciating his candor.

He's right, of course. This is my moment, an acknowledgment of the work I've poured into adapting and funding innovative prosthetic designs and technologies since my father's death. I'm being recognized for my contribution to the field, and I want to own the spotlight, even though the stress of the past few weeks is still sitting tight on my shoulders.

"Try the red one!" Max suggests. "That was my favorite from the ones we picked out."

I walk back into the changing room, and Max's eyes light up as I step back out.

"Now that's more like it!" he exclaims, practically bouncing on his feet.

The dress is a bold crimson, its neckline plunging and its back bare save for delicate crisscrossing straps. It's daring yet elegant. I preen under Max's approving gaze, feeling a surge of confidence.

“Very appropriate for someone who is about to receive the... what was it again?” Max says. “Excellent... something?”

“Innovator’s Excellence Award,” I say, knowing that he’s playing dumb and simply wanted me to say the words again.

“That’s it! *Innovator’s Excellence Award*,” he repeats with emphasis. “I’ll never get tired of hearing that. It’s just so—”

“Ridiculous?” I jump in, but he shakes his head.

“I was going to say big, or important,” he says. “They don’t just hand these out to anybody.”

I walk over to the seating area, where Max is sipping champagne while I try on dresses, to take a sip from my own flute.

“It sounds bigger than it is,” I say, though he is not completely wrong. “And it’s not like it changes anything.”

The lavish gala that is held to hand out these awards is one of the biggest and most important events of the year for people working in the public health sector. There will be a ton of influential people and representatives, and a lot of opportunities to network—especially for those who are lucky enough to receive one of the awards that are handed out each year. I have been attending these events for years, initially accompanying my father when I was still a student, and then in my own capacity as a figure in the industry. And I’ve been dreaming of being one of the people on stage for just as long.

Still, there was little more than a tiny hiccup of excitement when I received the call that I was one of the winners to be honored this year. It feels wrong to receive an award like this when I don’t even feel like I have my business under control. The dispute with my uncle has dampened my spirit for so long, and now this infuriating Chase has

joined him in reminding me that I'm just a stupid little girl, who has no idea what she's doing.

Chase, who just won't leave me alone. It was bad enough that he seems to manifest wherever I go, but now he's also invading my dreams. I still feel the heat rush to my ears when I think about this morning. I woke up with a racing heart, the skin on my face covered with a thin layer of sweat and my core throbbing with a desire stronger than anything I have ever felt. And it was his face that I saw in my dream, his hands that trailed across my body, that grabbed me and pulled me closer until I was pressed against his iron chest. It all felt so confusingly real. I can still feel his hand at the back of my head, his fist closing around a hank of hair, before he yanked my head up, forcing me to look up at him before we...

"Earth to Madison!" I hear Max's voice, muffled as if it was coming from far away.

I blink and turn around to him. "Sorry, I... what?"

"Damn girl, where did you disappear to?" he asks, almost spilling the champagne in his hand because he's laughing so hard.

"Nowhere, I was just thinking about..." I murmur, unsure how to finish that sentence.

Max raises an eyebrow at me, and I hurry to say, "It's just that... I could use a fun night out, after all the stress I've been under lately."

Max raises an eyebrow, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Does any of that stress have to do with a certain guy named Chase?"

I freeze, caught off guard by his question. Max seems to have an inexplicable ability to look right into my head, no matter how much I try to deflect.

Chase. His name lingers in the air, and I can't help but feel a pang of irritation mixed with something I'm not quite ready to admit.

"Why would you say that?" I counter, my tone a little too defensive.

Max just grins, sipping his champagne. "Oh, come on. I know you better than you know yourself."

I let out a halfhearted laugh, a mixture of exasperation and amusement. "Fine. Maybe he's been a small part of the chaos."

Max raises his glass, offering a playful toast. "To the chaos, then. And to you, my fabulous friend, who's about to sweep everyone off their feet at that gala. Especially with that dress."

As I clink my glass against his, I can't help but smile. In this extravagant store surrounded by beautiful dresses and the comforting presence of my best friend, the stress seems a little more manageable. And maybe, just maybe, the chaos isn't all that bad.

I carefully sit down in the seat next to Max and reach for my champagne flute to clink glasses with him.

"So, will I be meeting that handsome Chase at the gala?" he wants to know, his lips curved into a devilish smile.

I shake my head violently. "Absolutely not! Why would he be there?"

"Because he works in the same sector? Because he seems to be quite a big shot in that realm?" he suggests. "Or... because you invited him?"

My indignant gasp makes him laugh.

"Why would I invite him? Have you not listened to what I told you about him? He's obnoxious, arrogant and—"

"Handsome, tall, athletic, and you love to roll with him!" Max jokes, laughing when he notices the heat on my face. "Oh, Madison, you're adorable. It's obvious that you're intrigued by the guy!"

“I’m...” I stutter, unsure how to finish that sentence without lying to Max. I hate that he’s not wrong about this. “I’m... he’s annoying.”

“And a challenge,” Max concludes. “And when has Madison Hailey ever shied away from a challenge?”

He throws me a provocative look, one eyebrow raised as he tilts his head to the side.

“And trust me, if he saw you in that dress, I’m sure you two would—”

“Stop it!” I interrupt him, already feeling my ears turn red at the thought of it. I can’t let my mind wander to that again. I can’t control my dreams, but I can control what my mind latches on during the day. And I don’t want it to be him.

“He’s not going to be there,” I say. “And that’s a good thing, because you know what I really want?”

“What’s that?”

“A fun night out with my best friend. No stress, just great food, bottomless champagne, and maybe a little tipsy networking,” I tell him.

“Don’t forget about being celebrated, Miss Excellent Innovator,” Max reminds me. “You will be the star of the night! I can’t wait.”

I smile at him, already feeling some of the stress depart as my shoulders relax and I exchange a smile with my supporting friend—the best I could ever ask for. With Max, there’s a guarantee that the night is going to be nothing but fun.

Chapter 14

Madison

“I feel queasy.”

My words are barely more than a whisper, but don't go unheard by Max. He steps out of the cab and offers me a hand, like the gentleman he is.

“Of course, you do,” he says. “I would be worried if you didn't.”

He helps me out of the car and I straighten my dress while he fixes his suit jacket. As always, Max exudes an air of effortless elegance. Tonight, he's dressed in a way that perfectly embodies his personality—a blend of extravagance and class that only Max can pull off. His tailored tuxedo fits him like a glove, the deep black fabric offset by a crisp white shirt and a bold red bow tie, that—not surprisingly—matches the color of my dress. His dark hair is artfully styled, a sophisticated contrast against his pale complexion. I found it odd that he's not wearing make-up tonight, but when I asked him about it, he insisted that it was because “eyeshadow and tuxedos simply don't mix,” accompanied by a playfully condescending eye-roll.

He offers me his arm and I tuck mine into his, once again glad that I brought him here tonight.

“You're not a well-functioning robot, Madison. As much as you'd like to be,” he elaborates, throwing me a warm smile while placing his hand on mine. “It's only human to be nervous about having to go up on stage. Being honored for personal awesomeness can be rather daunting.”

He winks at me, and I can't help but chuckle at his words. Max always knows how to calm me down, which is why I'm glad that I brought him along tonight.

The grand entrance of the gala venue looms before us, a gilded archway leading into a world of opulence. We step into the hall, a symphony of shimmering chandeliers, cascading drapes, and gold accents that seem to dance with the light. People dressed in their finest evening gowns and tuxedos mingle, their laughter and hushed conversations creating a backdrop of sophistication, accompanied by the gentle sound of a string quartet that plays at the far back of the hall—right next to the stage that I will have to step on in a few minutes.

The grandeur of the hall momentarily takes my breath away. Maybe this occasion and the honor that comes with it is a little bigger than I anticipated.

As we move further into the hall, I notice familiar faces among the crowd. I nod in acknowledgment to a few of my colleagues and industry contacts, exchanging polite smiles and pleasantries. It's strange to see them all in such a glamorous setting, far removed from the hustle and bustle of our professional lives.

Max nudges me playfully with his elbow, a knowing grin on his face. "Enjoying the spotlight?" he asks in a whisper. "Everybody is looking at us! It's like you're a freaking star."

His eyes are wide like that of a child in a candy store, and he squeezes my arm in excitement. Max is the kind of person who effortlessly commands attention with his presence. Not just because of his striking looks, but because of the genuine charisma he exudes. Unlike me, he relishes being the center of attention.

“I think you’re enjoying this a little more than I am,” I admit, still dizzy with nerves.

Max giggles and nods in response. “Maybe I am, yeah.”

I force a nervous smile, my gaze flickering around the room. It’s true that many eyes are on me, whispers and sidelong glances following my path. But even as I’m surrounded by the trappings of success, I can’t shake the feeling of unease that’s been lingering in the back of my mind.

Max’s voice breaks through my thoughts. “You deserve every bit of this attention, you know. Enjoy it.”

I meet his gaze, gratitude warming my heart. Max has always been my biggest cheerleader, my voice of reason when self-doubt starts to creep in. I offer him a small smile, appreciating his words even if I can’t fully embrace them at the moment.

“I’m trying, Max,” I reply, my tone soft. “It’s just... a lot.”

He chuckles, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Well, let’s embrace ‘a lot.’ You’ve earned it. And who knows, maybe you’ll actually have some fun tonight.”

He looks around, ostentatiously craning his neck, then he asks, “So, where’s that champagne you promised?”

I release a genuine laugh, the sound carrying a hint of relief. Max has a way of making everything feel a little lighter, a little more manageable. As we continue to navigate through the crowd, I can’t help but steal glances at the people around me, their glittering gowns and confident smiles a stark contrast to the turmoil that’s been brewing within me.

As we pass by a group of elegantly dressed women, their heads turn

to watch us, their murmurs growing louder. I hear snippets of conversation—“Madison Hailey,” “knack for innovations,” “honoree tonight.” The attention is flattering, but it’s also a reminder of the weight on my shoulders. I may be honored for my achievements, but the reality is that my confidence feels fragile, especially in the face of the ongoing struggle with my uncle. The lavish surroundings may mask the turmoil, but they can’t erase it entirely.

How am I supposed to live up to this hype, if I can’t even keep the company under my family’s name? It feels more and more like my father wouldn’t be the only person I let down if this sellout really happens.

But it won’t. I *have* to make sure that it won’t.

“Oh, there we go!” Max exclaims, and when my gaze follows his, I spot a waiter balancing a silver tray filled with sparkling champagne flutes at the other end of the hall.

“You stay here, I’ll be right back,” Max announces, before he hurries toward the waiter.

I manage a cautious smile as I watch him meander through the crowd, smiling and nodding at people as if he knew them. With him by my side, this evening might actually turn out to be fun, despite my strained nerves. A sigh that tastes of relief leaves my lips, and I can feel the tension leave my neck for the first time since we got into the cab.

But this moment of ease is short-lived, and my body stiffens when I hear a familiar voice behind my back. “Well, if it isn’t Madison Hailey, the star of the evening.”

No, God. No!

This can’t be true.

I turn around, only to have my suspicion confirmed.

It's him.

Before me stands Chase Keaton, my too-hot-to-be-true nemesis, his presence radiating an insufferably assured air. His lips curve into a maddeningly confident smile as he delivers his words with a touch of sardonic charm: "What an honor."

And his smile widens.

Chapter 15

Chase

I'll never get tired of that face. This wondrous blend of shock, confusion, and a kiss of awe adorning her beautiful features every time we run into each other.

And I knew she would look amazing tonight, but she exceeds all of my expectations. The crimson evening gown she wears is molded to her figure in a way that leaves little to the imagination, embracing her curves with a tantalizing grace. Her sleek brown hair is meticulously gathered into an updo, exposing the graceful curve of her neck. Delicate yet tasteful jewelry adorns her, accentuating her beauty without overpowering it.

“What the hell are *you* doing here?!”

And the way she always greets me with that unparalleled kindness in her voice, accompanied by that cute little frown—I doubt I'll ever get tired of it.

“Is that just your usual MO when greeting people or do I get special treatment?” I ask.

She scoffs. “Oh, no, that's just for you, trust me.”

She crosses her arms in front of her chest, and I feel a magnetic pull tugging at me as my gaze sweeps over her. She looks hot, beyond doubt, igniting a torrent of thoughts that shouldn't surface in this refined setting. My mind begins to wander, tracing lines of temptation as I imagine the things I'd like to do to her.

“I take that as a compliment,” I say in a low voice—and her frown

deepens.

“You shouldn’t!” she barks at me. “I’m beginning to think you’re really stalking me, Mr. Keaton.”

Hearing my name drip from those pretty lips only amplifies the battle between desire and restraint that’s silently waging within me. It’s like she’s decided to just become more and more enticing with each encounter.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Miss Hailey,” I retort.

“Then why are you here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be here? This is one of the biggest events of the year for influential figures in the public health sector. The same sector you and I both work in,” I remind her. “We’re colleagues, remember?”

“Oh, we’re definitely not colleagues,” she objects. “And whatever you’re planning to achieve here tonight, I can promise you, it won’t change anything. I’m not selling.”

If she’s already this agitated about seeing me, I’m eager to see her in a few minutes when she’ll be asked to get up on stage to receive her award. I can’t wait to see her reaction to the surprise that’s waiting for her.

“What makes you think I’m here for you? Or that I’m ‘trying to achieve’ anything?” I ask back. “I’m here to network, and for the excellent catering.”

She rolls her eyes at me. It makes me want to grab her by that pretty neck and pull her close, until that delicious body is pressed up against mine, her heart beating against my chest, while I watch her face move in reaction to my whispered threats.

“Well, fine, go *network* then,” she says. “You certainly don’t need me

for that. We have nothing to discuss.”

“Oh, we do,” I tell her. “But not here, and not now.”

“That’s right, you’re not ruining tonight for me,” she says, and I notice the way her eyes linger on me for a second. Just long enough to let me know that she likes what she’s seeing, despite her dismissive attitude.

She nods, then swallows dryly, before ripping her gaze away from me and scanning the room, doing her best to avoid looking at me.

I grit my teeth, the slight frustration from our conversation still prickling beneath my skin. Then, Madison’s fiery gaze returns to mine, her words a cutting reminder that I’ve overstayed my welcome. “Just leave, Chase.”

I plan to do no such thing, but just as I’m about to tell her that, I’m distracted by the appearance of a ridiculously good-looking guy in a tuxedo right behind her.

“Drinks!” he announces with a cheery voice—and the sound of it has me pausing in my tracks, despite myself. My gut clenches, an irrational surge of annoyance coursing through me. His eyes flicker with something unreadable when he throws me a quick side-eye.

Madison casts me a nasty look, before she turns to the guy and happily accepts one of the champagne flutes.

“Thank you, Max,” she pipes, as she beams at him. I watch as they happily clink glasses, seemingly now oblivious to my presence.

They both take a sip of their champagne without looking at me, and as Madison makes no attempt to introduce me, I’m hit with an unpleasant assumption.

Is this her boyfriend? The guy who can make Madison smile with

such ease?

Do I really want to know?

I swallow the bitterness and turn around, striding away from them both, my footsteps echoing in the hollows of my own thoughts. I don't know why, but I expect her to call after me, to iron out this bothersome suspicion that could turn everything into ashes before it even begins. No part of my plan will work if Madison has a boyfriend who she is committed to be loyal to.

A boyfriend who makes her smile like that. A boyfriend who makes her forget I even exist.

A taste of bitterness lingers on my tongue, as I walk away, an uninvited guest refusing to be ignored.

Of course a woman like that would have a boyfriend. It was dumb of me to assume otherwise. Still, there was a small part of me that believed she was flirting with me, despite her snappy attitude. Or that, maybe, this snappy demeanor *is* her way of flirting.

There's no way of knowing now, but I *will* know when the evening is over—I'll make sure of that.

Chapter 16

Madison

“And who was that yummy man who just walked away with that incredibly handsome but sulky face?” Max wants to know. “He looked like we took his favorite toy away from him.”

I produce a chuckle, trying to ignore my trembling nerves. Seeing Chase here rocked me back on my heels. Of course, he’s right. We work in the same sector and this event is one of the biggest opportunities to network with people of distinction and to be recognized as such. It was dumb of me to assume that he wouldn’t be here. It may have been wishful thinking, considering the spotlight will fall on me in a few minutes and I hate the thought of seeing him in the crowd with that condescending smile on his annoyingly handsome face and...

“Madison, hello-oh!”

Max moves his hand in a waving motion in front of my face, and I startle as he rips me from my musings. I hadn’t even realized that my eyes had been locked on Chase’s back the entire time.

“Wait, don’t tell me...” Max ponders, still void of a response from me. “It’s *him*, isn’t it?!”

I can feel his hand close around my upper arm now, and find Max excitedly craning his neck as he gazes after Chase.

“Yes, that would be Chase Keaton,” I say in a low voice. “The guy who wants to buy my father’s company.”

Max releases a long “Damn,” before he empties his champagne.

“What a delicious piece of man,” he adds. “Yeah, I get it now.”

“Get what?”

He laughs and looks at me with a furrowed brow as if to indicate he thought me deliberately obtuse.

“Why you’re so unraveled by this dude. I mean, look at him! He looks good enough to eat! Too bad he’s straight.”

I shrug. “How do you know he’s straight?”

Max laughs, even louder this time, and shakes his head, as he moves his hand on my shoulder. “Trust me, I know. The way he looked at you, and then at me? That guy is not only straight, he’s also very much into you, Madison.”

“He’s not!” I object, raising my voice enough to receive a few looks from the people surrounding us. Heat rises to my cheeks, and I’m pretty sure it’s not due to the champagne. “He’s just...”

I don’t know how to finish that sentence.

“Jealous,” Max concludes. “He was jealous when he saw me with you.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Don’t be ridiculous. The only thing that guy wants from me is my company.”

“Nah, he wants to get into your pants,” Max insists.

I try to ignore the new surge of fiery tension that washes over me at the thought of it.

No, he doesn’t want that. He’s not interested in me. He can’t be. A man like Chase Keaton can have any woman he wants. With those looks, that disarming charm, that flame of determination that dances in his dark eyes...

“If he’s trying to get into my pants, it’s just because he wants to force

this buyout,” I decide. “Maybe he thinks that he can get me on his side by wooing me.”

Max shrugs. “Possible. I wouldn’t mind that, if I were you.”

“Excuse me?”

He raises both of his hands in defense, almost losing the empty champagne flute in the process.

“What’s so wrong with having a little fun?” he asks. “Especially with a man like that! I mean, look at him! I wouldn’t say no to that! And when was the last time you had a little fun yourself, huh? I can’t remember, can you?”

I can, but I don’t like to think about it. My last “fun” was a rather disappointing one-night stand a few months ago, with a guy who was clearly not worth it—and who ghosted me after he got what he wanted. Not a lot of *fun*, if you ask me.

“It would only make things even more complicated.” The words leave my lips before I can think twice, and—of course—Max laps them up like a treat he’s been waiting for all evening. The grin on his face could not be any wider when he nods at me.

“So, you *do* want to get a piece of that! I *knew* it!” he exclaims, a little too loudly.

I gesture for him to quiet down, as people are glancing curious looks in our direction, and he ducks with an apologetic smile on his face.

“Sorry,” he whispers, raising his empty glass. “Shall I get us another?”

I glance around the crowded hall and notice that they’ve already turned on the stage lights, suggesting that the award ceremony will begin any moment now.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure if we have time—”

I’m interrupted by a sudden hush that sweeps through the festive hall. All eyes turn toward the stage. The soft glow of the chandeliers casts an ethereal aura upon the figure stepping onto the stage, and my breath catches.

Dr. Rahul Young, a name synonymous with public health and policy innovation, steps onto the stage. His presence commands attention, and I can’t help but feel a surge of excitement. I’ve read his influential books and articles, his work shaping my own understanding of improving the quality and efficiency of medical care.

And he’s the person who will give my laudatory speech. I knew this before coming here, but seeing him in person, and knowing what is about to happen, accelerates my tension to the extreme. It’s as if the pages of those books I’ve pored over have come to life, and my heart swells with gratitude for the opportunity to be recognized by someone I greatly respect.

He opens with a short formal greeting, promising that he has no intention of taking up everyone’s time for too long—followed by a quick reference to the excellent buffet that will open after the ceremonial part of the evening is done.

As much as I’ve been looking forward to the food tonight, I can’t fathom the idea of eating anything right now. My stomach is churning with nerves, and I find myself searching the crowd for Chase. I can’t see him anywhere and don’t even know whether that’s good or bad.

“As you all know, we at MediTech Visionaries strive to recognize the achievements of individuals, who have made significant contributions to the field of prosthetics through innovative designs, technologies, or

research. And tonight, we're honoring a very special young woman, who has shown herself to be more than worthy of this recognition," Dr. Young says now—and my ears start burning with the heat of embarrassment.

Next to me, Max starts shifting from one foot to the other as well, sharing my inner unrest.

I watch as Dr. Young elaborates on my achievements and talks about the work I've poured my heart into, the strides I've made in the field of prosthetics. His voice carries a weight that reverberates through the hall.

And then, the moment arrives. His eyes meet mine, his gaze unwavering as he calls my name, his voice tinged with a warm sincerity that sets my heart racing.

Max gives my arm a supportive squeeze, offering me an encouraging smile—and taking the empty champagne flute out of my hand—before I make my way up to the stage. My heels click softly against the marble floor as I walk toward the stage, the world around me fading into a blur. I ascend the steps, my heart beating a rhythm of both excitement and nervousness.

As I stand before the microphone, Dr. Young's gaze locks onto mine once again, a silent reassurance that I'm exactly where I belong.

"Miss Hailey," he welcomes me, extending an arm in my direction as I join him at the center of the small stage.

He goes on to talk about my will to carry on my father's legacy, about the impending adaption of a very new and specific 3D technology for prostheses, and mentions my young age after every other sentence. A timid smile is all I can muster as he speaks, and his

words are muffled by the nervous turmoil inside my head.

I catch myself scanning the crowd for familiar faces. Max is standing right at the front, giving me a thumbs up when our eyes lock for a moment. I respond with a short-lived smile before I let my gaze trail along the rest of the crowd. They are quite visible, despite the intense spotlight, and I shy away from locking eyes with anyone else, because it makes me feel uncomfortable.

I can't find him. Chase Keaton is nowhere to be seen, and I'm surprised at the kiss of disappointment that pecks me at this realization. Where did he go? And why? Could it be that he had no idea that I'm this year's honoree before coming here, and he simply couldn't stand witnessing this?

Applause from the audience washes over us, and I realize that I've been lost in my thoughts again. I had barely heard all the nice things that Dr. Young just said about me.

But now, he raises his voice to share an unexpected twist to the evening's proceedings.

"Before we proceed to the presentation of the award, I have some exciting news to share," he begins, a glint of enthusiasm in his eyes. "As you all know, we at MediTech Visionaries established this award not only to recognize the achievement of young individuals in our field, but also to provide some much-needed aid to the less fortunate. Which is why the money that's tied to this award does not go to the honoree, but to a charity of their choice."

He pauses to look at me, and I nod in agreement, fully aware of this longstanding tradition. I knew that much, and have already compiled a list of charities that I would like to give to.

“But this year, we’ll have to do things a little differently,” he goes on, adding a reassuring wink when I throw him a bewildered look. My brow furrows in curiosity. Where is he going with this?

“This is very short notice, but we were contacted by a very generous sponsor at the eleventh hour. And when I say generous, I mean it. This sponsor promised to *double* this year’s award money!” Dr. Young says, while the room starts to buzz with astonishment, and my eyes widen in disbelief.

My confusion only deepens, when Dr. Young continues on with his speech.

“Of course, we couldn’t say no to that, could we? But, this generous offer does come with a little catch—something which I’m sure Miss Hailey will have no problem with,” he continues.

He’s winking at me again and I wish I had been informed about this before stepping onto the stage. Now I’m standing here looking like I’m lost in the fog. What catch is he talking about?

“But enough from me,” Dr. Young starts to wrap up. “I think it’s best for our benevolent sponsor to introduce himself and explain everything. May I ask Mr. Chase Keaton to the stage?”

What?!

I can’t stop my jaw from dropping, unable to hide the sense of pure and utter shock as I watch Chase appear from somewhere behind me. He takes his place right next to me, casting me the biggest, most condescending grin I have ever seen as he grabs the microphone from Dr. Young’s hand.

Chapter 17

Chase

The shock in Madison's eyes is barely concealed. I can see it even amidst the applause and the flush of excitement that dances across her cheeks. Her attempt to mask her surprise is impressive, yet I can't help but notice the telltale flicker of uncertainty in her gaze.

I clear my throat, my voice resonating through the microphone as I begin my introduction.

Meanwhile, Madison takes a step away from me when I place myself next to her.

"Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, and fellow supporters of public health," I begin, my tone measured and confident. "I stand before you as the CEO of Keaton Care Solutions and sponsor of this year's Innovator's Excellence Award."

I take a moment to let the weight of my words settle in. The room is attentive, the air filled with a sense of curiosity and expectation.

"But," I continue, after a slight pause for emphasis, "I am also the founder of Chasing Miracles Child Aid, a charity dedicated to providing access to special healthcare services for children living in poverty."

The audience's reaction is a mixture of surprise and appreciation. Chasing Miracles Child Aid has made a significant impact in recent years, garnering attention and support for its noble cause. My dual roles as a healthcare industry leader and a philanthropist are well-known, and it's a reputation I've worked hard to cultivate.

However, it doesn't seem like Madison was aware of any of this. She's obviously trying to suppress her emotions but fails to hide her surprise at my words. I notice the way her eyes flit in my direction with a spark of astonishment.

I knew it. I knew this would catch her attention. Boyfriend or not, she's forced to look at me in a different way now.

My thoughts drift back to the moment when I was approached to sponsor this prestigious award. At first, I had been hesitant, the idea of tying my company's name to yet another philanthropic endeavor seeming redundant.

My perspective shifted when Madison's uncle told me that she was this year's honoree. I saw an opportunity, and I took it.

I continue to talk about my foundation and its cause, highlighting our many achievements from the past few years, while I relish the appreciative looks and nods coming from the audience.

Next to me, Madison seems to grow stiffer and stiffer with every word.

"And now, let me elaborate on that little catch our distinguished Dr. Young was talking about," I announce, my gaze shifting to Madison. "It's true that I intend to double this year's prize money, but under one condition: I would like for a good chunk of that money—half, to be exact—to be used to support 'Young Chasers', the newest project established by Chasing Miracles Child Aid. 'Young Chasers' aims to support High School Students who are considering a career in the medical field, but may lack the support—financial or otherwise—to pursue their goal. We want to make it possible for every single child out there to achieve their dreams, especially when they are as noble as

this. A worthy cause, wouldn't you agree, Miss Hailey?"

We lock eyes, and I know she has no choice other than to respond with a nod and a polite smile, which is exactly what she does. Her lips are pressed into a thin line, revealing the tension that keeps her in a firm grip.

"Well, then it is with the utmost privilege that I present the Innovator's Excellence Award, sponsored by Keaton Care Solutions, to the remarkable Madison Hailey."

As I finish the introduction, an assistant approaches with the award, a sleek silver sail that gleams under the brilliant lights. Stars adorn the sail, a symbol of the limitless potential that innovation holds. I take the award with a gracious nod, my fingers briefly brushing against the cool metal.

I turn to Madison who straightens her back before she accepts the award from my hands. An unexpected surge of warmth courses through me when our hands touch for a brief moment.

I look at her, my heart pounding in my chest. That short-lived touch was enough to send a jolt of electricity through me. I'm reminded of the heat that simmers between us, the undeniable pull that I've tried so hard to resist. Madison takes the award, her fingers curling around it as her gaze meets mine.

She must feel it, too. I can see it in the way her pretty face derails for just a split second—and in the way she pulls away from my touch within an instant. There's a fire of confusion dancing in her eyes when she looks up at me now.

Her smile is short-lived, a glimpse of the warmth I've seen before, but it's tinged with a clear edge of irritation. She's mad at me, that

much is evident, and the tension between us hangs in the air like an unspoken challenge.

I step back from the podium, my eyes still locked on Madison, while I join in the applause that erupts through the hall. A thousand thoughts race through my mind, a whirlwind of confusion and attraction that I can't seem to escape.

This girl is trouble. I knew that from the beginning. But up until now, I don't think I realized how deeply in trouble I am.

Standing a few feet behind her, my eyes are locked on her athletic back, adorned with seductive stripes and revealing the fact that she's not wearing a bra tonight. I feel myself drawn to her and my body aches as I control the urge to step forward and tear that dress from her alluring body and have my way with her.

All of that *will* happen. Right now I can't care less about all the business bullshit standing between us. I must hear this girl moan, while she's wrapped around my cock, arching that beautiful back for me as I watch her explode again and again.

But first, I'll have to figure out who the hell that guy is. That ridiculously handsome man in a tux, who's clapping with more vigor than anybody else in the room, while beaming at this marvelous woman on stage. He loves her, that much is obvious. But who is he to her?

I hate how much I care.

My gaze wanders back to Madison. I'm standing a few feet behind her while she visibly enjoys the appreciation of the audience, each clap a sparkling testament to her moment. And from what I know about this girl, she deserves nothing less.

And I might be the biggest idiot ever known to mankind, but right now, my claps of acknowledgment might be the loudest of them all.

Chapter 18

Madison

The applause still is still echoing in my ears as I flee from the stage, my heart pounding, and my thoughts in disarray.

What the fuck was that? What in the world is Chase thinking?

Who does he think he is?

I clasp the award in my trembling hands, my fingers tracing the sleek lines of the sail-like trophy. But my mind is far from the accolade I've just received; it's consumed with the enigmatic man who turned my world upside down with his unexpected appearances. Just when I thought he couldn't get any more annoying, he shows up and does *this*.

As I navigate through the crowd, I can't shake the sensation of heat that lingers from our brief touch on stage. The undeniable attraction I've been trying to suppress is unsettling. I'm sure everybody saw it. It feels like they must have. My face was burning the entire time, a telltale tremble taking hold of me as I fought to maintain composure. I had to get away from him as fast as possible.

I spot Max across the room, and with a quick nod, I make my way toward him, my heels clicking on the polished floor. He looks equally stunned, his eyes widening as he takes in the award in my hands.

"What the hell was that?!" he gives voice to my thoughts.

"I have no idea," I say, my voice a mix of frustration and confusion. "I need to get out, away... I don't know. Somewhere with air, alone. With you, I mean. Can we..."

He blinks at me, comprehension dawning. "The balcony," he

suggests, nodding toward the glass doors that lead to the outdoor terrace.

“Go ahead, I’ll get us some drinks,” he says before disappearing back into the crowd.

I nod in agreement and turn around. I clutch the award tightly, my mind racing with a whirlwind of emotions. I yearn for a moment of respite from the unexpected turmoil Chase has stirred within me.

I run and make sure to avoid eye contact with anyone around me, worried that I might get pulled into a conversation that I would be unfit to hold at this point. I know I’ll have to talk to people later on, but not right now. Not when I’m barely holding it together.

Luckily, they announced the opening of the buffet right after the award ceremony, so I’m hoping that people are busy rushing to the food instead of seeking me out for a little chat.

The cool breeze sweeps over the balcony, sending a shiver down my spine as I clutch the award close to my chest. It’s a bit chilly out here, but I don’t mind. No one seems eager to venture out here, not with the grand buffet just opened inside.

I had been looking forward to indulging in some fine food myself, but now my stomach churns with a mix of anger and confusion and I find myself feeling queasy instead.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and I’m trying to regain my composure when the last voice I want to hear right now pierces the calm of the night. “Madison.”

My heart skips a beat as I turn to find Chase walking toward me, the soft glow from the gala’s lights casting an aura around him as he holds up two champagne flutes. The unease I felt moments ago intensifies,

my stomach churning with a nauseating mixture of conflicting emotions.

“What are you doing out here?” I manage to say, my voice betraying a hint of irritation despite my attempts to sound composed.

He approaches slowly, his eyes locked onto mine. “I wanted to talk to you,” he replies, his tone surprisingly solemn.

I act on impulse when he offers me one of the flutes and invites me to clink glasses, following his motions as if I had been waiting for him. My eyes never leave Chase as I pour down half of the champagne in one large swig.

I’m torn between anger and curiosity, my fingers tightening around the award as I take a step back.

“Who says I want to talk to you?” I ask. “I’m waiting for my friend, so if you could—”

He cuts me off, “Oh yes, Max.” A winning smile widens across his face. “Nice guy. He sends his regards.”

I can’t stop my jaw from dropping, which makes him laugh.

“He sent you out here?” I ask in disbelief.

Chase shrugs, pursing his lips, before he responds, “Not exactly. Quite a protective friend you have there, but I managed to convince him to give me a few minutes alone with you. Don’t worry, he made me promise to behave.”

I scoff. “Yeah, as if.”

He seems unfazed by my rebuke, and brings the flute to his lips again, while I do the same. I’m on edge, my emotions warring within me as I struggle to make sense of his presence, his words, and the undeniable attraction that still lingers between us.

“It’s not going to change anything, you know,” I tell him. “Whatever you’re trying to achieve with this, it’s not going to work.”

“You mean you don’t intend to support my cause?” he asks, leaning against the balcony balustrade next to me. He’s closer now, close enough for me to feel the warmth radiating from his body. I’m torn between wanting to distance myself from him and giving in to his intoxicating scent, when a gentle breeze carries a whiff of his aftershave in my direction. Why does he have to be this beguiling?

“Because that would go against the rules, Miss Hailey,” he goes on, placing an odd emphasis on my name. “You heard me on stage, the money is tied to a cause.”

“Oh, I heard you. But I don’t get it, Chase. If you want support for your own charity, why not just funnel your money there directly? Why take this detour?” I want to know.

“Because it looks better,” he says. “Simple as that. Besides the tax benefits, obviously.”

“Sure,” I retort. “And it has nothing to do with what’s been going on between us.”

“I never said that.”

His honesty takes me by surprise—and I’m even more surprised when he inches even closer to me, his arms now touching mine, as he leans into me. The smell of his aftershave, mixed with his natural musk and a hint of champagne hit me as he presses closer.

“So, Max is right,” I manage to utter. “You’re just trying to get into my pants because you think that’ll make me want to sell to you.”

I want to move away from him, but something is holding me back. It’s like I’m being pushed, no, *pulled* closer to him. He’s magnetic, his

pull impossible to withstand.

And his face is so dangerously close to mine when he looks at me now.

“Interesting analysis,” he remarks with a smirk. “What makes you think I’m trying to get into your pants? Do you think I’m flirting with you? Or is that just wishful thinking?”

Shit.

Even in the dark, I’m sure he can see the way my face flushes with treacherous red, confirming his assumption so loudly that there’s no point in me trying to object. He’s right. Just like Max was right.

And in this moment, there’s nothing else I can think about other than the way his lips part as he is about to speak, or the way his intoxicating smell wraps around me when he leans in even closer.

“Finish your drink, Madison.”

The words are barely more than a whisper, but they oscillate all the way down to my core. I don’t know what’s gotten into me, but I do as I’m told, my eyes never leaving him, while we both empty our glasses. He takes the flute from my hand the moment it leaves my lips and carefully places it on the balustrade. I don’t do anything but watch when he retrieves the award from my hands with the same care, his motions as if in slow-motion when he puts it next to the flutes.

Another whispered growl leaves his lips: “You know we have to do this.”

Then he pulls me in for a kiss, one hand firmly placed at the back of my head, as our lips meet with voracious need.

Chapter 19

Chase

Any doubts about whether this was the right move or not are dissolved the moment our lips meet. She welcomes me with impatient need, tugging at the thick fabric of my suit jacket. She pulls me in closer, wanting, taking just as much as she's giving.

Our tongues entwine in a sensuous dance, exploring the uncharted territory of each other's mouths. Her taste is exhilarating, a sweet symphony of lust and champagne, tinged with taboo. We lose ourselves in a passionate kiss, a testament to the connection we both fought to deny.

And yet, it's not enough. Tasting Madison only makes me want her even more—and she seems to feel the same way. Her body wraps around mine, the perfect curves of her hips grinding against me, while my hand trails down along her athletic back. The tips of my fingers trail across the crisscrossing straps of her dress, sending electric jolts through me every time I come in direct contact with her warm skin.

She moans into my mouth when my hand lands on her ass, cupping and squeezing so hard that it must come close to being painful. Her reaction to it almost makes me lose control when she arches her back and leans into my touch, practically begging for more. She likes a firm hand. She may even enjoy a bit of pain.

I know she's feeling it. I know she notices the way my cock is rising to attention, growing harder with every moment she spends in my greedy hold. But I don't care. She's fucking perfect. It's only right for

her to know how much I want her.

We're both breathing heavily when I break our kiss to look her in the eyes. But she rises to speak before I can say anything.

"I hate you," she breathes—before she lunges into me for more.

My grip around her tightens, a desperate attempt to keep the reins that she's trying to take from me. I'm in control. Always. But I almost lose that control as we indulge in an even more passionate kiss, our bodies clinging to each other like two lost lovers who have been reunited after being separated for an eternity. And, in a weird way, that's exactly what it feels like.

The realization sends a shock through my body that pulls me back to reality. I keep her in place by closing my fist in her hair, ruining her elaborate updo, as I break our kiss anew.

Her lips are still parted when she looks up at me, her face flushed while her chest heaves with erratic breaths.

"I hate you," she repeats, but her words carry no weight.

"No, you don't."

"No, I don't."

Her lashes begin to flutter, while confusion adorns her pretty face. I can tell that she wants to say something, but for whatever reason, the words never leave her lips.

"This is not enough," I tell her. "I want more."

"Now?" she retorts with a chuckle, but I remain serious.

"No, not now, not here. I'm not going to fuck you against the balustrade or in a random bathroom," I say nonchalantly. I relish the way her body twitches at my lewd words. For a moment, it almost looks like she's about to moan at the thought of being fucked by me.

“But I *will* fuck you,” I add, moving closer to her face, so close that our lips are touching as I speak. “I will fuck you like there’s no tomorrow.”

Her eyes widen when I let go of her and lift my hand to play with a strand of hair that has fallen from her updo. She sucks in a sharp breath of air when I tuck it behind her ear, and the tip of my finger gently dances across her cheek, before I journey down along her neck to her collarbone.

“You sound awfully sure of yourself,” she retorts, shuddering with tension. Her voice is trembling, just like her lips when she speaks.

She swallows dryly, and her eyes flit back over her shoulder, landing on the award as it glistens in the moonlight next to us. She never leaves my embrace, and even ignores the hand that is still cupping her firm ass.

“Why?” she wants to know. “Why that charity?”

“What do you mean?” I ask back, curious as to why she’s changing the subject now. Is she really this embarrassed about what just happened? Does she intend to ignore what just happened between us?

“Why children in poverty?” she asks. “Did you think that would make you look the best?”

I look at her with narrowed eyes. “Is that really all you can see? The cold-hearted businessman who thinks of no one but himself?”

To be fair, she wouldn’t be entirely wrong.

“It’s all I’ve seen from you so far,” she says. “Well, that and the fact that you overestimate your Jiu-Jitsu skills.”

She winks at me, and I hate what that does to me. My grip on her ass tightens, squeezing even harder than before, and she releases a sigh

that makes me even harder. Madison responds with a cheeky smile, that makes me want to spank her.

“So?” she probes. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“Who says I’m going to?” I say, pulling her closer. “I have other things on my mind right now.”

She wants to protest, but I silence her with another kiss. I don’t want to talk. I want to make the best of these precious moments alone with her, I want to taste more of her, to take more of her—and to feel more of her.

She stiffens at first, but soon gives into me, her arms wrapping around my neck this time as she clings to me, torturing me by pressing her hot body against my hardened length. Our lips remain locked to each other, while I squeeze her ass with one hand and use the other to cup her breast through the thin fabric of her dress. Just as I suspected, she’s not wearing a bra and I take the hard knot of her nipple between my fingers and give a not so gentle squeeze. She squirms from the pain, but never retreats, and her tongue engages in an even wilder, less controlled dance with mine. I almost regret saying that I wouldn’t fuck her here, because right now, there’s nothing I would rather do...

“Holy shit!”

The sudden exclamation parts us as quickly as we came together. She jumps away from me with flailing arms, while I try my best to hide the obvious bulge at my crotch by slouching against the balustrade at my back.

“Max!” Madison shouts at the figure who is standing in the door, eyes wide and his mouth forming a perfect O—before he erupts with laughter.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you little love birds,” he says, almost choking from laughing so hard. “But I couldn’t keep them away any longer. Madison, they need you for that interview.”

He nods toward the hall behind him, an apologetic expression replacing his apparent amusement from before.

“Shit,” Madison hisses next to me, as she hastily fixes her dress and tries to arrange the strands that have fallen out of her updo during our little encounter.

“Don’t worry, you look great,” I try to assure her.

“Yeah, good enough to eat,” her friend Max adds, winking at me.

“Shut up, both of you,” she barks without looking at either of us.

I try to catch her gaze, but she’s determined to avoid eye contact and keeps her head down as she hurries inside, practically pushing Max to the side—who throws me a facial shrug, before he follows her inside.

Chapter 20

Madison

My mind is a whirlwind of emotions, and my cheeks burn with a flush that I can't hide.

What the hell just happened?

Why did I *let* this happen?

Making out in secret with someone who is practically a stranger at one of the worst times and places anyone could think of—it's so not me.

Then again, this totally *is* me. My quick temper has gotten me into all kinds of awkward situations, but this is a new one. I'm being honored for my professionalism in the workplace, and I do *this*? What if it hadn't been Max but someone else who found us out there? What would that have looked like? Fishy for sure. Making out with the guy who just doubled the prize money that's tied to my award? I can only imagine what kind of conclusions people would draw.

Did Chase plan all of this? Is he trying to humiliate me, or is he really trying to get into my pants because he thinks that will make me want to sell to him?

My thoughts are still swirling when I step back into the hall, the vibrant energy of the gala once again enveloping me. All around, people are engaged in conversations, savoring the sumptuous feast that has been laid out.

But at this moment, I feel as though I'm in a world of my own, detached from the festivities and ensnared by the memory of Chase's

lips on mine.

Max is right next to me gently pointing toward the journalist who has been asking to see me.

“That’s Judy, she’s writing for Care Quest,” he whispers, shortly before we reach the young woman with a black pixie cut, who beams at us as we’re approaching.

“Thanks,” I breathe, grateful for the reminder. I can barely walk right now, let alone think straight. I can’t help but feel a twinge of anxiety about keeping my composure.

“Hey there, I’m Judy for Care Quest. It’s such an honor to meet you, Miss Hailey,” she greets me, and I shake her extended hand.

Max quietly retreats, leaving me alone with Judy.

“A pleasure,” I manage to produce, but barely. My voice is hoarse, and I have to clear my throat before I find myself able to add, “Should we find a quiet place somewhere?”

“Yes, sure,” she says, pointing to a deserted table close to the entrance. “It’s not going to take long, I promise. I don’t want to keep you from the buffet for too long.”

The buffet, right. I wonder if I’ll even be able to enjoy the magnificent food after what just happened. My stomach is still upside down, churning with nervous butterflies instead of yearning for fuel.

I follow her to the table, a temporary sanctuary amidst the gala’s vibrant chaos. She asks questions about my work, my motivations, and my vision for the future of prosthetics and public health. But it’s a struggle to focus on her words as my thoughts continually drift back to the balcony and the enigmatic man who has unraveled me so completely.

I want to look for him, see his face again, as if to make sure that this kiss really happened. It feels so unreal now that I'm back in the vibrant and busy hall with all of these people. I'm sitting with my back to the wall, with a perfect view across the entire hall, and it takes all my strength to keep my focus on Judy, who holds me in place with her super attentive and friendly smile.

I try to answer with poise, to convey the passion that drives me in my field. But my mind keeps wandering, remembering the taste of Chase's kiss, and the sensation of his touch.

What does all of this mean? He seems to be such an open book on one hand, but a great danger on the other. Is he playing me? Is he just trying to soften me up and get that buyout he so desperately wants? Somehow, it doesn't feel that way. If he's really just trying to get into my pants for that reason, he's a great actor for sure. His interest in me seems real. He has a way of making me feel seen that I've never experienced before. I feel unraveled, as if the carefully constructed walls I've built around myself are crumbling in the wake of his presence.

Where is he now? Is he watching me from somewhere? Is he even still here, or did he leave and flee from the embarrassment of being caught with me like that? Is he even embarrassed? Does he care?

"Okay, I think I've got everything," Judy says, pointedly closing her notebook. "Thank you very much, Miss Hailey."

I return her thanks and I'm glad that she lets me go without any attempt at redundant small talk. We shake hands and she gets up from her seat, leaving me alone for just a split second, before Max comes running toward me from God knows where. The wide grin on his face

tells me that he has no intention of letting me off easy.

“Sooo,” he begins, as he hooks my arm into his. “We are getting some food, and more drinks, and then we will sit down somewhere and you’re going to tell me *everything*. No objections!”

“Fine.” I nod, but can’t stop myself from scanning the room for Chase as we walk.

“I think he left,” Max tells me in a low voice, adding a consoling tap on my forearm. “I’m sorry, I really am.”

I’m not sure whether he’s talking about the moment when he caught me and Chase together, or if he’s referring to the fact that Chase has left the scene right after kissing me like that. The latter certainly leaves me with a sting of disappointment.

Of course he left. He got what he wanted and now he’s leaving the scene confident that he’s left me wanting more. It’s all part of his elaborate game to win me over, and to pull off this goddamn deal he’s so hyper-fixated on.

I squeeze my best friend’s arm and try to swallow the lump that has formed in my throat, as we make our way over to the buffet.

Chapter 21

Chase

I shouldn't have left like that.

It's been a couple of days since the gala, and I can't help but feel a nagging sense of discomfort as I sit at the desk in my main office in downtown LA. It's still morning and the city is hustling and bustling a few hundred feet below me, the sun bouncing off moving cars and still windows.

The memory of Madison's lips pressed against mine on that moonlit balcony is still fresh in my mind, but so is the regret for how hastily I left, something entirely uncharacteristic of me. I've always been one to face situations head-on, not one to run away when things get uncomfortable. But with Madison, it was different. *I* was different.

I've been wrestling with my own thoughts since then. I haven't spoken to her, haven't reached out. I know I should have, and I wanted to. But the truth is: That kiss floored me. It wasn't meant to feel like... *that*. Like so much more than just lust.

There's something between us, something that refuses to be dismissed so easily. Something that will make all of this a lot harder than I anticipated. I've kissed a lot of tantalizingly hot girls before, but none ever made me feel like this. I have no room for this confusion. She was meant to be a fun conquest, with a profitable buyout attached to our interplay—nothing more and nothing less.

As I contemplate my next move, my phone rings, and I see Aston's name on the caller ID.

“Hey, Chase,” Aston’s voice comes through, full of his characteristic enthusiasm. “Long time no talk. How are things going?”

Aston’s greetings always have a hint of reproach to them. He’s the only one of the four of us who regularly picks up the phone to check in with another Plutus boy. One could almost say he’s the caring mom of the group.

I lean back in my chair, grateful for the interruption. “Hello, Sir Aston, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

We never miss a chance to address Aston’s noble British background, mostly because we know how much he hates it. Even without seeing his face in front of me, it’s easy to visualize the way he rolls his eyes at my silly response.

“I’ll be giving a talk at UCLA the week after next, was just wondering whether you’d be up for a drink?” he says.

“There’s always time for a Plutus brother,” I let him know.

“Great! Can’t wait to catch up. I hear you’re facing some roadblocks on your everlasting journey to greatness?” Aston responds.

“So, you talked to Gabe, I presume?”

“That’s correct,” he says. “And when I asked him about his thing with Ella, he was all too happy to deflect and change the topic to you.”

Rage fills me the instant I hear that name. That witch Ella had broken my friend’s heart before, and from the looks of it, she’s about to do it again. And there’s nothing we can do to stop it.

“He’s not still pursuing that doomed relationship, is he?” I ask. “Even Gabe cannot be that stupid—”

“Oh, but aren’t you trying to do the same right now?” Aston cuts me off. “What is it with you boys and women? We’re not in college

anymore, but you guys are acting like goddamn teenagers when it comes to relationships.”

Aston sounds genuinely upset, but something tells me that this is more about him than me or Gabe. He has always been the “grownup” of our group, not only because he’s the oldest. Back in college, he was the only one of us who never skipped a class, who never smoked weed, even when everybody around him was doing it. It was him who made sure that everybody stayed hydrated when we were out drinking. He’s always been a bit more put-together and responsible than any of us has yet grown to be, but he never seemed bothered by it.

“Dude, what’s with the scolding? Are you okay?” I ask, knowing how much he hates to be called ‘dude’.

“Deflecting again?” he hisses back.

“I’m not deflecting anything,” I say. “I’m just wondering what’s got you so mad?”

He sighs at the other end of the line, and I’m pretty sure there’s some eye-rolling involved, too.

“I’m sorry, you’re right,” he admits. “Guess I was just hoping you’re not in the middle of doing something stupid like our friend Gabe is.”

“What makes you think I am?”

“Gabe told me you’re sleeping with the woman whose company you want to buy, and who fights you on it with everything she has,” he explains. “Or that you’re at least planning to do so.”

“What?!” I blurt out. “That’s bullshit! Why would he say that?”

“Yeah, I wonder. Why would he?” Aston responds pointedly.

Now I’m the one rolling my eyes. I can act all offended as much as I want, but I know that neither Aston nor Gabe are off with their

assessment of my situation. There's no use in lying to him.

"All, I told him is that—"

"She's a fucking snake who makes your life harder than it needs to be," Aston cuts me. "She doesn't want to sell, but for some reason, you just can't let it go?"

"That's... well, yes, that's correct. But it's not because I'm so smitten with her, trust me," I insist, and I wish I could believe myself. "Her company is a leading institution in the adaptation of 3D technology in this market. I've been working on this deal for months already, and I was misled."

"Misled how?" he probes.

"By her uncle. He wants to sell, and he made it seem like he's the CEO with the final word, but as it turns out, Madison is."

"Madison, huh," he repeats suggestively. "So, you're on a first-name basis."

We're a lot further along than that, I think. But I'm not stupid enough to share that with Aston. Out of the four of us, he's the one who's most familiar with the consequences of shitting where you eat.

"She must be quite a strong character, to stand up to you like that," he goes on.

"Yes, she is," I say through gritted teeth. "Strong and stubborn as hell."

"A challenge," he adds. "And you love a good challenge. You have always loved a good challenge, especially when it comes to women."

Goddammit, is he reading my fucking mind?

I move my lips as if to speak, but words escape me. Aston is right, but I didn't need him to know what I already know: Madison embodies

everything in a woman I find attractive—and then some.

“*Shit*,” I can’t stop myself from giving voice to my realization.

“You don’t have to tell me that I’m right,” he says, chuckling now.

“I wasn’t going to.”

“But I am right, aren’t I?”

An annoyed growl is all I can muster in response before I realize that there really is no use in lying to Aston.

“She’s quite something, yeah. Won’t leave my goddamn head, no matter how much I try,” I finally admit, unsure what to do with that realization myself.

“You’ve got yourself in quite a pickle there, young man,” he jokes. “But can I give you a piece of advice?”

“I have a feeling you’re going to either way.”

“Correct,” he says. “If you really like this girl, don’t play around. Don’t mess it up by being your stupid teenage boy self. Forget about the company for a while, and see what happens when you two aren’t fighting about this buyout.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a smart thing to do,” I say. “I don’t want to lose out on this—”

“Do you want to lose out on a chance with her?” he cuts me off. “If she’s that special, isn’t she worth a little risk?”

His words hit me by surprise. Of all people, Aston is the last person I expected to hear these words from.

“That’s what you did, back then,” I say, cautiously. “And don’t you remember how that ended?”

He groans, as if in pain, and I almost feel sorry for what I said.

“That was different,” he says. “And you shouldn’t let my personal

experiences scare you. I don't regret what I did back then, and I would do it all over again, despite everything that happened."

"Who says I'm scared?" I object, even though I know he's right.

"We both know you are," Aston says calmly. "Do the scary thing, my friend. It might be worth it."

"Thanks, Dad," I joke—and we both laugh.

My thoughts are still racing after Aston and I end our conversation shortly after.

Do the scary thing. The scary thing would be to ignore all that stands between us and pursue Madison like I would pursue any other girl. A girl who is not coincidentally the CEO of a company I want to acquire. A girl who I just happened to run into. She could just be the girl I met at the Tensho, the girl who I have yet to submit—either on or off the mat. The girl who's been haunting my thoughts ever since that very first moment I saw her.

It's scary to think of her that way because it could mean I'm losing sight of my goal, and the main reason I got so close to Madison in the first place. And I really don't want that to happen.

But that fucking kiss... How am I supposed to ignore what that did to me?

Do the scary thing.

Easier said than done, but Aston is right: it might be worth it.

Madison might be worth it.

Chapter 22

Madison

Today is not my day. That must have been one the worst Jiu-Jitsu classes I ever attended. My usual fiery determination was replaced by a nagging sense of distraction, and it reflected in my performance on the mat. It's rare for me to be submitted by a blue belt these days, but today, it happened. I can still feel the heat of shame radiating on my cheeks as I make my way out of the Tensho, hastily darting through the door with a slumped posture.

I glance around the parking lot, hoping that he might be around. Chase has been taking private lessons with Raymond, so I've never seen him in one of our classes again, but there's always a chance of running into him in the parking lot. It's happened before, so I almost expect to find him waiting for me out here, stopping me dead in my tracks with one of his surprise appearances.

My heart sinks at the realization that he's not here today. I can't find him anywhere inside or outside the Tensho. We haven't talked since the gala a couple of days ago, and I'm beginning to feel like an idiot for believing that he might actually be into me for anything other than my company.

But that kiss. That kiss felt so real, so special, and unlike any other. No one is *that* good of an actor, not even here in Los Angeles. Or is this just wishful thinking?

Sighing, I continue to walk to my car, my disappointment weighing on me. Maybe it was just as stupid to believe that he'd show up like

that again. I mean, what did I expect after days of radio silence? A surprise visit with a bouquet of flowers and a dinner invitation? As if.

I slowly approach my Bugatti, my head hanging low as I carry the weight of disappointment with me. Just as I'm about to open the driver's door, I notice something tucked beneath the windshield wiper. At first, anger flares within me, because I'm convinced it must be a parking ticket. My frown deepens as I reach for it, ready to face the inevitable.

But as I reach for the paper, I realize that it's not a ticket at all. It's an envelope, pristine white, with handwritten words on it.

In for a little adventure?

Confusion replaces my initial irritation as I read the sentence again.

My curiosity gets the better of me as I open the envelope, revealing a neatly folded letter inside. My heart quickens as I start reading, my emotions shifting from frustration to intrigue.

Let's talk.

Meet me at LAX, Atlantic Aviation, Thursday morning at 10 a.m.

Pack lightly.

The message is signed with Chase's name and three perplexing words: *"It might be worth it."*

"It might be worth it?" I read out loud. "What the..."

I mull over the note, my mind racing with questions. What is this supposed to mean? Why does he want me at the airport? And if I'm not mistaken, Atlantic Aviation is not a regular terminal but a hub for private jets.

Does he really think I'm crazy enough to hop on a private plane with him for "a little adventure"?

Because I just might be. He may just be playing with me to get what he wants, but Max is right—there could be something in it for me, too. Even if it's just sex with the hottest man on Earth.

But what's with those words at the end? The '*might be*' part nags at me, stirring both curiosity and a tinge of apprehension. Chase has always been unpredictable, and this message is no exception. And what does he mean by "Let's talk"? About what? About the buyout? About the kiss? About us? Why does he expect me to pack for a trip and meet him at the airport, if this is just about the buyout?

Who the hell does he think he is? He must know that this kind of game could never work with any halfway reasonable person.

However, I'm not sure if I would consider myself reasonable when it comes to him. Because I'm already considering going along with this. I'm actually considering following the demand in this short and presumptuous note. It's as mysterious as him, a risky riddle that I need to solve. His message gives rise to even more questions than I had before. But despite the uncertainty, I can't help but feel an undeniable pull, a desire to unravel this enigma.

Shaking off my bewilderment, I slip the note into my bag and slide into the driver's seat of my car. Fine. Let's go on an adventure, Mr. Keaton.

As I pull out of the parking lot, I make a mental note to call Ann-Marie first thing in the morning. Clearing my schedule for Thursday is the first step in this intriguing journey, and I'm curious to see where it will lead.

Chapter 23

Chase

The minutes tick by, and I scan the crowd for any sign of Madison. I've been standing here for more than ten minutes like an idiot because my dumb nerves drove me out of the house way too early. I haven't heard a word from her, but I know that she found the note—because I was acting like an idiot on that day, too.

I knew what classes at the Tensho she attends, and so after I attached the note to her Bugatti, I hid behind the wheel of my own ride, parked as far away as possible while still remaining in view of her vehicle, and waited. It felt like an eternity, until she finally emerged from the Tensho, her pretty lips pressed into a thin line and the hint of a frown gracing her features. She looked tense and unhappy as she hurried toward her car, her gaze trailing across the parking lot as if she was looking for something, or someone. She barely looked in my direction, but I still found myself ducking behind my wheel every time she glanced my way.

The expression on her face had darkened when she spotted the paper under her windshield wiper, but it changed entirely when she opened the envelope. She read the note with narrowed eyes, and then she smiled. She shook her head, but she was smiling.

She liked what she saw. But does that mean she'll show up today?

I check the time for the umpteenth time and almost groan in agony when I realize that only two minutes have passed since I last checked. It's a minute past 10 a.m. already and I'm beginning to feel uneasy.

But just as doubt begins to creep in, there she is. Madison steps into the terminal, looking absolutely stunning in a breezy summer dress that clings to her in all the right places. Her long hair is pulled back into a ponytail, her eyes hiding behind oversized sunglasses, adding an air of mystery to her presence.

Relief washes over me, and a smile tugs at the corners of my lips. She's here. She actually showed up. My breath catches in my throat as I watch her approach, pulling a small carry-on behind her and balancing an iced latte in her other hand.

As she gets closer, I admire the effortless grace with which she moves. Her confidence shines through, and I can't deny that I'm captivated by her presence.

"You know, I should call the police on you," she greets me, as she comes to a halt in front of me.

"And why is that?"

"Because you are, in fact, a stalker," she says in a matter-of-fact voice, tilting her head to the side. "You know what my first thought was, after reading your note?"

I shrug and shake my head no, curious to hear her answer.

"That it's pretty bold of you to assume that I could just up and leave town for a few days," she says. "As if I don't have a company to run, meetings to attend, work to do..."

She pauses and takes off her sunglasses before she pins me with her blue eyes, framed by winged lashes and a hint of sparkling eyeshadow.

"So, imagine my surprise when I called my assistant to make sure my schedule is clear for today and tomorrow, and she told me that my schedule has been cleared for the next couple of days, as requested,

because I'm on a 'work retreat with Mr. Keaton'."

She arches her eyebrows and sucks at the straw of her iced latte while casting me a contentious look.

"Well, I had to make sure you didn't have any excuses not to come," I retort. "But I must warn you, I may have told your assistant that this is a business trip, but that's not what this is about."

"What is it about then?"

She flinches when I take a step closer, but doesn't move away from me. Her lips part as she looks up at me, practically inviting the kiss that was coming either way. As I reach out, my fingers gently graze her cheek, and she leans in, closing the distance between us.

Our lips meet in a passionate kiss, a simple connection that carries the promise of something deeper. It's calmer this time, less greedy and a little more cautious, but still eager for more. The hint of a moan blends with the sound of our lips touching, and I almost lose myself when she rises on her toes, seductively arching her back as she grinds against my body.

She sighs with disappointment when I break our kiss, the need for more clearly written in her eyes as she looks up at me.

"So, I guess we're on the same page then," I say.

"Depends on what you mean," Madison responds, and the early harbinger of a frown adorns her features.

"That this will not be about business," I clarify.

"I don't even know what this is. You haven't even told me where we're going, or for how long," she laments. "We are going somewhere, right?"

Her gaze trails to the building behind my back. It looks quite plain

from the outside, concealing the luxury that awaits within. This is the private aircraft fixed base I like to use when flying out of Los Angeles. They are usually quick to service my demands, which often arise from a spontaneous spark—just like this one.

“Yes, we are going somewhere,” I tell her. “And you will find out more about our destination soon enough. Let’s go inside for a little welcome drink first.”

She rolls her eyes at me and laughs.

“Alright, Mr. Mysterious. Can I at least know for how long I’ll be gone? My uncle will—”

“Don’t worry about him,” I cut her off. “We’ll only be gone for four days. Think you can handle that?”

Her lips move, as she contemplates her response, her eyes moving anywhere but to me, before they rest on the entrance to the private charter base.

“This is crazy,” she whispers, seemingly more to herself than to me. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

That’s all I needed to hear. She doesn’t object or try to fight me when I gently hook her arm in mine and take the carry-on from her as I guide her through the open doors.

Chapter 24

Madison

I'm tipsy by the time we reach Inouye Honolulu International Airport. We step off the plane after a luxurious journey that brought us to Hawaii—as I found out only while we were already piercing through the clouds. The Gulfstream private jet was a masterpiece of opulence, with sumptuous leather seats that cradled us in comfort. The interior gleamed with polished wood accents, and there was even a small dining area where we enjoyed a gourmet dinner and way too much champagne.

“You’re trying to get me drunk,” I commented as Chase emptied the remains of a bottle into my flute.

“And you’re letting me,” he said with a wink.

He had a point there. It's so much easier to allow myself to indulge in this insane and irresponsible adventure when I'm not operating with a clear mind. However, sober or not, my mind has been lacking clarity when it comes to Chase on more than one occasion.

From the airport, we continued our journey to Lana'i, where a sleek limousine whisked us away along winding roads, providing picturesque glimpses of the island's lush landscapes and azure waters. It was a serene and enchanting drive, especially when the sun started to set, tinging the sky with a soft kiss of violet and orange.

We arrive at the Four Seasons Resort Lana'i close to Hulopoe Beach, a temple of luxury nestled along the island's coastline. The resort exudes an air of elegance, with its Hawaiian-inspired architecture and

manicured gardens that lead to the pristine Hulopoe Beach.

The lobby is adorned with hand-painted frescoes, and the scent of tropical blooms wafts through the air. A warm aloha spirit embraces us as we check-in.

“Liking it so far?” Chase wants to know, as we make our way to our suite.

He looks outrageously handsome in his casual summer outfit. My eyes trace the contours of his form, appreciating the casual yet effortlessly stylish choice of clothing. A well-fitted white button-down shirt clings to his toned physique, and the sleeves are just short enough to reveal a wheat tattoo on his upper arm.

“Who wouldn’t,” I say, before pointing at his arm. “Is that your only tattoo?”

“It is,” he simply says, without looking at me.

“What does it mean?” I want to know.

He chuckles. “Why does every tattoo have to mean something?”

“Because people don’t tend to just randomly poke ink into their skin for nothing,” I retort.

That makes him laugh, but he shakes his head. “You’re right about that. But I’m sorry, there’s no story to tell.”

Yes, there is. But for some reason, he doesn’t want to tell me. Just like he didn’t want to tell me more about his charity and the reason behind it.

His apprehension to open up to me makes me wonder whether this was a stupid idea. When I told Max about the note and the mysterious invitation, he practically *begged* me to go, because he was so excited on my behalf. But he also made me swear to protect my heart.

“Have some fun. Enjoy that delicious piece of man—but watch out. We don’t know what he’s truly after,” he said, a warning finger raised in front of my face.

Then he helped me pack as if he was worried that I might chicken out at the last minute.

As I steal another glance at Chase, I appreciate once again how effortlessly attractive he appears in this light ensemble. He pairs the shirt with khaki shorts that hang just above his knees, showcasing his sun-kissed legs. The outfit is completed with comfortable yet fashionable slip-on shoes, giving him an air of relaxed elegance that’s perfect for our tropical getaway. He looks like he belongs here.

“Were you born here?” I want to know, as we turn into a lavishly decorated corridor that leads toward a large wooden door.

“What makes you think that?” he says, side-eying me with arched eyebrows.

“You really don’t like answering questions, do you?”

A smile widens across his handsome face, but instead of answering, he holds the key card in front of the knob of the large door in front of us. A green light and a clicking sound later, the door unlocks and he opens it for me to go inside before him.

“Welcome to the Ohana Suite,” he says, as I follow his gesture to go inside. “It’s one of the best they have.”

I’m immediately struck by the unparalleled luxury that envelops us. The sitting room exudes an air of sophistication, with plush furnishings and a spacious couch stretches before us, adorned with tasteful throw pillows that add a pop of color to the neutral palette of the room. A polished wooden coffee table sits at its center. In one

corner, there's a small dining area with a sleek glass-top table set for two.

Large sliding glass doors lead to the balcony, offering breathtaking views of Hulopoe Beach and the shimmering Pacific beyond.

"So, you've been here before?" I ask when he follows me out onto the balcony.

"A couple of times, yes," he says, leaning against the balustrade. "Not a lot, though."

"Some people would call a couple of times a lot," I say. "I've never been to the same place twice."

"You haven't?" He asks back, visibly surprised. "Didn't your family have some sort of go-to spot or something?"

I shake my head. "My mother died when I was still young and my father... well, he was working all the time. I spent most of my time with my nannies."

I let out a heavy sigh. "Guess my dad didn't really feel like vacationing after my mother's death."

Chase clears his throat, looking a tad uncomfortable. Then he whispers, "That must have been tough."

"Not really," I say, shrugging. "I can't say I missed anything. We had money and he spoiled me relentlessly. He gave me everything, except for his time. At least when I was still a child. We grew really close when I started to show interest in taking over the family's company as a teenager. He started to see me like a partner more than a child, and he taught me so much. Everything, really. He taught me more than all of my classes at university combined."

I bite my lip, realizing that the words have just been pouring out of

me. I hate being such an open book—especially with a guy like Chase, who refuses to let me in even the tiniest bit.

“Dads have a way of doing that,” he muses, his face pensive and somewhat melancholic.

“Did your father teach you a lot, too?” I want to know, leaning in closer as I await his response.

But once again, Chase opts for a disappointing response.

“No.”

That’s all he says, before straightening his back and walking back inside.

I go after him, anger flaring up. “Really? I give you a page of personal history, and all you have to say is ‘no’?”

“That was your choice,” he reminds me. “Just like it’s my choice not to speak any further about this.”

I frown at him, but instead of facing my irritation, he begins to unbutton his shirt and walks into the bedroom. I remain in the living area for a split second, my lips parted as if to speak, but I’m bereft of words. I follow him into the bedroom.

The bedroom, adorned in shades of white and blue, feels like the perfect seaside refuge. A massive, inviting king-sized bed dominates most of the room, and heat coils through my core at the sight of it. The wall to the left is mostly covered with floor-length windows and French doors, facing the ocean.

An archway leads to the en suite bathroom to the right, and I see the shadow of Chase disappearing through it.

A moment later, I hear the sound of a shower being turned on.

Chapter 25

Chase

I know she followed me. I know she's standing behind me, and I know she's watching as I get undressed with my back turned to the door.

"What are you doing?" she exclaims, sounding shocked.

I take a moment to drop my shirt to the floor before I turn around to face her. She's standing in the archway, her cheeks flushed and her jaw dropping when she lays eyes on my bare chest. I've seen that look many times before, and it never gets old—but seeing it on *her* face is a special treat for sure.

"What does it look like? I'm taking a shower," I tell her. "You can join me if you want."

"Um, no," she says, but her voice carries no conviction, and her eyes are still latched to my sculpted chest.

"Fine, I'm not forcing you," I say.

A shocked gasp flees her lips when I begin to open my pants, and she turns on her heels in an instant.

"I'll just...I'll...wait," she stutters, as she hurries out of sight.

I shrug, and drop the rest of my clothes, before hopping under the rain shower with a hard-on. My cock rose to attention when I saw that look on her face. That thirsty stare, and the way her chest was heaving under needy breaths... I can't wait to tease her more, to make her want me even more.

I didn't expect her to jump underneath the shower with me. In fact, I

would have been a little disappointed if she had. It would have been too easy, too fast. The fact that she's conflicted about all of this plays into my hands and makes all of this a lot more interesting. Seeing a strong girl like Madison come apart before me is the most enticing thing, a real challenge that will lead to a promising reward.

I don't want to take her the first chance I get—I want her to beg me to take her.

And she will. Soon enough she won't be able to think of anything other than my cock inside that tight little pussy, and she will scream for release, begging me to let her come in my cock.

All in good time.

I wash off the plane ride, soaping and scraping my body long enough for my cock to calm the fuck down. For a moment, I consider taking care of it myself, but that would only take away the fun of having to restrain myself. It would make things too easy.

It's a deliberate choice not to put on any clothes before I return to the living area of our suite, but I do both of us the favor of wrapping a towel around my waist.

I find her sitting out on the balcony, hiding in the shade and sitting cross-legged on one of the lounge chairs, her laptop resting on her legs and her shoulders slumped, in the middle of typing something. She barely looks up, even though she must have noticed my presence.

“Didn't I tell you that this was no business trip?” I say, languidly walking toward her.

She looks up at me, and I relish the way her lips twitch at the sight of me. Her gaze travels across my chest, rising to my face only slowly and with effort, as if she was forcing herself not to linger.

“I just wanted to—”

She gasps when I fold her screen down and lean over to fetch the closed laptop from her lap.

“Hey!” she protests, and her hands fly up, awkwardly flailing against my chest as she tries to grab the laptop from my hands.

“No work,” I insist, throwing her a warning look. “There’s no need for you to check your e-mail or extinguish any non-existent fires back home. You are officially on vacation.”

She scowls at me, but I can tell that she has no fight left in her. She doesn’t need to work, and she doesn’t want to work. She’s just looking for something to distract herself from the temptation that is me—and I won’t let her do that.

“Fine.” Her eyes are flitting back and forth between my chest and the ocean, where the sunset is now in full progress.

“Let’s go for a walk on the beach,” I suggest. “Before it gets too dark.”

She scans me from head to toe. “Okay. Shouldn’t you... get dressed then?”

“I think you should get a little *less* dressed,” I tell her. “I hope you brought your bikini.”

I don’t wait for her response, but turn on my heels, feeling her eyes on my back as I walk back inside.

“Though, it probably doesn’t matter. We have our own private beach right downstairs. No need for clothes there,” I add.

I can only imagine the look on her face right now, but I resist the allure of turning around to see. Still, I do her the favor of putting on a short-sleeved shirt above my swim trunks.

The warm Hawaiian evening sun greets us with a gentle embrace, when we step out of our suite, taking a private path down through the greenery to the beach. Madison has changed into a green bikini, her sun-kissed skin radiant against the backdrop of the island's lush landscapes. A light cover-up gracefully drapes over her shoulders, the sheer white fabric revealing more than it conceals.

A surge of desire courses through me, and I find myself grappling with the urge to reach for her hand as we walk along the path. Her presence has a magnetic pull, one that's impossible to resist. But she's not my goddamn girlfriend and we're not here on our honeymoon or some bullshit like that.

This is just a fun little getaway to have my way with her. And if things go the way I hope they will, this trip might open more than one door.

Instead, I take a step closer to her, matching my stride with hers as we make our way to the beach.

"Where are we going?" she wants to know. It seems like she's sensing that I have a specific destination in mind, which I do.

"I want to show you something," I say. "Down at the beach."

"The sunset?" she asks.

"That's just an added bonus."

"But you won't tell me what it is, will you?" she probes, one eyebrow raised and her arms crossed in front of her chest when she looks at me from the side.

"That's correct," I tell her.

I've planned something special for us, a hidden spot down at the beach that will finally give me the opportunity to settle a score with

her.

As we approach the shoreline, the scent of the sea fills the air, and the sound of the gentle waves lapping against the sand is a soothing melody. I glance at Madison and her eyes reflect the azure of the ocean as she smiles against the setting sun.

“Wow,” she breathes.

“Right?” I say. “Come, I want to show you something.”

She flinches in surprise when I’m no longer able to resist that silly urge and take her hand to drag her with me. A wooden footbridge leads to the right, tracing the line where greenery and the sandy beach meet.

“Why don’t you just tell me wha—”

She stops mid-sentence, as we turn a little corner around a larger set of trees, and a large gazebo appears in front of us. The gazebo’s architecture blends seamlessly with the island’s natural beauty. The gentle ocean breeze flows through the open sides, carrying with it the scent of the sea and the distant crashing of waves against the shore.

But what truly captures her attention is what lies beneath. Spread out on the polished wooden floor of the gazebo is a sea of Jiu-Jitsu training mats, their pristine surface inviting us to step inside. The staff of this resort listened to every detail I laid out in my request, providing us with large towels and carafes filled with cool cucumber water next to a selection of coconut-based mocktails, all resting on a small table in the shade.

“What the...” she utters, before losing herself in a fit of laughter. “You can not be serious!”

“I am,” I say, already pulling the shirt off over my head. “It’s time for

my revenge.”

She stares at me, as I step on the mat, inviting her to join me with a wave of my hand, while I step out of my sneakers.

“Don’t be shy,” I say. “You’ll have the honor of being the first brown belt I submit.”

She smirks at me. “Oh, we’ll see about that, Mr. Keaton.”

A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth when the sheer cover-up slides down her shoulders and she approaches me in her delicate bikini.

That bikini is not going to stay on for long.

Chapter 26

Madison

A triangle bikini is probably the worst outfit for a Jiu-Jitsu session, and I'm well aware that I won't be wearing my top for long. It will slide off and expose my breasts within seconds.

But I don't care.

I want this. I want to touch this marvelous body of his. I want to let the tips of my fingers travel along the ripples of his chiseled chest. I want to squeeze his bulging triceps and trace the lines of his tattoo. I want to bathe in his scent and feel his strong hands on me.

My heart is beating wildly, hammering against my ribcage with anticipation as I slowly make my way into the wooden gazebo. Tiki torches are flickering at the corners, bathing the area in a warm light. I can see the reflection of the flames dancing on his tan skin, as he gets into position.

"I want to start with a good takedown, so let's start on our feet," he says, beckoning me to come closer with a wave of his hand.

Takedowns are my weak spot, especially against guys as strong as him, which is why I prefer to start with my butt on the floor—but I won't let him know that.

"You're awfully cocky for a blue belt," I tease him, while I place myself right before him, copying his position.

He winks at me before he starts counting down. "Three, two, one!"

With a swift motion, he lunges forward and attempts a foot sweep, aiming to take me down gracefully. His technique is good,

undoubtedly, but it's not enough to catch me off guard.

As he executes the move, I hold my ground, my weight shifting fluidly to maintain my balance, while his fists dig into my shoulders in an attempt to bring me down. It's not the first time I've faced such a maneuver, and my instincts have been honed by hundreds of hours of training. I feel the sweep, but I don't go down as easily as he may have expected.

I can tell that he's not going all in, despite his menacing words. His chances of taking me down would have been way better with a simple judo throw, but he opted for a foot sweep, a gentle and rather cautious way to bring your opponent to the floor.

"Almost," he hisses.

I look up to meet his gaze—which turns out to be a mistake. It's just a split second, a momentary lapse of concentration, but it's enough for me to no longer hold the upper hand. He lets go of my shoulders and bows down to wrap his strong arms around both of my legs before he sweeps me to the side in one swift motion. There's nothing I can do to stop it. I'm falling down, arms flailing through the air and a frustrated yelp echoing across the beach.

I manage to soften my fall with a slight roll to the side, but he's on top of me before I can push myself back up. He straddles me and tries to go for my wrists, but I have no intention of letting him get a hold of me. I try to push him up by the hips, but he's too heavy and too strong, and I'm too busy fending off his attempts to grab my wrists to put in enough effort.

And then it happens. All of my attempts to evade him turn out to be futile. He gets ahold of my right wrist first, then the left, and just a

moment later, he's pinning both of my arms down to the ground, leaving me helpless and stuck beneath him.

A smile widens on his face, and his gaze trails down to my chest—where my breasts are now almost fully exposed. The bikini top must have slipped when he brought me down on the mat, and I hadn't even noticed, because I was so focused on the roll.

But that has passed. I no longer worry about proving my worth as a Jiu-Jitsu practitioner by submitting him. I don't want to fight him. I want to know what that look on his face means, that wanton gaze, and the way he licks his lips, as if he was about to devour a majestic feast. And that feast is me.

I no longer want to submit him, I want to be submitted by him.

"What a naughty little girl," he says, and my core starts tingling with need for him.

"This doesn't count," I tell him, still unable to leave the fighter behind and let the girl come to the fore. The girl who wants him—all of him.

"Oh, it counts," he says.

My breath catches when he lowers his face down to mine, pausing for a moment, before he places a kiss on my cheek. It's an innocent peck, barely more than his lips brushing against my skin, but it stirs a desire within me that makes me coil beneath him. I can feel his hardened length moving against my belly as I rear up, pushing my hips against his butt as if I was trying to throw him off.

He stays close to my face, following a trail of gentle kisses along my jaw up to my ear, where he comes to a pause.

"You want me, don't you?"

He speaks in such a low voice that his words almost don't feel real, like they're just hushed whispers from a ghost.

"Say it, Madison," he adds. "Say that you want me."

"You're so full of yourself," I breathe.

"Wrong answer."

I startle when he straightens his back and moves his hips up, until he can pin my arms down with his knees. He's careful not to hurt me, but I'm even more at his mercy than before—and his hardened cock is straining the fabric of his shorts right between my exposed breasts.

He lets go of my wrists, leaving my arms locked to the mat with his legs, while he reaches down to his crotch.

"I want you, Madison. And unlike you, I'm not afraid to say it," he says, while stroking himself through the fabric of his shorts. "I want to fuck you until you forget every other man you've ever been with. And I will. But we're going to have some fun before that."

I frown at him, unable to stop my lips from trembling when I ask: "W-what is that supposed to mean?"

"You'll see."

A treacherous moan escapes my lips when he scoots further, bringing his steely length so close to my face that the tip is touching my chin, while he cups my boobs with both hands. I can't stop myself from moaning again, when he starts kneading the soft flesh, enveloping his length between my mounds. And when he takes my nipples between his fingers, I feel close to blacking out. He's careful at first, watching me, as he pinches my nipples between his fingers, harder and then harder still, until the sensation starts bordering on pain—and I cry out with pleasure.

“Good girl,” he comments, and the words send a bolt of heat through my middle. “This is even more fun than I expected.”

He squeezes both of my nipples between his fingers, and the fiery pain makes me shriek, blinding me with its intensity for a split second, before I’m left with the aftermath, a warm sensation pulsating through my tortured buds.

“Lovely,” he says, while his eyes rest on my hardened nipples. “Like playing an instrument.”

“I’m...I’m not your personal keyboard,” I stutter, heaving underneath him.

The sensation of his hardened length nestling against my boobs renders any coherent sentence impossible. He shifts on top of me, and my gaze trails down to the considerable bulge below my chin.

“You want to see it, don’t you?” he asks.

My cheeks flush, and I nod, bereft of words.

“Say it,” he demands.

My eyes find his and I’m momentarily baffled by what I’m seeing. His expression is not stern, not condescending, or provocative. Instead, there seems to be honesty and curiosity, almost like he’s afraid of making a mistake.

Are we making a mistake here? Probably.

But it’s very hard to care right now.

“Say it, Madison,” he urges, his hand already playing with the hem of his shorts. The sight of it, the promise that comes with that motion, finally pushes me to speak.

“I want to see it,” I blurt out. “And I want...”

I hesitate. Why is this so hard to say? *You. I want you, Chase. I*

know what I want, and I've never been this dumbfounded and mute when it comes to giving voice to my desires.

But I've also never met a man like Chase, a man who throws me off course like that.

Our eyes lock again, and it seems like he understands. He suggests a subtle nod, an acknowledgment of my struggle.

"I want to see it," I repeat. "Please."

We're both smiling, and my breath catches when he pulls at the hem of his shorts to reach underneath the fabric.

Chapter 27

Madison

He's huge.

That's the only coherent sentence my brain can come up with upon seeing his massive size. I've never been with a man this big, but the thought of it turns me on even more.

He chuckles, and I'm very aware that my amazement must be clearly visible on my face as I stare at the tip of his erection.

He wraps his hand around his length and begins stroking himself in slow and deliberate motions while moving his cock closer to my face. He's so close now, that I could touch him with my tongue if I tried.

But when I open my mouth and jerk my head up, he withdraws, accompanied by "tsk tsk" sounds.

"Did I say that you were allowed to touch me, let alone suck me?" he asks in a menacing voice.

I frown at him. "No, but why wouldn't you want me to?"

"Who said I didn't want you to?"

Ugh, why is he being so difficult and infuriating, even now?

"I do want you to," he goes on. "But on my terms, and my timing."

He smirks at me before he adds, "I'm going to take my sweet time with you, Madison."

"Why?" The question sounds so stupid when it leaves my lips, but I can't stop myself.

"Because you're worth it," he says in a whisper, bowing down a little, to bring his face closer to mine. "You're worth every delicious second

of this. And I hate to rush.”

We stare at each other, and it takes everything within me to not let my eyes wander back to his crotch, where he continues to stroke himself, only inches from my face.

“You wanna play with it, don’t you?”

God yes, but I could never admit it.

He moves his hips forward, which causes the tip of his cock to brush my chin, before he places the tip on my lips.

“Don’t open your mouth,” he warns. “Don’t move until I tell you to.”

I don’t know why, but I comply with his wish. My heart is beating so wildly now, that I’m beginning to feel dizzy. I guess it’s a good thing I’m already lying on the floor.

He goes on to stroke himself, while his thick tip rests on my closed lips. I want nothing more than to open my mouth and bring his length between my lips—and I don’t understand why he wouldn’t want the same.

I want to call him a tease, but I don’t dare to part my lips to speak. So I just watch, my heart beating with excitement and my core throbbing with need for him. The urge becomes almost unbearable, but just as I’m ready to give up my self-control and do whatever I feel like, he stops stroking himself.

“Open your mouth,” he demands—and I do as I’m told in an instant.

He shoves his tip between my lips the moment they part. A groan escapes him when I begin to circle his thick head with my tongue, taking in more and more of him as he thrusts his hips in rhythmic motions.

“Fuck,” he growls, before pulling back.

I almost sigh with disappointment, especially when I see the strained expression on his face.

“Did I hurt y—”

“Fuck, no,” he cuts me off brusquely. “It’s not that, Madison.”

He glares at me, looking so angry that I’m almost losing myself in self-doubt.

“I don’t want to come just yet,” he explains, narrowing his eyes as he looks at me. “And not like this.”

He hoists himself from me, pulling up his shorts as he gets up on his knees, lifting his weight from my body and letting go of my arms.

I feel weirdly exposed, lying beneath him with my bare boobs and my askew bikini bottom.

“Let’s see if I’m the only one suffering here or not,” he says. And before I can ask what he’s talking about, I can feel his hand on the inside of my upper thigh.

“Part your legs.”

His voice sounds different now, deeper and with a kiss of welcome menace. I consider objecting to his demand, just to see what he’ll do, but the desire to be touched by him is stronger than any thought of playful defiance.

I obey and move my legs apart, while he places himself between my legs, his gaze firmly fixed on my core. I’m trembling with need when his hand starts moving closer to my middle, softly caressing the sensitive skin on the inside of my thighs, while he comes closer to my most sensitive spot.

I moan in anguish when his hand circumnavigates my core, steering clear of my pussy, until he reaches my belly button above the hem of

my bikini bottoms.

“Don’t move,” he reprimands when I begin squirming under his touch.

I groan in torment and throw my head back, staring up at the wooden ceiling of the gazebo while I feel the tip of his finger circle around my belly button.

It has gotten almost completely dark around us, only the torches still illuminating the area around us with their restless flames. I can hear the sound of the ocean behind me, waves breaking as they meet the sandy beach, palm trees rustling in the breeze. The wind seems to have grown stronger since we got here, and even in the dark, I can tell that there are clouds above us, shielding the stars from our view. The sky was clear when we got down to the beach. I wonder if...

He hooks a finger under the hem of my bikini bottoms and begins to pull them down. I lift my hips to help him, and a moment later, I’m completely naked, except for the askew laces of my bikini top that still drape around my torso without covering anything.

He hums with approval and gets back on top of me, supporting himself on his arms while his face is directly above mine, an ominous smile gracing his handsome features.

“Are you wet for me?” he asks.

I swallow dryly, and shake my head, despite myself.

“Liar,” he assesses.

I gasp when he lifts his left hand, now only supporting himself with his right arm, and reaches down to my core. There’s no teasing this time, no slow and deliberate approach to torture me. This time, he goes straight where I want him, cupping my hot mound with his palm

before he parts my lips with two fingers. The slick sound is enough of a telltale, but the grin on his face widens even more when he moves a finger between my wet folds.

“Damn, you must really be into me,” he teases. “You’re practically drooling, you little minx.”

I blush and want to object, but I find myself bereft of words and defiance. There’s no use when my body betrays me like this.

“Spread your legs,” he says. “As far as you can.”

I do as I’m told, parting my legs and thus giving myself to him and his restless hand. He moves his finger up and down between my folds, dipping into my wetness, before he concentrates on my most sensitive nub. It’s a cautious touch, the tip of his finger barely brushing against my swollen clit, but the sensation sends hot sparks of lust through my entire body.

“Good girl,” he breathes. I can tell from the tone of his voice that he’s just as electrified as I am. He wants this, but for some reason torments both of us with this prolonged teasing.

Another moan escapes me when he pushes a finger inside my channel. He continues to massage my nub with his thumb, while he spreads me with two fingers, and it’s almost too much.

“I’m gonna c—”

“No, you’re not,” he interrupts. “Not until I tell you to.”

Is he serious right now? How am I supposed to have any control over this if he keeps doing what he’s doing? I try to evade his enticing caress by moving my hips away from his hand, but he won’t let me. He pinches the soft flesh of my thighs when I try to close my legs. I mewl in agony, unsure whether this is the best or the worst I’ve ever felt. I

want to come so badly, and I'm already dancing dangerously close to the edge, as I feel the first subtle harbingers of an orgasm approaching.

And that's when the thunder starts.

There was no forewarning, no rumble in the distance, or lightning to announce an incoming thunderstorm—or if there was, both of us missed it. But now, it's here, and it's impossible to ignore. The thunder is so loud and sudden, that Chase's hand flies up with shock, and just a split second later, it starts pouring down, accompanied by a fierce blast of air that instantly kills most of the flames surrounding us.

"Shit," Chase exclaims, before jumping up on his feet. He's still hard as a rock, his enormous size stretching the fabric of his shorts, while he bows down to help me get up.

"Inside," he yells, his voice muffled by the storm, while he puts on his shoes. "Run!"

"My clothes!" I protest when he grabs my arm to drag me with him.

"You won't need them tonight," he yells back—and we start running back up to the resort through the pouring rain.

Chapter 28

Chase

I told myself I was letting her run in front of me to make sure she's safe and not left behind in the raging storm while I flee into the suite without her. But I failed to consider that she's naked, and how hard it would be to be faced with her perky behind as she's running before me bare naked.

I can't keep my eyes off of her, my gaze firmly locked on her athletic behind, while a furious need is raging through my veins.

This is going to be a lot harder than I thought it would be.

She makes her way up the path that leads back to our suite, and I realize that she's not even wearing her flip flops anymore. She must have left them under the gazebo, just like her bikini. But the path is lined with stones and pebbles, slowing down her pace in an instant. She yelps out in pain when she steps on the first stone, and I almost run into her, as she rubs the sole of her hurt foot.

"I can't—" she yells, raising her voice against the intense noise of the storm.

I don't hesitate for a second, and swoop her up in my arms before she can say another word.

"Hold tight," I tell her as I begin carrying her over the rocky path at a quick pace.

She drapes her arms around my neck, and my hand digs into the soft flesh of her ass, while I support her upper body with my other arm. I can feel her tits grazing against my chest, while my hard length pokes

against her ass cheeks from underneath.

I can't suppress an anguished groan, wishing for nothing more than to bury myself between her legs. Holding her naked and wet body pressed against mine, I hurry up to the resort, my pulse racing with anticipation.

This can't wait. *I can't wait.*

This is no longer under my control. The storm took that from me, or *she* did. I'm not sure which is worse—her irresistible allure or the fact that I just can't catch a fucking break when I'm alone with her.

I run as fast as I can, keeping her close to my body, while I try to ignore the urge to throw her to the ground and have my way with her right here and now.

The door to our suite is already in sight, but still seems too far away. Slowly, it draws closer, and another blast of lightning and thunder gives me a much-needed push to hurry the fuck up, as the sky shines bright above us. Madison gasps in my arms, tilting her head back to stare up at the turmoil above our heads.

Finally, I reach the doorstep to our suite. Madison begins to squirm in my arms, asking to be put down, now that the rocky path lies behind us, but I refuse to do so. I keep her in my arms as I push the door open and dart into the living area of the suite.

She's still squirming in my hold when I lean against the door from the inside until it closes with a loud click.

"You can put me down now!" she argues while trying to get out of my arms.

"Not here," I say—and before she can muster the words to object, I make my way over to the bedroom, not wasting another second before

I throw her onto the bed. She cries out in surprise, her wet hair splashing against the silky cushions, when she lands on top of the bed.

For a moment, time stands still, our eyes locked onto each other, while the sound of our heavy breathing fills the room. She is the first to move, her agile body sliding across the sheets as she reaches for the hem of my pants.

I want to stop her, but instead of reaching for her wrist to stop what she's doing, I let her do as she likes, my heart racing with anxious longing as she pulls down my pants. Her eyes are locked onto mine the entire time, but not to seek reassurance. She's not waiting for me to take her, like most girls would, but taking matters into her own hands. And I will let her—for now.

I step out of my sneakers and my shorts and place myself right next to the bed, my hips tilting forward, while she closes her delicate hand around my cock.

Mischief flares in her eyes, when she leans forward, parting her lips in the process, as if to swallow me whole. But instead, she pauses, placing a gentle peck on the tip of my cock, then another, barely touching my glistening skin, while my core erupts with fiery desire.

"Tit for tat," she whispers, when I cast her an impatient glare. "What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

"You teased me, now it's my turn," she explains.

"That's not how it works," I object.

I want to reprimand her, to take back the control she took from me, but she thwarts my plans by wrapping her lips around my thick head in a sudden surprise.

I groan, tilting my hips forward as I thrust into her mouth. She's

magnificent, and almost manages to take in my whole length at first try, choking and coughing around my hardness, before she withdraws. I place my hand on the wet hair at the back of her head, moaning, as her tongue circles the sensitive spot at the tip of my cock.

She's moaning, too, when she swallows my length once more, holding her breath as she forces even more of myself down her throat.

My fingers close around a tuft of her soaked hair, and I close my eyes while my cock meets the back of her throat. I tighten my grip around her, not allowing her to retreat when she tries to, and she stiffens, choking around my length, while I'm holding her in place.

Saliva is running down her chin when I finally let go of her, and a mischievous grin adorns her pretty face when she looks up at me. There's no complaint in her expression, but a challenge for me to do it again. My grip around her hair tightens and I shove myself between her pretty lips in one brute motion. She groans in a blend of surprise and delight, careful not to grace my sensitive skin with her teeth when she takes me in once more. Her tongue glides along the lower side of my shaft, sending ripples of lust through my core with its touch.

The sensation is almost too much to handle, bringing me dangerously close to a climax I do not want to reach just yet.

She looks confused and even disappointed when I let go of her hair, placing my hands on her shoulders instead, to bring a little distance between us.

"Lie down," I command, helping her to obey by providing her with a gentle push.

She complies all too willingly, her wet body coiling beneath me as she lies down on her back. I almost lose it again when she parts her

legs for me, a playful smile gracing her face, while she brings her hand between her legs. I'm momentarily distracted by the motion, held back by a desire to watch what she's doing, before I spring back into action.

I join her on the bed, crawling between her parted legs, while my hands explore the curves of her athletic body. I follow the curves of her hips, her waist, cupping her soft tits with both hands, while I lean down to kiss her shaved mound. Her bare pussy is glistening with wetness. She is more than ready for me.

Moving upward, I pause above her tits, holding and kneading them with both hands, while I take her right nipple between my lips. She arches her back beneath me, groaning loudly while my tongue circles around her hardened nub. And she yelps with pleasure when I increase the pressure, adding a little bite, before I let go and do the same to the other side.

I can feel her scoot down, moving closer to me, while her restless hand searches for my length.

"Fuck me," she pleads. "Now."

There it is. I've been waiting to hear that sentence, but I was expecting it to be phrased like a plea, not a command.

"I don't take orders," I breathe, as I bring my face up to hers.

She guides my cock to her pussy, placing my tip right at her entrance, before she's smart enough to let go of me. A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth when she whispers, "Well, take the lead then, Mr. Keaton."

If she expects me to wait or to move slowly, cautiously even, then she's wrong.

I'm done with waiting, done with teasing and wanting to guide a

dance that is no longer within my control. A gasp of surprise escapes her, when I part her tight channel with my entire length, shoving myself into her wetness with relentless savagery.

Our lips are almost touching, and our eyes fixated onto each other, when I pause for a moment, feeling her tight muscles around me as I'm deeply immersed in her hot wetness.

“Fuck me,” she breathes, the words barely audible. “Please.”

That's better. That's how it's supposed to sound.

“Good girl.”

My praise makes her smile, and that smile doesn't leave her face when I start to pound into her with voracious force, causing the bed to jolt around us, as I finally have my way with her.

My thrusts are strong and deep, driving with vicious need, while she groans and wails beneath me. She's so fucking tight, squeezing and testing me as I plunge into her again and again. I lose myself inside her, suddenly overcome with the urge to be even closer to this infuriatingly strong girl, who now wraps her arms around my upper body, her nails leaving trails of deep scratches across the skin of my back, while she aggressively pulls me closer.

This is it. This is how I want her to come.

“Come,” I hiss in between thrusts. “Come on my cock.”

The smile on her face widens. “I don't take ord—”

She stops mid-sentence, cut off by her own rapture, while I can feel her muscles clenching around my length. Her eyes roll back into her head, and she loses herself in a wanton groan. The sight of her pure and unbridled ecstasy brings me over the edge, and I join her, slowing down my pace as I reach my own climax in a couple of final and extra

deep shoves.

Her fingernails are still digging into my back when I lower myself on top of her, my cock still throbbing inside of her, as our lips meet for a passionate kiss.

Chapter 29

Madison

I want more.

That's all I can think of, when I wake up the next morning. The sun is shining through the partly opened curtains, after the storm has raged around the resort all night long. But now the sky seems clear, the clouds gone and the sun up and stronger than ever.

It must still be early, because the breeze that kisses the room through the open window is rather chilly. Why is the window open? Did Chase open it in the middle of the night, while I was sleeping?

He's passed out next to me, the ruffled sheets barely covering his god-like body as they drape around him. Just like me, he's completely naked—and hard as a rock. My heart begins to flutter at the sight of his marvelous cock, standing thick and erect, with the tip glistening in the morning sun. My core starts throbbing with demand, yearning to repeat last night's encounter.

I sit up, supporting myself on my elbow, while I reach over to his hardened length.

He doesn't seem to be awake, but sighs with relish, when I close my hand around him and start stroking his steely length with slow and deliberate motions. I can still feel him inside of me, my pussy stretched to the limit while I lost myself in the best orgasm of my life. I have never been this sore from a fuck, but still, I want nothing more than to do it again. I want to feel him inside of me, and desperately so.

My gaze wanders to his face, and I realize that he's awake, though

barely so. His eyes are half-closed beneath his ruffled hair, and a brazen smile plays at the corner of his mouth.

“This one is just for me,” I say in a whisper, before I get up to straddle him.

“I was just going to tell you to sit on it,” he insists, once again unwilling to relinquish control.

He grabs me by the hips and lifts me up with a strong push, before lowering me on his hard rod.

“Do you always need to be the boss?” I ask, while bringing his cock between my wet folds, teasing both of us by gliding along his length in smooth motions.

He squirms beneath me, closing his eyes while jerking his hips up into my touch.

“Does it feel like I’m in command right now?” he says between gasps, his lashes fluttering as his eyes roll back into his head. I tighten my grip around him, parting my lips with his thickness for a bit, before I retreat.

“For God’s sake, Madison...” He groans in agony, and I throw him a coy smile when his eyes fly open. The plea is apparent in his expression, but I know he would never beg, like he made me. It’s only his luck that I don’t have the patience to torture him any longer.

I mewl in a blend of pain and delight, taking in all of him, until his massive girth is stretching me from the inside. Rotating my hips, I rub myself against him, finding that sweet spot right behind my entrance that sends warm waves of electric shocks through my middle.

“Play with yourself,” he demands. “Get yourself off on my cock.”

I wink at him. “I don’t take orders, Mr. Keaton.”

Still, I move my hand down to my core and begin massaging my clit, while I continue to ride his cock. Contentment flares up in his eyes, and as much as I hate obeying to his demands, I can't deny the pleasure it gives me.

"Good girl," he breathes, tightening his grip on my hips.

I hate what that praise does to me. It's so patronizing, so typical Chase and so condescending—but still, hearing it feels just as good as his hard cock inside me.

I can feel my climax approaching, the first subtle ripples of pleasure already tingling through my core as I keep riding him.

He notices and his hands dig into my flesh, as he moves me up and down on his length, an intent expression gracing his face, while he's getting closer to his own elation.

A shriek of pleasure flees my lips when I find my release, my muscles clenching around him, while my sight blurs and the sound of the crashing waves outside is muffled behind my ecstatic bliss.

I can feel the pulsations of his orgasm shortly after, as the final waves of my rapture are washing through my body. He fills me, his hips shooting up, as he buries himself deep inside of me.

"Fuck, Madison," he gasps, as droplets of sweat pearl around his temples.

"Thanks." I grin at him, and lean forward to plant an innocent kiss on his cheek.

"Good boy," I tease, adding a wink to my words.

He shakes his head, a menacing smile on his face.

"Oh, don't you dare," he says.

"Don't dare what?"

“Calling me that,” he says.

“Or else?” I probe. “Are you going to punish me?”

“Would you like that?”

He lifts his hands to cup my boobs, kneading and squeezing them, before he takes my nipples between two fingers and starts pinching them. It’s merely a warning at first, a slight nip, a flirtation with pain, but not real anguish. That changes, when I raise an eyebrow at him, challenging him to give me more. He closes his fingers around my hard nipples with such force that I’m momentarily blinded by pain, unable to stop myself from shrieking out.

“Beautiful,” he assesses, now softly caressing my tortured nubs with the tips of his fingers. “There’s more where that came from. A lot more, if you keep teasing me like that.”

“Good to know,” I say.

I get up from him and lie down in his arms, my fingers absentmindedly traveling across his muscular arm. His eyes follow, when I begin to trace the lines of the wheat tattoo on his arm.

“Why do you not want to tell me about this?” I ask, as I admire the delicate work. It’s an elegant tattoo, drawn in fine line and with a lot of detail. It’s obvious that a lot of thought went into it, and I don’t believe for a second that there’s no story behind it. He just wouldn’t share it.

“Why do you need to know?” he asks back.

“So, there is a story,” I retort. “I knew it.”

He sighs, and pulls me closer, his gaze latching onto the ceiling above us, when he begins to speak.

“It’s just something me and my friends did back in college,” he says. “There were four of us and we...”

He pauses, clearing his throat. "It's silly, really."

"Don't be shy," I tease him. "I promise I won't laugh."

He chuckles and shakes his head.

"It's not that," he argues. "It's just rather personal, at least for me. I don't know about the other guys."

"Why is it more personal to you?" I want to know.

"Because I... well, okay." He pauses again, clearing his throat even louder this time, before he finally speaks.

"The wheat ear is the symbol of Plutus, who is the god and personification of wealth in ancient Greek mythology. The four of us, Gabe, Logan, Aston and me, we're all quite different characters, but that's what we always had in common: A desire to become super rich, before we turned 30," he begins. "We made a pact to achieve that goal, called ourselves the Plutus boys and all got the same tattoo, albeit in different places."

"And did all of you become 'super rich'?" I ask.

"Yes, in fact we did. Though some of us had to work harder for it than others."

"I don't think that's silly," I interject. "It sounds rather ambitious and well... like you guys had quite a special friendship."

"We still do, even though we live in different places," he goes on. "I'm the only one who moved to the West Coast after graduation. The three of them never left the East Coast."

I furrow my brows. "And that's why this tattoo means more to you?"

"No," he shakes his head. "Quite frankly, it means more to me, because I was the one who had to work the hardest to achieve our goal. You see, Aston comes from a rich family, he was already wealthy when

he started university. Same goes for Logan, kind of. He's a bit of a mystery, that one, but I know he didn't grow up poor, and he didn't need a scholarship to attend university. Gabe had a scholarship, just like me. But he still had a better starting position than I did."

"So, you grew up poor?" I ask, snuggling against his strong chest.

"It sounds harsher than it was, my mother worked her ass off to get me where I wanted to be. And I didn't really feel any lack, until I got to university, when I was surrounded by spoiled rich kids," he answers. "That just shows how much my mother sacrificed for me. She raised me by herself, worked several jobs and gave up her whole life to me, after my asshole of a father left us when I was still a toddler. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be where I am today. I didn't have to earn a living while studying two majors, thanks to her."

"She sounds like an amazing woman," I whisper.

"She is," he ponders. "But man, does she hate this tattoo. She freaked out when she first saw it."

We both laugh, and I can feel his arm strengthening around me, squeezing me even closer, as if he was afraid I would run away.

"Is that why you established that foundation?" I ask. "Because you want to help out kids in a similar position?"

He groans, as if answering that question caused him pain.

"There might be a correlation," he says, and his embrace around me loosens. "Let's get something to eat. I'm starving, aren't you?"

He looks at me, obviously unwilling to continue our conversation.

I nod. "Yeah, sure."

He smiles at me. "Good. I'll order us some room service."

"We're not going outside?"

“No,” he says. “I want you naked for the rest of the day.”

Chapter 30

Chase

The gentle sound of the ocean provides a soothing backdrop, as the sun dips toward the horizon, painting the sky with hues of orange and pink. Madison and I are sitting on the restaurant's patio, enjoying our last evening together. It's our third—and final—dinner at this place, which has quickly become a favorite in the short time we spent here.

She looks radiant in a light summer dress, the setting sun casting a warm glow on her features. However, her unparalleled beauty is subdued by a somber mood tonight, mirrored by the wistful atmosphere of this farewell dinner.

"These past few days were like a dream," she says, her voice carrying a gloomy undertone. Her eyes meet mine, and in that moment, I see the weight of impending reality in her gaze.

We both understand the truth—we must leave this idyllic paradise behind and return to the real world, where we are not vacationing lovers but business rivals.

Wait, did I just call her my lover? Is that what this is? Do I really want to attach myself to her like that? The past four days with her were incredible, and even more fun than expected. We didn't leave our suite during the first full day, but spent that time rolling around in the sheets, on the beach, and on our private patio. Her body was constantly close to mine, her scent enveloping me, her voice in my ears and her beautiful face before my eyes. It's only been three days, but the thought of not being close to her feels foreign—and a little daunting, to

be honest.

Throughout our stay, we've purposefully avoided any mention of business, relishing the bliss of our joint vacation while momentarily blocking out the inevitable reality.

"A dream that had to end," she adds now, after I left her hanging without a response.

Our eyes lock, and I hope she can see the sincerity in my gaze. Despite the challenges that await us, I can't deny the bond we've formed.

"You won't let it go, will you?" she asks now, and the pleading in her eyes almost makes me rethink my desire to buy her company. Almost.

"No, I won't," I tell her.

Our eyes remain fixated on each other, while we both bring a champagne flute to our lips, still observing as we each take a large swig. I can see the hurt in her eyes, and the pinch to my chest mirrors that pain. Just a few hours ago, we lay in a tight embrace in our private gazebo on the beach, the view shielded with bamboo panels, when another Jiu-Jitsu session had turned into fucking within seconds. I challenged her on the mat every single day, but we never made it to a point where one of us had to tap and surrender. It always turned passionate before that, and I don't regret a single minute spent this way. I've never met a person whose energy levels met mine as well as Madison's. She is a true powerhouse, the first woman who can not only keep up with me, but actually challenges me to better myself.

She is everything I could ever want in a partner. Thing is, I'm not looking for a partner. Not like this. Relationships demand too much, they are a distraction that I have no room for.

And with Madison, this distraction could actually be lethal for my business ambitions. I never allowed anyone to get in my way, and I can't make an exception for her. I can't lose sight of my goal because of her.

I managed to get close to her, just like I wanted—now I have to use that intimacy to my advantage.

But Madison is a tough nut to crack.

“Neither will I,” she lets me know, defiantly raising her chin in my direction. “How can you expect me to give up everything my father has built? It's all I have left of him, and it's mine. He left the company to me, and not to my uncle. My father trusted me, he helped me become the person I am, the person who is meant to continue his legacy. It's my entire life, Chase.”

“I'm aware of that,” I say. “And I would never expect you to let go of it easily.”

She huffs. “So, where does that leave us, Mr. Keaton?”

She always calls me that when she's trying to challenge me. I can't say I hate it, but right now, it feels like being pushed into a corner I never wanted to be in.

Yet, I'm the idiot who brought myself here. I was the one who whisked her away to a tropical island, thinking I could change her mind by making her mine. I should have known that a woman like Madison doesn't work like that. I wouldn't be this enthralled by her, if she was this easy to conquer.

“I guess we will have to see when we get back to California,” I say, raising my glass to her. “How about we let future-Chase and future-Madison worry about that?”

My attempt at deflecting impresses her just as little as Aston, when I spoke to him on the phone. She doesn't look convinced, and instead of reaching for her flute to clink glasses with me, she leans forward, supporting herself on her elbows as she pins me down with an intense stare.

"Future-Chase and future-Madison are not as far away as you'd like them to be," she adds for consideration. "In fact, they are less than 24 hours away from who we are right now, Chase. I think we should really talk about this, and we should talk about it now."

I glare at her. "Do you always have to be so fucking rational?"

I can't believe I just said that. That's exactly the kind of thing I have been accused of by others many, many times before. And it's true that I was always the one who lost his patience, when others would base their decisions and actions purely on emotions.

And now I'm the one asking to be dumb and irrational? What the fuck is she doing to me?

My words hurt her. I can tell in the way her face derails, as if I'd just punched her in the gut. Her shoulders slump, as if all vital energy was leaving her body, after I pulled the plug on her.

Fuck.

"I'm sorry, I didn't meant to—"

"Yeah, you did," she whispers. "You meant it. Just like everyone else who's said it to me before."

She clears her throat in an effort to compose herself, but the pain is still apparent in her expression. "I'm so sick of men telling me how to act, or how to feel! I'm so sick of it!"

"Mad—"

“It’s either ‘don’t lose your temper’, or ‘Oh, Madison, don’t be so emotional’. And when I’m trying to be smart and sensible, I’m accused of being ‘too cold’ and ‘too damn rational’. Madison, the fucking ice queen...”

Her lips are trembling, while she starts fidgeting with her fingers in her lap, unwilling—or unable—to look at me.

“You have no fucking idea how hard it is to deal with you assholes all day long! To have to prove yourself again and again, because everybody thinks you’re just a stupid little girl, and then...” Her shoulders slump as she deflates in defeat, before her tear-filled eyes find mine. “And then, you sit here and practically tell me to *be* a stupid little girl, just throw caution to the wind and play along with your stupid game... or whatever this is.”

I swallow dryly, pained by the realization that she thinks this is nothing but a game for me.

Because I know that’s no longer what this is. I can’t deny it any longer.

I’m fucked beyond belief, and I can’t stand the fact that she’s hurt by my actions—even though it shouldn’t surprise me. I have been playing with her, that’s what started all of this.

However, I didn’t expect things to become this complicated this fast. I didn’t expect to catch these conflicting feelings for her.

“Madison, I really—”

“Stop it. I don’t wanna hear it,” she cuts me off, by raising her hand. And even in the soft light I can tell that there are tears pearling in her eyes.

Fuck, fuck. Fuck!

“I... I didn’t mean to hurt you,” I force myself to say, hoping that she notices the gravity of my words. “I just thought, we could—”

“Fine then, let’s just be fucking idiots,” she cuts me off, before her voice breaks.

Her hand flies up to her trembling lips, and no words can describe the pain that soars through me, as I watch her trying to keep it together.

She tries to push me away when I jump up from my seat to comfort her, but I persist, going down on my knees next to her, while I search for her hand in her lap, while I place my other arm around her shoulders.

“Sorry,” she blurts out through tears, her voice muffled by her hand. “I’m not... I don’t want to...”

“Madison, please, I—”

“Fuck you,” she hisses, while squeezing my hand in her lap. “And fuck me. You’re right. I’m an idiot. I don’t know what I was—”

“We’re both idiots,” I murmur.

The solemn tone of my words causes her to pause and her hand slowly sinks down into her lap, while she looks at me through reddened eyes. Our gazes lock, and she calms down, the tension leaving her shoulders, while a single, last tear rolls down her cheek.

“What do you mean by that?”

She’s whispering, as if she was afraid to ask that question. And there’s a glimmer of hope in her expression that breaks my heart. I don’t want to shatter that hope. I want to feed it, and see what grows from it, if neither of us fights it—as impossible as that may seem right now.

“I mean, that I’m just as fucked as you are.”

A slight tremor moves through her, when I start caressing her hand with my thumb, it’s a gentle touch, warm and soothing—and I’m shook by the realization that I’ve never touched a woman like this. I never wanted to. I never cared enough to allow this kind of intimacy without the need for sex hammering at the back of my head. I’m still drawn to Madison with a force that borders on painful, but right now, all I want is for her to stop crying, and to bring back that provoking smile, to see that dimple on her left cheek when she’s about to tease me, to hear that winning laughter when she gets something she wants...

And it pains me to know that I will never be the man who can give her all she wants. Because if her wishes are met, mine are destroyed. And I’ve fought too hard to be where I am to give up now.

“Believe me, Madison, this isn’t easy for me,” I manage to say, fighting for every single word. Why is this so fucking hard?

“Then why are you doing it?” she asks. “Why do you have to take my company away from me? Even after... all of this.”

She looks out to the ocean, and my heart aches when she pulls her hands out of mine.

“Because I have to,” I say, as I get back up on my feet. “I’ve been working toward this my entire life, Madison. I thought you’d understand that.”

She lets out a pained chuckle.

“That’s the fucked up thing,” she says, now looking back at me. “I *do* understand, Chase. I understand what you’re trying to do—because I’m doing the same. I have been working for this my entire life, too.”

There are unspoken words lingering between us, the air filled with

meaning, understanding, and so much pain, that it makes me want to
fucking scream.

Chapter 31

Madison

We haven't talked much since last night's dinner. Chase tried to lighten the mood, but I couldn't get myself to return to the breezy and fun person he spent the last few days with. His comment hurt more than he could ever know, and our dinner conversation ruined the mood entirely.

I hate him so much for all of this, but still, I can't really say I'm mad at him. I wish it were as simple as that. I hate how much I understand him. I know that he can't let go of his dream, because neither can I. And when he looked at me with those tortured eyes, I could tell that the weight of everything that stands between us is weighing on him just as much as it's weighing on me. I believed him when he said that he's just as fucked as I am—or I want to believe him.

My heart was aching when we returned to our suite last night, and it was aching even more when we started packing in silence. By the time we went to bed, I was close to tears, and he wrapped his arms around me, when he noticed. We kissed then, but we didn't have sex. I wanted to, and I'm sure he did, too, but it didn't feel right after what happened during dinner. Instead, we fell asleep in a wordless embrace, unable to deny the magnetic pull between us, despite everything.

I always knew that having sex with him was wrong, but in the moment, it felt so inexplicably right that I refused to think of all the things that stand between us. The reality that we blocked out during our entire stay, except for that last dinner, when I couldn't help but

bring it up.

Did I hope that he might have changed his mind? Did a tiny part of me even *expect* it, after all that happened between us? Was I really that stupid?

And did *he* expect *me* to change my mind? Is that really the game he was playing? I still can't be sure either way.

This morning, I don't even know if I was more disappointed about being hurt by him or about not having sex with him one last time. It would have been our last time, right? We never said anything about bringing this confusion back home to California.

Which sucks a lot, because right now, he looks "good enough to eat," as Max would say. His tan darkened during our stay on the island, and he looks exceptionally hot in a white shirt and Cartier sunglasses, as we board the private jet on our way home.

He's the perfect gentleman, holding open doors for me, trying to help me with my carry-on—but I wouldn't let him—and making sure I have everything I need. And it doesn't exactly help with my conflicting emotions.

He looks rather miserable himself, but his touch is as electrifying as ever, his hand at the small of my back when he guides me to my seat sends sparks through my core, dancing and tingling with need, while he helps me get settled on the plane.

I watch the strong muscles on his arms flex when he stows away our carry-ons, and I find myself taking an extra deep breath when he leans over to my side to look out the window as we take off.

His scent is an alluring blend of beach and citrus, the salty breeze leaving a pleasant wisp on his hair, accompanied by the kiss of his

after shave. He stays close to me, while we watch the ground move further and further away, until we reach our cruising altitude and the seatbelt signs are switched off.

He's still leaning into me when I open my eyes and we look at each other, a cautious smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"You don't hate me," he says in a whisper.

His words come out of nowhere, and I arch my eyebrows in surprise.

"What makes you say that?"

"The way you just looked at me," he says, placing a hand on my thigh, while our eyes remain locked onto each other. "You want to hate me, but you can't."

"Well, you're not making this easy," I say.

I watch his hand trail across my thigh, and I know I should cast it away. I know I should keep my distance from him—but I can't. He's so close, the warmth of his magnificent body soothing me, while his touch elates me with desire.

"We're not back in California, yet," he says, adding a suggestive wink.

A moan flees my lips, when he provides my thigh with a strong squeeze. The plane starts jerking with mild turbulence, but his hand remains on my thigh, moving back and forth, while moving closer to my core with every stroke. My chest heaves with erratic breaths, and I can't stop myself from parting my legs for him. We're alone in the passenger cabin. It's just us, and the captain and his co-captain, both of them in the cockpit at the front, behind a closed door. Chase negated the offer of a flight attendant, and I'm beginning to think that there was a reason behind it.

“We can’t...,” I utter. “Not here.”

He looks surprised, when he responds: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I’m sure he notices the heat that rushes to my cheeks and causes my ears to glow with shame, and he laughs when I try to retreat and remove myself from his touch.

“No need to be shy, Madison,” he says. “I like your idea.”

“*My* idea?” I exclaim. And he laughs when I throw a taunting look at his hand on my thigh.

“It would be stupid,” I tell him.

“It was stupid from the beginning,” he argues.

He lifts his hand to my face, gently tugging a loose strand of hair behind my ear, before he leans in for a kiss. It’s an innocent peck at first, but I refuse to leave it at that. I can’t possibly resist him now that I’ve been given a taste. My demand becomes clear when I intensify our kiss, our tongues intertwining in a hungry dance within moments.

A surge of regret fills me when I start to think that he may have been right last night. We could have enjoyed ourselves, instead of facing the ugly truth that awaits us once this plane lands. We could have been stupid, but happy for one more night.

Right now, I want nothing more than to be stupid and have one last taste of the best sex I’ve ever had.

He breaks our kiss, fixating me with a solemn look, when he whispers: “I’m sorry for—”

“I don’t want to talk,” I say, before hooking a finger under his collar and pulling him in for another kiss.

He releases a soft moan, when I start caressing his strong chest

through the fabric of his shirt, while my hand travels down to his lap. He starts to get hard the moment my hand finds his bulge, fondling and cupping him, until his pants get stretched so much that it almost looks painful.

“You’re unbelievable,” he breathes through our kiss.

“We’re not back in California, yet,” I say, while I begin to unbutton his shirt.

“I’ve always wanted to join the Mile High Club.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t so far,” I retort, while pulling his shirt over his shoulders.

“Guess I had to wait for the right person.”

His words bring a pause to our actions, leaving us in a speechless state for a moment before we both choose to ignore the gravity of his words. I’m not ‘the right person’ for him in any regard, and we best remember that. This is purely carnal, a momentary lapse of judgment that provides us with short-lived pleasure—not at all rational.

He pulls me onto his lap, frantically pulling the dress over my head, while I straddle him. I move my hands to my back to unclasp my bra, while he unbuttons his pants to free his hardened length.

I close a hand around him, once again admiring his considerable girth, while I begin to stroke him.

“No,” he simply says, before taking me by the hips and lifting me up to place me on his length.

I want to protest at first, but words fail me, when his thick head spreads my lips as he impales me on himself. His accompanying groan sends a warm wave down my spine, accelerating my own lust, and I throw my head back in delight, when he’s filling me with his entire

length. He feels so good inside of me, so right and strong. I begin moving my hips on his lap, circling around his steely length, while he cups my breasts with both hands. I squeal with delight when he closes two fingers around my sensitive nipples and starts squeezing. The pain is short-lived and just intense enough to leave a throbbing after glow. The sensation travels all the way down to my core, causing a wanton pulsation around my clit. I can feel my muscles tensing around him when I begin to move up and down, supported by his hands that are now digging into the flesh of my behind.

His gaze is fogged with desire, his eyes rolling back into his head as he approaches his climax just as fast as me. I lean forward, and our lips clash together in a hungry kiss, devouring each other while I can feel the first waves of my impending rapture twirling through my core. I moan through our kiss as I find my release on his cock and he wraps his arms around me as he joins my elation, thrusting his hips up, while he fills me with his seed. The crests keep coming, rocking both of our bodies as we shudder through another joint orgasm, holding on to each other in an embrace so tight that it almost robs me of air to breathe.

We're both breathing heavily when we break our kiss and stare into each other's eyes, the last remnants of our elation still echoing through our bodies. He loosens his grip around me, his hands trailing down my back, while he looks at me through hazy eyes.

"Do you know why people say that sex on a plane is the best?" he asks in a whisper.

I shake my head. "No."

"They say it's because of the vibrations," he says, gently tugging a

strand of hair behind my ear, before his lips follow.

“This was intense, wasn’t it?” he whispers, barely audible.

“But I don’t think this had anything to do with the aircraft,” I dare to say.

He sighs, and wraps his arms around me again, and pulls me closer.

“Neither do I, Madison,” he whispers, sounding almost sad. “This was all you.”

Chapter 32

Chase

“You’re late.”

Aston’s stern look meets mine, as I take a seat across from him, the aroma of sizzling steak filling the air around us.

“Sorry, parking is a nightmare in this neighborhood,” I apologize, while waving for the waiter to bring me a beer.

Aston’s gaze flickers to my tanned skin, an unintended souvenir from my recent getaway.

“Looks like you’re never leaving the sun these days,” he observes, a playful smile tugging at his lips. “Last time you looked like this was right after you moved to California, when you vowed to make up for all that missed sunlight after spending so many years under gloomy New England skies.”

He raises an eyebrow at me, and I’ve never been more grateful to see a beer being placed in front of me than at this very moment. I reach for the drink the moment it hits the table, and clink glasses with him, before bringing the drink to my lips and taking a large swig.

“So?” he probes. “What have you been up to?”

I want to deflect so badly, but I can tell that Aston suspects something, and he has every reason to, after our last conversation on the phone.

I clear my throat and lean in a little closer, as if I was about to share a well-kept secret with him. “You remember what you told me, right? About doing the scary thing?”

Aston nods, his curiosity piqued. “Of course. Don’t tell me you listened to me for once?”

Taking a deep breath, I decide to lay it all out. “Well, after our last conversation on the phone, I did something incredibly stupid. That snake who stands between me and my plans—”

“Madison,” he interjects. “That’s her name, right?”

I don’t know why hearing her name has this kind of impact on me, but my throat suddenly feels uncomfortably dry, and I need another swig of beer before I can answer him.

“Well, yes, Madison,” I confirm. “I... we took my jet to Hawaii for a couple of days, and—”

“You what?” Aston’s eyes widen in surprise, and he leans back in his chair, absorbing my revelation.

“You told me to do the scary thing!”

“I said scary, not stupid!” he clarifies. “I was talking about maybe taking her out to dinner, taking a chance to get to know her outside of a business meeting... something like that. I never said anything about taking her to a remote island in a private jet!”

His eyes roll back into his head before he adds, “Why do you always have to overdo it, Chase?”

“Because I don’t half-ass shit like that,” I tell him. “I needed her to look at me differently, and this girl... she’s not easy to impress.”

He frowns at me. “You *needed* her to look at you differently? Wait, are you playing this girl? Did I give you advice on how to play with her heart, so you can get what you want?”

I feel an unpleasant quiver in my stomach, and draw my lips into a thin line while biting my lip, instead of giving him a verbal response.

That's pretty much what happened, but now that I hear Aston say it out loud, I feel nothing but shame about what I did to Madison.

"I know, I'm an asshole," I admit.

I can feel his eyes on me, as I reach for my beer, and I can see the way he shakes his head in disappointment from the corner of my eye when I take another large swig. I'm given a temporary reprieve when the waiter comes to our table to take our orders.

"Wagyu ribeye steak," we say in unison, exchanging a quick smile while the waiter types our order into his tablet. Wagyu ribeye has been our group's signature steak since college, and there's an unspoken rule that this is what we order when we meet for a meal.

"You *are* an asshole," Aston cements. "It didn't sound like you were just planning to play with that girl's heart when we last talked about her. I thought you really liked her?"

Well, that's the fucking problem, isn't it, I think to myself. I completely underestimated my feelings for Madison, and was stupid enough to think that this would be the way to convince her to sell to me—and that was just as stupid as thinking I would be able to get through this without getting too attached to her.

"I do like her," I say eventually, finally looking him in the eyes. "And yes, that's what I planned initially. Problem is, she totally thwarted my plan by..."

I pause, unable to find the right words for what happened between us.

"By being too awesome?" Aston concludes, arching another eyebrow at me. "You fell for her, and now you don't know how to proceed?"

"Well... yeah, fine," I concede. "She's fucking amazing, and I don't

want to hurt her. I hate causing her pain because she doesn't deserve it. But I also still really, really want her company."

"That sucks," he comments dryly. "If I were you, I'd reconsider that buyout. I've never seen you like this. You've never been this smitten with any other girl. I mean, acquisitions? Don't you have enough of those?"

"This isn't just any other acquisition," I maintain. "This is a true giant that could turn my entire empire around—"

"Oh, you and your empire!" Aston interjects.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I wasn't born into one like you!" I call him out. "I worked hard to get where I am, and I'm proud of what I've achieved. I've been wanting to expand into orthoses and work with the army for years, you know that! *This* is what I have been working toward!"

He looks a bit hurt, lowering his gaze for a moment, which makes me want to apologize for what I said about him, but he waves me off before I get the chance.

"It's fine, I get that," he says. "And I understand that this is about more than just 'growing your empire', even though you would never admit it, for whatever reason. There's no shame in doing something good for other people, you know?"

Our eyes meet, and once again, the sobriety in his gaze gets to me. Sometimes it feels like Aston has some kind of third eye that allows him to look into other people's souls. If he hadn't become a university professor, he would have made a great therapist for sure. He knows that my altruistic endeavors don't stop with my foundation.

After making my first million with a proprietary legal technology platform that I built from the ground up with our friend Gabe, I have

invested most of my efforts—and my money—into the healthcare sector. Not only because it was a great way to make money, but also to help people. A collaboration with the army to provide them with better orthoses for injured veterans has been on my list for a long time.

“Well, it doesn’t matter how noble—or whatever—my intentions are. She won’t sell, even after...,” I cut myself off, unwilling to share the intimate details of my time with Madison. “You’re right, I was trying to play her, to make her fall for me, so she would sell. But I should have known that that could never work. It’s her father’s legacy, and she worked all of her life to get where she is.”

“Just like you.”

“Just like me,” I agree. “Which is why I can never take it from her.”

He nods. “So, what are you going to do then?”

I release a dark laugh. “Fuck if I know!”

It’s my luck that the waiter chooses this moment to bring our steaks, placing the heated plates in front of us. My mouth waters when the scent of freshly grilled steak fills my nostrils, providing a momentary diversion from my dilemma.

But I’m painfully aware that I won’t be engaged with this steak forever. Just like I couldn’t escape to Hawaii forever, and just like Madison and I couldn’t pretend there was nothing between us forever. Reality will catch up with me soon enough, and I will have to make a decision: Break Madison’s—and frankly, my own—heart, or give up on my dream.

Chapter 33

Madison

I knew it was only a matter of time, until I would have to face reality again. In fact, reality welcomed me right after we landed—in the form of an email, sent from my uncle’s office. He didn’t even sign the email himself, but communicated through his assistant, who let me know that my uncle would like to sit down and talk about the buyout with me. Again.

I feel like I’m tilting at windmills with him. We’ve been going back and forth for so long and he hasn’t budged from his stance at all—and neither have I. How are we ever going to solve this?

And what if he has already convinced our investor, and I’m being pushed into a corner by three men? Can I really assert myself against all of them, uncle Walter, our investor, and Chase?

Chase, the walking enigma.

I was so torn and confused when we left the private jet that I couldn’t stop my mind from going to dark places, while we were walking across the airfield. I was torn between feeling stupid for indulging in this trip—and him—and the gnawing worry that he was just playing with me. But the way he looked at me with those sad puppy eyes... is he really that good at deceiving people? Or can I trust him, when he says that this is just as confusing and hard for him as it is for me? I don’t know, and it’s driving me crazy.

We haven’t seen each other since we got back from Hawaii, but we’ve exchanged a few messages about trivial things, always keeping it

light and superficial. It's been a couple of days since our return, and every morning I've woken up to a good morning text from him. If he's playing me for my company, he's certainly trying hard.

Chase is all I can think about, even now, as I wait for my uncle in my office. He shows up late again, but I choose to ignore it this time.

"I don't see any point in doing this," I greet uncle Walter, as he sits down across from me. "Nothing has changed."

Uncle Walter's brow furrows, and then he finally lets out a sigh as if surrendering to the weight of his own secrets.

"Okay, Madison, I guess it's time for me to share something with you," he begins, his voice barely above a whisper. He shifts awkwardly in his seat, unable to look me in the eyes, when he goes on: "We really need to sell, because... well, I don't know what the best way to say this is—"

"Without beating around the bush would be best, I think."

He casts me an angry look, before he finally reveals: "I need the money because I'm in trouble, okay? I've got debt."

"What kind of debt?" I ask, an uncomfortable suspicion creeping up in my mind.

"The bad kind," he insinuates. "The kind that doesn't go away over time."

My heart sinks. I know that my uncle has had trouble with gambling before. He lost his wife because of it, when I was still a teenager.

"I thought you had it under control?" I ask, my blood boiling.

"I did!" he exclaims. "For years, I was doing fine, but then... you know how it is—"

"No, I don't know how it is, uncle Walter," I say. "Because I'm not an

addict.”

He sucks in a sharp breath of air. “I’m not an addict!” he protests. “I have a sickness.”

“Same thing,” I argue, refusing to react to his attempt at painting himself as a victim. I’ve suffered enough because of his actions.

“Why not just sell your own shares then?” I ask, my voice tinged with desperation. I’ve been willing to compromise, I just can’t bear the thought of losing all of Dad’s company to Chase.

Uncle Walter shakes his head, a hardness settling in his eyes. “Mr. Keaton wants to buy it all, and not just become a shareholder. And to be honest, Madison, his offer is just too good to pass up. I think I have no other choice than to hold a gun to your head here.”

I frown at him. “What do you mean?”

“If you don’t agree to sell, I’ll make sure that the financing for the new 3d technology you so desperately want will not go through,” he says. “I’ll tell our angel investor that the project is off, and I will make him withdraw from the project.”

“But we can’t implement the technology without his money!”

“That’s exactly what will happen,” Walter confirms.

“So, you’re threatening to kill the company’s progress and make us lose months, no *years* of work, just get your way?”

Fear courses through me as my uncle mentions the angel investor.

I’m dangerously close to tears when I add, “Dad would be so disappointed in you.”

He doesn’t say a word, but meets my probing gaze with an unapologetic expression on his face. Dad was never close with his brother, but he helped him with his gambling problem before.

“I think you’re the one who would disappoint him right now—”

“Get out,” I say, my voice trembling with anger. “Leave my office. Now.”

But he doesn’t budge. Instead, he sneers back at me, “You can’t throw me out of my own company, Madison.”

My frustration boils over and I raise my voice. “This is not your company. It’s mine!”

His eyes widen in shock when I rise to my feet, pointing to the door with a trembling finger. I only now realize that the door has been standing ajar, so half the floor must have heard my little outburst.

Great. I’m sure this’ll make me look real professional in the eyes of our employees.

My heart is racing, but I manage to stay calm and maintain eye-contact with Uncle Walter, never breaking my stance, as I refuse to show him even the slightest sign of weakness.

“Get. Out.” I repeat pointedly. And to my surprise, he does get up from his seat, then he turns around to walk away, but not without throwing me one last, angry glance.

“Close the door behind you,” I manage to say, just as he leaves the room.

As soon as the door clicks shut, I fall back into my seat—and then I break down in tears, slumped over my desk.

Chapter 34

Chase

I never thought I'd attend one of Raymond's public classes again, after becoming one of his private students, but here I am. And I came here with a purpose, a silent hope to run into Madison again.

I scan the hall after stepping on the mat, and there she is, a glint of surprise but not displeasure in her eyes as they meet mine. Today is a gi class, and it's the first time I see Madison in her uniform, proving that she is in fact the proud owner of a brown belt.

The air is charged with a palpable tension, a blend of attraction and unspoken words hanging between us, as I walk over to her.

"What are you—"

I cut her greeting short, by placing a hand at the small of her back and pulling her in for a kiss. It feels so natural to do this, her lips on mine and her scent greeting me. She seems to feel the same way, because there is no resistance from her side, her soft lips meet mine with sensual intent. Her eyes are closed when I retreat, and I can feel my pulse speeding with the excitement of being close to her.

But as reality comes crashing back, I realize what I've done. This isn't some casual fling; Madison is a woman I genuinely want to be with. I find myself wanting to be the one to make her smile, to be the one she turns to, like she did with that guy—who I now know to be her best, and gay, friend.

The realization hits me like a punch to the gut. She's someone I'm falling for, someone I shouldn't be falling for.

“Why did you do that?” she asks, a line emerging between her brows.

“I don’t know,” I reply honestly, suddenly feeling like the rug has been pulled from under my feet.

A pang of guilt gnaws at me. I know I’ve complicated her life—and mine—with my actions, but I don’t see a way out.

And I definitely don’t see a way away from Madison. She has to stay mine.

“You don’t know?” she repeats in disbelief, crossing her arms right above her impressive belt. “What the fuck, Chase? What am I... how am I supposed to feel right now?”

“Why are you so snippy with me? It was just a kiss, and I—”

“Just a kiss, yes,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Do you know what I had to endure earlier today?”

I shake my head. “Of course I don’t. How could I?”

She sighs, her frustration evident. “That’s right, of course you don’t. And I bet you don’t care either. Because none of this is your fault, right?” she laments. “I had a very uncomfortable meeting with my uncle this morning. He’s trying to threaten me to get this goddamn buyout on the road. I bet you’re happy to hear that?”

I want to refute her words, tell her that their issues run deeper than my involvement, but I realize it won’t help.

“No, I’m not happy to hear that,” I say. “What is he threatening you with?”

“Why do you care?” she snaps, casting a cautious look around after raising her voice a little too much. The dojo is filling up with other people, but no one seems to pay attention to us.

I offer a sympathetic look, knowing that the storm inside Madison is

a pain she can't run away from. It's a conflict that runs deeper than our tangled emotions. And I've become a part of her world, and the ripple effects are more complicated than I could have foreseen.

"I do care, because I care about y—"

"Alright guys, sorry for being late!" Raymond marches into the room, clapping his hands to attract our attention. "Let's get started."

Madison has already turned away from me when I try to catch her eyes one last time before class starts. I have no other choice than to wait until class is over if I want to continue this conversation.

I line up among the other practitioners, staying close to Madison during the warm up. She meets me with a wary look when I follow her, but doesn't say a word when I place myself right next to her. We follow Raymond's instructions for our warm up session, both getting our muscles and mind ready for the class.

When it's time to pair up for the first rolling session I'm faced with Madison's back as she has already turned her attention to a different guy. It stings to see her walk away like that, but there's nothing I can do about it, not here and not now.

I look for her every time we're asked to pair up with a new opponent, but Madison is moving farther and farther away from me each time, it appears. When the class finally ends, she's the first one to run out the door, and I have to hurry to catch up with her.

But she disappears inside the ladies' changing room before I can talk to her, forcing me to wait for her outside in the parking lot. To make sure I didn't miss her I just grabbed my stuff from the locker, skipping the shower and not changing out of my Gi.

It looks like I was right to hurry because she's still in her gi as well

when she steps out just moments after me. She rolls her eyes when she sees me and pauses. She needs a moment to catch herself, before she continues on.

“I can’t do this right now, Chase,” she tells me as she walks right past me. “Please, just leave me alone.”

“No,” I insist, meeting her fast pace, as I walk next to her. “I need to talk to you ab—”

“I know what you want!” she barks at me, her voice raised to new levels. “You have made that pretty clear. And I was an idiot to think that this whole Hawaii thing meant anything or... whatever.”

She waves me off, and my pulse speeds when I realize that we’re only a few yards away from her Bugatti, as she unlocks the car, while accelerating her pace.

“But it did, Madison! I really... I am...”

Fuck, why is this so hard to say? Why does it feel like I’m undressing right here in the middle of the parking lot when I try to express my feelings in front of her?

She opens the door to her car and throws her bag on the passenger seat, before she takes her seat behind the wheel. I hold the car door to stop her from closing it, but when I see the fear in her eyes as she looks up to me, I realize how frightening this might appear. We both pause, our eyes locked, while I still can’t get myself to say the things I need to say to her. She wants to hear it, I can see it in her eyes.

It’s a sad truth that I’ve been trying to play her, but a truth that’s no longer valid—and I need her to know that. I need her to know that my feelings for her are genuine. But it’s like something is pressing against my chest every time I try to utter those words.

Slowly, I let go of the car door, defeat washing over me as she pulls it closed just a split second later. She's still looking at me, when she starts her engine, and the moment her Bugatti starts moving, I know that I can't let her go. I *can't* let her leave like this.

I turn around and start running to my Mercedes.

Chapter 35

Madison

The click of my car door reverberates through the underground parking area as I lock the car and turn around to make my way to the elevator. My heart quickens, when I realize that another car has entered right behind me, a dark Mercedes that just rolled into another parking space near mine. There are a few offices and stores on the lower levels of my apartment building which means that underground parking is not only accessible to the residents of this building.

It always gives me the creeps when I notice another car driving in right behind me because I can never be sure if the person behind the wheel can be trusted. My senses are on high alert as I side-eye the other car while hurrying toward the elevator.

And then I stop mid-pace, when the door opens and the driver reveals himself.

“You followed me home?!” I exclaim, my voice edged with irritation. “This stalking behavior won’t get you anywhere, Chase. How can you be so fucking stubborn?”

I stride over, my frustration bubbling to the surface, while he approaches me with a look on his face that I’ve never seen before. He looks uncertain, a little helpless and... rattled?

“I wouldn’t say that,” he retorts, composing himself. “A lot of surprising things happened because of my stubbornness, wouldn’t you agree?”

I glare at him, unsure what to make of his behavior. For a moment,

silence hangs heavy in the air, the tension between us palpable. Then, in a rush of words, he finally speaks.

“I’ve fallen for you, Madison,” he blurts out, his voice unsteady, as if the confession is physically painful. “And I’m a complete idiot because I don’t have a clue how to deal with it.”

I freeze, his words echoing in my ears. It’s an admission I never expected to hear from him, a declaration that takes me completely off guard. A swirl of emotions dances within me—surprise, confusion, and a flicker of something more.

And then, my doubts are back, screaming louder than ever before. He’s lying. He must be. And he’s very good at it.

“Don’t...” I begin, stirred by a whirl of conflicting emotion. “Don’t do this to me.”

“Do what?” he asks, concern masking his face, as he comes closer.

I want to withdraw from him, but before I know it he’s holding both of my hands in his, closing the last remaining distance between us, until we’re standing close enough to kiss.

“I’m not messing with you,” he says, seemingly fighting to maintain eye contact. “I... for fuck’s sake, I didn’t see this coming, Madison. I didn’t expect you to be so...”

He bites his lips, and lowers his gaze with an audible groan. If this is all an act, he’s really, really good at it, I have to give him that.

“You’re making my life hell,” I tell him, swallowing hard as I fight back a swell of unwelcome tears. I hate how easily I’m weeping these days. And it’s all because of him. “And I hate that, because—”

“I’m also making it... better?” he offers, throwing me a reserved smile, while he squeezes my hands.

“Well, yes, I mean, Hawaii was—”

“Pure bliss,” he concludes. “Yes, for me, too. I’ve never enjoyed the company of another person as much as yours, Madison. I’ve never...”

Another groan keeps him from finishing his sentence, and he throws his head back, facing the ceiling for a moment, before he tilts back down and meets my anxious eyes.

“You’ve never what?” I probe, unable to calm my storming pulse.

“I’ve never... felt this way, okay?” he finally admits, keeping his head down as his eyes look up. “I’ve never met anyone like you, and it’s fucking with my head.”

“Fucking with *your* head?!” I cry out, unable to stop my voice from breaking. I have to clear my throat, before I can add, “*You* are fucking with *my* head! And you’re doing it on purpose! I know you fucking are, because all you want from me is my company!”

“I want *you* even more!” he blurts out—and we both fall silent.

He seems to be just as shocked and confused about that revelation as I am, his lips parted and his eyes wide as he stares at me.

“Why would you say that?” I utter, unable to stop the tears swelling up in my eyes. “Why are you being so confusingly cruel...”

My voice breaks again, and I let him wrap his arms around me and pull me in for an embrace. I hate that I’m crying again, but I can’t help it. I want to believe his words so badly, but how can I? How can I trust a guy who’s still going after my company, who’s causing me this much anguish with my uncle, and whose behavior seems to switch between cold and warm every other minute.

The man who now places a finger below my chin, to bring my face up to his.

“I hate you,” I whisper, as another tear rolls down my cheek.

“No, you don’t,” he breathes back.

“No, I don’t.”

His lips meet mine, and for a moment, everything else fades away. It’s as if the world falls into place, and in that kiss, I feel the truth of our connection. We must present an odd picture right now, standing in the middle of the underground parking lot, still wearing our gis, the weight of my bag pushing down on my shoulder, while my soul is elated with this tear-filled kiss.

Pulling away, I can’t help but smile, teasingly remarking, “I think we need a shower.”

His eyes meet mine, a mixture of surprise and amusement dancing in them, while the sweat-drenched tips of his hair on his forehead support my assessment.

“Luckily,” I add with a playful grin, “I have one upstairs.”

Chapter 36

Chase

Madison's apartment feels like a breath of fresh air when we step inside. The living room is bright and inviting, awash in a soothing palette of white with delicate pastel accents. The flowery accents sprinkled throughout add a touch of femininity, softening the overall minimalist decor. It's a space that feels comfortable yet refined—filled with charm, elegance.

After we close the door behind us, Madison drops her bag to the floor, her face illuminated by an automatic light that seems to have been switched on by a motion sensor, when she turns around to face me.

She steps closer, hooking a finger below my belt, while a smirk tugs at the corner of her mouth.

"I've never seen you in your gi before," she says in a whisper. "It suits you, Mr. Keaton."

"It suits you even better, Miss Hailey," I respond, mimicking her gesture, by hooking my index finger under her brown belt. I don't stop there, but quickly open the knot, catching her belt with both hands, before I coil it up and place it on an empty stand right next to the entrance. She does the same with my belt, placing it right next to hers, before her hands glide beneath the jacket of my gi and across my naked chest. The tips of her fingers trace the lines of my muscles, and I can feel the blood rush to my core, when she bites her lower lip, revealing how much she enjoys what she's seeing.

“You’re soaked,” she remarks, playfully sticking her tongue out, while winking at me.

“You brought me up here to shower, remember?”

“Come,” she says, and I follow her through a corridor to the left, the lights on the ceiling switching on one by one, as we make our way toward a door at the very end of it.

Madison’s bathroom is a space that combines functionality with indulgence in a seamless blend of modern design and comfort. The walls are adorned with gleaming white marble, their surfaces reflecting the soft glow of ambient lighting. A rainfall showerhead hangs from the ceiling in one corner and the glass-encased shower area boasts intricate mosaic tiles that add an artistic touch to the space.

She turns the shower on, and we’re undressing each other with urgent speed, our gis landing on the polished marble to our feet, quickly followed by everything else. My lips crash onto hers as soon as we find ourselves under the warm water, my cock poking against her belly. The sound of the water almost drowns her moaning, when my hand travels down to her ass. I cup her cheeks, squeezing and massaging, while my right hand moves closer to her middle with each grip.

She parts her legs for me, and an especially loud moan flees her lips when my fingers dip between her welt folds. My finger glides inside her slick channel with ease, and she breaks our kiss to throw her head back with a wanton exclamation, when I bend my finger inside of her.

She’s gasping, practically breathing for air, while I continue to please her, using my thumb to circle around her swollen nub, while

subtly moving my finger inside of her. Her fingernails dig into my shoulders, when I add another finger, spreading her, as I prepare her for my thick rod.

“Fuck me,” she breathes through the water, already lifting one of her legs, and tilting her hips forward.

“Not yet, filthy girl,” I tell her.

Confusion, tinged with a hint of irritation is mirrored in her eyes, when she watches me reach for the shower gel that’s resting on a shelf behind me. I fill the palm of my hand with the pink colored goo, before I start soaping her delicious body. She closes her eyes, relishing my hands on her skin while I massage her perky tits, the soap foaming around my hands as I draw circles around her buds. Her nipples harden under my touch, and she hollows her back to lean into my touch. A short-lived yelp echoes through the tiled room, when I take her nubs between my fingers, pinching and squeezing harder than I ever have before. It must hurt a lot, but Madison absolutely fucking loves it. Her eyes roll back into her head, while another groan escapes her, and she holds on to my shoulders, while grinding her hips against my hard length.

I let go of her tits, and continue to cover every inch of her luscious body with pink soap, the flowery smell engulfing both of us, while I journey down along her legs, until I reach her feet. She giggles when I lift her left foot and massage her sole and between her toes.

A wide smile is gracing her cute face when I come back up and reach for the shampoo next while she grabs some of the soap for herself. Her delicate hands wash over my sculpted chest, while I reach up to shampoo her long hair.

Now I'm the one groaning, when she goes down further, closing her hands around my erection, as she slowly begins stroking. And I'm forced to lower my hands, when she goes down on her knees, washing my legs, just like I washed hers, before she brings her face to my cock. For a while it seems as if she enjoys watching the water pearl down around my tip, while her fingers close around my girth, only moving with small and deliberate strokes. Water is streaming down her pretty face, dripping from her lashes, while her eyes are latched onto me with adoration.

When I gently place my hand at the back of her head, she leans forward, bringing my length between her lips. She closes her eyes, as if she's devouring a delicious piece of candy, while sucking on my cock.

I thrust my hips forward, wishing for nothing more than to be inside of her, but what she's doing feels so good, almost too good. The way her tongue twirls around my most sensitive spot at the tip of my cock drives me crazy, and I realize I can't hold it any longer.

I beckon her to stop, hooking my hands below her armpits to pull her up on her feet. I support her when she lifts her leg, leaning against the white tiles, while she tilts her hips forward, and I guide myself to her entrance.

She's so wet, but unbelievably tight, when I part her with my thick head, slowly diving into her hot channel before I close in for another kiss. We are as close as two people could possibly be, so intimate in our embrace, while our tongues entangle in a passionate dance, and I spread her with my size.

"Fuck me," she breathes into our kiss. "Fuck me senseless."

"With pleasure," I groan back, before I start thrusting into her with a

momentum that almost makes her lose balance.

I hold her tight, making sure that she's secured between me and wet tiles, while I fuck her like I've never fucked anyone before. The need for her is raging within me with such violence that I could scream with fervor.

And so I do.

I huff and groan, as I let my carnal desire for her run free, and the world around us turns into nothing but a stage for our passion.

"I'm..."

She doesn't need to finish her sentence for me to know that she's reaching her climax. I can feel the clenching around my length as I drive into her, slowing my pace, as I try to match her pulsations.

I want to prolong this, and I don't want to lose this feeling of belonging—but I can't stop the waves of my own elation following shortly after. Roaring, I find my release deep inside of her. I'm coming so hard that stars are dancing before my eyes, and I'm suddenly feeling dangerously dizzy.

But when I notice her staggering in my arms, I'm ready to stabilize her right away, still refusing to pull out of her, as the last crests of our rapture wash over us in unison.

Chapter 37

Chase

Madison's living room is a testament to modern elegance. The room is spacious, with floor-to-ceiling windows, giving it a bright and airy feel. The predominant color scheme is white, creating an open canvas that accentuates the room's size. Delicate pastel accents punctuate the decor.

The overall design is so reduced and minimalistic, that one could almost think a man lives here—if it weren't for the centerpiece of the room, a plush sofa adorned with flowery cushions.

I'm sitting on a bar chair at the counter that separates her open kitchen from the living area, feeling both relaxed and a bit ridiculous in the comically short robe she's lent me. It's white, but adorned with subtle pink petals around the sleeves, and I'm beginning to suspect she chose this robe on purpose. The robe she's wearing is similar, but lacks the pink flowers and the sleeves. Instead, there are delicate black lines which would have been more suited for a man.

She glances over and can't help but chuckle at the sight of me.

"You look like a hero in one of those cheesy romantic comedies," she teases, her laughter infectious.

I laugh along with her. "Well, I aim to please," I reply with a grin, feeling surprisingly at ease in this playful banter.

"Do you want a drink?" she asks, already opening one of her polished cabinets. "Non-alcoholic of course. You still have to drive."

"Yes, Mom," I mock, raising an eyebrow at her.

She laughs. “Don’t worry, I know a great mocktail. If you like ginger?”

“Love it.”

“Great, two Ginger Zings coming up!”

She beams at me, and the light-hearted ease with which she moves around in her kitchen almost lets me forget our encounter from before. The strain on her face is gone, and she’s a lot more relaxed since our shower fuck. Right now, here, in her home, we’re just two people sharing a moment of laughter and camaraderie. It’s as if the flush of happy hormones has temporarily erased all the stress she’s under—and the conflict that stands between us.

As I watch her make our drinks, fetching things from drawers, cabinets and the fridge, which she throws together as if she has done this a thousand times before, my mind keeps whirling with uncomfortable thoughts. She may be in a surprisingly good mood right now, but I can’t ignore the things we have to talk about.

“It’s just a bit of ginger, agave syrup, lime juice, and sparkling water. Very simple, but so refreshing,” she announces as she places the drink in front of me. “Sorry, no garnish. I don’t have any cucumber or mint or anything.”

She even adds a straw made from glass, which she uses to stir her drink, before we clink glasses. The mocktail is a well-balanced combination of spiciness, bright citrus, and a touch of sweetness, all enhanced by the refreshing bubbles of sparkling water.

“Very invigorating,” I comment.

She nods. “It’s my go-to drink after a Jiu-Jitsu session. I’m always so drained after class.”

“Tell me about it,” I say. “Raymond really knows how to wear you out.”

“He’s good, though, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yes, even better than I expected,” I agree. “I’ve never trained with anyone who has his level of expertise without letting it get to his ego. He’s very down to Earth, despite his success.”

“A quality that’s hard to find in L.A.,” she murmurs, as her gaze begins to migrate through the room, latching on to things here and there, but always avoiding me.

“We don’t have to talk about it now,” I say, keeping my voice low, as if I was afraid to scare her away.

“You never want to talk about it,” she sighs. “Not, when we were still in Hawaii, not now... when then, Chase? When will we talk about the giant elephant in the room?”

I can tell that she’s trying to stay calm, fighting for composure while her fingers tighten around her drink. She’s in turmoil, but doesn’t want for me to see just how much this is bothering her.

“To be honest, I’m not sure,” I tell her truthfully. “All I know is that it has to be in a meeting room, an office. And we should be fully dressed.”

A frown emerges on her pretty face. “Why is that?”

I swallow dryly, noticing how I can no longer look her in the eyes, as I try to find the right words.

“Because the buyout is a business matter,” I say. “And not... whatever this is.”

I’m a fucking idiot. The hurt in her face is so apparent that I can feel it, too.

“Whatever this is?” she repeats, her voice almost breaking.

“I mean... this is... complicated,” I say. “We can agree on that, can’t we?”

She doesn’t respond to that, but brings the drink back up to her lips, taking such a large swig, that the glass is almost empty, when she brings it back on the counter top. Her pretty face is shrouded with sadness and defeat, and a drip of water pearls from a loose strand of her wet hair, landing on the counter like a heavy tear.

I need to comfort her before there are real tears following.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I say, and when I reach for her hand, she doesn’t pull back. “I really don’t, Madison, because I... I think, I may... I mean...”

For fuck’s sake. I can’t say it, I just can’t. But why? What the hell is wrong with me? Why am I being such a pussy? It shouldn’t be *this* hard to tell a girl that you like her, well, *more* than like her.

The expression on her face is tense and stern, her lips pressed into a thin line and her eyes locked on mine, while she waits for the end of a sentence that doesn’t come. I deflate with a long sigh, shaking my head, as if I was acknowledging defeat.

“You know that every day at the office has become a nightmare ever since this started?” she says. “I feel like it has turned into a battlefield, and I’m constantly fending off attacks from my uncle and his minions.”

“I’m sorry for—”

“As if this hasn’t been hard enough for me already,” she goes on. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to be a 27-year old woman in my position? A position that my father would never have given me if he

didn't think I was capable."

"I'm sure you are more than capable. I never doubted that for a second, Madison," I say. "You're amazing."

That's the understatement of the year, but at least I was able to say it without turning into a stuttering kid.

"Well, most men don't agree with that assessment, my uncle included," she says in a bitter voice. "All he can see is a stupid little girl, who took something away from him. And now, he's even threatening to sabotage the investment in our new 3d technology now."

"He's what?" I ask, my interest piqued.

"Oh, yeah, you can't be happy to hear that either," she says, tilting her head to the side. "I mean, this is why you want to buy us in the first place, right?"

"You know it," I retort.

"Well, if my uncle acts on his threat, you won't get what you want either," she goes on. "He's vindictive like that, and obviously thinks he can wear me down with that threat because it would kill years of work. No one would win in that scenario, not even him. He just thinks it will never get that far."

"He's wrong," I say. "That's just foul behavior on his part, not good business practice."

"Then why are you on his side?!" she asks, almost yelling.

Her knuckles turn white as her hands clasp the glass with such force that I'm almost worried it might break.

"I'm not on anybody's side!" I argue.

"Well, you're certainly not on mine, are you?" she says, thankfully

letting go of the glass to cross her arms in front of her chest.

“That’s not fair,” I say. “You know I’m in a difficult position here, too.”

“Not as difficult as mine,” she interjects.

And, frankly, it’s hard to disagree with that. She may not have had my struggles growing up, and unlike me, she didn’t have to work her way out of poverty. But my struggles are behind me. I’m well-respected in the industry, and I no longer have to fight for recognition now that I hold more money and power than most other men. I’m seen as someone who belongs in their world.

But the same never holds true for a woman, especially at such a young age.

“I’m not going to argue with you,” I say, unsure where I’m trying to go with this. She’s right, after all. We can’t ignore the problem forever.

“I just... don’t see a way out of this right now,” I go on, catching her distraught eyes with mine.

“Neither do I,” she says. And the hollow sound of her voice breaks my heart.

She doesn’t shy away when I reach for her hand again, much to my surprise. I take her hand in mine, hoping that this gentle touch tells her all the things I find myself unable to verbalize.

“Do you want to stay the night?” she asks. “It’s fine if you—”

“I would love to,” I interrupt. “If you’ll have me.”

The smile on her face warms my idiotic heart.

Chapter 38

Madison

The morning light filters into my office, casting a soft, warm glow across the room. It used to be a place where my father's wisdom and love filled the air, but lately, it's become nothing but a battlefield.

I remodeled the office when I officially took over the company after my father's death, getting rid of everything but my father's large mahogany desk. And I placed a framed picture of Dad right next to my screen, a constant reminder of his enduring presence. My fingers trace his smiling face, and I can't help but wonder how deeply disappointed he would be if he knew what was transpiring right now.

"Good morning, Miss Hailey!" Ann-Marie pipes, as she bounces into my office.

"Good morning," I greet her. On any other day, her cheerful mood would be infectious, but today, I can barely mirror the smile on her face.

"I just wanted to check in with you, about that investment being put on hold," she begins, and my heart sinks immediately. "Is there anything I should know? It caught me by surprise, because there's no explanation for it, and I thought we were—"

"It's Walter," I say, pinching the bridge of my nose with two fingers, as I try to keep my cool.

"Oh, so should I talk to him or—"

"No, Ann-Marie, you should not fucking talk to him!" I snap at her.

She jerks back, her hand flying up to her chest, while she stares at

me with wide eyes. Once again, I've been venting my anger at the wrong person. My heart plunges into my stomach when I see the look on her face.

"I'm so sorry," I murmur, regret washing over me like a heavy wave. "It's just... everything's become so complicated lately."

She nods, a silent understanding passing between us. Ann-Marie, like me, shared a deep bond with my Dad, and the thought of the company he tirelessly built being sold off weighs heavy on both our hearts, I know that much.

Taking a deep, calming breath, I confide in her, explaining the turmoil with my uncle, and how he seems to be using this investment delay as a coercive tactic to force me into selling. She listens intently, her unwavering support a lifeline amidst the chaos.

"We have to find a solution," she states, her resolve mirroring my own. "We can't let this happen."

"You're right about that," I agree—a little surprised about the liveliness with which she plunks down into the chair on the other side of my desk.

"Let's figure something out," she says. "I've been watching this for too long to just go on and stand by while Mr. Hailey ruins everything. Girl power!"

She raises a fist in the air, and I can't stop myself from laughing. Her upbeat energy is contagious and I find my heart beating with excitement.

Ann-Marie and I engage in a focused discussion, the weight of our predicament heavy in the air. We brainstorm solutions, our determination to preserve my father's legacy unyielding.

And then, it comes to us—an idea that sparkles with promise in the dimness of our worries.

I lean forward, my eyes meeting Ann-Marie's with newfound resolve.

“I think this could work,” I say, the words infused with determination. “We need to talk to our third shareholder, Mr. Whalon, who holds the remaining twenty-five percent of the company.”

Ann-Marie nods, her eyes gleaming with intrigue, ready to recap the details of what we've just figured out.

I continue, my voice laced with conviction: “If I can convince Mr. Whalon to work together, we could convince the investor for our 3d technology—Mr. Johnson, from HealthWell Enterprises—to finalize his participation in this. Mr. Johnson and I were on good terms before all of this happened, and Mr. Whalon and I hold a majority over my uncle. I just need him to stay on board and to believe in the future of this growing company, instead of selling his shares.”

A glimmer of hope dances in Ann-Marie's eyes as she recognizes the potential in our plan.

“It could work,” she says softly, her voice filled with optimism. “And you are on good terms with Mr. Whalon?”

“I am,” I say truthfully. “My uncle is simply using him as a pawn in this game. He convinced him that selling would be to his benefit, but it isn't. He just needs to realize it.”

I nod, feeling a renewed sense of purpose coursing through me. If I can secure the necessary investment on my own, it might just give me the leverage to convince Chase that there's an alternative to buying the entire company. We could form a joint venture instead.

After our last conversation, I can't help but believe that there's a flicker of sincerity in Chase's words, that he truly doesn't want to harm me. This could be the moment to test the authenticity of his intentions, to see if he's willing to find a compromise that doesn't involve the sale of my father's company.

He just needs to say yes.

Chapter 39

Chase

I'm in the midst of a busy morning at the office when my assistant patches through an unexpected call. The name she mentions makes my heart race, and I answer with a cautious tone.

"Chase Keaton's office," I greet, keeping my voice professional.

Madison's laughter dances through the line, a surprising sound that instantly brightens my day.

"Chase, it's me," she quips, her voice lighthearted. "I thought we should discuss business matters in a business manner, as you suggested."

I can't help but chuckle.

"Alright then, Miss Hailey," I reply, genuinely impressed by her initiative. "What's on your mind?"

She proceeds to lay out an idea she came up with this morning, and I have to admit, it's a solid one. I listen attentively, my mind racing as I consider the possibilities. A joint venture is never what I was after, but after all that has happened, and the way she keeps surprising me, I find myself quietly listening instead of immediately rejecting the idea as I would have just a couple of weeks ago.

When she finishes, she sounds positively thrilled.

I take a moment before responding, my doubts lurking in the background.

"I can tell that you've worked hard on this," I tell her.

"My assistant and I came up with it this morning," she says. "I'll just

have to talk to Mr. Whalon, but I'm sure I can get him on board, and together we could get Mr. Johnson back to the original agreement. My uncle can sell his shares to you, and we could—"

"I'll give it some thought," I cut her off. "We should discuss it in more detail soon."

Madison's voice is filled with enthusiasm as she asks: "How about tomorrow?"

I hesitate for a moment, torn between business and personal commitments. My mother's birthday is coming up and I'm flying her in tomorrow to spend a few days with her. It's a little tradition we started, ever since things were taking off for me in California.

"I'll be a little busy," I admit reluctantly. "My mother's visiting for the next couple of days."

Madison's tone betrays a hint of apprehension, as if she doesn't entirely believe my words. But then she concedes, "Alright, we'll talk later. Next week?"

"I will call you," I promise. "As soon as I'm free to talk more."

She doesn't say anything, but her disappointment is palpable in the uncomfortable pause that follows.

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to take the wind out of your sails," I try to soothe her. "I'm not lying to you."

"Okay," she says, still sounding a little wary.

We exchange polite goodbyes, and as the call ends I can't shake the feeling that the path ahead is only going to become more complicated.

Her solution is smart, and if she can really pull this off I would be an idiot not to consider a joint venture. It would be a compromise, though. And I never wanted a compromise.

I lean back in my chair, my gaze absentmindedly scanning the view through my window as I contemplate my next move. All of my life I have always known what I wanted, and what decisions I need to take to get it, but this... this is the toughest nut I've ever had to crack.

My phone rings again, but this time it's my cell phone, dancing across the surface of my desk as the ongoing vibrations announce an incoming call. It's my old college friend, Gabe.

"You guys were right," he says, without even saying 'Hello'.

"About what?" I ask.

"Ella," he says, and my blood begins to boil. "I should never have done this. She never deserved a second chance..."

His voice trails off, as if he was doubting his own words.

"I don't know what you want to hear from me. A good old 'I told you so'?" I retort, noticing the strain in my voice.

"I guess so, what else can you say. I feel like shit," he says. "How are things in your world? Distract me from this crap. How is the snake doing?"

"She's not... not a snake," I tell him. "A lot has been going on, but I'm not sure if my tales are a good distraction for what you're going through."

"Oh, now I'm intrigued!" he exclaims. "Spill it."

I go on to divulge the intricate web of emotions and business dealings that have entwined me with Madison. It's the first time I'm sharing the whole story with anybody, leaving out almost no detail as to what has transpired between us. When I explain Madison's business proposal and my doubts about its merits, he lets out an annoying groan.

“Well, sounds like that’s a good solution for *her*,” he says pointedly. “But you wouldn’t get what you’re after.”

“Well, it would be a joint venture. If she gets the other shareholder and the investor on board like she promised.”

“Dude, since when do you let some random woman torpedo your plans? She came up with this all by herself because it’s what’s best for her, not for you,” Gabe says, practically fuming as much as I was the last time we talked about him and his ex-girlfriend Ella.

He’s right, and I know it. But there’s more to it than that.

“And you said the investor is a Mr. Johnson? Craig Johnson? Of HealthWell Enterprises?”

I’m taken by surprise at his question. “How the hell do you know that guy?”

Gabe laughs. “Man, how can anyone not know him? He’s big—and you know he invested in one of my earlier endeavors, right? I can’t believe you don’t remember him. I mentioned him a lot back then. We’re still buddies, actually.”

Now that he mentions it, I actually do remember the guy. And I’m a little shocked that it didn’t come to me earlier. I was so absorbed with Madison and all the trouble surrounding her that I didn’t pay attention to the other players in this game—and the power I may yield over them.

“Don’t let your heart get in the way of what’s best for you, Chase. This is business. And in business you sometimes have to make tough decisions, even if it means hurting someone else’s feelings.”

Gabe’s response is swift and unyielding, his words echoing with conviction.

I nod, my thoughts swirling with the complexity of the situation. But then, he says something, that changes everything.

“You know, I could talk to Craig,” he proposes. “I think I could turn him in your favor, and make sure his investment is secured—but only if the company ends up in your hands.”

“What about Madison?” I implore.

“Well, she came up with a solution that suits herself. This way you could respond with a solution of your own,” he elaborates. “She can keep her shares, as long as you get all the others. I’m sure Craig could back you up and coax the other shareholder to sell to you. Granted, you wouldn’t get *all* of the company, but you would get most of it. It’s a compromise, just like what she suggested—but a compromise that makes *you* better off, and not her.”

“And Madison would still have a place there,” I muse. “This could be an option.”

It’s still a compromise because I wouldn’t end up with all shares as I had intended. But could this be the solution we need?

Chapter 40

Madison

Two days have passed since my conversation with Chase, and I find myself in my office, surrounded by the familiar trappings of corporate life. Papers are scattered across my desk awaiting my signature, and Ann-Marie hovers nearby, assisting with the final touches.

“And one here,” she says, sliding me another piece of paper that needs my name.

“Shall I get Mr. Keaton on the line after we’re done here?” she asks, while I’m bent over my desk to sign the document.

“No, I want to talk to Mr. Johnson first,” I tell her. “I couldn’t get a hold of him yesterday, and I want to settle things with him first, before making an appointment with Mr. Keaton.”

“Very well,” she says, reciprocating the smile I cast her.

I’m in a good mood today, a stark contrast to the tension that’s hung in the air recently. These past few days have been a whirlwind of activity. Chase’s hesitant response to my proposal lingers in my mind, but his promise that we’d discuss it eventually gives me hope.

He really seems to harbor some affection for me, right? After the night we spent together at my place, I’ve been choosing to trust him when he says he doesn’t want to hurt me. And while he did seem reluctant, he did not shatter my idea of a compromise right away, like he did just a few weeks ago.

Things have changed between us, and if we can get this whole buyout thing out of the way, we might actually have a chance. I want to

believe it, because I've never met a man like him—a man who respects me without being intimidated by me. A man who sees me, and who gets me like no one else.

“Okay, that’s it,” Ann-Marie says, as she gathers up the signed paperwork from my desk. “I’ll leave you to it, then. Good luck!”

She raises a little fist and throws me an encouraging smile before she excuses herself and leaves the room. My fingers drum lightly on the desk as I prepare to make the call. Confidence fills me, tempered only by a trace of nervousness.

I can do this, I know I can. I have to.

The call connects and I’m greeted by Mr. Johnson’s secretary. She patches me through to him and I take a deep breath as I prepare to lay out my plan for his investment in our 3D technology project.

But before I can utter a word, Mr. Johnson’s voice fills the line, curt and to the point. “Miss Madison,” he says. “Before we discuss anything further, you’ll need to come to an agreement with your buyer.”

My brow furrows in confusion.

“Excuse me?” I inquire, unsure if I’ve heard him correctly.

He doesn’t waste a moment in clarifying. “I’ve been approached by a source,” he continues, “who has advised me to consider this investment only if your company is acquired by Keaton Care Solutions. They believe there will be better leadership under their CEO.”

The shock of his words hangs heavily in the air. What the hell is going on? Why is he saying this?

“I’m... I’m sorry, Mr. Johnson, I heard that you put your investment on hold, but this is new to me. Would you be so kind as to tell me who you were talking to?”

I hear him shifting in a leathery seat, a subtle groan fleeing his lips, before he responds. “I would rather not, Miss Hailey. I’m not saying I’m withdrawing completely.”

“Did Mr. Keaton call you?” I blurt out, biting my lip in frustration.

He sighs. “I’m sorry, I don’t feel comfortable with this conversation.”

My hands are trembling, and I can feel my heart rate starting to accelerate to a furious gallop.

How could Chase do this to me? The man I thought was starting to mean something to me, the man who looked at me with those sad eyes—and he played me like a pawn in his game. I’ve never felt so stupid, so disappointed, and so hurt in my entire life.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Johnson, very sorry,” I hurry to utter. “I promise, I will clear things up at our end, and...”

Tears are starting to blur my vision, and my voice is dangerously close to breaking. I have to end this call before Mr. Johnson realizes that he is, in fact, talking to a little girl who can’t control her emotions.

“I’ll take care of things,” I promise, trying my best to sound confident and stable.

“I’m sure you will,” he says, thankfully adopting an amicable tone.

My voice trembles as I mutter another quick excuse to him. I hang up the phone and lean back in my chair, a whirlwind of emotions engulfing me. I can’t let him hear me crying; it would only add insult to injury.

I feel as if the rug has been pulled out from under me. The tears fall freely now, and I angrily wipe them away. How did I let myself fall for Chase’s charm, for his words and his touch?

It was lies, all of it. He played me, just like I suspected he would. I

should have listened to that voice of reason that had kept me at arm's length from him in the beginning. I was right to be skeptical. Instead, I let myself become easy prey.

Chase planned all of this from the beginning. That's why he was so reluctant when I told him about my idea. He couldn't push it aside right away, because he had to keep me hanging for just a little bit longer before dropping this bomb on me.

He distracted me so he could use that time to cozy up to Mr. Johnson and win him over, behind my back.

The anger builds within me, an inferno threatening to consume everything in its path. How could he have manipulated me like this? I had believed him, trusted him, thought he might be different. But in the end, he was just like everyone else, looking out for his own interests.

With trembling hands, I pick up my phone, my heart pounding as I scroll through my contacts to find Chase's number.

Chapter 41

Chase

The sun casts a warm, golden glow over Venice Beach as we sit out on the restaurant's patio overlooking the picturesque California shore. The decor matches the atmosphere of the beach, with shades of turquoise and sandy neutrals adorning the interior. It's the perfect place to celebrate my mother's birthday, and she deserves nothing less.

My mother is in her late fifties but looks much younger in her flowing, long summer dress, a cascade of pastel blues and delicate floral patterns. A wide-brimmed sunhat perches atop her head, shielding her fair complexion from the harsh rays.

"You shouldn't have," she says, her voice soft and filled with gratitude as she gestures around the area. It's a familiar refrain, one she's uttered countless times over the years. Of course I have planned everything down to the last detail. I picked one of the best and most expensive places in the area and I made the reservation weeks ago. I ensured that she was greeted by name, with a drink specifically created to her tastes. I know she deserves this—and so much more—for all the sacrifices she's made for me.

"It's way too much, Chase," she adds, leaning closer because she's whispering, as if we were doing something illicit.

"I'll never listen to that, and you know it," I respond.

Her warm smile is a beacon of kindness, and her eyes, a gentle shade of blue, reflect a lifetime of love and nurturing. But I can see the insecurity, a slight unease that she's trying to hide with her gracious

demeanor. She's a humble woman and always will be.

Her shoulders tense when the waiter arrives at our table to serve our first course. And her eyes widen with appreciation when the noble dish is placed in front of her.

"Seared Hokkaido Scallops with Champagne Beurre Blanc," the waiter announces—and I almost burst out laughing when my mother casts me an amused, but quizzical look across the table.

"I didn't understand half of what he was saying, but I love scallops," she says after the waiter has left our table. "These look great."

"I'm sure they are," I say. "Happy birthday, Mom."

She throws me a warm smile and reaches across the table to give my hand a quick squeeze before she turns her attention to the scallops.

"So, what's been bothering you so much lately?" she asks, without looking at me.

Caught by surprise, I almost choke on my scallop, which causes her to laugh.

"What do you mean?" I ask, meeting her amused smile.

"Oh, come on, Chase. I'm your mother. Of course I notice when something is bothering you," she says. "You've been in a world of your own ever since I got here yesterday. Remember last night, when you wanted to make me a tea, and forgot to put the kettle on the stove? And you keep glancing at your phone, as if you're expecting something important. Something is up, and don't you try to deny it!"

"It's just... work stuff," I try to save myself. "You know how it is, I have a stressful job."

She huffs and rolls her eyes at me. "We both know that's not it, Chase."

I meet her gaze, feeling the weight of her words, and for a moment, the turmoil that's been brewing within me threatens to spill over. But this is her special day, and I can't burden her with my own troubles. Instead, I offer her a reassuring smile, squeezing her hand in return.

"Today is about celebrating you, Mom. Let's not—"

"*You!!*" A voice bellows from somewhere.

A familiar voice.

I turn to my right, and can't hide my surprise, when I see Madison marching toward our table, pointing at me with her right index finger, and her cheeks flushed. She looks oddly misplaced in her office attire, a black pencil skirt and a light-blue blouse, as she strides to our table on black heels.

"How could you!" she cries at me, as she comes to a halt right next to our table. And before I know it, she reaches for the glass of water that's standing next to my plate and empties it into my face.

"How could you do this to me! I fucking trusted you!" Madison goes on.

I'm still busy wiping the water out my face. "Mad—"

"No!" she shouts. And before I know it, she reaches for my mom's glass of water, and throws the contents of that one into my face as well. "*I'm* talking! I don't want to hear your pathetic excuse, you foul monster! You've been playing me all along, haven't you?! You deceitful, lying bastard—"

"Excuse me!" My mother interjects, loud enough for the entire restaurant to hear.

Madison pauses and stares at my mother, as if she hadn't even noticed her before. Then she looks at my soaked clothing and her eyes

widen with horror.

“Madison, my mother,” I say, in a deliberately calm voice. “Mom, this is Madison.”

Time seems to stand still, all of us freezing, Madison and my mother staring at each other, while I try to decide what to do next. Madison has caused quite the scene, and all the other guests in the restaurant are side-eying our table, some women shaking their heads in disapproval. I lock eyes with a waiter and let him know that the situation is under control by suggesting a subtle nod in his direction.

Is it under control, though? I’m not so sure right now.

“Madison, maybe we could talk another—”

“Oh no we can not!” she yells at me. “You’re just afraid that your mother is going to find out what a cruel, self-centered, and greedy asshole you are! You lied straight to my face, because all that matters to you is this goddamn buyout!”

She pauses to gasp for air, and from the corner of my eyes I can see my mother leaning back in her chair, her eyes focused on Madison.

“You said you would think about my proposal and then you go behind my back to make sure the investor pulls out?!” she goes on—and my heart jolts, when I see tears dwelling in her eyes.

“Wait, what, how did you—”

“How did I find out?” she bellows. “I talked to him, just now actually! He said he wouldn’t invest unless we sell and work under a new CEO. Apparently, *someone* put the idea into his head that I can’t be trusted as much as the CEO of Keaton Care Solutions! I wonder who that could have been!”

“Chase! You did what?” my mother chimes in now, tilting her head

to the side, as she crosses her arms in front of her chest.

“It wasn’t me!” I retort truthfully, defensively raising my hands.

What the hell did Gabe say to Mr. Johnson? He said he would make a call in my favor, but we never said anything about dethroning Madison in this manner.

“Of course it was you!” Madison insists. “Who else would do this! And who even knows about this impending investment! You are the only one who benefits from this outcome, Chase! Don’t you fucking try to deny it!”

“I’m... I wasn’t the one who talked to him!” I try to explain. “I just talked to a friend, who—”

“Oh, you talked to a friend!” Madison intercepts. “Well, that makes it so much better.”

“Madison, please listen to me,” I say, rising to my feet, to be closer to her.

I try to lay my hand on her shoulder, to calm her down, but she jerks away from me, and I can’t blame her.

“I swear, I never meant to undermine your position,” I say. “I was simply looking for a compromise that could work for both of us.”

“A compromise that still robs me of my father’s legacy,” she says with a bitter voice.

I sigh. “It’s not that simple.”

“Yes, it is, Chase!” she snaps.

She clears her throat, and then—as much as she’s obviously trying not to—she starts crying.

“Chase!” my mother reprimands me, nodding toward Madison with an empathetic look on her face.

But when I try to approach Madison to console her, she shies away from me again, violently shaking her head as she steps away from me.

“I should have known,” she says, her lips quivering. “I should have known that this was a stupid idea. I never should have trusted you with anything. I should have listened to my gut.”

She chokes on a swell of tears, and now my mother jumps up and fetches her napkin to give it to Madison.

“Oh, my dear,” my mother says, as she hands her the napkin. “Here, take this.”

Madison stares at my mother through tear-filled eyes, before she takes the napkin from her hand. “Thank you.”

“Madison, please let me explain—”

“No,” she cuts me off, while she’s wiping her face with my mother’s napkin. “I don’t want to hear it. I can’t do this, Chase. You’ll hear from my lawyer.”

“Lawyer? But...”

“You asked for it!” Madison cries out. “You have gone too far, Chase. This is not only cruel but borderline defamatory. I will not talk to you again. Ever.”

And with that, she turns on her heels and starts to stalk away in long, hurried steps.

“Mad—”

“Leave her be,” my mother says, holding me by the arm, when I try to go after Madison. “Respect her wish, for now. She needs some time.”

My mother’s voice is soft as she speaks, unlike the grip on my arm, that’s almost tight enough to hurt.

“Now,” she says then, meeting my eyes with an unyielding gaze.
“You’ll tell me what you did to that poor girl, son.”

Oh, shit. I know to tread carefully, when my mother calls me ‘son’. She’s only ever done that when she caught me doing something wrong, and I was about to receive a lecture.

This time, however, I may very well deserve it.

Chapter 42

Madison

Max and I are lounging on my couch in my bright and airy living room. I like it clean and simple, and only added a few pastel accents here and there, like the pale blue throw pillows and the soft pink vase on the coffee table. Max has always loved those flowery cushions on the sofa, and they add a touch of warmth to my minimalist decor.

Tonight, the room is transformed into a temporary mayhem of indulgence. Empty pizza boxes and various snacks are scattered haphazardly around us. We've traded our usual glasses of wine for champagne, a nod to a night of cathartic wallowing.

I take another deep gulp of champagne and let out a sob, my emotions bubbling over.

"I can't believe how stupid I was," I mutter between choked sobs, my voice tinged with bitterness.

Max puts a comforting arm around my shoulders, and I lean into him, tears streaming down my face.

"You're not stupid," he murmurs, his voice full of sympathy, while I feel the weight of my own foolishness pressing on me.

"I knew he couldn't be trusted... or, I should have known," I whisper, my words trembling with pain. "I was falling for him, Max. I really thought he was serious, when he said he liked me... But he went behind my back, and now I just... I can't believe I let myself get hurt like this."

Max squeezes my shoulder gently.

“It’s not your fault, Madison,” he says softly. “I was the one who practically pushed you into his arms, remember? I’m so sorry for that, I really am. I had no idea he could do this to you. He seemed so genuine and nice during our brief conversation at the gala.”

I sniffle and wipe away my tears.

“No, Max, don’t blame yourself,” I reply, my voice wavering but determined. “I was the stupid one. You only told me to have some fun with him, you never told me to fall in love with him.”

Max inhales audibly, and stares at me with his mouth formed to a perfect O and his eyes wide.

“In love?” he repeats. “You fell in love with him?”

I shovel another bite of pizza into my face instead of answering him, while another crest of tears swells from my eyes. I’m so pathetic, sitting here with my goddamn pizza, looking like an ugly ghoul while I cry about a man who doesn’t deserve it.

“Maybe,” I utter, still chewing.

“Holy shit, Madison!” Max rejoices, much to my annoyance. “Ten years, I’ve known you, but I have never—and I repeat, *never*—heard you say that! You’ve never fallen for anyone before! This is *huge*!”

Max’s weird excitement comes to a halt when he notices the way I frown at him through reddened eyes.

“It’s not huge, it’s dumb,” I maintain.

A warm smile spreads across his face and he wraps his arms around me again, pulling me close and weighing me like a baby. “Love is never dumb, Madison. My girl Madison Hailey doesn’t just lose her head and heart to anybody. She can’t be played.”

“Well, your dumb girl *was* played,” I utter. “I thought I had it under

control, but now I regret ever getting involved with him. I never should have.”

“Don’t blame yourself for opening your heart to someone,” Max comforts me. “And for what it’s worth, I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think he really played you,” Max says. “When I talked to him at the gala, I had a feeling that he was genuinely infatuated with you, and not just because you’re a bombshell—”

“Max!” I interject, giggling.

“Well, even I can see that you’re a hottie, Madison,” he says, winking at me. “But that’s not it. I can’t bring myself to believe that there was nothing there on his side. I would never have let him be alone with you at the gala if I didn’t think that there was something genuine about him.”

I sigh as I slump down into his embrace. “You’re just a hopeless romantic, Max.”

“Maybe,” he says. “Or maybe, I’m right. I don’t think this is the last you’re going to hear of him.”

“Well, I guess we can agree on that,” I reply, adding a dismissive huff. “I’m sure he won’t let go of his atrocious plan. Which is why I have to talk to my lawyer. I need him to check the paperwork we had with our investors and talk to him about what I can do to get my uncle off of my back, too.”

A long, sad sigh flees my body, as I deflate into Max’s embrace.

“Maybe it doesn’t have to be that way,” he says, his voice cautious and low. “But whatever happens, I’ll be there, you know that right? I won’t let anyone dim your fire, Madison. Remember that.”

I'm sure it's the alcohol, but I'm so touched by Max's unwavering support, that another set of tears starts rolling down my cheeks.

"Thank you," I murmur. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

He squeezes me again, and I can actually muster a smile when I free myself from my slumped position in his arms and sit up straight.

"I hate all this wallowing," I announce. "Let's watch a movie or something."

He claps his hands. "Yes, lets! I'll get us another bottle, while you pick something."

I cast him a grateful smile as he gets up from the couch, picking up the empty bottle of champagne before he teeters over to my kitchen.

Chapter 43

Chase

The quiet click of my bicycle gears fills the air as I pedal down the sun-drenched streets, my body moving in rhythm with the gentle cadence. Exercise has always been a way for me to clear my head. But I've been steering clear of the Tensho, the place where Madison and I first crossed paths, deliberately avoiding any potential encounters.

The thought of running into her fills me with dread; I can almost hear her cutting words in my mind. She has every right to be furious with me.

My mother's parting words reverberate in my thoughts. She has a knack for seeing through my façade, always hitting the mark with her insights. She left for her flight this morning after offering some tough love.

"If you really like that girl, you should reconsider that whole buyout thing," she said, a heavy hand resting on my shoulder. "I know you boys don't like listening to your mothers, but I think she could be good for you, Chase. After all you've told me and that fire she showed at the restaurant..." She shook her head then, laughing as she recalled the incident. "She's a tough cookie. Strong-willed and ambitious, just like you. You know, I never believed in the saying 'opposites attract'. Every Jack has his Jill—and she could be yours."

Her words rendered me speechless, and I simply nodded as I kissed her goodbye, before I watched her walk through security.

Could she be right? And how could she think that after only seeing

Madison for a few minutes, during most of which she was screaming at me.

Maybe that's exactly why, I think, chuckling, as I enter a steep curve on my bike. My mother may have seen someone who could handle me in Madison, a partner who can stand up to me and put me in my place when needed. It wouldn't surprise me—and it wouldn't be entirely wrong either. Because that's exactly what I see in Madison, too.

But does that mean I should let go of something that I've been wanting for years?

The world passes by in a colorful blur as I navigate the familiar streets, my mind wrestling with the guilt and regret that's settled within me. Running away from the problem won't solve anything, I know that. Madison deserves better, and it's time I find a way to make amends, no matter how difficult this might be.

For now, the open road and the gentle hum of the bicycle beneath me are my solace, a temporary respite from the turmoil, as I exert my body to the limit. As I continue pedaling along the sun-drenched streets, a sudden commotion up ahead pulls my attention away from my swirling thoughts.

Two teenage kids, a boy and a girl, are standing on the sidewalk, their young faces twisted in shock and confusion. From what I can see, it looks like they were about to cross the street on their skateboards when a car, seemingly oblivious to their presence, cut them off, narrowly avoiding a collision. They almost hurt themselves as they had to jump off their skateboards to get out of the way.

Before I can fully process the unfolding situation, the driver, a burly man, angrily jumps out of the car. His face is contorted with rage, and

it's clear he has no intention of addressing the situation calmly as he approaches the startled boy.

Without thinking, I slam on the brakes of my bicycle, my feet hitting the pavement with a sudden jolt. In a few quick strides, I'm at the scene, just as the man lunges toward the boy, fists clenched and ready to strike. I seize the raging driver from behind, wrapping my arm around his neck in a practiced Jiu-Jitsu grip.

The man struggles and thrashes, but I have him immobilized. His gasps for air grow desperate as he realizes the futility of his efforts. The onlookers, including the skater kids, stand frozen in shock, their surprise mirrored in the driver's widening eyes.

"Enough," I hiss into his ear, my voice cold and stern. "You're not going to hit a kid, are you?"

With one final, desperate gasp, the man's eyes roll back into his head, before he loses consciousness and slumps down in my arms. I can only support his fall, as he crumples to the ground. *Shit*, I went too far.

"Dude!" The skaterboy shouts, before he starts clapping applause. "That was sick!"

But I don't feel quite so amazing about what just happened. I could have seriously hurt this man because I momentarily lost my temper.

I turn to the skater kids, my expression softening. "You guys okay?"

The boy nods, his wide eyes filled with a mixture of gratitude and awe, while the girl just stares at me.

"Will he be okay?" she asks.

I offer a reassuring smile. "Yeah, he'll be back up and shouting in no time, don't worry."

However, there's more conviction in my words than there is in my mind. I check the man's pulse, just to make sure, and release a sigh of relief, when I realize that he's in fact just unconscious.

"Thanks for stepping in, man," the boy says, kneeling down next to me, as his hand lands on my shoulder. "I would have been in big trouble, and it's not like anyone else would have stepped in."

My eyes follow his as he scans our surroundings. I hadn't even realized how many people have come to a halt on the sidewalk around us, some of them holding up phones. *Great, this is just what I needed.*

"Oh, he's waking up!" the girl pipes. She's standing next to us, having picked up her skateboard from the ground and carrying it with one arm, while she uses the other to point at the man on the ground.

He's groaning when I look down at him, and blinking with confusion as his eyes slowly open.

"What... what's hap—"

"You're alright, sir," I say in the most polite tone available to me. "Looks like you became dizzy behind the wheel, and collapsed when you tried to step out."

Both the boy and the girl regard me with looks of confusion, but I gesture for them to go along by casting them a pointed look.

The man tries to get up on his feet, but I stop him half-way.

"Take it slow, buddy," I say, adding a well-meaning tap on his shoulder. "Let's just sit for now, your body needs a minute."

"Alright," he mutters, still utterly confused.

Hoping that he wouldn't remember what just happened was a long shot, but it seems to have worked. There's no anger in his eyes, when he looks up at the two kids who just enraged him with their presence

moments earlier.

“We... er, we just wanted to...err...” The boy starts stuttering.

“We wanted to help,” the girl pipes. “We just wanted to make sure you’re fine, sir.”

A trembling smile adorns her face, revealing that she’s not much of a liar. But it appears to work, as the man, who is still sitting on the ground, just nods, before he thanks all of us for our help.

I’m still tense, however, still feeling the aftermath of the adrenaline rush and the way I almost went overboard just now. I didn’t think, I just acted—and I almost seriously hurt a man because of it.

Just like I did with Madison. Could things have ended differently between us, if I had just taken a moment to think and reflect on a solution that’s actually good for both of us and not just me?

And is there a way to fix it? There must be—and I will find it. Things with Madison are a lot more complicated than this traffic incident, but if I could pull myself out of a tight spot here, I’m sure I can do it with her, too.

I have to get back to the office and make some calls.

Chapter 44

Madison

“What the hell are you doing at the office on a Saturday?”

The underlying tone of indignation in Max’s voice makes me smile. He’s right to reprimand me, but he shouldn’t be surprised either. It’s not the first time he’s caught me working on a weekend—and not the first time he’s scolded me for it.

“I have things to do,” I tell him. “I need to find a way to get Mr. Johnson back on board, without my uncle knowing, and I have to prepare for my meeting with the lawyer, so we can—”

“Yes, yes, that is all very important,” Max agrees. “But not as important as your health. You’ve danced at the edge of burnout before, do you really want to risk that again? And especially now?”

I bite my lip, twirling a pen in my hand as I stare out the window. It’s sunny outside, the first kiss of fall already palpable in the soft breeze that casts away the hot summer air. And Max is right. After Dad was diagnosed with cancer my whole world crumbled, and I not only had to deal with the emotional turmoil that comes with losing a parent, but with getting myself ready to take over the company. I hardly slept, forgot to eat, and even skipped my much-needed Jiu-Jitsu lessons, until I passed out in the office. It was embarrassing to say the least—and it played into the hands of those who didn’t have faith in me to begin with.

But still, how could I possibly take a day of rest with everything that’s been going on?

“The clock is ticking, Max,” I tell him. “Every minute counts. I have to be quicker than them, and better prepared.”

“You can still do that on Monday,” he claims. “Take a day of rest, just like everybody else. Do you really think they’re working today?”

“I’m sure *he* is,” I murmur, trying to ignore the sting in my heart. I wish I could just forget about Chase, and about everything that happened between us. I hate how much space he’s still occupying in my head, how his face appears before my eyes, and his voice echoes in my ears, and the sensation of his touch...

Don’t go there.

I clear my throat, before I ask: “Did you just call to check on me and scold me for not being a good girl and chill?”

“Not exactly,” Max says. “I wanted to ask you out for lunch. I’ve got something to show you.”

“Something to show me?”

“Yes, but I want to do it in person!” he insists. “I want to see your face when you see it.”

“When I see what?” I probe, suspicion lacing my voice.

“Trust me, Madison, this is worth it. Plus, I’m sure your work will still be here when you get back.”

I glance at the stack of paperwork on my desk, my eyes tracing the lines of numbers and statistics that seem to blur together. The weight of the workload bears down on me and I sigh heavily. I hesitate, my fingers drumming on the edge of my desk. The thought of leaving the office gnaws at my conscience, but curiosity gets the better of me.

I sigh, resignation settling in. “Alright. You win. I could use a break. Where did you want to go?”

“How about Harborview Grill? We haven’t been there in ages.” Max suggests.

A smile tugs at the corners of my lips. “Alright, I’ll meet you there in a bit.”

With the call ended, I gather my things and leave the office behind. The warm California sun greets me as I step outside, and I actually feel a glimmer of excitement.

When I arrive at Harborview Grill, Max is already waiting for me, his grin infectious. He points to the empty seat across from him and says, “I already ordered your favorite—California Turkey Club, right?”

He gets up from his seat to welcome me with a strong hug, and just as I sink down in my seat, a waiter materializes next to our table and brings us two homemade citrus and mint lemonades.

“Another favorite, you’re really pampering me,” I say, before we clink glasses and I bring the straw to my lips for a first sip. “Now, why am I here? What did you want to show me?”

Max’s grin widens, and he reaches for his phone that’s been lying on the table in front of him.

“Okay, let’s cut right to the *chase*,” he says—and the wink he adds to his words is more than unsettling.

“What?” I blurt out. “Why are you mentioning him, when I specifically said—”

“Just wait!” he interjects. “Trust me, you want to see this.”

“I doubt it,” I murmur, as I watch him scroll on his phone. My heart is racing and my insides are churning with unpleasant anticipation.

“So, you know how much I enjoy these feel-good videos about people doing something nice for animals or other people,” he says, his

eyes still glued to the phone.

“I can’t wait to see where you’re going with this,” I say.

“So, yesterday, I was just scrolling on my usual sites, and a local viral video popped up that... oh well, you just gotta see it.”

He taps his finger on the screen, and a video starts playing, as he hands me his phone with a conspiratorial grin, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

On the screen, a chaotic scene unfolds. Two teenagers, a girl and a boy, are seen confronting a car that seems to have cut them off in traffic. The situation escalates quickly as the car’s driver, a burly figure, steps out and advances toward the teenagers with aggressive intent.

But then, out of nowhere, a man bursts into the frame, moving with such speed and precision that I can’t help but be captivated. But then, I realize that it’s Chase, who intervenes, positioning himself firmly between the teenagers and the irate driver. In the blink of an eye, he wraps his arms around the driver’s neck, executing a rear-naked choke with expert precision.

I watch in amazement as the driver struggles, his face turning crimson as he gasps for air. Chase’s grip remains unwavering until the driver’s resistance dwindles, and he releases his hold. The driver drops to the ground, dazed and defeated.

The video captures the teenagers thanking Chase, their faces filled with gratitude and relief. Chase, on the other hand, looks visibly worried for both the teenagers and the driver. His head turns back and forth between the man on the ground and the kids, and he doesn’t even seem to notice how many people are watching him.

I hand Max's phone back to him, my mind racing with a mix of emotions.

"Quite the hero, your guy, isn't he?" Max says, excitement flaring in his dark eyes.

I nod, feeling a sense of complexity about Chase that I hadn't considered before.

"I mean, the way he just jumped in there to help those kids!" Max goes on, almost jumping up from his seat. "And that quick and unyielding move! So elegant and efficient. He really saved that boy's ass. Who knows what would have happened if he hadn't stepped in."

I don't know what to say, and take another sip from my lemonade as I contemplate how I'm feeling right now.

"Would a bad man do that?" Max probes, his eyebrows arched as high as possible, when he looks at me.

"Being a hero in the street doesn't automatically turn him into a good person, Max," I say.

"But a bad person would not have done this," Max insists.

I shrug. "Maybe."

Max sighs and leans over the table to reach for my hand. "Madison, I know he hurt you, and I know he has acted like a complete idiot, but maybe, just maybe, it's because... well, he's overwhelmed."

I let out a dismissive huff. "Overwhelmed? With what? Me?"

"Um, yes!" Max says. "I mean, yeah, maybe he just wanted to get into your pants and convince you to sell, but maybe... not? What if what he said was genuine, and now you're not even giving him a chance to make things right."

"He can make things right," I retort. "By letting go of this buyout."

Max nods. “Yes, but from what you’ve told me, it sounds like he may actually be looking for a compromise.”

“Do you not remember what he did to me? He called our investor and told him I was an unfit CEO!” I exclaim, a little too loud. I slouch in my seat, when I notice eyes from all around turning in our direction.

“You don’t know for sure that he did that,” Max adds for consideration.

“Who else would have done it?” I retort.

“I don’t know,” Max says. “Maybe it’s all a big misunderstanding? He said it wasn’t him, right?”

“Well, yes, because he was lying,” I maintain, even though I feel a sense of doubt at the back of my mind. Chase insisted that it wasn’t him who talked our investor into backing out, and he looked visibly shocked when I approached him at the restaurant. And I know that there’s a very small chance that it was my uncle. He denied any involvement in this when I asked him about it, but he could be lying just as well.

“You never gave him a chance to explain,” Max says, looking at me with a somewhat maternal look. “Did you?”

“No,” I admit, suddenly feeling very small. “I threw a glass of water in his face and yelled at him—all in front of his mother.”

“That’s right,” Max says, laughing. “I still can’t believe you did that! Like in the movies.”

His amusement is infectious, and for a moment, I can’t help but join his laughter, when I think about the absurdity of it all. It was a pretty hilarious scene, now that I think about it. And I remember seeing a little smirk on the face of Chase’s mother, when I turned around to run

away.

I wonder what happened after I left? Did he tell her what was going on between us? How much does she even know about what her son is doing? From what he told me about her, they seem to have a pretty close relationship, and she must be a tough woman to raise him alone like that. Did she scold him after I was gone? The thought of it makes me smile.

“It didn’t feel very movie-like in the moment,” I say eventually. “But I’m glad I did it. He deserved it.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Max notes.

“Yes, we do,” I object. “Even if he told the truth about not being the one who talked to our investor, he still deserved it for all the other things he put me through.”

Max nods in response. “Fair enough. Still doesn’t make him less of a hero.”

He glances at his phone, a subtle reminder of the video he just showed me. Of course, the fact that he helped some random kids in a dangerous situation isn’t enough for me to think better of Chase’s action in regard to my company. But I can’t deny the fact that it gets to me, just like his charity work and all those things he told me about his background.

He’s not all bad—but does that mean I can trust him?

Chapter 45

Chase

I worked it out. There's no chance in hell that she can say no to this.

I'm sitting in my office, all alone, because it's a Saturday, and only desperate people work on a Saturday. People like me.

I've been working tirelessly to come up with a solution that could solve everything between Madison and me. And I can't believe that this idea didn't come to me earlier. I was too focused on bulldozing toward my goal that I didn't even think of any alternatives. I didn't change course even after I met the real CEO of the company I'm trying to acquire—and that was my biggest mistake.

Funnily, this idea didn't even occur to me until I heard what she said to me at the restaurant, with my mother present. I wasn't the one who called the investor to bad mouth her in front of him, it was my friend Gabe. I made the mistake of involving him in all of this, without thinking twice.

Gabe admitted his mistake after I gave him an earful when we talked on the phone just now. When he called Mr. Johnson, he had no intention of going this far, but the words simply poured out of him, before he could stop himself.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wasn't thinking straight and went far beyond what we discussed. I'm not in my right mind right now."

He said that his thoughts were poisoned by his own woman troubles at the moment. I didn't want to hear more about it, because I'm sure this involves Ella, the biggest mistake of his life—and that's a can of

worms I have no intention of opening right now.

In the end, I blame myself for all of this. I should never have gotten him involved. It was a cowardly move to begin with. Instead of wasting my time venting about my dilemma with Madison, I should have actively tried to find a solution that makes both of us happy.

And now that I feel like I found that very solution, I cannot wait to share it with her. But she won't answer my calls or answer any of my texts and emails. Even her secretary refused to patch me through to her. So, there's nothing left for me to do but to ambush her again—which I know she will just freaking *love*.

My gaze wanders across the skyline that spreads before my window, as I contemplate my options.

I consider waiting for her at her home, but that feels a little too predatory, even for me. Besides, she could easily run away from me and lock the door, or—even worse—call security on me. I don't want to scare her like that, so it's better to find her at a public place—a neutral place that feels safe to both of us.

And then it hits me.

I jerk up in my seat, my back suddenly as straight as an arrow and my eyes wide, while a new notion manifests inside my head. Yes, this is it. This could work. She will have no other option, but to hear me out. I just have to make the arrangements accordingly.

I reach for my phone.

Chapter 46

Madison

The familiar scent of the Tensho's dressing room surrounds me. I have been going to class almost every single day, ever since things have gone awry with Chase—and I hate that I can feel his presence here, too, even though I haven't seen him at the Tensho for weeks.

As I methodically secure my brown belt around my crisp white gi a sense of pride swells within me. There's something about gi classes that I enjoy—a chance for everyone to gauge my level of expertise with a single glance. No one ever underestimates me when they see this belt around my waist.

With my belt tied securely, I exit the dressing room and make my way to the training room. The anticipation hums in the air as I push open the door to a room already brimming with other people.

Raymond steps into the room, his presence commanding respect and attention. It's then that my heart stutters and my breath catches. A figure moves into the room just behind him and I can't stop my jaw from dropping when I see his face.

Chase.

In his crisp Gi, the blue belt tied around his waist, he steps onto the mat like he belongs. My jaw tightens as anger surges through me. I haven't spoken to him since our explosive argument at the restaurant. Our eyes meet for a split second, as he takes his place at the other end of the room, the weight of unspoken words, misunderstandings, and hurt hanging heavily between us.

What is he doing here? He hasn't been to one of our classes in weeks.

I'm conflicted, emotions churning within me. Confusion mingles with anger, and for a brief moment, I contemplate bolting from the room, escaping the tension that's now thick in the air. But that would just create unnecessary drama, and I would prove once again that I'm not in control of my emotions. It would be like I was literally running away from Chase.

No. I'm going to stay. But I'm not going to talk to him—let alone roll with him. The room is big enough and full enough with other sparring partners that I can keep my distance from him.

I avert my eyes away from Chase, and face Raymond, who takes his usual place at the front. Class starts with the usual warm-up, and we all follow along with Raymond's instructions to get our bodies and minds ready for class. I refuse to look in Chase's direction for the entire time, but when it's time to pair up for a roll, I can't stop myself from turning to him. I'm telling myself it's only to make sure that he doesn't come over and try to pair up with me, but I know a small part of me would actually want that. I miss him, despite everything he has done—that's impossible to deny.

But he doesn't look my way. His back is turned to me as he speaks to a guy who was standing next to him. I feel like an idiot, especially when my heart stings at the sight. Did he really just come here for class, with no intention of approaching me whatsoever? Why am I sad about this?

"Okay, guys, we'll try something fun today!" Raymond announces, pulling my attention away from Chase.

“It’s called ‘blind grappling’, and it’s exactly what you would expect it to be,” he goes on, while blindfolds are distributed among us. “This will teach you to rely on your other senses and not just sight while you’re rolling. This is crucial during a roll, when your eyes can easily be obscured. For now, I want you to pair up, and one of you will put on the blindfold, then you’ll switch after the first roll.”

I feel a gentle tap on my shoulder and turn around to find a girl with black locks next to me. I can’t remember her name, but I’ve seen her here before. A violet belt—one belt below me—is tight around her waist.

“Wanna pair up?” she asks, holding up the blindfold she just received. “You can go first with the blindfold.”

“Yeah, sure,” I say. “But you can go first, if you want.”

She shakes her head, and practically shoves the piece of fabric into my hands. “No, please. You go first.”

With a nod, I secure the blindfold, and the world darkens around me. In my temporary blindness, I can hear people rummage around me, chatter filling the room and naked feet moving across the mat.

Raymond’s voice pierces the dimness, instructing us to start when we hear the sound of the timer. Time drags on and I continue to hear commotion throughout the room, but I’m unable to see what is happening. I can sense the presence of the girl before me, as she gets in position for the roll.

Finally, the timer’s chime pierces the air. I steel myself for my partner’s attack, but nothing happens. After a few moments, I decide to explore the area, extending my hands cautiously. I’m surprised to reach into air, but my surprise turns to shock when I sense another

person nearby.

Their presence doesn't feel like the girl I just talked to, and I instinctively move to execute a sweep. A gasp of surprise flees my lips when a set of strong—masculine—arms wraps around me, and I'm enveloped in a familiar scent.

“What the...”

His grip tightens around me, drawing me nearer, trapping me in his embrace. Panic surges through my veins as I summon the strength to wrest one arm free and yank the blindfold away. My voice escapes in a mixture of shock and anger. “What the hell, Chase?!”

He lets go of me the moment my eyes are no longer blocked, and my surprise grows into utter shock when I realize that the whole room has emptied. It's just him and me now.

I turn around, taking a step back to bring some distance between us, as I regard him with a puzzled look.

“You left me no other choice,” Chase says, shrugging.

He's smiling at me, but it's a cautious smile, almost rueful and submissive.

My eyes flit back and forth between him and the closed door. How did everybody get out so fast? How did I not notice?

“You arranged this?” I ask, helplessly pointing to the door. “You canceled a whole class, just to talk to me?”

“Don't worry, they're off to a fun steak dinner at my expense,” he says. “Raymond and I get along pretty well, he didn't need much convincing.”

“You're insane!” I yell at him. “This is insane!”

“Maybe,” he agrees, shrugging again. “But like I said: I had no other

choice. And I desperately need to talk to you.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “You *desperately* need to talk to me, huh? What is there even left to say?”

“Let’s sit,” he says, pointing to the middle of the room. When I don’t set in motion, he makes the first step and moves to the middle of the room, before he sits down on the mat in a cross legged position.

“Please,” he says, almost pleading, as he nods to the spot before him.

I hesitate for a moment before I follow his gesture and take a seat across from him, sitting cross-legged as well.

“Why here?” I ask him, my eyes trailing around the empty training room. “Why choose this of all places?”

“Because I was wrong,” he begins. “About so many things. But let’s start with this one: Remember when I said I wanted to discuss our deal in a meeting room or the office, because it’s a business talk?”

I nod in silence, curious to hear where he’s going with this.

“Well, that’s bullshit, because I can’t be that person with you. I can’t distinguish between business and pleasure when it comes to you, because you are everything. You are not two separate people who need two separate conversations, and neither am I. I can’t be business Chase with you, and I can’t see you as simply another business partner, because that’s not who you are. You are so much more than that.”

He clears his throat, awkwardly shifting in his seat. As he seems to fight for words.

“I... I love you, Madison,” he finally manages to say, his eyes finding mine with a look on his face that I’ve never seen before.

He looks scared. Terrified, actually.

“Fuck, it felt good to finally say that,” he then adds, adding a nervous chuckle as he scratches the back of his head.

Meanwhile, I feel like I’ve been run over by a truck. I don’t know what I expected to hear, but it was definitely not this.

“I love you,” he repeats, almost pleading now. “And I can’t stand the thought of losing you.”

“You really love me,” I say. It’s a statement, not a question—because I believe him. I can see that he’s not lying to me, but still, I’m struggling to process his revelation.

“Yes! Yes, I fucking love you, Madison,” he says, as gets up on his knees to crawl over to me.

I can’t move and remain seated, still stunned when he reaches for my hand, taking it in both of his as he lifts it up to his lips. He places a kiss on the back of my hand, and looks at me with such intensity that tears start to well in my eyes.

“And I think I found a solution that could make both of us happy. I’m not going to take anything away from you,” he says. “I could never be happy that way.”

“A solution?” I want to know, my interest piqued.

“Yes!” he says, his hands still wrapped around mine, as he settles closer before me. “You see, I can’t help but be impressed by you, and immensely so. You’ve achieved great things, Madison, and I’m sure you’ll do even greater things in the future, and I want to be a part of that—and not stand in the way of it. I want you to grow, and I want you to be in charge of your father’s legacy.”

I can’t talk. I can barely see straight as I stare at him, still in disbelief. There’s a *‘but’* hanging in the air somewhere, I’m sure there

is. He's been fighting me on this buyout for so long that it's hard to believe that he would just drop it now.

"I... I have an idea how we can do this," he goes on. "And I want to tell you all about it, but right now, please, Madison, I just need you to tell me that it's not too late. I need you to say something. I need to know that I didn't royally fuck this up and that I've lost you forever, because I really—"

"I love you, too," I produce. The words come with a surge of tears that I can't hold back. "I've missed you, Chase. And I love you."

The relief is clearly written on his face, and I fall over on my back, when he lunges forward to kiss me. He's on top of me, our lips meeting each other with desperate longing after we've been apart for too long. I wrap my arms around him, the warmth of his body and his endearing scent enveloping me, while I feel my heart beating against his strong chest.

"Fuck, I've missed you," he breathes in between our kiss, while his hand travels beneath my gi. "I need you more than air to breathe."

"Don't let me choke you then," I say, as I pin down his right arm next to my face.

Before he realizes what's happening, I bridge my hips up, driving through my heels and pushing my chest forward. The move is executed with precision as I manage to free myself from underneath him and throw Chase to the side. He's laughing when he lands next to me, but there's mischief in his eyes when he looks at me and says: "Oh, it's on now!"

Chapter 47

Madison

Chase's relentless determination has finally led to my submission—on the mat that is. “By sheer strength!” as I pointed out loudly, and he chuckled, his breath slightly labored.

Our gis didn't stay on for long after, and it's safe to say that our second roll—naked this time—ended in my favor, with him on top of me, while I succumbed to a beautiful wave of bliss.

After the grappling session, we left the Tensho in a hurry, our laughter echoing in the evening air as we jogged to our cars through a surprise shower of rain. Chase suggested we go out for dinner, so he could tell me more about his plan, calmly and without any pressure. He said I wouldn't have to say yes, because he would rather back out of the buyout altogether than to lose me, but I'm very curious to hear what he came up with.

Now we find ourselves at a beachside restaurant, nibbling on our Scallop Bruschetta as an appetizer. It's balmy and humid outside, and we're protected by a roof, the darkness enveloping us, while the rhythmic sound of waves crashing against the shore fills the air.

Memories of our time in Hawaii come rushing back, and a faint smile tugs at the corners of my lips when the image of us at Hulopoe beach emerges behind my eyes.

“What are you thinking about?” Chase asks, before he takes another bite of the bruschetta.

“Our time in Hawaii,” I say. “Feels like it was an eternity ago.”

“But it was good, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was great,” I say. “You really spoiled me.”

A wide grin appears on his handsome face. “So, it’s me then. You’re smiling because of me.”

That makes me chuckle, and I throw him an amused look. “You really are full of yourself.”

“Nah, just happy,” he says, and the content look on his face warms my heart.

“So, tell me,” I request. “What’s your great idea that could get us out of our dilemma?”

“Again, you don’t have to say yes,” he says, raising an appeasing hand. “But I honestly don’t think you’re going to want to say no.”

“Yes, you said that before, now stop teasing and get to the point.” I add a little wink to the defiant look on my face when I lean back with my arms crossed in front of my chest.

He swallows hard and takes a large sip of his beer, obviously anxious to share his thoughts with me. I have never seen him like this, so nervous and afraid of saying something wrong. I almost feel a little sorry for him, but I can’t deny that it also makes me feel rather powerful to see a man like him losing his nerves because of me.

“Okay, so, my idea was that I do in fact buy your company, or most of it, Mr. Hailey’s—your uncle’s—shares and those of Mr. Whalon, your third shareholder. You can keep yours—”

“But that would mean—”

“That I hold most of the company, yes, but let me finish,” he says, now raising both of his hands in an appeasing manner. “But, you’d still be on the board, and we would appoint you the job of Chief

Technology Officer, the head of research and development for the *whole* conglomerate, including my company and everything that's part of the whole group. You'd have a lot more responsibility, and a lot more influence and power than you do now, and not just for your father's company, but for mine, too."

My jaw drops to the floor when I stare at him in disbelief. "Are you insane? Chief Technology Officer for such a large enterprise! I could never—"

"Yes, you can," he insists. "You have shown more than once that you have a knack for this, Madison. You may be young, but you're smart, experienced and strong-willed. I wouldn't offer you this position if I didn't believe in you. You are way more capable than a lot of old moneybags who are sitting in a seat like that. You would also share the responsibilities of a CEO with me, of course. You wouldn't lose anything, but gain a lot. You would be the one who's responsible for the direction of our growth in the future."

He's right about that last part. The majority of the share would no longer be within the family, with my uncle out of the game, but we could pursue the growth I've been fighting for. After implementing the new 3d technology that I've been eying for months, we could make a much larger leap than I was expecting to begin with.

And I can't even imagine what I could do as a Chief Technology Officer of such a large conglomerate, with no one above me, no one who can interfere with my ideas the way my uncle could before.

"And my uncle would be completely out?" I ask.

Chase nods. "Yes, I want him off the board. I'm sorry, I know he's your uncle, but after what he tried to do, I no longer want to work with

him at all. He can't be trusted."

"Agreed," I say solemnly.

"And your father's company would still be yours, for the most part," Chase adds.

"What about the name?" I probe.

"You can keep it," he says quickly. "Or we come up with a new one. Whatever you decide. But it doesn't have to be absorbed by mine."

"Good," I say. "It would... I don't know, it would feel like losing my father all over again."

My heart aches when I realize how true that is, and how true it has been the whole time. It was a major factor in me not wanting to sell the company. Dad poured his life into this business, and it hurts to think that it could all go away, now that he's gone.

"I understand that now," Chase says, reaching over the table to take my hand in his. "I didn't get it in the beginning, and I'm sorry for that. I acted like an idiot."

"You did," I say, squeezing his hand. "Thank God you came to your senses."

Chase's laughter bubbles up, a delight that fills the air around us. It's not just any laughter, but a release of tension and pent-up emotions. His eyes crinkle at the corners, and his shoulders relax, no longer burdened by the weight of uncertainty.

The sound is warm and infectious, pulling a reluctant smile from my lips as I watch him. I can see the relief in his eyes, a gleam of happiness that dances within their depths. And I feel exactly the same.

"So, you'll think about it?" he wants to know next.

"I don't have to decide right now?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Of course not, it's a big decision."

"Good," I let him know. "But yes, I will think about it."

"But you think it's a good idea?" he probes.

"Yes, Chase. I think it's a good idea, and I do see the opportunity it would give me," I say. "But I still have to think about it."

"Yes, sure. That's all I'm asking!" he says, smiling brightly. "I just... I'm sorry, I'm just a little too excited right now."

"Even after that roll?" I tease, winking at him.

He laughs again, while shaking his head. "We would be a team, Madison. A real team. I just..."

For a moment it looks like he's choking on tears, and maybe he is, but the moment is gone as quickly as it appeared.

"I just never expected to meet someone like you. A real partner," he finally manages to say, his eyes glistening. "Someone who..."

"Can keep up?" I ask, familiar with the feeling.

"Well, yeah," he says. "But you do more than that. You don't just keep up. You spur me on."

My vision begins to blur, but unlike him, I don't feel the need to hide my tears, not this time. I get up from my seat and walk around the table while he pulls his chair back and welcomes me onto his lap. I sit down on his strong thighs and he wraps his arms around me, pulling me close for a kiss. His lips are warm and taste of beer and a hint of sweet tomato, his hair still wet from the rain, and his soothing scent embracing me as our tongues intertwine.

"We still have a long way ahead of us, though," I say, breaking our kiss.

"And I can't wait to walk this path with you, my partner," he replies

before our lips meet for another kiss.

Epilog 1

Chase

~ Ten months later ~

The grand hall is buzzing with chatter, the clinking of glasses, and soft melodies playing in the background. I stand amidst the opulence of the ballroom, the lights shimmering off crystal chandeliers and casting a warm glow over the guests.

This is only our second visit to New England, ever since Madison and I made things official and moved in together. We came here for the opening gala for the green foundation that my friend Gabe and his girlfriend Ella have founded. While the idea for the foundation originated with Ella, I know that Gabe has put in his fair share of work, too. He's the one who invited me to be here, but only after I promised to be nothing but nice to Ella. As if I hadn't already shown my forgiveness toward her for the past year. I was skeptical, because it looked like she may break my friend's heart again, like she did before. But she redeemed herself, and the two of them are nauseatingly happy today.

Besides, I wasn't the only one who had to make apologies for past behavior. I didn't know it at the time, but back then Gabe was the worst person to give relationship advice, as he was going through something with Ella again. He was heartbroken, angry and disappointed—which meant that all women were in his bad books at the time. So of course, he'd told me to overturn Madison's proposal

and just stomp ahead with my own selfish plan while breaking her heart. He apologized profoundly when he realized the kind of turmoil his suggestion had caused, even though I was the bigger idiot for going along with it and hurting Madison.

I wonder why she's not here yet, as it's getting late. She promised she'd be here before the opening speech, but as the room fills with more and more people, she remains nowhere to be seen. I find myself growing increasingly concerned as time ticks away.

She said she had a work-related video conference with some of our shareholders that she needed to finish, a detail that had struck me as odd. After all, we're on vacation, and I couldn't understand why she'd need to work on this particular day. Sometimes I feel like she's even worse than me, when it comes to being a workaholic.

Still, I'd taken her at her word, trusting that it was an important call. Reluctantly, I'd left for the gala without her while she stayed glued to her laptop in our hotel suite.

Now, as the minutes stretch into eternity, I can't help but worry. Why is she so late? Has something gone wrong?

I decide to sweeten the wait with a drink and follow after one of the waiters who are roaming the hall with trays full of champagne flutes.

"That's a very good idea," I hear my friend Gabe say as I reach for one of the drinks.

He takes one for himself, and we clink glasses before bringing the sparkling drink to our lips.

"Nervous?" I ask him, as I notice the way his eyes flit through the hall. Tonight is very special for him, and not all of it has to do with the foundation that's being celebrated.

“Fuck yes,” he utters, exhaling audibly. “I feel like I’m going to throw up at any moment.”

I laugh at his expense. “I guess I better keep my phone ready to take a video then.”

“Ha. Ha,” he says, rolling his eyes at me. “Have you seen Ella? She’s out of her mind with nerves, too. And I’d feel a lot better if she was next to me right now.”

“She’s powdering her nose.”

Logan and his girlfriend Kat have joined us, unnoticed by Gabe and me, which causes both of us to jerk in surprise at Kat’s words.

She chuckles at our reaction before she adds, “I saw her go over to the ladies’ room when we walked in just now.”

“Also, hi!” Logan adds, before providing each of us with a strong hug.

“Thanks for being here,” Gabe says absentmindedly. “Glad you could come.”

“Where’s Madison?” Kat asks.

“She had to finish a work call,” I say. “She should be here any moment.”

“Oh, good.” Kat looks visibly relieved and happy. “I was hoping to talk with her, she said she wanted to come and check out Books & Brews while you guys are here.”

“Yeah, she mentioned that,” I tell her. “She was quite excited about it. Congrats by the way, I hear it’s going well?”

Kat nods, beaming with pride. Logan helped Kat to open her own bookstore a few months ago, and from what I’ve heard, it’s going rather well. Madison, who took a liking to Kat from the first time they

met a few months ago, has been looking forward to seeing Kat's first entrepreneurial endeavor.

Gabe, who has been standing quietly next to us, stares at the exit that leads to the restrooms, and he bites his lower lip.

"I better check on Ella," he says eventually.

He provides us with a friendly nod, before he disappears to check on his soon-to-be-fiancée—though, she doesn't know that part yet.

"That poor man," Logan jokes.

"Right? I haven't seen him this wrecked since we started our legal tech platform way back when," I say. "But I guess tonight, he has every reason to be."

"Why's that?" Kat implores, obviously oblivious to what is about to happen.

"Oh, you'll see," Logan says, winking at me. We all agreed to not spill the beans, not even to our girlfriends—a true Plutus boy pledge that shall not be broken.

"Why won't you tell me?" Kat wants to know, pouting at Logan.

"Let's get ourselves one of those drinks," he says, instead of answering her.

Kat casts me a quizzical look before Logan ushers her away.

I'm just about to check the time on my watch again, when I see Madison storming through the entrance. She looks marvelous in an elegant evening gown that drapes over her form in alluring, luxurious folds, the fabric seemingly spun from moonlight itself. Her long, chestnut hair is swept up in an elaborate updo, a cascade of tendrils framing her face.

The soft, romantic lighting of the gala casts a gentle halo around her,

making her seem almost ethereal, as she walks over to me.

“Finally!” I welcome her, before planting a kiss on her perfect lips. “You look amazing.”

“Thanks,” she breathes, and a timid smile appears on her face. It’s gone as quickly as it appeared.

“Everything okay?” I ask. “Is something wrong?”

Now that she’s standing so close to me I realize that something is bothering her. Her face is pale, her eyes wide and apathetic and her shoulders a little too high up to her ears.

“It’s nothing,” she dismisses.

“What did they say? We’re not in trouble with the financing again, are we?” I probe.

But Madison hastily shakes her head. “No, the... no it’s fine. Really. I’m just exhausted because I had to hurry, so I wouldn’t be late.”

I can’t shake the gnawing feeling that she’s lying to me.

“Really, nothing is wrong,” she insists, when she notices my eyes on her. “The... the call went fine, we just had to clear up a few things, and it took longer than I had planned. It was a bit stressful.”

She smiles at me, and it looks a little more believable this time.

“I don’t understand why you had to talk to them today anyway,” I say. “We’re on vacation. I didn’t even bring my laptop.”

“Well, you’re not quite the workaholic I am,” she says, placing a gentle kiss on my cheek.

“I never thought I’d ever hear that sentence from anyone,” I respond, laughing. “Usually I’m the one who doesn’t know when to quit.”

“Well, I guess you found your match,” Madison says, and my heart

does one of those silly hiccups when she winks at me.

For a moment, worry clutches at me. Does she know? No, she can't. I hid it too well. It's impossible for her to find. I'm just waiting for the right moment to give it to her.

Soon.

She has no idea how true her words ring. Because she really is the match I never thought I could find.

And soon, the whole world will know that she belongs to me, forever.

Epilog 2

Madison

I have to tell him. And I have to do it sooner rather than later.

But how can I tell him about this? I've been telling myself that I'm just waiting for the right time, but how do I know what the right time is?

All I knew was that I couldn't tell him why we were still traveling. I had to wait until we were back in California, because I need the comfort of our home, a bit of stability and calm within the storm that's been raging inside of me for the past few days.

We've only been living together for a few months, but I've made myself quite at home at his place. I was sad to give up my apartment downtown, I loved it, but this is so much better.

I'm sitting out on the patio, a peach ice tea next to me, and the neighbor's cat curled up on another lawn chair on our porch. I was told her name is Pica, and she lives down the street with an elderly woman. She took Pica in after finding her out on the street, together with her four kittens. They were babies still, just a couple of weeks old, and Pica was doing her best to take care of them, despite barely finding enough food for herself. She was weak and skinny, and her fur full of lice eating away at her skin when she was found.

I don't even know the name of the woman who took her in, but I know all that there is to know about Pica. Pica, the selfless mother cat, who put her babies before herself and almost died in the process. Her babies have all been homed with families, and Pica stayed with her

rescuer.

Do I have this in me? Could I ever be selfless enough to be a mother?

My hand rests on my belly, acutely aware of what's growing inside it. A new life. A life that I didn't expect.

A life that *we* didn't expect.

All my life I've been so focused on my career, on becoming a worthy successor to my Dad, that I never thought about motherhood. I never asked myself if this is what I wanted. Or maybe, I just thought it would happen one day.

One day. Not now. Not like this.

But now that it's happened, I can feel the love grow, just as my child is growing inside of me. I already feel attached to my baby, especially since today, when I had my doctor confirm what three tests have already told me. The tears that were pouring down my face were born out of joy more than fear—though the latter is definitely present as well.

I'm pregnant. And I haven't told Chase, yet. I found out while we were on the other side of the country, in New England, attending Gabe's and Ella's opening gala, and visiting Chase's mother. Something tells me that she knows, and not only because she found me dizzy with nausea one very early morning. I had to throw up and went down to the kitchen for a glass of water after, still swaying and my face pale. There was concern written across her face when I assured her that I was fine—her eyes resting on me for a little too long.

I woke up feeling sick on the day of the gala. That and the fact that I was already a couple of days late with my period made me lie to Chase about having a Zoom call. I needed for him to leave before me so I

could sneak out and get a pregnancy test. I didn't want to freak him out for no reason, but in the end, I was the one freaking out—and to be honest, I still am. I didn't expect the test to be positive, not really. I just wanted to make sure that I wasn't pregnant, not prove the opposite.

A slurping sound pierces through the warm afternoon air when I finish the last of my ice tea through the straw. He should be here any moment now. I've been waiting for almost half an hour, staring at our driveway, my heart beating wildly every time I hear a car approaching. I wanted to wait until I had my proof, until I had a picture to show him. But now I'm wondering if I'm making a mistake. What if he feels pressured? What if he runs? No, he wouldn't do that. Chase and I haven't talked about kids yet, and I feel incredibly stupid about that now. I would feel so much better if I knew what his stance on babies was...

My heart skips a beat when I see his Maybach turn around the corner, and slowly roll up our driveway.

I'm going to tell him today. I'm going to tell him *now*. I have to get it over with.

With my pulse racing, I get up from my seat, and Pica perks up next to me, her eyes following me as I meander to the end of the patio to welcome Chase. He jumps out of the car with a smile, wearing a white shirt with rolled up sleeves and black pants. I left work a few hours early today for my doctor's appointment and he promised to pick up some takeout for dinner on his way back.

"I hope kimbap is okay?" he asks, smiling. "I got some vegetarian options, too."

I muster a smile, when he walks up the stairs and I welcome him with a kiss.

“Sounds great,” I say in a low voice.

“You sure?” he probes, looking concerned. “Is something wrong? You don’t look well.” He places a hand on my forehead. “It feels like you’ve been a little out of it for like a week now. You sure you’re not getting sick?”

“I’m pregnant.”

The words blurt out, before I can stop myself, before I can come up with a better way to say this. I had planned to go easy on him, to slowly approach the subject after I asked him to sit down. He’s not even sitting now. How is he supposed to process this while standing?

Chase freezes, his jaw drops open, and for a few moments that feel like an eternity, he just stands there, staring at me as if I’d just... well, as if I’d just told him that I’m pregnant.

“I’m so sorry—”

“Sorry?!” he blurts out, and then he starts laughing. “Are you fucking kidding me!”

He drops the bag with our food to the ground, and a surprised gasp flees my lips, when he loops his arms around me, to pull me close against his strong chest. His embrace is tight, almost desperate and so strong that it robs me of my breath.

“Chase...” I mutter, and he loosens his grip on me.

He takes my face between both of his hands and looks at me with tears pearling in his eyes.

“You’re... we’re...,” he stutters, before he starts laughing again. “I can’t believe this! This is so fucking great!”

“Great?” I repeat in disbelief. “You’re not mad?”

“Mad? Why would I be mad?”

“Well, I am!” I blurt out, freeing myself from his touch, as I take a step back. “I didn’t plan for this! *We* didn’t plan for this! We have so much work to do! Do you know what my work schedule looks like for the upcoming *year*? I have no time for this! I can’t take a break now! I can’t...”

“Easy now,” he cuts me off, his hands now landing on my shoulders. “Yes, you’re right, we didn’t plan for this. But that doesn’t mean we can’t handle it!”

“How? I don’t want to take a break from work now, I don’t want to stay home,” I mutter. “Not now, at least. I’m not ready for this, and I can’t—”

“I’m ready,” he asserts, much to my surprise. “And I get it, you are Miss Career Woman. But you’re forgetting something: You’re not alone in this. I’m going to be a father!”

He has tears in his eyes while the widest smile I’ve ever seen on him spreads across his face.

“I am going to be a father,” he repeats. “And I’m going to be a *great* father, an involved father, hell, why not a stay-at-home-dad? Yes, I think I would actually like that!”

“You what?” I exclaim, unable to stop myself from laughing.

“Why not? You just said you’re worried about work and your schedule and whatnot, and I don’t want you to worry,” he says, taking both of my hands in his. “I don’t want you to worry. I want you to be as happy as I am about this.”

“I am happy,” I say, as my lips curve into a smile. “I just thought you

wouldn't be..."

A frown appears on his face, and he looks almost hurt at my words.

"You really have no idea how much I love you," he says. "How could I not be happy about this news? I mean, I was about to... oh, fuck it!"

He lets go of my hands, and my heart almost stops, when he goes down on his knees, reaching into his pants' pocket.

"I've been carrying this around for weeks," he says, casting me a coy smile, as he reveals a little jewelry box. He opens it, and a diamond in a bezel sitting on a platinum ring comes to light. "I've just been waiting for the right moment, and I can't think of a better moment than now, after you shared this wonderful news with me."

"Chase...what..."

"No, wait, let me do this!" he says, clearing his throat, before he goes on. "Madison Hailey, you stormed into my life like a tempest. From the moment we met, I knew that you were the challenge I was looking for, the woman who would never fail to amaze me, the only woman who can push me to achieve everything I want to attain—and more! This past year with you has been the best year of my life, and I can't believe how lucky I am to walk through life with you at my side, as my wife. Madison Hailey, will you marry me?"

His hands are trembling as he holds the ring up to me, but my eyes are locked on his, my tear-filled vision blurred, as I go down on my knees, nodding at him. I didn't think it was possible to feel this way, to be this unbelievably happy and content at the prospect of the future.

Chase brought a light into my life that I didn't know I was missing. And he has shown again and again that he's ready to catch me when I fall. I was so scared about this unexpected turn of events just a few

minutes ago, and now I can't see anything but joy ahead of us, as a family.

“Of course, Mr. Keaton,” I say, taking his face in between my hands, before I add: “Of course, I will marry you—partner.”

Thank you for reading!

Can't get enough of the Billionaire Pact boys? Have you met Logan, yet? If you like fake relationships, book nerds and a lot of spicy scenes, then **[Billion Dollar Lie](#)** is the book for you!

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BILLION DOLLAR LIE

BLURB

I need a fake fiancée, she needs my money — together, we'll play the perfect game of deception.

I made it to the top, among the richest of the rich. But I have one more goal in my sights... to become a member of the illustrious Vanguard Society. Being a billionaire is not enough to join their ranks.

I just need one thing to win their trust: A fiancée.

When Kat stumbles into my arms at an elite nightclub, I know that she is perfect for the job.

She's beautiful, smart and feisty — and totally off limits.

But she's desperate. She needs me just as much as I need her.

One million dollars is all it takes to make her play along. She agrees to become my fake fiancée.

My partner in crime.

My plaything.

The moment I'm alone with her, the urge to break her becomes overwhelming.

It's all a lie, a contract between us, just for as long as I need her. Hell will freeze over before I tie myself down to one woman. No matter how enticing my name sounds as it drips from her lips when she moans.

But Kat is not who I thought she was.

And when things take a dangerous turn, I find myself in the risk of losing everything—including her.

PROLOG

Logan

I should never have done this. Not with her.

I'm paying her to be with me. It's her job to make me look good, to put on a demure smile and hang on to my arm like a devoted fiancée.

She is the key to my success. And the ring on her finger is nothing but a lie. It's a signal, to the world, and most of all to *them*.

It was never meant to mean anything to her—or me.

**I should have stopped this a long time ago.
Maybe I never should have started.**

But how could I not? How could I resist this brazen, smart and bewitchingly beautiful girl?

The girl who now kneels before me, her head tilted and her eyes closed as she awaits my next move. Her chest is heaving, her nipples hard with arousal and her cheeks flushed. My gaze trails along her perfect little body, her teardrop-shaped breasts, the dark strands of hair that stick to her sweaty neck and her delicate fingers, idly resting on her thighs.

Why is she wearing the ring when it's just the two of us? Did she ever take it off since I placed it on her finger? How did I never notice?

And what does this mean?

Nothing, probably. It doesn't mean anything, just like the way she looks at me doesn't mean anything. She's just very good at this. She's a great actress, that is all.

I will fuck the living hell out of her. And then I will do it again. And again.

And then, at some point, our ways will part. Because they have to. Whether I want it or not...

CHAPTER 1

Kat

This isn't happening.

Not again.

Patrick, my boyfriend of three years, sits across from me, slumped and with an apologetic expression on his face. He sighs and lets his tired gaze idle through our living room, before he turns back to me.

"I don't know what to say, it just... happened," he murmurs. "I didn't want it to happen, but—"

"Oh, please, don't give me that bullshit," I cut him off. "It's not like anyone forced your tongue down her throat."

"Kat, please—"

"How could you?" I utter, helplessly shaking my head as I avert my eyes from him. "How could *you* do this to me?"

My gaze is latched to the floor, trailing along the lines of the wooden cracks between my naked toes while I let his harrowing words sink in.

"I slept with Stacey from work."

A life-changing sentence that has been playing on repeat inside my head—each syllable crushing my vulnerable ego with its withering weight.

He cheated on me. Patrick, the only guy who ever made me feel safe enough to trust him, cheated on me.

I thought I'd finally found my place, after years of being passed around like an unwanted heirloom. He's so different than the guys I

used to date—all those bad boys who were excitingly dangerous at first, but turned out to be flaky cheats with abusive tendencies. I thought I was safe with him.

And now, it's happening again. I am no longer wanted.

Someone else was better than me. *Stacey from work*—so painfully random.

Patrick leans over and tries to comfort me by placing his hand on top of mine, but I wave him off like a pesky fly.

“I have to leave,” I utter.

He throws me a confused look.

“I mean, I have to move out,” I clarify. “Right? The lease runs under your name. And I could never afford this place on my own.”

I can't afford *anything* on my own. A crushing pile of debt has been overshadowing my life for years. My résumé is nothing but a long list of bad decisions—a flawed life that was about to change.

Patrick's support allowed me to study for my GED without having to worry about money. I was so grateful, and too besotted to realize how vulnerable I was because of my dependency on him.

Patrick swallows dryly and suggests a nod. “Well, yes. I actually took care of that already.”

I throw him an impatient look. “Took care of what?”

He shifts in his seat, a pained expression lacing his face as he lowers his head, his fingers nervously fiddling in his lap.

“Well, since... you know, I know money is tight for you—”

“Tight as in I don't have any,” I interject.

“Yes, I'm aware,” he says, clearing his throat before he adds: “That's why I asked Mrs. Warden if you could live with her.”

“You what?!”

“Don’t worry, it’s okay! She said it was totally fi—”

“Of course she said that! What the hell is she supposed to say?!” I cut him off, almost jumping up from my seat as I gesture toward him. “Patrick, this is fucking insane! How could you drag my old teacher into this mess, just so you can feel better about kicking me out of my home!”

“I’m not kick—”

“Yes, you are!” I burst out, dangerously close to tears. “I woke up this morning thinking everything was fine and the only thing I have to worry about is that damn job interview next week. I thought about what to make for dinner tonight, what to watch on Netflix... and meanwhile, you...”

My monologue is cut short by a violent urge to cry. I choke on my own tears as I try to suppress the heaves that rattle my chest, but it only makes things worse.

I feel so utterly humiliated, so stupid, so blind. I was so focused on finally achieving an eye-blink of security for myself that I didn’t even realize my relationship was falling apart.

I neglected him—and he found someone else. Someone better.

I hated being dependent on him, but he never made me feel bad for it—and I thought I could repay him one day. I thought we were in this for the long run.

Meanwhile, that cheating bastard arranged a new living situation behind my back.

“I’m sorry for being such a burden on you,” I murmur. “That’s what you’ve been thinking, right? That I’m a fucking social case who can

now become someone else's responsibility?"

He sucks in a sharp breath of air and looks like he wants to respond, but I beat him to it.

"Well, I'm not!" I continue my furious rant. "I can take care of myself. I don't need you! And I certainly don't need you to make phone calls on my behalf!"

He flinches when I jump up from my seat, now towering above him as he watches me through fearful eyes.

I turn around and march toward the door, fetching my phone and purse in the process.

"Where are you going?" Patrick's voice follows me down the hall, stained with indignation, while I struggle to slip into a pair of flip-flops.

I have to get out of here. I have to get away from his sorry face and the disappointment he represents.

"Kat, we should—"

The door shuts behind my back, drowning out the rest of his sentence. I don't need to hear his consolatory words.

I don't need him.

But I do need money. Fast.

CHAPTER 2

Logan

“Told you! A loaded bank account is not enough to convince those motherfuckers,” my friend Chase says at the other end of the line. “I don’t even understand why you’re so desperate to join their dumb club.”

“I’m not desperate,” I retort.

The traffic light ahead turns green and my driver steps on the gas so hard that the phone almost falls out of my hand.

“We’re not in a hurry, Christopher!”

He’s driving as if we’re caught in a chase tonight. His shift ends after this trip and he probably wants to get home to his family, cradling his newborn baby while his dutiful wife serves him dinner. How wholesome. A life so different from mine, so normal—so fucking mundane.

Christopher slows down the car. “I’m sorry, sir.”

It’s a farce that a man like him would have a better chance with the Vanguardians than myself, if he could pay their membership fee. But while he lacks the money, I—apparently—lack the integrity of a gentleman deemed suitable for their exclusive club. I’m too young, too inexperienced, and show no traits of a responsible family man.

“Then why not just let it go?” Chase asks. “Who needs those staid and stuffy dudes anyway.”

“I do,” I say. “They may be squares, but their network is worth a

mint. Once I'm in, everything will change. My name will no longer be tied to the Reid clan, but to the Vanguard, a well-respected business community."

I've been living under my family's murky shadow for too long. Sure, I used their ways to accumulate wealth, but—unlike my brothers—I'm aware of the fragility of it all. You can't build a long-lasting empire on dirt. It will all crumble at some point, and I want to get out before I end up behind bars like my father.

"Well, you'll still be a Reid," Chase reminds me. "Unless you marry and take your wife's name."

He pauses for a chuckle, before he adds: "Hey, why don't you just do that? Find a wife! You remember our pact, don't you? Just kill two birds with one stone."

Oh, that damn pact. A drunken joke the guys shared at our friend Aston's birthday party just a couple of weeks ago. The four of us—Gabe, Chase, Aston and me—were inseparable during college. We all went our separate ways after graduation, but were bound by a common desire to become part of the super rich before we turn thirty.

And now that we all achieved that goal, the boys decided that we need a new pact—the goal to find a wife and produce heirs. But it was never more than a joke—at least to me.

"Solid advice," I lament. "You know I have no intention of thwarting myself with a nagging wife."

"Get one that doesn't nag, then!" Chase laughs, obviously amused at my indignation.

I roll my eyes. "You're not helping."

"Dude, chill," he replies. "I'm just saying. Sounds like this could help

with your problem. The Vanguards might look at you differently if you had a wife hanging onto your arm. Makes you look more legit, more—”

“Normal,” I interject, rolling my eyes.

“Yes, exactly! Squares like that dig a good old ball and chain to keep them in place.”

I hate that he is probably right about this. A wife would polish my image in no time, as ridiculous as it is.

The car stops and I’m met with the familiar sight of a refurbished brick stone facade, telling me that we have arrived at our destination.

“Listen, I gotta go,” I inform Chase, already unbuckling my seatbelt. “Talk to you later.”

“Hot date with the future Mrs. Reid?” he asks.

“You wish.”

I end the call and climb out the car, sending Christopher off to his family, before I walk toward the main entrance of the brick building. The large wooden doors are topped with an elegant canopy with pillars on both sides, shielding the entrance just enough to provide a hint of mystery.

I don’t know whether the boys would be jealous or disgusted if they knew where I am tonight. Probably the latter. My old college friends never ventured to the darker side of life, whereas for me, it’s the only place I know. Murky waters, full of secrets and sin.

Just like this place—The Velvet Rooms. The owners don’t like to label it a kink club, claiming that it’s more than that, more luxurious, more exclusive and sublime. I’ve been a patron at their main location in Boston for years and when the madame, Miss Barry, announced that she was looking for investors to expand with another location in

DC, I saw an opportunity.

An opportunity to turn my dirty money into... well, a little less dirty money.

One step at a time.

I missed the club's official opening last weekend, because it collided with Aston's 30th birthday—an occasion that I couldn't miss. But I had to promise Miss Barry to stop by as soon as I could.

The building itself is an old Victorian mansion, massive in size and restored beyond its former glory. Red-cushioned interior is matched with a hint of boudoir, drinks served in golden flutes and elegant tumblers, and the floor-to-ceiling windows, adorned with heavy curtains, add to the lavish allure of this place.

The dim light immerses the room in varying scarlet tones, accented with large candles and an oversized chandelier floats in the center of it all.

I meander through the room, taking in the sight of the hall and the girls who work here. Angels, dressed in white and not to be touched, and devils, dressed in black lingerie and open for business—the same concept I know from Boston.

However, I am not here to play or to get laid. I'm here to check on my investment.

And to have a drink. Just one drink.

It's still early and not too crowded yet, so it's easy to find a quiet place to sit and observe at the far end of the room. Button tufted leather seats, red as blood and soft as skin, welcome me in a dark corner next to an old fireplace. I sink down in one of them with a heavy sigh, placing my elbows on the soft leather as I scan the room.

And then I see her.

Tall and slender, with long dark brown hair, sleek as silk, cascading down to her slim waist in a strong contrast to the white lingerie her delicate body is wrapped in. She's dressed as an angel, showing a little less skin than her devil coworkers, but still enough to draw attention to herself.

But it's not just her alluring outfit and the body it adorns that keep my gaze fixated on her.

It's her face. Or rather, her expression. She's beautiful, stunning actually, but unlike the other girls, she doesn't sport a plastic smile topped with wide puppy eyes. Instead, she looks focused, grim almost, with her painted lips pressed into a thin line and the hint of a crease between her brows.

I wave her over when our eyes meet. Instantly, her lips curl into a friendly smile, but her eyes remain apathetic when she stalks over to me on her plateau high heels.

"Evening, sir," she chirps, tilting her head to the side as she comes to a halt before me. "It's a pleasure to welcome you to The Velvet Rooms! Would you care for some company?"

She's even more tantalizing from up close. I study her from head to toe, taking my time as I indulge in the sight of her shape, adorned with white lace, matching sheer stockings and jewelry, earrings that look like silver teardrops and a delicate necklace, barely noticeable. Her eyes are framed with thick fake lashes and too much glittery make-up, her lips painted in a rose-colored tone, a bit lighter than most other girls in here. A white hairpin with a single pearl keeps her smooth hair in place on one side, while the chocolate streaks partly shield her face

on the other.

She is devastatingly beautiful—and visibly uncomfortable.

“A drink,” I tell her. “Scotch, neat.”

A frown flashes on her face. “I’m not a waitress.”

She bites her lower lip, seemingly regretting her response in an instant.

Bad girl.

“You’re here to entertain me, aren’t you?” I retort. “Bring me a Scotch and whatever you like for yourself—and join me.”

She utters a low “Yes, sir,” followed by a demure nod, before she turns around and walks away to the bar, swinging her hips for my benefit.

Looks like she *can* be a good girl, if she’s put in her place properly.

Very promising.

End of preview

[Click here](#) to read the rest of [Billion Dollar Lie](#).

ABOUT LINNEA MAY

Linnea May loves to read and write about strong alpha men with loaded bank accounts and skeletons in their closets. Her heroes are as sexy as they are broken – only to be fixed by the smart & captivating heroines who cross their paths. She loves twisted and dark tales that push boundaries, and there’s always a hint of kink in even the sweetest of her stories.

She lives in Europe with her own hero, and her cats Pi and Zeta.

And she loves squirrels.

Be sure to follow her on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) and [subscribe to her newsletter](#), so you never miss her newest updates, ARC opportunities, sales & giveaways!

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