



BILLIONAIRE GRUMP'S

Baby Surprise

I V Y K A R R

Billionaire Grump's Baby Surprise

An Enemies to Lovers Boss Romance

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Contents

[1. Chapter 1](#)

[2. Chapter 2](#)

[3. Chapter 3](#)

[4. Chapter 4](#)

[5. Chapter 5](#)

[6. Chapter 6](#)

[7. Chapter 7](#)

[8. Chapter 8](#)

[9. Chapter 9](#)

[10. Chapter 10](#)

[11. Chapter 11](#)

[12. Chapter 12](#)

[13. Chapter 13](#)

[14. Chapter 14](#)

[15. Chapter 15](#)

[16. Chapter 16](#)

[17. Chapter 17](#)

[18. Chapter 18](#)

[19. Chapter 19](#)

[20. Chapter 20](#)

[21. Chapter 21](#)

[22. Chapter 22](#)

[23. Chapter 23](#)

[24. Chapter 24](#)

[25. Chapter 25](#)

[26. Chapter 26](#)

[27. Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[. Chapter](#)

Chapter 1

Ashley

Graduation comes with its woes, one of which is indecision on how to proceed and what to do next. Some are lucky enough to choose a path that works out right away. Many of us will go through several attempts and failures before finding the right path.

After getting a degree from the University of Michigan, I told myself that it's now time to see what life has to offer. Growing up in the state of Michigan, I have become too accustomed to the scenery; this cannot be where I will start life once more. The city of New York had been a childhood dream and it's time I lived that dream.

In the city of New York, I am lucky that Justin has a comfortable apartment in the heart of the city. Justin is an old friend and a buddy of mine since we

were six and luckily for both of us, we didn't grow apart despite having different journeys in life. He was more than happy to put up with me until I get my own place and even helped me by dropping my resume for a position at his workplace.

That didn't seem like a bad idea to me. IM CORP is one of the top five tech companies in the US and getting a position at the headquarters wouldn't be such a bad idea.

I once interned as a creative director for a small tech start-up company back in college, so I knew the basics and my work with them had given the company a solid name. At least, while I was there, they thrived. I had several other achievements packed in my resume, so I was pretty confident that I could get a job somewhere. No company would want to lose out on a fresh mind like me, Ashley Lane.

Justin happens to be what I'll refer to as a loyal employee. All of his gadgets are products of IM. He always managed to fill my ears with talks of his boss and has futilely tried countless times to make me read a book that was published about him.

Even without reading the book, I could tell the story of Ian Maxwell from beginning to the end. That's how much Justin adores the man. Ian Maxwell controls the corporation and all of its resources; his story is that of a self-made man who at age 22 started a small tech company that ended up becoming the tech giant it is now. While his success is impressive, he does not seem worthy of the worship that Justin gives him.

After several days of furtively trying to go around New York myself, I insisted on this particular day for Justin to take me around the city so as to experience the sights and sounds of the city. Several hours after touring the city, we both decided to get something to eat at a restaurant. Halfway through our meal, I excused myself to use the restroom.

In my hurry, I bumped into a person's chest. I rubbed my forehead, while

trying to steady my body from falling flat.

“Hey! What the hell? Are you blind? Did you really not see me coming?”

I was thrown aback by this outburst. Blind? Really? All I did was bump into someone and he was throwing such a fit of rage? I glanced up at the person only to come in contact with the most arguably handsome man, but very well the rudest to ever exist too.

“You again!”

I screamed, pointing a finger at the suit clad form of the man, who was clutching onto his tablet as wrath laced through me. I remembered him hitting me with his car door while opening it yesterday, only to rain insults on me for a mistake he had made.

“Do you not have actively working eyes or do you like walking around with them closed?”

I could remember his words clearly and his sultry voice as he had pinned me down with a look so intimidating, I wanted the ground to swallow me up.

His green eyes contorted in a frown of confusion at first before recognition sat firmly in it. His brows furrowed deeply.

“I see you still haven’t gotten a good pair of eyes. Would you do the whole world a favor and see an ophthalmologist instead of bumping into every damn thing?”

My eyes flared with fury. “You are the rudest, most immature and stupid man I’d ever seen.”

“Immature? Stupid?” With scorching eyes, he stepped towards me, trying to

intimidate me with his glare.

“How dare you?” he huffed.

“I see you’re not complaining about being called rude, looks like you accept that.” I ran a hand through the front of my dress. “A word of advice, you should get your brain checked instead of going around and blaming everyone for things that are clearly your fault.”

I stomped out of his presence, forgetting my whole plan of visiting the bathroom. Looks like this green eyed, handsome devil was some kind of bad luck attached to me. I can’t believe I’d see him again considering how big New York was.

“You’re back so quick,” Justin said to me as I approached the table. When he noticed the frown permanently etched on my features, he raised his brows. “Something tells me some unlucky soul just got their ears filled with *enticing* words.”

I picked up my bag. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” I heard Justin’s laughing voice following behind me as I hurried towards the car.

I wanted to be out of there; that was the only way my anger could subside. Not a word came out of my tightly clenched lips all through the drive back home and by the time I finally made it home, my jaws were aching with how hard I’d been gritting my teeth. I threw my bag across the kitchen island as I walked into the kitchen to get a cup of water for myself.

“This is worse than yesterday,” Justin said, his Hazel eyes darting across my face with a curiosity that couldn’t be missed. “Who bumped into you again, Ashley?”

I dropped the cup on the kitchen island, my tensed shoulders relaxing a bit.

“Trust me, you’d be mad if the same man who had shoved his car door into you bumped into you the next day and still somehow faults your eyes for it. It’s pretty obvious he doesn’t even deserve to live amongst humans.”

Justin held back a chuckle the moment he saw my red rimmed eyes turned on him. He raised his hands up in mock surrender. “I’m just saying, mother fate might be at work here. Who knows, he might be your destiny.”

“What!” I screamed, faking a gagging sound as the thought of that rude punk being my destiny. There was no way.

“Mother fate had better be ready for a big surprise because there is absolutely no way in hell I’d ever consider a man like that to be anything but the rude clump of dirt he was.”

“Whoa, calm down, Feisty one,” Justin said, his hand reaching out to me as he pulled me down into a stool.

“I’ve studied humans quite a lot and those who appear to have the worst first impression are the ones who turn out to be the most amazing people, Ashley.”

I scoffed, awarding him a sharp glare. “Look here, Justin Andrews, not everyone is like your beautiful and calm Jenny who made a bad first impression and turned out to be a sweet human.”

I made sure he got this information well. His girlfriend might be the sweetest soul he knows, but that doesn’t make everyone else so. “Some people are just plain bad. It happened twice. On two different occasions, he showed who he was.”

Justin fought back a laugh but soon he let it roll out as his calculated gaze

roamed across my face. For some reasons, I couldn't figure out what was so funny.

“Stop laughing or I'll gouge your eyes out and Jenny won't have those annoying eyes to gaze at anymore!” I threatened, my hands squeezing the cup on the table.

“Alright!” Justin made a show to raise his hands once again, calming down his heaving chest. “I mean what is the possibility that you bump into the same person twice on two different occasions?”

“He bumped into me,” I corrected, refusing to believe otherwise anymore. I'm sure his head wasn't in the right place both yesterday and today.

“Of course he did, I know,” Justin said, nodding his head, a sly grin on his face. It took everything in me not to pull out his blonde hair at that moment. “I'm sure you won't have to see him again though.”

“I hope not,” I said absentmindedly as I reached for my beeping phone.

I pulled out the phone from the bag to see a text from IM CORP, inviting me for an interview the next day. I smiled. “I got a message from IM. I have an interview with them tomorrow.”

Justin reached out for my phone and read the text with an unmistakable smile on his face. “Looks like we'll finally be able to pop that champagne tomorrow.”

“You bet!”

I hightailed towards my borrowed room, my mood lifted and mind off the annoying green eyes hunk. Life was definitely going to be smooth sailing from now on.

Chapter 2

Ashley

Life was definitely going to be smooth sailing from now on. I had assured myself of this fact yesterday and it did look like things were turning out beautifully well.

I was up early the next morning and left for IM with Justin, who didn't understand my need to arrive an hour early for an interview. My interview was for 10:00am and I was already at the company by 9:00am. This was my way of getting familiar with my environment. I call it 'scouting the battleground before the big war' and it was a habit I grew into back in college.

I'd always arrive more than thirty minutes early for almost everything. It helps to keep me calm and makes it easier for me to carry out what I intend to

do effectively because once I'm familiar and comfortable in my surroundings, every other thing becomes relatively easier for me.

So on this day, instead of heading over to the HR department where my interview would take place, I decided to take a tour of the company after checking in with the security. With a cup of coffee in hand, my bag in the other, I paraded the several big buildings compiled into one, admiring the beauty of the place.

It was obvious great care was taken into building this place; it sure looked like the headquarters of a corporation like IM. Every employee that walked by me had an IM gadget in hand, phones, tablet, earphones. I couldn't blame any of them though; even I prefer IM's phone to any other one. I can't even remember the last time I bought a phone that wasn't a product of IM.

After I decided I'd had my fair share of the place, I started making my way towards the HR department, my eyes glancing towards the silver wristwatch on my hand. I stopped in front of one of the glass walls and checked out my reflection to confirm that everything was perfect.

And it was. Not a hair was out of place. My brunette hair was styled in a tight high ponytail, and I was looking every bit as professional as I wanted to in my dark blue pants and black lacy shirt tucked in smoothly. With one final glance, I turned swiftly only to nearly bump into a person. What was wrong with me?

I quickly looked up to find a tall man whose gaze was fixated on a tablet in his hand as he walked past me, not even sparing me a glance. My eyes followed him, taking note of the expensive suit he had on, the jet-black silky hair that almost reached his nape and the broad shoulders that looked so inviting from where I was. I wondered what could be so engrossing that he'd not even look up when we'd barely survived a collision.

It was in my goodwill to ignore the blind bat, not wanting to spoil my day, but then I couldn't ignore him if he was walking straight into a pillar. It

wouldn't be nice to see such a sturdy young man get a concussion because I refused to do a good deed.

“Hey!” I ran after him and pulled him back the elbow only to come face to face with that rude jerk from yesterday.

Everything suddenly made sense. I remembered he had a tablet with him yesterday too. No wonder he keeps bumping into things.

Although I had managed to stop him, he still hasn't taken his eyes off from his tablet in his hand, so I snatched it. “Try to make use of your eyes and stop bumping into things.”

“Hey! What the heck was that for?” Angry eyes bore into mine immediately. The anger soon turned into fully blown wrath as he recognizes me. “It's you again! Are you stalking me?”

I scoffed. “You wish!” I returned his tablet. “Use your eyes for the road instead of your tablet. You'd bump into that pillar and the next thing you'd be doing is cursing at it, jerk!” I turned swiftly, heading for my interview.

Somehow, I didn't bother to wonder what that rude jerk was doing here. I was too busy looking forward to my interview. At 10:00am sharp, the secretary at the HR department led me into a small conference room with a small nod. and a ‘The manager will be here soon’ before she swiftly made her way out.

I took my seat at the big table, my eyes darting across the place. Not too long after, a stout elderly man dressed in a finely pressed suit walked into the room, holding on to a file. I stood up, acknowledging his presence as he walked towards me, a grin on his face and a glint in his eyes.

“Ashley, it is really nice to meet you. I am Barry Stewart, HR manager of IM Corps. Call me Barry,” he introduced himself composedly, stretching out his

hand for a handshake.

I shook his hand. “The pleasure is mine, Barry.”

“We are not exactly hiring at the moment,” Barry started saying as he pulled out the chair opposite from me and sat down. His brown eyes shone with wonder as he stared at me.

“But we couldn’t say no to your resume. You were the creative director who brought Groovy Tech to the limelight only as an intern. I must say, I find your brand strategizing quite amazing.”

His smile made me at ease. I was confident that I’d get the job, but I couldn’t deny that I had been a little scared. “Thank you, sir. It’s something I love doing, so I try my best to make it worthwhile.”

Barry nodded his head thoughtfully. “The CEO would be joining our interview and he should be here anytime from now.”

My eyes nearly slipped out of their sockets from opening so wide. I wanted to ask why but I stopped myself before I could. I had presumed the CEO wasn’t someone I’d get to meet so easily. What was going on?

Noticing the questions clouding my eyes, Barry chuckled. “He is just really interested in the brain behind the Groovy Tech outbreak even though they didn’t manage to keep it up after you left. I handed your resume to him when I received your application.”

“Ohh,” I muttered, surprised at my own widespread fame. I had thought Groovy tech wouldn’t even be recognized by employees of IM but looks like I was wrong. “That is quite pleasant, I guess.”

Barry nodded his head absentmindedly, his eyes roaming through the files before him that definitely continued a copy of my resume. “The position of

Creative Director at IM is quite competitive here. We have a lot of great hands-on deck already. And frankly, if you are hired, you'd be the youngest. Which is quite unusual. Most people your age are hired as assistants."

"I'm sure that is not going to be a problem for me. I am quite competitive myself," I said, picking out my words carefully, while fighting the urge to tell him that twenty-three wasn't such a young age.

I was well aware of what he was trying to say. Back at Groovy, I was the one in charge because I was the only one and the company was a small startup. Here at IM, my job is likely not to be the same. I knew there was a position above that of a creative director here, the CCO (Chief Creative Officer) whom all Creative Directors are answerable reporting to.

In my brooding state, I heard the door open once again and knew it must be the CEO when Barry stood up immediately. I followed suit and turned towards the approaching sounds of footsteps to meet with the most unpleasant shock of my life.

What was he doing here?

That was the question that flipped through my mind as my eyes raked over the tall gorgeous but rude man who was staring at me with newfound shock. I dare say, he looked as stupefied as I felt.

His daunting green eyes ran over me rapidly as though seeing me for the first time ever. I felt shivers run through my spine and I didn't know what to think or feel. Whether it was embarrassment, fear, anger, or something entirely different that I refuse to identify with at the moment.

I took a cautious step back. All the confidence I felt about getting the job was slipping away from me as something else settled in the pit of my belly, profound anger. I was pissed at the man who had started off our fate on the wrong foot and pissed at myself for losing my temper.

Maybe he is the CEO's assistant.

My subconscious tried to calm me, but I knew it wasn't working. At least, the self-satisfied smirk on his handsome face told me so. The universe was definitely playing a trick on me because why would anyone like him be a CEO.

"Ian, this is the creative director I mentioned. Ashley Lane," Barry said, blind to the tension in the room as he pointed his hand towards me before turning to face me. "This is our CEO, Ian Maxwell."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Ashley Lane," he said in a really husky voice that sounded too good to belong to the jerk that had insulted me on three different occasions. His hand was stretched towards me as he dared me with his eyes to refuse the handshake.

"The pleasure is mine, sir," I said between gritted teeth as I placed my hand in his, not wanting to embarrass him in front of his employee, but all logical thoughts flew out of my head the instant my hand connected with his.

I sucked in a breath as my eyes glanced towards my small hands encased in his large ones, processing the whole entourage of emotions spiraling through me. It had to be my anger. Definitely my anger. I reassured myself of this fact, knowing fully well there was no way in hell I'd be attracted to an obnoxious man like Ian Maxwell.

Or was I?

That wouldn't make any sense, there is the stupid gnawing fact that this man might look handsome, but from what I heard from Justin, he is at least a decade older than I am. And let's not ignore the fact that he also happened to be the most unpleasant man I had ever encountered in my life.

Chapter 3

Ian

I looked from Barry to the young woman whose countenance keeps switching from mild to wild. She held an identifiable animosity for me in those deep blue eyes of hers, but I knew they weren't as deep as the one I felt towards her.

“You are the rudest, most immature, and stupid man I'd ever seen.”

Her words laced with icy insolence replayed itself in my head and I felt that absolute disdainful shiver of anger swim through my head. To think she had the guts to step those tiny legs of hers into my company after throwing insults at me.

My brows furrowed as I squinted my eyes at her set features. There is the

inevitable truth that she is quite a beauty, if I ignored the fact that her mouth was permanently etched in a thin line as she stared at Barry Stewart and focused instead on those beautiful compelling eyes of hers. Ashley Lane was doing quite a good job of pretending that I wasn't in the room with her and that infuriated the hell out of me.

“Why do you think we should hire you, Miss. Lane?” I asked her pointedly, my eyes asking questions of my own. How the heck did she expect to get this job?

Ashley Lane's lips parted in a fake smile as she turned fiery eyes on me. “Because you need my expertise in brand strategy. The real question should be, why do you think I should work with you, Mr. Maxwell?”

My lips pursed as my still eyes devoured this woman with imminent rage. Everything she does managed to bring out some kind of unexplained anger in me. And oh my, I hated the fact that she could make me feel this way. Calm, collected and cool headedness were my attribute, not the wild, disoriented and hot-headedness this woman made me feel.

“We will get back to you, Miss. Lane,” I said, a finality to my tone that even a deaf person could hear.

Ashley didn't look like she was sad about the proceedings of the interview. If I was right, she looked as though she enjoyed it and appreciated the fact that she might not be working here. She was proud, I understood this, but if only she knew how much I pride myself over respect.

She stood up and turned to Barry. “Thank you, sir, it was nice meeting you.” She picked up her bag before she turned ferocious eyes on me. “And you, sir, Mr. Maxwell.”

There was something about the tone she used, something I couldn't identify yet but it sure didn't make me feel good. I turned a sharp glare towards Barry

who was now on his feet and walking with Ashley Lane towards the door. He soon scurried back into the room, his eyes glinting with so much joy.

“We really have to hire her, she is a smart one and I’m sure a fresh mind like hers will bring a big change to our company,” he ranted off, his dodgy eyes wavering across the place.

I could tell just what his thoughts were consisting of. Fresh mind, indeed. He just needed a fresh face to flirt with. As the thought of something occurring between the two left an unpleasant feeling in my gut, I contemplated why Barry Stewart was still my employee. Well, there was the annoying fact that he was good at what he did.

“Since when do you call the shots here, Barry?” I asked, baring my teeth at him in a smile that seemed more like a threat. “I will decide if we hire her. We have enough hands on deck as it is.”

I stormed out of the place, the whole purpose of being there in the first place defeated. I had come with the mind of meeting the young expert behind Groovy’s achievements from two years ago. A lot of people had even started calling Groovy a tech company that was setting out to be like IM and although I love seeing other people succeed, I had been more interested in how it was achieved.

So it had been a huge surprise for me when I found out that their success has been as a result of brand strategizing ideas that was brought by a creative director who was only an intern. My interest then had shifted to the intern and Barry knew how much I had wanted to bring her on board, but to think she’d even reach out to us by herself was a plus. The only thing that made this situation detestable was the annoying fact that this tiny little lady insulted me on two different occasions.

That didn’t sit well with me and somehow, I knew I couldn’t take it lightly. I’ve never taken lightly to an insult, and I wouldn’t start now.

I took off my jacket as I stepped into my office, giving a nod to the secretaries who were standing at their seats with their heads bowed in greeting. As I stepped in, my steps hesitated a bit, noticing the person sitting on my seat. The hell!

“How many times have I told you to keep your butt off my seat, Ryan McMahon?” I called out, stalking towards the figure who was now getting up and heading towards the other direction with a grin on his face. “And stop showing up in my office unannounced!”

“Hey, I wanted to surprise you, but you don’t seem to be in a good mood,” Ryan said, his smiling face peering down at me as I sat down at my desk. “Not that you’re ever in a good mood though.”

“Will you state your business and make your way out of my office?” I snapped, my eyes darting towards my computer. “I have work to do.”

“Did you bump into the wall again?” Ryan asked, chuckling. His eyes were filled with so much mischief as he looked down at me. “I told you to stop reading emails while walking.”

“Use your eyes for the road instead of your tablet. You’d bump into that pillar and the next thing you’d be doing is cursing at it, jerk!”

Her words coincided with what Ryan had always told me and it only fueled the rage I was feeling. “I met a crazy woman.”

Ryan sat himself down on the chair opposite me, looking absolutely interested. “You met a crazy woman! That’s new. All the women you meet are usually on the obedient and reserved side; what happened this time?”

“She bumped into me on two different occasions and somehow...” I trailed off, the words sounding too bitter in my throat. “...she insulted me.”

“Damn!” Ryan’s eyes grew wide with disbelief. “That’s huge, no one ever insults Ian Maxwell.” Ryan moved closer to me, shifting a pile of file aside. “But are you really sure she bumped into you or was it the other way round? You know your eyes are always glued to something in your hand.”

“Don’t you have work to do?” I questioned, my eyes squinting at the annoying dude who also happened to be my friend of twenty years. “I don’t think you’re paid to make small talk in my office, Vice-president McMahon.”

Ryan nodded, but still didn’t yield. “So where did you meet her? Is she one of our employees?”

I chuckled. “No, but coincidentally she is the creative director whose interview I sat in today.”

“You should definitely hire her,” Ryan said instantly, his grin filling up his face now. “Anyone who can call out Ian Maxwell’s bluff is always welcome in my corner. And looks like she got you quite good. Would be nice to meet her.”

“Get out!” I deadpanned, my face stern and eyes intent.

“I mean, think about it, it’s the first time any woman has made you feel any sort of emotion at all. You are usually dead when it comes to thoughts of them. So even though it is rage, I’ll take it,” Ryan explained, looking dead serious suddenly.

And somehow, I didn’t feel like admitting the fact that she had made me feel more than rage. The reason I had found her so annoying on the first day when she bumped into my car was because of the way those blue eyes of hers stared at me. They held so much emotion that affected me in ways that had never happened before, and it angered me to no end.

I shelved that particular thought aside and glared at my favorite but most

annoying human on earth. “Thought you hated my moodiness; now you want me to be outraged?”

“I’d take your outraged side over that emotionless side any day.” Ryan stood up. His grin now turned into a fully blown laugh. “I left some files on your table. You might want to sign them and send it with one of your secretaries. As you know, I’m a busy man.”

With this said, Ryan strutted out of my office, his blonde hair whipping around behind him as he walked out the door. My hands squeezed the nearest file as I mulled over everything that happened. If I leave it as is, that would mean someone somewhere had the guts to insult me and get off scot-free. Formulating a beautiful plan in my head, I gave a call to the HR manager.

“Barry, you can go ahead and hire Ashley Lane as one of our Creative Directors; we will really have a good use for her expertise.”

Barry sounded way too glad about the prospect of hiring Ashley, but I ignored it. There was an undeniable exhilarating feeling surging through my veins too as I thought of her and what I planned to do with her.

I’d make her see that Ian Maxwell wasn’t someone to be messed with. She was going to rue the day she insulted me and the day she stepped into my company. I was going to make her pay in unimaginable ways. Ashley Lane is definitely going to hate her days at IM, but I was going to enjoy it so much. I was looking forward to it.

Chapter 4

Ashley

So much for getting a well-paying job and also having a good work relationship with the boss. I scoffed, my hand pushing that far-fetched dream aside. That dude was as infuriating as he was intimidating and pretty much more annoying.

When I got home that morning, I discarded of my clothes, feeling absolutely disturbed with how the events of the day turned out. When I left the apartment this morning, I had hoped that I'd be coming home with a job and glad how well the interview turned out. I hated the fact that my day has turned out to be so unproductive.

I sat at my PC, checking out different jobs application and looking for what company to send my resume to. My mind was reeling with the events this

morning and as I scanned through my PC, it felt like I could still see those calculating green eyes watching me with hawk-like intent. It sent shivers down my spine and changed the whole course of my thoughts instantly.

And somehow, my hands must have followed my thinking because staring back at me was the homepage of Ian Maxwell. When did I type his name? It had to be the work of some kind of ghost. I thanked the ghost and checked through his page.

Who would have thought that the rude man would turn out to be the great Ian Maxwell Justin always spoke of? If only Justin knew just how obnoxious his great boss was. That doesn't nonetheless change the fact that he was great. I couldn't take away this fact because every single thing I read about him proved just how great he was.

A great business strategist, an even greater philanthropist and all these he managed to have achieved at the age of thirty-six. The fact that he started up IM Corps as a small tech company at the age of nineteen was enough to leave me in awe of the man. He had been a college student who had created an app that threw the world in a frenzy when I was still only a kindergartner.

This clearly proves that he was a one of kind man, but having had several encounters with him, I thought otherwise. I moved over to the images section. There were several images of him at different business events, meetings and there were even two images of him walking on the road with his eyes on a tablet. Looks like his bad habit was quite frequent.

That wasn't what interested me the most in everything about Ian Maxwell though. I couldn't quite wrap my mind around the fact that he has never been associated with any woman before. There were even several rumors that he might be gay and that he had some kind of romantic relationship with his best friend and vice-president of his company, Ryan McMahan.

I scoffed, closing off the PC as the realization that my stupid attraction towards the annoying man was way out of place. I remembered that sharp

feeling of arousal that had sprung through me when I had shaken his hand. Was it possible for someone who was gay to make me feel that way?

“Ashley Lane, you’ve really outdone yourself this time.” I laughed at my plight because Ian Maxwell was someone I hated, he was also thirteen years older than I am and he could be gay. Yet somehow, my stupid mind is attracted to him. It wasn’t something I could deny any longer because the mere thought of him had me feeling this weird way I couldn’t and didn’t want to understand.

I shook my head furiously, trying to shake away every thought of that man. There was no reason to keep thinking of him so much if we’re never going to meet again. I decided to resume my job hunting but was stopped when I came across an email notification. The sender of the mail had me clicking on it instantly and was quite surprised at what I saw.

“We will get back to you, Miss. Lane.”

The way his deadpan voice had said this particular sentence and the way his eyes had remained impassive had clearly given out the message that I wouldn’t get hired and I had been quite content with that fact. How then do I explain this surprising news that I just got hired as one of the creative directors at IM Corps?

Maybe he realized my expertise was much more needed than his anger towards me. As much as I found the thought of my indispensability amusing, I was going to reject this job offer. No way in hell was I going to work for a man that annoying and somehow keep my sanity. I needed to retain my sanity to enjoy the rest of my life.

Justin didn’t seem to like my idea though and he made this fact known the moment I told him this when he got back from work. “I know you’ve made up your mind and it's quite hard to change your mind when it’s already made up, but I have to say, you’re losing an opportunity of a lifetime here.”

“I can always get another job. I’m good at what I do,” I stated, still standing on my previous decision.

“And when will that be?” Justin asked. He was looking at me in the way he usually does whenever he thought I was doing something reckless. “You might want to deny it, but most companies wouldn’t hire a twenty-three-year-old as a creative director; you’d have to start as a creative assistant even though your expertise has been proven.”

“Look, I can always work my way up the ladder. Don’t make it sound like IM is the only option I have,” I snapped, getting quite offended.

“Oh really?” Justin chuckled. His face filled with a seriousness that didn’t match his laughter. “Any creative director you work under will not appreciate you pitching in ideas; they will believe you’re after their position. And even when your idea is used, it will be called that creative director’s work and you won’t be acknowledged. Tell me, how on earth do you expect to work your way up the ladder? Walk straight to the CEO’s office and tell him about how you have countless ideas but they keep getting stolen? You can’t do that! And that’s a bye-bye to that dream of getting a well-paying job.”

I grew silent as his words hit me. I couldn’t deny the fact that he was right. The field I specialized in was a very competitive one and there were people who have been doing it for years and haven’t moved anywhere.

“But there is a possibility that one could hire me as a creative director,” I said, stubbornly.

Justin rolled his eyes. “Yeah, there is. A start-up company. Go ahead if that’s what you want.”

I fumed as I folded my arms across my chest, realizing my lack of options.

Justin put his hand on my shoulder. “You can’t throw this opportunity away

because the CEO is a rude punk as you put it. Your job will rarely bring you around him, that's the CCO's job. Only if you're promoted to the position of the CCO though and that's aiming pretty high at this age."

As usual, Justin was right. This reminded me of how we'd always been. Whenever I was about to make a rash decision, Justin has always been the one to help me reorganize my thoughts and not do things in anger. Looks like he was still doing so.

I smiled at him. "You are right! I shouldn't lose an opportunity because of some rude..."

"Maybe you are the rude one, Ashley," Justin interrupted me immediately. "You know you have that razor sharp mouth, so you shouldn't fault Ian Maxwell."

I huffed as I pulled him by the hair, shaking him. "You've been bewitched by those stupid green eyes."

Justin laughed, swatting my hand off. "You mean like you?"

"What!"

"This is it, Ashley Lane," Justin said, sighing heavily. "The hands of mother fate is at work. This is the beginning of your destiny."

He laughed out loud when he saw my dumbfounded face. "I mean what kind of coincidence brings you to your future CEO's radar three different times before you even start your work? If it isn't fate, tell me..."

"Say one more thing about fate and I assure you, you won't have legs to go on that date of yours," I said in a flat tone, my eyes daring Justin to say anymore.

Justin raised his hands up as he backed out of the sitting room. “Coincidence, it is.”

Having made up my mind, I read through the rest of the email and found out that I’ve been asked to show at the HR department tomorrow to finalize the rest of my employment details. It was a no-reply email, so I didn’t bother with one and just sat back on the couch, wondering what to make of how my life was turning now.

Well as Justin said, my work wouldn’t exactly bring me under the radar of the CEO; I was under the CCO, who is the one that communicates all of our works to the higher ups. Looks like things might be really looking up for me.

The next day, I showed up at the HR department to meet with the overenthusiastic Barry Stewart once again. We discussed my responsibilities, whom I’d be working under, then finally the pay. The pay that I was offered was really huge and this had me surprised, but somehow, Barry mistook my stupefied state for disapproval and increased the amount by another 10%.

By the time I left the office with my employee guidelines book in hand, I was still so shocked that everything felt so surreal. Looks like the universe was finally smiling down on me; my dead parents must be working wonders up there.

I was so elated with how things had progressed and even more happy after reading through the employee guidelines book and found out that I mostly had no business even appearing before the CEO unless my ideas were chosen and I needed to present it to them. I knew times like this will come but there would be a long desk between us. This was definitely a dream come true.

Chapter 5

Ashley

I took in a deep breath and walked towards the office of Simone Jacobs, the CCO, armed with a copy of the revised proposal. This is the tenth revision I've made on this proposal and yet I had a feeling that it was also going to be rejected. I knew this because it was obvious whoever was rejecting my proposals was getting a good kick out of making me feel so incompetent.

It's been two hellishly beautiful months at IM Corps. Hellish because the first project I was put on was rejected with a note to revise and resubmit from the CEO, who didn't drop any further information on what was wrong with it. And ever since then, I've been working on this same proposal. Simone keeps saying the whole idea was good and couldn't understand why Ian keeps rejecting it, but I could already tell why. This was his way of retaliating.

And that was where the beautiful part of my work here came in. The pay was good. Even though I felt underutilized because none of my ideas have been put into action while all other directors were working on one thing or the other, the pay here for these past two months was enough to get me my own apartment and I couldn't be any happier.

Happy but hateful of the fact that the other directors were beginning to look at me like an incompetent child. That made it worse since I was the youngest. Every other creative director here was almost ten years older than I am and they seemed to hate me for that fact. There were even rumors going around among the creative assistants about me only getting into the company through nepotism.

I despised how things were turning out too and wished there was a way to shove my heels down the throat of Ian Maxwell, but just as I had wished, I haven't seen him since I started work here. Frankly, I had no business seeing him and I should be happy about it, but I wanted to find him and demand why he derived so much joy in punishing me this way.

Even I couldn't deny the fact that this was a childish but classic way of extracting revenge. Power abuse at its finest.

Simone beckoned me to come in when I knocked on her door. She glanced up from her desktop, her slightly wrinkled eyes smiling at me. I knew she liked me and somehow treated me as though I was her own daughter, and I respected her dearly because of her demeanor and achievements. She was one of the first employees to ever work at IM Corps. She had been a young woman who had trusted her whole career into the hands of a boy who was ten years her junior. Well, look where that got her, one of the highest paid CCO in the US, and I wanted to be like her.

"I believe that's another revised proposal, Ashley," Simone said as I stepped foot into her large office. She stared up from her desktop.

"Yes..." I nodded, my hands circling the rim of the file before I dropped it on

her desk.

Simone picked it up and flipped through it. “It’s a fresh and beautiful idea and I can’t for the life of me understand why the first one was rejected because that looked like the best one to me.”

“Beats me too,” I muttered underneath my breath before I looked up and smiled. “Thank you, Simone.”

She passed the file back to me. “I think you should take this to the CEO yourself.”

“What!” I yelled, my ears perking up before I recollected my tone and said in a sweet voice, “But why, Simone?”

“Maybe he’d provide a reason to you on why it’s being rejected, in case he does reject it,” she explained before she resumed what she had been doing before I came in. “That’s it, off you go.”

I knew she expected me to be on my way, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to face that man. I needed to figure out how not to split his head into two when I see him because I needed to keep that paycheck. I nonetheless made my way to the CEO’s office. All through the elevator ride, I tried my best to keep calm and prayed that he would accept this proposal.

The main office area of the IM Corps headquarters was just as I had expected it to be, endless halls filled with secretaries stationed at almost every entrance. When I finally made it to the CEO’S office, I met with two secretaries seated at the large reception. One of them was quick to question my intention.

“I’m Ashley Lane from the strategic planning department, here on behalf of Simone,” I spelled out to the blonde lady who had questioned me. I read her name tag as Leslie Bryant.

Leslie picked up a phone. “Ashley Lane from the strategic planning department is here. Okay, sir.” She dropped the telephone and stood up from her seat. “Come with me, Ashley.”

I followed her, knowing that this was it., There was no going back. I was going to face that tyrannical, rude jerk again and somehow, I had to keep my tongue in check. Leslie stopped at the huge black double doors and knocked on the door before pushing it open slowly and ushering me in.

I held my breath for a moment as I stepped into the dark abode of Ian Maxwell. The office was dark and brooding just like the man itself. Everything inside it was black, from the furniture to the window blinds, even up to the little flower vase on the equally dark center table in between the couches. The flowers that were supposed to have lightened the atmosphere were black in color. The only splash of color in the room were the silver irons on some of the furniture and the glass that made up the wall behind the dark oak desk.

The whole place felt intimidating, but definitely not as intimidating as the man seated behind that huge desk. He was dressed in a dark shirt, an equally black tie on his neck. His dark hair was slicked back as usual, leaving his well structure well-structured face for my eyes to feast on.

He raised his head up and pinned me with a dazzling gaze, successfully flushing every memory of the job I had come here to do. Does he really have to be so handsome? And do I really have to be attracted to such a man?

“How may I help you, Miss Lane?” he asked, facing his computer once again.

“I am here to submit the revised proposal.” I managed to find my voice and also managed to beat down any form of anger in it.

“Ohh, about that,” he said, his eyes still on the computer he had been working

on. He didn't even spare me a glance anymore or try to take the proposal from my hand. "I was going to send word to Simone and ask you to start work on the first proposal you submitted. Turns out it was the best of the bunch."

My head sparked up with immediate anger but somehow, I managed to keep my tone even as I spoke to him. "Do you mean the first proposal I submitted almost two months ago?"

"Yes, any problem with that?" Ian raised an icy glare at me, daring and taunting me to find fault in what he was doing. I could see that sick joy in his storm clouded eyes as he stared at me.

"None, sir," I lied, my hand tightening into a fist as I fought back the urge to call him out.

"Okay, then, you are dismissed."

I don't know what made me angrier, his dismissive tone or the fact that he had put me through two months of hell only to choose the first idea I had submitted. I had even started to doubt my own abilities even though I used to have unwavering trust in them.

"If I may ask, sir, why did you reject the proposal in the first place if you'd end up choosing it?" Although, I could tell he had no valid reason for what he had done, I wanted to know what he'd say.

"I'm not sure why I rejected it then. You're dismissed." he said as he turned towards his computer once again.

"*Stupid, egoistic, obnoxious, savage.*" I ranted in my head. If only I wasn't crippled by the fact that this was a well-paying job, I would have cracked his skull into two by now.

A knock from his door brought me out of my boiling wrath. I turned towards the door to see Leslie step into the office again. “You have a lunch meeting with Mr. Beckham, a representative from London, Mr. Maxwell.”

Ian glanced up and nodded. “I’m aware.”

“Would you like me to come with you, sir?”

“Never mind, Leslie, that will not be needed,” he said, waving a dismissive hand towards the woman, who left briskly. He cocked a brow at me. “You are still here.”

He stood up from his seat and walked towards his coat stand to pick up a wine suit jacket, which he donned on smoothly. I watched him while fuming with anger, my fingers piercing into the palm of my hand.

“Why don’t you escort me to this lunch meeting since you’ve refused to leave my office?” He turned to me, buttoning up his suit. “Drop that proposal on my desk and come with me.”

It was after he said this that the turn of the situation registered itself in my brain. “What!”

“Let’s go,” he snapped, heading out of the office.

I couldn’t even tell what made me move, the command in his tone or the fact that he was my boss. I dropped the proposal on his desk as he asked and smoothed my hand across my suit pants as I followed him out of his office. This was turning out to be a very annoying day.

“I can feel you glaring holes staring at me, Ashley,” Ian Maxwell said halfway into our drive, his eyes on his tablet. No wonder he couldn’t drive himself anywhere, he’d definitely get into an accident with his eyes always on that device. “State your business.”

“Why do I have to follow you to this lunch meeting?” I asked, even though it was far too late. I blamed myself for going out of function when he had ushered me out of his office.

“Because someone has to take notes. You weren’t expecting me to do that, were you?” he replied in a straight tone, still not glancing at me.

“But that’s not my job to do; you have assistants for that,” I ranted, almost yelling.

He scoffed. “Not like you’ve been doing your job so well.”

“Well, that’s what I don’t understand. Why would you reject that proposal in the first place when you were going to accept it at the end? Why would you put me through such endless torture?” I blurted it all out, unable to keep it in. That wasn’t me, I couldn’t pretend for too long.

“Because I can,” he said in a flat tone, his eyes still glued to that stupid thing in his hand.

“Stupid jerk!” I muttered to myself, looking away, but to my surprise, he heard me.

“I heard that.” His green eyes were blazing fire as he turned around to face me.

The close proximity of him was driving me crazy, but him adding this sultry insult made it more difficult to hold my anger.

I faked an innocent look, blinking rapidly. “What? I didn’t say anything...”

Luckily for me, the car came to a halt, and I quickly hopped out of the car with a mental note to keep my mouth in check around Ian. And somehow, I

managed to keep to that promise all through the lunch meeting. I did my best to take down notes for the infuriating man even though it was not my job, but I could already tell that this was another way of frustrating the hell out of me. I just hope that one day I don't throw all my cautions in the air and shove his job back into his face.

Chapter 6

Ashley

The weekends were turning out to be my favorite time and I was looking forward to this Saturday. I've never really considered weekends to be that special, but ever since I started to work at IM Corps, I've gotten to realize just how beautiful the whole idea of having weekends was. Whoever invented weekends deserves a medal. After a stressful week of working on the ideas that were rejected one after another only to find out the first idea was perfectly fine, it was nice to have a day where I wasn't cooped up in an office with two assistants who would rather be anywhere but there.

I had a lunch date with Justin and Jenny today, which added to my excitement. Justin had left the apartment earlier to pick up Jenny to the restaurant and I am to meet them there. I really appreciate how Justin makes time to help me with my problems even though he has a ton of work as one of the core engineers. He is always striving to perfect his designs. So when I

heard about Jenny, I was so happy for Justin. His face lit up whenever he talked about Jenny.

It feels nice being able to rant to Justin and tell him all the things his perfect role model has been doing to me. I mean, it was time he realized that Ian Maxwell was a devil in human's clothing.

One last glance at my appearance and I confirmed that I was set. I brushed my hair out with my fingers and tucked a few behind my ear as I walked out of the apartment. I checked the text message from Justin confirmed where we were supposed to meet again, and after double checking the address, I called a cab and headed for the restaurant, Maschil.

I met Justin right outside the restaurant. He rolled his eyes playfully, smacked me on the arm, and said, "What took you so long?"

I smiled as I placed my hand on my arm, pretending like his smacking had hurt a lot, and said "I was hoping to give you lovebirds a head start. Is that so bad?" I looked around to find Jenny. "Where is she?"

"Hello."

I turned around and smiled to find a pretty, petite lady beside me. She had curly dark hair that was placed neatly on her head in a ponytail and light brown eyes that looked perfect on her slim face.

"Hi, you must be Jenny," I said, my hand outstretched towards her. "I'm Ashley."

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Ashley." Jenny accepted my hand and pulled me into a comfortable hug. "I've heard so much about you."

"All good things, right? ," I said to Justin as I pulled out from the hug with Jenny.

“Nope, all horrible stuff.” Justin joked, chuckling a bit as his hand settled around Jenny, leading her in.

I chuckled to myself, following them in, already looking forward to how the day was going to turn out. And maybe that’s where my mistake was. Looking forward to this lunch with my friends. Only a few minutes after setting in the restaurant, I received an annoying call.,

I sighed, staring at the caller ID, wondering why June Lawson, one of the creative assistants working for me is calling. I picked up the call, nonetheless. “Hello, June.”

“Ashley,” her voice sounding panicky and fretful.

“Hello, what’s the matter?” I asked, my brows already scrunching up in displeasure.

I heard her sigh. “I think there’s a big problem...I-I...”

Her stuttering nearly threw me in a fit of anger. “Will you calm down and speak clearly.”

“I deleted all the files on the project mistakenly,” June blurted out in a hurry.

“What!” I snapped, unable to believe nor comprehend what I was hearing.

“I’m sorry, but I think you need to come to the office now, Ian wants to see you,” June added, her shaky voice growing firmer.

I cursed as I hung up and stared at Justin and Jenny with bleak eyes. “I’m sorry but...”

“You need to go, right?” Justin interrupted me, a look of understanding

settling on his face. “Is it a work emergency?”

I took in a calming breathe, wishing things would just turn out differently. “Yes. I’m sorry about this, Jenny.”

“It’s fine, Ashley, it can’t be helped. You should go,” she said, giving me an encouraging smile.

Feeling a little at ease, I stood up and hurried out of the restaurant, muttering curses to myself. . I hoped June was mistaken and the files were still there. , because there was no way I was going to accept losing two months of work. Even if it was a June’s mistake, I would take the blame since I’m supposed to be in charge.

Fortunately for me, it turned out that June had been lying and there was no sort of emergency for me to run to. She stared at me with pleading eyes the moment she saw me run into the office. She was breathing heavily and bit her bottom lip before she told me she had lied.

“What! Why would you do that?” I yelled before I could even bring myself to stop.

“Leslie from the CEO’s office made a call to our department and since I was the only one in, I picked it up,” she started explaining herself and I made sure to listen carefully without asking her what she had been doing in the office on a weekend. “She told me to make sure you were in the office within thirty minutes and come up with any emergency situation that would get you here faster.”

I squinted my eyes at her. “So there is no emergency? The files are still there?”

“Yeah, but I believe Ian wants to see you.” June smiled sheepishly, her eyes sending a hundred apologies. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, June,” I said even though it was obviously not fine. Well, I couldn’t be mad at her, she couldn’t have said no to her boss. I flipped my hair back and headed towards the main office. A certain CEO has some explaining to do.

Leslie was the only secretary there when I arrived at the main office. Her face instantly shone with relief the moment she saw me hurrying into the place.

“Thank goodness!” She exclaimed, leading me towards the door. She knocked on the door before she pulled it open and motioned for me to go in.

I didn’t need to be told twice. I stormed into the office, my anger mounting higher by the minute. I paused and took in a calming breath. Then I saw him turning to face me from the glass wall he had been staring through. My eyes roamed across his firm body clad in black pants and black shirt. I wondered if black was the only color he could wear.

“Come in, Ashley.” He said in a low tone.

I reached for my hair, pulling it over my shoulders, “Good day, Ian. Is there anything you needed me for?”

He smirked. “As a matter of fact, yes. I want you to attend a lunch meeting with me.”

I fought back an angry retort but somehow my next words managed to come out harsh. “But it’s the weekend and I’m not your personal assistant.”

“Well, if you have the time to go on dates, you should be able to sacrifice some time for the company that has been paying you to laze about.” He said, “Let me guess, your boyfriend would be mad if you’re working on the weekend.”

I started to wonder why he made the statement like that. *Why does he care*

what I do during the weekend, anyways? How much of a nutcase was this guy really?

“Did you call me to work on a weekend because I am trying to enjoy my life and get away from work for a while?”

“ Watch your tone, Ashley!” He warned, his eyes blazing towards me, but he wasn’t the only angry one here.

“I will take whatever tone I want with you, Ian!” I snapped, my anger a burning lava in my vein. If I have to put up with his antics anymore, I might go crazy. “You’re the one being unprofessional, you faked an emergency to call me in to prevent from enjoying my weekend with my friends!”

Ian Maxwell stepped towards me which automatically had me stepping back a little. He stopped right in front of me and bent towards my height, his hand falling on my shoulder. I felt instant sparks shoot from that spot and right through my body and this led to a sharp gasp from me as my body shook lightly under his hand.

He moved close and said , “I don’t remember giving you the permission to use my first name, Ms. Ashley Lane.”

I gulped, trying to convince myself that whatever feeling was running wild through my body at this moment was as a result of my anger and nothing else. There was no way the sound of my name from him had this much effect on me. “I don’t remember doing the same either, Ian Maxwell.”

I didn’t expect what followed. Ian Maxwell burst out in laughter, throwing his head back as he did so. I watched him with mouth agape as I wondered what was so funny and wished the sound of his laughter didn’t sound so beautiful.

What was wrong with me? I had to be crazy, there was no other way of

classifying this.

“I was right about you, Ashley, you’re crazy” he said bluntly., His green eyes staring right into my face. He walked towards his desk and placed his hands on it.

He sounded a little confused and so was I. Never in my life has anyone ever treated me the way this brute has and I hated him with all my gut. But for some inconceivable reason I wanted to hear him laugh again or I wanted to feel his hand.

I loved the feel of his hand on my shoulder, the way he said my name, the feeling of being close to him, and the way his eyes stared me as though he could see my deepest desires for him.

I took in a calming breath and said, “Nothing makes sense because I was right about you being a crazy asshole!”

Ian Maxwell laughed once again, but this time it wasn’t that free hearted laughter I had heard before. It was a dark kind. “I’m going to make you regret ever insulting me, Ashley Lane.”

I knew that he did not make idle threats, but at this point, I didn’t care. I was done with him. “You can try all you want!” I flipped my hair and stormed out of his office.

I was done with this crazy CEO and his stupid job. As I stepped out and headed out from Ian’s office, I passed a man that looked a lot like Ryan McMahon, but I was in no mood to find out. I was done with everything IM Corps and by the time I arrived home, I made this known to Justin while on call with him.

I was hoping Justin will accept my decision, but I had been greatly wrong. Justin remained on the fact that I could have reacted some other way and

leaving my job wouldn't be such a great idea when I don't have another job lined up yet. He advised me to stay put for a few more months, but that is because he wasn't aware of the fact that I had insulted his great Ian Maxwell right to his face again. I couldn't bring myself to say such a thing.

"Believe me, Ian wouldn't keep up this charade for long. I think you should just apologize for insulting him back then," Justin said calmly. If only I was a lot more like Justin.

"Yeah, you are right, I should do that," I said, grating my teeth.

"It's all good since you didn't say anything to him this time around and just left," Justin added, a slight questioning tone in his voice. I just knew he didn't believe my claim. "You didn't insult him again, or did you?"

I laughed, lying . "Of course, I'm not stupid enough to insult my boss again."

"Nothing makes sense because I was right about you being a crazy asshole!"

I cringed as I recollected my own words. Great, Ashley. That's bye-bye to your well-paying job, isn't it? I should just issue myself a sack letter already instead of going to work on Monday.

"How about I drive you to work on Monday, maybe seeing my face would brighten your mood." Justin sounded chirpy , ruining my plan to avoid work.

"Yeah, that would be great, Justin, thanks." We said our goodbyes and I hung up, my whole head ringing with everything that was happening around me.

"I'm going to make you regret ever insulting me, Ashley Lane."

His words rang through my head once again, sending the exact shivers it had caused while I was in his office. Damn it, I wanted out of his craziness, but I

could already tell that I had a long way to go with him.

Chapter 7

Ian

“You can try all you want!”

Her words hung in the air after she left. If only she knew what I planned for her. She infuriated me to no end for several reasons that were beyond her comprehension. I don't know why I have no control over emotions when it comes to Ashley.

Somehow, I wanted to blame her for manipulating my emotions. But I knew the blame wasn't solely hers. I was attracted to this fiery woman no doubt, but she also enraged me immensely. I wonder if I am blaming her things that clearly weren't her fault.

“I don't remember doing the same either, Ian Maxwell.”

Her sultry voice, the way my name had sounded, and the way her blue eyes compelled me with emotions that were beyond my power. I despised the way in which women trap men. Using their charms and youthful vibrancy to achieve their aims, and Ashley did just that. Her being so young was another reason why I felt this way about her. It seems like I have no control over my own emotions anymore.

I've done well for myself these past years by steering clear of women and anything to do with them, and it was my plan to continue this way for the rest of my life.

This great plan of mine didn't look possible anymore, and that filled me with a fear of unknown, the fear that transformed directly into rage.

“Why do you look so out of it? And who was that firecracker that just walked out of here?”

I heard Ryan's smooth voice before I saw him standing right in front of me. When did he get here? And how come I was still standing this way? I ran a hand through my hair, walking towards one of the couches and sat on it. Ryan sat not too far away from me with his grey eyes on me.

“Let me guess, that firecracker is the crazy woman you spoke about, right?” Ryan asked, sounding absolutely thrilled. “She is a beauty, no wonder she has you twisted up in knots.”

I sent him a glare, daring him to say one more word about Ashley, but knowing Ryan, he was going to say more. “Not exactly a beauty, I'd say.”

“Even your mouth knows you're lying.” Ryan chuckled, stretching his long legs out. “So tell me, what was your firecracker doing here on a weekend?”

My firecracker. As annoying as it sounded to me, I kind of liked it. “I called her to work.”

“You called her to work? Why did you call her to work on a weekend?” Ryan asked, looking as confused as I felt.

I couldn't even pinpoint the exact reason I had called her to the office and didn't even know how to justify it at the moment. All I knew is that I had been filled with so much anger when I saw her in front of Maschil, hugging some man who looked oddly familiar. She looked so beautiful in that blue dress that reflected those beautiful blue eyes of hers. Why would she be going on a date when the company...

I stopped my train of thought, knowing well that the company had absolutely nothing to do with this. I had wanted to take her away from that man's presence regardless of whether he was her boyfriend or something else.

“Cats got your tongue!” Ryan said, waving a hand in front of my face. “And it looks like someone's got more than your tongue.”

“She's crazy, Ryan, and she infuriates the hell out of me,” I explained, placing a hand under my chin in thought.

Ryan seemed to find my situation amusing. He chuckled, His eyes glinting with excitement. “Why, Ian? Is it because she makes you feel like doing things you already swore off?”

My eyes narrowed as my face grew quizzical. I wanted to ask Ryan how he could tell just what was going on with this lady in my head, and I didn't want to admit he was right.

“ What do you mean by that? What do you think she is making me feel?” I asked instead of providing an answer to his dumb question.

Ryan raised a brow, his upper lip slightly raised in a smirk. “Seeing how defensive you are, then I must be right!”

“All she is capable of making me feel is anger, and you are well aware of this fact.” I stated.

“No, I’m not,” Ryan denied immediately. “It’s not the first time a woman behaved annoyingly , but you always ignore it and most times you have no recollection of such women. When did you grow the ability to conjure up emotions like anger towards a woman? It’s obvious this anger of yours stems from a much deeper feeling you’re not ready to accept.”

I gave a dry chuckle, clasping my hands together above my knees. Ryan McMahon never ceases to amaze me with his words, actions and thinking. “Must be nice to act all knowing. State your business and get out of my office.”

Ryan laughed, throwing his head back a little. “You always do this whenever I hit the nail right on the head.” He scoffed, then crossed his legs. “Well, I was just here to let you know that the team picked the UNIQUE theme submitted by Ashley Lane for the London project. They believe it will be the best option, and it would give us a bigger advantage at winning all potential investors over.”

I grunted, wishing they had chosen any other theme but Ashley’s. I couldn’t deny the fact that her idea was great and that she was a great employee but having her project at the forefront makes things tougher for me. Or maybe not. Her idea getting picked means she gets to go on that trip to London with me. I might be able to torture her a bit, or maybe it would be the other way around. She would torture me knowing how much I’m attracted to her.

“What’s with the disgruntled look?” Ryan asked, sounding skeptical. “Don’t you like it? You also said it was the best.”

“*The firecracker is Ashley Lane*” I thought to myself, wishing I wasn’t so displeased by having such an amazing employee.

Ryan laughed but this time he laughed harder than usual, his hand holding his stomach as he doubled bent over, reaching out to the arm of his couch for support. “Ohh, I love this firecracker of yours. She makes it hard for you to even do away with her. Your business trip to London is going to be so beautiful.”

“Get out!” I snapped. My hand pointing towards the door, wishing there was a faster way to do away with this human.

“ Alright, I will.” Ryan stood up, straightening out his sky-blue shirt. “I should probably get to know this Ashley better. She might become my new best friend.”

“Stay away from her, Ryan!” I snapped even before I could stop myself. My nails were pressing deep into the leather couch.

“Why?” Ryan asked instantly, a coy look on his face.

I wanted to know why too, and I asked myself but came up short I couldn't think of any answer except the one I couldn't admit. I didn't want Ryan getting close to Ashley. I sat back down, clearing my throat. “Just stay away from Ashley , Ryan.”

Ryan snickered, waving a hand my way as he started walking out of my office. “Of course, I will, Ian.”

I let out a breath. I didn't even know that I'd been holding a breath until Ryan left. I rubbed my hand over my face, wondering why things were getting so out of control. Calm and collected was my nature, not this hot-tempered man Ashley had turned me into. At the same time. I can't deny the sick joy I derived from knowing that she was working her brain off trying to create new proposal when I already accepted her first one a long time ago. I wasn't someone to be messed with and I needed to prove that to her.

My hands went beneath my head, holding my head it up as I relaxed and stretched my legs over the center table. I was curious as to what Ashley Lane was going to do after the insolent boldness she had shown today. I wanted to know if she'd come to work on Monday. Any normal person would be scared to death, knowing they could potentially be fired and wouldn't come to the workplace anymore. But I could already tell that Ashley wasn't so normal. So I wouldn't be completely surprised if she did show up.

Chapter 8

Ashley

Monday arrived faster than I wanted it to, much to my distress, and despite knowing that I was almost certainly fired. I dressed up for work and waited for Justin to get ready. We drive to work while listening to our favorite music and singing along. I could have used the car ride to tell Justin that I could already be fired because I had insulted my boss once again, but I didn't. I just pretended everything was okay.

I knew Justin wouldn't be so happy with me being fired and he would start worrying himself trying to help me search for a new job. I didn't want to disturb him anymore because he's already done enough for me. So my plan was to pretend everything was fine and take a taxi back to my place after Justin dropped me off. And somehow, I'd have to keep pretending I was still working at IM Corps until I get a new job, that way telling him I lost my job would be easier.

I had some money saved up and I knew I wouldn't be penniless for the next couple of months, but then I'd have to find a new job before the money runs out.

Getting to IM Corps that morning, I discovered that Justin didn't believe my lie as he offered to walk me to my department, stating that he wanted to see my workspace and meet my assistants. I made a couple lame excuses about being busy which Justin quickly brushed aside.

As we neared the strategic planning department, I thought of coming clean and telling him the truth, lying to Justin never really turned out well to begin with because he could always tell I'm lying. That's why I never lie to Justin Andrews. He always makes sure to prove it to me that I was lying by debunking it. Instead of letting that happen this time around, I stopped walking and turned to him, but it looked like the universe was in my favor this morning because June came to my rescue.

"Good morning, Ashley," she said, her voice sounding excited.

"Morning, June," I said, praying she wasn't here with news of Simone wanting to see me.

"Have you heard the news?" June piped up happily and my heart nearly flew out of my chest. "They want to move forward with your UNIQUE theme for the London project."

"What!" I asked, blinking twice because I wasn't sure I had heard it right. "It was?"

"Yes, the whole office buzzing with the news, you should come in," June said, strutting into the doors, a skip to her steps.

I heard Justin sigh in relief. "You know, I actually was worried you got fired and were trying to hide it from me."

I scoffed, pretending to be shocked and outraged . “What? Why would I get fired? What are you talking about?”

Justin raised his eyebrows as he looked at me in a way that told me he wasn't falling for my mock outrage. . “Somehow I didn't believe you when you said you didn't insult Ian on Saturday.”

I gave a wry chuckle, hitting him lightly with my elbow. “Don't be silly, you should trust me more.”

Justin huffed and turned on his heels. “Sure .”

I sighed in relief, wondering what had happened. I was curious and a little scared. I wondered if there was something bigger planned for me, I knew I couldn't trust any decision made by Ian Maxwell. He hated my guts and he already promised to make me regret ever insulting him. Was this part of his plan to make me pay?

I was nowhere near as happy as the three creative assistants working with me who were overjoyed to finally get the work approved and even chosen for a major project, while I brooded on the fact that I might have gotten myself into an even bigger evil plot.

Simone was quick to let me know about an upcoming presentation to the CEO and the board of directors and how well I should be prepared for it. I left her office with conflicting emotions, but when I finally sat back in my desk and stared at the proposal on my desk, I knew I wasn't going to let some grown man with a six-year-old tantrum get to me.

I worked on perfecting the proposal and worked on the perfect presentation slides with June and Steve. I read through my market survey research paper once again to be sure I had reflected all of my findings in the proposal and I haven't left any important aspect out in the proposal.

I stayed cooped up working in my office well into the afternoon, and I didn't even realize when it was time for lunch. June made me aware of this and I asked them to go ahead without me. I continued with what I had been doing, my gaze reviewing the spreadsheet and designs on my desk. I had been so engrossed in what I was doing that I didn't even hear the raspy knock on my office door or the sound of the person's footsteps when he walked into my office.

"You seem to be busy."

I was startled, both because it was a stranger's voice and it was so close to me. I jerked up, letting out a loud yelp. I raised quizzical eyes up to find an absolutely gorgeous sight: a blonde-haired man with the dreamy grey eyes and a beautiful smile that could melt the hardest of heart.

My brows furrowed as I stared up at him, wondering where I knew him from because he looked oddly familiar. Then my eyes grew wide with recognition as it clicked into my head. I stood up. "Mr. McMahan, good day, sir."

He smiled. "Now I understand why Moody is so obsessed."

"What?" I asked, confused. It was at this instant I began to wonder if everyone around Ian Maxwell was as crazy as he was.

"Never mind." Ryan waved me off. "I was hoping I could steal you out for lunch."

"What!" My eyes watched the smiling man, questions churning inside me of their own free will.

He chuckled, taking in my stupefied state. "I promise you. Moody wouldn't mind."

"Who's Moody?" I asked, a heavy indication of confusion in my tone.

Ryan winked at me. “Don’t tell me you don’t know our dear Moody; he’s always glued to his tablet.”

“Oh.” Realization set in more ways than one. Aside from realizing who he was referring to as Moody, I was also convinced that Ryan was a part of Ian Maxwell’s plan. “I think Asshole suits him better.”

“Ouch!” He touched his heart, faking a look of hurt before laughing. “Well, I guess I can’t deny your comment. So about lunch?”

I blinked, glancing over at the unfinished work piled on my desk. “I’m kind of still busy. Why do you want to have lunch with me though?”

Ryan wore a thoughtful look before he grinned. “Because we have a mutual friend.”

“He is not my friend!” I snapped, forgetting just who I was talking to once again.

“You really are his firecracker,” he said, folding his arms across his chest.

My ears perked up at the words. *His firecracker*. The whole idea left a bittersweet feeling in my belly. I hated it and at the same time, I found it a little exhilarating. I had to be crazy.

“Did Ian send you to torture me, Mr. McMahon?” I asked, also crossing my arms.

“No, he’d kill me if he knew I was here. He specifically warned me to stay away from you.” Ryan laughed.

I wondered why Ian would warn him to stay away from me. *Did he actually think I was crazy?* That had to be the reason, he was trying to protect his

friend from me.

“By the way you can just call me Ryan, and I will call you Ashley in return, Good?” He stretched his hand towards me in a handshake.

“Good” I accepted his handshake, a smile settling on my face. I wondered why a certain someone wasn’t more like his friend and wondered why Ryan was even friends with someone like that him since they seemed to be polar opposites. One was the lord of the dark, with his dark hair and dark clothing while the other was the angel of the light with his blonde hair and light-colored clothing and much sunnier attitudes.

“So lunch? I bet you this work of yours won’t run off,” Ryan said lightly.

Frankly, I knew this was a bad idea. Although it was just lunch, but it’s a lunch with the vice president of the company in this department where I’m rumored to have gotten the job through nepotism. I could already tell what manner of rumors would spring up after this, especially because my work was suddenly getting picked for a major project. A feat that was hard for even the older employees who have been working here for years to achieve. At this point, I couldn’t care less though. Ryan seemed like a nice person, and it was obvious his main purpose for coming here was to rile Ian Maxwell up. Anything to get that Moody grumpier is something I love to participate in.

“Okay.” I closed the files I had been working with and slipped on my jacket. “Let’s go.”

“Ladies first.” Ryan motioned towards the door, a bright smile on his face which had my heart doing a quick flip.

I could already tell that this man knew his way well around the ladies. He was effortlessly smooth. Makes one wonder why some people just chose to develop the worst kind of manners.

We headed out to lunch, and I was glad that Ryan hadn't intended to go to the staff's cafeteria. He drove us to a nearby restaurant. Through lunch, I got to know Ryan more than I expected. Ryan was a very interesting guy. He seemed to find everything his best friend does hilarious and had a good laugh when I explained to him how Moody and I met to him.

He wasn't so surprised about my side of the story and mentioned that he'd constantly warned Ian to stop reading emails while walking.

I was really glad I had agreed to come for this lunch because talking to Ryan about Ian Maxwell oddly put me at ease.

"How did you even end up being friends with someone like him?" I blurted out, deep into our conversation.

Ryan smiled. "You know, everything you say about Ian is right, but he isn't all that bad."

"What do you mean he is not all that bad?" I questioned Ryan finding it odd. I chalked it up to him trying to defend his friend. "He is so rude, wrathful and unchanging."

"With you at least." Ryan said, and I couldn't for the life of me understand what he was trying to imply.

"He is usually very calm and doesn't show such impulsive emotions like anger. But for some reason he does when he's around you.

"Why? Did he take my insult so badly?"

Ryan shrugged. "That's something for you to figure out." He smiled, reaching a hand out to pat mine. "I'm just glad for this change. At least he gets be more human thanks to you."

“...he gets to be more human thanks to you.”

I was left wondering what those words meant even hours after I got back from my lunch with Ryan. I found it hard to concentrate on work after this and instead, I thought about the fact that Ian Maxwell was ever angry only when it came to me. I wanted to know why he felt that way, but I just couldn't think of a logical reason. So I gave up on it and tried to concentrate on work hoping to put Ian out of my mind.

Chapter 9

Ashley

My eyes are beginning to grow weary; my gaze has been on my screen for so long that I am starting to have a migraine. I reach out for the bottle of water on my table and take a few gulps, I need to stay hydrated.

Developing my project plan is becoming harder than I thought it would be. Beside my desk was a bin filled with dozens of torn sheets, sheets containing some rough drafts that I have made so far. I have been on this for hours and I am just beginning to get all the pieces together. *It needs to be perfect! I won't have that jerk ridiculing me just for his amusement, hell no!*

“Hey Ashley, you should get some rest. It's 5pm already.” a knowing voice draws me back from my thoughts. It was June peering at my computer screen like she is scrutinizing my proposal for errors.

"This looks really good." She says, beaming a comforting smile.

"How can you tell?" I ask, turning my mouth into a twist as I turn to look in her direction fixing my gaze on something else for a moment. Her jacket buttons are undone revealing the black camisole she has on the inside. Her Skirt hangs tightly around her waistline like it is just tailored to fit. The buckles on them are just for aesthetics obviously.

"I actually can't." She laughs ridiculously, I laugh too. The feeling of being a part of something huge is new to her. She readjusts and stands upright, walking behind my screen now, slowly moving towards the door.

"Everyone is already heading home, are you planning on working late today?" she inquires.

"I don't want to, but I think I have to June. This is a very important project you know." That is all she needs to know. She doesn't need to know that I am putting in the extra effort out of fear and uncertainty - I do not know what awaits me during the presentation.

For some reason, I blame Ryan that I had to work so late. If only he had not offered to take me to lunch. I let his charms and his nice appeal draw me away from my responsibilities and now I am facing the repercussions all by myself.

"It's also really important to everyone else in your team, you know? So don't overwork yourself. We got this!" I smile at her, then advance towards my screen with my fingers placed on the keyboard again.

"Thank you, June" I was not looking at her anymore, I already lost a lot of productive time.

June realizing there was no convincing me, shrugged and adjusted her bag on her left shoulder.

“Oh well, I will just leave you to it then. I have a date later tonight and I need to get dolled up to meet him at 7”.

The smile on her face was real and huge. I glanced at her for a bit and chuckled lightly.

"Alrighty then, have fun, and be safe!"

"I sure will!" She responded. Her voice slightly high-pitched than it had been all along. She walked towards the door briskly, pulling out her phone as she leaves.

"I would like to see how far you've gone with the report too. Please email it to me as soon as you can. I'll look through it tonight. I... We only have a few days".

June stopped momentarily at the door, drawing my attention again while she does a mock bow, just like they do at the opera or at the end of a play.

“Yes, your highness.” She echoes amidst chuckles and shuts the door. I laugh too, June is one hilarious character.

"Silly girl." I narrow my eyes at the screen again, like I am failing to see something clearly.

"No, that can't be right." I cup head in my left hand while still scrolling through the screen with my right hand on the keys. I collapsed into the chair momentarily and tilted my head backwards, my eyes shut and facing the ceiling.

“...*he gets to be more human thanks to you.*” The thought of Ryan’s statement comes back to me again.

What did that even mean? If all this was him being more human, then what was he like before our paths crossed? The mere thought stifled me.

How then have the people at this company been coping with Ian at this company? Why am I the only one getting constantly infuriated? I'm not really that bad tempered, or am I? How come we don't just get along?

A snap on the door jolted me back to reality, I sit up immediately, not wanting to be caught being all unprofessional. I relaxed as soon as I realized it's just Justin.

"Ashley, you're not done yet?"

"Nope, not even close." I reply, gazing at my screen again.

Furrowing his brow at me and placing his hands on the desk, Justin tried to get my attention before speaking.

"You are not joining me back to the apartment for dinner? You're just trying to escape doing the cooking tonight, huh?" he said with a laugh.

"Oh, come on. You know that's not it." I could not help but laugh. His assumption was incorrect, but thinking of it now, that was the only plus side for trying to get my word done tonight.

"I have to get this done tonight, you know. I still have a lot to do regarding this. Come on, take a look at this for me. What do you think? Good enough?"

Justin sighed. "I have a feeling that you're just trying to distract me from the subject of discussion, but fine, I'll oblige for a few minutes."

He moved over to the other side of the desk, facing my laptop screen now to see what I was showing him.

"Nice, not bad at all. Just a few touches and you're good to go," he said, poking me on the cheek.

"You sure? I think it's just basic though. I was thinking I should come up with something less conventional and something electrifying. I need to beat that jerk at his own game."

That had slipped out without me knowing. I hoped Justin would let it slide and he wasn't aware that I didn't get along with the guy.

"What game? You think this is all a ploy to get back at you for insulting him?"

"Umm no... that's not what I meant." I flashed a guilty smile across my face, almost failing to maintain eye contact.

"Sweetheart, you should be apologizing for lying to me. Did you really think I would not find out? This company isn't that big, my dear. The only thing that flies faster than work files here is gossip. Need I remind you that virtually everyone has got eyes on you? Especially after this huge project you just clinched?"

"Alright, alright, I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I just knew you wouldn't be happy about it and you'd start to worry."

"Well, I would not have to worry so much if you weren't so hotheaded." He was scolding me in mock seriousness and I pouted my lips like a baby, blinking severally as I clap my hands together apologetically.

"You will have to make it up to me." I knew I should have just ignored him just then. Now he was taking undue advantage.

"For real? Come on! Don't be like that!" He looked at me in mock derision and hissed, then continued.

"For breaking our bond of trust and lying right to my face, you are buying dinner tonight. Pick up some cheeseburgers on your way back, and fries too." He said smiling mischievously. He briskly lifted himself from my desk where he had been sitting with half his buttock.

"You can't be serious!"

"See you later in the apartment. I'll be kind enough to make you some hot coffee when you get back." He made to leave, then stopped again.

"Hold up, why don't you just finish this up at home? I promise, I'll try not to be a bother." He gave a wry smile, compelling me to laugh some too.

"Yeah, right. I can handle you though, just a good dose of whiskey and you're snoring like a whale on pilgrimage." His speechless reaction to my clapback left me laughing victoriously.

"Alright. I'll give you that one."

"Of course, I got you real good! But you're not the reason I can't finish my work at home. You of all people should know how relaxed I get when I am in my comfort zone."

Justin smiled mischievously again, like he always did when he was about to say something silly. "What happened to annoying Mr. Maxwell? Hmmm?" I could notice him holding back his laughter.

"Please just get out of my hair already Justin, I need to work. Run along now, you know those hazel eyes have got nothing on me." I laugh as I watched him grab his jacket and turned to leave.

"How's Jenny though?"

"She's good. Don't forget the burgers!" He replied with his back turned to me as he began to move towards the door.

"Seriously Justin?"

"And the fries!" His back was still turned towards me as he pulled the doorknob and yanked the door open. He walked out and just before attempting to shut the door, he turned to me again and said,

"Try not to stay out too long, you will need to beat the 9pm traffic!"

"True that!" I exclaimed with my eyes fixed on my system.

"Plus, I'm hungry!" He yelled as he pulled the door to shut it.

"You're just terrific! Please leave the door open!" He immediately released his grip on the handle and the door came rolling back to its position against the wall.

"Thank you. Help me tell the security that I will be here for some time before you leave too!" I screamed after Justin.

"Stop yelling at me!" He retorted like a child being bullied. I chuckled lightly and shook my head at Justin's folly.

"Silly old man." I was grateful he didn't hear me say that. I immediately vanquished the smile on my face and turned my focus back to the screen of my computer.

"Now let's get serious baby." I said under my breath.

Chapter 10

Ashley

An hour and thirty minutes passed now, but I was just getting to notice that it felt like 25 minutes to me. My proposal was almost ready, even though I felt there was something not quite right still. My water bottle was empty now, I wondered how I was not pressed to use the restroom yet with all the gulps of water I had taken at intervals. Just then, a notification drove my eyes to my phone screen. I picked up my phone and looked closely. It was a text from Ryan.

“How is the work going?”

I pick up my phone and replied to the text; *“Well, it's going fine, just not there yet though. Something's off.”*

“Really? You're still at the office?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah, I thought I should finish it up before heading back.”

“Perhaps that's why it's not clicking. You have overworked your brain. You need to go home and get some rest, it's almost 9. Your presentation is not scheduled for a few more days”. Perhaps he was right, I needed to get some rest and start again on a fresh slate tomorrow.

“Alright. I think I'll do just that.” I replied and dropped my phone to stretch for a minute. I shut down my laptop and began to pack up.

“Good. And oh! Before I forget, thanks for agreeing to have lunch with me today.” I smiled. Again, Ryan is really smooth.

“It was my pleasure.” And indeed it was. Not just because I had a good time over lunch, but I was wondering how I would have survived not eating for so long, having worked this late. I was done packing up now. I lifted myself from the chair and headed towards the door. On my way out I remembered I had left my jacket on the coat rack. I turned, took my jacket and raced down the stairs to the exit.

“Miss Lane, you are leaving now?” the security officer asked, a show of concern in his tone.

“Yes Joe, I don't want to be late for work tomorrow.” I answer.

With both his hands grasping his belt, he replied, *“Oh, sure, the boss won't be happy about that too.”*

Forcing a smile on my face, I motioned to him to go on to help me with the door and as he did, I gave my reply, *“Yeah, I wouldn't want to get in trouble either.”*

“Alright then. Have a nice night ma'am.” Joe concluded.

“You too Joe.” *Ma'am? That was too much. I am not that old to be called “Ma'am”, right?* I decided to let that slide nonetheless, I wasn't in the mood.

It had been a stressful day. I dragged myself out of the building onto the road and tried to wave down a cab. New York City really was a busy city. One could tell from the number of cars that stormed the well tarred roads across the office building. The sounds of the honks of cars from the impatient drivers could be heard. The sirens of ambulances, fire trucks and police cars howled at my ear drums, making it cringe.

A yellow taxi stopped in front of me, the window rolled down giving me a peek of the driver. A dark beige blonde-haired man was seen behind the wheel. He had dull eyes, probably from driving all day. He opened the door, giving me the liberty to hop in the car. He looked at my reflection from his rearview mirror and seemed to discern my demeanor.

“Had a busy day?” He asked. His voice was quite coarse for a man in his early 40s.

“Yes, I did. You seem to also have had a quite the rowdy day?” I replied.

“Ah, you can tell?” he said with a forced smile. “Where is your destination?”

“Uhm, 315 W 57th Street. But before that, could you please take me to the burger place near the destination first?” I pleaded, my voice almost cracking out of thirst. I rummaged my bag for my water bottle only to remember I had run out of water minutes ago. I raised my head to the roof of the car and heave a sigh, even the driver heard.

“Sure, don't sweat it.” he voiced, then moving his gaze to the windshield and started to drive.

I bothered myself with thoughts of what to add to the presentation and I didn't realize when we arrived at the burger joint. *Well, that was fast.* I thought to myself.

"We're here miss." the driver voiced.

The aroma and heat from the counter sweeps through the air and welcomed me. I was starting to feel hungry again after the heavy lunch.

"What's your order ma'am?" the young lady behind the counter asked. A look at her and I could spot smudges of mayonnaise on her apron. Good thing the smudges seems fresh, or I would have just continued my ride home. Her hair is tied back as well covered with a cap.

"I will have two cheeseburgers and a large fries, please."

"Coming right up." She replied. She withdrew a bit into the small kitchen to process my order. She had a kid who just sits by, staring at me blankly. I winked at the little boy and he smiled at me. "That will be \$25.40 in total ma'am," she said as she extended the package towards the car window.

"Oh alright." I took my order as I exchanged it with the pay for it. "*Like seriously? Ma'am again? What's up with everyone calling me ma'am today?*" I pondered, looking at my face in the rearview mirror. I was trying to observe if there is something they saw that I didn't. I had given the woman 30 dollars and asked her to use my balance to get some treats for a little boy. I asked for some water too.

The driver finally stopped in front of my building. The area was getting quieter, but the air is still filled with the noises of the sirens of the city. Leaving the taxi, I closed the door behind me and waved the man goodbye.

"Thank you, sir. Have a nice night." I echoed with a tired smile.

“My pleasure, miss. You have a splendid night too.” He drove off with the sound of his car disrupting the peace of the night.

Looking at the grandiose of the residential structure, only a few apartments had their lights on. Probably many were still working late, too. I squinted my eyes to look at Justin's apartment and the lights were still very much on. A white light was emanating from the window too, occasionally changing color intensities; surely that meant the TV set was on.

"Oh, Justin," I said with a smile, as I made my way into the building.

I found my way to the door of the building. The doorman seemed to have gone on a break; it was quite strange for him to be absent at his post.

Walking to the elevator, I slipped my hand into my bag to get the keys to the room. *I had better not have forgotten the keys to the apartment at the office. Justin might be asleep, and dude sleeps like a log!* Opening the door to the apartment, I found Justin sitting on the couch with a remote.

“Justin!” I screamed.

Out of shock, he almost fell to the floor, spilling his popcorn all over the couch and floor. He raised his head above the couch to see it was me.

“Really? Ashley, you scared the shit out of me,” he retorted as he tried repositioning himself on the couch.

I laughed my heart out as I dropped both my bag and our dinner on the kitchen counter and took off my jacket, hanging it on the coat rack not too far from the counter.

“You fell asleep, didn't you?” I said as I bent down, trying to undo the buckles of my heels even though my long hair was getting in the way. I flipped the hair onto my back and continued with my shoes.

“Well, I am not the only culprit here, am I? In fact, I am the victim here.,” he replied.

“I waited for you for hours, Ashley. Did you plan to let me starve to death? Where is my burger?” he wailed as he bent to pick up his popcorn bucket and remote.

“Oh, shush! You big baby.” I scoffed as I successfully took off my shoes and set them aside.

“I even had to drink the whole jug of coffee I made for the both of us.” he said with his hand holding the remote pointing towards the coffee maker in the kitchen.

The smell of brewed coffee filled the room, so he was actually serious about making me coffee tonight when all I needed was to eat and sleep. I needed all the inactivity triggers I could get now.

"I was waiting to have dinner before I could sleep."

“You're just the worst! Dinner is on the table. You can help yourself. As for me, I need to go take this off first and freshen up for a bit before joining you at the dining table.”

Just as I was heading towards my room, Justin came again, “Who's going to clean this up now?” He pointed at the mess of popcorn on the floor.

I turned towards him and rolled my eyes at him. The show on the TV caught my attention for some seconds that felt like minutes. “It's your mess grumpy, so clean it up,” I replied with a mischievous tone.

“I will dispose of it in your laptop bag, you just watch me!” I laughed again and continued my movement up the stairs. “Be quick and get down for dinner. I am starving to death here.” he called, walking across the sofa

towards the dining table.

“Are you being serious right now?”

“What? Go freshen up,” he said with his eyes fixated on the food bag. “Hope they are extra cheesy?” he yelled.

“You could at least say thank you, dum dum,” I replied from my room.

I put on some comfortable clothes and walked to the dining table to see him already digging in. He had already brewed more coffee to eat with his burger. To his left was my mug of coffee and my dinner served on a plate.

“Aww, Justin. You are too sweet. Hope you do same for your girlfriend?” I teased.

“Thank you. You can be mean you know,” he expressed as he made silly faces at me. “Were you able to finish up at work?” He inquired with a mouthful of burger.

“Nah, I will continue tomorrow. Can you try eating without getting the burger all over the place?” I mocked while trying to hold my laughter. He looks at me with his cheek bulging and makes a silly face once more.

“You should finish up soon and go get some rest,” he said after taking a few gulps of coffee.

“Yep, I will.” I replied, focused on my burger. I had stayed without the hint of food for hours for so long that I almost felt like a barbarian as I could smell every ingredient in the burger.

Chapter 11

Ashley

Dinner was nice. Justin and I talked for few minutes before he switched off the TV and headed to his room to get some shut eye.

I headed for my room, opening the door, the windows revealing a beautiful view of the city at night. I felt elated and it gave me a drowsy feeling as I watched the lightings of the city. I could smell the orange scented air freshener I had used last night in the room.

I ought to catch some sleep and show up in time at the office tomorrow. My attention was immediately called to my phone, and this time it was the document I had asked June to send earlier today. I quickly texted her and Steve for a meeting together at the office tomorrow. The words of Ryan went through my head as I dozed off.

In my head, I could hear the faint sound of someone calling out my name. The more I focused, the more the sound got sharper.

“Ashley!” I turned and the blurry structure of a man stood over my bed. It was Justin.

“Good gracious, you are finally awake. Come on, today is a workday,” He said as his gaze left me to his leather watch.

He immediately stood up and the rays of the sun hit my face unforgivably. I figured he had been blocking me from the early morning sun as it had still seemed like night to me. I couldn't help but notice as the sun lit his blonde hair, matching his hazel eyes. His blue coat covered his suit and his cologne filled the room.

“Ahhh, Justin, give me five minutes,” I said as I tried turning away from the sun to tuck myself in.

“Sure. I will give you five minutes to freshen up. Alright, get up! Up!” he scolded as he pulled the blanket off my body. He walked around the room picking up various items I had overlooked earlier.

“Pleeease! Just five more minutes, no make that ten,” I begged with my eyes half closed.

“Ashley, you know that's not possible. You made me have dinner late last night. I won't let you make the both of us late for work today,” he bellowed while he sorted through the books on the side table as if he was looking for something.

“Okay, you win. What are you looking for?” I asked while still in the bed comfortably tucked in.

“Nothing actually. Are these the books you are compiling your project plan

from?” he asked with great curiosity.

“No. They are just random books. I didn't know where to place them, so I just kept them by the table. I will get a better location for them soon,” I said as I raised myself from the bed.

I reached out for the glass of water close to my lamp on the side table, took few gulps and returned the cup to its initial position and stood up to make my way to the bathroom.

“Five minutes!” Justin annoyingly screamed on his way to the kitchen.

“You are not a lady! I need my time, thank you,” I yelled back.

We walked down the hallway to the elevator and found our way down the hallway to the door leading outside. The cool breeze of the morning swept through my hair, reminding me of the cool neighborhood of my home in Manhattan.

We walked to Justin's car and we drove to the office, narrowly missing morning rush hour. We got to the office at 7:05am, almost an hour early for work. As Justin and I walked towards the door, the security guard called our attention.

“Good morning, Mr. Andrews and Ms. Lane. You both are quite early today,” he voiced with a surprised expression on his face. His eyes peered towards us as if we were looking strange.

“Hey, good morning, Joe. Yes, we sure are,” Justin replied with a warm smile. The security guard's gaze immediately fixated towards me with a stern look.

“Joe! Morning. Yeah, thanks to mister grumpy over here.” I interjected with a laugh. He seemed not to be in the laughing mood, but he smiled anyway. It

seemed he took his security position quite seriously.

“Well, do have a great working day then.” He then opened the door for the both of us to walk in.

“Thanks,” we both said in unison.

“Okay, Ashley, you be a good girl today at work. And try not to get so boiled up, okay?” Justin whispered. He was giving me the devilish smile of his.

“Really?” I said with an annoyed look. “Just take care. We may meet at lunch, or maybe not,” I blurted before I headed for the stairs.

“Bye!” Justin yelled.

I turned back to see him waving at me in the lounge. I wanted to pretend I didn't see that, but I just reciprocated the gesture.

“Uh... Justin had to remind me to stay level-headed at work again.” I pondered to myself.

My head turned from where Justin was and connected with something along its course. No, it was someone. *“Please let it not be Moody this time again,”* I prayed.

Looking down, I could see the well-polished brown Oxford shoes on this figure's feet. I took a step back with my hand on my head to take a clearer look of who I just hit my head on. The royal blue suit matching the shoes fitted nicely on this figure. A pink tie matching the pink pocket square stood out. I immediately took my gaze off the pocket square to his hand and heaved a sigh of relief.

“Pheww. I am so sorry,” I humbly apologized.

“Thank God, it's not Moody.” I thought to myself before a hand patted my left shoulder.

“Are you okay? Hope you are not hurt?” he inquired. I knew that voice. How could I forget those grey eyes.

“Hello?” He went on.

“Ah. Hi, Ryan. I am fine. Sorry for bumping into you,” I replied while trying to sweep my hair to the right as I fastened my bag.

“It's fine. You've got to be careful next time. How are you?” He asked, with a hint of concern in his voice, still looking at me with utter interest.

“I am fine. Thank you. Hope you're good?” I muttered.

“Yeah, I am. How are your preparations for the presentation tomorrow coming along? asked with a serious face.

“Working on it. Surely, I will finish it up in time.” I replied, ever confident with a smile, which turned immediately to a frown. “Uhm, catch you later, I've got to go.” I said in a hurry.

Ryan, observing this sudden change in demeanor, turned to see what made my mood drastically change. There on the second floor was Ian Maxwell and his troop of associates walking towards the elevator. His eyes were ever fixed on his tablet as he walked past.

Ryan turned to me to say something but I immediately went behind him and raced up the stairs without looking back. As I did so, it seemed like everybody's eyes were fixed at me as I crossed them.

“Hiya Ash, you are early today,” June said with excitement.

She was in a black skirt which had a slit at the side, with fancy buttons running above it. On her waist sat a black waist belt perfectly carving out her waistline. She was wearing a blue button up shirt which she wrapped up the sleeves to her elbow level with two buttons opened mimicking a low neckline, revealing a little cleavage. On her lips was pink lip-gloss and her hair tied in a ponytail. Her right hand was placed on her waist and her left hand holding some documents.

“Oh, June. Yeah, I am,” I replied as I set my eyes towards my door handle. “Hope you got my text from last night?” I inquired before my right hand connected with my doorknob.

“Yes, I did. I made sure to inform Steve again about it.” She replied with a smile, but looking at me as if there was something I forgot to ask her about.

Then I remembered she had gone out on a date yesterday. With her demeanor this morning, it seemed like her date last night went very well.

“So how did your dinner date turn out? Was he any good?” I immediately asked, and I was right. That was the question she was waiting for.

“Oh my gosh, he is a darling! The date went quite well. He is also shy, but we had a great time together.” she uttered quickly.

“Wow, that's nice. He sure is a lucky guy,” I said as I opened the door to my office and walked in.

I pulled off my jacket and hung it on the coat rack by the side, laid down my bag on my desk and went for the coffee machine. June walked in and dropped the document on my desk and crossed over to get a cup of coffee for herself.

“I will make sure Steve and I finish reviewing the documents you sent us before the meeting. ” she said as she left the office.

She turned back as if she had just remembered something, “Oh yeah. We will be having the meeting in your office, right?” she voiced, holding the cup of coffee about taking some sips.

I just took a mouthful of coffee and gulped it down quickly, the heat of the liquid immediately burning down my chest... Yes, remember the time, okay?” I replied with a cough.

“Sure thing.” She had just finished taking some sips of the hot coffee and left for her office.

“*Ouch. This coffee really is hot,*” I thought to myself as I placed my hand on my chest, trying to recover from the burning sensation of the coffee.

I dropped the coffee on the desk and made my way to my work chair. Rummaging through my bag for my presentation documents. I stretched down to my drawer and brought out stacks of blank A4 papers and began my work for the day.

The building was rowdy as different colleagues could be seen running around in search for their materials. Most were on business calls. The sound of ringing telephones filled the air.

I, on the other hand, was bent to my computer looking at different spreadsheets. I could feel my head already aching slightly from the laser focus I put on the screen. I stretched my hand to get my water bottle and took a few gulps and took deep sighs at intervals.

“*This project is no joke.*” I said to myself as I thought of the detail plan to make the UNIQUE project successful in London.

As I heard a knock, my focus was drawn to the door.

I immediately looked at my watch. “Oh, it's time.” I moved my keyboard

slightly closer to the monitor and stretched my back on the seat.

“Come in!” I called out towards the door.

It was Steve and June. They both had their laptops in their grasps coupled with other documents they carried.

“Please have a seat,” I told to them.

June immediately walked to the seat on the right and sat down, crossing her legs to reveal her lush thigh from the slit on her skirt.

Steve looking quite rough, with his upper two buttons unbuttoned and his tie loosed to lie below the second button. His shirt was also folded up to his elbows, his glasses hanging on his neck and his demeanor bright. He walked to the left chair and sat.

I stood up, pacing round my desk to walk across behind them to come and sit between them across from my desk.

“So shall we begin?” I asked as I looked at them with respect.

Our meeting lasted until lunch break and we all went our ways in search for lunch to meet up after. I picked up my phone and texted Justin.

“*You done?*” I typed.

“*Not quite, maybe in 5 minutes,*” he replied in few seconds.

“*Okay, I am coming to meet you anyways,*” I replied and held my phone, leaving my office to meet him in his office.

Chapter 12

Ashley

The day was well spent. June, Steve and I were able to draft out our plans for the presentation tomorrow and I hoped to beat that grumpy CEO's plan to make me look bad.

It's 5:40pm, and the building was starting to empty. I powered down my laptop and closed it, calling it a day. My back ached from sitting in one posture for too long. The number of voices heard in the building had greatly reduced but I could discern the voice of Justin in the air. I packed up my table and emptied the coffee jug in the coffee maker.

I walked to the window and shut the curtain. I could hear the sound of footsteps coming from the stairs. It got louder as time passed, meaning that someone was coming up to the office. I immediately picked up my phone and

quickly arranged my laptop and documents in my bag.

The effects of the coffee I have been drinking seemed to be wearing off. My eyes were tired and watery. *“I want to lie down on my bed, but I still need to refine our presentation for tomorrow.”* I pondered to myself.

I heard the squeaking noise of the doorknob followed immediately by the creaking sound of the door. I turned my eyes to see who it might be.

Seeing a black loafer, I figured it was Justin. *“That's what he wore to work today.”* I immediately relaxed and turned my face back to the window, thinking of what to make for dinner tonight.

“Hey! Are you ready to go or are you working late again?” Justin inquired as he walked past the coat rack to sit on the desk. His gaze wandered the whole room and finally came to rest on the wastebin which had been filled with paper.

“Yes, I am. I was actually waiting for you so we could go home together.” I replied as I watched him bend towards the wastebin to pick a paper and unfold it.

“Hmmm. This is crazy!” he exclaimed in shock and immediately pointed his hazel eyes at me with a sharp gaze. “This is one hell of an idea!” he screamed again.

“What? If it was, it wouldn't be in the trash.” I replied uninterestedly, taking my eyes away.

“No, really, this is really good!” he insisted. “Take a good look at it again, will ya?” He went on stretching the paper towards me.

“Really? You think so?” I inquired, taking the paper from his outstretched hand.

“Of course. While you ponder on that, let's start heading home.” He said, finally lifting his bum from the desk and walking towards the door. I followed suit, still pondering on the idea in the crumpled paper Justin picked up from the trash.

In a moment that felt like seconds, we were already at our apartment building. We drove to the car park adjacent to the building and left to make our way upstairs for the apartment.

I prepared some spaghetti and meatballs for us for dinner and went to my room to round up the presentation for tomorrow. I had to go to bed early to wake up more refreshed tomorrow for this.

The morning was cool and calm.

I turned on my bed to look at the window; there was a pigeon sitting in front of it. I could hear the sound of the neighbors' kids from the background, seems the school bus has arrived for them.

I turned to look at the ceiling of the room, looking at it for a minute. I decided to get up from the bed to go prepare for work. It took me exactly 30 minutes to prepare and leave my room.

On my way to the living room, the apartment was strangely quiet. “*Justin's still asleep?*” I guessed.

Nearing the door to the kitchen, I stopped and turned to go check up on Justin. Now in front of Justin's room, I could hear faint sounds of music coming from behind the door. I hesitated but knocked three times on the door.

I immediately heard him scream from behind the door. “Ashley? Wow you are up early!” he answered as I heard running music in the room.

“Yeah. But what's up? You good in there?” I asked concerned. I still heard him struggling to do something in the room coupled with rumblings in the room. In a moment, the door was creaked open.

“Uhhmmmm, I'm good I'm good... Just busy...ish,” he said, but his facial expression gave him away.

“Justin...” I said with persuasion “Open this door.”

“Nope. Can't do that...” he stammered.

“What are you trying to hide?” I said standing on my toes trying to take a peek behind him.

“Oh... Just hurry up.” I bet he was trying to find what to wear to work today. His room was a mess actually.

“I'll be ready in a minute.” he said as he hurried to get ready.

We arrived at the office building and this time the door was very busy, everyone rushing in and out as if it was a highway express.

“Today is the presentation day. I hope everything goes well.” I told myself trying to stay calm.

We both walked up the pathway to the door and Joe opened the door for us. I immediately waved Justin goodbye before he could even say anything and rushed up the stairs to find my office to prepare for the presentation. It's a big day for me.

Just as I was about to settle down, the door burst open, making me throw the documents I had all over the place.

“June! Oh my God, you scared me. What's up?” I inquired as I bent to rearrange the documents I had just dispersed by my desk.

On getting up, I see June's face with an expression I couldn't read. Was it a shock? Or fear? Or amazement?

“Hey, you okay?” I asked again.

“The presentation has been moved,” she said with an expression I could now decipher. It was utter shock. “*What did that bastard do this time?*” I thought to myself.

“Moved? To when?” I asked with my eyes so wide that the strain started to kick in. My breath has already started getting rougher. My hands were gripping tight and my teeth grinding already.

“In two hours.” She said as she finally let go the door handle, walked over to my desk and rested on her right hand with her left on her forehead.

“Holy... What? In two hours?” My breathing could now be heard.

I immediately recollected my demeanor and tried calming my head.

“Call Steve, we have to start reviewing and revising,” I immediately spoke.

“Okay,” she said and turned for the door.

I found my seat, helped myself and let out a long sigh.

Two hours passed and we were now in the presentation room with the board of directors.

I could see him, Moody, sitting at the long end of the desk. His tablet on the table, his expensive suit commanded an aura of respect. His green eyes fixated at me with a contemptuous look on that symmetrical face of his.

My heart skipped a beat, no, probably more than one beat. I could tell that he would enjoy making mockery of me today if I messed this up.

He immediately took off his gaze towards his Hublot watch, which complemented his black suit, also matching with his jet-black hair.

I took my gaze off him and it landed on Ryan who was smiling at me. "*Why is he smiling?*" I asked myself.

The room was spacious and warm. All the directors seemed to have settled down, either holding a pen to their chin or taking a glance at their phone.

"So are we going to wait for you to get ready or what?" Ian said with utter disdain.

His eyes were still dangerously looking at me and I was terrified.

"Come on? Get on with it." he said again, calling back my attention from the beyond.

"*How can such a good-looking guy be so unlikeable?*" I said to myself before scurrying over to the large white board in front of the long table.

Turning to my left, my colleagues still stood there like statues. It's no surprise since this is their first time ever or them to be in front of the board of directors. I signaled them to come over and they immediately follow.

"Good morning, everyone," I greeted with a smile to cover up my nervousness.

“Morning,” they all echoed back, but Ian didn't. He just kept staring with a devilish smile.

The presentation went on for the next hour and fifty-five minutes. I finally got comfortable and dished out the best of what I had worked on. They all look at me with complex expressions. Even Moody could not hide his awe.

I immediately turn to my colleagues who were just smiling sheepishly with raised thumbs at me. The room goes silent for about ten seconds before a brown skinned executive on a grey suit stood up and started clapping. Followed by another man with dark hair. Then Ryan and the whole room was filled with the sound of clapping and congrats.

Ian waited for the clapping to die down before he spoke, with a countenance that showed nothing but indifference, almost like he wasn't impressed.

“You've done well, Ashley, better than I expected.”

I did not know how to take his statement; it seemed like a compliment and an insult at the same time.

“Thank you, sir.” I said with my voice sounding high pitched.

“We will implement your plans, as no one in the room obviously seems to be objecting it. Meet me in my office at 3pm for your briefing,” he said as he pushed his chair backwards to make space for his exit.

Ian picked up his almighty tablet and headed for the door, not sparing me a glance. His black shoes shone as he walked by.

“*All black? That's some choice of wear for today.*” I thought to myself, not noticing the barrage of compliments coming from the baffled directors.

“That really was something, Miss Lane. Good job.” Mr. Curtis, one of the board of directors said as he extended his hand for a shake, calling back my attention.

“Oh, Mr. Curtis. Thank you, sir.” I replied with a smile that finally gave me a relief.

“Ashley, you really escaped Moody this time!” Ryan said with a warm smile on his face. His grey and white check suit coupled with his shoes and watch.

“Oh yes! I told you I was going to beat him at his own game,” I replied with a sudden outburst of laughter. My colleagues waved bye and slipped out the room.

“You sure did. Keep this up and he may call in a truce,” he stated as he repositioned himself to stand behind the board seeming to get a better look.

“Oh, when I am done, there won’t be hope for a truce,” I blurted, immediately holding back the rest of my words.

His grey eyes left the board and pointed at me, as if he was looking into my soul. “Really?”

“Uhhh... Yeah?” I replied quite in the blue.

He immediately let out a short laugh and started making his way to the door. “Maybe we celebrate your victory at lunch?”

“I don't know. Maybe next time?” I replied, with my shoulders shrugged.

“Okay, whenever you are free then.” He said slightly tilting his head to the right, making his hair lie towards his right face. He promptly turned and left the room.

“Phew. Now that was something. Let's hope Moody doesn't think of something else to try torturing me again.” I pondered to myself as I packed up my things from the desk.

Chapter 13

Ashley

2:56pm

I start sorting out the various papers on the desk and head for the door. On my way to Ian's office, various coworkers kept complimenting me as the walk past. It was a nice feeling; at least some nice people cared to compliment my work.

Finally in front of his office, I hesitated to knock, trying to stabilize my breathing and gather my thoughts. Summing up the courage, I knocked in his door after which a calm voice ushered me in.

“Come in,” the voice echoed from behind the door.

I gently turned the knob to open the door. There he was standing in his white shirt with two buttons open. I couldn't help but notice the bottle of wine on the side of his counter and the glass in his hand one quarter empty already. Those devilishly sexy green eyes locked with mine and then swept to his bottle of wine.

“Good afternoon,” I casually uttered as I went to take a seat for myself, not waiting for him to offer me one.

He ignored me and behaved like I wasn't even in the room. He left his former position to the counter with both his glass and wine bottle which he dropped and headed for his seat.

“You know, for an ill-mannered lady, you do know your subject. You surprised me.” He said with his eyes closed and his arms folded as he inclined backwards to rest on his seat.

So this is his own version of a compliment? Seriously? I thought to myself. However, I tried not to show my displeasure and force a smile.

“This is no compliment though; your proposal still needs some shaping up.” He turned away from me again and went on.

“Be careful not to get cocky. As the contract states, you and I will be going on a business trip to the UK. So get your stuff ready and please, try not to embarrass this establishment.”

I was in utter shock. I almost fell for his good looks every time but his bad attitude always brought me to my senses. How can someone be so cranky and inconsiderate? Just as I was trying to digest the rude statements, he went on again.

“The company will provide for your transportation, meals and accommodation. Meanwhile, you will have to be my P.A. We have a lot to

work on.” He said with a sultry voice and an enticing but scary look.

“You may leave. Please close the door while you are at it.” He concluded and switched his attention back to his work.

“Uhm, alright sir. But what about my colleagues? Aren't they entitled to the trip too?” I asked with concern.

He paused. “Did you not hear what I said? Or didn't you read the contract for the London project?” he inquired.

“Ye... Yes sir. I did. I was just inquiring since they also played vital parts in helping prepare the proposal. I just hoped they could come too,” I replied.

“Well, that's cute of you to think so nicely of your colleagues, but the company can only provide for one person for this trip. And since you are the one who spearheaded the project and came up with the idea, you are the one going on the trip. Unless you would rather have one of them pitch your idea instead,” he accurately dissected.

“Oh, okay sir. I understand,” I said with my fists clenched tightly under the table.

He looked at me again and went back to looking at his screen. The lighting from the screen highlighted his face, making him look like an angel. I swear I gulped down a mouthful of saliva at that sight.

“Okay sir, I will be taking my leave now.” I said and he gestured me to skedaddle. This annoyed me so much that I bolted out of the office, slamming the door behind me.

Storming into my office, I grabbed my bottle of water and took three huge gulps and sighed. “I won't let that jerk ruin my day.” I thought out loud.

The day was fast spent. Justin and I rounded up work early and headed straight for home. He insisted on taking me out to celebrate my big success. I agreed, because only Justin knew how to cheer me up.

During the week of the trip, I packed thoroughly, being sure not to leave anything behind.

Justin insisted on dropping me off at the airport, but I let him know that the company already arranged the transportation to the airport.

On getting to the reception, I asked the receptionist for where I was supposed to wait for the ride to the airport. I was directed by a middle-aged man to the spot I was meant to wait.

Thirty minutes later, Ian finally arrived with Ryan along with other suits. They talked for a few minutes before Ian gets in a limousine. Ryan on the other hand waved me goodbye and gestured to text me later as he turned around and headed back into the office building. He was the Vice President of the company after all; he had to stay back and manage operations while Ian is visiting London.

Fortunately, I was given a ticket to be seated in the first-class for the flight to London. My joy immediately subsided once I figured it was Ian that purposely did it to bring the both of us sit next to each other.

“Anything to piss me off, right? Well, we will see who will have the last laugh.” I said to myself.

The flight from New York to London took approximately seven hours. It was a smooth ride, or so I would have said if only that bastard wasn't there.

Just his presence was suffocating enough for me. He seemed to be unbothered by my presence during our flight.

He just fastened his eyes to the tablet screen most of the time in the journey. Only if he learned to leave that tablet screen to at least speak with humans, he would stop being a jerk.

London was just as I had seen in the movies. The air was cold, the driving lanes were switched, the driver's seat was at the right and the accent was something I would need to get used to.

We drove to our hotel which was one of the most beautiful hotels in London. The scenery was nice as the cool air of the city blew into the car.

The car came to stop at a very big parking lot, filled with a lot of luxury cars. My gaze doesn't seem to leave a couple who just parked. They looked good in their vintage coats. The porter immediately came and opened the car door for me to step out of.

"Good morning, miss." The porter greeted with a smile.

"Good morning," I replied, still wandering my eyes around the vicinity.

He gestured to give me a hand to hop out of the car. I held his blue glove covered hand and found my way out of the limo. He immediately signaled the bellhops to go to the trunk to get the luggage out of the car, which they did. They loaded the luggage on a hotel bell cart and pushed it into the hotel building. Moody and I followed him and headed for the hotel behind the bellhops.

On beholding the hotel structure, my heart skipped a beat to such a work of art in a magnanimous scale. Whoever designed this grand beauty surely did it with great panache.

My attention was called back when the porter opened the door to the hotel for us both.

“Do have a pleasant stay here, sir and miss.” He expressed, beaming a wide smile. I couldn't help but notice the gold canine he had in his dentition. He was probably in his late fifties and had some grey hairs intermingled with his light brown hair.

“Thank you,” I blurted since Moody was too moody to reply.

We both walked into the lobby and I couldn't help but admire the architecture once more.

The interior view of this grandiose hotel was jaw dropping. The workers in the hotel were all dressed in black and red attire. Looking so professional in their dress code, I nodded to the level of intricacies in the clothing designs.

At the reception, we both went to book our rooms, but lo and behold to my utter amazement, Ian had already booked both our rooms.

”Good morning, sir. Welcome to our hotel, how may we help you?” the beautiful blonde-haired receptionist inquired with a captivating smile that even made her eyes look like they were smiling along.

She had a tied her hair into a low bun giving us a glance of the cute stud earrings she was wearing. I could spot two small birthmarks on her neckline, her collar almost covering the second mark. The tracing of the collar gives the beauty of the red shirt that fit so perfectly one would think it was glued on her skin.

Her lips gleamed because of the pink lip-gloss she must have just applied. Her eyes radiated, probably from seeing such a devilishly handsome man like Ian. I don't blame her. If I hadn't known this meanie, I would have reacted in the same way. She even tried arranging her posture to look more enticing to this man.

“We are from IM Corp, I am Ian Maxwell, and this here is my personal

assistant.” he said in the most professional manner. He behaved like he didn’t notice the gorgeous blonde in front of him.

“Oh. Just a minute sir... You reserved a royal suite, correct sir?” she voiced with her eyes still wide open. With her demeanor, she seemed to want to confirm her doubts.

“Yes, I did,” he replied as he stopped looking at the receptionist and moved those green eyes to his watch for a quick look.

“Alright sir. Your room is 715. Here is your room card.” she said as she extended a card towards Ian.

Ian, always having an attitude, immediately looked at me, expecting me to get the card for him.

“Really? Don't you have hands?” I pondered.

Just as my hateful thoughts roamed in my head, he turned to leave for the elevator.

“That jerk! Really? Is this how this personal assistant thing is going to work? Wait. I should have a room of mine own too, right?” I immediately turned to the beauty to inquire for my room in the hotel.

“Uhm, sorry for the disturbance. I am Ashley Lane. I am also a member of IM Corp, and like he said...” I paused to roll my eyes before I went on. “... I am his personal assistant,” I said, gesturing with air quotes. “Is there a reserved room for me?”

“No miss. From the records we have here, your name is listed with Mr. Ian Maxwell in a royal suite.” she said after looking through the system by her right. Her mood was now completely professional.

“What! Hell no! This cannot be happening!” I screamed in my head with my face cupped in my hands.

“Are you okay, miss?” the receptionist asked with concern.

“No! I am not okay! Gosh,” I replied.

Slipping my bag back on, I collect the card she placed on the table, and headed for the elevator.

“What in the hell is he thinking? Was this really his plan? I can't stand his presence, let alone being in the same space with him,” I thought.

The chime of the elevator arriving at my floor calls me back to reality. I slipped my bag on once more and start looking for the room.

The floor of the hallway was covered in a red luxurious rug with golden linings all over. The rooms lying opposite one another make me look to my right and left consecutively as I navigated the hall.

Finally, I arrived at the door to our room. Moody wasn't there at the door. The hallway was relatively empty and the room was locked.

“Where could that jerk have gone?” I thought to myself, thinking he intentionally booked both of us in a room to try to have his way.

Chapter 14

Ashley

Just as I was about to swipe the card into the card lock, the elevator chimed and drew my attention. I looked towards the elevator opening and I wished I had not turned to look. It was Ian exiting the elevator.

His golden tipped shoe glittered under the light in the hallway, his jet-black hair well placed to the left and his hand deep into his right pocket. His posture looked like that of royalty as he walked towards me with his tablet in his left hand. Those dangerous green eyes looking through me, he stopped in front, so close that I could smell his cologne. His chest directly in front of my face, I looked up to see his freshly shaved chin.

“What's the hold up? Are your hands not working? Do you not know how to use the room key?” he mocked in his sultry voice.

“Wha... Wh... What do you mean? Do you have to be like this every time?” I chimed back at him while stammering.

“That was not my question. I said do you not know how to use the room key?” he repeated in the same annoyingly sultry tone. This time he was looking down on me due to our height difference.

“Of course I know how to use the room key!” I said, trying to suppress the anger I felt deep within me. I was so furious that I felt like hitting the gym to just punch some bags.

I turned, unlock and then opened the door and forced myself in.

The room's majestic appearance immediately subsided my anger. It was so beautiful that I lost my breath to the scenery. The furniture looked so well made that it was a piece of art. The presentation of the room lives up to its name as a royal suite.

There were pure gold and silverwares, and the décors illuminating the room with their reflective surfaces were placed at specific points of the suite. I took a few steps forward, not minding the bastard behind me, and tried getting more of the view in the room.

My eyes came to rest on a magnetically beautiful painting placed on the east wall of the suite. I bet this cost a whole lot of money. Things like this were only bought in auctions of the greatest caliber. The roof was dancing with various designs and motifs.

The sculptures seemed to be depicting different things, I just couldn't place my finger on it yet. The lighting in the room was of the grandest of scales. The suite beamed with different colors of light. The chandelier in the sitting room was an epic sight to behold. This place really made you feel like royalty.

He immediately breezed by me to the indoor bar at the northeast end of the sitting room to pour himself a drink. His hand swept through the counter and picked up a champagne bottle. He then moved his focus to the cupboard containing the wine glasses and took a champagne glass.

He rummaged through the shelves for a wine opener which he found without difficulty and popped the bottle open. He then poured himself a drink and took the whole contents of the glass down his throat. He didn't spare me a glance and immediately started unbuttoning his suit jacket.

"Go order dinner for me," he said as he pulled off the jacket and dropped it on the sofa. He walked towards the windows to have a better view of the scenery.

You must be kidding right? I said in my head again, the only place where such thoughts ran freely. I just stared at him like I didn't understand what he had just said or why he did.

"Remember, you are here as my personal assistant. Start behaving like one." he said after which he took another sip of champagne, still facing the window.

Great! This is just original! I was so blinded with frustration that I almost couldn't find my room. *"Shit. He was being serious with this P.A. stuff. How will I survive this trip in this state?"* I thought to myself.

I ran for the phone to place his order, only to realize that he didn't mention what he was going to have for dinner. "This guy really knows what he is doing. He wants to have every chance at insulting me. Shit!" I said out loud.

I turn from my room to meet him in the living room again. This time, he wasn't standing in front of the window. He was seated on one of the couches in the room with his legs crossed.

“What? Have you ordered dinner?” he asked with fresh inquisition. His eyes beamed with contempt.

“Uhm. No sir, I was about to order your dinner, but you didn't say what you felt like eating so I came back to ask. What will you be having for dinner?” I humbly replied with a cool head.

“Really? I didn't?” he said, placing his palm under his jaw to gesture like he was trying to remember something. He finally stopped rubbing his chin and looked at me for few seconds.

“I will have some beef Wellington. And then for dessert, I will have some custard.” he said after much consideration.

“Yes sir,” I replied and rush to go place his order as well as mine.

About thirty minutes later, the doorbell rang. “It's probably the room service. They should be with Moody's dinner,” I said. Rushing to the door, I opened it to find the attendant who pushed in a trolley with food of different sorts.

“Here is your order, miss,” the young lady said with a smirk. She looked quite young, probably in her early twenties.

“Oh, thank you so much. You can place them on the table over there,” I said, tying the rope of my robe to a knot.

She pushed the trolley to the dining room and placed the dishes on the table, taking note of all the methods of serving in English style.

“Thanks. You can go now.” I said again with my eyes fixed on the table admiring the crockery sets. I looked at her and smiled.

“My pleasure. Please call if you need anything else,” she said with a beautiful

smile before taking her leave.

I immediately navigated my way around the suite to Ian's room. I couldn't help but keep complimenting the interior decorators of this suite. Everything was so well placed and made the suite look so beautiful. In front of Ian's room, I took a deep breath to get my confidence. I tried arranging the robe I was wearing to look as covered up as possible.

Knock, knock.

The sound of me knocking reverberated in the room. There was no reply from Ian. I waited a few more seconds and knocked again. This time I heard a voice from behind the door.

“What is it?” he bellowed from behind the door.

“Uhm... Sir, your dinner is served at the dining table,” I said. There was still some uncanny silence that followed.

This time, I knocked once more to make sure he heard me.

“Okay okay, just leave my room door, thank you,” he said this time.

As I made to leave, he called me back and asked me to come in. I hesitated for a while then advanced into the room where he cast a firm look at my face.

"Help me take my necklace off and place it on the dresser over there."

This seemed weird in every regard. He was sitting on the bed. I had to adjust to stand closely by him so I can take the necklace off. I could smell his cologne, and it was divine. I noticed he stared at me as I tried to take off the necklace, but I paid no attention to him.

It was after taking off the jewelry that I realized that I had let go of my hold on my robe and my cleavage was revealing to a sufficient level. *Was that why he was staring?*

I tried to pass in front of him to the dresser area to drop the necklace while trying to hold my robe shut again but somehow, I tripped on one of his legs as I wasn't paying attention to the floor as I walked.

I ended up falling on top of him and his lips brushed mine. For a moment, we stared at each other, then I felt his lips coming close to mine.

I was immediately jolted back to my senses when I felt warm, but electrical sensations ran through my body. I got up immediately, rushed to set down the necklace and proceeded to the door.

"I'll be in my room, sir." I could tell he was too embarrassed to respond; I was too. *What the hell just happened?*

As I arrived at my room once more, I tried to take my mind off what had just happened and rather focused on spotting the intricacies of my room that I had ignored earlier on. The room was actually bigger than I had thought.

My luggage was already placed in the right areas by the dressers in the room. The tags on my bags were still very much fastened to it. Seemed the bellhops overlook it as they pushed them into the room.

The bed in the room was quite big and soft. It had a regal look and was even under a mosaic work on the roof of the room. The artist seemed to try mimicking the technique of the Byzantine Catholic church. It gives a historical aura that strangely feels good. Across the bed was one of the windows to the room, running from the floor to the ceiling of the room.

The scenery shows the nightlife of London city at its peak. The city's buildings are so evenly distributed and leveled that one may not be able to

distinguish which building from which. I stretch out my hand to close the curtains and head for my bed.

I curled up in the bed; my legs tucked close to my chest, the pillow tightly In-between my embrace and my head over my knees. I squeezed my eyes close to recollect my thoughts and doze off.

Chapter 15

Ashley

It's a bright morning in London. The sound of the Big Ben echoes from the distance, signaling the time for the residents of the city. I woke up to this novelty realized I needed to start my day. "Please let today be good." I said a short prayer under my breath.

I immediately lift my rump of the comfortable bed and head for the restroom to freshen up to and get ready for the day. I overheard Ian during dinner while he was on a voice call. He seems to be expecting an important business partner at the suite. I hope he doesn't play any trick to make me look bad in front of the important business partner.

After a nice shower, I picked up a blue button up shirt and match it with a high-waisted grey Palazzo pants. I wear my chic leather watch and slip on my

black stiletto heels. I rummage through my luggage for documents he might need during the meeting and head for the living room.

A few minutes after arriving at the living room, Moody shows up, clad in a white shirt and navy-blue pants. He had three buttons open, showing his perfectly shaped pecs take form on each side of his chest.

He must have had some serious workout routine to keep that chest so perfectly toned. His black belt sat beautifully around his waist. His black designer loafers matching with his jet-black hair, belt and chain watch bring the whole thing together. This man is handsome no doubt.

“You are ready? Surprising.” he said while making his way to the dining table. He stops halfway and turns to me with his index finger pointing upwards. “Oh, I might have a meeting with Mr. Smith today. Keep my appointments with other people closed for now.” He said with disdain towards me.

“Yes sir.” I replied as obedient as I could. Just as I was about to get up from the seat to leave the room, he turned and called out to me.

“Miss Lane.” he said with a pause.

I turned with my brows raised in surprise. “Yes, Mr. Maxwell?”

“Get me an espresso. Pronto!” he ordered without even looking at me to see my expression.

I took a deep breath, squeezed my hands into fists and finally loosened up and replied as calmly as I could. “Yes sir. Give me a few minutes.”

“And be fast, I don't like being kept waiting” he blurted as he walked to the living room and sat down.

I scoffed... *“Who the hell likes being kept waiting after all. Idiot.”* I contemplated as I walk towards the door to leave the room. I would have ordered the coffee from the suite, but I needed some space away from that inconsiderate brat. I arrived at the reception to relay the messages from him.

“Hello Miss. Lane. Good morning. Hope you had a splendid night?” the hot blonde from yesterday inquired.

“Oh, good morning...” Taking a closer look at the name tag on her shirt, it says Beatrice, “ I had a nice evening, thank you, Beatrice.” I replied with a warm smile.

She smiled back at me with an even more beautiful smile and raised her brow, depicting enquiry.

“Mr. Maxwell closed all his appointments for today. Only a Mr. Smith is allowed to see him.” I added as I moved my left hand from my hips to come rest on the counter.

“Okay miss. I will do so. Anything else?” she inquired.

“Oh, yes. Where can I get some espresso?” I asked. She gave me directions so I can get the espresso and head back for our room.

While I am going through some papers in the royal suite, I heard Moody calling me name.

“Yes sir!” I replied as I make haste to know the reason for me being called. I arrived in front of his room, only to see him sitting legs crossed, finishing up the espresso I brought for him. His eyes were on his tablet as always when I called his attention.

“You called for me sir?” I uttered with racing breaths.

“Yes, Mr. Smith said he couldn’t come over to the hotel for our meeting, he would be meeting me at lunch somewhere else. Get ready, we will be leaving in a few minutes.” he said as he looked at his watch.

“Sure.” I replied .

We arrived at the front of our hotel. The architecture still baffled me, no matter how many times I look at the building. The hotel was busy as usual, with affluent men and women entering and exiting the hotel. Ian Maxwell is one of these men.

His business associate, Mr. Smith had asked us to meet him at the restaurant outside of the hotel. We both head towards the road awaiting our ride to the location.

It wasn’t long before the ride shows up in a 2022 Jaguar F-type and the valet hopped out of the car, walking around and behind it to come over to our front.

This man was tall, average looking man, probably in his mid-thirties. He stretched out his hand, with the key in it, handing it over to Ian, who took the key and walks to opening the door to the car. He hopped in and signals that I do the same. I hop in in the left front seat and he zooms off to our destination.

Arriving at the restaurant, he parks at the parking lot and walks in the restaurant. The interior decorators of this bar did a wonderful job! Everything looks right in place and well arranged. Just as I was still soaking in the beauty of the restaurant, Ian left me at the door to meet his associate immediately. I was baffled for a minute there but immediately regained my composure.

“What are you waiting for? Or are your eyes not working again?” he exclaimed a few feet away from me.

I immediately looked down to avoid an eye contact and walked to his seat.

“Oh, good morning miss.” Mr. Smith greeted with a cheeky smile.

“Good day sir.” I replied to the best of my composure.

“Where are the documents?” Ian insisted. His eyes locked on mine. I immediately started rummaging through my bag and voila, I found the documents.

“Here they are sir.” I said while giving them to him.

“Okay. Go get us some drinks.” he said immediately collecting the files from me.

“Uhm, sir, I will just call the waiter...” just as I was about completing my statement, he cut me short.

“I said go get us drinks!” his tone was slightly higher now. Mr. Smith was quite in awe with what was going on and I turned immediately to do as I was told.

“Oh my gosh, why is he doing this? I just wish I could pour his drink on his face.” I thought to myself as I went to the counter.

“Oh man, they didn't tell me what they want. I will have to return and ask again, what do I do?” I pondered. I immediately solve the issue by sending a waiter to their service and avoid them till their meeting had ended.

It wasn't long before the meeting ended, both standing and giving each other a handshake. Both going their separate ways, I rush to go meet Ian before he left the building door.

“Why weren't you at the meeting?” he asked just seeing me running towards him.

“I... I ha... I had to go to the restroom...” I replied with the first thought that flew through my mind.

“Really? You did?” he said with a belittling tone.

“Ye... Yes.” I replied avoiding those devilish eyes.

“Okay. Well, this meeting kind of made me hungry. You order some burger for me. There is a burger joint that I like not too far from here. Get me some burgers and soda.” he said extending a card towards me.

“Sir, I could order the burger for you once we get to the hotel, ...” I was about completing the statement when he cut me short once more.

“I said, go to the nearby burger joint and order me some burgers and soda.” he said in an emotionless tone.

I was getting really frustrated. He kept looking, then smirked and put his card in my hands.

“Use this card. I will be waiting.” he said.

I still stood there in shock, “*How can you be so insensitive. Can't you see I am about to cry here?*” I murmured.

He couldn't hear what I said and headed for the car. I stood at the spot for few minutes as the chill London breeze swept by drying my already dropping tears. I quickly clean the tear off my cheek and head for the burger joint.

It was a 15 minutes-walk to the burger joint thanks to the directions from nice locals. I had to wait 10 minutes before they started to take my boss's order. I board a taxi. It grabbed a taxi and took 4 minutes to arrive at the parking lot where Ian was waiting.

Hopping out, I waved the driver goodbye and headed for the car. There was Ian with his tablet inside the car. I knocked twice on the side window. He opened the window and gave me a look.

“What took you so long?” he asked with contempt.

I don't know how I was able to do it, but I managed not to raise my hand to hit him. “I am sorry, I had to find my way and wait for the order to...” he cut me short again as I tried to complete my sentence.

“Don't bother, I have lost my appetite anyways. You can have it.” he said as he signals me to hop in.

“ Mmmmm...Ok.” my voice cracking a bit. I find my way to the other seat, waited for him to open the door and finally hop in. I tried my best not to cry in my seat. I know he is enjoying this, as I could see him smirking from the side mirror.

“*Why are you being so mean? Are you that heartless?*” I kept pondering to myself.

The next day arrived. My life had been in constant agony from the beginning of this trip. This was not the trip I had envisioned and it's worse than I could handle. I was literally at the very edge of breaking down at any moment if Ian kept going on this way.

Today is the big day where I present the project to his main business associates. We are to go to JC investments, the big leagues behind the London project and the main sponsor.

I decided to look chic and wore a black work dress , with some suede boot heels and silver bangles. I tied my hair into a ponytail and apply colorless lip gloss. Today must not go wrong no matter what Ian tries. I immediately rushed down to the hotel lobby to wait for the man who has been making life

a living hell for the past few days.

There he is, Ian Maxwell, a dangerously good-looking man walking down those stairs.

His poise was regal, his jet-black hair well placed to look like it was being blown by the wind. His gorgeous green eyes keep scouting around the surroundings as if he was in search of something, in this case someone. He was wearing a grey suit this time. He really looked hot today, as he does always. I could tell he prepared for this event.

On the hour of the meeting, my toughness was finally tested. Just as I was about to present the project to these sponsors, he immediately cut in and asked me to leave to get something completely irrelevant.

I obeyed and by the time I returned to the meeting, he had concluded everything. The deal was signed, the project was now his, a project my team members and I worked nights and weekends for.

I literally broke down in tears. The deed is done, we all dismissed the meeting and as I was about to get into the car with him, the door was still locked. Just as I was about to signal for the door be unlocked, he drove off without me. I was in a state of disbelief as I watched the image of the car fade away.

Chapter 16

Ashley

"Are you in a cab now?" Justin asked over the phone, he could tell that I was becoming frantic and tried to placate me.

"Yes, I eventually found one. I didn't remember the address but the cab driver knows where the hotel is."

"Please Ashley, please calm down." Justin pleaded, his voice sounded very serious and convincing.

"No Justin, I won't. I have had enough. At this rate, I don't even want this job anymore. He is not the only one who owns a tech company in New York. Why would he treat me like a worthless piece of shit? " I was spitting pure rage and bitterness.

"But you know how he can be most times. It's just his nature, don't stoop to his level please." Justin was trying his best to calm me down but he knew it's futile. I was going to be confronting Ian soon and no one was going to stop me.

"Exactly it's the reason why someone needs to put him in his place. And I've longed for so long to be that someone. I won't pass up the opportunity to give Ian some brutal truth. He should thank his stars that I am not a man, or I would have beaten the shit out of him."

I can't control my rage. The driver can feel it as he keeps peering at me through the rearview mirror. I didn't care, I had every right to be furious.

Justin had given up trying to dissuade me from confronting Ian, perhaps because a part of him also felt that Ian had truly done enough to push me over the edge this time. He eventually ended the call while I tried to put together exactly what I was going to say to Ian, .

I finally arrived at the hotel. The driver gradually brought the car down to a halt in front of the hotel and I got out of the car after giving him his fare.

"Thank you".

As I walked through the parking lot I spot Ian's car, confirming that he had made it back to the hotel. I walked into the building and instead of walking to my room, I walked to his instead with a rage that can tear down the grounds of the hotel.

I get to the front of his door and knock loudly for the first time. I do not wait for long to get a response before the second knock.

He opened the door just as I was about to land the fourth knock on the door and immediately walked back to where he was sitting and drinking wine.

"Sorry I had to leave without you. Did you bring my lunch?" He asks, barely looking at my face. I bit my tongue in fury. The nerves he has to pretend like nothing happened and even ask me for his lunch!

"Oh no Mister, absolutely not!" Ian was surprised at the tone of my voice. He turned sharply towards me, looking like he had just seen a ghost.

"I beg your pardon? You are out of line!"

I laughed hysterically, what a joke! Did he just say I was out of line? For real?

"Don't wait for my apology because you are not going to get it! And out of line you say? I'm the one going out of line? You are the one who has been out of line from the very start of this trip, acting like a deranged psychopath. First, you turned me into your errand girl, sending me on all kinds of humiliating errands that is not within my job description."

"Well, technically you're my personal assistant."

"You hired me as a creative director! And even if I was your personal assistant that doesn't mean you can send me to do whatever the fuck you want! I endured all of the humiliations and abuse because I kept giving you the benefit of doubt, that perhaps, you would come to your senses."

"Ashley!" He retorted, trying to remind me to use caution, the very same caution I had thrown to the wind before I had gotten into his room.

"I am not done Mister! And all for what, to feed your narcissistic and over bloated ego? Oh, what?! You enjoy seeing people around you suffer because of you? Is that what it is? Does it make you feel in control? Like you own their lives, which you clearly do not!"

"All these because what? I didn't give you a ride back?" Ian scoffs. "Are you

that petty?"

At this point, I can barely hold myself back from slapping him.

"You drove off without me for no damn reason! I had to go get a cab, wasting my own time and money."

"Oh ,stop whining, if the cab fare is too financially straining for you, send an invoice to the company."

I looked at him intently for a while, he didn't even seem remorseful. He grabbed his wine again and takes a sip, looking out the window now and turning his gaze away from me.

I couldn't help but take notice of the fact that he had undressed and just had his shorts on. His body was bare and showing an enchanting mass of ripped flesh. His muscles were evenly toned and well built, carving down to his slim waistline and back out towards his hip and very supple ripped thighs.

I admit I was admiring the view but I can't forget I came here to strangle this asshole.

"You know what? Fuck you!" This one hit. He immediately turned his gaze at me with his brows raised and his eyes wide open.

"What did you just say to me?" He asked, like he was expecting that I won't have the courage to say the words out loud again.

"Fuck you, Ian! Fuck you and everything that you represent! You think you are something? What? Because you own a company and have some money in your bank account? Well, that's where you are wrong! You are nothing but a narcissistic, pompous asshole! I wonder how the people around you can stand you, and your rotten attitude!"

"Leave my room!" His voice was slightly elevated now, I could tell he was angry now. I felt satisfied that I had gotten him to feel the exact same way he had made me feel every day since I started working for him."

"Or what? What is the worst that you can do to me? Fire me? Well, there won't be any need for that. Because I'm going back to my room to pack up my stuff and leave with the first flight tomorrow morning. I will email you my resignation letter. You can have your job back and get your own coffees from now because I did not work so hard just to be serving some cold-hearted asshole coffee and food!"

I was done now. I have said all that needs to be said before he could fire me. I was victorious.

As I turned my back to leave, I felt his hand grabbed me and turned me around.

"What the..? Get your hands off..."

My words were stolen from my mouth with a kiss. He had immediately kissed me like he was trying to shut me up and stop me from hurting him any further. I am in shock. I didn't see that reaction coming. It was quite the opposite of what I was expecting.

He paused for a while and looked into my eyes, then I heard him say in a very soft sounding voice- "Don't leave me, please." Before I could find a response, he kissed me again like he didn't require any response from me.

This time around, I kissed him back. Gosh! His lips are so soft and succulent, just as I had presumed. It almost tasted like soft scented candy.

I could feel his hands rummage all over my body, cupping my breast and hips. I found myself doing likewise. Unable to resist the urge to run my hands all over his ripped body to feel the firmness of it. And damn, were they firm!

My hands brushed past his nipples and it seemed I had awoken the tiger in him. He lifted me up and I clutched my leg around his waist while he was kissing me all over my body.

I hold on to him right, enjoying the sensation I am feeling with what his mouth was doing to me. A part of me just imaged him pinning me against the wall and thrusting all of the frustration away, and he felt like he has punished me sufficiently for being unruly.

It was after my body hit the bed and he was trying to take off my bra that I regained some sanity and immediately shoved him off my body, slapping him also, and literally running out of the room.

What had I just done? I asked myself as I walked back to my room. He had it coming. He couldn't take advantage of me like that. What a jerk! But the words he said so softly, "*Don't leave me, please*", refused to leave my head and I started to wonder if he had different side of him that I hadn't seen yet .

Chapter 17

Ashley

The next day, the tension between Moody and I had gotten intense. It was difficult for me to be around him without thinking of the incident from last night at the hotel. We had left the hotel the next day.

All through the journey back, we didn't say a word to each other and we barely even made eye contacts. He only spoke to me when it was absolutely necessary. I wasn't so sure if I wanted to resign anymore since obviously, he wasn't planning to let me go either. He had sent a text as early as 5am reminding me of our flight.

I got back to the apartment exhausted and feeling jetlagged. No one was at home. Justin was obviously still at work and I was grateful for that. I didn't want to talk about the incidents that happened during the trip and I knew he

would want to know the details .

No one was expecting me at work until Monday and today is Friday. Ian had given me the rest of the weekend off. He had included that in his text message this morning. I just hoped it wasn't an indirect way of firing me because I would just feel humiliated that I didn't resign first.

I took my bags up to the room and dropped them. The house was not a mess thankfully. Justin seemed to have taken his time to clean it up. He had even picked up my clothes from the dry cleaner. I smiled knowing that he would want me to sing his praises for the rest of the month for this.

I collapsed onto my bed, not bothering that I was still fully dressed. In no time, I fell asleep soundly.

Ian

While at the office, I could not get my mind off what had happened at the hotel in London. I had let my guards down and what was going to happen if anyone ever heard that I tried to have sex with an employee? True, I was incredibly drawn to her, but I should be able to keep the emotions in check.

I had my driver drop me off at work after he had dropped off Ashley at her place. I needed a distraction from thinking about the incident endlessly. Ryan would have a myriad of questions that I was unwilling to answer now. But at this point, I thought I would prefer him asking me questions than being at the mercy of my thoughts and imaginations at home alone.

"You couldn't just stay off work one more day, could you?" Ryan commented.

I sent someone to fetch Ryan so he could give me the summary of what had happened at the company while I was in London.

"Haven't I stayed away for too long already?" I ask, trying to flash a smile at my friend.

"Have you? It hasn't been a week. I was thinking that you would stay a bit longer and enjoy the city and the scenery. After all you weren't alone on the trip."

The wink that followed the statement shed some light on what he was trying to imply. I was going to avoid the subject as much as I can.

"The trip went well Ryan, it was a business trip, not a vacation on a cruise." Ryan rolled his eyes in disappointment.

"You're no fun at all." I chuckled lightly. I had heard worse.

"I need you to update me please. How has it been around here? Any major deals rolled in?" I asked hoping to bury my thoughts in work as soon as possible.

"Oh well, it's the weekend already. As expected, the UNIQUE project has gotten us a lot more calls in the past days. I mean the Ashley's project." Ryan emphasized to make sure that Ashley was an asset I should not let go of.

"As expected, this one is a win for the company. We should anticipate a rise in profits soon as well." Ryan nodded then asked the question he had been dying to ask all along.

"So what happened between you and Ashley over there? And where's Ashley? Didn't she return with you?" I casted a look at Ryan with his many questions and obvious assumptions.

"I do not know what you want to hear, but the important thing is that we sealed the deal and Ashley is back home. I gave her the rest of the week off. She should be back in the office on Monday unless she decides otherwise."

I said the last part with a low tone and a level of uncertainty and I could tell that Ryan had noticed I was keeping something from him. A part of me is scared that Ashley might choose to resign especially when her idea had proven very valuable to the company.

"Unless she decides otherwise? Why would she even do that? She would want to stay with the company knowing that she's likely to receive a promotion soon."

I had been distracted by my thoughts so much that my eyes weren't even on Ryan anymore. However, his last statement had called me back to the present.

"Promotion? No one said anything about Ashley getting a promotion." I said looking very stern.

"But why not? The girl is really smart and hardworking. Her input already got us all these good deals coming to the company. She certainly deserves a promotion."

"A raise, maybe. But certainly not a promotion. She's far too ambitious and audacious, I cannot trust her just yet." Ryan twists his mouth showing that he disagrees with what I am saying.

It does not matter though. I am not promoting Ashley. I wasn't about to reward her for insulting and slapping me back at the hotel.

"I know you don't agree with me, but you won't get me to change my mind on this. I would rather discuss hosting a party to celebrate our latest wins. Since it's a weekend already, we could just get it done over this weekend. Tomorrow night, perhaps?" Ryan heaved a sigh and lights up a bit.

"Alright. I'll tell Samantha to send you a budget as soon as possible."

"Please remind her to get it done now."

"Yes, boss." Ryan echoes. I smirked mischievously.

"Get out of here."

Ryan laughed as he got up to leave the office. I had forgotten to tell him to announce the party to everyone else before they went home for the day. I will just have to call one of my assistants to do that.

Ashley

I opened my eyes a few hours later and looked around the room. Justin was obviously not yet back since he would have woken me up the moment he came back.

I reached out for my phone beside me and tapped the power button to bring light to the screen. It was only 3 pm. Time seemed to be moving so slow today. I thought it should be evening by now. I stretched on the bed for a while, yawning as well. I was hungry. I had just then remembered that I had not eaten anything since this morning.

I lifted myself from the bed and sit up for a while, then I gently lift myself onto the floor and slide my feet into my flip-flops. I opened the door and walked down the stairs, and headed towards the kitchen. I thought I should make dinner for Justin and myself. For me, it was going to be both dinner and lunch.

I opened the refrigerator in hopes that everything I need to make a meal is there.

"We need to restock pretty soon." I said to myself. The frig is not empty, but definitely need some restocking. I reached into the refrigerator and brought out everything I need to make some pasta dish. Justin loved pasta, especially

with the special sauce I use to give it a different touch.

My phone rang suddenly. I laid all the items I had in my hand on the kitchen counter and reached out to pick up the call. It was Ryan. I flashed a smile as I picked up the call.

"Good day, boss." I answered. It would be unwise for me to become too friendly with Ryan since he was still my boss.

Ryan responded, "How professional!" I am certain he was teasing me and wondering how we got back on with the formalities. I just chuckled a bit, making him realize that I got the joke.

"Anyways, how are you? Heard you're home already. And you're off until Monday?" He continued.

"Yes, I am. I'll be returning to work on Monday."

"Alright, good because you owned me a lunch appointment."

I laughed. I was thinking he had forgotten about that already.

"Hold on, wait, you thought I had forgotten about that?" He continued again.

"Well, most likely." I said, awaiting his reaction while I pulled out a bowl and some plates to start getting some of my ingredients ready to use.

"Certainly not. Especially when we genuinely have something to celebrate." He sounded ecstatic.

"What are we celebrating? This project? Or did something else happen?"

"You happened to the company, my dear. That was what we're celebrating. I must recognize your efforts, just in case no one else does."

"Thank you so much."

"No worries. You have to be at the party tomorrow evening though. The Moody is hosting a party to celebrate our latest achievements."

"Oh, he is?" I asked. My surprise was evident from the tone of my voice.

"Yes. The party was at his house. It's just something that was scheduled in the last minute." *His house? I have never been to his house before. I doubt anyone has. Why is that the venue?*

"Oh, okay. Does anyone know where he lives?" I asked voicing out my thoughts. Ryan laughed, then responded.

"I'm sure Justin can bring you there. He gave out the address at work today."

"Alright then, I will be there."

"Great! Let me leave you now to go on and rest some more. See you tomorrow!" He dropped the call almost immediately.

I dropped the phone at the counter, still marveling at the thought that Ian could consider hosting a party. So he wasn't such a bore after all? Or did we impress him so much that he was willing to bear the torture of having us invade his house for a few hours? These thoughts were propelling other thoughts to pour in, so I shut it down instantly.

I started to prepare the pasta dish, and soon enough, I was done. I couldn't wait for Justin to be back before taking a portion for myself since I was way too hungry.

Chapter 18

Ashley

"Did you get my text?" I asked as soon as Justin walked into the room. I had sent him a text to get me some pizza and yoghurt on his way back. I didn't think I would be able to eat another plate of pasta.

"Here you go Ma'am" Justin handed the pizza box and a couple containers of yogurt. I smiled broadly as I lifted myself off the couch and collected pizza and yogurt from him.

"Awww. You made sure to get my favorite flavors too." I said beaming a smile at him like a little girl who is being spoiled silly by her father.

"Enjoy it while it lasts. You're everybody's star at the moment." He said rolling his eyes.

"Indeed!" I said doing a mock dance movement on the chair where I sat.

"How about you? What do you want for dinner?" I asked Justin. He looks a little confused as he had probably assumed the pizza order was for both of us.

"Oh. Were you expecting to have some pizza, too?"

"Well yeah, it's a large pizza and I bought it."

I shook my head vigorously .

"Nope, I think this is just for me. I have no plans of sharing it with you. I made some pasta however, so you can have that for dinner." I winked at him knowing he would rather settle for my Pasta.

"Okay the pasta is nice, but I still want at least a slice of pizza". He was begging with his eyes; but I had no plans of budging in.

"You're getting nothing my dear. Not even a bite. I earned this."

"You're just a pretty bully." He said as he made a move to go up the stairs.

"At least you know that I am pretty!" Justin scoffed and went up the steps grudgingly to shower and change his clothes. He comes down wearing his favorite lounge wear, a pair of pale pink shorts and a T-shirt. He said he felt most comfortable in this pair of shorts.

"Won't you be having some of the pasta, too?" He saw that I had already had four slices of the pizza. I had let him know that he could get the best slice. The pizza was so good. They added a different ingredient that gave a whole new taste.

"I'll be having just my pizza, thank you. I already had some pasta before you

came home because I was really hungry."

My eyes were mostly on the screen at this time, I barely paid any attention to Justin as he paced around trying to dish out some food for himself and get some water.

"When did you get back?" He finally asked just realizing that I had just returned from a trip.

"Oh, now you're going to ask?" I responded turning towards his direction and rolling my eyes at him.

"So sorry, Ash. I got carried away with the food talk. I didn't get the time to have lunch at work today. I had a lot of work to finish up before I left for the day."

"The only reason I'm going to pardon you is because you called me often while I was away."

"And because I got you pizza". He cut in winking at me and sticking out his tongue. I looked at him derisively and just yawn. He laughed and sit on the couch with his food.

"The trip was good though. Our flight back was an early morning flight, so we got back quite early. I was home by 11."

"That's nice. About what you called to tell me yesterday. You know, regarding what he did. I hope you didn't overreact or cause some kind of problem for yourself."

I am certainly not telling Justin about what happened at the hotel that night. It was far too embarrassing, especially for me.

"No. I just let it go." I pretend to be largely distracted by the TV and used it as an excuse not to look him in the eyes so I didn't feel compelled to tell him the truth.

"Really? You did? Are you being honest with me right now?"

"Well, yeah. I realized that it was not worth it, so I just laid the matter to rest." I glanced at Justin through the corner of my eyes. The look on his face showed that he was aware I just lied to him. However, he was trying to give me the benefit of doubt.

No matter what happens, no one was ever going to hear about what happened between Ian and me in London. Not even Justin.

"There's a party tomorrow anyway at the boss's place." Justin said while eating pasta dish.

"I know. Ryan told me." I feel Justin's eyes on me again. I tried not to look back to prevent meeting those prying eyes.

"Ryan? You mean the vice president?" I didn't know you guys were so close now that you even address him by his first name.

"What's his deal anyways? What does he want with you?" I could tell Justin was just being concerned for my welfare. However, I hadn't figured out the answer to Justin's question myself, either.

"I guess he just wants to be friends. At least that was what he said, and I have no intentions of having it become something else." Justin let out a deep sigh and continued to eat his food.

"Just be careful, alright? I'm worried about you. I don't want to see you getting hurt in anyway." I looked at him and smiled warmly.

"Thank you for being a good friend, Justin. Really, thank you." He smiled, nodded his head and then tried to take advantage of the opportunity.

"I'm guessing I've been good enough to get another slice of your pizza, right?" He tried to sell his request with a puppy dog look.

"It's not working Justin. Go to bed. Goodnight." He rolled his eyes at me, lifted his body from the dining table and walked into the kitchen to put the dishes away. It seemed like he had his fill of pasta also.

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of the doorbell chiming. I laid back a while, expecting that Justin would get it. The doorbell went off again, and yet again. I heard Justin screaming my name from somewhere in the apartment.

I had fallen asleep on the couch. I look at my phone screen, it's only 8:30am. Who could that be? Justin hardly gets any visitors and neither do I.

"Justin!" I yelled out.

"Get the door! I am in the restroom." I got up lazily from the couch as the doorbell went off yet again.

"Hold on please!" I walked towards the door, ensuring my night wear is properly covered up and in order. I opened the door and a delivery man is standing in front of it with a package in his hands.

"Good morning, miss. I have a delivery for Ashley Lane." A delivery? I am sure the new work clothes I ordered could not have arrived already. I just placed the order late in the evening yesterday.

"I am Ashley." I said, giving him the assurance that he was at the right place and speaking to the right person.

"Oh, alrighty then. Please sign here Miss Ashley to confirm that you received the package." He extended a form on a clipboard and a pen to me, which I collected and began to sign.

"I wonder who sent this package to me and what's in it" I said still curious as I handed back the signed form and a pen back to him. He collected his items and handed me the package with a smile.

"I'm guessing you'll get the answers to that when you open the package, miss."

With that, he turned to leave. I watched him walk down the hallway and then I glanced at the package in my hands again.

I heard Justin's voice and I immediately drew my head back into the apartment and shut the door. I turned to see Justin standing in front of me.

"Who was it?" He asked with his eyes on the package in my hands.

"Some delivery guy. He came to drop this off. It was for me." I responded peeping into the package to see if I could spot the contents.

"Did he say who it's from?" Justin was surprised as much as I was.

"No, not at all. He didn't say."

"Well, open it up then." He stood close to me as I went ahead to place the package on the table while carefully unwrapping it to open the package.

The contents revealed a box with a note at the top which read - Just making sure you have something to wear for the night.

I went on to open the box. It contained a dress, a pair of shoes and a set of

really nice and seemingly expensive jewelry. I looked at Justin who was staring at me with a grin from ear to ear.

"What's so funny? Are you the one behind this?" I asked, not being able to think of anyone else who could pull off such a stunt.

"Me? No. Do you see that Jewelry? I would have to save up for several months to get you all of these. I think you have a secret admirer now. It's about time, you know." He winked at me as he proceeded to check out the dress.

"Wow! This is lovely and it's also just about your size. I bet it'll be the perfect fit!"

"Isn't this somewhat creepy? I mean, there's no name on the note, yet the person knows my size, where I live, even about the party tonight. How am I sure that I am not dealing with a stalker? Or worse, a serial killer?" Justin rolled his eyes at me.

"You keep watching all those horror movies even when I ask you not to. Now you can't even appreciate a simple romantic gesture."

"Justin...come on!"

"Try out the dress, Ashley. Let's see how it fits. There's nothing to get frantic about. Your secret admirer probably does not intend to reveal himself just yet. Maybe he's just shy. Enjoy the serenade while it lasts. Try on the dress please, I'm dying to see how it looks on you."

Justin just made me feel a bit better. I suddenly find myself smiling.

"Ok. Maybe I am worried too much. I'll try them on. The dress is gorgeous. Be right back!" I ran up the stairs with the package to try everything on.

Justin grabbed the remote and switched the channels while he waited for me to do my thing.

“Ok. Justin. What do you think?” I came back to the living room in the dress, heels, and jewelry with a big smile.

“Wow, you look really good! How do you feel in them?” Justin winked.

“I feel gorgeous and the jewelry make me feel like a princess,” I smiled again, “the dress fits perfectly, but the heels were a bit tight.”

“Can you still walk in them?” Justin asked.

“I should be Ok in these heels. It’s not like I will be running or hiking in them tonight. To look this good, I can forget about being comfortable for a few hours.” I winked.

“Well, I think you are all set for tonight then, Ashley” Justin laughed and turned around to watch TV again.

Chapter 19

Ashley

"Come on already Ash! We're late!" Justin yelled out from the living room. It was already 6:45pm. The party was to start at 7:15pm.

"I'll be down in a minute!" I had said that several times already. Justin must have gotten exhausted from waiting on me.

"You said that five times already!" He was quite frustrated at this point.

"I'm really sorry. I just needed to do some finishing touches to my hair and make-up." I started to walk down the stairs elegantly.

"Tell me now, how do I look?" I asked spinning around slowly in front of Justin to get his opinion .

"Just like I told you when you tried the dress on for the first time, there's no better figure for this dress than yours. It looks magnificent on you. You're certainly going to have some women jealous tonight!" Justin said as he laughed. I laughed too.

We had yet to find out who sent the package. I had thought it was Ryan, so I called him to ask and thank him for his kind gesture. However, it was not Ryan who sent them. I was still concerned a bit not knowing who sent this gift to me, but I just decided to follow Justin's suggestion and enjoy the party tonight.

A cab was waiting at the entrance to the apartment. Justin had booked us the ride as early as he could. He opened the door and allowed me to walk in. Then he got into the cab right after me and shut the door.

"You can go now, get us to this address." Justin said, reclining against the back seat where he sat with me.

"Alright, sir. You look really beautiful, miss. What a lovely dress!" I found myself blushing at the driver's compliments.

I did feel beautiful as I thanked the cab driver for his compliments.

"So this is going to be my ordeal standing close to you tonight?" Justin feigned an exhausted and teary face.

"You look good also, sir." The driver responded realizing that his one-sided compliments just might have upset Justin.

"Please ignore Justin. He knows he can't wear this dress as well as I can." I laughed as I watched Justin laugh in his fancy suit and nice blue shirt.

I playfully pulled Justin's hair for making the comments about him not getting enough compliments on how he looked.

"Ouch!" He exclaimed acting like he's in excruciating pain.

"That's what you get for being such a big baby!" I stuck my tongue out to his face and arranged my hair neatly on my shoulders.

Soon enough, we were at the Ian's estate and the driver brought the vehicle to a halt.

"I think you should help your wife out your door, sir. There is a large puddle on her side."

Wife? Both Justin and I looked at each other and began to laugh.

"Oh no, sir. We're just good friends and roommates .We're not a couple." I said.

"Oh. I apologize. I hope you don't mind me saying, but you two looked really good together."

The driver had certainly said more than we needed to hear. Justin got out the vehicle still smiling as he helped me get out as well.

"Wipe that useless grin off your face!" I said slapping my purse across his chest.

"But how can I, my dear wife?" He winked at me expecting my reaction.

"Oh, shut up." I said as I tried to advance into the hall leaving him behind.

"I will not be accused of not being a gentleman." Justin rushed to my side and presented his arm to escort me.

I put my arm around his as we made our way into the mansion as we showed our invitation.

Ian's house was beautiful and magnificent just as I expected. We walked in and found everyone else socializing and reaching for a drink. Our entrance was well noted as we were late coming in. Many guests turned and stared at us in admiration and the talking dies down quite a bit.

The sudden hush was broken by Ryan as he raised a round of applause for me from where he stood. The others joined in, beaming smiles.

June rushed to me and hugged me while whispering into my ear, "You look stunning." I smiled and thanked her.

Ryan walked up to me next, smiling mischievously.

"I'll go get us a drink" Justin excused himself as he went to grab us a drink while briefly exchanging quick conversations with a few of his colleagues from his department.

"Now, whoever picked this dress for you definitely has the good sense. You look ravishingly beautiful my dear!" Ryan always knew how to make a woman feel good.

"With the rate at which everyone is flattering me today, I might just have to go home so I don't steal the show from our amiable host".

Ryan laughed, "Wow, calling Ian Maxwell, amiable?"

"Well, I... he..." I stammered. I was not sure how to continue, so I eventually stopped talking.

"It's nice to see that winning the deal isn't the only thing we have to celebrate

from the London trip. You both seem to have warmed up to each other."

The way Ryan put emphasis on the words 'warming up' was a little suspicious to me. *Did Ryan know something? Did Ian tell him something?*

"I don't understand. What do you mean? What has Ian told you?" Ryan laughed a little bit as he saw my reaction.

"Relax. He didn't tell me anything. But it just seemed the friction between the two of you is less prominent now. You could barely say a nice word about him before, but you just referred to him as amiable now. I could also tell that Ian was not as angry about you when he came back. He seemed to change also." I feigned indifference.

"Well, we're supposed to be celebrating tonight. It would be nice for everyone to enjoy the party." Ryan smiled.

"Actually, I just remembered something about Ian. His favorite color happened to be blue. Perhaps we may have just figured out who your secret admirer is." Ryan winked at me and walked away.

No, it can't be! I looked ahead, and there he was, walking towards me and staring at me. Apparently, he had been looking at me for a while. Maybe Ryan had seen him coming and decided to walk away.

"Come with me." And without even giving me the opportunity to oblige and follow him, he grabbed my hands and drags me along with him while everyone stared.

"Take it easy, these heels aren't so comfortable. You're going to make me trip." He turned sharply and looked at my feet.

"They aren't? That can't be right. Isn't your shoe size 7½?" He responded still paying attention to my feet with his hands holding my hands.

"How do you know that the shoe I'm wearing is a size 7½?" He let go my hand and walked briskly ahead of me.

"Hurry up please, I wish to introduce you to some people. They've been dying to see you." I don't know what to think at this point. I just walked closely behind him to keep up with him.

"Everyone, this is Ashley Lane. She is the real brain behind the UNIQUE project in our contract."

Apparently, Ian was trying to give me the rightful credit in front of the US executives from JC Investments.

"I attended the meeting in London along with my UK colleagues. I thought you said she was your personal assistant. She was the one who came up with the UNIQUE project?" Mr. Eric Jones, one of the executives from JC Investments asked looking confused.

Before Ian could say anything, I responded. "I'm sorry for the confusion. I was my fault. I was going to present the project plan myself on that day, but I became too nervous and asked Ian to present the project to JC Investments. I thought Ian could present the project more confidently than I could that day."

I continued, "Ian insisted that I should be recognized for the UNIQUE project at this party tonight and he had to literally dragged me here in front of you."

"Well, we are glad that we can finally meet the brain behind the UNIQUE project. We hope you are no longer nervous in front of us." Mr. Jones smiled.

Ian just stared at me speechless. I avoided his gaze long enough to keep up my act.

Chapter 20

Ian

"Thank you." I said, barely looking at Ashley and trying to walk slowly to keep up with her pace.

"For what?" She asked pretending she didn't know what I was speaking of.

"Thank you for covering for me. I was wrong to not introduce you properly to the JC investments on that day."

She smiled and said nothing. As she continued to walk, she was in pain from the heels that were a bit too tight. At that point, I knelt in front of her. She is perplexed.

"What are you doing? She asked, looking around to ensure no one is seeing

what is going on.

I said nothing and just reached out to her to take her heels off.

"No one can see you here. You don't have to keep wearing the heels if they hurt you that bad." From the way she exhaled, one could tell that she had been walking in pain.

"It's 8". She just blurted out.

"What's 8?" I asked confused.

"My shoe size. It's 8." She said and looked away, keeping a straight face like she didn't say a word.

"Ohhh..." was all I could mutter. We kept walking with her heels in my hand.

I gave her a tour of the rest of the house that isn't being used for the party and we arrived in my private wine cellar. There was a sitting room with a comfortable couch and chairs across the wine cellar and I often used that room to escape from everything else and relax with a glass of wine.

I opened the door to the cellar and she follows me in.

"Wow. This is very impressive. Maybe you should be a sommelier. Do you drink a lot of wine?"

I shook my head as I got closer to the island table in the middle and placed her shoes on it. Then I pulled out a stool and directed her to sit on it.

"I enjoy them often, but I like to keep a clear head so I don't indulge too much or too often." I came around the island table and sat on a stool opposite from her.

"Why did you treat me so badly? Why are you so uptight with everyone else? Don't you think you're driving away the people who are supposed to care for you?"

"I am driving no one away. Anyone who wishes to be around me, must accept me the way I am. Besides, I'm a grown man, I don't need anyone caring for me. I can do that all by myself." I am slightly getting agitated.

"Are you doing all these because of a past experience? Did someone hurt you? You could share it with me and we could talk. Maybe I can help you."

I suddenly burst out, "You know nothing about me, and I am not a nut job that needs fixing!" I see the shock and resentment slowly return to her face. I could feel the tension in the air suddenly.

"Now I need a drink!" I said as I got up and picked up a wine bottle from the cellar; one that is very strong. I returned with the wine and two glasses. Then I opened the bottle and poured myself a drink.

"You can join me if you want." She stared at me for a while, then reached out and grabbed the bottle of wine and began to drink directly from the bottle. I looked at her in amazement.

"Since you will not be a gentleman and pour me some drink, I will just drink from the bottle myself. You can get yourself another bottle, you've got a lot of them after all." I almost chuckled at the sight of this, but carefully suppressed it.

"You can handle your liquor though, right?" I said, not looking in her direction again as I got up to get myself another bottle of wine.

"I am not a pea-brained teenager. I can handle it." She spat back. I didn't fully believe her, but at this point, I would rather not argue with her. She was an adult after all.

We drank for a while in silence, until we begin to feel tipsy. We were both about halfway through our bottles of wine.

"Sometimes, you know, I just wished you were a different person. Like the person you were some minutes ago. Why is that so hard? Why do you make it so hard?"

"I make it hard you say? Well maybe I'm not just cut out for commitments or any form of entanglements. Of what use are they anyway? When people find out that you love them to a fault, they take undue advantage and ruin your life, leaving you hopeless. And they don't even look back. They don't care if their actions make you miserable. Everyone just thinks of themselves and how they can accumulate benefits for themselves. Human beings are very insensitive and selfish! I would never let myself be played".

Ashley looks at me in bewilderment, I bet she's wondering where all these came from.

"You think I'm trying to play you and take advantage of you?"

"You for one are not a saint. You're too ambitious your own good. Someone's got to keep you in check before you get me to sign my company away to you."

"Good heavens! How do you even think this way? It's just absurd. I would never do that!" She was exasperated by what I just said.

I scoffed before I replied, "Isn't that what they always say at first? That they care and they just want to help and they'd never betray the trust that was given to them. Then they stab you in the back when you need them the most. I would have never lost my brother, Jack if I prevented him from being tricked by the woman she trusted." The alcohol was kicking in, I was beginning to open up more than I should.

"Your brother? What happened to him?" She asked showing some serious concern.

I wanted to stop talking, but the wine in my system kept me talking.

"You want to know? Well, sure then! I'll tell you. My brother Jack fell head over heels in love with this woman, Gina. He married her and planned to start the family with her. Then one day, he found out that she ran away with his business partner, Ed and they took everything he had in the bank with them. Jack was so heart broken, but also embarrassed and ashamed that he took his own life."

"He died?" Ashley was in shock and she looked so sad.

"Yes, he did." I said, taking another chug of wine.

"And what happened to Gina and his business partner?"

"After we found out they took all the money Jack had, we involved police, but we never heard from Gina or Ed again and the police could not find them, either. All I know is that they had no remorse when Jack died."

I tried to hold back the tears that were filling my eyes.

"I watched my brother get played like a fool by a woman he loved and cared for. He trusted her even to the point of death. He was my only brother. There is not a day that goes by where I don't think of him."

I couldn't hold back the tears anymore, I had to let them flow freely.

I watched as Ashley gets up and comes closer to me. She wrapped her hand around my neck and brought me to her chest. I let myself go and lay against her chest.

She lifted my head and looked into my eyes. Then suddenly, I grabbed her and kissed her. She kissed me back and locked her lips in mine to start kissing each other passionately.

The kissing became more intense as I lifted her off of the stool and carried her on my body. She clenched tightly to my body. I put her on the island table with my grip still firm on her.

I began to kiss her all over, from her neck all the way down, brushing through her cleavage. Her breasts were supple and a beauty to behold. I pressed them tenderly at first, but started to press them harder fueled by the sounds she made.

I kissed her down to her legs, getting my face in between them, licking each leg softly. Then I went further upwards, aiming for the wet love canal. I kissed it over her panties first, before gently taking it off.

Then I dipped a finger into her canal which was extremely wet while Ashley was calling me to keep on going. I played her canal with my fingers for a while, then replaced it with my tongue shortly after. Her moans became louder as I began to lick through it.

I reached for her dress and unzipped it. Her breasts fell out as I pulled down the dress. I began to play her soft, supple, full breasts with my tongue. I sucked on her nipples softly and Ashley gasped. She was enjoying every bit of it and I held down my head to make sure I didn't lift my head too soon.

I lifted her off of the island table and carried her onto the couch in the room across the wine cellar. I quickly took off my trousers and was ready to have all of her. While I still was working my way around her nipples with my tongue, I thrust into her and she let out a loud moan.

Chapter 21

Ashley

I wake up the next morning, my head was hurting from a hangover and I struggled to open my eyes. The first sight I come across is the ceiling. It doesn't look like I'm in my room. I was naked on the couch with Ian who was still sound asleep. I slowly lifted Ian's arm off from me and quickly got myself off the couch.

"Shit!" So that wasn't a dream." A part of me was filled with regret, I felt like I let him have me too easy. I couldn't deny that I enjoyed the sex. It was everything I had imagined it to be and more, but we were drunk when it all happened.

I couldn't be here when he woke up. I couldn't face him. I hurried to put my clothes on. I paused whenever I noticed him turn, and continued when he was

fast asleep again. I didn't know what I would say to him if he woke up right now. I was certain it would be awkward for both of us.

As soon as I'm done putting my clothes on, I carefully left the room with my heels and purse in my hands. I found my way out of the mansion and stopped a cab to take me home.

Another thing I needed to figure out was what I would be telling Justin about my where I was last night. He must have left without me after looking everywhere for me. He had called 15 times and had sent 22 texts. He must be worried sick.

"I should really get my own place". I thought to myself. If I had my own place, I wouldn't have to explain where I was. Justin had let me stay long enough in his apartment and with the raise I had just received, I could afford a decent apartment and have enough to buy some furniture also.

I had hoped the ride back would be long enough to give me the time to think of something to say to Justin. However, in less than 20min, I was already back at the apartment. I got out of the cab and paid my fare, then I walked into the building feeling exhausted and hungover. My head was still hurting badly.

As soon as I got in the apartment, I saw Justin in the kitchen trying to make some breakfast. He walked over as soon as he heard the door opening.

"Ash, my goodness! Where have you been? You just disappeared last night. I literally looked everywhere for you, I asked about you from everyone, and all they could tell me was that they had seen you being pulled away by the boss. Nobody could give me anything more than that." He went on. It was obvious he was worried sick and was waiting for an explanation.

"Please make me a cup of coffee." That was all I could say at that moment, holding my forehead as the migraine becomes more intense. "Some aspirin

too.”

"Okayyyy" he replied and walked down to the coffee machine to make me a fresh brewed cup of coffee. He returned shortly with the coffee and some aspirin.

"Here you go." He said, handing a cup of coffee and aspirin to me.

"Thank you" I said, taking the coffee from his hands and nearly gulping it down in one go. I took the aspirin afterwards with some water that he had brought along with a cup of coffee.

"You're hungover. You were drinking with Ian?" He asked, calling the boss by his name for the first time.

"Yes, we had a couple of drinks while we were talking." I said, feeling a lot better to talk.

"A couple? A couple dozen maybe! You look like a mess." He said, lifting my hair and dropping it back on my back.

"Maybe we had a little too much. We got to talk about a lot of personal things. I think he needed the drink to have the boldness to talk about them, so I just drank with him." I held my head again, still feeling a bit of a headache.

"Alright, that's fine. Go upstairs and get some proper rest. Sleep if you can. After that, take shower, come down and have some food." He helped me get up from the chair where I was sitting and I began to find my way up the stairs.

"Thank you, I'll be down after I get some rest." I climbed up the stairs, got into my room, slumped on the bed with everything I had on me.

"That wasn't half as bad as I thought it would be." I thought to myself, turning over on the bed and shutting my eyes, hoping to get some more sleep.

I smiled as the images of the previous night flashed back again. I could see the image of Ian hold me naked on the couch this morning before I left. He looked so innocent and peaceful while he slept.

I had not forgotten how he broke down in tears the night before. I had no idea what happened to his brother and how much it hurt Ian to lose his brother like that. I felt sorry for judging him without understanding what had happened.

After I got some sleep, I showered and came down to have some of the food that Justin had made for me. I also broke the news to him that I would be moving out to get my own apartment. He was excited for me, yet at the same time, he was sad. We had gotten so used to having each other as roommates.

"How could you? You want to leave me and all that we've shared? Wifey?" Justin was fooling around again, remembering what the cab driver said last night.

"Oh, jeez. Get serious Justin, I need your help to find my own apartment, please." Justin laughed.

"Alright, alright. I'll contact the agent that helped me get this apartment. He'll help you find your apartment."

"Thank you so much! I really appreciate that. "

"Just so you know, I'll be visiting your apartment often. Don't even think for one second that you could get rid of me so easily." I could not help but laugh this time.

"You know that I would never stop you from coming to my place, and I'll be visiting yours anytime I feel like it also. Best be ready!"

Monday morning, I woke up really early to take my time to get ready for work. I've done my hair and make-up perfectly, chose my clothes and shoes to look good.

Justin noticed I was putting extra efforts to look good and asked, "Are you going on a date after work? What's with the dashing look?"

"Dashing? Oh, come on, it's Monday, I just thought I should look good to start the week, nothing special."

"Perhaps I should go to work on my own today and let you get to work on your own later."

"Why? I'm nearly done." And in all honesty, I truly was.

"No, it's not that. With you looking this good, if I walk beside you, they'll think I'm your errand boy just following the queen around to bear her tiara. I should save myself from the embarrassment."

"Do you always have to tease me like this Justin?" His statement had gotten me laughing.

We got to work just in time. On my way to the office, I looked back and saw Ian walking in. He was walking towards me wearing a grey suit and I smiled. When he got closer, I decided to greet him first. After all, he is still my boss.

I smiled again and greeted, "Good morning."

The reaction I got was not what I was expecting at all. He barely even looked at me, as he brushed past me without responding to my greetings. I felt embarrassed, especially because I was so happy to see him and I thought he would be, too.

I quietly walked to my office feeling stupid. *What was I even thinking? That he would cease to be an asshole in one night?* Apparently, he had proven me wrong that he opened up to me and we had connections. He was still an asshole! To think I had put in all the extra efforts to look good today to get his attention. What was I thinking?

"What's going on with you Ash? Get it together!" I yelled at myself., I was upset that I was still thinking about him - How handsome he looked this morning with his neatly shaved beards and those gorgeous eyes. It is official; I need help! I had to be losing my mind!

Chapter 22

Ian

Ashley looked exceptionally beautiful this morning and there is no denying that. I was almost tempted to look back after I had walked past her. But some feelings are better left unattended to.

As much as I yearned for and wanted to be with Ashley again, I couldn't. What would be the reaction from everyone in the office if they find out I slept with Ashley? The speculations that Ashley got her job based on nepotism would now seem to be true.

Ashley is a smart girl and a great asset to my company. The one night that we had was already making everything awkward between us. I must put an end to this madness before it escalated and I ended up losing the talented creative director for my business. The office romance never ends well and needed to

keep things in check.

However, I couldn't stop thinking about that night with Ashley. It was the first time I could really open up to someone, and the physical attractions for each other was undeniable. I couldn't keep denying my feelings for Ashley much longer. I loved this girl.

But this was one feeling that I promised myself to avoid. I wish I had the courage to accept my feelings for Ashley. I wonder how she was feeling right now after how I had treated her this morning. I bet she had anticipated a more friendly response from me. I didn't know what I was supposed to do anymore! I could ask Ryan for advice, but I already knew what his advice would be and I was not sure if I was ready to follow the advice.

I stretched my hands across the table and dialed my assistant, Leslie.

"Hello, Leslie"

"Hello Sir". She responded as she waited for my instructions.

"Go to Ashley Lane's office and tell her to give you all the documents that she's supposed to bring to my office later on. Let her know that I said you'll be bringing them instead and I'll be sending feedbacks to her through you or via email or text. Did you get what I said?"

"Yes, sir. I'll get right to it."

"Also, don't let anyone into my office without my permission. Only Ryan is exempted from this".

"Alright, sir". I dropped the call before she could complete her sentence. I am in no mood for formalities.

Just then, Ryan walked into my office looking pumped. I had a feeling he was pumped for something he wanted to hear from me. He kept giving me a look.

"What? What's with the faces you're making? You're a grown man, you know? Stop acting like a kid." I retorted, trying to throw him off balance so he couldn't bring up the topic about Ashley.

"Or maybe you're the one who just won't grow up and keep denying feelings that you clearly have inside." He rolled his eyes daring me to go into full-blown rage.

"What do you want from me Ryan? I'm not really in the mood for your shenanigans."

Ryan laughed hysterically and responded, "Again, you use that word. Anyways, that's not where my interest lies right now, tell me you already asked her out!"

The word 'shenanigans' is one that our English teacher used a lot back when we were in school. We always found it funny, especially with the way the teacher said it with rage and fury. The word triggered a lot of memories for Ryan and I.

"Asked who out? My employee?" I look at him like he was going nuts. He adjusted on his seat and sit up, staring at me sternly.

"Is that what this is about now? Come on Ian, aren't you tired of giving yourself excuses? Why not give yourself a chance to love? Why are you so hard on yourself?"

His questions hit me hard. I knew that no one would want me to be happy more than Ryan would. I knew that he was a true friend who cared about me.

"I'm just stating facts. It just doesn't work for me! It's a whole new level of awkward! I saw her this morning and I couldn't even look her in the face. She expected a smile from me, but what will the others say when they see me treating her differently than others. It won't be fair to her, either. Her success will be the results of nepotism and not because of her real talent and hard work."

I continued, "Let's look at it this way. What if it doesn't work out? She's going to resign, and I end up losing a great asset to my company. I can't afford that especially after we just landed the biggest opportunity in the history of our company. I believe everything was just good and perfect the way it was. I would rather keep things that way".

"So it doesn't matter that she makes you happy? Ryan persists, not wanting to give in too easily.

"I'll find happiness in something else or Someone else. It's too big of a risk to take."

While discussing other matters regarding the company with Ryan, a knock comes on my door.

"Come in!" I answered hoping it is just my assistant.

Leslie walked in, bearing a good number of files that she had collected from Ashley as I had instructed.

"Are these all of them?" I asked while looking through the files.

"These are all the documents she handed to me." Leslie responded.

"The documents are complete. You can go now, thank you." Leslie walked out. Ryan waited until she's gone out before continuing to scold me.

"I can't believe you would go this far. Why didn't you let Ashley deliver the documents herself? Are you trying to avoid her here in the office also? How's that even going to work?" Ryan threw both of his hands up in the air.

"I'll make it work, whatever it takes." I put on a defiant look. Ryan knew better not to continue with his conversations whenever he saw that expression from me. He knew he would be wasting his time.

"Suit yourself. I hope you won't regret this because I'll be here to remind you that I tried to save you from your own self. At least consider the poor girl's feelings. You really stirred up something in her, and now you're backing off". I gave him the look again. He raised his hands again in submission.

"You could help me make sure she's okay. I see you and Ashley are friendly. Just work your magic and make her smile," I pleaded with him. He rolled his eyes at me and looked away.

"I won't let you keep dragging me into this. I have done the best I can. I'm not getting involved anymore." Ryan looked defiant. He was obviously not going to oblige me this time. He had every right not to, but I wouldn't oblige him either.

"Okay, fair enough. She's got Justin. He can cheer her up," I said trying to make myself feel better.

"And who will do the same for you?" Ryan asked, rolling his eyes.

"Aren't you here to do that? I thought you were here to take me to lunch."

"What lunch? What time is it? Do you usually go to lunch this early?"

"Oh..." I checked the time and It's not lunch even 11am yet.

"And frankly, I'll require more than a dozen lunches to fix you this time."

"We could still try," I said almost absentmindedly.

"Are you playing with me right now?" Ryan is getting frustrated.

I looked at him, then shrugged.

"Why are you acting so weird and more importantly, how do I stay friends with you? You know, Ashley asked me the questions about you before, but now I'm asking the questions directly to you".

This got me laughing, even though a part of me was concerned.

"Maybe because we're weird in different ways and my weird compliments your weird." I winked at Ryan.

"It's weird that it makes any sense to you, Ian" Ryan scoffed.

"I'll be fine Ryan, you know me." I said trying to ignore the part of me still concerned.

"That's precisely why I'm scared, because I know you".

Ryan did know me well, perhaps better than I even know myself. Even though I said I would be fine, deep down, I knew I wouldn't. I was far from being fine anytime soon.

Chapter 23

Ashley

I was trying to focus on other things to keep me from thinking about how Ian behaved this morning. I was going through the documents I was supposed to take to his office later today and made sure that everything was set.

Perhaps I would get the opportunity to ask him face to face why he ignored me this morning. As I was still contemplating, Ian's assistant, Leslie walked into my office and approached my desk after greeting me.

"Good morning, Ms. Lane. Ian asked me to come get the documents that you are supposed to bring to his office later on. He wants me to bring them to him instead." I was dumbfounded.

Had it gotten to this already? He didn't even wish to see me in his office?

What did I do wrong? I can't think of anything I did that upset Ian.

I packed up all the documents and hand them to her. She took them from me and turned away heading for the door. I sat still thinking what I was supposed to do now. *Do I need to ignore him too? And act like what I feel for him doesn't exist?* That won't be easy.

I told myself again to focus on my work and avoided thinking about Ian.

And unfortunately, this awkward situation continued for several weeks after that.

"Hey Justin"

After having another awkward day at work, I came back to Justin's apartment. He had gotten home earlier and already took off his work clothes.

He was sitting relaxed on the sofa with a pair of comfortable sweatpants. Justin had noticed that I had been a bit off lately and had asked me what the matter is countless times.

But somehow, I couldn't bring myself to tell him what was in my mind. I felt too ashamed to talk about it. I even pictured a future with Ian at one point. How embarrassing!

Ian had made it a point to avoid me at all costs. Even when it was to do with official matters, he would rather send Ryan. Ryan had been nice, as always. But I didn't even want his friendship anymore. I somewhat blamed him for softening my heart towards his cold-blooded friend, and I had fallen for it. I was feeling like a pawn in their little game. A conquest that they had successfully achieved.

"Ash, you look really pale. Why did you stay so late at the office today? It's not like you had a lot of work to do."

I slumped onto the couch and tilted my head upwards to the roof. I was feeling a lot of things - dizzy spells, a migraine, nauseous too.

"I don't feel so well Justin. I needed to finish up the task Ian assigned me to do before coming home because I was thinking of calling in sick tomorrow.

"Oh no, sorry dear. How do you feel exactly?" He moved over to where I was sitting, placing his hands on my forehead to feel my temperature.

"Your forehead feels hot. You probably have a fever. I'll take a day off from work tomorrow also. I will take you to the hospital to get yourself checked." He was worried about me.

"You really don't have to, Justin." I didn't want to be a burden to anyone, especially not to Justin. He had done a lot for me already.

"It's not up for a negotiation. I'm taking you to the hospital tomorrow morning. You have to oblige me this time." I just nodded, not willing to argue any further.

"You must have worked yourself way too hard, I'm sure this is due to stress. You've got to slow down Ash, you've already proved yourself at work, you just have to do enough to keep yourself floating. Don't overdo it. "

Justin continued, "On the bright side, I'm happy that the boss isn't as hostile as he used to be with you. At least that's one thing going well for you. As a matter of fact, I don't even get to see him much at the office anymore."

I lifted myself slightly from the sofa and sat up. "Perhaps you haven't been seeing him that often because you're always around me. He would rather be found anywhere else."

I was not sure if I made any sense to Justin, but looking at his face, I could tell he had a lot of questions brewing in his head. I jumped to another topic

before he could ask questions about what I just said.

"Please get me some water, my head really hurts. And maybe some food too." Justin had been cooking often these days probably out of sympathy for my down mood.

"Alright, I'll be right back" he stood up to get me some food from the kitchen, and some water. He set them at the dining table and invited me to come and eat. I dragged myself to the table like a zombie in training. The food smelled good and I smiled at Justin.

"What?" He asked, laughing because he knew what I was about to say.

"Oh, nothing. Just that you're really good at cooking. You should do it more often".

"Don't you dare! I am extra nice to you this time because you are sick. Once you're well, you're doing the cooking for a whole month!"

I laughed, almost choking on my food. He passed a glass of water to me.

"Thank you, you almost choked on your food and died." The statement got him laughing.

"I will have my own place by then." I stuck my tongue out to his face.

"Ohhhhh... Is that the excuse you'll use?"

"Of course not Justin. Don't mind me. I'm just kidding. Speaking of which, has your agent found me a place?" He was giving me the 'I know what you're doing' look.

"Oh my God. Come on now!" He knew what he needed to say next.

"Alright, fine. I'll cook for you again, satisfied?" Justin continued, "What kind of asshole will that make me if I don't cook for you when you are not feeling well?"

We paused for a moment, then I said, "I want pasta." I tried to control my laughter, but I was getting nauseous again.

I got up from the dining table and rushed into the restroom. I stayed there throwing up for what seemed like a very long time. Justin was standing by the door watching me. He came in to be closer to me. He supported my body with his hands and helped me clean up.

"Was my food that bad?" He teased me as he led me back to the living room. I tried to control my laughter again.

"You're a clown. And yes, your food was that terrible. It always is! I do not know how you live with yourself." I winked to Justin.

"You're a crazy woman. Wait till you get your own place. I bet you'll always come running back to have a taste of my terrible cooking. The agent already found you a place. I was going to go with you to check it out this weekend".

"Aww, thanks so much, my darling hubby!" I leaned towards him to give him a fake smooch.

"Get lost silly!" He pushed me off with a laugh.

He walked up to the dining table and packed up the leftover dishes and plates. I just laughed and relaxed on the sofa, feeling lighter and trying to fix my eyes on the TV screen.

Eventually I fell asleep on the sofa as I was too tired to go up to my bedroom or do anything else the rest of the evening.

The next morning, Justin woke me up. He had the shower already running, ready for me to jump in.

"Get up, go and shower. I already called work and informed them that you're not feeling well and I will be taking you to the hospital today. We got the day off."

I smiled and got up from the sofa. I woke up with a blanket over my body. Justin must have covered me up in the middle of the night. From what I can see, he had also slept in the living room to keep an eye on me. His own blanket was lying on the other sofa.

"Did you sleep on the sofa too?"

"Of course. What if you get nauseous in the middle of the night and start throwing up all over my living room?" I grabbed a garbage bin next to the couch before I lie down on this sofa.

"You didn't think I could walk to the bathroom to throw up?"

"Don't argue with me Missy. Get into the shower. Let me go get you something to wear".

"Aww how sweet!"

"Get lost!" He responded walking away to pick out what I could wear.

"I'm making you a cup of coffee, drink it once you are done the shower. I won't have you wasting my food again this morning."

"The coffee will be just fine please" I take my time to scrub my body well. The warm shower felt so good on my skin. I can already feel a burst of energy. Soon, I was drying my body with my towel and was ready for my

coffee in no time with my lobes on. The hot coffee was so good and it was just what I needed.

"You picked this? Why exactly?" What Justin picked was definitely not something I would wear today.

"Because I think it's colorful and since you look so pale, you need something to add more color this morning. I need to make sure that the potential love of your life will notice you and not pass you by."

"You really think I care about that right now?" I reluctantly lifted the clothe Justin picked and placing it over my body in front of the mirror to see how it looked. He was kind of right. I did look pale and I could use some color today.

"I know you're on a mission to being single eternally. That's way I'm here to knock some sense into you. Now put on that colorful clothe and thank me later!"

I shrugged and put on the clothe.

"Now, sit and watch me have breakfast." He walked into the kitchen, picked up a plate to heat up some breakfast.

I quickly walked into the kitchen, and violently shut the microwave.

"What do you think you're doing?" I look at him sternly.

"I'm not the one who's sick and throwing up everywhere, at least let me have some food." Justin answered.

I pulled him by the ear and drag him out of the kitchen.

"No, you're not! Unless you want me to throw up all over the kitchen."

I grabbed my handbag and re-adjusted my hand from his ear to his arms.

"Oh, come on Ash!"

"Do you want me to pass out?"

He looked at me in disbelief.

"You wouldn't. I've had enough horror for one night. Please lead the way."
He opened the door leading out of the apartment. I pulled him by the arm again and pushed him through the door, then followed behind.

"I hate you so much". He initiated his puppy eyes, as I locked the door to the apartment and shoved both his key and mine into my purse.

"I'm too dizzy to see you." I said as I walked past him while squinting my eyes to avoid the bright sunlight as much as possible.

"Taxi!" I yelled. The taxi came to a halt. I walked towards the taxi and Justin followed behind.

Chapter 24

Ashley

We got to the hospital in no time. It is barely 20 minutes-drive away from where we lived.

"Good morning, we're here to see the doctor." Justin said, taking the lead.

"Do you have an appointment?" The nurse at the reception asked.

"Do we need an appointment for emergencies or urgent care? Because that's why we're here today." The nurse looked at me and Justin thoroughly, wondering who the emergency case was. I slapped Justin lightly across the back.

"Ouch" he yelled, drawing back a notch.

"I apologize nurse, we don't have an appointment. But I would really like to see the doctor."

"Alright. Just sit over there, you should be able to see an urgent care doctor shortly." The nurse pointed to a seat at the far end of the waiting area.

"Thank you." I pulled Justin by the hand and went over to the waiting area to sit down.

"The smell around here makes me feel nauseous". I said to Justin who was looking through his phone.

"Ryan wants to know if you're alright. Your phone's off?" It almost seemed like Justin didn't even hear what I said because he had been distracted by Ryan's text.

"Oh no, my phone has been off?" I rummaged through my bag, looking for my phone. "Wait a minute! I think I left my phone back at home".

"Good job, Ashley!" he said sarcastically. "So what do I tell Ryan now?"

"The doctor will see you now." The nurse came for me, interrupting my conversation with Justin.

"Alright, thank you so much." I got up from where I was seated and turned to Justin, "Wait here for me".

"Okaayyy, what do I tell Ryan?" He gave me a look.

"I don't know, tell him whatever." I followed closely behind the nurse. I'm so glad that IM Corp gave me a great health benefit.

I went in and greeted the doctor.

"Good morning, Miss. What can I do for you today?" After I gave him a rundown of the symptoms I was experiencing, he scribbled some notes and recommended I run some quick tests. My blood sample was taken by the nurse and I was asked to wait for the results.

"I didn't hear you wailing". Justin sarcastically said as I returned to the waiting area with a patch of cotton bandaged over the site where my blood samples were taken from.

"I am not a big baby like yourself."

Justin chuckled.

"How long till we get to know the result of the test?"

"About an hour. That's what the nurse told me."

"We'll just wait and get it then." Justin was back to using his phone as he spoke.

"What did you eventually tell Ryan?" Justin turned to look at me, then showed me his phone revealing the reply he had given.

"That sums it up, don't you say?" he said, smirking.

I put my hand over my head in exhaustion. "I've really had enough of you".

He laughed, shoving me with his shoulder.

"Shh! This is a hospital!" I say, shushing him.

After about an hour, the nurse came to meet me.

"Your result is ready. You can go in to see the doctor now." She smiled. I wondered why she smiled since she didn't smile much since we got in.

"Thank you." I walked back into the doctor's office.

Moments later, I was out from the doctor's office and back where Justin was waiting for me.

A lot of emotions were welling up inside of me- anger, frustration, disappointment, shame, lots of it! What the doctor told me didn't make sense, yet. *How was I pregnant? I could not possibly be pregnant! It was just one time! What the hell am I going to do now? How could I have gotten myself in such a mess?*

"Ash, are you okay?" Justin noticed that I was distraught.

"Let's go Justin." I went on and walked ahead of him throwing a fit of rage.

I immediately flagged a cab, not wanting to let the tears flow before I could get into a cab.

A cab pulled up and I immediately got in. Justin was running closely behind. As soon as we shut the door of the cab, Justin asked again.

"What is wrong Ash? Talk to me!" He looked terrified, imagining the worst. I just stared at him for a while, then burst out crying. He pulled my head close to his body and rests it on his chest to give me the opportunity to cry.

Back in the apartment, Justin was fuming in rage. "That asshole! How could he treat you that way? This is outright crazy! I've always admired him but I didn't know he was a sadistic son of a bitch. How could he treat you so badly?"

I had told him everything from the very beginning. Just as I should have done a long ago. I was still in tears, confused and distraught, not knowing what I should do next.

"You need to tell him about this Ash, he needs to take responsibilities for his actions. He can't just leave you hanging like that!" It's unusual to see Justin being furious and yelling in this way.

"What's the use?" I said, "he doesn't want any form of commitment whatsoever. I have already humiliated myself enough. No more Justin. I'll handle this one on my own. To hell with him."

My voice was cracked from crying constantly. Justin moved closer to me and placed his right hand on my back, gently rubbing it trying to calm me down.

"Calm down Ashley, you don't have to handle this all on your own, I'm here for you, always! We'll figure this one out together, okay? Stop crying please, you're draining yourself out. You need to be strong for your baby. I should be the baby's godfather, you know." He got me laughing while I was still crying.

"See? That's it. Please stop crying and be happy. We'll get through this together." Justin's words were very reassuring, I felt more at ease now.

"Thank you, Justin."

"Anytime, wifey. What we need to figure out now is how to get you a new job, I doubt you can still stand him."

"No. You're right, Justin. I definitely can't stand him, not one bit. I will resign and leave this town until I give birth to my baby and can get back properly on my feet."

"Leaving town? To where? I know you don't want to go back home in

Michigan. Do you know anyone else outside of New York that you can stay with? Who could help you during your pregnancy?"

Justin continued looking really worried, "You should think this over Ash. If you stayed back here, I could look after you until you give birth, then you could leave town if you wish to."

I smiled refusing to burden Justin any more than I already had. I was going to get through this on my own and nothing was going to make me change my mind.

"I'll be fine Justin, trust me. You know me well. I'm anything, but weak. I can handle myself just fine. All I need you to do for me is just to help me book my ticket out of town and submit my resignation letter at the office. I'll draft the letter out today so you could take it to work tomorrow. I need to leave as soon as possible before anyone comes looking for me here." Justin nodded but could not hide his sadness and concerns.

"I'll miss you" I can tell that he's trying to hold back tears from flowing down his cheeks. No kidding I was going to miss Justin terribly, I had gotten so used to having him around.

"I'll miss you too, Justin. I promise to surely keep in touch. I'll be changing my phone number, too. I'll call you with the new one once I get into the new city."

"You had better! Or I'll hunt you down and drag you back so I can watch over you." I laughed again, wiping my tears off entirely now. Justin turned his face away, not wanting me to see him cry.

"Are you crying?" I asked finding the strength to tease him.

"Of course not! Why would I cry? You're just imagining things". He moved away not allowing me to have the opportunity to tease him anymore.

"I'll go make us something to eat now. Throw this one up and you're on a diet till you leave town!" I laughed at his comment and turned my face to the TV to distract myself from the myriad of thoughts that has filled my head, but it's not working.

I'm very scared and I was unsure what fate lay ahead of me. *What if I really couldn't handle this on my own?*

Justin brought some food in a short while. My nausea had passed and I was feeling hungry, so I ate until I'm full, went back up to my room to write the resignation letter and then laid down on the bed in my room.

The next morning, I woke up and stood in front of the mirror, checking out my body. I lifted my shirt up and looked at my belly, rubbing it gently. Then I turned to the sides, examining how my body would look with the pregnancy.

Justin sneaked up on me and joked, "So in a few months, you will be having a protruding belly and stretched out skin. Then your breasts will eventually sag and not be plump anymore. And you'll become fat and bloated like a watermelon."

I smacked him on the back with my right arm.

"Ouch! What?! I was only helping you list out the rest changes you'll be going through so you don't go around lying to yourself. Don't worry too much, you'll probably be the sexiest pregnant woman."

"I didn't ask for your help, silly!" I said, reaching out for the letter I had enclosed neatly in an envelope and handing it over to him.

"How official!" He mocked, shielding his body from another violent hit from me.

"You're just crazy. Please don't forget to get me the plane ticket. I'll be all packed up and waiting for you to return this evening".

"Alright. I'll be leaving now. I made you breakfast. Try not to throw up, please. It took me an hour to make those waffles."

"An hour? Just to make waffles? Did you use sunlight to cook them?" I rolled my eyes at him. "All for some tasteless waffles."

"Hey, if they were tasteless maybe you should save some for me. I didn't want all that effort to go to waste." He left the room while I laughed. I was certainly going to miss Justin. That is for sure!

Chapter 25

Ian

"What happened? I heard Ashley resigned." Ryan stormed into my office. I was totally in shock.

"What are you talking about? You informed me she was feeling unwell yesterday and asked for a sick leave. Isn't that why she still didn't turn up for work today? I checked her office today, but she wasn't there".

"Yeah, yeah. I know what I told you, but that was yesterday. She sent in her resignation this morning through Justin, her friend. She's not coming back and she doesn't clearly say why in the letter".

"You're kidding!" My heart is beating fast now, this is not the outcome I am expecting. Ashley could not just up and leave!

"Do I look like I am joking?" Ryan was serious. I got up from my seat and stormed out of the office.

"Ian! Wait up!" Ryan yelled chasing after me while scared for what I might do. I walked to Justin's tech department and found him in his office working on some papers.

"Get up!" I ordered him as I stormed into the office in full rage.

"Sir?" He asked, looking confused and shocked.

"I said get up!" Justin adjusted his seat, stood up and looked at me directly in the eyes.

"You will go now and tell Ashley that I want to see her in my office right away! Do you hear me?" Justin kept silence and just stared at me, not moving an inch.

"I believe I'm speaking to you, yeah?!" I yelled again. My voice resounding across the room.

"With all due respect, sir. I won't be able to do that". Justin finally answered defiant and confidently standing his ground.

"Excuse me? Did I hear you right?" Ryan was pulling me back now as I advanced closer to Justin. My rage was getting the better part of me.

"I can't do that Sir. I believe Ashley reserves the right to resign if she wants to, and she had her good reasons".

"What reasons?!" For some reason, I was further enraged. What reason could she have had to just up and leave like this?

"That's not for me to say, perhaps you need to search your conscience, and you just might find answers, sir." Justin was obviously ready to stand for Ashley no matter what this morning.

"Let's go Ian, let's go now!" Ryan practically pulled me out of the room back to my office and shut the door behind him.

"What do you think you're doing?" He asked giving me a stern look.

"Finding out the truth! That's what! And I'll get it out of that young man!"

"Get a hold of yourself Ian! Justin has nothing to do with this."

Ryan continued, " This is all your fault, I warned you about ignoring her after that night, didn't I? Did you not see this coming? This is all on you." Ryan had been waiting to tell me this since he warned me what was going to happen.

"This isn't just about I ignored her, Ryan! Did you hear what Justin said? Did you see the way he looked at me? He looked so angry. All that anger can't be just because I ignored Ashley's feelings. There's more to why she left, I'm sure of it."

I grabbed Ryan's shoulder, "Why did she wait until after she sees a doctor to resign? I'm positive that this might have something to do with what she found out during the visit to the doctor."

Ryan paused for a while and considered what I just had said. I could tell from the look on his face that he believed I was making a point.

"What do you think caused Ashley to disappear like this? Ryan asked.

"I need to find out what she learned from the doctor, and you're going to help

me." I pointed at Ryan and kept thinking about what else I could do to find out.

"And how do you intend to do that? You know a patient's personal health concerns are strictly confidential. You are not going to get it."

"I have to find her. By all means I must! Justin would know where she is," I said.

"You've got to calm down., Take it easy, we'll find her." Ryan was still trying to calm me down.

After taking a few minutes to close my eyes and take deep breaths, Ryan and I walk over to Justin's office again, but he was no longer there.

"Where's he? Where's Justin?" I asked the staff working in the same area.

"He left almost as soon as you left. He didn't look like he was coming back to the office today though". Ryan and I looked at each other simultaneously.

"He left? Where did he go to? Did he say where he was going?" I asked frantically.

"No, sir. He didn't mention where he was going. He only packed up his stuff and started leaving in a hurry, he was trying to call someone on the phone as he left".

"Are you Ok, sir?" One of the employees asked. I ignored her and thought of what I could do next.

Chapter 26

Ian

It had been 3 months since Ashley disappeared with no trace and I hadn't been able to get hold of Justin, either. He also left IM Corp after taking a few days off after that day.

I received Justin's contact information and tried to have face to face conversations with him several times, but there was no response from him. Eventually, I hired a private investigator to help me find them. One day, they informed me that they had found Justin working at another tech company, Sinews and living in a new apartment in the city.

I cancelled my meetings for the rest of the day and hurried over to see Justin at Sinew with Ryan.

"Welcome to Sinews. How may I assist you?" The receptionist asked.

"We're here to see Justin Andrew." Ryan responded, giving the lady a warm smile. I stepped backwards and allowed him to do his thing. He knew his ways with the ladies always.

"Do you have a prior appointment?" She asked, returning Ryan's flirtatious looks and smiles.

"Not exactly, but we were hoping you could make an exception for us. It's very important that we see Mr. Andrew today. Will you tell Justin Ian Maxwell and Ryan McMahon from IM Corp are here, and arrange the meeting with him?" He pleaded winking at her.

"Alright. Let me check with Justin. You can wait over there." She pointed at a spot in the lobby not too far from the counter she sits in.

She made a call and informed Justin that we're here to see him.

"Yes, sir. They're standing in the waiting area in the lobby."

I kept thinking Justin would not see us, but by some miracle, the receptionist said, "Mr. Andrew had asked me to let you both in. He is waiting for you in his office now."

I was stunned and took me several seconds before I could say "I'm sorry. Which way to his office please?" My mind was racing thinking I was one step closer to finding Ashley.

"Room 405. Take the elevator over there to the fourth floor and it's the last door to the right".

"Alright, thank you." I immediately started to walk towards the elevator.

"Thank you" Ryan smiled at the receptionist before following me to the elevator.

We quickly got to Justin's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in". I heard Justin's voice. We opened the door and walk in. He greeted us with a smile and got up to shake hands with us respectfully.

"It's been a while Justin, you look good." He did look quite good.

"Thank you so much, sir.. Please sit down. Would you like me to get you anything?"

"Not to worry Justin, we're good. We actually came here for a reason. I need to see Ashley. I am worried that Ashley might be pregnant with my baby. I don't know why she would hide that from me, but I really need to see her, I need to make this right." Justin smile disappeared.

"Why? Because you think Ashley may be pregnant with your baby? Because you certainly didn't give a damn about Ashley before." Justin retorted, not looking pleased with me at all.

"That's really not true Justin. I do care about Ashley, I always have."

"And yet, you chose to ignore her and treated her like you don't even know her after sleeping with her. What's your definition of caring about Ashley? Is that how you were taught to love someone? The poor girl fell for you. She loved you even though you chose to humiliate her by acting like she means nothing to you."

"I had no choice! It's difficult, okay? She was an employee for my company. I have my personal issues to deal with, but I also didn't want to complicate our working relationship any further. I was scared that I might lose her. I am sorry, I know I could have done better. I know that now, and I'm willing to

make amends, please. I just need you to tell me where she is. Please take me to her so I can apologize and make things right."

"Sorry, that may not be possible... " I looked at Ryan, who in turn turned to me.

Then I turned back to Justin and asked, "Why? Why won't it be possible? Come on, don't be like this Justin. Please." I pleaded with him, hoping that he changed his mind.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not against you making amends with her. I would rather see you make amends with Ashley if you are sincere about it. But in all honesty, I don't know where Ashley is."

I opened my eyes wide in shock, this isn't the response I was expecting.

"What do you mean by you don't know where Ashley is? She is your close friend and was your roommate for a while. So what are you saying to me right now?"

Justin sighed deeply. I could see the sincerity on his face. He doesn't seem to know where Ashley is, either.

"The plan was that I would get Ashley a plane ticket to Chicago where she has another close friend from college. She was going to stay with her until she could figure out how to start a new life. She was supposed to leave on the same day you confronted me. After you came to my office, I called her to meet me at the LaGuardia airport as soon as possible and left the office, but by the time I get to the airport, she was not responding to my call and I could not find her. I haven't been able to get hold of Ashley since."

My hopes were dashed, once again. I started to think I would never be able to find Ashley and even if I find her, she won't speak to me again.

Justin said, "I've been trying hard to locate Ashley without success, but I haven't given up just yet. When I heard that you are here, I thought you found where she was and trying to get my help to finally talk to her."

Our visit to Justin had me feeling worse than I already felt. If anyone was to know where she had been all these months, I had always assumed it would be Justin. I found out he didn't even know where she was. I didn't know what else I could do to find Ashley.

"So, what's the plan?" Ryan said interrupting my thoughts.

"I don't know what to think anymore Ryan. This is all just like a nightmare. I may never see her again, or my child. The thought scares me more than anything."

"Don't lose hope my friend. I am certain that we will find Ashley eventually. Nothing bad has happened to her. Ashley is a strong lady; she can survive anything. I have a very good feeling that she's doing well. We will find her soon."

Chapter 27

Ashley

"Ash! Are you leaving already?" Claudia asked, coming into the house. She carried a bag with her, containing some items. Claudia is my close friend from college.

"Yes Claudia, my presentation at work starts in an hour." I was packing my bags, ensuring that I'm not missing anything. I checked to make sure that my health insurance card and phone are in the bag. I was going to visit the hospital right after work for my prenatal care. The hospital was just a few miles away from where I work.

Four months have passed since I had met Claudia at the O'Hare airport as soon as I got into the city. I had explained my situation to her and she invited me to come stay with her without any hesitation. A few weeks later, I got a

job at this tech company through Claudia's recommendation.

"Here. I got you some breakfast. I'm sure you haven't had anything to eat yet." Claudia knows me so well; I was planning to get some food on my way to work.

"Thank you so much Claudia, you just saved me some time and money." I gladly received a cup of yogurt with mixed fruits in the bag from her.

"I will try to get out of work early today, so I can meet you at the hospital. Ok? Have a nice day, Ashley!" Claudia was already leaving for her work. She waved at me as she left the apartment and I followed shortly after with my bag with laptop on my left and the bag of breakfast on the right.

My presentation at work went well and it seemed like I could wrap up my work in time for my doctor's appointment today. I had already missed a couple of appointments and I couldn't afford to miss this one.

I took a cab to the hospital. The cab driver kept going on and on about how exhausting the city had become, but all I could think of was if I could get to the hospital in time for my appointment.

Luckily, I arrived at the hospital in time to see the doctor. I have not received any text message from Claudia, so I was guessing she couldn't leave her work early to meet me at the hospital today.

I was ushered into the doctor's office shortly after, she asked me series of questions and completed some examinations.

"You and the baby are in good condition, everything's just fine." I breathed a sigh of relief. The doctor prescribed prenatal vitamins. I was saying goodbye to the nurses while walking out slowly. Suddenly someone grabs my hand from behind, making my heart race. I turned to see who it was.

"Ashley? My God, Ashley! Where have you been? I've looked for you everywhere." I was in shock. I didn't think I would be seeing Ian Maxwell anytime soon.

"Ian... what are you doing here?" I asked. My legs were shaking, I wished I could disappear in this moment. He kept staring at my baby bump.

"I came here to see my friend. He was admitted here a few days ago." What are the odds? Ian Maxwell had a friend in Chicago who was admitted to this hospital. Who even knew that he had friends besides Ryan.

"Okay. I've got to get going now." I said, loosening my hand from his grip and taking a step forward. He came right in front of me and stopped me from leaving.

"What are you doing? Please let me go." My voice was stronger now. I am getting emotional.

"We need to talk Ashley. Please."

"Talk? Did you say talk? Oh, now you want to talk? When I wanted to talk to you, you ignored me as if I didn't even exist. You avoided me intentionally and didn't even let me get close to you. Now, all of a sudden, you wish to talk?" I tried so hard to fight back the tears that were about to run down my cheeks.

"I am sorry Ashley, I'm not proud of my actions. I've been looking for you ever since, just to make amends. Please come home with me, let me take care of you." I looked at him wide-eyed, and almost like a reflex, I slapped his face. He is shocked, holding his cheeks as the pain from the slap turns his cheek red.

"Don't you ever! Do you hear me? Don't you ever say those words to me again". I shoved him to the side and walked briskly out of the hospital not

minding that everyone was staring at us.

“Ashley!” all the sudden I hear Claudia’s voice in a distance. “I’m sorry I got stuck at work a bit longer than I expected and couldn’t get here earlier. What’s going on?”

“Nothing, will you please take me home?”

Claudia looked at both of us and said, “Is this Ian Maxwell? The father of your baby?”

I said nothing and tears start to come down on my cheek.

“Ian, is that you? What are you doing here?” Claudia was also getting emotional.

“Do you have any idea how much you hurt Ashley? Do you honestly care about her?” Claudia asked.

“I’m truly sorry. I was visiting my friend who was recently administered to this hospital. I have been looking for Ashley to apologize for months, but I could not find her. When I saw her here, I could not believe it. I just wanted to apologize to her from the bottom of my heart and ask for forgiveness. I love her and care about her. I want to make things right.” Ian was looking straight at Claudia.

“Ashley, are you Ok? You really don’t want to talk to Ian?” My tears were still streaming down and I couldn’t answer.

“Ashley, I tell you what. I have a feeling that you may regret in the future if you guys don’t sit down and have a heart-to-heart conversation today. Why don’t I take you and Ian to the apartment so that you guys can talk in private in your room. If you need me, I will be in my room. Ok?”

I still didn't say anything and the tears continued to come down on my cheek. But seeing me not resisting, Claudia said, "Ok. Let's go back to our apartment."

She turned around to Ian and said, "I hope what you just said is sincere. Come with us, but promise me, you will never hurt Ashley again."

"Thank you so much for giving me a chance to talk to Ashley. I am truly sorry and I will never hurt Ashley again" For a second, it looked like Ian was tearing up also.

Claudia drove us back to the apartment, brought each of us a cup of tea and as she closed the door to my room, she said, "I hope you guys can really talk to each other this time. If you need me, I will be in my room".

Ian and I thanked Claudia, and for a while, neither of us could say anything.

I finally spoke, "You have no idea how much you hurt me. I love you and I wanted to be with you, but I don't ever want to get hurt again."

"I'm so sorry, Ashley. I know I didn't treat you in the way you deserved to be treated. I pushed you away because I was scared that I was falling in love with you. I know that I ended up hurting you. I love you so much, Ashley. Please give me another chance. I'm willing to do anything to love you in the way you deserved to be loved."

"How do I know that you won't hurt me again?"

"I know you did nothing wrong and it was me who ended up hurting you. I didn't know what to do with the feelings I have for you before, but now I can say I love you. I'm not hiding my true feelings for you to anyone. If I need to step away from my company to be with you. I will. Nothing matters to me more than asking for your forgiveness and if you allow me, I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

I didn't know what to say. A part of me was so happy, the other part of me was still scared that I get hurt again.

"Please forgive me, Ashley," Ian reached out to hug me and this time, I couldn't push him away. I was holding him tight and not letting him go.

We just held each other for a long time without saying anything. And this time, I was crying because I was so happy to be held by Ian.

Epilogue

Ashley

It's been a year since Ian and I found each other in Chicago.

"Oh no... Can you please wipe her face?" I beg. Ian is feeding Sophia, our 6-month-old baby girl.

"Mama!" Sophia smiles with food all over her face.

"Yes, dear" Ian smiles as he wipes Sophia's face.

Ian adores Sophia and she is such a daddy's girl. Nowadays, what Ian stares in his tablet are the pictures of Sophia and I. Nobody could have guessed he would be smiling so much at home and at work one year ago.

“I love you, honey,” Ian comes over to kiss me, and then wipes his hand with the baby food on my face.

“Stop it!” I laughed chasing him with the baby food wiped off from my face in my hand.

I am now getting ready for two big events.

After taking some time off to take care of Sophia, I am going back to IM Corp as a creative director again in a few weeks.

I just got a text from June and she tells me she can't wait for me to come back! She is now engaged to the shy guy whom she had the first date with one year ago.

Steve will continue to be on my team, and according to June, he can't wait to work on a big project with me again. He says if I ever go to London again, June and Steve will come along no matter what.

According to Simone, she is planning to assign another big opportunity for IM Corp to me as soon as I come back. She jokes that this time, Ian will not reject any good ideas that I submit just to torture me.

What is the second event?

Ian and I are officially getting married next week!

Claudia is flying in from Chicago this week to be the maid of honor.

Justin and Jenny will be attending the wedding, too. Justin repeatedly reminds me that he should have been the maid of honor. He says if he can't be the maid of honor, he has to be the godfather for Sophia.

Ryan will be the best man. He started to date someone he met in the tech conference recently. I have a feeling that she may be the one. His eyes light up every time he talks about her.

Who knew I would have a family with my grumpy billionaire boss. After all the heartaches I went through, I never thought I could be this happy, but I am living a happily ever after life now.

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