



CROSSLAND

A BILLIONAIRE'S GAME NOVEL

SAMANTHA WHISKEY

Crossland

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*For those who love you no matter what or who tries to stop
them.*

Crossland

“I still can’t believe you two,” Weston said from his seat right next to Asher at the poker table, but his eyes were on Ethan and me. “You both repelled down a skyscraper today but wouldn’t tour the live volcano.”

Ethan and I shared a look, but Ethan was the first to speak. “Hey, I boarded down one. Isn’t that enough?” He jabbed a thumb in my direction. “He’s the one that didn’t do either. Why don’t you give him more shit?”

I gave him a mock offended look. “Thanks for throwing me under the bus.” I shook my head. “Repelling down the skyscraper didn’t involve being chased by hot lava at the same time.”

Fuck that. I was all for nature and hiking and exploring the local terrain, but it didn’t matter what Weston tasked me with. I would never be one to risk my life as much as he did. Though he had slowed down ever since he and Brynn got engaged.

Had to give him credit though, this morning had been unmatched. Dawn had just broken the sky when we’d repelled down the city skyscraper, the entire cityscape of New York stretching out before us as we plummeted down. It wasn’t something I’d easily forget. Thankfully, there was no lava included.

“I think you’re all nuts,” Asher said, leaning back in his chair just enough to flash his fiancé, Daisy, a wink. “You wouldn’t catch me doing that.”

“You did the volcano boarding,” Weston countered. “What’s so different about flying down the side of that versus going straight down a skyscraper?”

“The difference is I had *control* of the board, and my feet were firmly on the ground. There wasn’t just a flimsy harness and carabiner holding me steady.”

“What’s life without a little risk?” Weston teased.

“That’s the beauty of this group,” Asher said. “We get to choose our risks.”

“Speaking of this little group,” I said, glancing around the table and noticing one seat was empty. “Where is the dismal sixth player?”

Gareth had been uncharacteristically quiet—even for him—as we waited to get our game started, but I spared a glance to the empty seat, and the one directly behind it that Serenity usually occupied.

“He’s late,” Weston explained. “Let’s wait another ten minutes. If he doesn’t show up, we’ll start without him.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky, and he won’t show up at all.” I knew that wouldn’t be the case, but a guy could dream.

“I’m not that lucky,” Gareth said.

I glanced to my right, cocking a brow at him. “You don’t really mean that,” I said. “I bet my Rolex that you’d be the most upset out of all of us if Doyle suddenly lost his seat in this game.”

Gareth flashed me a warning glare, one that I dutifully ignored. The guy was undeniably scary, and, as his best friends, we’d certainly heard more than our fair share of stories that sounded more like a mafia movie script than real life, but he didn’t scare me. Maybe that made me reckless, but I didn’t care.

The guy couldn’t keep his eyes off Serenity whenever she was in the room. Even when he wasn’t directly looking at her, he always knew where she was, like he had a sixth sense about it. And yeah, we were all worried about the girl, especially

with her father being the asshole that he was, but with Gareth, it was different, and I loved pointing it out when no one else would.

“Speaking of Serenity,” I said, even though no one had, I just enjoyed getting a rise out of Gareth. “Has she called in her chip yet?”

“Jesus, Crossland,” Ethan said, but laughed. “He’s going to murder you.”

“No way,” I argued, leaning over to nudge Gareth with my elbow. “He loves me too much. Not that you ever tell me,” I added for good measure, batting my eyes dramatically. It was enough to get the barest of smiles from him, which he held close to his chest like he’d run out if he used them too much.

“I wouldn’t murder him,” Gareth said.

“See?” I aimed at Ethan, who sat on Gareth’s right. “I’m his favorite. Come to think of it...” I tilted my head, dramatically running my fingers over my trimmed goatee. “Actually, I’m *everybody’s* favorite.”

Asher shook his head, barely holding back his laugh as he shuffled the cards.

“You’re not my favorite,” Gareth continued. “But I wouldn’t murder you. That would be too easy. Do you really want to find out what happens to people who think it’s entertaining to fuck with me?”

Now *that* was enough to pique my curiosity. Gareth rarely evoked the old-school tone we all knew he’d used when he’d been entrenched with his family legacy, but whenever he did, it was intimidating as hell. I knew he was just fucking with me, but damn, I never wanted to be on the other end of a genuine threat from him.

“I know I’m late,” Doyle grumbled as he entered the room, taking his seat on my left. Serenity followed him, lowering into her designated chair behind him.

I bit down on the question on the tip of my tongue, *why don’t you sit with the other girls while they plan out their night?* Brynn, Daisy, and Alex were already gathered around one of

their tablets, checking out the best things to do in the city. They'd hang here with us for a while before heading out, as was their usual plan if they decided not to stay the entire game. But I knew from Doyle's big mouth that Serenity was to be seen, not heard, and while I hated that, I didn't want to say anything that would get her into trouble. Probably the same reason why Gareth so rarely vocally expressed his opinions about Serenity's role here either.

"You're not my favorite either," Brynn said, ignoring Doyle. Her smile was bright as she glanced at Weston from where she sat just a little ways behind him in a grouping of plush furniture we'd brought in for her and the other girls. Her, Daisy, and Alex had been particularly giggly tonight, which I assumed had everything to do with Brynn's approaching wedding more than the craft cocktails they sipped on. Thank fuck they had Weston's driver to take them wherever they landed on going later.

"*Please,*" I drug out the word. "That's not at all fair. I'm almost one hundred percent certain that before you and Wes became a thing, I was totally your favorite. Who was by your side touring that natural reserve in Nicaragua?"

Brynn smiled and shrugged. "That's fair," she said.

"You can deal those cards now, Asher," Doyle said, raising his brows like he had no clue what Asher was waiting for, despite the fact that he'd been almost an hour late.

Dick.

"You can't be serious," Weston said to Brynn, peeking at his cards after Asher dealt them. "Even before us? *He* was your favorite?"

Brynn laughed, rising from her seat to cross the room and plant a quick kiss on her soon-to-be husband's cheek. "So jealous," she said, then winked at him.

Weston slid an arm around her lower back, tucking her against his side as he looked up at her from where he was still seated.

The way they held a silent conversation laced with nothing but excitement and love and tease was almost nauseating. Asher behaved the same with Daisy, and now even Ethan had fallen victim to the moon-eyed effect with his girl Alexandra.

It was a goddamn epidemic.

Luckily, Gareth and I seemed immune.

“I’m going to pretend that you didn’t say that,” Weston murmured to Brynn after he and I had called Gareth’s raise.

I had an ace and king of spades. I wasn’t going anywhere.

“Or what?” Brynn challenged him.

“We only have two weeks till our wedding, and you’re pushing me?” Weston asked her, his tone purely playful. “Say Crossland was your favorite again and see what happens.”

“I’m sitting *right* here,” I reminded them.

“And you’re really a delight, Cross,” Brynn said, pushing herself away from Weston with a sweet smile. “But let’s face it, that’s all you want, and that’s all you offer. *Fun*. Some women want more.”

“Not the women I see,” I said, smirking as Asher dealt the flop. A queen and a jack had me sitting on a nice straight draw. “And trust me,” I continued after betting. “I haven’t had any complaints.”

Weston, Gareth, Doyle, and Asher all folded, but Ethan called.

“That’s because you’re barely with the same woman more than a night or two at a time,” Ethan said as Ash dealt the turn. A two of spades, which now gave me a flush draw too. “It takes way more work to hold the attention of one woman for a longer period of time, trust me.”

“He’s not wrong,” Weston said. “It takes more than good looks, a smile, and a fun little outing.”

“You call a weekend on a private island a *little* outing?” I asked, referring to the date I set up for the last woman I’d spent more than a night with. Rochelle. That’d been a year

ago. Three nights with her and she was more than happy to get back to the States and never call me again the second she realized I'd been serious when I said I didn't want a relationship. I usually could tell when the women I dated were in it to change me, but I'd missed the mark with her.

I haven't let that happen again since.

One or two nights.

That's it.

"He's saying..." Asher said. "That satisfying the same person over and over again is a completely different subject. It takes a certain kind of person to be able to do it."

I furrowed my brow, shock rolling through me as I tried to keep track of the conversation and the hand.

Did my friends really think I didn't have the talent to keep a woman entertained for more than a few nights? Sure, I might not be cut out for love like they were, but that didn't mean I couldn't maintain a steady partner.

Asher dealt the last card in the middle of the table, revealing a seven of spades. I had the nut flush, and I did my best not to react as Ethan threw out his bet—one of his three yachts.

"It's okay," Ethan said, continuing the conversation like he hadn't just bet his luxury vacation home on the water. Too bad it was about to be mine. "We get it. We're not trying to change you. We're just saying that we've never seen you even bother to date someone longer than three days."

"You didn't, either," I said. "Not before Alex." I nodded to where she sat next to Daisy, and she grinned at me. "So, you aren't really one to talk."

"Touché." Ethan grinned. "If you're struggling with what to bet," he continued. "I'd love that '64 Ferrari."

The mention of my father's favorite car hit me right in the chest, not that Ethan meant it to. I couldn't blame him for wanting it—it was a spectacular car—but it was my dad's. The familiar sensation of grief trickled lightly into my veins, less

than when Bristol and I had first lost our parents, thanks to the passing of time, but still very present.

“That confident in your hand, huh?” I asked, playing off the fact that I had the best hand out there.

“Try me,” Ethan said.

He must have a flush too and didn’t put me on the higher spades.

“Or we could keep talking about how you can’t compare your quick charms to something sustainable,” Ethan added, smirking. He was trying to shake me up, get me off the hand. It probably would’ve worked if I didn’t have the best one.

“You guys have no idea,” I said, shaking my head. I couldn’t believe they thought they were different from me. I could easily do what they were saying I couldn’t. “How do you know I’m not dating someone right now?”

Asher and Wes shared a look before laughing.

“Do you see anyone in this room?” I asked, motioning to the women who were all attached to someone at the table in one way or another. “Normally, I have at least one woman here, but not this trip. Haven’t you wondered why?”

Now *that* got their attention. I was full of shit, but they deserved it, ribbing me like they were. Truth was, I’d been... tired in preparation for this month’s game. I’d been bouncing back and forth between NYC and Calgary—my two main homes—so much that I often woke up and didn’t remember which bed I was in. Add to that my trips to Charleston to see my little sister Bristol, and I felt beyond restless...like I couldn’t find solid ground. The idea of dragging a random woman who was only interested in the monetary perks I could offer on this trip sounded like a chore.

“You’re saying you have a girlfriend?” Ethan asked.

“Are you going to call his bet or not?” Doyle asked, but I waved him off, totally ignoring him.

“Maybe,” I answered Ethan.

“Bullshit,” Weston aptly called, but I was *so* into this challenge now.

“Where is she then?” Asher asked.

“Downstairs,” I blurted without really thinking, a shit habit of mine.

Ethan laughed, then tilted his head. “You’re serious?”

“Call,” I said, wanting to take the spotlight off what I’d gotten myself into. I threw in my equivalent chip, and Ethan proudly turned over a flush. It was just lower than mine.

“Damn,” he said when he saw my winning hand. “Didn’t put you on the ace.”

“Clearly,” I said, raking in the chips.

“Why didn’t you raise me?” Ethan asked, eyeing me.

Because I’d been too eager to get out of the lie I’d dove right into. *Shit*.

“You had the best hand, and you knew it,” Ethan pushed.

“Maybe I didn’t want to take any more of your prized possessions.”

“Since when has that ever stopped you before?” Ethan asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Gareth asked as Asher dealt a new hand. “He didn’t want us pressing him on the dating stuff anymore. Because he’s full of shit.” He barely smiled, but I saw it. Fucker was getting me back for earlier.

I glanced at my cards and folded when it came to my action.

“That makes sense,” Ethan said. “So, about this imaginary girlfriend—”

“She’s not imaginary,” I cut him off.

Okay, now what the hell was I doing? Why did it bother me so much?

Sure, all but Gareth had found the loves of their lives. Partners who supported them, challenged them, went on trips

with them without expecting millions of dollars' worth of luxuries in the process...but that didn't mean *I* wanted it.

"Then go get her," Wes challenged. "You know we'd all love to meet her."

"You said she was downstairs," Ethan pressed.

I laughed, pushing away from the table. "Okay, I will," I said. "And then you're all going to wipe those smug looks off your faces."

My friends laughed as I headed out of the room and into the elevator that would take me down to the club level of the hotel. It was one of NYC's most popular hotspots for nightlife after all—which is why I'd bought this building a few years ago.

The elevator doors glided open, and I stepped out, immediately entrenched in thumping music and muted lighting. The elevator was roped off and guarded for me and my guests only, and the bouncer nodded toward me as I headed past him.

"Girlfriend, girlfriend," I muttered to myself as I navigated through the throngs of people dancing, drinking, or sitting in booths lining the walls. I scanned the crowd, looking for someone, *anyone*, who would play the role for me.

I mean, how hard could it really be to get a girlfriend, anyway?

"They don't have any snacks here?" a light voice whined from beside me as I rounded the bar. "Ugh. What kind of place did you drag me to, Jesse?"

Damn, the woman in question was gorgeous, with emerald green hair with lighter green streaks that framed the most beautiful face I'd ever seen. She had full lips that were in the cutest pout as she stared up at an extremely tall, dark-haired guy. She had stunning hazel eyes that made her look almost otherworldly with all the gold shimmering in them, but she wore a casual black sparkly romper and well-worn sneakers that screamed innocent to me.

“Um, only the hottest, hard-to-get-into club in the city? You’re welcome,” her friend Jesse said.

“Okay, fair,” she said. “But I’m *hungry*. I don’t care how exclusive the club is, there should always be a food option.”

I laughed, totally shook by the knockout currently food-shaming my club.

She looked behind her and up, her eyes meeting mine before she spun back around.

“Excuse me,” I said, remembering why I was here in the first place. “This is going to sound strange,” I continued once I gained her attention, “but would you like to earn ten thousand dollars for thirty minutes of your time?”

“More power to you,” she said, shaking her head. “But I’m not a worker.”

I blinked a few times, shock blazing through me at that response—first, by her assuming I thought she was a sex worker, and second, by the chillness in which she’d responded.

It made me laugh.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” I said. “I need someone to pretend to be my girlfriend to prove a point to my friends. Ten grand. No questions asked.”

“Wait, *what?*” She fully turned around to face me, shock coloring her features.

“I’m serious. Are you in?”

“I...”

“Who the hell are you?” her friend asked, stepping up to her side. He was almost as tall as me, draped in some serious clothes I knew Bristol would love to take a closer look at.

“Fuck,” I said. “Are you two together?” I wasn’t about to start a fight over this.

“No,” she quickly answered.

“Babe,” he said, lowering his voice. “This is a line. He’s not serious—”

I pulled out the cash I kept in my pocket on game nights, showing her how serious I was.

“Holy shit,” Jesse said. “I take that back.”

“Ohmigod,” she said looking from the money to me and back again. “Are you that desperate for a fuck?”

I blinked at hearing the word come from such a light voice, a jolt of heat spearing down my spine. “I don’t want to fuck you,” I said, then tilted my head. “That’s not to say I wouldn’t take you up on the offer, but for now, I just want you to be my girlfriend for half an hour.”

Jesus, it sounded as awful in my head as out of it.

“Cash first,” Jesse spoke on her behalf, and she smacked his stomach. He laughed, sipping from his drink. “What, girl, don’t turn the universe down when it’s trying to give you a gift wrapped in a hot-as-sin package. I mean, come on, he looks like the duke from the first season of Bridgerton. Be a duchess for a minute,” he teased her.

I pursed my lips, nodding my thanks to him.

“Time really is of the essence here,” I said.

“Why?” she asked, looking at me skeptically.

“I’m in the middle of a very important poker game upstairs, and my friends don’t believe I have a girlfriend and I want to prove them wrong.”

“By *buying* one?”

I shrugged. “Desperate times.”

She laughed, and I couldn’t stop the smile that shaped my lips at the sound.

“Why me?” she asked, glancing around the packed club. “There are tons of women—”

“Ah, but none of them have your eyes,” I said. “I’m a sucker for all those gold flecks wrapped in green,” I continued, glancing at her hair. “So is your hair,” I said, and my fingers itched to feel if the strands were as soft as they looked.

“It’s also the color of all that money he has in his hand,” Jesse said, nudging her toward me.

She furrowed her brow. “No sex? No weird stuff? All I have to do is say I’m your girlfriend?”

“I promise,” I assured her. “You may have to sit on my lap.”

“As girlfriends do,” Jesse said, and I grinned at the guy.

“Thirty minutes,” I said. “That’s it. Then you can come back down here and dance all night.”

She still looked skeptical, so I handed her the cash. “That’s yours no matter what,” I said, hoping that would earn me some trust. “And I have food upstairs.”

Her eyebrows raised at that.

“Jesse comes with me,” she said.

Relief untangled the tension in my chest, tension I didn’t even notice until it was gone.

“Absolutely,” I said, taking her free hand in mine. “This way.” They followed me into the private elevator, and she and Jesse started whisper-fighting like I wasn’t there at all, her saying *if we get killed it’s your fault*, which really made me laugh.

“I’m Crossland McClaren, by the way,” I hurried to say as the doors opened and we headed back into the game room.

My friends immediately fell silent when the three of us entered, and I tried not to look too smug at the shock on each of their faces. “Everyone, this is Jesse,” I said, pointing to the girl’s friend, only then realizing I was an absolute *idiot* who didn’t ask her for her fucking name.

“Aspen,” she said, saving me the embarrassment as she waved to the room. “Food,” she said the moment she spotted the bar across the room. “Can I, babe?” she asked, falling totally into the role so quickly it took me a second to keep up. “I’m starving.”

“Of course, pumpkin,” I said, laying it on thick. She headed toward the bar, and I couldn’t keep my eyes off her luscious ass. The girl had legs for days. Even in sneakers she was tall and curvy, and I knew she would look even better splayed out beneath me.

As much as I’d like to make that happen after this whole debacle was over with, I knew better than anyone not to mix business with pleasure, and right now, she was technically an employee.

I sat back down at the table, and Asher dealt me into the next hand, which I folded just as Aspen came over to me a few minutes later, having satisfied herself with the snacks. I scooted back just enough to pull her into my lap, sighing softly when she settled herself there easily.

“How long have you two been dating?” Weston asked.

“Three weeks,” I answered before she could.

“Three super fun weeks,” she added, shifting slightly so she could wrap an arm around my neck.

Fuck me, she smelled like citrus and rose and if she kept wiggling her ass like that, we were going to have bigger problems on our hands than trying to pull this off. The glittering romper she wore showed off her thighs as she sat perched on my lap, and it took all of my willpower to keep from skimming my thumb across her bare skin.

I kept my arms around her but my hands on the table as I waited for the next hand to be dealt. I folded the next few, happy when the sixth hand gave me a couple of lower connecting cards I could actually play.

“What’s the buy-in?” Aspen asked, the first question she’d asked in the twenty-or-so minutes she’d been here as we threw in our chips.

Doyle laughed. “More than you can afford, sweetheart.”

“Don’t,” I said with lethal clarity, “*ever* talk to her like that.”

“Fuck off, Crossland,” he said, waving me off. “You’ve been on me since day one. What more can you do?”

“A lot,” I assured him. “Back off or you’ll find out.”

Doyle rolled his eyes but focused on his hand.

“It’s an invite-only game,” I explained in a softer tone to Aspen. “But you’re here now. Want to play my hand?”

“Not with those cards,” she said, and Ethan and Gareth laughed.

“In that case,” Gareth said. “Raise.”

I groaned, but called because of the draw Asher dealt on the flop.

“Oops,” Aspen whispered into my ear, concern lining her face.

I smoothed my free hand down her back in reassurance. “All good,” I said. “I promise.”

To my surprise, she relaxed into my touch, and then laughed when she spotted Jesse across the room, making himself at home with Daisy, Brynn, and Alex.

Asher dealt the turn, and I missed my straight draw again, but called Gareth’s bet in case I hit on the river. Ethan called too.

“Oh,” Aspen said, as her phone chimed in the small clutch she carried. “It’s my sister. I’ve got to take this, babe,” she said, pushing off my lap. “You’ll come dance with me later, right?” She motioned to Jesse, who reluctantly got up and followed her toward the door.

“Definitely,” I said, more than a little shocked she’d set a timer. Thirty minutes had flown by. I didn’t realize I was hoping she’d lose track of time with me and want to stay longer. “Tell Craig I said let you back up,” I said. “In case you get tired of dancing.”

She winked at me, then blew me a kiss for good measure. I couldn’t help but smile as she and Jesse headed out.

I cleared my throat and focused on the hand, which had paused because Asher hadn't dealt the last card yet.

"We playing or..?"

"*Bullshit* she's your girlfriend," Wes said.

I shook my head. "Did you not just see her?"

"She looked pretty into him," Brynn said in my defense, and I nodded my thanks to her.

"Anyone can look into someone in the beginning," Wes countered. "Doesn't mean it's a relationship."

I sighed, but shook my head.

Ethan contemplated for a few seconds before a wicked smile overtook his expression.

Oh fuck.

"Put your money where your mouth is, Cross," Ethan said in a mocking tone. "Three months of monogamy with Aspen," he continued.

"Oh, here we go," Alex chided in from where she sat with Brynn and Daisy. "What?" she asked when they gave her a questioning look. "You guys did it to me and look how that worked out!"

She wasn't wrong. My bet against Ethan that he couldn't make a woman fall for him longer than a week led to him meeting the love of his life.

That wasn't what was happening here, though.

"Of course, I'll be monogamous in a relationship," I said.

I just didn't happen to be in a real one, not that they needed to know that.

"Then write it on a chip," Ethan challenged me, eyeing my blank chips. "If you win, who cares? You don't have to stick with it. Don't have to *try*. But if you lose to me? You have to stick with it, and if you can't...I get that '64 Ferrari."

I swallowed hard, analyzing my hand. I still had several outs, and he could be bluffing. With the way he was talking, I

was leaning more toward he was bluffing.

Gareth folded his cards, wanting no part in it.

Fuck it. I called.

The river came.

I didn't get my straight.

Ethan checked, and I did the same.

He had a pocket pair of kings that annihilated my hand.

Shit.

Asher and Wes burst out laughing, and the girls gasped.

"Here we go again," Doyle grumbled.

"If you don't like the way we play, feel free to leave," Gareth said.

Doyle didn't respond, and I couldn't throw in my own jab because I was too busy wondering how I'd pull off this bet because there was no way in hell I was losing that car to Ethan.

"I'm out," I said, pushing away from the table.

If I was going to get Aspen to agree to be my girlfriend for three months, I had to act fast.

Aspen

Officially weirdest night *ever*.

My sneakers scuffed against the concrete as we made our way out of the club. I knew we could've stayed and danced and drank, but the events of the night made it impossible.

I could still feel Crossland's hands on my hips, could still smell the cedar and cinnamon of his scent, could still hear the way his voice shaped my name, and it was all making my head spin. Not to mention the stack of hundreds I now had shoved into my small black clutch.

"I can't believe you wanted to leave," Jesse said as he kept pace with me. "If I were you, I would absolutely have milked that guy for all he was worth."

"If you were me, you would've negotiated your way into a much higher price," I said, chuckling as we finally made it past the line of people waiting to get into the club.

"Damn straight," he said. "I know my worth, unlike *some* of my best friends." He eyed me knowingly.

I flashed him an equally knowing look, silently expressing that *that* subject was not up for discussion.

"What?" he asked, ignoring my look completely. "You didn't see the way he was looking at you. You totally could've gotten more out of him."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Because that's how life works."

“Apparently,” Jesse said as we pulled off to the side of the building, settling into an open alcove while we chatted. “I mean, according to the ten thousand in your purse, anyway.”

I couldn’t argue with him there, but I also couldn’t imagine getting any more out of the rich mystery man with eyes like an Artic lake. I could barely wrap my head around the last hour of the night, let alone think about working some sort of angle to get more money out of him.

The last thing I ever thought about was *me*.

Almost my entire life has been about my sister, Brecken—taking care of her, making sure she was fed, clothed, and healthy. Making sure she got enough rest for school, making sure she got into the college of her dreams...the college I was still struggling to pay for thanks to my parents being completely absent since I was fifteen years old.

At least when I turned eighteen, I’d been able to get custody rights over Brecken, but it was a yearlong battle that cost me thousands of dollars to get my parents to sign over the rights.

So, yeah, like Jesse implied, I didn’t exactly know my value...because I gave it all to Brecken. I always had. It had always been me and her, and I always did everything I could to protect her from my parents until I could safely get her out of that toxic-as-hell environment. I would continue to give all I had to her so that she could have the life she deserved.

And I didn’t have a *bad* life at all. Just a busy, complicated one.

I had a wonderful sister, an okay job that at least kept us fed, and I had the best friend a girl could ask for in Jesse. And now I had ten thousand dollars for thirty minutes of pretending to be some rich guy’s girlfriend. I mean, what were the freaking odds?

Jesse had dragged me out tonight because I’d been joking about how I was about to eat peanut butter and crackers for dinner for the third time this week, and then he took me to a

random club, where a random rich man asks me to fall into his lap?

Again, weirdest night ever.

A crisp breeze chilled my warm skin as we lingered outside the building, the city's nightlife surrounding us in full swing. All the city's brightest and most beautiful were strutting down the sidewalks like it was their own personal runway. Everyone was hustling to and from social events looking as carefree and as fun as ever.

I *knew* I didn't look like that and I had no delusions that I would *ever* look like that. Not when I'd exhausted myself to the bones raising myself and my baby sister for the last decade, and I was okay with that life.

But, *sometimes*, on nights like this, when Jesse dragged me out of my studio apartment in Brooklyn and brought me into the city, I played pretend.

I *loved* pretending.

That's probably why I'd been so good at the role Crossland asked of me.

Beyond watching Brecken thrive, there was nothing I enjoyed more than escaping my daily grind. Whether that be in a book, a great movie, or a night out with Jesse where I pretended like I was any other twenty-something with their whole life ahead of them—chasing down a hard-earned career or starting a passion project that I'd dreamed about my entire life.

Brecken *was* that passion project for me. Ensuring she could put her brilliant mind to the test at her dream college.

“Do you want to go somewhere else?” Jesse asked as we lingered outside of the club. “Or do you want to go get some food?”

I definitely had that post-thrill buzz radiating beneath my skin. I wasn't exactly ready to go to bed, but I knew for a fact I couldn't go back to that club. If I did, I'd be looking over my shoulder, hoping that the rich guy might make another

appearance. Not because I wanted his money, but because he had stunning blue eyes that turned me into a puddle.

It had been *so* damn long since I'd felt any kind of physical connection, and one touch from him had me on fire. I could still feel it, that slight ache between my thighs, that edged hunger for affection, for release.

Funny, I'd kept those feelings buried for months, but one scrap of attention from Crossland and I was practically panting.

It'd obviously been too long since my last one-night stand, and if we'd stayed in that club, I'd be hoping to score that with him. One night. That's all I ever allowed myself, *if* I ever felt that chemistry with someone. I worked too much, and history had proven that the second men figured out I had zero aspirations other than to work and make enough to get my sister through college and keep us fed, they bailed.

"Food always sounds good," I finally said, even though I'd stuffed my face with snacks in Crossland's VIP game suite, or whatever the hell it was called, that rested above the club.

I was no stranger to cards, but I didn't understand their betting system in the slightest. The chip values didn't make sense to me, but I guess when you could throw away ten grand for thirty minutes of someone's time, the poker bets wouldn't be standard.

"Food it is," Jesse said. "Do you want to go to that street vendor you love so much? It's only a few blocks away."

My eyebrows pricked up at the idea of sinking my teeth into my favorite taco. It would certainly be the cherry on top of this strange evening.

"That sounds like perfection," I said, and then grinned. "And since I just got a new deposit," I added, tapping my little black clutch for emphasis. "I'm buying."

For once, I thought to myself, my heart deflating.

Sometimes the guilt of not being able to treat Jesse as much as he treated me was unbearable. But Jesse always waved off my concerns, saying that our friendship wasn't one-

sided, and that money had nothing to do with why he adored me. Of course, that was easy for him to say when he hadn't had to worry about money since his custom clothing line went viral on social media two years ago.

He was one of those special talents that came around once in a decade, and he was so in demand that in order to keep the integrity of his custom line—all the pieces he made by hand himself—he had to release his clothes in quarterly drops. They always sold out and often crashed his website within seconds of going live.

I was lucky enough to know him before his fame, having served him a caramel macchiato with a triple shot years ago when he was having a bad day. I helped talk him through it, and we'd been inseparable since. He's the reason I was wearing the sleek romper I did now. Without him, I'd still be in my five-year-old yoga pants and a T-shirt. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but I didn't think an exclusive Manhattan club would approve.

Jesse extended his arm, and I looped mine through it. He turned us in the direction that would take us toward my favorite street vendor—

“Aspen! Wait, Aspen!” I heard Crossland calling my name, and Jesse stopped, spinning us around just in time to see him skidding to a stop before us. His chest heaved as if he'd run through the club and out of it in order to catch up to us.

Jesse kept his arm in mine and stepped just slightly in front of me like he thought Crossland might try to snatch me up and drag me back upstairs again.

A little flutter of heat raced through me at the thought of being in Crossland's arms again, and I reminded myself that I was an independent woman who had been taking care of myself since I was fifteen and the last thing I needed was a man coming in to save the day.

That shut that needy little feeling down real quick.

“How would you like to make a million dollars?” Crossland asked, not a hint of amusement or playfulness in his

tone. He said it as seriously as if he were asking if I preferred coffee over tea.

“Excuse me?” I asked. Who *was* this guy?

Crossland grinned, smoothing down the lapels of his suit jacket. “Look, I just lost a massive bet and I need you to be my exclusive girlfriend for three months. I’ll be *damned* if I lose to Ethan Berkeley—”

“Ethan Berkeley?” Jesse asked, looking down at me and then back at Crossland. “What did you say your name was again?” he asked.

“Crossland McClaren,” he answered.

Jesse released me, pulling out his phone and typing away on the screen.

“Holy shit,” Jesse said. “You’re...you’re *Crossland McClaren*.”

“Yes,” Crossland drug out the word. “I thought we already established that.” He smiled, his eyes solely on me.

Heat trickled into my veins, and I shifted on my feet under that stare.

“*Damn*,” Jesse said, nudging me as he bent down to show me his phone. “He owns the Calgary NHL team.”

I looked at the screen, noting the numerous pictures scattered across the browser he had opened. One picture had a quick bio underneath explaining Crossland was a billionaire NHL owner with a variety of other companies, some I recognized and some I didn’t. The rest of the pictures showed him either with other people like Ethan Berkeley and Asher Silas, fellow franchise owners, or with multiple models that I’d seen in Vogue or movie stars that plastered the big screen.

My lips parted open, shock radiating through me. This was the guy whose lap I was just on? The one I’d called *babe* in a fun little game I thought would quickly be over and done with?

“One million,” Crossland said again. “All you have to do is pretend to be my girlfriend for three months.”

Jesse pocketed his phone while I struggled to find my voice.

“Nah,” Jesse said. “You may be who you say you are, but we’ve seen documentaries like this. I’m not letting you make my girl into your weird rich-guy pet.” The seriousness and defensiveness in Jesse’s tone actually made me laugh.

Which made Crossland tilt his head, an effortless smile shaping his lips that I couldn’t stop looking at for some reason.

“Look, I don’t trust anyone,” I finally said. “Thirty minutes was a giant leap for me. Three months would be impossible. No matter how cute you are. But thanks for the offer.”

I needed that taco now more than ever, and tried pulling Jesse that direction, but Crossland stepped into our path, his hands raised like he wanted to make sure we knew he wasn’t about to grab me.

“I get it,” he said. “Trust me, or don’t...trust me.” He cringed. “Look, I’m not a creep. I know that probably isn’t clear with me approaching you on the street and all, and making you sit on my lap earlier for ten grand, but I digress. *Please*, just meet me here at three p.m. tomorrow and I’ll have a better business proposal for you.” Crossland handed me a business card, and I took it with a sense of surrealism.

Was this really happening?

“Please?” Crossland asked, those blue eyes locking with mine in full pout mode.

I’m sure he’d used that look on more than one person to get his way.

“Three p.m. tomorrow. Give me the ten minutes I need to show you I’m not a creep.”

I stuffed the business card into my little clutch that was now about to burst at the seams thanks to the wad of hundreds he’d given me earlier.

“We’ll see,” I said, and then spun around before I could stand there and say more. Before I could ask all the questions

that were brimming in the back of my mind.

Jesse looked back for me, more than once, giving me exquisite details on the fact that Crossland didn't take his eyes off of us as we walked away, not until we were completely out of sight from each other.

I don't know why that made me smile, but it did. Guess there was something to be said for holding the attention of somebody supposedly so powerful, but I didn't truly know who he was. He could be one of those super scary rich guys who collected people like pets and diamonds like candy.

Tonight had been way too weird, but as we stopped in front of the line that snaked in front of my favorite street vendor, I managed to get my breathing in check and my mind clear.

I'd chalk this up to a hilarious story I'd tell repeatedly throughout the years, and I'd never see Crossland again.

Because this wasn't some romantic comedy movie or Hallmark special where some gorgeous billionaire sweeps in and fixes my life. That's not how the real world worked.

In the real world, I preferred food truck tacos over exclusive bars.

In the real world, I worked as a barista, not a high-paid escort that helps some rich guy win a bet.

* * *

"You didn't give me oat milk! You gave me whole milk. I ordered *oat milk!*"

"No, you said whole—"

"I paid seven dollars for this latte," the lady snapped, smacking her hands down on the counter that separated us. "Now move your ass and make my drink the right way. Or do I need to talk to your manager?"

I was half-tempted to go to the back and grab Chels because she certainly would get a kick out of throwing this customer out, but instead, I took a deep breath and spun around to make the lady a fresh drink.

I was too wiped out to fight today, and she was my third angry customer in the past two hours. Once I finished making her drink, I handed it to her, plastering the best smile possible on my face.

“So sorry for the inconvenience, ma’am,” I said.

The woman rolled her eyes and snatched the cup out of my hands before stomping away.

There was a break in the rush, and I rubbed my palms into my eyes, trying to generate some life there. I’d had a headache since ten minutes into my shift, which I started at five a.m.

It was just after twelve now, and I was practically dead on my feet, but I picked up a few extra hours to cover for someone who was out sick.

Everyone here always counted on me to cover their shift, not because I was super dependable, but because I needed the money, and everyone knew it.

Brecken may have gotten a few grants for her first year at NYU, but I’d blown through my life savings on the rest of tuition. And it was only the *first* semester. I had no idea how I was going to buy her a second, but I would never tell her that. I just needed one of these fucking banks to cut me a break.

I had an appointment with a loan advisor after my shift—the third bank I’d tried this month.

I cleaned up the counters, refilling the cream and sugar stations and the napkin holders, losing myself in the routine of my day-to-day at work. I thoroughly enjoyed the quiet between rushes, especially after today had been a fuck-all of a day. I could probably blame it on how late I stayed out with Jesse last night, but I’d needed it, so it made whatever hell came my way today worth it.

The memory of being perched on Crossland’s lap flashed red hot through my mind.

It wasn’t the first time he—and his offer—had crossed my mind today. The ten grand was absolutely going to give me some breathing room for the next two months, especially if I budgeted properly.

But with the debt piling up, and the interest killing me on the two credit cards I'd maxed out to get Brecken necessities for her dorm room and books for the semester, it was hard *not* to think about his offer. I mean, one million was probably nothing to him, but it would change my life.

I was already one of the *best budget bitches around*, according to Jesse, so it's not like I'd blow the newly found cash on—

No, what was I thinking?

I couldn't possibly take Crossland up on his offer. Who knew what he *actually* wanted me to do? He might claim he needed me to pretend to be his girlfriend for three months to win a bet, but what if all he wanted was an on-call fuck? Or maybe he'd be like that guy in that movie and he'd trap me in a locked room and surgically remove pieces of me to feed to other rich people?

An ice-cold shiver raced down my spine, and I laughed at myself as I finished tidying up. My imagination and the ability to picture the worst-case scenario in every possible situation was some unavoidable gift of mine.

Crossland could've done a lot more in the thirty minutes he'd bought with that ten grand last night, but he hadn't. I'd been perched on his lap, even going as far as wiggling around a little to see how he'd react, and he hadn't so much as *attempted* to take advantage. Hell, he'd barely even touched me unless he needed to. I highly doubted he was like the murderer in the movie, but one could never be too careful.

Besides, like I concluded last night, I wasn't living in a fairytale. Some gorgeous billionaire wouldn't magically fix my problems. They'd be fixed by hard work, picking up these extra shifts, and doing my best to get a loan at this bank.

An hour and two irritated customers later, I finally clocked out and changed into what I hoped was a presentable, responsible, adult-looking outfit. One that said, *I'm a trustworthy individual who you'd love to loan money to.*

I headed to the bank a few blocks away, making it to my appointment ten minutes early. Lucky for me, the loan advisor was ready for me, politely shaking my hand across her desk as we both took our designated seats.

“Miss Reed, we’ve extensively reviewed your application for a loan. I’ve spoken to three of my superiors, and unfortunately, we can’t approve you at this time.” She dipped her head slightly, a heavy dose of pity in her eyes as she looked at me.

I probably would’ve curled inward with shame at that look, the one I’d seen all too often when people found out how broke I was, if I hadn’t been so busy trying my best not to break down in tears.

This was the third time I’d been turned down.

“I have a steady job,” I blurted desperately. “I work over sixty hours a week. My credit score wasn’t that bad, was it?”

“Oh no,” she said, shaking her head as she flipped through the papers on her desk. “It wasn’t your credit score. You just don’t have the equity or assets that we would need in order to ensure that the loan would be repaid.”

I tilted my head. “So, I need to prove that I have enough money to not need this loan to be approved for it? What kind of sense does that make?” I tried to keep the sharpness out of my tone but was unsuccessful.

After being turned down for the third time, I was at the end of my rope. Cost of living was insane, and I lived in Brooklyn. It’s not like I lived in the city or in a high-rise. I lived in a very cheap ground-level studio apartment. I ate packaged ramen and boxed mac and cheese most of the time. Things like good bread, milk, and eggs were luxuries to me.

Thankfully, every shift I worked, I earned a free meal—a salad or a chicken wrap or one of the protein snack boxes. Thank the universe I’d been able to get Brecken on the cafeteria plan. I’d never seen the girl so excited in my entire life, even more than when she got accepted into NYU. When she found out she had unrestricted access to the cafeteria

twenty-four seven, you would've thought I handed her the keys to a brand-new Mercedes.

My heart sank at the reasoning behind the excitement—a childhood filled with the stress of not knowing when her next meal would be or where it would come from. Once again, the hatred toward my parents swelled to the point of pain. I shoved it down, focusing on the positives—Brecken was attending NYU, the college she'd busted her ass off in school to get into, and she had finally stopped insisting she skip a year and get a job like me. I refused to let her see the struggle because of that fact. The last thing I wanted her doing was putting off her dreams because of money. I could handle this.

“There has to be something you can do,” I said, but the loan advisor just looked at me like I was making the situation awkward.

If I didn't figure out a way to get this loan, there was no way I could afford a second semester for Brecken. They wouldn't approve us for financial aid, and she'd exhausted every grant application she could.

We were at an impasse.

I leaned my elbows on the desk, raking my fingers through my hair as I barely held back the tears enough to look the woman in the eyes. Maybe if I was open and honest with her, she'd do something with all that pity she was throwing my way. I normally kept my little sob story to myself, but I was out of ideas.

“Look,” I said. “I'll get a second job if I have to. Hell, I'll come work for *you*. I'll clean your house, run your errands, or answer phones here. *Please*. I need this loan to make sure that my little sister gets the education that she's worked her entire life for. I don't want this money to buy a yacht or put a down payment on a house I don't need. I want it so my sister can go to college. Can you understand that?”

The loan advisor furrowed her brow, pursing her lips enough that I thought she might be entertaining pulling some strings for me to get this loan.

But then she shook her head, and my heart completely broke.

“If there was something I could do, I would. But I can’t,” she said. “You *have* to qualify. You have to check the boxes, which you don’t. Also, we’re not hiring now, but you can keep checking in—”

I scooted away from her desk, the sound of the chair scraping against the linoleum cutting off her attempts at empty empathy. A couple tears rolled down my cheeks that I quickly swiped away, and I sucked in a deep breath before letting it out slowly.

“Thank you for your time.” I hurried out of her office, out of the building, and I kept walking, lost in the emotions strangling me.

I didn’t check the boxes.

No shit.

I hadn’t checked the boxes in high school, the teachers and advisors always disappointed in my tardiness or my inability to stay awake in class, never once asking me why I was so tired or why I always showed up late.

I hadn’t checked the boxes when I was thinking about going to community college because of my terrible grades in high school, and I certainly didn’t check the boxes at any of the higher paying jobs I’d applied to because of the same reasons.

It was one stupid, debilitating cycle that I was sick of being a part of.

I was smart where it mattered—sure, I couldn’t do quantum physics, but I could follow directions to a T and socialize like the best of them, even when my battery was drained. I was a hard worker, and I rarely complained, even when I had a constant stream of customers ready to call me an idiot for getting their seven-dollar coffee wrong. I never called in sick, and I always picked up extra shifts. I deserved that loan as much as Brecken deserved to get the education she’s always wanted.

I blew out of breath, pausing when I came to a bench and sat down, watching the hustle and bustle along the city sidewalks as people went to and from events, work, school, lunch dates, and who knew what else. There were people scamming other people for money every day, there were people selling products that broke seconds after opening the package, and there were people who stole and lied and cheated to get the money they needed, and here I was trying to do it the ethical way, and I couldn't get approved because I didn't check a couple fucking boxes?

I shook my head, anger overtaking the despair that was swirling inside me. I hated when my mind lashed outward, blaming the world for my problems rather than accepting that *I'd* failed somewhere along the way. I should've tried harder in school, should've ignored the exhaustion and pushed through, should've...should've...

My phone rang and I dug it out of my purse, prepared to send whoever was calling to voicemail. But it was Brecken, so I swiped the screen to answer.

"Hey Brec," I said, forcing my voice into a normal tone.

"Hey, sis," she said. "Guess what?"

"What?" I asked, a small smile lifting my lips at the sound of her voice. She sounded so excited.

"I got an A on my economics exam. Me and some friends are heading to the cafeteria to celebrate, but I couldn't wait to tell you."

"Nicely done! I know you were worried about that one."

"Economics isn't really my forte," she said. "But now I can breathe."

Her silence after was so loud I could hear it. "What else is going on?"

"Well," she said, hesitant. "Um...my English Lit class assigned a few new books I have to read over the next month. I checked the library on campus and the local one but..."

My heart sank, but I breathed in deep. “Oh, no worries,” I said. “I bet you can find them online, right? Or that half-price book store you love? I’ll transfer some more money into your account to make sure you have enough.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “I don’t want to put you out. If you’d support me getting a job then I could—”

“Your job is school,” I cut her off. “That’s hard enough. I’ve got this. You worry about getting those books you need, let me worry about the finances.”

Brecken sighed. “Okay, thanks, Aspen.” Background chatter erupted over her end. “My friends are calling me. You’re the best. Love you.”

“Love you,” I said, barely able to keep the crack from my voice as we hung up.

I swallowed hard, already mentally calculating what I had left in my checking account. Luckily, I had the cash I needed to deposit, and even though I’d already budgeted for most of it, I could make some room to cover the newly required books. But damn, I hated that sinking feeling on my chest over such a small shift in expenses.

I opened my bag, searching for some lip balm, my fingers hitting the contents I’d dumped in there from the small clutch I’d carried last night.

My fingers brushed a small piece of cardstock, and I pulled out the business card Crossland handed me last night. I glanced at my phone, checking the time.

He’d told me to meet him at three.

An hour ago, I’d been certain I would never even consider his offer—thanks to all the true crime documentaries I watched and seriously not wanting to end up being a steak in some rich guy’s skillet—but I didn’t know what else to do. I was sitting here stressing over a few book purchases, let alone tuition and bills.

I checked my face in my phone, making sure I didn’t look like I’d been crying before I forced myself to move. I looked as fresh as I could, despite a little despair in my eyes, and

quickly decided it didn't matter. He'd already made me the offer, so I might as well go see if it still stood.

Twenty minutes later, I walked inside a spacious building where the top ten floors were dedicated to McClaren Inc. I didn't have a clue what that meant or what the company did, but I was ushered in like they'd been expecting me. Security deposited me in an expansive office with a view of the city skyline that literally took my breath away, saying that Mr. McClaren would be in shortly and that I was to make myself at home.

And really? I *could* make myself at home in this office. Two of my studio apartments could fit inside the office, which was occupied with rich leather furniture in one corner, bookcases filled with books that itched to be cracked, lush rugs sitting beneath walnut desks and tables, and floor-to-ceiling windows that were tinted just enough to make it comfortable to look at the sparkling city under the mid-day sun.

It was those windows I was drawn to, and I walked across his office, pausing before one to look down at the city below. It seemed never-ending from this height, stretching out with all the possibilities in the world.

But I felt like I was sinking, drowning with how much possibility I *couldn't* grasp.

Hello, pity party, let's just make this a whole damn vibe today.

It smelled like coffee and cinnamon in here, all things comforting and cozy, like it'd be easy to curl up on the oversize couch and take a nap. Something I hadn't expected for a billionaire's place of business, but then again, I'd never had any experience with a billionaire before.

I heard the door open and shut behind me, and I slowly turned around. The weight of the entire day, the entire last ten years, hit me all at once. As if everything had been driving me toward this destination, toward this spot, toward the deal I was about to make.

Was I really about to do this?

Was I really about to sell myself, my *body*—hell maybe even my soul—for a chance to give my sister a normal life?

Yes.

Fucking hell, I would do anything for that girl.

Crossland smiled at me, surprise making those blue eyes sparkle. In this light, he was more breathtaking than the view behind me.

I hadn't gotten a good look at him last night, not with the muted lights of the club, or the soft the light in the game room. He was tall and broad, with dark hair that was cropped close to his head, a neatly trimmed goatee dusting his strong jaw, and light brown skin that was smooth and stretched over muscles that his custom-tailored suit had a hard time hiding. His lips were full and really hard to ignore when he smirked like he was now.

Damn. Maybe being a steak wouldn't be so bad—

“I have to say I'm surprised you showed up,” Crossland said, stopping my erratic thoughts in their tracks.

“I have to say, I'm surprised, too,” I admitted, folding my arms over my chest. I was so out of place in this world, *his* world.

“I have something for you,” Crossland said, taking long strides toward his desk with a confident gait that had me standing up just a little straighter. He grabbed a file off his desk and handed it to me.

“Is this the contract?” I asked, only half teasing as I opened the folder, rifling through the papers inside.

Crossland laughed, then casually slid his hands inside his dress pants pockets. “That's a full background check,” he said. “My entire history, right down to the ticket I got last week for speeding.” He came closer to me, tapping the papers in my hand. “Everything in here usually requires an NDA signature before reading.”

I glanced up at him. “And yet here you are, handing it over to me,” I said unable to hide the bitterness in my tone after the long ass day. “I feel so special. If I get on my knees right now, will you throw in an extra million?”

I regretted the words the second they flew from my lips.

This wasn't his fault. It was my shitty attitude thanks to the day I'd had, and I was taking it out on him.

Crossland took a step back, smirking with nothing but challenge in his eyes.

“I don't pay for sex, sweetheart,” he said, his voice low and rough. “And if you're so offended by my offer,” he said, pointing toward the door. “You're more than welcome to get the fuck out.”

Crossland

Surprisingly, she didn't seem offended by my blunt response.

Instead, her eyes lit up with shock and delight, and just a hint of curiosity, all of which were quickly swallowed by some form of shame or hesitance which appealed to my more sensible side.

This wasn't a typical, everyday business transaction, and I was sure the situation was taking her out of her comfort zone.

Well, that made two of us.

I was just thrilled she'd actually shown up today.

"I'm sorry," she said, her shoulders dropping slightly as she glanced down at the folder in her hands. "This is all new to me. I'm not entirely convinced it's even real."

I nodded. "I understand that," I said, dropping my hand and sliding it into my pants pocket. "It's not like I've done this before, either."

She seemed surprised by that statement, tilting her head as she looked up at me, then down to the documents in her hand, then back again.

"You're pretty prepared for somebody who hasn't done this before," she said skeptically.

I laughed softly, then motioned to my desk. "Do you want to sit down and talk about this or are you about to bolt?"

She studied me for a few moments, something settling in her eyes before she walked to the chair across from my desk.

She settled into it, crossing one leg over the other. I couldn't help but note the move. She was effortlessly graceful, but she didn't exactly look comfortable. The professional outfit she wore hugged her body perfectly, but she didn't look like those were the clothes she'd normally wear, and it made me wonder what she would be completely relaxed in.

I walked around my desk and took the spot behind it, facing her.

"I'm prepared," I said, getting back to what she'd mentioned earlier. "Because I'm an entrepreneur. Whenever I make a deal, I make sure I do my due diligence. And since you haven't officially accepted my offer yet, I wanted to do everything in my power to ensure that you knew exactly what you were getting into."

"And what *exactly* am I getting into?" she asked. "Beyond the obvious of pretending to be your girlfriend for three months so you can win some sort of billionaire poker bet."

I chuckled at that, realizing how ridiculous it sounded when it came out of her mouth. I leaned back in my chair, contemplative.

"The thing is, I made a bet thinking I was going to win. I lost. And what I put at risk was something I actually can't afford to lose." The thought of losing my father's beloved car, one of the last things that we ever rode in together on our last boys' trip before he passed away, was unbearable, even when I knew it would go to my best friend. It's not like Ethan would trash the car or even sell it. Nevertheless, I couldn't part with it. I was kicking myself for ever even entertaining the idea in the first place.

"I'll do whatever it takes to not lose what I mistakenly put at risk," I continued. "Can you understand that?"

"More than you realize," she said softly, then shifted in her chair. "But you need my help to win? What kind of bet is that, anyway?" She continued without allowing me time to answer. "Like, why would you need a girlfriend in order to win the bet?"

That was a fair question.

“It’s the one thing Ethan thought I wouldn’t be able to do,” I explained. “He thought it would put me off the bet. My friends don’t believe I can be in a relationship longer than one night.” I hesitated, wondering if I should elaborate. Knowing the truth about my intimate habits might be a deal-breaker for her.

“One thing that you can understand about me, Aspen,” I continued. “Is that I’ll *never* lie to you. Hence the background check in front of you and all the personal details I normally keep close to the chest. I’m not exactly a relationship person. I love sex, and I love women, sometimes more than one at a time. I always make sure I’m upfront about my relationship stance and everything is always mutually consensual and beneficial. But my friends love to give me shit about it.” I sighed. “Plus, I might have made a similar bet against my friend, and he’s delivering some payback, even though he found the love of his life out of it. You’d think he’d be grateful, not spiteful,” I said, and a flicker of amusement played over her features.

“Anyway,” I continued, getting back on point. “It’s not that I’m against the idea of monogamy, but it’s never suited me. I don’t like being tied down. I enjoy playing the field and I’m not shy about it. Most of my friends have been falling in love, getting married, or getting engaged, and they thought it would be funny to make me pay for the fact that I’m in my thirties and still behave like I’m in college.” I shrugged.

There were definitely times I wished I had someone I could count on. Someone I could trust. Someone who shared my passion for life. Someone who cared enough to notice when I slipped into one of those shadowy spaces—the ones where the grief of losing my parents and running their empire and constantly questioning if I was making them proud threatened to swallow me whole.

But I already had nearly everything I could ever want—an NHL team, numerous successful business ventures, amazing friends, and the best sister anyone could ask for. What more could I really expect from life?

Often, I wondered if losing my parents was the price I had to pay in order to have what I do. Asking the universe for a person to love me...*really* love me and understand the parts about myself that I couldn't even get a grip on seemed like pushing it.

"Wait," Aspen said. "This little deal of ours. How is it going to convince your friends if you just *say* I'm your girlfriend, but you're out there having threesomes every other day?" she asked.

"Why just every other day?" I teased.

"Recovery time," she said, eyes widening.

I laughed, shaking my head. "I don't need that much recovery time.

"*Jesus,*" she muttered under her breath.

"And I have no intention of doing that while I'm with you," I hurried to add. "I'll take this as seriously as I would any other business venture," I explain, and the declaration made me think about the other investments that my assistant had lined up for me to look at later in the day. While I loved my hockey team and my other franchises, I was getting restless. I was itching for a new project. This was certainly new.

"If you agree to this," I said. "It'll be purely professional between us. To the outside world, you'll be my girlfriend. One I've been dating for three weeks already. You'll attend events with me, hold my hand, call me darling or babe or whatever it is people call each other in relationships these days, and in return, I'll pay you a million at the end of the three-month contract."

Aspen chewed on her bottom lip as she looked through the documents again, scanning the information about my background. The little anxious move was cute as hell and this side of sexy. I couldn't help studying her lips, all lush and kissable. And she was undeniably gorgeous, her colorful hair slightly chaotic as it framed her delicate face. And those eyes...they were absolutely killer.

I cleared my throat, shifting in my seat as my instincts took over. If she'd been anybody else, I would've already been working my charm on her and seeing if she'd be up for a little consensual no-strings-attached fun. But due to the nature of this deal, she was strictly off-limits.

Aspen closed the folder and looked at me. "No violence, no arrests. Squeaky clean, Crossland. That seems rare for a billionaire, doesn't it?"

I cocked an eyebrow at her. "I'm aware there are some wealthy individuals in the world who use their power to take advantage of people because they don't have a moral or ethical bone in their bodies. That's not who I am, and that's not who my friends are. We have money, and we've worked for every dime, but we don't abuse it."

Aspen nodded, studying me. "I'm seeing that," she said, but tilted her head. "You said you don't pay for sex."

"I don't," I said matter-of-factly.

"But you want me to be your girlfriend for three months... and you've said you're going to be monogamous during that time. So, how does that equate to you not paying for sex?"

My lips fell apart, no words escaping as I noted the uptick in her breathing.

Wow, she came in here fully thinking that I was contracting her not only to pretend to be my girlfriend, but use her for sex?

Jesus, and she was ready to agree to that?

I didn't fault anyone who made money as a sex worker, but that wasn't what I was trying to do here, and I was equally shocked she was contemplating accepting the deal while she assumed that was what came with it.

"For the outside world, I'll be your loyal boyfriend. You won't find me with anyone else during our three-month contract," I explained, wanting her to know I wasn't taking this situation lightly. "But for us...we won't be having sex."

An image painted itself all too quickly in my mind—me gently gripping her curved hips, lifting her onto this desk and

spreading those thighs—

No, fuck.

Business.

Professional.

“I won’t expect that of you,” I continued. “And it won’t be in the contract. I’ve never wanted to mix business and pleasure. This is strictly a business deal with quite a bit of money involved. If we were to cross that line...” I cringed, damning the fire licking through my veins as the fantasy in my mind begged to play out. “Don’t you think involving that would make this incredibly messy?”

It was one thing to have a mutually agreed upon one-night stand, but an entirely different thing to agree to a relationship, sex, *and* money.

Aspen visibly swallowed, the motion drawing my gaze to her neck and then lower, and I quickly snapped my eyes back to hers.

Damn it, she was gorgeous. And the longer I looked at her, the longer I spoke with her, the more I liked what I saw and heard. But that didn’t matter. Not if she took this deal.

If she didn’t? Maybe I’d ask her out to dinner.

But from the internal debate working itself out behind those beautiful eyes, I could tell she was in. She just needed to figure it out how to say so.

Aspen blew out of breath, then nodded. “I agree with that,” she said. “Sex always complicates things, but what about kissing? Won’t some of that be expected in public outings?”

“It could come up,” I said. “But if you’re not okay with that, we’ll work around it. The last thing I want to do is make you feel anxious or uncomfortable.”

“I’m okay,” she said. “With kissing. *If* the situation calls for it.”

I don’t know why that made me smile, but it did. “It sounds like we’re ready to get into the concrete details of the

contract,” I said. “Have we ventured into negotiations?” I asked playfully.

“I think we have,” she said. “But don’t you want to know more about my background? I mean, I didn’t think to show up with my personal records, but I could be *anybody*. I could be a horrible person or a con-woman after your fortune. How would you know?”

I laughed at the adorable way she said all the horrible things she could be.

“I’m very good at reading people,” I said. “And while you’re right, I don’t know a thing about you, I kind of have a sixth sense for when people are trying to screw me over.” I planted a studious gaze on her, my eyes lingering on the softer features of her face. “You’re a good person. That’s why I picked you last night.”

She pursed her lips. “You picked me because I was the first girl you saw in a slightly skimpy romper.”

“Did I think you looked absolutely stunning?” I asked, pushing away from the desk and rounding it. I stopped next to her, leaning against the desk as I looked down at her. “Did I think about how your legs would look wrapped around my hips as I fucked you into oblivion? Absolutely. I’d be crazy not to react to how damn attractive you are.”

Her breathing hitched again, evident by the way her chest rose and fell, but her eyes never strayed from mine.

“But your knockout good looks had nothing to do with why I chose you,” I continued. “You made me laugh,” I said. “All that sass about me not having proper food in my club. Plus, Jesse seems like an amazing guy. You are the company you keep.” I smiled at her. “But to be safe, with your consent, I’ll have my team do a thorough background check on you before we officially sign the contract.”

The slight heat in her eyes instantly shifted to something cold, something fearful.

Dread.

It was *dread*.

Fuck me, what kind of skeleton was in her closet that would make this deal more of a liability than an asset?

I folded my arms over my chest like I was prepping to take a blow.

“Where did you just go, Aspen?” I asked, my voice soft.

She blinked a few times, and I could’ve sworn there was something glittering there, almost like tears. Just the thought of that tugged at something in the center of my chest, a pit opening in my stomach that I’d never felt before.

“My past,” she finally answered. “I went to the past.”

I swallowed hard. “And?” I pressed. “What are you afraid I’ll find?”

“I’m broke,” she admitted, the words sounding like they were literally breaking her to admit even though she paired it with a casual shrug. “I’m a twenty-eight-year-old barista.”

“In your own shop?” I asked and immediately regretted the question when I saw her face fall.

“No, not my own shop. Just a barista.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” I said. “That doesn’t seem like a thing to worry you when I brought up your background check.”

“My parents...” Her face scrunched like the words were hard to force, and I could detect the pain in her voice that she tried to hide. “Are the *worst* people you can imagine. They’re the kind of people who lie to your face while stealing directly out of your pocket. They’re the kind of people who have children, so they can be paid by the state. They’re the kind of people who forget they have children, leaving them to fend for themselves at the age of five for days at a time.” She sighed. “They’re also addicts, and despite the many attempts in my adult years to get them the help they need, they’ve refused.” She fidgeted with the strap of her bag.

“I have a younger sister who I’ve been taking care of since I was ten. She just turned nineteen and got into the college of

her dreams, and I've worked my entire life to raise her and make sure she's had every opportunity my parents denied us.

"I got her out of the house the minute I could and cut ties with my parents, but they come around sporadically when they need things. Not that I've ever given them what they want... I've fed them before, given them a ride to clinics, nothing more. But I can imagine to somebody like you, who lives in the spotlight, that might be seen as a poor mark on your otherwise pristine portfolio."

Hearing her story unravel in front of me made me see things about her I hadn't noticed before. Like the slight exhaustion underneath her beautiful eyes, the weight she seemed to carry on her shoulders, and the determined attitude to do whatever it took to survive. It all made sense in a sad sort of way that made me want to wrap her in a comforting hug even though I barely knew her.

"One," I said. "I find it truly admirable that you did that for your sister, and I'm sure she appreciates it more than you'll ever know. I have a sister, and while I didn't have to raise her, I had to take care of her after our parents suddenly died. So I understand in some ways the toll that takes on you."

"Two," I continued. "Thank you for being open and honest with me about that. You didn't have to, and I appreciate it. I think that's what's going to make this contracted relationship work. Neither one of us attempting to lie to the other." I shifted against the desk, doing my best not to reach out and offer her a comforting gesture. It didn't really look like she needed it, but I couldn't deny the instinct I had to give it. "How often do your parents come around?"

She wasn't wrong about them being a liability, and if they were as bad as she said, then the second they found out she was dating me—which they likely would if they kept track of socialite media because that's just the life I lived—I'm sure they'd come sniffing around. It wasn't a deal-breaker, but it would definitely be something we'd need to prepare for.

Aspen sighed, shaking her head as she shrugged. "I haven't seen them in a year and a half." Her eyes went distant

for a moment, as if she was back in that memory, and she shuddered. The girl actually *shuddered* like she was remembering a moment with the grim reaper, not her estranged parents.

Adrenaline spiked my blood, protective instincts firing.

I just wanted to protect my investment, that's all.

“We can prepare for those kinds of situations,” I said. “Especially since you let me know ahead of time. I don’t want you to worry about it.”

She relaxed slightly.

“What *do* I need to worry about?” she asked after a few moments, then cleared her throat. “*If* I take this deal.”

I grinned at the way she was trying to play aloof, but she didn’t realize I’d been doing this for years. I could spot somebody who was already committed to the deal a mile away, but I played along, pushing off the desk and returning to my seat.

“I’m going to need you to be available,” I explained. “I spend half my time here in New York and half my time in Calgary where my team is, and in between I travel widely. Sometimes at the drop of a hat. Any girlfriend that I’d actually settle into a relationship with would be available to be at my side at any time.”

Aspen furrowed her brow. “That seems a little ridiculous,” she said. “And pretty one-sided. Would you really only pick a girlfriend whose only interest was traveling with you and being at your beck and call?”

I considered this, then shrugged. “That’s fair. Honestly, I’ve never really thought about what I’d expect out of a serious relationship. My friends’ fiancées and wives have careers of their own and they pick where they go when we travel as a group, but it’s important to me that during this time we show face. The more they see of you, the more they’ll believe you’re mine.”

Aspen worried that bottom lip between her teeth again, and I couldn’t help but want to relieve her of the pressure.

“Okay,” she said. “What else?”

“I’ll also need you to be monogamous to me. The second you’re seen out in public with me and declared my girlfriend, there’s a chance that paparazzi will take an interest in you. Your day-to-day routine, your night life, everything. If you’re out there trying to relieve an itch with someone who isn’t me, they’re going to report on it. I really don’t want that kind of publicity. I know it’s a lot to ask...three months is a long time to go without—”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” she cut me off, laughing anxiously as she shook her head.

“No, I do,” I pressed. “I’m not taking this lightly. I understand asking you to give up any sexual relationships for three months is intense, but this will be a part of my deal-breaker. If I’m going to stay committed, you have to stay committed, and I know if I’m not offering it then the urge might come up to seek the release elsewhere, and that can’t happen—”

“Again,” she cut me off. “Not an issue. I don’t do relationships either. I’ve never had time to even consider anything serious, and anyone who’s come close to even trying to date me more than once has run for the hills the second they realize that the only ambition I have is to take care of my sister.” She smiled. “Not an issue,” she reiterated.

Damn, that seemed seriously easy for her to agree to. If she was so willing to let go of the idea of sex for three months straight, she must not have had anyone treat her the way she deserved in the bedroom.

Or, she must know how to get herself off really well—

Fuck. Just a thought of her touching herself filled my mind and made my blood run hot.

Jesus, I couldn’t afford for my thoughts to go that direction, so I slammed an ice-cold wall against the fantasy and pressed on.

“All right,” I said. “That’s good to know, because if there was ever a breach in that stipulation of the contract, it will be

terminated.”

“I get it,” she said. “Anything that mars your public persona or reputation will void the contract. I told you about the one thing I was worried about, unless you think dating a *lowly* barista will bring you down a few notches, then I think we’re good.”

I smirked, narrowing my gaze at her. “You’re not lowly anything,” I said. “Do you love what you do?”

Aspen considered for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, I do.”

“Then that’s all that matters. As long as you take joy in what you do for a living, it doesn’t matter if you’re a barista or a billionaire. What matters is that you’re happy, so the whole *lowly* comment seems more of a *you* thing, doesn’t it?”

She pursed her lips at me, and I really liked the way she looked like she wanted to either throttle me or throw her arms around me.

“Fair,” she said, echoing my early sentiment. “There are times I really wish I had more money to give Brecken the life she deserves—hence me sitting in your office, entertaining this ridiculous idea in the first place. But when it comes down to it, we’re fed, we’re safe, and she’s chasing her dream. That’s all that matters to me, and I don’t care how I obtain it.”

“Well, maybe we can help you with the money thing,” I said, and she straightened in her chair.

“Right. About that...you said one million? After hearing all your requirements and how available I’ll need to be, I think it’s worth two.”

I blinked, shock radiating down my spine at the direct shift in conversation. “Are you negotiating with me?” I asked, totally amused by her boldness. “I plucked you out of a crowd of strangers, sweetheart, and you want to ask for more money?”

Aspen shrugged, not at all shying from my response. “You need me,” she said, and my heart jolted.

I really fucking did.

I didn't have time to track down anyone else, especially when my friends had already seen Aspen and I'd told them she was my girlfriend. I had to see this through, if only to prove to them I was fully capable of being in a relationship, which, for all intents and purposes, this *would* be a real relationship.

I wouldn't be with anybody else, and neither would she. We'd spend a lot of time together, getting to know each other, and at the end of it we'd go our separate ways. If that wasn't a relationship, I didn't know what was. The only *non*-relationship part of it was that we wouldn't be having sex, which, yeah, that sucked, but it was for the best.

"One point five," I countered her offer, reaching into my drawer and pulling out a checkbook. "One point five million," I said again. "That's what you'll earn at the end of three months as long as all contractual obligations have been held up by both parties," I continued, scribbling down an amount on the check and tearing it off. "And you can have this now for expenses." I handed her the check, and she took it, her lips parting slightly as she looked at the amount. "How does that sound to you?" I asked when she remained silent for a heartbeat too long.

Aspen put the check into her oversize bag that she'd hung on the chair. "I think that sounds fair," she said. "When will I see the contract?"

"I'll have it to you by the end of the day," I answered, and we both walked toward the door.

"And what if I don't like what I see in that contract?" she asked, looking up at me as we lingered in the open doorway.

I grinned down at her. "Like what?"

"What if you slip something in there about me having to clean your mansion or scrub your bathroom floors with a toothbrush? What if it says I'm obligated to give you a kidney or that you're going to use me as food in some crazy underground rich-guy scheme—"

A laugh ripped from my lips, and I shook my head. “I saw that movie. It was horrifying.” I shuddered, remembering watching the film alone on one of the rare nights I decided not to go out. “I may have movie-star good looks, but don’t confuse me with that type of man,” I said. “I’ll tell you right now, I have zero interest in hurting you, humiliating you, or putting you to work as a maid. Technically, you’ll be working for me since we’ll be in a mutual business agreement, but you know what I mean. Take your time with the contract, read every line. I’ll even pay for a lawyer who has your best interest at heart if you’d like to have somebody else look at it.”

“I can do that,” she said, and we quickly exchanged information, emails, and phone numbers. It felt almost official between us.

The only thing left was getting her to sign.

“I’ll text you later after I’ve read it,” she said, and then lingered in the doorway, almost like she didn’t know the proper way to say goodbye to me.

I winked at her. “We’ll worry about physical gestures after the ink dries.”

She sighed a relieved breath, and spun out of my office.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the way she held her head up as she walked, as if she owned this building instead of me. Couldn’t take my eyes off the way her luscious hips swayed as she moved. Couldn’t take my eyes off the curves of her body, begging to be touched, caressed, teased.

By this time tomorrow, if Aspen agreed to all the terms and signed the contract, I’d be in a relationship...

I’d be in the first relationship I’ve had in over a decade.

Aspen would be all mine for three whole months.

Mine in every way that mattered except for the one I normally wanted.

It was going to be a long three months.

Aspen

“A wedding?” I blurted two minutes after I’d settled into the private jet that Crossland had invited me on. “You want to hard launch our relationship at your best friend’s wedding?”

My head was still spinning from all that had transpired in the last week. Crossland and I had gone back and forth on some of the contract negotiations, like just *how* available I had to be, but we finally settled on a clear-cut three-month relationship, and I’d signed it.

Jesse’s lawyer looked over everything for me—after signing an NDA—and now I was officially Crossland McClaren’s girlfriend. He’d urged me to pack a bag for a quick weekend trip to Raleigh last night. What he’d failed to mention was that we were going to be attending his best friend’s wedding tomorrow.

“What’s wrong with that?” Crossland asked like he didn’t see the issue.

I stared at him where he sat across from me in the buttery soft leather seats. I fidgeted with the buttons, there were so many. Some that moved the seat back and forth and others that turned on a warmer and who knew what else. I’d never flown anywhere before, let alone a private jet where flight attendants were serving us champagne and French fries, brought in special just because Crossland knew they were my favorite snack, something he’d asked through text the night before.

I was way out of my depth here.

“I’m trying to wrap my head around everything,” I admitted. “And I’m just a little surprised that you want our first date to be your best friend’s wedding. So many people that you know will be there and we’ll be under the microscope, *especially* at the reception. Luckily, at the ceremony, all the attention will be on the bride and groom, but after?” I fiddled with a few strands of my hair, suddenly realizing something terrible. I snapped in my eyes to Crossland. “I didn’t pack properly. You didn’t explain—”

“Aspen,” he said, his voice warm and commanding, causing chills to curl down my spine. “Relax,” he continued. “We’re going shopping today.”

“Oh,” I said, relieved.

I sat back against the warm, cushioned chair and glanced at the clouds out the window.

Was I really here? On a private jet with a billionaire who was going to take me dress shopping to be his date for a wedding?

Yesterday, somebody had yelled at me because I didn’t include their cream cheese with their bagel, and today I was here enveloped in all things Crossland, from his cedar and cinnamon scent to the sharp, clean, spacious private jet.

“Okay,” I said, focusing. “We need to get our story straight if we’re going to pass the wedding test.”

“Wedding test?” he asked, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“Yes, the wedding test. Taking a date to a wedding is a huge deal. Love and commitment practically bleed from the walls, and if you bring a new date, then everybody will ask questions. And we’re going to have to behave as if we’ve been dating for a month. At four weeks, we should know each other’s favorite stuff—music, food, songs, treats. We should know how each other takes our coffee and what our bedtime routines are.”

Crossland’s eyes darkened, as if he was contemplating just how we *would* go to bed together. The images I hadn’t been

able to get out of my head for the last week made my heart flutter. It was impossible not to think about it with Crossland, especially after he'd been so gracious and understanding with the deal. He made sure I was comfortable every step of the way and sex wasn't even on the table, but somehow, it kept popping into my mind. I blamed his patience and charm, but his damn blue eyes and gorgeous body had a lot to do with it, too. And...ugh, everything about Crossland was appealing so far. Surely he had some flaw ready to creep out and hit me with a good dose of *ick*, right?

I pushed the thoughts away, focusing on the monumental task at hand.

This was a job for me and I always took my job seriously. Took anything that provided me with security seriously.

“Lucky for us,” I continued. “We have a two-hour plane ride in order to get all the details down.”

Crossland grinned at me.

“What’s your favorite food?” I asked.

“Seafood,” he answered. “More specifically, Dungeness crab.”

Picturing him tearing into seasoned crustaceans while wearing his ten-thousand-dollar suit made me giggle.

“Why is that funny?”

I waved him off. “Sorry, just the *image* of you getting crab all over your suit is hilarious.”

“I don’t always wear suits.”

I eyed the royal blue number he was in right now, and he rolled his eyes, smoothing down the lapels of his jacket as he crossed one leg over the other.

“I’m used to traveling in style,” he said. “Especially if I’m going to a high-media-interest event, which Weston Rutherford’s wedding absolutely is. I enjoy being photographed in suits. It’s something I can control when other times I have no idea when someone is snapping pictures. But if I’m tearing into crab, trust me, I’m not wearing Armani.”

“Good to know,” I said.

“And yours?” he asked.

“Tacos,” I answered simply.

“Tacos?” he repeated, and I noted the raised brows like he was waiting for more. “Is that it? There’s no other specific detail to it, just tacos?”

I laughed softly. “Pretty much,” I answered. “I like all kinds, *any* kind. If it’s in taco form, I will eat it, but the best ones are the carnitas from my favorite street vendor who happens to frequent the corner only two blocks away from your club.”

“Good to know,” Crossland said, echoing my earlier words.

“How do you take your coffee?” I asked.

“That depends,” he answered. “If I’m at home, I like it with honey and creamer. If I’m out at a coffee shop, I like a flat white. You?”

“At home I drink it black,” I said. “If I’m at work, I like a double Americano with a little half-and-half.”

Crossland nodded. “Favorite type of music?” he asked before I could.

I blew out a breath. “That’s an incredibly complicated question,” I answered. “I listen to everything. One minute I could be listening to Taylor Swift and the next minute I could be listening to Hans Zimmer’s score for *Pirates of the Caribbean*. I love music. It’s an escape for me, and it used to be a luxury. My parents were always asleep during the day, so anytime I played music I would—” I cut off that sentence, shaking my head at how easily I’d been about to divulge my past to him. “Honestly, it depends on my mood,” I continued, hoping he wouldn’t bring up what I left out. “You?”

“I like electric when I’m working because the instrumental beats help keep me focused and if it’s for pleasure, I like anything as long as it has good lyrics.”

“Do you have a favorite?” I asked.

He tilted his head, thinking. “That varies from day to day,” he said. “But my sister Bristol sent me a song by David Kushner, and I’ve been listening to his songs on repeat lately.”

I quickly opened my phone and dove into the free music app I had on there, pulling up the artist and adding it to my queue so I could listen to his music later.

“Okay, what else,” I said thinking to myself, my knee bouncing slightly. “Are you allergic to anything?”

Crossland chuckled. “No, I’m not allergic to anything.”

“Me either,” I said.

“What’s your deal-breaker in a real relationship?” Crossland asked, diving into more serious waters. “I know that both of us have expressed not having many serious relationships, but if you were in a real one, what’s the line?”

I had to really stretch back and think about my last relationship to find an answer. It was *that* long ago, and it hadn’t been serious, but there was one key factor that made me end things quickly.

“I don’t want to feel unworthy or unwanted,” I admitted, and I didn’t like how it sounded out loud, but it was the truth. “Thanks to the way my parents raised, or *didn’t*, raise me,” I continued. “Feeling unwanted is sort of a trigger of mine. Feeling unworthy is even worse. The second anyone makes me feel that way, I’m out. I don’t have the time or the emotional capacity to deal with it. I’m already hard enough on myself as it is.”

Crossland’s Arctic blue eyes were sympathetic as he looked me over. “I can see that,” he said. “And understand it.”

“What’s yours?” I asked. “Is it someone asking for a commitment?” I joked.

“Anyone who spends time with me in that capacity knows commitment isn’t on the table,” he said, smiling at me. “Lying,” he continued. “I can’t stand it. I’m a big boy and can handle the truth. I’d rather handle any hardship, any horrible fact, over the sweetest of lies.”

He blew out of breath, closing his eyes for a few moments before returning them to mine. “And that goes way back,” he explains. “When my parents died and I had to take over my family’s empire, so many people came out of the woodwork trying to scam me out of money. And some of them were very good at it. Some of them succeeded by lying so well that I easily handed over millions to them.” He shook his head, a muscle ticking in his jaw. That sting of the past evidently still lived with him.

“That wasn’t as bad as those who were telling me I shouldn’t become Bristol’s guardian,” he continued. “She was seventeen, but she was still *my* responsibility. And even now, as a grown woman, I still think she’s my responsibility.” A regretful smile played across his face, and he let out a strained laugh. “I even kicked out one of my own players years ago because I thought he crossed the line with Bristol.” He shrugged. “Turns out he didn’t, and years later they reconnected, and that same player is now married to my sister and plays for one of my best friends’ teams. It’s funny how life works out.” He cleared his throat, coming back to the present. “Either way, lying is it. I’d rather take a harsh truth than a lie any day.”

“I get that,” I said. “Especially the part about becoming your sister’s guardian. I was eighteen and had been working for the past three years. First, it was babysitting gigs, and then the minute I could legally get a higher paying, more consistent job, I did. I worked after school—sometimes during—as a server at this local café that was near our house. I could walk, so it made it easier to get more shifts. I saved up almost everything I made except for when I needed to pay the electric bill to keep heat on in the house in the winter or to feed us, never knowing when my parents would actually pay the bills or buy groceries. But once I turned eighteen, I had a good chunk of money saved up that I’d planned on using to get an apartment for Brecken and myself far away from them.”

I shook my head as emotion clogged my throat. I focused on the clouds outside of the window as I continued. “I didn’t realize the legalities of the situation. She was only eight, and I was a naïve teenager with a dream of escaping our tragic little

home. I didn't realize the legal battle that came with trying to take my baby sister out of our parents' home. It didn't matter how awful they were, they still had rights. It took all of my savings and a year of fighting them before they finally signed over the rights to me. But once that was done, I had her, and we were safe. We were hungry, but we were safe. After I got my feet underneath me, I could at least keep us fed. Then I worked a little harder, saved up a little more, and now look at her," I said, beaming as I pulled out my phone and showed him a picture of Brec standing outside her dorm building. "She's at NYU."

For the time being.

"She looks so happy," Crossland said as I pocketed my phone. "They made you pay for the rights?" he asked, sympathy coating his eyes.

I grimaced and nodded. "Yep, but it was for the best," I said, even though my hands shook every time I thought about it. "I would've paid way more in legal fees if they wanted to drag it out for years, and I think in the end they knew I would win. They knew I would push and push and testify to their neglect and that I would *never* give up. Never leave her there with them. And hey, they wanted ten grand, so they got ten grand, and I..." I tried to catch my breath, the emotion surrounding the story swirling inside me.

"And you," Crossland said. "Practically became a mother."

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. I *had* become a mother. Brecken had been eight, and it'd been hard. I'd been clueless on how to do things, but I at least knew how *not* to do them.

Crossland shook his head, and I could see the struggle written all over his features.

"It's okay," I said, and really meant it. "I've mostly healed from the past. Are there times it creeps back up and threatens to shatter me completely? Definitely. But more often than that, I'm just happy to be where I'm at today, and that's with Brecken at NYU, regardless of how long I might have to work to keep her there."

Crossland grinned. “You know three months isn’t really that long in the grand scheme of things or do you really think that you’re not going to make it to the end of this contract?”

I cringed slightly. “I don’t know why I keep forgetting I’m getting paid for this,” I said. “Part of me still feels like it’s not real. Like the rug will be ripped out from underneath me at any moment.”

Crossland leaned forward slightly, looking as if he might reach across and take my hand.

He didn’t. He held my eyes with his.

“It’s real, Aspen,” he said. “I promise. You saw the contract yourself and signed it. This is your job now, one that will hopefully help take some of that stress off of you by the end. And you’re already doing so well.”

I laughed at that and swallowed down the emotion that rose inside me with his words. He really meant it. I could tell that much, but it didn’t stop me from thinking that all of this would come crashing down on top of me. I’d lived that way my entire life, always waiting for the next blow to come or a new price I’d have to pay. I couldn’t change that, no matter how much I healed.

“We’ve only officially been together for two hours,” I said, smiling at him.

He leaned back in his seat, cocking a brow at me. “Four weeks, Aspen. Four marvelous, *bliss-filled* weeks.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Is that part of the deal now? Am I supposed to lay it on thick and make you look good?”

He scoffed at me. “I don’t need you to lay anything on thick to make me look good, sweetheart. I do that fine on my own. And trust me, if this was an actual relationship? You *would* be more than blissful.”

I laughed again, surprised at how much laughing I did around the billionaire who had employed me to be his girlfriend. It was nice, even if it was all fake between us.

We spent the rest of the plane ride answering more questions, all about our likes, dislikes, dreams, right down to how we met—which was an embellished version of the true story about him spotting me at the bar in his club.

I still felt very out of place, but by the time we landed, there was a common connection between Crossland and myself. The questions we asked each other had genuinely felt like a first date as opposed to a job interview, which is what it *should've* felt like, but it was easy with him. And I didn't know if that was because the stakes were off the table, knowing this wasn't a real relationship and I didn't actually have to uphold anything except for what we agreed to in the contract that took the pressure off, or if it was because he was just genuinely easy to talk to.

He was smart and funny and playful and just this side of restless. The last one was the most surprising for someone with as much as he had. His wealth ensured he could do whatever he wanted to do, but I think it was the insurmountable options that he had at his fingertips that made it hard to figure out what exactly he wanted to do next.

A black SUV waited for us on the tarmac and staff loaded our bags into the back before a driver whisked us off to an equally luxurious hotel, guiding us into a penthouse suite with more than enough rooms for the two of us. I could've brought Brecken and Jesse and their friends if I wanted to. It was four times the size of my apartment, but I was proud of myself because I didn't let my jaw fall on the floor.

After the staff member left our bags in the primary bedroom and headed out of the room, Crossland headed into the living space, shedding his suit jacket, and neatly laying it over the back of the couch. He poured himself a drink and then sank into the couch, leaning back against it.

I hesitated for a moment in the middle of the room, wondering where exactly I should go, but then Crossland patted the space right next to him on the couch, and I headed over, settling down beside him.

“I thought we were going shopping?” I asked, a little nervous about what I was going to wear to this wedding. The way Crossland and his friends had been dressed at the poker game, I was sure that it wouldn’t be a backyard barbeque event, which was the extent of the suitable outfits I’d packed.

“Oh,” he said, setting his drink down on the coffee table before us. “Shopping comes to us.”

I raised my eyebrows, utterly confused.

He smiled sweetly at me and glanced at his watch. “In about ten minutes,” he continued. “Our styling team will be here with options for you to pick out and try on.”

“You know,” I said, shaking my head. “I really am trying to go with the flow here, but is it showing on my face every time I’m shocked by how your world works?”

Crossland laughed, pressing his lips together. He opened and closed his mouth a couple times like he was trying to come up with the correct response.

I rolled my eyes. “Great,” I said. “I’m so going to blow this for us. No one is going to believe we’re an item. No one will believe that you’re with me—”

“Hey,” he said, reaching across the space between us. He slid a comforting hand down my arm. “That would be the other way around. No one would believe someone as amazing as you would have the patience for someone as obnoxious as me. And you’re doing great. I promise. I think it’s only me that can tell when you’re surprised by something. I’m sure no one else will be paying that close attention.”

Was he saying he was paying close attention to me? And why did that notion give me butterflies? Of course, he was paying attention to me. I was his employee, his investment, his ticket to winning a bet for fuck’s sake.

“I get it,” he continued. “My world is completely ridiculous sometimes, but having the stylists come to us is just easier sometimes. It helps us avoid the circus of paparazzi or other people tracking us down.”

“I’ll try to do better,” I said. “At schooling my reactions.”

“You don’t need to,” he said. “You’re already perfect.”

Ten minutes later, as promised, a multitude of stylists stormed into the penthouse, staff rolling in racks upon racks of clothes—dresses, gowns, rompers, pant suits, shoes, bags, and jewelry—everything I could ever want or need for this weekend and more.

“Oh, man,” I said as I looked through the racks of gowns. “Jesse would *love* this.”

“Did you want me to fly him out?” Crossland asked, and it was such a casual inquiry that my heart melted just a little.

“He’s holed up in his studio right now,” I answered. “But thank you.”

“What do you think of this one?” I asked minutes later after trying on a black gown.

“Beautiful,” he said, looking up from where he’d opened his laptop on the coffee table. “But not the one.”

I agreed with him, nodding before I headed back into the primary bedroom to try on another one.

What kind of life was this? I literally lived paycheck to paycheck, buried in debt and always short on groceries...and here I was surrounded by elegant gowns that cost more than my car and with a fake boyfriend offering to *fly* my best friend out just for me?

How was this my life? And why did I feel guilty for enjoying it?

After a few hours of shopping inside the penthouse, I had more than enough outfits to last me the weekend and a stunning, dark blue gown that would complement the tux that Crossland was going to wear in the wedding.

And after a quick dinner, the whirlwind of the day caught up to me, and I was more than ready for bed.

I grabbed my PJs out of the suitcase in the bedroom, quickly changing into them before heading out, finding Crossland still hunched over his laptop.

“Do you ever stop working?” I asked. He’d worked half the time that I’d been shopping, only pausing to say yes or no to an outfit. There were more *yesses* than *noes*, but I actually liked his honesty. He stated what he wanted, when he wanted it.

“Not really,” he said, looking away from his laptop to give me his full attention. That was another thing I liked. He never ignored me or tried to split focus. If I said something, he looked at me and listened—really listened—and it was something I was absolutely not used to. “Kind of comes with running the family empire,” he continued, then shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal to be running numerous companies. “I don’t really have a steady set of hours, but because of the income streams, I do have the ability to be super flexible about when and where I answer the constant influx of questions.”

“That must be difficult,” I said.

“How so?” he asked.

“Well, I have a steady set of hours regardless of whether I work a single shift or a double. I know at the end of my shift, I get to go home and check out. But that’s not really your life, is it? Do you ever get to check out, Crossland?”

He considered that for a moment. “Not in my world. But hey, that’s a small price to pay for all that I’ve been given.”

I smiled back at him, lingering near him even though the bed was calling my name. I liked how humble he was, especially because I had expected him to be overly confident and entitled thanks to the money he had, but he wasn’t.

“Do you want me to take the guest room to the left of the primary or—”

“Primary,” he said, as if it wasn’t even a question. “You get all set up in there and I’ll take one of the extra rooms.”

“Okay,” I said. “And we need to be ready to leave at nine a.m.?” I asked, wanting to be extra sure about the time.

“Yes, my team will be over here to help us get ready, unless you’re against that?” he asked, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you want to do your own hair and makeup or not wear makeup at all, it’s completely up to you. I normally have the team come because that’s usually what...” His voice trailed off.

I smiled down at him. “That’s usually what your model and movie star friends expect?” I asked, using the term *friend* because it fit better than employee after the short time we’d spent together. Maybe that was his ability to make me feel comfortable in out of my comfort-zone situations, but it was true all the same.

“I can cancel—”

“No, please don’t cancel. I want to look my best to impress your friends. It’s our hard launch, anyway, isn’t it?”

Crossland grinned. “I can’t wait to see you in that dress,” he said.

A flush raked my body, and I hesitated, a sudden rush of regret swarming me that he’d created the no-touching rule. I couldn’t help it, he’d been nothing but kind to me, and there was no denying how damn attractive he was. I let myself explore that sensation a little more, simmering in that need that coursed through my body while I looked at him. I wanted...

Nope. That instinct was enough to have me turning the opposite direction.

“Good night, Crossland,” I called over my shoulder.

“Good night, Aspen,” he called back, just as I was shutting the double doors to the bedroom.

I sank into the lusciously enormous bed and fell asleep wondering how the hell I would be able to deny the intense attraction for the next few months.

Crossland

The church venue was packed with all of Brynn and Weston's closest family and friends.

It was time for Weston to take the stage, but the groom was nowhere to be found.

I had a good idea where he was, and *who* exactly he was with. Especially when Brynn couldn't be found, either.

I smiled as I walked through the guests, politely ignoring their questions about when the ceremony was going to start. One of Brynn's aunts was more than pushy and had reminded me no less than three times that it was supposed to start twenty-five minutes ago. I would've left sooner and searched for the two, but I'd been distracted by all things Aspen.

The woman was a knockout in the gown she'd selected yesterday. I could honestly say I'd never had more fun watching a woman try on clothes before. I'd taken some dates shopping before, but never like that. And none of them had reacted with such endearing excitement about it, either. Aspen was the definition of down to earth, but she was absolutely sure of herself in a way that was completely refreshing, too.

She knew what she felt comfortable in and she knew what she looked great in. She knew what she didn't like too, and I loved that about her. Especially because she had no qualms about telling me.

I'd been engrossed in a conversation with her when I realized we were running behind schedule. Well, *I* didn't realize. Asher did.

The guy was a walking planner. Who needed a digital reminder when you had Asher Silas to keep you on schedule? He'd been about to stomp off to find our friends, but I reminded him that this wasn't his event and that it was fine if they were late for their own ceremony.

He'd given me a stern look, and Daisy, his fiancée had laughed, distracting him by fixing his already immaculate tie.

I wandered around the hallways, walking casually in the hopes of giving my friends just a few more minutes of privacy before I ruined all their fun. Couldn't really blame the two. They'd been looking forward to this day since they'd made things official a few months ago, and hadn't been able to stop the PDA they subjected us to on a daily basis. Of course, isn't that what love was about? Losing your mind over the other person, so much so you could barely stay away from each other?

I'd never felt it myself, but if I did, I highly doubt I'd hide it.

I turned down another charming hallway in the church that Brynn had picked out and meandered over to her dressing suite. The door was closed, and I wasn't about to try and open it. Not when I knew my friends better than apparently some of the guests who'd speculated about why exactly Weston and Brynn were late.

I knocked on the door.

"The entire church is waiting," I said in a singsong voice.

"In a minute," Weston snapped.

The irritability in his voice made me laugh.

"Seriously, you two," I grumbled. "It's not like you don't see each other every fucking day." I chuckled, shaking my head and heading back down the hallway having successfully delivered a reminder that they weren't the only two people in this building.

I leaned against the wall, folding my arms over my chest while I waited.

It didn't take long before Weston and Brynn came out of the dressing room, Brynn frantically fixing her slightly mussed hair.

I smirked at the two of them, noting the flush on both their cheeks as they walked toward me. Brynn could barely even look me in the eye.

I stifled another laugh and did my best not to draw attention to what they'd clearly been doing before the ceremony.

Weston leaned down to whisper something in Brynn's ear, and then turned to me, clapping me on the back as we rounded the corner and headed back toward the main event room.

"So," I said. "How's it going?"

Weston cocked a brow at me, flashing me an equally warning and ecstatic look. "Best day of my life," he said with a grin. "Absolute best day of my life."

We pushed through the double doors that led into the main event room at the church, and were greeted with a sudden silence as the audience hushed and looked our way. I winked at Brynn's pushy aunt, pointing dramatically and mouthing the words *I found the groom* at her. She gave me a chiding look and shook her head but otherwise looked relieved as I followed Weston down the main aisle and up to the slightly raised platform where Asher, Gareth, and Ethan were anxiously waiting.

Aspen sat relaxed in her chair near the aisle and gave me an excited little wave that made my heart do a strange flip as I waved back and then winked at her.

"Wait," Weston said as we reached our designated spots on the platform. "Isn't that the same girl from the poker game last week?"

"The same," Asher said, his gaze falling to Aspen. Gareth and Ethan and Weston followed his line of sight seconds later.

"Let's not all stare at once, boys," I said, rolling my eyes.

To Aspen's credit, she didn't flinch under the stares of my friends. Instead, she sat up a little straighter, giving them all a friendly wave and smile.

My friends focused on me, looks of utter confusion dancing over their faces.

"That's the same girl," Weston said.

"Yes," I said. "We've established that."

Music sounded from the small string quartet set up in the corner of the event hall. The double doors of the room swung open, and Brynn's bridesmaids started walking down the aisle, queueing that this wedding had officially and *finally* started.

"You brought the same random date to my wedding?" Weston asked, his voice now lowered to where just the five of us could hear him.

I kept my face even and my hands relaxed at my sides as I nodded to each of the bridesmaids as they came and took their places across from us on the platform.

"My girlfriend," I gently reminded him. "Aspen."

"Your girlfriend," he said but it sounded more like a question. "She's actually your girlfriend?"

"Yes," I whispered. "I told you that last week. I don't know why you're struggling now."

"It's just..." He struggled to speak.

"You don't do girlfriends," Gareth said in a no-nonsense tone that was just a little too loud for what was going on right now.

"This doesn't seem like the time for this conversation," I whispered. "Maybe we should talk about my relationship habits and your opinion about them later?"

"This conversation is the only thing keeping me from racing down the aisle and hurrying this thing up. I want Brynn—"

"Pretty sure you have her," I whispered, nodding toward the aisle.

Weston's eyes widened as he snapped his gaze toward the open double doors and his soon-to-be-wife as she took the first step down the aisle.

Everything about his demeanor shifted.

One second, he'd been aloof and giving me shit. But now?

The man looked like he was unraveling with each step Brynn took toward him. He only had eyes for her, and if I wasn't seeing things, I swore they were glittering with what looked a lot like happy tears.

The sight of my friend completely reduced to a speechless love-struck man had my chest tightening, and I swallowed hard.

Brynn finally made it to her spot in front of Weston, and there was no denying how gorgeous she looked. Pride swelled in my chest as the officiate started the processions. Two of my best friends were finally getting married after years of dancing around their feelings for each other.

I'm certain Ethan and I had a bet ten years ago that this would happen, but I couldn't remember the stakes.

And it didn't matter.

What mattered is that they had finally done what we all knew they wanted to do.

I turned around, glancing over my shoulder at Asher, Ethan, and Gareth, finding them smiling just as hard as I was. As much shit as we loved to give Wes over how long it took to finally acknowledge his feelings for his best friend, we couldn't be prouder of him. There was no one better suited for him, and now they were getting to start the beginning of their happily ever after together.

As the officiate continued with the standard ceremonial rituals, I couldn't help but wonder how my two friends made it look so easy? The act of choosing a partner to be with for the rest of forever didn't seem like an easy decision to make. I mean, honestly, how did they know that in four months they'd still want to hang out with each other, let alone *sleep* together? How did they know that one or the other wouldn't leave after

growing bored with the antics that came with such a high-profile lifestyle like we lived? How could they trust the other person to keep their deepest, darkest secrets, the small confessions one made to such a person in the middle of the night when doubt and fear took over every other emotion?

Those types of confessions I'd always kept to myself, never even burdening my sister with some of the shit that crept up in my head.

It had always been me.

Ever since my parents passed away and I'd inherited the family empire, entrusted to keep it running and growing like it should. Just me. It'd been me who'd taken care of my teenage sister, comforted her during the grieving process, was strong for her during the more intense parts of healing, while never once letting her see how worried I was about failing. About taking what our parents had so graciously left us and ruining it.

Every single day, I lived with that weight. And yeah, maybe I used my adventurous lifestyle as a way to drown out the pressures that I constantly felt, but wasn't that better than entrusting my entire, very heavy baggage to somebody else? Somebody who might end up leaving me in the end anyway?

My eyes traveled across the audience, most of them teary-eyed and smiling at our friends, until I found Aspen.

My paid-for date.

My fake girlfriend.

The one I couldn't help but grin at as she pantomimed crying and then stealthily pointed at me, silently indicating that I was a big baby.

I checked myself, discreetly brushing away the *one* sliver of emotion I'd let show. But she'd made me smile. She seemed to have a knack for that. Then she covered her heart with her hands, swooning at me, and it was all I could do to not laugh out loud.

This girl.

She was nothing if not surprising, and the way she was so unapologetically herself did something to me.

I couldn't wait to find out what she was going to say or do next, and it made this little arrangement of ours incredibly interesting. It didn't help that she was also incredibly gorgeous, her body filling out that dress in a way that showed off every single one of her curves.

Curves that itched to be under my fingers.

But it was more than that. I genuinely liked being around her. Even during the plane ride over, when we'd had our crash course in personal history and dating facts, I never had the urge to put distance between us like I usually did with strangers. It was new for me.

Normally, especially on trips across the country, I found reasons to put my headphones on and lock into work.

And of course, that could be because the prior dates I'd had were casual, no-strings hookups. There'd been no reason to go in depth like Aspen and I had on the way over here.

This was all incredibly new to me. And part of me found it exciting, the unknown. But there was another part of me that was just as curious if Aspen would be acting the same if this were a real relationship. Or was she so funny and endearing and understanding because I was paying her?

I guess, in the end, it didn't really matter, did it? Because this wasn't a real relationship, and I *was* paying her.

I never thought I'd need to remind myself of that fact.

Applause erupted from the audience, everyone standing from their seats as they clapped for the newly crowned bride and groom. I returned my attention to my friends just in time to see them clasp hands and walk down the aisle, smiling and waving to their family and friends as they headed out of the main room.

Ethan took center stage and informed everyone where to go for the reception, just a quick walk outside to the veranda that had been fully transformed into a white silk tent and

twinkle light fantasy, complete with champagne and appetizers and a live band.

I waited my turn and walked down the aisle behind my friends, only slowing to extend my arm for the designated bridesmaid that paired up with me, one of Brynn's cousins who was a charming woman expecting her third child any day now. I walked her all the way to her assigned table and settled her in a cushioned seat, grabbing her a mocktail before I left her side.

The live band was already playing the requested songs from the bride and groom, but they were nowhere to be seen. Again.

"Insatiable," I said when Asher found me near the bar. "Those two are absolutely insatiable."

"Can you blame them?"

"No," I said. "I can't judge. Hell, you know me. I've treated sex like a marathon on the best of days, but these two seem determined to miss their own wedding. And what's the point? It's not like they'll be spending the *rest* of their lives together?"

"You wouldn't understand," Asher said, then tilted his head. "Or would you?" His eyes trailed behind me, and I turned around.

He was looking at Aspen, who was talking to someone I didn't recognize. A very tall masculine someone who was making her laugh.

"Isn't that your girlfriend?" Ethan asked, joining our group.

"Looks like Weston's Raptor rookie tight end is finding her quite interesting," Gareth added as he joined us, sipping from his cocktail.

"What the fuck? He's a Raptor?"

"Yep," Gareth answered. "And a damn good one, too. Even as a rookie, he's got a shit-ton of potential. I'm hoping I

can trade him from Weston in the future. Just before he gets big.”

I couldn't take my eyes off of Aspen and the way she looked up at the rookie, fully engaged in whatever the hell it was they were talking about. And then she laughed again, her smile bright, her head thrown back because whatever he said was *so damn funny*.

A foreign emotion sliced through me, an odd instinct that had me passing my drink to Ethan without looking back and heading straight for her.

I slid my hand along the small of her back, not so casually tucking her into my side as I locked eyes with the rookie.

“There you are,” I said, finally looking down at Aspen.

“Here I am,” she said in an equally sugary voice as she patted my chest. “I didn't know if you were done with groomsmen duties yet,” she said, and then motioned to the rookie. “Jake was just explaining the difference between a running back and a tight end to me.”

“It's never too late to learn,” Jake said, raising his drink toward her before taking a sip. Then he turned to me, reaching out a free hand. “You must be the boyfriend she was talking so much about. Crossland? You're friends with Weston right?”

I shook his hand firmly before releasing it. “That's me.”

“Nice,” he said. “I love hockey. Your team isn't doing half bad, but I usually root for the underdogs, which doesn't include yours or Asher's team, huh?”

“No, I can't say that we are,” I said. “If you're looking for underdogs, Bangor is shaping up to be the absolute worst team in the league.” I brought up Doyle's team and sighed, actually feeling sorry for the players who had such a prick for an owner.

The rookie laughed and shook his head. “I don't root for *that* big of an underdog,” he said. “But I wouldn't mind seeing Detroit rise in ranks a little bit before the end of the season.”

I nodded, respect overtaking whatever instinct had propelled me to stomp over here in the first place.

Was it jealousy?

That was a rare, unfamiliar feeling for me. And yet, I still had a possessive hand placed around Aspen's hip. How could I be jealous of something that wasn't even real?

I shifted my stance, relaxing a little bit and convincing myself that I was only interested in protecting the image that we were trying to portray to the public, especially to my friends.

That's all.

My friends would expect me to come over here and make sure the rookie knew who Aspen belonged to. Because that's what you did in a real relationship. I'd certainly seen Asher, Wes, and Ethan do their fair share of growling when the situation arose.

I looked down at Aspen, studying the features on her face as I tried to navigate these new emotions.

"You hungry?" I asked, unable to come to a firm conclusion.

"Always," she said, grinning up at me before she offered that same smile to the rookie. "It was great chatting with you," she said. "I'm definitely going to watch the Raptors now and cheer for you."

"Thanks," he said nodding to us both. "You'll be able to see me play whenever the first string needs a break."

I nodded to the guy, then gently guided Aspen away and toward one of the dessert tables across the room.

"Making friends?" I asked after she'd loaded up her plate with chocolate-covered strawberries, an array of delicate cookies dipped in caramel, and a few truffles.

"Yeah," she said as we settled into a little free space near the tables. "Am I not supposed to?" she asked, her eyes flickering over me. She picked up a strawberry and wrapped her lips around the tip before sinking her teeth into it.

Jesus, I don't know if I'd ever noticed how full and luscious her lips were until I watched her do that. And it made heat streak through my blood, every instinct roaring to slowly back her into the corner and see just how much she tasted like strawberries.

I took a deep breath, cooling off the instinct and reminding myself that she was not a date.

She was an investment.

"Of course, you can make friends," I said, doing my best to school my features in a not-bothered-at-all look. "He just looked a little more interested in you than that."

"You're not jealous, are you?" she teased, her eyes lighting up. "We were just talking. He wasn't interested—"

"Maybe from your perspective," I said. "But I could read the vibes pretty well."

She chuckled softly before taking another bite. "One of the first things he asked was who I'd come with, and I immediately told him it was you. I promise, there was nothing to be jealous over."

"I wasn't jealous," I said a little too quickly. "Besides, I'd have nothing to be jealous over, because this isn't real," I said the words quick and quietly so only she could hear. But for some reason, I immediately regretted it. It could've been because of the slight drop in Aspen's shoulders or the flicker of hurt in her eyes.

But that couldn't be right, could it?

She knew this wasn't real, and I knew this wasn't real, so why did it feel like we were having a *real* disagreement?

"You're right," she said sampling one of those truffles. "I just wanted you to know that we were just talking. And I didn't think a conversation with a random, *friendly* stranger would make any of your friends think poorly of me."

"They don't," I said trying to sound reassuring. "I just... It's me. I'm still trying to figure out how to behave. I've never done this before."

Aspen's eyes softened, and she nodded. "You keep saying that like you need to explain it to me. I assure you, you don't. I understand."

Silence settled between us, one that wasn't exactly comfortable, and I felt completely out of my element.

For some reason, I felt like I should apologize, but I didn't know what for.

"They're stunning," Aspen said, her eyes locked across the room where a commotion had started.

Weston and Brynn had just made their grand entrance, and they truly did look blissfully happy.

"They really are," I agreed with her, smiling at my friends as they took the dance floor, kicking off the first official dance of the reception. "You'll love Brynn, I said. "She's great. And Daisy and Alex, too. I think you'll get along with all of them."

"Will we be spending a lot of time together during the next three months?" Aspen asked.

"We tend to go most of the same events together, and every month we have our standard poker game. I imagine you'll be seeing a lot of each other, and because they're all so incredibly sharp, you'll have to be extra careful and convincing around them. My boys might be easy to fool, but they'll be the ones to watch out for."

Aspen laughed, finishing the desserts on her plate and thanking the server who came over to take it out of her hands. "Are you doubting my abilities in this mission? I'm a girl, after all. I think I can handle girl bonding time."

"I would never doubt you," I said. "I've seen your determination, and if you put in even one percent of that into our little arrangement, it'll already be going above and beyond."

Something like pride shone in her eyes, and she grinned up at me.

Couples started flocking to the dance floor, surrounding the bride and groom as they moved to the music.

I offered my hand and looked down at her. “Shall we, darling?”

She laughed again, but took my hand. “Absolutely, sugar.”

Aspen

“I can’t believe we’re here,” Jesse said as we got out of the back of the limo that Crossland had sent over a half hour earlier. He’d flown us to Charleston, unable to travel with us because he’d come out early to help Bristol with a few things before her fashion show.

Cameras flashed in so many directions that you’d think we stepped into a nightclub with a strobe light. A red carpet lined the entryway, reporters and paparazzi and influencers on one side of a velvet rope while celebrities slowly made their way inside the building.

“I can’t either,” I said, unable to deny the surreal feeling washing over me as Jesse proudly took my arm and led me up the red carpet.

Thank God for Jesse. I don’t think I could’ve made this walk by myself.

Crossland had called earlier and mentioned that his sister needed his assistance, some last-minute low-stock fashion emergency, and was sad that he wouldn’t be able to walk me in. But he would meet us inside, and it practically melted my heart when he automatically included Jesse in this invite-only fashion event.

“If anything, this is a good networking event for you,” I said. “Show the industry how you’re a big-time designer too.”

Jesse grinned down at me. “I’m a small fish in a big pond,” he said. “But I like it that way. I enjoy knowing I can hand craft my pieces and drop them whenever I want. It suits me. But, you know I’d never turn down an invitation like this.”

“It’s definitely something, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

I’d met some celebrities at Weston’s wedding last weekend, but I was still starstruck at the amount of A-listers walking ahead of us on the same carpet. I may have felt out of my depth on Crossland’s private jet, but standing here? Smiling for cameras snapping pictures of Jesse and myself—Jesse striking poses that were absolutely model worthy while I did my best to smile and not cross my eyes—I felt like I was on another planet.

There was a literal movie star with a career spanning longer than I’d been alive, walking not six feet ahead of us. He stopped to talk to a reporter and we waited, not wanting to invoke some red-carpet taboo by walking behind someone as famous as him.

Ahead of him, I could see some well-known hockey and football players, lead singers, and other movie stars making their way into the building, not to mention models upon models that I’d seen on magazine covers and reality shows.

At least Jesse *belonged* here. He owned this vibe and was in the industry. I wouldn’t be surprised if some people in the audience were wearing one of his designs today.

This life was just unreal to me. A life with paparazzi and endless wealth? That only existed in fairy tales, but somehow, I was living right in the middle of one.

Yes, it had a *turn me back into a pumpkin* deadline, but that was a few months away. For now, I needed to do what Jesse kept telling me to do, which was enjoy the hell out of it while I could. I took a steadying breath, remembering the end game—Brecken would be taken care of after this all ended for me. That’s all that truly mattered.

“Aspen,” Crossland’s voice sounded over the calls of the reporters and the chatter around us as we waited our turn on the red carpet.

I scanned the crowd, finally locking eyes with him as he made his way toward us.

He wore a stunning midnight-black suit, each cut of the fabric made specifically for him, with an ice-blue tie that made his eyes pop. His smile beamed, his trimmed goatee shaping his chiseled features as he locked eyes with me, spotting us on the red carpet.

“You made it,” he said as he finally made it to us. He shook Jesse’s hand before extending an arm toward me.

And I fell under that arm like a magnet pulled me toward him. The move almost effortless now since we’d done it so much at the wedding.

The same wedding where we’d danced and laughed, and where I swore he got jealous when I spoke to that football player from Weston’s team. He’d assured me there was nothing to be jealous of, and I don’t know why those words stung, but they had. I’d quickly forced the small hurt away and chalked it up to my own trauma of not feeling like I belonged or being told I wasn’t worth the fuss while growing up.

Jesse took a calculated step away as reporters called Crossland’s name and asked him who he was with.

I glanced up at Crossland at the same moment he glanced down at me, and it was such an awkward moment that we both started laughing.

“This is my girlfriend, Aspen Reed,” Crossland said without looking at the reporters, holding that irresistible smile of his.

My grin deepened, and my heart expanded despite knowing this was all fake.

But *dammit*, Crossland said it like he was genuinely proud to have me on his arm.

In reality, he could have any of celebrity or model or heiress on his arm if he wanted. More than one, actually.

But he was here with me.

And regardless of the circumstances, I was going to take that as a win.

After the celebrity ahead of us finished answering questions and moved into the building, Crossland led Jesse and me inside. I breathed a sigh of relief at leaving all the cameras behind.

“You doing, okay?” Crossland asked, leaning down to whisper the question in my ear.

“I’m okay,” I answered honestly. “I’m just not sure I’ll ever get used to that kind of attention.”

Crossland’s smile fell, but he nodded. “I know it can be a hassle,” he said. “Especially when you’re not used to it.” He shrugged. “It does get easier,” he continued. “But it’s never really enjoyable. It’s just something you learn to accept overtime. I find I have a *camera-ready* mask and an *I’m with my inner circle* mask. It helps if you can compartmentalize the two.”

I tilted my head as we lingered in the entryway. “If that’s the case, then when are you just Crossland?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, his hand settling in the small of my back as we crept forward, the crowds of people bottlenecking into the small entryway as they filed out into the much larger event hall where the fashion show would take place.

“You said you have masks,” I said. “Even with your inner circle. I’m just wondering when you’re simply you?”

“Did I?” he asked, confusion fluttering over his features.

I nodded, feeling sympathetic for the way he had to live his life. Constantly on alert in case somebody was watching or recording, knowing that his reputation, wealth, and family legacy all depended on how he behaved.

“I’m myself with my inner circle,” he finally said. “But it’s not like we live together,” he continued. “We’re not this entourage of chosen family who all dwell on one estate.” He chuckled softly as we moved forward. Jesse tagging along behind us, mingling like he always effortlessly did.

“So, I guess sometimes,” Crossland continued. “Sometimes, I fall into the person who I am when they’re

around. And when I'm at home or when I'm with Bristol, I play a different role."

I nodded, another little piece of the Crossland puzzle revealing itself to me.

"You have to be several versions of yourself," I said. "Because you want to make sure everyone is getting the version of you they need. The big brother for your sister. The cocky comedic relief for your friends. And the playboy billionaire with a heart of gold for the public." I gave him a soft smile. "And for me, the employer and guide to all things famous and wealthy." I stepped a little closer, making sure I looked up at him and caught his eyes as I said the last part. "Who are you at home, Crossland?"

Crossland visibly swallowed, his lips opening and closing a few times.

He looked like I'd punched him in the chest as opposed to asking a simple question, and I realized I didn't exactly like that look on his face. It made emotion clog my throat. Made an instinct creep up inside me to continue to push him, to pull more pieces of himself out in order to understand him better, in order to help him understand *himself* better.

The crowd ushered us forward, and Crossland blinked out of his stare. We continued into the main event hall without him answering.

And that was fair. He didn't owe me anything personal because this wasn't an actual relationship where that sort of give-and-take was expected. But it didn't stop me from wondering, and it didn't stop the pang of empathy for him not even being able to answer it.

I may be a broke barista from Brooklyn, but I was the same person slinging espresso drinks as I was standing here among the rich and famous. I didn't know how to be anyone else because I'd spent my entire childhood trying to be someone worthy of my parents' attention until I got older and learned that person didn't exist. So, I gave up trying to be anyone other than who I was, and it'd worked out so far.

“Where are we sitting?” Jesse asked when Crossland paused, his eyes scanning the sparse open seats on either side of the catwalk that had been placed in the center of the grand room.

The lighting was muted, just enough for us to find our seats and see the other faces filling the crowd.

Crossland took a step toward the left, where he spotted three empty seats, but then he halted.

“We can’t go there,” he grumbled, and I followed his trail of sight to see a gorgeous model glaring daggers at him.

“Why can’t we go there?” I asked, even though I had a good guess.

“I wasn’t open to her proposed adjustment to our arrangement,” Crossland reluctantly answered. He stepped to the right, then stopped again. “Can’t go there,” he said, and I laughed.

“Let me guess,” I said, glancing at the other equally gorgeous woman glaring at him. Actually, there were two this time on the right side. “They wanted to be the ones to change your mind, too?”

“Yep,” Crossland said, shifting gears back to the left.

Jesse chuckled, then pointed to an unreserved single seat that was in the front row. “Can I just take that one?” he asked politely.

“Be my guest,” Crossland answered, waving Jesse forward. “I never take front row seating at my sister’s shows. I never want to take any of the spotlight off of her.”

“That’s considerate of you,” I said, then winked at Jesse as he rushed off to snag the prime seat.

“I can’t tell if the surprise in your tone is a good or bad thing,” he said.

“Good,” I hurried to explain. “I’m realizing I had poor expectations of how billionaires behaved. Every time you surprise me is a good thing.”

“I’m happy to change your perspective,” he said. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Bristol. Speaking of,” he continued, frowning his brow as he scanned the crowd again. “I figured she’d be out here by now, but she must still be backstage. I’ll introduce you to her after the show, okay?”

“I can’t wait to meet her,” I said, and I really meant that. Crossland wasn’t shy about anything, but he especially loved talking about his sister and how proud he was of her. It was endearing, if not this side of charming, and it was something I could absolutely relate to.

“Crossland,” someone called near the back row on the left side, the crowd shifting just enough to show Gareth, one of Crossland’s friends that I’d had the pleasure of talking to at Weston’s wedding last weekend.

He was an intimidating-looking guy, but fairly easy to talk to after you got over the whole terrifying thing. He lifted his chin once Crossland spotted him, and we both headed that direction.

“Thanks for saving us seats,” Crossland said as we made our way to Gareth. Asher and his fiancée, Daisy—who I’d also met at the wedding—sat on the other side of Gareth. All three of them looked at me a little skeptically as Crossland held my hand to guide our way past them.

“Wouldn’t miss the chance to see you,” Gareth said as we settled into our seats next to him. “Especially when I have to fly out tonight. Thanks for inviting me,” he continued. “I’ve always been a fan of your sister’s clothes. Especially the suits. She makes them so they’re not so damn suffocating.”

Crossland laughed, clapping Gareth on the back before nodding at Asher and Daisy. “I’m grateful you all came,” he said. “It means a lot to Bristol when we show our support. Weston and Brynn only get a pass because they’re off skiing in the Alps for their honeymoon.”

The tight-knit group of friends fell into an easy conversation that I felt I stood just on the outside of.

I tried to give them space despite sitting right next to Crossland, while also being available enough if he wanted me to chime in as a girlfriend would be expected to. I was still trying to figure out exactly how to behave, and the more I thought about it the less natural I felt.

After agonizing over that some more, I decided the best thing to do was to behave exactly as I would if I were really dating Crossland. Yes, it was hard as hell to make my brain believe I'd ever be in a relationship with someone like him—all gorgeous cocky charm and endless wealth—but if I wanted to do this job well, I needed to make myself believe it.

A gentleman in his silver fox era passed behind Crossland's chair where we sat in the back row and shook his hand in greeting. "Crossland," he said with enthusiasm. "So glad you could make it. So proud of Bristol. She's got the hottest line on the market."

Crossland released the man's hand and nodded. "I agree with you there," he said.

The man glanced over at me after nodding to Crossland's friends, arching a brow.

Crossland shifted in a seat, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "This is Aspen Reed, my girlfriend," he said. "Aspen, this is Rene Landon. He's a legendary fashion industry executive."

"I don't know about legend, but I don't mind the sound of it," Rene said. "Wonderful to meet you." He extended his hand, and I quickly shook it. "What is it you do, my darling? It must be something fascinating if you're able to hold down this one's attention," he joked, laughing at himself.

"Oh, I..." I said, surprised.

This was one discussion we hadn't had, and sitting among billionaires and fashion legends, I suddenly had a hard time remembering how to speak. Then I remembered who I was and went with it. "I'm a coffee industry expert," I said, grinning up at him. It wasn't a full lie, but the title sounded so much better than barista.

Crossland laughed and cleared his throat at the same time, making it hard for me to not snort as well.

“Coffee expert,” Rene said, eyes washing over me with intrigue. “That’s absolutely fascinating. Do you have your own line of coffee beans that you distribute? I’m always looking for new flavors.”

“Not yet,” I answered, the words rolling off my tongue like I really belonged here, discussing collective empires. Like there was a part of me that had been researching coffee bean distribution for my own business interests.

It wasn’t *too* far off the mark. I had often dreamed about owning my own shop with a little bookstore connected to it or coming up with something fresher, like a coffee shop, bar, and bookstore. They were just dreams, though. Just like when I was a kid, I used to dream that I would be a rock star drummer.

I had one realistic dream, and that was seeing Brecken achieve her goals of majoring in family law at NYU. She was firmly on that path, and that’s all I could really ask for.

“Well, it was wonderful meeting you,” Rene said, then glanced at Crossland.

“Always a pleasure to see you and your sister’s work. I must go take my seat before the show starts.”

We shifted back in our seats, moving so we could face the stage as the lights dimmed, indicating the start of the show.

Music poured through hidden speakers, filling the room with a booming, exhilarating beat, and soon models strutted confidently down the catwalk, looking almost otherworldly in the beautiful clothes that Crossland’s sister designed.

Each piece had a special cut or theme and it all meshed together so cohesively it felt like getting a personal glimpse of Crossland’s sister without ever actually meeting her.

I leaned closer to Crossland’s ear. “Your sister is brilliant,” I whispered.

Crossland beamed. “She really is.”

We both clapped as one segment faded into another, and with each new model that took the stage, I relaxed a little in the surreal environment. I did my best to not jump in my seat every time I saw someone I recognized from the big screen or social media. Crossland and I even shared an inside-joke moment when I discreetly pointed out the actor who starred in the movie about the human-eating billionaire. And by the end of the show, I almost felt natural at Crossland's side.

The show transitioned effortlessly into an after party, complete with more music and mingling, drinks, and food.

Jesse already made what looked to be an entire group of new best friends, and it warmed my heart to see him in his element. And as his best friend, I secretly hoped he'd meet some industry connections here, just in case he ever wanted to launch his line on a wider scale.

Crossland made some obligatory rounds, greeting those that he felt needed greeting, and altogether avoiding others. There were several places we *couldn't* stop and chat because of past scorned lovers of his. It was actually quite amusing, especially with how apologetic he was about the whole thing.

"Shit," he said, spinning us back around and making a beeline for where Asher and Gareth talked across the room. "I'm sorry."

"*Cross*," I said, stopping him before we made it to his friends. I took his hand and met his gaze. "You don't have to keep apologizing to me. I understand you have a past. Sometimes our pasts fill up with things we were not proud of. That's okay. That's human, and it absolutely has no effect on what I think of you. Okay?"

Crossland stared down at me, his eyes curious and distant. I was half tempted to wave my hand in front of his face to see if he'd decided to take a micro nap with his eyes open. He quickly blinked and gave me a genuine smile that didn't have his usual mischief shaping it.

"Thank you," he said, the words wrapped in this deep relief, as if he wasn't used to that kind of honesty or understanding.

I knew his friends gave him shit about his playboy antics, but was it so bad that he constantly felt like he had to apologize for it? Or was that just for my benefit?

We made our way back over to Asher and Gareth. Daisy was off somewhere speaking to a celebrity that she had a connection with, and I found myself under the scrutiny of two incredibly powerful males.

Weston and Brynn's wedding had been a whirlwind which hadn't allowed for a ton of one-on-one time with Crossland's best friends. Right now, despite the exciting energy of the after party, I felt like I was under the spotlight for the very first time.

I did my best not to show my nerves and hid behind my champagne flute in order to center myself.

Asher motioned to me, his no-nonsense attitude clear in the way he held himself. "I'm really glad to see you again, Aspen," he said.

Gareth nodded his agreement, and I grinned at them both.

"I'm happy to see you guys again, too," I said, meaning every word. I genuinely enjoyed chatting with them, and couldn't help be surprised at how down to earth they were.

"I was worried," Asher continued.

"Why is that?" Crossland asked.

Asher smiled sheepishly at me, then shrugged. "Well, I try not to get too attached to anyone Crossland dates. You never know when you're going to see them again."

"Ah," I said before Crossland could respond. "Are you getting attached to me, Ash?" I said with an air of familiarity that I probably hadn't earned yet, but we'd done the chicken dance together at the wedding, so I think that made us on our way to besties.

Gareth had obviously opted out of that dance, but he and I had shared a whiskey at the open bar, and I think I managed to get him to say seven words to me, so I'm sure we were on the bestie track, too.

“I appreciate the way you call Crossland on his bullshit,” Asher said, laughing as he nodded toward his friend. “It’s about time someone did.”

I grinned at that, then nodded toward Crossland, who stood next to me. “You have no idea,” I said, totally buzzing off of the role I was playing. It was just too damn fun to be somebody else for a little while. “I have this one completely wrapped around my finger.”

Gareth snorted, and Asher outright laughed.

Crossland gaped down at me, playfulness flickering over those Arctic blue eyes.

“You do not,” he argued, but there was a wide grin on his face.

“I think I do,” I said, smirking up at him. “After all, you’re the one who keeps whisking me off on these grand adventures without so much as a hint from me.” I turned my attention back to Asher and Gareth, motioning toward Crossland. “He’s quite the romantic,” I said.

They both looked absolutely shocked.

“It’s true,” I continued. “He gets me my favorite tacos whenever I ask. And he never demands anything in return. I think he does it just to make me smile.” I grinned up at him, and he pursed his lips, his features saying he was amused by how thick I was laying it on.

“He sounds like the perfect boyfriend,” Asher said, and I could detect the hint of skepticism in his voice, noting the same look in his eyes as he glanced between the two of us.

Shit. Maybe I was getting a little too carried away. I could tell they weren’t buying it, going as far as looking at Crossland with disappointment. I scrambled for a second, trying to figure out how to dig us out of the hole I’d walked us right into.

Then it dawned on me.

A public display of affection should do the trick.

“He really is the best,” I said.

“You really don’t have to—”

I cut Crossland off, gripping his shirt with my free hand, pulling him down to my level to plant my lips against his.

Sparks shot across my skin, adding to the adrenaline from the role playing. Crossland didn’t react for a second before he took up his designated role and kissed me back. His hand flexed on the small of my back like he might pull me in for more contact, but I tugged myself away, grinning up at him before returning to our conversation.

“I just can’t get enough of him,” I said, patting his chest. “Anyway, where are you off to tonight, Gareth?” I asked, as if I hadn’t just kissed Crossland in front of two of his best friends.

“I have some business in Chicago,” he said without missing a beat.

I quickly realized that there probably wasn’t much that phased Crossland’s intimidating looking friend. Though I definitely didn’t get the violent vibe from him, not in the way my father was violent, but definitely in a way where he could handle himself if the situation arose. That was evident in all of Crossland’s friends. They simply carried themselves in a way that was both mature and composed.

We fell into some easy chitchat, with me carrying most of the conversation. Crossland stayed oddly silent. I kept up the PDA, especially when Asher and Gareth’s skeptic looks lessened with each easy touch. Still, Crossland was quiet, up until the point where Gareth had to leave to catch his flight, and Daisy and Asher left to make a dinner reservation.

The after party was still in full swing, and I’d barely said my goodbyes to Daisy before Crossland pulled me away from the crowd, to where we could hear each other in a darkened alcove of the building.

“What the hell was that?”

“Was I talking too much?” I asked, panic creeping up my spine. “I thought me and your friends were getting along great—”

“You are,” he said, shaking his head. “That kiss. What was that?”

I sighed, the reality of the situation hitting me. “I’m so sorry. I thought that you’d given your consent when we had that discussion on the plane about kissing. And Asher was looking at me like he didn’t believe us, so I thought the kiss would help our story. I didn’t mean to cross a line.”

Crossland blinked a few times, his eyes softening. “No,” he said. “You didn’t cross a line.”

“Did you hate it?” I asked, mortification creeping over my body. God, it’d been quick, but I thought it’d been nice. “I won’t do it again if you disliked it that much—”

“Hate it?” he asked, eyes widening.

“I mean, yeah,” I said, shifting my weight as anxiety clawed up my throat. “I know I’m not usually the girl you go for. If we have to do that again, I can take pointers, but it was just a kiss. Right? It wasn’t a big deal.”

I was rambling now, needing his assurance so he wouldn’t fire me. I needed this job, however unconventional it was.

“You didn’t think it was...” His words trailed off, his demeanor shifting completely as he walked toward me, forcing me to retreat until I hit the wall behind me. “You want pointers?”

“Of course,” I said, looking up at him. My breathing hitched as he leaned one arm on either side of my head.

“First one,” he said, our bodies almost flush. “It was entirely too quick.”

My heart fluttered in my chest, anticipation flaring beneath my skin as he dipped his head and captured my mouth.

The kiss was *searing*.

Hungry.

Frenzied.

It made me forget everything outside of the way his lips felt against mine.

Instinct swarmed my body, taking over as I slid my hands between his opened suit jacket and smoothed them over his dress shirt, greedily feeling the chiseled chest beneath.

Crossland gently gripped my chin, tipping my head back as he licked into my mouth, the contact making heat pool between my thighs. He teased and flicked his tongue against mine, no hesitance or timidity about it. I whimpered at being handled so confidently, my hands fisting in his shirt as I pulled him closer. He sucked on my bottom lip, and my heart raced. He kissed me like he knew exactly how to make me achy.

He pulled back, eyes wide as they locked with mine.

Our chests heaved, and I couldn't help but look from his eyes to his mouth again, wanting—no, *needing*—more.

“Just a kiss,” he said, repeating my earlier words. “No big deal, right?”

What an absolute prick, I thought but couldn't stop the excited smile from shaping my lips.

A gorgeous, funny, and charming *prick*.

Fine. Two could play that game.

“Right,” I said, boldly shifting my hips, rolling them ever so slightly, delight sparking beneath my skin at what I felt with his body flush against mine. I glanced down at the lack of space between us before flickering my eyes back up to his. “Definitely no big deal.”

His lips parted, mischief and challenge flashing in his eyes.

“Careful,” he warned, his voice raw and deliciously deep when I wiggled against him again. “You're playing with fire. The last thing I want is you getting burned.”

I laughed softly, my head spinning with the game we were playing. I reached up on my tiptoes, bringing my lips to the shell of his ear.

“Maybe that's what I live for,” I whispered, nipping slightly at his earlobe before freeing myself from the cage he'd trapped me in.

I walked away without looking back, totally needing air before I did something tragically stupid...

Like drop to my knees in order to bring Crossland to his.

Aspen

Bristol sat across from me in one of the buttery soft chairs near the window of Crossland's private jet. It was amazing how much they looked alike, except for their eyes. Hers were more hazel where Crossland's were that stunning Arctic blue that I had a hard time looking away from sometimes.

She looked surprisingly calm and relaxed, given that she'd just finished an epic fashion show, and was now hitching a ride back to New York with us since, according to Crossland, she had a few business meetings to attend at the offices she kept in the city.

Jesse had taken a seat across the aisle from me and was already peacefully snoozing. His ability to be snoring before the wheels were even up was one of the things I envied about my best friend. I tried to keep my focus out the window or casually scrolling on my phone, but I could feel Bristol's penetrating stare.

"Did you ask to come to my show?" she asked casually, an intrigued look shaping her features.

"No," I answered before thinking about how that sounded. I sat up straighter in my chair. "Not that I didn't want to come," I hurried to add. My eyes flashed to Jesse, wishing he was awake to help me. He was always so much better at socializing than I was. "Your show absolutely blew me away," I continued. "He's a designer too," I said, nodding to my sleeping friend. "So, I've been around fashion a little, but not on that scale. You're incredibly talented. I love how your designs looked edgy yet approachable."

“Thank you,” she said, smiling softly at me. “But you didn’t ask to come because you wanted your friend to meet me?”

I furrowed my brow, wondering about the question. There was no malice in her tone, no judgment in her eyes, but I couldn’t help but feel as if she was searching for a specific answer.

“No,” I answered honestly.

Bristol’s lips parted slightly, and she glanced behind her where Crossland had sat separately from us, insisting he had work to catch up on.

I couldn’t help but follow her line of sight, my heart picking up speed as I saw his dress shirtsleeves were rolled to his elbows as he typed away furiously on his laptop. There was a slight crinkle between his brows as he concentrated, a tense set in his jaw that made him look fierce in a way I hadn’t seen before.

He was usually all confidence and jokes, but I could tell when it came to his business that he didn’t fuck around. And I guess that was obvious, given the deal he’d struck with me just to win a bet.

Another flutter of heat raced through me as I thought about the kiss that I could still feel on my lips. It had been mere hours ago, and yet it was like I could still feel his hands on me.

Which was ridiculous because it had just been a playful, simple kiss.

A not-a-big-deal kiss, according to us both.

Yeah. Right.

I blinked out of my stare, not noticing that Bristol had turned back around and was intently watching me gaze at her brother. Heat flushed my cheeks, but I did my best to be as casual as she was.

“So, my brother just brought you to my show,” she said.

I simply nodded.

“He’s super proud of you,” I said. “There was no way he was going to miss it.”

She smiled, but there was pity washing over her features as she looked at me. “And you said you’ve been together for three weeks?”

Oh, this was the part where the baby sister interrogated the new flame. Luckily, we’d prepared for this.

“Four,” I answered. It wasn’t exactly a lie. Crossland and I had been in a mutual agreement since the moment we met.

Bristol cringed, and I tilted my head in question. “Sorry,” she said, smoothing her features. “I love my brother, don’t get me wrong. But he’s kind of... he doesn’t exactly scream monogamy. And I like you. You’re sweet and funny and seem to have your shit together, and I just don’t want you to be—”

“Torn to pieces?” I cut over her, and she chuckled softly.

“Yeah, something like that.” She shrugged. “I’ve never seen him with a woman longer than a weekend. Sometimes two or more, but never one and never the *same* one. And now here you are, smart as hell, nice as hell, *and* he’s brought you to my show.”

I kept my grin in place, using all the skills I’d learned from schooling my features in front of my parents whenever they popped back into our lives. It was a sticky skill, being able to be different versions of yourself at any given moment. A survival mechanism I learned early on in life.

The blowups were less likely to happen if I didn’t have a reaction, not that Bristol was on the attack, but the talent came in handy.

“Don’t worry,” I said, waving her off. “I know exactly who your brother is. Anyone with Google capabilities knows who your brother is.” I tilted my head. “On the surface anyway.”

Crossland was absolutely every inch the playful bad boy that the media portrayed him to be, but after spending so much time with him, learning about him and watching his habits, I was learning there was a lot more to him than he let people see. One of those things being the immense responsibility he

took on not only for his companies and business endeavors, but his family.

And that we had in common.

“If you know him, and his reputation, then what...”

“What am I doing here, a month later?” I filled in where she left off.

Bristol laughed and nodded.

My eyes trailed around her, grazing over the still-concentrating Crossland, who hadn't once stopped working the entire flight.

What am I doing here? I'd been asking myself that for weeks, and the obvious answer was the money. The future he promised with the only condition being playing a simple little game.

The kiss and the banter we'd shared after it lit up something beneath my skin.

Crossland's eyes trailed up over his laptop, meeting mine, like he'd felt me looking at him.

A sweet zing traveled the length of my body at being caught, and I quickly returned my focus to Bristol.

“Don't worry,” I finally answered her in my most confident and playful voice. “It's a mutually beneficial relationship. I'm not after his heart, just his wallet.”

Bristol laughed, and the tension faded. She was honest and direct and talented—exactly the kind of woman I'd want on my team—so lying to her about this fake relationship with her brother probably wasn't the best way to earn her friendship, but I'd skirted around the truth as much as I could.

Bristol blew out of breath, leaning back in her chair. “Good luck with that,” she said. “Cross may be frivolous with some of his expenses, but if you try to play him, you'll lose.”

The protective undertone of her playful comment hit home. “I know it,” I said honestly. “I promise, I'm not audacious

enough to think that I have the capabilities of winning with someone like him.”

Bristol gave me a respectful look and smiled. “I don’t know,” she said. “Like I said, I’ve never seen my brother with anyone as long as he’s been with you. So regardless of what you say, there’s got to be something here. And I’m always going to be on his side—big brother and all that—but I hope you know what you’re doing. Anyone who thinks my brother’s heart is up for grabs is in for a rude awakening.”

“I appreciate the heads-up. But his heart is the last thing I’m after,” I said the last part as I glanced behind Bristol again, finding Crossland’s eyes still very much on me.

And there was something in them, some sizzling hint of a challenge that had me coiling up inside in an achy way I hadn’t felt in a very long time.

* * *

Me: How are classes going?

I fired off the text to Brecken as Jesse and I rode in the back of a cab to meet up with our other friends for a rare get-together. Crossland was slammed with work, so I was off the hook for the night.

Brecken: Long, but amazing.

My sisterly instincts tingled.

Me: Are you making sure you get enough sleep?
And you’re still eating plenty in the cafeteria, right?

Brecken: Yes and yes. Stop worrying.

I could practically feel the eye roll through the text, but it wasn’t like I could help it. Brecken had been my focus for so long, worrying about her was ingrained in me.

Me: That's impossible. I'll always worry about you. It's my job.

Brecken: It's really not.

I cringed. I was doing that thing where I hovered too much, a latent instinct that was really fucking hard to quell.

I knew Brecken wasn't an eight-year-old girl cowering in the corner because our father was on a bender. But after years of protecting her, of sacrificing everything so I could get her out of that horrible environment and into a space she loved, it was hard to switch to the reality of the present—where my baby sister was now a grown woman, living her best life.

Brecken: I'm about to meet up with some friends in the cafeteria. Love you.

Me: Be safe. Love you.

I stared at my screen a little longer in case Brecken texted again, but she didn't, so I put my phone in my bag just as the cab was pulling up to the restaurant where we were meeting our friends.

"Everything all good with Brec?" Jesse asked as he helped me out of the cab.

"Yep," I said as we headed to the entrance. "She thinks I worry too much, but that's nothing new."

Jesse smirked and held the door open for me. "Oh, well, she's spot-on there," he said as we headed inside.

I rolled my eyes. "I do not," I argued.

"You absolutely do," Jesse said, scanning the crowded restaurant for our friends. "You're the one who gives me a half-hour lecture if I don't drink enough water, yet you rarely ever worry about yourself."

"Hydration is important."

“Yeah, and iced coffee doesn’t count, Aspen,” he playfully chided, spotting our friends in the back near the bar area.

I gaped at his back as he led the way to our friends, shaking my head at his blasphemy.

Sophia and Maple hopped up from the high-top table, instantly swarming us with hugs. I squeezed each of them before taking the seat across from them.

“It’s been forever!” Maple said, grinning at me. Her long blonde hair was pulled half back in a cool intricate braid that I’d never be able to manage. She was always rocking the latest styles, showing off her skills as a hair stylist. She owned her own boutique salon, and it was rapidly growing in popularity thanks to a few influencers posting about her.

“It’s only been a month,” I said, shaking my head.

“Too long,” Sophia said, planting me with a serious look. Her wild, dark curls framed her face, matching her no-bullshit attitude.

I blew out of breath. “I know, I know. I’ve been busy.”

“You know we get it,” Maple said. “I’ve just missed you guys.”

“Same,” Sophia said.

“You have to be like me,” Jesse said. “Venture out to Brooklyn for your coffee. Then she *has* to spend time with you.” He lovingly nudged me, and I rolled my eyes.

“Act like I’m the only one who works.” I motioned across the table to Maple. “This one is running her own salon. It’s not like that comes with soft hours.” I glanced at Sophia. “And neither does managing one of the largest hotels in Manhattan.”

Sophia and Maple gave over-exaggerated proud looks before bursting into laughter.

“I know you’re not suggesting that just because I have an unconventional work schedule that I have soft hours,” Jesse said in a perfectly snarky tone.

I gasped in faux shock, laying my palm over the center of my chest. “I would never.”

We all laughed again just as the server came to our table and we placed our drink orders.

After he left to put in the order, our little table descended into the delightful chaos that came with catching up with friends. As each second ticked on, my heart filled with a much-needed warmth and energy I hadn’t realized I’d been missing.

There was something to be said about having a group of friends that didn’t need constant maintaining in order to stay healthy. Maple and Sofia knew my schedule and respected it. They knew that sometimes I worked double shifts, barely making it home with my eyes open before crashing into bed. Hour-long phone conversations for check-ins or daily texts in the group chat were often missed by me, but they never faulted me for it, and I loved them all the more because of it.

And whenever we did catch up like this, it was like no time had passed at all. It’d taken me years to believe it was real, because I’d been so used to people bailing the minute they found out I had toxic family history and a one-track-goal when it came to survival.

So many friendships before I met Sophia, Maple, and Jesse had been superficial when I thought they’d been genuine.

Not this group, though. They knew me, knew my history, knew my trauma, and still loved me for me. It was something that I never took for granted even if I couldn’t tell them every day how much I appreciated it.

“Oh, come on,” Jesse said, his tone pleading. He even flashed Sophia his best version of puppy eyes for good measure. “You can’t tell a story about a celebrity demanding the entire floor be cleared of guests without actually telling us who it was!”

Sophia shook her head, stirring the ice in her cocktail with a little golden stir stick. “That’s the line I draw,” she said, shrugging. “I can give you the tea, but no specifics.”

Had to give her credit, managing the hottest hotel in Manhattan, she saw her fair share of celebrities. It was almost so regular to her now that she was barely starstruck by anyone. And while I loved myself some good tea, I respected her for upholding the privacy of the guests that stayed in her hotel.

“Such a tease,” Jesse joked before taking a sip of his cocktail.

I’d opted for a soda water and lime, knowing that I had a ridiculously early shift tomorrow. But there’d been no way I was missing out on this dinner. Especially with my now unknown schedule, being the subject of Crossland’s whims. I had to take any time I could get with my friends.

“What about you, Aspen?” Sophia asked. “Anymore thoughts on opening up that coffee-bar-bookstore you’ve been dreaming about?”

I spluttered out a laugh, shaking my head. “You know I have zero time to entertain that right now.” I waved off my friends concerned looks. “All I want to do right now is get Brecken through school. After that, we’ll see about me.”

Our chatty little table fell quiet, each of my friends’ eyes glued to me with concern.

My cheeks flushed, and I swallowed hard. I didn’t particularly respond well to pity, and it took everything in my power to swallow down my trigger response—rambling about how content I was with my life the way it was.

They knew me. They knew I was fine with my life, but they also knew it wasn’t exactly a dream. Guilt sliced through me at the thought. I was putting Brecken through school. That should be enough for me.

I shouldn’t need more.

“Okay,” Maple said. “Then tell us about this new man in your life. Crossland McClaren? He’s like a gojillionaire.”

I laughed softly at that, loving her for the change in subject.

“Yeah,” Sophia said. “You said in the group chat that you weren’t dating, but you’ve been spending a ton of time with this guy over the last few weeks. We’ve seen you pop up in tons of posts with him. What’s going on?”

Jesse and I shared a look, and another little sliver of guilt burrowed deep. Jesse had been present when the deal took place, or at least the beginnings of the deal, and he had to sign the NDA just like me. I knew I could trust Sophia and Maple, but as much as I wanted to tell them, I couldn’t break contract just to ease my guilt.

“We have a complicated relationship,” I said, breathing a little easier at that truth. “One I’m not exactly ready to talk about yet.”

“That’s fair,” Sofia said.

“Can you talk about how hot he is?” Maple asked, and we all laughed. “Because *damn*.”

“Seriously,” Sophia said. “I haven’t seen *one* bad picture or clip of that man. He wears a suit like he was made for it. I can’t imagine how hot he is in person. Not to mention sleeping with him.”

“He’s not really like that around me,” I said. “I mean, it’s not really like that between us. Right now.” God, I sounded as unsure as I felt. But it was the truth. Despite our arrangement, despite my role in his life right now, Crossland never really danced around that line with me. As much as I thought he would. Except...

Heat flushed over my body, my mind instantly replaying the kiss.

I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I’d never been kissed like that before. He’d somehow thrilled me while also coaxing me into this languid and blissful state, which didn’t make any sense at all because they were two complete opposite feelings, and yet somehow he’d managed it.

Not to mention that every time I thought about it, I *craved* that feeling again.

The feeling of being someone's sole focus. It was such a rarity for me to allow anybody to take control or to help or to even put me at the center of their attention. That just wasn't my role in life. It never had been.

I was the responsible one. The protector, the provider, the planner. The warrior, as Jesse and Brecken liked to say.

I wasn't someone who was taken care of. Ever.

And yet...When Crossland had kissed me, I'd felt fully taken care of for the first time.

Even though it was just a game.

Even though it had been out of some desperate edge to prove he could do better than I did.

And I *liked* that. I liked that a lot.

"Oh, no," Maple said, wagging her finger at me. "I see that look. Where did you just go?"

"I have an idea," Jesse muttered under his breath before hiding behind his drink.

I flashed him a scolding look.

He'd been at the show and told me he'd walked by, witnessing a fraction of what we thought was a hidden kiss.

"You have to give us something," Sophia begged.

I couldn't stop myself from smiling. I guess it wasn't against the contract terms to talk about things that a boyfriend and girlfriend would do.

"We kissed," I said. And it felt good to tell some truth.

Sophia and Maple shared excited little squeals before silently urging me to continue.

I took a sip of my drink, drawing out the anticipation just because I knew it would drive them nuts. When Sophia looked like she was ready to throttle me, I continued.

"It was as hot as he looks in those suits he wears."

I was met with another round of squeals, followed by several high fives across the table.

The normality of sharing sassy tidbits among trusted confidants filled me with excitement.

But as our food arrived, I caught Jesse looking discreetly at me.

And because I knew him so well, I knew that he was worried.

Because he knew the truth.

He knew this was all a ruse.

Pretending to be somebody's girlfriend was one thing, but kissing them and actually enjoying it? Kissing Crossland and craving it more than I craved my next iced coffee? Well, that was another thing entirely.

CHAPTER 8

Crossland

It was a rare thing when our monthly poker game and a Calgary versus Reaper game ended up in the same weekend.

And it was even rarer for everyone, including spouses and girlfriends, to have the time off to attend both.

The fact that I had my entire chosen family in one hotel suite was the only thing that took the sting out of losing to Asher's team.

It was a close game, one that I spent half of my time watching Aspen enjoy more than I did watching my players. I couldn't help it; it was sexy as hell to watch her cheering on my team from the owner's box that Asher and I shared that night.

She had no qualms about rubbing it in Asher's face every time we scored, but in the end, the Reapers had pulled out a win. Aspen had been supportive through the loss, taking my hand in a comforting squeeze once the clock ran out.

Asher had been doing his fair share of gloating during dinner, or as much of gloating as Asher allowed himself to do, but now we were all back in the villa I'd rented for all of us, and we were gathered in the living room for after-dinner drinks.

I lingered behind the marble kitchen island, playing bartender and mixing up several requested gin and tonics for Aspen, Daisy, Alexandra, and Brynn. Then I poured whiskeys for myself, Asher, Ethan, Weston, and Gareth.

“Are you sure you don’t want a drink?” I asked Serenity, who had been left with a few security details that we’d demanded remain outside the villa. Her father, Doyle, was unfortunately included because of the poker game, but he’d gone out for the night. And thank fuck for that. I didn’t want that asshole mucking up an already losing night.

“No, thank you,” Serenity said, her voice so soft it was almost like she never spoke up or she’d been reprimanded enough about being loud that she’d trained herself not to. And from what I’d seen of the interactions with her asshole of a father, I was betting on the latter.

Sympathy pricked me as I noted her gazing longingly at my friends that had gathered with their drinks among the plush sofas and armchairs in the center of the living room that connected to the kitchen.

I hated that she likely felt separate when it came to our little group, although she’d become a staple part of it since Doyle won a seat in our monthly game. The man rarely traveled anywhere without her, but treated her like this prized commodity that wasn’t worth respect or affection. And that was just what he showed us.

“How about a mocktail?” I asked her. “I make a mean cranberry and soda with lime.” I smiled at her, reaching for another crystal tumbler.

Serenity’s eyes lit up, and she nodded eagerly.

I quickly mixed the ingredients before passing her the glass and motioning for her to join us in the living room.

“I haven’t played that game since college,” Gareth grumbled as we joined the group.

Serenity split off from me, electing to sit on the floor near where Gareth sat in an armchair. It almost looked comical, the sweet and innocent-looking Serenity folding her legs beneath her near the grumpy, fierce-faced Gareth. Maybe she gravitated toward him because he’d spoken on her behalf when Doyle berated her, but I always thought there was

something more there, even when Gareth constantly assured me there couldn't be.

“What are we playing?” I asked, taking a seat next to Aspen where she sat on the love seat.

Asher, Daisy, Brynn, and Weston took up the sofa across from us, a little mahogany coffee table situated between us. Ethan and Alex sat just to the right of us, Alex on Ethan's lap where he sat in the other armchair.

“Daisy wants us to play Never Have I Ever,” Brynn explained.

I cocked a brow at her.

“What?” Daisy asked innocently. “It's for book research.”

I barely held back a laugh. I eyed Asher, who told us just enough about her book research to make her request for this game viable.

“I'm in,” Aspen said, raising her hand in the most adorable way.

I leaned back against the love seat, effortlessly smiling down at her eagerness to play a game with my friends. She'd folded herself into this group without a hint of hesitance. It didn't matter that this was a contract between us, she was unequivocally and unapologetically herself.

The only thing fake about her was our relationship. That fact sat heavy on my chest for a few moments, but I shifted in my seat, distracting myself from the feeling by taking a moment to admire how freaking beautiful she looked sitting next to me.

She still donned the Calgary jersey I'd gifted her that morning, with black leggings accentuating her long legs that she'd tucked beneath her, a pair of rainbow socks covering her feet. Her colorful hair looked silky soft and almost iridescent thanks to the crackling fire roaring behind us.

“Crossland?” Ethan said my name like he'd said it a few times before, and I blinked out of my appreciation of Aspen, slowly drawing my gaze to my friend.

“Hmm?” I asked, and my friends chuckled.

“Are you in?” Ethan asked.

I quickly realized they were asking me about the game, and I nodded. “I’m so in.”

“Yay!” Daisy clapped and raised her glass. “I’ll start us off and whoever wants to go next can, and so on and so forth. Got it?” Everyone nodded, and she smiled. “Never have I ever used restraints in bed.”

Every single person in the room took a sip of their drink, openly admitting that they had, in fact, used restraints... Except for Serenity.

I was shocked to see Aspen drinking too. I cocked a brow at her, and she smiled with a shrug.

“Why do you look so shocked?” she asked, her voice lowered between just the two of us while the others laughed and joked among themselves.

“I didn’t know you were into that kind of thing,” I admitted.

“You never asked,” she said so simply I suddenly felt foolish for *not* asking.

But in reality, I had no business asking.

We weren’t actually dating, regardless of how real that kiss felt last week. Jesus, every time I thought about it, I had to lock down my muscles to not take that thought any further. She’d been so damn responsive, giving me every bit that I gave her, and it made me think all sorts of little things about just how responsive she’d be in other areas.

Nope. Can’t go there.

“Never have I ever kissed a stranger,” Alex said, continuing with the game.

Everyone but Aspen, Serenity, and Brynn took a drink.

Interesting. Aspen had never kissed a stranger. I made a mental note to thank Daisy later for bringing up the game. I was suddenly learning more intimate details about Aspen than

I'd ever thought to ask before, and I thirsted for every new answer.

"Never have I ever role-played," Brynn said.

Everyone but Serenity drank.

And while I was gobbling up the details about Aspen like an eager boyfriend, I couldn't help but feel sorry for Serenity, who had yet to take a drink on any question. Just how sheltered had Doyle kept her all these years? It wasn't a bad thing to not have these experiences, but that was only if that was *her* choice. With the way Doyle kept her cloistered, I highly doubted it was up to her.

"Never have I ever said *I love you* to a partner," Daisy said when no one else offered a question.

Everyone but Aspen, myself, Serenity, and Gareth drank. And yeah, I guess that one was pretty obvious since the rest of the people in the room were all either technically engaged or married.

"Never have I ever sexted," I said raising my drink to my lips. Everyone but Aspen, Serenity, and Gareth drank.

Aspen eyed my confused look, then shook her head. "If you have something to ask me Crossland, just ask me."

I smirked, loving how she didn't hesitate to call out what she could clearly read on my face. I leaned closer to her, making sure we were the only two that could hear. "How is it that you have experience with restraints, but you've never sexted? I know they're both a trust thing, but you think one would come before the other."

"It is a trust thing," she said.

"So you trusted someone to restrain you but not to sext you?"

A delightful little flush rushed over her cheeks. "Who said that I was the one restrained?"

My lips parted, shock barreling through me at her sassy little remark. The idea of her being the one to tie me up

completely unraveled me, almost so much that I damn near missed the next question.

“Never have I ever had sex in the office,” Asher said, immediately raising his drink to his lips. Weston, Ethan, Brynn, and Daisy followed suit, leaving Alex, Aspen, myself, Gareth, and Serenity to not drink.

“Never have I ever come within five minutes,” Weston said.

Not one of my male friends drank, and where I expected all the women in the room to drink, only Alex, Brynn, and Daisy did.

Serenity didn't.

Aspen didn't.

“Oops,” Weston said, his eyes widening as he noted Aspen's lack of drinking before he gave me a squeamish look.

The same look that Asher, Gareth, and Ethan were now giving me.

And I understood why they were looking at me with such confused disappointment. Aspen and I had been together for a month now, which meant I was doing something horribly wrong in the bedroom if I'd never made her come in less than five minutes.

I quickly set down my drink and stood up, turning toward Aspen with a hand outstretched. “If you'll excuse us,” I said the second she took my hand, a look of confusion on her face as I tugged her out of the living room, up the stairs, and down the hallway to our shared room.

I quickly shut the door behind us and had barely turned around to face Aspen before she was apologizing.

“I'm so sorry, Crossland,” she said urgently. “This is my second drink. I'm a little buzzed, and I wasn't thinking.” She cringed a little, shaking her head. “I didn't think about how my answer would make you look—”

“Aspen,” I said her name softly, cutting her off as I crossed the distance between us to look down at her. “I didn't bring

you up here to reprimand you.”

Her shoulders dropped slightly, and it killed me to see how tense she was.

“Did you really think that’s why I brought you up here?” I asked, baffled at her reaction. Fuck, had I been treating her so badly that she thought one assumed misstep would send me into lecture mode?

“I…” She blew out a breath. “I don’t know. I just figured I’d embarrassed you and in my world that usually means trouble.”

I tipped her chin up, so she’d meet my eyes. “Not in my world.”

Her bottom lip trembled slightly, and I grazed my thumb over it.

“Then why did you bring me up here?” she asked, her voice a whisper between us.

Why had I?

Fuck, the truth wouldn’t be an answer she’d want to hear.

“Crossland,” she urged, leaning closer to me like she just couldn’t help it.

“Partly because I wanted to make sure you weren’t about to get grilled about that answer by everyone, in case you were uncomfortable—”

“I wasn’t,” she assured me. “I love your friends. And I’d never be embarrassed about my answers. They’re my experiences. I own them.” She shrugged.

I tilted my head. “You’ve really never…”

“Gotten off in five minutes?” She filled in when I couldn’t. “No, I really haven’t.”

“Fucking hell, Aspen,” I said, my muscles clenching with need. “You’re missing out. An experienced partner would’ve—”

“That’s not fair,” she said. “I’ve been with plenty of—”

“*Inexperienced* partners,” I cut her off, no room for argument in my tone. “Any partner who doesn’t take care of you first is nothing less.”

Fire churned in her eyes. “Maybe it’s me,” she said. “Maybe I take longer than other people. That’s not a bad thing.”

“Of course it’s not a bad thing,” I said. “But I feel like it’s more a lack of knowledge from previous partners, and less to do with you.”

She tipped her chin, defiant as ever, and I dropped my hand, no longer needing to gently hold her attention. She was all fire now, no hint of hesitance or insecurity about her. “What was the other part?”

I furrowed my brow.

“You said you brought me up here partly because you wanted to make sure I was comfortable. What was the other part?”

Oh. Well, I guess there was no getting around it.

“Instinct,” I answered. Maybe she’d be satisfied with that.

“What instinct?”

Or maybe not.

“You don’t want to know.”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.”

I raked a hand through my hair.

“I’m not some delicate princess, Crossland,” she said. “Tell me—”

“To get you off in less than five minutes.” The words rolled off my tongue quick and solid. I rarely tried to hold myself back from saying anything, but with Aspen, the last thing I wanted to do was make her feel uncomfortable with our arrangement and bolt as a result. “But don’t worry,” I hurried to add. “I’m a big boy. I can control my instincts—”

“You couldn’t,” she cut me off, and my brows rose.

“Excuse me?”

She shrugged. “I told you before, I never have. It takes me longer. You couldn’t.”

“I could,” I said, with every ounce of confidence I possessed.

A wild sort of grin shaped her lips as her eyes flickered to my mouth. “So cocky,” she said, shaking her head.

“Confident,” I countered.

Her eyes met mine. “Then prove it.”

Flames speared through my veins, the sensation so intense I took a step away from her. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do,” she said. “I think it would do you good to be proven wrong for once.”

I half-smiled, half-gaped at her. “Careful, kitten,” I said. “If I prove you wrong, it’ll be all I can do to keep you from begging for more.”

“Ha!” she huffed, nothing but delight in her eyes. “And you’re so sure it won’t be the other way around? See, all cockiness with nothing real to back it up.”

“Oh, I assure you, I have *everything* to back it up.”

She popped her hip to the side, a little move that I tracked and filed away as a tell of hers—she was digging in. “There’s nothing in our contract that says we can’t,” she said. “So, prove it.”

I turned around, walking toward the door, hearing her sigh that sounded a hell of a lot like disappointment. I reached for the doorknob and flicked the lock before turning to face her again.

Her eyes widened and she visibly swallowed.

She’d thought I was leaving her.

Thought I was disregarding what she so openly offered. A challenge for sure, but I’d never been one to back down.

I crossed the distance between us, rolling my shirtsleeves up to the elbow, my suit jacket already discarded somewhere downstairs. I slid my hands into my pants pockets to keep them contained for the moment.

“I need you to tell me you want this,” I said. “Need you to tell me this isn’t a joke or some sassy banter. You’re not pressured into this just because you started this game. You say you don’t want me to touch you, and I won’t.”

“Seriously?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “I need to know you’re one-hundred-percent into this moment with me or we don’t move forward.”

She grinned softly. “Yes,” she said.

“Yes, what?” I asked, allowing my eyes to trail the length of her gorgeous body. I lingered on the curves I was desperate to worship, but somehow made my eyes move back to hers.

“Touch me,” she said. “I want you to touch me.”

I took my hands out of my pockets, reaching for her as I gently cupped her face. “I need you to get more specific, kitten,” I said, lowering my face to within an inch of hers. “Tell me exactly what you want me to do to you.”

Her breathing hitched, and her lips opened and closed a few times as she tried to find the words. I grinned down at her, content to drink in the lines of her face, trace them with my fingers before slipping them into her silken strands.

“Crossland,” she said. “I...I want you to make me come.”

“If you insist,” I said, my mouth instantly capturing hers.

In seconds we were tangled, her body flush against mine, her fingers fisting my shirt as she parted her lips for me. I slipped my tongue between her lips, picking up right where we’d left off at the fashion show. Only now, we weren’t preforming or playing a little game. Now, we were fully entering into a little bit of fun and the clock was ticking.

I wanted to take my time with her, wanted to explore every inch of her body and figure out just how to make her tremble with pleasure, but this wasn’t about that. This was about the

fact that for some reason, no one had ever taken the time to get her off in a rapid burst of passion.

And she deserved that.

Deserved to know what it was like to be desired by someone so much they *couldn't* wait to make her come.

And I was more than happy to be that someone right now.

I licked into her mouth, teasing the roof, the edges of her teeth, every spot that made her clutch my shirt harder, made her arch against me again and again.

“So fucking responsive,” I growled into her mouth, gently gripping her hips as I walked us toward the bed until the backs of her knees touched it and she tumbled backward.

I grinned down at her, loving the way her lips were kiss-swollen and her cheeks were flushed. I made a show of looking at my watch.

“We’re only a minute in and look at you, all breathless and needy.”

Her lips parted. “Cocky prick,” she said, but there was laughter in her tone.

“*Confident* prick,” I countered. “Let’s get that clear.” I bent down, hooking my fingers in the band of her leggings, meeting her eyes as I slowly tugged them down. She lifted her beautiful ass off the bed, allowing me to fully slide them off her legs and toss them and her socks to the side.

“*Goddamn*,” I said, taking a moment to look down at her. She had nothing on but black lace and the Calgary jersey, and I’d never been so damn attracted to a woman in my entire life.

Did that mean I had a fucking ego on me? Being turned on by her wearing my team’s jersey?

Yeah, but I sure as shit didn’t question it.

“You’re fucking stunning, Aspen,” I said, smoothing my fingers down her thighs.

She looked like she wanted to argue with that statement, so I stepped between her thighs, leaning over to kiss her again. I

slid my hand between her legs, teasing her over the lace with light strokes that had her hips arching off the bed, silently begging for more contact.

I smirked against her lips, sucking her bottom one into my mouth and relishing the sweet little gasp that came out of her mouth.

“So eager,” I teased, backing up enough to look down at her. Fuck, she was gorgeous, all splayed out on the bed, eyes needy and breaths quick. “And I thought you said you were slow to fire.”

“I am,” she groaned, her back arching as I continued to tease her. “That doesn’t mean it doesn’t feel good.”

Heat coiled beneath my skin. “What feels good?” I asked. “This?” I drew a light circle over the lace, right above her clit.

“Yes.”

“What about this?” I trailed my fingers lower, just barely grazing her center, my entire body going taut when I felt a slip of wetness there. Fuck, my dick ached, growing rock hard in my pants to the point of pain. I silently told him to calm the fuck down. It wasn’t about him tonight.

“God, yes. *Crossland*,” she said my name like a demand, and it only made my grin widen as I watched the need play out over her face.

My girl was strung out and begging to be pushed over the edge. Maybe she’d been that way since our first kiss, maybe it’d been too long since she’d had a good orgasm, but either way, I was more than happy to oblige.

I continued to play with her, leaning down and planting kisses down her neck and lower, pushing up the jersey to lay kisses over her hips. She arched into my every touch, her little gasps and moans feeding into every aching need I had. I glanced at my watch.

“Two minutes left,” I whispered, before hooking my hands behind her thighs and dragging her to the edge of the bed.

Her shocked little squeal abruptly cut off the minute I sank to my knees between her thighs. She propped up on her elbows, looking down at me, and I swear the way she looked at me made me want to come right then and there.

I kept myself together, just barely, before dipping my head enough to tease my mouth over the lace.

“Crossland,” she groaned, her fingers digging into the comforter. “*Please.*”

And there it was. That breathy *please* was what I’d been waiting for, her tone laced with equal parts need and irritation. She was on edge, right where I wanted her.

I smiled up at her, gently adjusting her knee over my shoulder to bring her pussy right where I wanted it. Fuck me, I wanted to rip the lace off and sink my cock into her until she moaned my name over and over again.

“What?” I asked, knowing damn well what. I pressed the lace against her clit, using the textured friction to work her up even more as I drew circles around the swollen little bud. “You can’t be there already,” I teased, dipping my head and dragging my bottom lip ever so lightly up her slit.

Her thigh clenched where it rested against my face, and I knew she was, in fact, right there.

In that case...

I shifted the lace to the side and lapped my tongue through her heat, groaning at that first heady lick of her. Damn, she tasted divine, like salt and honey and whatever fucking dreams were made of.

She gasped, arching into my face as she sought her pleasure.

“Goddammit,” she groaned as I lapped and sucked and licked. “*Goddamn* you.”

I smiled against her swollen flesh, not once stopping, her little pleased curses only fueling my need to devour her entirely. I brought my hand up, sliding two fingers inside her while flattening my tongue against her clit. I pumped and

curled my fingers in time with her breaths, quicker and quicker until she clenched around me.

“Cross!” she moaned, her body trembling as her orgasm rippled through her. Fuck, hearing her say my name like that, too worked up to get my full name out, made pre-come bead on my cock. I ignored its demands to unzip and sink into her, and instead focused on pumping her through the aftershocks of her orgasm, my fingers working in slow strokes until she went limp beneath me.

Gently, I pulled my fingers out, shifting the lace back in place over her gorgeous glistening pussy, and stood back up. I kissed her again and relished the little whimper that escaped her lips as our flavors collided.

I pulled back, grinning as I glanced at my watch. “I still have thirty seconds left,” I said, more than proud of myself.

She fisted my shirt. “Then let’s keep going,” she said, her voice slightly breathless.

My eyes widened. “You want more?”

“Please,” she said.

I saw it play out in my head, all the wonderful things I could do to her body, all the places I could explore to make her come again and again.

But...

“Aspen,” I said before her lips met mine in a more than tempting kiss. Fuck me, I didn’t want to stop. “We can’t,” I said.

She immediately backed up, confusion flickering in her eyes.

“I want to,” I hurried to say. “Trust me.”

“Then why—”

“You’ve been drinking,” I said. “And there is a huge difference between making you come and fucking you so hard I’ll ruin you for anyone else.”

Her lips parted in shock, her features telling me everything about how much she loved that idea without her having to say a word.

I kissed her again, a deep, hungry kiss so she wouldn't take what I was about to do next as an insult.

“Get your gorgeous ass in this bed,” I said, hefting her up slightly so I could situate her under the covers. “And relax. Sleep.”

She leaned back against the pillows, looking only half convinced. “What about you?” she asked. “Where are you going?”

I shifted off the bed, standing as I looked down, admiring her. “I'm going to take a very long, very cold shower.”

She bit her lip, trying to stop her smile, and that look alone had me groaning.

I reluctantly made my way into the bathroom connected to our room, stopping to look over my shoulder at her. “Oh, and Aspen?”

“Yeah?” she asked, sitting up to look at me.

“I win,” I said, winking at her before I walked into the bathroom.

I heard her mumble *cocky prick* before I shut the door behind me, and the laughter in her tone made me realize that I'd never enjoyed being called a prick quite as much as I did when it came from her lips.

Crossland: Can you be ready to leave in an hour?

Crossland: I have a business opportunity in India, but there are a few black-tie events that would be great if you were on my arm.

Crossland: Do you have plans?

I cringed as I read the texts, glancing at my phone for the first time in the last three hours.

It had been an intense morning, with no break in the rushes. Mondays were normally busy, especially in the morning, but today had been a real cluster.

Usually, I loved rushes. I thrived off the chaotic energy that came with a constant stream of customers. I could lose myself in my work, satisfied with hours that passed quickly, knowing that was just more money in the bank.

But guilt twisted my insides as I noticed that Crossland had texted just after my shift started four hours ago.

Me: Sorry, I'm at work.

It was the only answer I could quickly type out before chugging an iced coffee and hurrying back to my position.

India. He wanted me to go to India? With only an hour's notice? With all our other adventures or outings he'd given me ample warning. At the very least enough time to schedule the

copious amounts of non-paid leave I had stored up. But even I knew I couldn't keep taking it advantage of my boss's good nature forever. I definitely couldn't bail with just an hour's notice, especially when I'd been slinging extra shifts in my off time in order to make up for the time I'd missed.

I quickly dismissed all thoughts of being whisked away to a country I'd never dreamed I'd get to visit. I never even allowed myself to think about vacations that grand. I was lucky when I got to go to Manhattan.

A steady stream of pre-lunch customers came in, and I lost myself among the sounds of grinding espresso beans, steaming milk, and the clinking of the blenders. It was sort of like meditation for me at this point, and I counted myself lucky to find so much peace in the motions of my work.

I'd barely had time to even think about how or what to say to Crossland by the time the lunch rush had ended, and I was in that delightful afternoon lull where I had time to clean and restock my fridges and supplies.

"Can I get a flat white?" Crossland's voice was easily recognizable, and I snapped my head up from where I was kneeling behind the counter restocking my cup sleeves, only to find him grinning down at me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked completely taken aback. I was fully prepared to meet Crossland on his own turf, but him coming to mine? I didn't even think the man knew how to get to Brooklyn.

"Did you miss the part about the flat white?" he asked, that overly confident smirk playing over his kissable lips.

I closed my eyes and took a breath, willing myself *not* to think about his lips or his tongue or his mouth in general. He casually leaned his palms on the counter, and my eyes fell to them, remembering exactly what those hands had done to me.

It was impossible to *not* think about. In fact, climbing a mountain without a harness would be easier.

He'd absolutely and utterly blown my mind, to the point that it was hard to think about anything since. I'd never

experienced anything like that, and I thought I'd had good sex before.

But what he'd done to me in a matter of five minutes from the challenge I so naively presented him with? Jesus, I don't know how I was supposed to come back from that. And I wasn't quite sure if I ever would.

I finally reoriented myself behind the register, ringing him up like I would any other customer. "Okay, a flat white. Anything else?" I asked, falling right into my barista role.

"I'll take five minutes." He smirked.

My lips fell open, shock radiating down my spine at the challenge in his eyes. Flabbergasted, I simply turned around to make his flat white, and by the time I finished, I had somewhat collected myself.

He took the paper cup and slid a twenty across the counter.

I finally checked him out, but he refused the change, electing to put it in the tip jar instead.

"No, really," he said. "I need five minutes with you."

"Here?" My heart fluttered in my chest, adrenaline surging through my veins.

He couldn't be serious, could he? He couldn't want... then again, it's not like I knew his kinks. Maybe he was into the public thing, the thrill of getting caught.

While I could get behind that, and while I knew that a lot of his friends were accustomed to getting frisky at the office, that wasn't something I could do here.

It's not like I owned the place. Not even close.

Crossland tilted his head, studying me. "I'm surprised you didn't give me an instant *no*," he said. "But no, kitten, that's not what I meant. Do you have a break? So we can talk?"

My heart sank, my mind repeating the words *so we can talk*.

The phrase triggered every abandonment trauma I had, a string of past friendships and partners all leading with that

exact phrase before cutting me out of their life completely, pairing it with excuses that I was too much to handle or my baggage was too much or my commitment to my sister was unhealthy.

“Sure,” I said doing my best to keep my tone even.

What the hell was wrong with me? This was a business transaction. Crossland and I weren’t actually dating.

Had he given me the most intense orgasm of my life? Yes.

Was he by far the best kisser ever? Absolutely.

Did he make me laugh on a daily basis? One hundred percent.

But when it came down to it, he was still just a business partner.

Shit. I hope I wasn’t about to get fired.

I made sure to check with my coworker that he was good to handle the front, even though we were in the midafternoon lull before coming around the counter and taking a seat at one of the far tables across the coffee shop.

“This is good,” Crossland said after we took our seats across from each other.

He’d taken a sip of the flat white I’d made him, licking a few stray drops off of his lips.

I couldn’t help but track the move, my mind directly linking back to what that tongue had felt like between my legs.

I crossed one leg over the other and took a deep breath. What if he was about to fire me because of the line we’d crossed? I told myself over and over again not to depend on completing this contract and getting the ridiculous amount of money he’d offered me, but all my preparation obviously didn’t work if the cracks in my heart were any indication.

Damn it, I’d already dreamed of how much that money could change mine and my sister’s lives. And now I’d gone and ruined it all for the sake of a little game I’d started while tipsy—

“I thought that I’d given you enough living expenses to no longer work here,” Crossland said, totally shocking me out of my train of thought.

“What?”

He took another sip of his coffee before setting it down. “If you needed more money, you should have just told me.”

“I don’t. Wait, I’m confused.”

“So am I,” Crossland said, leaning back in the chair and looking so damn good in the silver suit he wore.

I mean honestly, who looks that good?

“I thought I gave you enough living expenses so that you wouldn’t have to work here. I need you to be able to go to India on a whim. That’s what my real girlfriend would be able to do.”

“Oh,” I said, understanding finely dawning on me. “Right. The living expenses were wonderful. And I really do appreciate it. But our contract is for three months. Three months, Crossland, and you’ll be gone. I’ll still need my job.”

A little crease formed between his brow. “You’re going to continue working after we’ve completed our contract?”

I laughed, looking at him like he should know better. “One, I happen to love my job. Two, I may not have money, but that doesn’t mean I don’t *understand* money. And while one point five million is an incredible amount, after taxes, setting me and Brecken up for retirement, living expenses, and an NYU education, there won’t be enough left to live on indefinitely. It would be frivolous of me to throw my job away.”

“Wow,” Crossland said, looking genuinely impressed. “I really didn’t think of that.”

I waved him off. “I wouldn’t expect you to,” I said honestly and with no judgment. The guy had billions in the bank, he had tax breaks galore and he never had to worry about taxes taking nearly half of every paycheck or saving for emergencies and retirement.

And I didn't have those last two things yet, but I fully intended to use what was left over of the one point five million after school expenses and taxes to ensure that I did.

Customers started to pile in, and I scooted away from the table. "I'm really sorry," I said. "But I pulled a double today to make up for what I missed last week. I won't be off until seven tonight, and I work all of this week."

I really hope that wouldn't compromise my standing in our agreement, but I knew enough about Crossland to know that nothing in his life was predictable. I think he preferred it that way, and I couldn't really blame him. After being with him, living in his world, I loved getting caught up in chaotic and wild adventures just as much as the next person, but I had responsibilities.

Crossland followed me, stopping in front of the counter as I went behind it. He winked at me, holding up his coffee cup. "Thanks for the drink, kitten," he said before moving out of the next customer's way and disappearing without another word.

I knew there would be more to discuss about my schedule, but I quickly pushed those worries to the back of my mind as I focused on each new customer. And by the time my shift ended, I was more than ready to walk home and fall into bed.

I managed to stumble through my front door and lock it behind me, then took a hot shower before I did, in fact, fall into bed. I rolled over to grab my phone, intending to set my alarm for tomorrow's morning shift only to see a text from my boss.

Chels: All your shifts have been cleared. Enjoy the vacation. ;)

I started typing back a question to her text, but stopped myself mid-thought, quickly deleting it.

Instead, I pulled up Crossland's number and dialed.

He answered after the first ring. "Looking for another five minutes?"

“What did you do?” I asked, adrenaline snaking through my veins. “Did you talk to my boss?” I asked before he could answer. “Did you bribe her into letting me off? Because that wasn’t your decision to make.”

“Of course not,” he said. “I don’t bribe people. I bought the coffee shop.”

“You what?” I asked unbelieving.

“I bought the coffee shop. Now your job will be there when you’re done working for me.”

“You can’t be serious? You can’t just go and buy a business because you want me to have the next couple months off.”

“Who says?”

“The real world?” I sputtered my response, my emotions leaping from shocked too impressed to shocked again. Once again, I was met with the vast expanse of his world. It wasn’t the same as mine. Hell, we lived on different planets.

“Aspen, I didn’t do this as some form of control. I did this so that you would have options without any worries. Now, if you’re that objective to going on last-minute trips with me, that’s another story. And we’ll need to talk about it to see how we can find some middle ground. But if feeling guilty for taking time off work and worrying about not having a job when we’re done was the main reason behind it, then I’ve solved that problem. The owner was more than happy to sell to me, and your manager—who was an absolute delight by the way—completely supported my inquiry when I asked if you would be able to take some time off. They love you over there, not surprisingly. But when it comes down to it, I’m now the owner and I have final say on if you have a job or not when we’re done, which obviously you do. So which is it?”

I sat on my bed, gazing at my phone and shaking my head as I tried to gather my thoughts. It was like Crossland had a direct insight into my over-analyzing brain. He’d just as easily erased the concerns of control and intention in a few sentences as he had when handling other things about me.

Where did he come from? And how did he understand me so damn well already?

“I’ve never had any hesitation about traveling with you, Cross,” I said on a released breath. “But I feel like I should be angry with you on principle.”

Crossland laughed, and the rich sound of it loosened the tension in my chest. “I respect that,” he said. “It’s okay if you’re angry with me, kitten. I’ll have fun making it up to you.”

Heat spiraled down my core at the seductive tone his voice dipped into, easily switching from businessman to playboy in a matter of seconds.

I could barely bite back my smile, and I was thankful he couldn’t see me grinning at the phone. Though he could likely hear it in my voice. “Fine,” I said, doing my best to sound as aggravated as possible. “Then I’m angry with you. The next time you decide to buy one of my places of business, you should consult me first.”

Crossland laughed again, and I shook my head, chiding myself for how much I enjoyed the sound.

“Okay, kitten,” he said. “I’ll be sure to do that next time. In the meantime? Can you be ready to fly out tomorrow at eight a.m.?”

“I don’t know,” I said playfully. “I guess you’ll just have to show up and see.”

“One thing about me you should know by now, Aspen,” he said. “I always show up.”

“Goodnight, Crossland,” I said.

“Goodnight, Aspen,” he echoed back before we hung up.

I fell back against my pillows, still in a state of shock as I set my alarm for a totally different reason.

He’d altered my world in a matter of hours, taking off the undue stress that had been weighing on me since we entered our agreement. Hell, I was certain that if I’d told him three weeks ago he would’ve rushed to solve it then. And it wasn’t

in a malicious way or a controlling way, but in a genuinely helpful and healthy way.

It was something I was entirely unused to.

I'd been used to doing things on my own and only depending on myself for years. Allowing somebody else to take some of the burden? That was unheard of for me. And I wasn't exactly sure how to handle it.

Luckily, I didn't have to sink too deep into it. Because Crossland and I were held together by a string of ruses and games and banter. Sure, we had some electrical chemistry, but that was it. His eagerness to help was absolutely and understandably also for his benefit.

All I needed to do was remember that and not fall into whatever fairy-tale world he lived in on a daily basis.

Because I only had a temporary pass, and the last thing I needed was to pretend like this was going to be my forever.

Crossland

The past week had been one of those fast-paced weeks where the days blurred together, and I wasn't exactly sure what day it was by the end of it.

Aspen had made the India trip more enjoyable, but it had been a non-stop string of events, business meetings, and negotiations. In the end, I'd managed to successfully invest in a growing company in the energy research and development industry. It was another asset to add to my arsenal, but something about this trip just hit different. I'd never spent so much time with one woman before, and I never knew how nice it could be to have someone to talk to throughout the ups and downs of an endless string of meetings.

And Aspen never yawned during the events, never rolled her eyes, or begged to be taken for a ride on the jet or the yacht. She engaged in the conversations with the power players in the room, not so much as flinching when speaking to some of the country's wealthiest entrepreneurs. She was fun as hell to watch, not to mention drop-dead gorgeous, but the combination was nothing compared to the way she'd check in with me between meetings.

I'd never had that before.

Never had a partner who was invested enough to ask if I was emotionally drained or angry due to a deal going sideways. It was refreshing, and it made a little piece of me wonder if there was something to this whole monogamy epidemic that had afflicted my friends recently.

Not that Aspen and I were an official couple. On the outside? We looked like the perfect pairing—laughing, flirting, and sharing little moments of intimacy for the whole world to see. On the inside, we were simply business partners.

A business partner I genuinely couldn't wait to see the next day.

A business partner I was growing increasingly attached to.

A business partner I'd made come on my tongue two weeks ago.

I tried to force the thoughts out of my head as I finished setting up the dinner I'd picked up for the two of us, making sure everything was set out on the dining room table I rarely used unless Bristol and her husband were in town.

Aspen would be here any minute, and if I kept thinking about her flavor bursting on my tongue, I'd answer the door sporting the hard on that plagued me every single time I thought about that night.

Hell, I'd walked around half-hard all throughout the events last week, unable to stop the red-hot thoughts I had about her every time she walked into the room. It didn't matter if she was dressed in a ball gown or those silky pajamas she liked to wear to bed, I wanted her.

There was no denying it. We had some intense chemistry, but I hadn't crossed that line again since the night we played the Reapers. And she hadn't broached the subject either, so we'd kept everything PDA friendly when in public, and kept our distance when in private.

I hated to admit that it was killing me, and I didn't know what the hell to do about it.

I wasn't just attracted to Aspen on a physical level, even though her emerald hair and curves turned me on to the point of madness, but I found myself attracted to her personality—to the way she never tried to cover her laugh, the way she called me on my bullshit, the way she never let anyone look down their nose at her, the way she loved her sister and nearly broke

herself in order to provide for her. All the little nuances that made her *her* had me excited every time I saw her.

I didn't exactly know what to do with all the new sensations cropping up around her, so I was content to do what I normally do—just roll with it. She wasn't a puzzle to solve. She was a paid-for partner, and if at the end of our contract I managed to find a friend in the process? Bonus for me.

A knock on the door jerked me out of my thoughts, and I quickly sat the last of dinner on the table before heading to open it.

Aspen grinned up at me, her smile a sweet and breathtaking thing that I wasn't certain I'd ever get used to. I took a deep breath, inhaling that intoxicating scent that clung to her skin before motioning her inside.

“Was the drive over okay?” I asked as she followed me through the entryway, toward the dining room.

“You sent your driver,” she said. “What do you think?”

“Just checking to make sure you enjoyed it,” I said, smiling at the tease in her voice.

“Of course,” she said. “Me and Len are becoming friends at this point. Did you know his daughter just had twins?”

“I did,” I said, rounding the corner into the dining room. “I helped him set up their college funds.”

“I *knew* it,” she said, a sense of pride wrapping around her tone. “You've totally changed my opinion of billionaires for the rest of forever. You're amazing, you know that?”

“I definitely know that,” I teased, motioning to the table.

“What's this?” she asked, her eyes widening when she took in the table.

“They're your favorite tacos, right? From that food truck?” Fuck, I hope I hadn't made a mistake. Jesse assured me these were the ones when I'd texted him.

“Yes! You went and got them for me?”

Relief pooled through me, and I pulled out her chair for her, not taking mine across from her until she'd settled in it.

"I realized that I never officially apologized for buying the coffee shop without discussing it with you first," I admitted.

She grabbed a taco from the silver container in the middle of the table and took a huge bite. Her eyes fluttered closed and she moaned.

Jesus, that sound was going to end me. I wanted to hear her make that sound while my cock was in her mouth or when I was bottoming out in her sweet pussy.

I cleared my throat, forcing the thoughts from my head as I reached for a taco in an attempt to hide that even the way the woman ate turned me on.

"The. Best. Apology. Ever," she said after swallowing. "Seriously, I didn't even think you remembered this."

"I try," I said, taking a bite myself. She wasn't wrong, they were absolute fire.

"Also," she said after finishing her first taco and moving onto her second. "You know I was kidding about the whole being mad at you thing. I wanted to be angry with you, but with your explanation, you made it kind of impossible."

I blew out a breath, nodding. "I'm glad to hear it. As I'm sure you've learned, I'm impulsive. I react to my instincts because they've never let me down before, but the last thing I wanted to do was cross a line."

"I get that," she said. "Even though I've never had to think about something like this before. It's not like someone purchases my place of work every other day just so we can go on unlimited dates." She chuckled softly, shaking her head with this surreal look on her face.

"You're not the only one in uncharted territory," I said.

She arched a brow at me.

"You're not," I said between bites. "I've never been with a woman longer than a weekend, so everything about this is new." I motioned between us. "Even if it's fabricated, it's the

closest thing to the real deal that I've ever had. Bear with me if I continue to make missteps.”

Aspen caught my gaze across the table, something like understanding and pity in those irresistible eyes of hers.

“Can I be honest with you?” she asked, finishing the food on her plate before pushing it aside.

“I would appreciate that,” I said, swallowing my last bite a little harder than necessary.

She took a few sips of the soda water I'd set out for her, collecting her thoughts. “I know this is a ruse,” she said. “I know that we have a contractual obligation to each other and that this is just another business deal for you, but I genuinely enjoy being around you, Crossland.”

Something tightened in my chest.

“You're fun personified, even if you are a cocky prick,” she said, smiling at me. “And you're kind, perceptive. Your world is a lot sometimes, no doubt, but you're worth spending time with. And it has nothing to do with your money or the NHL team you own.” She shrugged, reaching for her soda water again. “I just...wanted you to know that. In case the weekend partners you had before never told you.”

Fuck me.

I felt like I'd been nailed to the chair. I could do nothing but stare at her and wonder what the hell was happening inside my body right now. I couldn't tell if I wanted to pull her into my lap and kiss the hell out of her or wrap her in my arms and fucking cry. Jesus, what the hell was happening to me?

I swallowed hard, honestly not sure what to say to that.

“Sorry,” she quickly added, shaking her head at herself. “That probably has more to do with my own bullshit,” she continued. “I've had countless people bail on me because of the baggage I carry, and I always told myself I'd never take the people in my life for granted. I know you're here because of the deal, but still...I don't hold things like that in.”

“I love that about you,” I said.

“Really?” She laughed. “I used to get punished for speaking freely like that.”

“Your parents?” I asked. She’d mentioned them before, in our initial one-on-one, and I knew they were estranged, but she hadn’t gone into full details on her upbringing.

“Yeah,” she said. “For the longest time, I was afraid to speak, even after I’d moved myself and Brecken out of the house. It took a shit-ton of therapy for me to understand that not everyone would punish me for having an opinion.” She tilted her head. “Of course, the few relationships I did have in those early days of healing didn’t help. I attracted men who made me feel small, men who said I embarrassed them if I colored my hair or said something sassy in public.” She rolled her eyes. “I was stuck in a pattern, I guess. At least that’s what my therapist said.” She shrugged. “Anyway, that’s why I haven’t had a relationship in years and why I never hold anything back anymore.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” I said, having to clamp down on the instinct to track her family down and make them pay for what they’d done to her, then the ex-boyfriends. That wouldn’t be helpful to her.

“It’s fine,” she said, even though I knew it was anything but. “I bet you’re so glad you plucked me out of the crowd, huh?” she laughed, pushing away from the table and gathering our plates.

I quickly hopped up, gathering the leftovers to store them in the fridge. “I am,” I said as we made it to the kitchen.

She didn’t turn to look at me as she rinsed the plates before putting them in the dishwasher. She remained not looking at me after she was finished and I’d put the leftovers away, instead electing to look out of the glass doors that led to my balcony that overlooked the city. We were fifty flights up, with nothing but the sparkling city stretching out toward the horizon.

It was a hell of a view, for sure, but I had a feeling she wasn’t looking at me for a reason.

“Hey,” I said, standing next to her and gliding my hand comfortingly along her arm. “I *am* glad, Aspen.”

She finally looked away from the view, glancing up at me with shining eyes. “How is that possible?” she asked, her voice almost a whisper. “You could’ve picked anyone, but you somehow managed to find the most baggage-ridden and furthest economical person from your world.”

I furrowed my brow. “And you say I sell myself short? Come on, Aspen, you know better than that.”

“Do I?” she asked, blowing out a breath. “Everything with you is surreal and complicated and extraordinary. I ask myself at least twice a day why I’m here, *how* I ended up here.”

“I’ve always been honest with you,” I said. “I know we struck a deal, but do you think I did that lightly? I was drawn to you from the very first moment I laid eyes on you. And everything since has just gone in my favor, because the person I made a deal with to be my fake girlfriend happened to be pretty fucking awesome.”

She laughed roughly, shaking her head. “There’s that cocky charm again.”

I grinned down at her. “Not charm, just facts.”

She nodded, accepting the compliment even though it looked like a struggle for her, and then she schooled her features. “Okay, then,” she said. “What’s on the agenda for tonight? A club opening? A charity gala? A—”

“I just wanted to see you,” I admitted, reaching up to smooth my hand over her cheek.

Her lips parted, and she leaned into the touch.

“Is that okay?” I asked, shifting closer to her like a magnet pulled us together.

“Why wouldn’t it be okay?” she whispered.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Everything is getting blurry for me, Aspen.”

“Why?”

“I want you on a level that has nothing to do with the deal we made,” I said, the confession rolling off of my tongue easily, and I knew that was all because of her. She was just so damn easy to be myself with.

“But you haven’t...we were in the same suite all week and you didn’t try...”

“Like I said....” I shifted closer, her body moving with mine as she turned, her back pressed against the glass. “I don’t want to cross any lines you don’t want me to.”

“I’m pretty sure we erased those lines the moment I came on your face, Crossland.”

“Fuck, Aspen,” I groaned. “That mouth.” I dragged my thumb over her bottom lip, doing my best to keep from bringing her body flush against mine.

Her hands lightly grazed my chest, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Did you want me to try something, then?” I asked. “When we were in India?”

She visibly swallowed. “Honestly?”

“Always.”

“I’ve wanted you to try something since the moment you left me in that bed in Charleston.”

I shuddered, liquid fire pumping through my veins.

“And it has nothing to do with our contract,” I said. “Correct?”

She shook her head.

“You don’t feel obligated to say that?”

“No,” she said. “It’s you. Just you.”

“So whatever happens next, it’s just between us. Not as business partners, but as...” Fuck, what were we? What would taking this to the next level make us? Panic crept up my throat at the unknown—

“Friends,” she offered. “Right? We’re friends?”

I breathed out a sweet sigh of relief.

“Friends,” I said. Yes, that made perfect sense. I loved spending time with her, loved talking and laughing with her, loved challenging and joking with her. Of course, we were friends.

“You want this?” I asked one last time for clarification. “Because I want to be very clear,” I continued. “You’ll always be in control, Aspen. Just because we do this tonight doesn’t mean we have to continue doing it. But if you let me, I’m going to spend the next two months worshipping that goddamn irresistible body of yours so much that you’ll feel me long after you move on.”

Because she *would* move on.

We both would.

Neither one of us was built for the long term, we’d already established that, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t thoroughly enjoy each other.

“If any of that makes you uncomfortable—”

“It doesn’t,” she said, her hands fisting my shirt. “I’m in. I want you.”

“Thank fuck,” I said, dipping down to capture her mouth in mine.

She met me with equal hunger, parting her lips to let me in, our tongues rubbing and exploring and claiming. Fuck, kissing her sent lightning streaking through my veins. Each stroke, each nip, each suck wound me up, my thoughts emptying except for the primal need to devour her.

I broke our kiss, grinning down at her as I moved to the line of her jaw, then the spot behind her ear, and lower. I quickly tugged at the hem of her shirt, pleasure rippling through me when she lifted her arms, more than eager to be rid of the barriers separating us. She made quick work of her pants, and I did the same until I was just in my boxer-briefs.

“Shit,” she said, cringing as she glanced down at herself. “I didn’t think we’d...*ugh*. I’m mismatched.”

I had to blink a few times before I realized what the hell she was talking about. She wore a sexy pink bra, but her underwear was a bright shade of blue. The notion that her underwear being mismatched was cringeworthy made me laugh out loud.

She gaped up at me. “You are *not* laughing!”

I couldn’t reel it in, so I spoke with it. “Aspen—”

“I can’t believe you’re laughing. I’m so mortified.” She tried to cover herself, but I gently gripped her wrists and pinned them above her head with one hand.

“You,” I said, dragging my free hand down the center of her cleavage, over her soft stomach, and then between her thighs. “Would be sexy in any and all colors, kitten.” I kissed her, hard and quick, before pulling away. “I only laughed because you thought it was an issue. It’s not. You’re so fucking beautiful, Aspen. You literally bring me to my knees.”

I released her wrists, kissing down her neck and over the globes of her breasts that threatened to spill from the cups of her bra, and lower, until I was on my knees looking up at her.

“Understand?”

Her entire body trembled, but she nodded as she looked down at me.

“Good,” I said, then hooked my fingers in the sides of her underwear and dragged them down her legs. She quickly stepped out of them, and I tossed them to the side, groaning at the sight of her before me.

I wasted no time teasing her, instead licking up her slit like the starved man I was. Fuck, she tasted as good as I remembered, and I was certain I could live and die here.

“Cross,” she gasped, and I groaned.

“Fucking love it when you say my name like that,” I said against her warmth, using my fingers to part her slick flesh so I could lick her properly. “Mmm,” I murmured against her. “Hold on to me,” I said, and her hands instantly flew to my shoulders.

I shifted her right leg over my shoulder, giving me all the access I needed to properly eat at her. “Been thinking about doing this since the last time,” I said, lapping up her flavor and relishing each of her little whimpers when I lingered on her swollen clit. “Look at you,” I continued. “All slick and needy for me.” I glided two fingers through her wetness for emphasis, my cock rock hard with the knowledge that she wanted me as badly as I wanted her.

One of her hands flew to my hair, her fingers tangling there as she arched against me.

“Eager little thing, aren’t you?” I teased, pulling my fingers away and replacing them with my tongue for a few pumps before pulling back. “What happened to my slow-to-pop-off girl?”

Frustration lined the features of her face when I looked up at her, and it was sexy as hell when her eyes met mine.

“Not with you,” she breathed the words, the strain in her voice like a string ready to snap.

Fuck, she was going to be the end of me. All eager and needy. For *me*. All for me.

“No,” I said. “Not with me. Never with me, kitten.” I speared my tongue inside her, plunging it in her heat over and over again before pulling back and circling her clit with my tongue, alternating back and forth so rapidly she couldn’t predict my next move. She rocked against my face, chasing her pleasure as I ate at her, savoring every moan, every tremble, every frantic grip.

And then I sucked her swollen, needy little clit into my mouth, and she cried out my name, coming on my tongue in a burst of flavor that I drank down like my favorite cocktail.

Her breaths came in heaved rushes, her thighs trembling as I gently shifted her leg off my shoulder, keeping a good hold on her as I stood up to grin proudly down at her.

“That was quicker than five minutes too,” I teased.

She laughed, her skin glowing with post-orgasm bliss. “Are you always going to keep count?”

“No,” I said, sweeping an arm beneath her legs and cradling her to my chest. “But I can tell you that what I’m about to do to you will take way longer.”

Aspen’s eyes flared in anticipation, and I smirked down at her, using a hand to open the glass door before I took her out to the balcony.

She gasped at the brisk air that coated our already flushed bodies, and I groaned at the sight of her nipples peaking from beneath the pink lace of her bra.

“This has to go,” I said, quickly unclasping it and dropping it to the side before laying her on the oversized couch on my balcony.

“Is there a chance anyone could see?” she asked, glancing around at the concrete borders of the balcony.

“No,” I assured her. I’d made double sure before I purchased the place for this very reason, not that I’d ever fucked someone in my apartment.

Holy shit.

I’d never fucked anyone here before. It had always been at their place or while traveling.

Damn.

A shot of nerves tingled up my spine, but I forced the sensation away, distracting myself with the absolute stunning way Aspen looked splayed out beneath me, all naked and flushed.

“Too bad,” she said, a little mischievous grin shaping her lips that shocked the hell out of me.

I shed my boxer-briefs and parted her thighs, moving between them but not bringing us flush yet. “Do you like that idea, kitten?” I asked, bending over her to brace myself with one arm near her head. “The idea of getting caught?”

She bit that plump lip of hers. “Maybe,” she said, and fuck me, heat speared through my veins at her little admission. There was a certain level of trust in sharing that, and I sure as fuck wouldn’t take it for granted.

“Sometime,” I said. “I’ll fuck you in public and give you what you want.”

She reached up, exploring the planes of my chest and the ink I had there, then lower, until she met my aching cock and gripped it. “I just want you,” she said, and those words were my undoing.

I groaned as she stroked me, guiding the tip of my dick through her wetness, teasing us both until I pumped into her hand, my hips thrusting into her touch on instinct. I pressed my lips against hers, kissing her with a newly formed hunger that had everything to do with her playing.

“Condom,” I growled against her mouth when she’d moved me inside her an inch before pulling me out again. “Now,” I said when she didn’t let go.

“Say please,” she said, and I swear to fuck I almost came at the demand.

I lifted up enough to look down at her properly, tangling my fingers in her hair and tugging on it just enough that she gasped and arched her neck. I bent down, sucking roughly on the soft patch of skin beneath her jaw, and felt her grip on me tighten.

“You first, kitten,” I finally said when she’d arched her hips, desperately trying to get to more of me.

“*Please,*” she said, instantly conceding.

She released me, and I was gone and back in a matter of seconds, condom on and ready.

It took all of the willpower I possessed to not instantly sink inside her, instead ensuring I went slow. It was our first time, after all, and I wasn’t exactly average size.

“Cross,” she gasped as I sank inside inch by agonizingly slow inch until, finally, I was seated to the hilt inside her.

I held still, giving her time to adjust, and letting her take the reins even though I was on top. After a few seconds, she started to move, wrapping her legs around my back and urging me to pull out and pump back inside her.

Fuck, she felt like a goddamn dream. All searing silk and fire, her walls hugging my cock perfectly as I sank inside her again and again.

“Fucking hell, kitten,” I said, shifting above her to slide an arm beneath her lower back, hefting her up so I could fuck her deeper. “You feel amazing.”

“Cross,” she moaned. “Ohmigod,” she said, gasping as she urged me to go faster. “I’m...I’m...”

Fuck me, she pulsed around my cock, already coming again, the sensation snapping every thread of self-control I possessed. I pumped into her harder, her slickness allowing me to slide in and out so damn well.

Her nails dug into my back, the sweetest little bite of pain adding to the pleasure building beneath my skin as I slammed home again and again. I looked down at her, appreciating every inch of her, and lingered on where we connected, loving the way my cock looked gliding in and out of her pussy.

My eyes trailed back to hers, and I savored the look of pure pleasure coating her features, loved the crinkle between her brow as I pushed her to that edge again. My fucking chest filled with pride that I was the one taking her here, the one making her sigh like that, whimper all needy like that.

“Cross,” she said again. “I...I can’t...” Her words were breathless, her brow pinched and back arching as I felt her clench tighter around my cock.

“You can, kitten,” I assured her, wondering how she was already spent after just two orgasms. Who the hell had she been with before that would stop after just one? We’d have to work on those numbers, and I found myself more than delighted at the prospect of doing just that.

“Oh, God,” she said, her thighs tightening on my hips. “You...fuck,” she moaned. “You feel so damn good, Cross.”

Fuck me, that did it.

Her words, her breathy little moans, her pussy rippling around my cock sent me right over the fucking edge.

I came with her, pumping into her harder and faster, seeing fucking stars I came so hard.

When my vision cleared seconds later, I slipped my arm out from behind her back, supporting myself so I wouldn't crush her as I slowed my strokes, both of us trembling from the aftershocks.

After quickly cleaning up inside, I returned with a blanket and wrapped her up in my arms as we laid on the couch, the brisk air raising chills on our sweat-soaked skin.

"I don't think I can move," she admitted a few minutes later, her back tucked against my chest as I held her.

I grinned down at her, kissing along the line of her neck. "Good," I said. "Because I don't want you to."

And the reality of those words struck me dead center in the chest.

I didn't want her to go anywhere.

I wanted her to *stay*.

And I didn't have a fucking clue what to do about that.

CHAPTER 11

Aspen

Jesse: Sophia and I are at Lux. Come out!

Jesse: I know you're home from your trip don't ignore me.

Jesse: Babe! Come dance.

Brecken: Got an A on my Lit final!

Jesse: It's now eight in the morning. If you don't text me back to let me know you're alive I'm going to break into your apartment.

I sat up in Crossland's bed, holding a sheet around myself as I quickly read through the string of texts I'd missed last night. I hurried to type back to Brecken, so damn proud of her for acing that final because I knew she'd been worrying about it.

Then reality caught up to me, and I glanced around the room.

Crossland was nowhere to be found, and I didn't hear anything outside his bedroom either. When had we even moved in here? The last thing I remembered was him holding me outside on the balcony couch...

I shifted off the bed, spotting a sticky note on the nightstand next to me.

Didn't want to wake you. Had to run into the office. Please make yourself at home.

I held my phone in one hand, and Crossland's note in the other, my mind reeling from the memories of last night. I could still feel the effects of him on my body—the sweet soreness between my thighs, the sensitivity in my lips from kissing him so much, the tangles in my hair—

My phone buzzed in my hand, making me jolt so hard I dropped Crossland's note. I swiped my screen to answer the call.

“Jesse,” I said, catching my breath.

“You're alive, thank fuck. You know how worried I've been? You never don't text back!”

“I'm sorry,” I said, shifting back against the pillows. “I was busy.”

“How dare you,” he said, but there was playfulness in his tone. “I'll forgive you if you give me the deets. I'm assuming you were whisked away by blue eyes again?”

“Sort of,” I said, my heart fluttering in my chest at the thought of him. “We didn't go anywhere. He got my favorite tacos and we had dinner at his place.”

“I knew he was getting the tacos,” Jesse said. “He texted me to confirm your favs. But tacos don't take all night—ohmigod! You're still there, aren't you? You never left!”

I half-laughed, half-groaned.

“Aspen Reed, did you sleep with your fake billionaire boyfriend?”

“Shh!” I scolded him.

“I'm in my bedroom, babe. Alone. Now spill.”

I blew out a breath. “Yes. I slept with my fake billionaire boyfriend. God, when you say it out loud it sounds like I'm in a romcom.”

“A good one, too,” he said. “How did it happen? I thought he hadn't made a move since that one night and you blamed it

on the drinks?”

I nodded even though he couldn't see me. “That's what I thought, then last night, we kind of had this moment of honesty and then one thing just led to another.”

“So you're like really dating now?”

“No,” I said a little too quickly.

“Okay, then it was like a perk in the contract?”

“No,” I said again. “This...it was just...a friend thing.”

“Babe, we're friends. We don't do that.”

I laughed, thankful for my best friend's ability to take the pressure off this monumental tea session. “Last time I checked, I don't have what you're looking for,” I teased right back.

“If only you did,” he said wistfully. “We would've been perfect for each other.” I laughed again, happiness settling into my bones. “Okay, so you had a friendly frolic,” he continued, and I snorted at his use of the word frolic. “Now, how was blue eyes?”

I sighed contently.

“Damn, that good?”

“Better,” I said.

“Le swoon,” he said. “And you're still at his place?”

“Yep,” I said. “He's not here though.”

“He left you alone?” he asked. “Do I need to find him and kick his ass? Remind him you never leave a lady alone—”

“No,” I laughed. “He left a note. He had to run into the office, but he said to make myself at home.”

“Ohhh,” he said, intrigue laced in his tone. “Doesn't he have one of those ridiculously expensive and equally gorgeous penthouses in lower Manhattan?”

“That he does.”

“That’s a score, babe. I’d go take a dip in his tub *Pretty Woman* style and never look back.”

“You have the best ideas,” I said. “I’m sorry for not texting back and worrying you.”

“Great sex is always an acceptable excuse. I’m proud of you, babe. You needed this.”

I gaped at my phone. “Who says I needed it?”

“Your best friend, that’s who,” he chided me. “You never do anything for yourself. And this entire situation, however unorthodox it is, has really worked out for you. You deserve it and you should sure as hell enjoy it.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. He wasn’t wrong. I couldn’t remember the last time I actually did something for myself beyond treating myself to a night with Jesse or the girls or taking Brecken out to a play. Was that why a flower of apprehension bloomed in my chest? The fact that I wasn’t used to this situation or was it because Crossland had turned out to be the exact opposite of what I’d expected when I entered into this deal?

A friend.

That’s what we’d established last night. Over the last month, during our ruse, we’d become friends.

I shook my head.

“Don’t overthink this, Aspen,” Jesse said like he could read the silence between us.

“I’m trying not to,” I said. “But you know me. Anytime anything good happens…” Icy dread laced through me.

“You worry your past will show up to steal it,” he finished for me. “I know. I remember it took you years to realize I wasn’t going anywhere. No matter what.”

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you, babe.”

“How was dancing at *Lux*?” I asked, wanting to know about his night too. “Meet anyone fun?”

“It was a blast,” he said. “Drinks were on point, and I might’ve, maybe met someone.”

“Oh?” I asked, curiosity piqued.

“He seemed a little too good to be true, but I gave him my number.”

“Whoa, that’s huge! You rarely give that out.”

“It was the cocktails,” he groaned. “But Mr. Too-Good-To-Be-True already texted asking for a brunch date.”

“Holy shit, he sounds amazing.” I grinned, genuinely happy for my friend. “Wait, how was he dressed?” Good taste in clothes were a huge plus for Jesse—

“Like I drew him,” he answered, and I squealed. “Right?” he continued. “If anything, he’ll be good for inspiration for my next collection.”

“That’s awesome,” I said. “So glad you went out last night.”

“Me too,” he said. “Now, back to you,” he continued. “Don’t question what’s happening between the two of you. Just enjoy it. It’s not like you’re in love with the guy, so there isn’t a risk for heartbreak.”

“Right,” I said, my stomach sinking for a reason I couldn’t place.

“Good. Now go explore the penthouse and report back anything fascinating.”

I chuckled. “Will do.”

“Love,” he said.

“Love,” I said before we both hung up.

I sat on the bed for a few moments, contemplating gathering my things and leaving. I’d never stayed long at any of my previous boyfriends’ houses before, but this wasn’t anything like those had been either.

Fuck it. Jesse was right, I should just enjoy myself. I was still doing my job—posing as Crossland’s girlfriend, and a

girlfriend would certainly stay and take a long, hot bath, especially when Cross insisted I make myself at home himself.

With that decided, I shoved all other concerns away and let the sheet fall off my body, padding barefoot to the bathroom connected to his bedroom.

“Holy shit,” I said out loud as I took in the spacious, spa-like bathroom. It was huge with dark marble floors, a massive shower, and a giant square stone tub that was sat atop the floor.

I gave a giddy little squeal and started to fill the tub, exploring his cabinets until I found some fancy-looking bubbles and salts, pouring them in the steaming water and dimming the lights to a low golden hue. I threw my hair back in a messy bun, then sat my phone near the tub, playing music from an artist Crossland had told me about weeks ago.

Sinking into the steaming water, I moaned as it soaked my still-weak muscles. Turning the water off, I moved my arms back and forth, shifting through the tub that was big enough to fit myself and all my friends until I found a convenient stone bench to rest on. I leaned my head back, sighing as I lost myself in the utter relaxation that came with such a moment. I’d never been in a tub like this one, and I was quite sure I’d never leave again.

I hummed along with the music, instantly hooked to the deep and hauntingly beautiful voice of the singer, and allowed my mind to wander back to last night, my muscles clenching at the memory of Crossland’s mouth on mine, on my body, on—

“*Damn,*” Crossland’s voice cut over the music, and my eyes snapped open to find him undoing his tie as he looked down at me. “Didn’t expect to see such a prize when I rushed home.”

I gaped at him, suddenly wondering if I should be in here or not. “You said make yourself at home,” I hurried to say. “Should I go? I thought you were working.” And now I was rambling, but it was hard to concentrate when he was unbuttoning his dress shirt.

“I was,” he said, tossing the shirt behind him as he went for the zipper on his pants. God, he looked amazing, all smooth skin, dark whirling tats along his chest, and rigid muscles. “But I couldn’t concentrate.”

That made two of us. “Why?” I asked, eyes widening as he dropped his pants, leaving him in his tight, black boxer-briefs that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. Was he hard?

“I couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that you might stay.” He moved toward the tub. “That you might be waiting for me.”

I swallowed hard, my heart suddenly pounding as anticipation overtook me. Did the tub suddenly grow ten degrees hotter?

“Who says I’m waiting for you?” I teased. “Maybe I’m just enjoying the benefits of being a billionaire’s girlfriend.” I moved my arms through the water to emphasize the lie.

He cocked a brow at me before sliding off his boxer-briefs, his beautifully large cock springing free and on full display. “Then you don’t want me to join you?”

My mouth went dry, need slamming through me with such intensity I wasn’t sure how to speak, let alone answer him.

He stepped into the tub, far enough on the opposite side that he didn’t come close to touching me. Instead, he settled confidently on the bench there, stretching his arms along the edges, a confident smile shaping his lips.

“Cocky prick,” I muttered, but couldn’t contain my grin.

The man made me giddy.

I was in so much trouble.

“You know, every time you say that, it sounds more like an endearment than an insult.”

“That’s because you only hear what you want to hear. It explains that ego of yours.”

Crossland laughed, his smile wide and head tilting back slightly, and the sound filled me up from the inside out, all

warmth and tingles and goddamn him, did he have to look like that when he was naked and wet and grinning like I was the funniest person on the planet?

“There are other things that feed my ego other than myself,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Like that little sound you make right before you come on my cock.”

The breath caught in my throat, his words stroking down my spine like a lick of flame. I swallowed hard, tipping my chin. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lied.

“Really?” he asked, wholly unconvinced. “You don’t remember. It’s such a sexy noise.”

I pressed my lips together. “Nope,” I said. “Don’t recall.”

“That’s a shame,” he said, playing right into the game. “I guess if it wasn’t memorable for you, I should leave.” He lifted out of the water, sitting on the edge to spin his legs around—

I spanned the distance in a heartbeat, my hands gliding over his wet thighs. “Don’t go just yet,” I said, my heart pounding against my chest. The position I was in, me in the water and him just on the edge of the tub, gave me the perfect opportunity to slide between his thighs. “Let’s see what kind of sounds *you* make,” I said before dipping my head and wrapping my lips around his cock.

He gasped, jerking slightly at the way I took him in my mouth.

I flickered my eyes up to his, keeping him in my mouth as I moved lower.

He groaned, a pleasure-filled sound that vibrated along my bones, and it made me smile as much as I could with him in my mouth. I drew back, stroking his cock with my hand as I swirled my tongue over his thick head, whimpering at the bead of pre-come that coated my tongue before I sucked him in my mouth again.

“Fuck,” he hissed as I upped my pace, my free hand digging into his thigh as I did my best to take him all the way in. It was impossible with his size, but it didn’t look like he minded one bit. “Kitten,” he growled when I dragged my teeth lightly along his shaft, ending only to suck his head before bobbing up and down again.

His fingers flew to my hair, half spilling out of the messy bun I’d thrown it in, his grip tightening the harder I sucked him.

“*Aspen*,” he said, his voice laced with need.

It was intoxicating, hearing him say my name like that, feeling him so undone by me. I moved my free hand to his balls, toying with the sensitive area between them and his cock.

“Aspen,” he groaned again, more urgently this time. “I’m going to come.”

I stayed right where I was, adrenaline crackling through my veins as I felt him harden another degree.

“Fuck,” he hissed right before he spilled inside my mouth.

I swallowed him down, gliding my fingers over my swollen lips as I moved back slightly. “I like the sounds you make too,” I said, my skin too tight and hot for my body. I needed to get out of this tub, needed to—

Crossland stood up, reaching for me as he hauled me out of the water and immediately laid me down on the heated marble floor. I gasped, my flushed, sensitive skin reacting to the change, but Cross stole my breath with a kiss as he licked into my mouth.

His hand glided down my body and between my thighs, and he slid his fingers through my heat. Everything narrowed to the way he made me feel, to the sensations he wrenched from my body. He kissed his way down my breasts, sucking my nipple into his mouth until it was peaked for him before doing the same to the other, all the while his *fingers*. He stroked me, teasing my aching clit with light circles.

I arched into his touch, desperate for more contact, and he smiled into our kiss before sliding one finger inside me, then two, filling me, stretching me.

I whimpered, rocking into his hand as he pumped his fingers inside me, curling them until I shivered, dancing on the edge of release. And he kept me there, content to kiss the breath from my lungs and work me up into a tangled mess at his command.

My clit throbbed, begging for attention as everything coiled inside me.

He pulled back, blue eyes trailing the length of my body until he focused on where he touched me, eyes churning with lust as he pressed the heel of his palm into my aching clit, rubbing it hard and fast while he pumped those fingers inside of me over and over—

“*Cross*,” I groaned, his name a cry of release as pleasure tore through me.

“Fucking hell, Aspen,” he said, gently pulling his hand away. “I can’t get enough of you.”

I was still too thrown to respond or even question when he shifted away from me for a moment, only to return, urging me up to straddle his lap.

“Already?” I asked, breathless as I looked between us, noticing a condom rolled over his hard cock.

He gave me an incredulous look, like I should in no way be surprised.

I didn’t question it twice, and instead crushed my mouth over his as I settled over him, inching my way down until he was seated entirely inside me. I wrapped my arms around him, giving myself a moment to adjust, but thanks to what he’d just done, I didn’t need much time.

I moved on him, slowly at first, explorative to see what felt the best, what made him arch his head back in pleasure, and did as much of that as I could. We were chest to chest, his lips a breath away from mine as I rolled my hips, taking him in

over and over again, chasing my pleasure like my life depended on it.

Each stroke felt better than the last, every kiss hungrier, every touch or grip a needy, desperate thing that fueled the heat flowing through my body.

This...this was everything. I never wanted it to end.

“So damn beautiful,” he said, cupping my breasts and rolling my nipples between his fingers. “Riding my cock like it was made for you. Fuck, kitten. That feels good.”

I rocked against him again, relishing the delighted shiver that rolled down his body from the move.

My body trembled, my thighs clenching on either side of his hips as we crashed together again and again, insatiable for the other. Everything in me tightened, that sweet edge sharp and gleaming with every stroke we made together until I completely came undone.

I whimpered, my orgasm tearing through me fast and sharp, stealing my breath as I felt him fall over that edge with me.

I went limp above him, my forehead resting against his as we caught our breath.

He smoothed his hands up and down my back before he pulled away enough to look at me, an infectious smile on his lips.

“What?” I asked.

“I got you all dirty,” he said. “Looks like we’ll have to start over.” He motioned behind us, to the tub. “Unless you have somewhere to be?” he asked.

“I’m wide open,” I said, then smirked. “Unless my boyfriend needs me to make an appearance at an event,” I teased. “Then I’ll have to go.”

His grin widened, and he playfully smacked my ass. “The only place you’re needed is right here.”

I gasped, delight rippling through my body.

In that moment, there was nowhere I'd rather be.

Crossland

“I love that place,” Aspen said, pointing out a quaint little tea shop as we casually strolled the streets of Manhattan.

“Let’s stop in,” I said, guiding her through the heavy foot traffic and holding open the door for her before she could object. Because she did *always* object, even though by now she should realize that I was more than ready and willing to indulge her every whim.

Still, it was cute as hell every time she insisted I didn’t need to.

“Fine,” she said as I followed in behind her. “Then I’m buying.”

I furrowed my brow at her as we stepped into line, the smell of freshly brewed teas and honey and citrus hanging in the air. It had been a thoroughly perfect day, one we’d spent at a business breakfast meeting, followed by a spontaneous round of shopping where I’d purchased more things than Aspen had even looked at.

“What?” she asked, grinning up at me as she nudged me with her shoulder. “What’s the point of having all this expense cash if I don’t get to spend it?”

She had a point there, and it wasn’t like I would ever tell her what she could and couldn’t spend her money on. I knew by now, after spending nearly two months with her, that it was hard for her to allow someone to take care of her. And I understood the reasoning behind it, with her parents never actually playing the role of parent and her having to take on the role herself for her baby sister at a very young age.

The two people she was supposed to be able to count on the most ended up betraying her in the biggest way possible. Naturally, she'd have a hard time allowing people in her life that she trusted enough to depend on. And as the days wore on between us, I hoped that I was getting closer to that category.

She certainly trusted me with her body. The thought speared through me like a line of fire. Ever since we opened that particular box, we hadn't been able to stop. It had been a month of business meetings and events, charities and galas, hockey games and sex.

A lot of sex.

Really good, incredible, earth-shattering sex.

But it wasn't just her body that had me absolutely content as we stood in line at a casual tea shop on a Wednesday afternoon.

It was her.

Somehow, by taking all the pressure off of a real relationship, I'd managed to be totally myself around her and her the same with me. It gave us the ability to cut through the bullshit and be real, and it turned out that we just absolutely got along.

Aspen's energy matched my insatiable appetite, and her thirst for adventure was likely higher than mine, even though the circumstances of her situation didn't allow her to indulge those whims as often as she'd like.

At least not until I came into her life. Not until I purchased the coffee shop she worked at in order to allow her full time off so she could hop on the jet with me whenever I needed.

And in the beginning, it had been a means to an end. A good business decision on my part, but now? Now I was just thrilled to see her thriving. Not that she hadn't been before, but at least now the woman was getting decent sleep. Well, somewhat decent. I had to say I was guilty of keeping her up a little too late every other night, but I hadn't heard any complaints so far.

"What's good here?" I asked as we moved up in the line.

“They have incredible boba,” she said. “You have to try the lychee green tea with the lychee bursting balls.”

I nodded as we reached the counter and ordered exactly what she said. She ordered herself a mango boba, and we stepped off to the side after she paid for the drinks and waited for our order.

I wrapped my arms around her from behind, tucking my head over her shoulder as I dipped down to whisper into her ear.

“Thank you,” I said my lips grazing the shell.

She arched into the touch, leaning back against me with the ease that had been built between us in the last two months. I didn’t even know if anybody knew who I was in this tea shop or if there were any hiding paparazzi outside. I certainly hadn’t seen any, but I wasn’t holding her for show.

I was holding her because I *liked* it.

Because I liked touching her. Lived for that little grin that shaped her lips whenever I did.

I liked the way her signature scent wafted up to my nose every time I wrapped my arms around her, and I liked the feel of her against me.

I liked her.

I liked her in a way that I’d never liked anyone before.

And I still wasn’t sure what to do about it.

“You know you don’t have to thank me for buying you a tea,” she said. “Especially not after all you’ve—”

“We’re not in a competition,” I said, trying to soothe the rambling concerns that I knew were about to spill from her kissable lips. We’d had the conversation before, many times. Despite me paying her for our contractual agreement, she still felt out of balance when it came to gifts and outings and everything extra that came with the gig I’d hired her for. She felt like she owed me, when I tried to explain time and time again, that she gave me more than I ever bargained for by just being her.

“I know it’s not a competition,” she said. “But you have to understand it’s hard when I can’t even pretend to keep up. I’ll never be able to treat you the way you treat me, which is like a freaking queen.” She shook her head. “Like royalty.”

I gently spun her around to face me, tipping her chin up as I met her gaze. “You are a queen,” I said. “My queen. One I happily get on my knees for whenever she wants.” I smirked at the little intake a breath that slipped through her lips. “And you make me feel like a king just by being you. Just having you around makes me feel richer than any number in any of my bank accounts.”

Aspen tried to hide her smile, but it was impossible and breathtaking. “I think I’m about to swoon,” she teased pretending to have her knees go out.

I caught her easily, laughing as I hauled her against me. “You know I’ll never let you fall,” I said, dipping down to still a quick kiss.

She wrapped her arms around me, kissing me back, but then her name was called and we quickly pulled out of the embrace to grab our drinks. Her eyes watched me eagerly as I brought my lips to the straw and took a drink, instantly moaning around the burst of flavors in my mouth.

“That is good,” I said nodding at her.

She grinned clapping a little before she took a drink of her own.

“You have to try the mango too,” she said, offering me her straw. I immediately took a sip, enjoying that one as well.

“Can’t believe I’ve never tried this before,” I said, glancing around the little tea shop and noticing that it was crowded for a Wednesday afternoon. The gears in my mind started turning and I pulled out my phone to do a quick search before pocketing it again.

Aspen looked at me knowingly, arching a brow. “What are you up to?” she asked.

“I was just checking to see if they were franchised,” I explained, holding the door open for her as we continued our

leisurely walk down the street.

Aspen chuckled, shaking her head as she continued to drink her tea.

“What?” I asked, wrapping my free arm around her as we pulled over to window shop at a boutique a few blocks down.

“I just love the way your mind works,” she said with a shrug. “Most people go into their favorite businesses just to enjoy the products, but if you see a good one your mind instantly goes to investing in it. You just landed the energy deal in India, you have a highly successful NHL team, and more franchises and investments than I know how to keep track of. And yet you want more?”

“You know the insatiable appetite I have,” I said, flashing her pointed look that made a beautiful flush dance across her cheeks.

“I do,” she said. “And that’s another thing that I’m very fond of. But...” She stopped herself, focusing more on the jewelry and outfits in the window than on me.

“But what?” I asked.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “I just wonder what it is you’re really searching for?”

“I have an empire to uphold,” I said easily.

She nodded. “No, I know that,” she said. “I understand that you were left with a giant responsibility at a young age, and that you have a sense of responsibility when it comes to filling your parents’ shoes and ensuring their legacy lives on, not to mention in the beginning you outdid yourself in order to ensure that Bristol was taken care of. It’s something I can totally understand, obviously. But have you ever stopped and wondered if you’re doing all of this because of the responsibility or because you *want* to?”

I swallowed hard, her words hitting me dead center in the chest. I’d never been asked something like that before, let alone took the time to think about it.

“And it can be both,” she hurried to continue. “It doesn’t have to be one or the other. I was just curious because I know that there are things I’ve thought about, those fun little dreams that happen late at night when you think about if your life was different. I can’t help but wonder if there’s something you really want that has nothing to do with your empire?”

“I...” Damn. I literally had no idea how to answer her question.

Something expanded in my chest, this flood of warmth that Aspen understood me on so many different levels in such a short time. It felt like we’d spent years getting to know each other versus the last couple months. And I had no idea if that was just because of the easy way we got along or if it was because of the crash course of getting to know each other we’d had in the beginning of our agreement. Either way, it touched something inside of me, stirring up a whole slew of emotions that I didn’t exactly know how to regulate.

“No one’s ever asked me that before,” I admitted. “I’ll get back to you when I find out.”

She turned and smiled up at me. “No worries,” she said. “I get it. You love your life, and you’re really fucking good at living it. You don’t *need* to want anything else. I was just curious.”

I nodded down at her, tucking her under my arm again as we continued to walk.

She wasn’t wrong. I did love my life, but I had felt restless recently. The little shots of dopamine of buying a franchise or winning a Stanley Cup had lost its allure, not because it wasn’t worth everything, because it was.

I was incredibly lucky, and lived a very privileged life that I was completely aware of. But I couldn’t deny the small itch that I hadn’t been able to scratch for a while now.

And I always tried to satisfy it with more businesses or more women, more parties or more trips around the world, but in the end, when I was home and alone, it was still there, plaguing me with its uncertainty.

Though lately—the last two months to be precise—I hadn't been as bothered by it. Of course, I'd been incredibly busy, and more than distracted with Aspen.

Maybe that's all it was.

I just needed distraction. Needed to stay moving forward and never stand still.

Or maybe it was because I was rarely alone now, with Aspen indulging my request to sleep over most nights of the week even though she had a perfectly good apartment in Brooklyn all to herself.

"We should get back home," Aspen said after another hour of window shopping, and my heart did this weird little jump when I knew she was talking about *my* place, not hers. "I only have an hour to get ready."

"You could go as you are and you'd be perfect," I said eyes trailing the length of her body, admiring the cozy cream sweater she wore that hung just below her luscious ass that was sheathed in warm black leggings, her feet tucked into a pair of black boots that were perfect for long walks like this.

She smiled up at me. "Thanks for that," she said. "But I'd like to wash the city out of my hair before dinner." A little flash of nerves shifted over her features, and I cocked a brow at her.

"Are you nervous?" I asked slightly shocked. She rarely showed that side of herself to anyone, and I was honored she trusted me with it, but she'd been in the room with some of the most powerful people in the world and hadn't batted an eye. But tonight's dinner? *That* was enough to worry her?

"No, of course not," she said, but I could read through her assurance. "It's going to be great."

A little bit of apprehension skittered down my spine, as if I could feel her energy pulsing inside of me. I smoothed my hands down her shoulders. "If you're not ready," I said. "We don't have to do this."

It had been her idea, her insistence on this dinner happening, but if it was going to make her uncomfortable, we

wouldn't do it.

“Is it me?” I asked, my stomach twisting. Was she worried about me? How I would behave? Was she worried I would mess everything up?

Shit, *would* I mess everything up?

“No, not at all,” she said, placing her hand on the center of my chest. “Crossland, I would never be worried about you. It’s not that I’m even worried. It’s just...” She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, her eyes meeting mine with an open vulnerability that tugged at something in my chest. “It’s *Brecken*,” she said. “I’m incredibly protective over her. It’s kind of my tragic flaw. I’ve had it since she was born. And I don’t normally introduce people to her until I’m sure they’re going to be around. And I know we haven’t exactly talked about what’s going to happen in a month, but I want you to meet her. And I know she wants to meet you. And I’m probably making too big of a deal about this. We’re friends, right? That’s what we agreed to. Even after...”

There was a rock growing in my throat the more she spoke, something settling heavy in my gut.

She was right, we hadn’t talked about anything that would happen in a month when our contract was up, but I knew for sure I wouldn’t want to just pretend like she’d never been a part of my life. I wouldn’t want to pretend like this never happened.

But I didn’t know what to do or what to say.

This was all new to me. All paths I’d never navigated before.

“Aspen, I’m honored that you trust me enough to meet her. I know how important she is to you and I’m not going to take that for granted. I’ll do my best not to fuck it up. And who knows, maybe she’ll be as enamored by my charms as you are,” I said, flashing her the cocky smirk I knew she loved. Wanting desperately to get us back to a more common ground where things didn’t feel so heavy.

A month.

I had a month to get my shit together. To figure out exactly what to do when our contract was up. My friends already loved her, and were shocked that she was still around.

I couldn't blame them. It's not like they'd ever seen me in a relationship before. The bet was as good as won in my eyes, but what about after?

In the beginning, I'd never given any thought to actually *missing* the person I'd entered into a contract with. What were we supposed to do? Were we supposed to just be casual friends that met up once a quarter when she found time?

That didn't sit right with me.

That didn't sit right with me at all.

When I looked ahead at the future, she was in it.

Shit.

Aspen had become someone I found invaluable in my life.

When had that happened?

"She's more immune than you think," Aspen said, drawing my mind back to what I'd said about me charming her sister. She looked at me with a little bit of pity as we climbed into the elevator that would take us up to my apartment. "Are you prepared to be grilled?"

"I'm always prepared," I said as smoothly as possible, not even hinting at the turmoil that was wreaking havoc on my insides.

I tried to calm my nerves by assuring myself I had a month to figure things out. Aspen wasn't going anywhere until then. I had time.

"Good," Aspen said. "Because while I had four of your very intimidating best friends grill me that first week, that'll be nothing compared to what Brecken will bring to the table tonight."

I smiled down at her, finally moving away from more complicated thoughts. I bent down and stole a kiss before

pulling back as the doors opened and we entered my apartment.

“You know I’m always up for a challenge.”

* * *

“How *does* one make the jump from hockey team coach to investing in developmental research in the energy sector?”

I had just taken a sip of the iced tea I’d ordered, and nearly spit it out at Brecken’s bold question. Our drinks had only just arrived, the three of us barely out of the introductory phase of this dinner.

“I’m the owner,” I casually corrected her. “Not the coach. And honestly, it’s not that broad of a jump. I have investments in a variety of different commercial categories.”

“Yeah, I’ve read all about that,” she said, and my eyes flashed to Aspen for a silent vibe check.

Aspen was still smiling softly, sipping her drink, her eyes bouncing between her sister and me and back again. She was letting me choose how I responded to her little sister’s questions, and not doing me the disservice of trying to explain my choices for me.

“What I’m trying to understand is the *why*?” Brecken continued.

“I was given an empire, and I wasn’t going to let it die just because having it grow would be a lot of hard work. I’m always on the lookout for the next opportunity at growth, or expanding my wealth—”

“Because being a billionaire isn’t enough?”

“Brecken,” Aspen said, her tone chiding.

But I laughed, nodding respectfully toward her little sister where she sat across from me at the table. This kid had even more unapologetic confidence than her sister, if that was possible. And yeah, I knew she was nineteen and technically an adult, but to me she was just a kid. I admired her for her lack of sugarcoating. She had questions, and she wasn’t beating around the bush before asking them.

“It’s more than enough,” I answered. “But inheriting wealth doesn’t mean you just sit there and live off of it for the rest of your life. Not for me anyway. My parents left behind a legacy, and I’ve committed my life to expanding it. The more I have, the more successful I am, the more I have to give.”

Brecken tilted her head, sizing me up from where she sat. Her long blonde hair was tied back in a braid, and I wondered if that was what color Aspen’s hair would be if she didn’t dye it.

The two looked a lot alike, but there was an even more identical look of shared love and protection between the two that I’m not sure they noticed.

“What charities do you give to?” Brecken asked, after we placed our orders with the server, and I couldn’t help but notice that Aspen was practically chugging her drink at this point.

“My friends and I predominantly donate to Doctors Without Borders, but I also have a particular interest in hospitals and the services they provide,” I said. I could see the gears turning behind Brecken’s eyes as they softened just slightly with my answer.

She was hunting for another question, another bold ask in the hopes of tripping me up and revealing my true nature, no doubt. I couldn’t blame her; I did the same thing to all of Bristol’s romantic interests back when she was single. Hell, I’d almost been the cause of ruining her now husband’s career back when I’d caught him kissing my then seventeen-year-old sister.

The years that had passed—and a hell of a lot of education from Bristol—had taught me that I might have overreacted by kicking him off of my team back then, and thankfully it all worked out for them in the end.

“How are you liking NYU?” I asked before she could come up with another question, genuinely interested in how she was getting along at the university.

“I love it,” she said the answer rolling off her tongue easily. “My courses are still introductory, but I’ll be going into family law.”

“Brecken took on a double caseload this year,” Aspen said proudly. “She doesn’t even make the extra coursework look challenging.”

Brecken waved her sister off, but there was a glimmer of happiness shining in her eyes. “I can never get enough,” she said. “Plus, I want to make sure to put as much coursework as I can into each semester so I can reach my goal as a family lawyer that much sooner.”

“That’s no small major,” I said just as the server brought our food to the table. We all took a couple bites before I continued. “And you’re still so early in your college career, what makes you so certain that’s what you want to do?”

I opted to ask the questions that I would ask Bristol if it was her sitting across from me, hoping that it would help me prove to her that I had no bad intentions when it came to her family.

“I picked my major years ago,” Brecken said determinedly. “Watching your big sister struggle with the courts to gain custodial rights will do that to a girl.”

I flinched, grinding my teeth as I nodded. “I hate that you both had to struggle with the system for so long before finally being free of it. It’s super admirable that that’s the career choice you would go for, no doubt to help people who are in similar situations.”

Brecken smiled softly, nodding as if she’d made up her mind about me, but I couldn’t tell if it was favorable or not yet. “That, and I’ve always been fascinated by the justice system,” she continued.

“And she’s always been the top of her class in everything,” Aspen added. “School has always come naturally to her, which is why I wanted her to be able to go to her dream college when she got out of high school.”

“And you never had any interest in attending university?” I asked Aspen, generally curious since the topic had never come up.

Brecken laughed, and Aspen flashed her chiding look, but it was purely playful.

“That’s one thing that’s entirely different about the two of us,” Brecken said. “Aspen hates school. What was it, junior year?” she asked. “You were absent like a hundred and eighty days or something?”

Aspen chuckled. “A hundred and eighty-two, if we’re trying to be precise. I still managed to pass all of my classes, which kind of sealed the deal for me on how pointless it was.”

“In your opinion,” Brecken said. “Some people love school. Some people see the value in education.”

“I see the value in education,” Aspen countered. “There’s no denying how important it is. But some of the classes that you’re required to take are completely pointless when it comes to the real world. Now, had junior year in high school offered classes on budgeting, taxes, and basically being able to survive on your own as an adult, then I absolutely would have showed up. I’m not missing anything because I skipped out on a few gym classes.” She reached across the table and squeezed Brecken’s hand. “And of course I appreciate that there are universities with incredible professors who are dedicated to giving you the specific skills you need for your dream career as a family lawyer. I appreciate education, I’m just saying it’s not for everybody.”

I studied the way the two spoke to each other, instantly being warmed by their connection and their love for each other. They accepted each other for who they were even though they were starkly different. And, as usual, I was happy to discover this new little detail about Aspen’s preferences, always gobbling up the information about what made her *her* like a starved man.

“And how do you feel about my sister not going to college?” Brecken asked, bringing the attention back to me.

“How do you feel about her working double shifts at a coffee shop?”

“Ohmigod,” Aspen muttered under her breath, cutting into her roast chicken a little harder than necessary.

“I’m of the mind that as long as you find joy in your work, then you’re doing life right.”

“So it doesn’t bother you that she’s a barista and not some trust fund heiress or wealthy oil tycoon?”

Now that made me laugh, but I reeled it in because Aspen looked like she was literally trying to disappear behind her food.

“Aspen could be unemployed and I’d still adore her. You don’t need me to list all the reasons why she’s amazing, and while I am a huge fan of her flat whites, I’m not dating her for her job. I’m dating her because I feel better when I’m around her,” I said, the truth flying past my lips before I could even think to stop myself. “She makes me feel like the best version of myself, not to mention she’s incredibly funny and I enjoy laughing almost as much as anything else in this world.”

I took a bite of my steak, needing to put something in my mouth that would stop me from waxing poetic. Especially since *when the fuck* do I do that? I wasn’t a dishonest person, so it’s not like I was going to make up some lie about the reason why I liked being around Aspen, but saying all that... fuck, I just hoped it didn’t make Aspen uncomfortable.

I spared her a glance after another bite, and found her eyes on me, curious and questioning and maybe a little hopeful? I smiled at her, then continued to eat my dinner, answering more questions from Brecken as the night went on.

“Okay, then,” Brecken finally said after we’d finished dessert, and I hadn’t shied away from even the boldest of questions—which included my questionable dating history.

Aspen had excused herself to go to the restroom, leaving Brecken and myself completely alone at the table in the restaurant, the hushed chatter flowing all around us from the crowded space.

“I’ve decided that I’m going to like you,” Brecken said, folding her arms over her chest. “But know that my opinion can change on a dime. Aspen is the kind of person who would literally give the shirt off her back to someone in need, and she has a habit of allowing people to take advantage of her good nature. I know that she’s outspoken and confident, but she’s still vulnerable. We’ve both had a lot of growing to do, but she suffered through my parents ten years longer than I did, and so she has more trauma to heal from than I ever did.” Brecken sighed. “And yet, she’s still the one who feels responsible for me.” She leaned forward a little, her eyes unflinching as they met mine.

“If you’re only here for another one of your notorious flings that I’ve read so much about, you better make damn sure my sister knows that up front. I’ve never seen her act the way she has with you before, so if you’re not in this, be honest. I’d hate to have to bury a billionaire, especially one who donates to charities I like.”

Holy shit, I was actually a little intimidated by this nineteen-year-old blonde who couldn’t be over five foot four.

She held her ground and spoke her opinions better than some of the best business people I’d ever gone toe to toe with, and I had to give her credit for that.

“So, what you’re saying is, you like me?” I gave her my most charming smile and relished the pride that sliced through me when she laughed. A real laugh, one that I had earned all by myself.

There was a sense of accomplishment, coupled with just a hint of dread.

“I’ve never been anything but up front with your sister,” I said, making sure she knew that. It was the truth, even more than she understood. We had a contract for fuck’s sake, one that outlined everything to do with our relationship.

Everything except for every intimate moment we’ve had since. But we discussed that beforehand too. I wasn’t taking any steps was Aspen that weren’t crystal clear, unless you

counted the feelings that I was no doubt catching for the woman, and had yet to tell her about.

But that had everything to do with me knowing that I needed to sort them out before spouting off at the mouth and not really knowing what I was saying. She deserved more than that.

When we discussed the parameters of our future beyond the contract, beyond the bet and the deal and the arrangement, she deserved to hear my side and my proposal when *I* knew exactly what I had to offer. And as of right now, I had no clue. Everything was new with Aspen, and I wouldn't burden her with my thoughts until I could understand them myself.

“Also,” I continued. “I meant everything I said. I just like being around her. I like having her in my life. And I'm pretty sure she likes being in mine.”

Brecken nodded, smiling as Aspen returned to the table.

“All good here?” Aspen asked, eyes dancing between the two of us.

I glanced at Brecken, wanting her to be able to answer for both of us.

I already knew that I adored her, just as I adored her sister.

Now it was up to her to lay the final results.

Brecken grinned at Aspen. “Yeah,” she said. “We're all good here.”

Aspen

“Is it possible to be physically attracted to an inanimate object?” I asked, my mouth half gaping as I delicately traced my fingers along the gorgeous exterior of the car Crossland had pulled up in.

It was cherry red and sleek and aerodynamic and just *screamed* rare.

I’d never seen a car like it. Not even the ones in the James Bond movies came close to touching this one.

“It is.” Crossland beamed with pride as he walked around to the passenger side, opening my door for me and ushering me in.

I sat stiffly in the seat, afraid if I moved the wrong way, I would tarnish the leather.

Crossland laughed as he got behind the wheel. “You can relax,” he said, noting my rigid stance.

“Speak for yourself,” I said, barely allowing myself enough movement to speak as he pulled onto the busy city street. “I don’t even want to begin to know what this car cost.”

“It’s a ’64 Ferrari 250 LM,” he said, as if I was supposed to know exactly what that meant.

“Wait, is this the car that ended up in the bet between you and Ethan?”

Crossland slid his hand over the steering wheel, the touch almost loving. “This is the one.”

I swallowed hard, wondering why on earth he'd picked this car to transport us to whatever event he had planned for tonight. This car was the catalyst for our agreement in the first place—a piece of his father's past that was so important to Crossland, he'd rather hire a fake girlfriend than lose it.

“Are we going to a rare car show tonight?” I asked, wondering if that's why he decided to risk bringing this car out on the town tonight.

Crossland chuckled, shaking his head. “No, why would we be doing that?”

“Because I may not know everything, but I do know that this car is incredibly important to you. Why risk bringing it out? What if something happens to it?”

“You're not wrong about it being important to me,” he said, turning down another street. “This was my father's car. He absolutely cherished it.” A wistful smile shaped his lips as he continued. “I remember being eight years old and him taking me for my first ride in it. The leather still smells the same, the purr of the engine still makes my heart race, and I can almost hear him crooning out his favorite rock songs as we drove for hours, just me and him.”

Emotion clogged my throat, and I couldn't stop myself from reaching over and laying my palm over his thigh in a comforting gesture. Crossland draped his free hand over the top of it before intertwining our fingers like it was the most effortless and easy thing in the world.

And in reality, it was easy.

Things had been easy between us since the second week we struck this agreement. And we'd only grown closer. Every day I got to know him, I liked him just a little bit more. I knew that was trouble, knew that I shouldn't be feeling the way I did, but I couldn't deny it. I was pretty smitten with this man, the same cocky billionaire that I thought I would enjoy sassing for three months.

Joke's on me, I found myself excited just to be around him, just to hear the sound of his voice in the morning or feel him

in the bed next to me while we slept at night.

Dangerous.

I knew it was incredibly dangerous ground to walk on, feeling the way I was.

I hadn't depended on or counted on anyone in years, and I promised myself I never would. But here I was, making room for Crossland in a life that was already full. Sharing things with him that I hadn't shared with anyone in a long time, and knowing that somehow, he would understand. Because he knew me, and I knew him. We were so alike in so many ways.

Crossland smiled down at me before returning his attention to the road. "And we're not going to any event tonight," he said. "I'm just taking you to dinner."

"What?" I asked, shock rattling through me. "I would have been fine with having Len driver us. You didn't have to bring out your father's prized car—"

"I wanted to see you in it," he said so matter-of-factly that it stopped any response I may have formed.

My heart expanded, pounding furiously as I tried to work out the meaning behind those words.

This felt important, but it couldn't be that important, right? This had to be just another layer of him that he was sharing with me as his fake girlfriend and very real friend.

Very real friends who knew the most intimate details about each other's bodies, sure, but *friends*.

That's what we agreed to in the beginning, and beyond that, I was just hired help. An actress playing a role, and I had to wonder if I was doing what so many of the stars do.

Was I falling for my leading man?

I mean, it would make sense. Crossland was absolutely somebody worth loving. Not only for his sense of adventure and irresistible confidence or his skills in other departments, but for his heart. He was a genuinely good man, regardless of how many ridiculous jokes he would crack when things would get serious in order to break the tension.

He'd be *easy* to fall in love with. If I was going to allow myself to do such a thing.

Which I wouldn't because he'd *hired* me for one thing and one thing only. And we only had a month left before all of that would be done, and I'd be left with this wonderful, adventurous memory of my time with him.

Maybe I'd get the occasional friendly text or, if I was very lucky, a casual meetup. But it couldn't be more. Because as Crossland had so expertly displayed and told me over the last two months, he wasn't somebody that could be tied down. And why would I want to tie him down when he lived for adventure? When he lived for the next thing and the next thing and the next thing, never settling, never standing still.

I knew I should talk to him about it. Knew I should tell him that I was feeling apprehensive about the end of our contract being only thirty days away. I should tell him that every time I thought about it a pit opened up in my stomach, threatening to swallow me whole. But the idea of me telling him, and him giving me one of his beautifully charming and gentle rejections?

I don't think I could go on pretending for another thirty days if he did that. So maybe I was a coward, but I didn't want to ruin the last of something that had become so beautiful to me.

Crossland pulled up to a restaurant I'd seen raved about on social media, electing to park his car himself before he escorted me up to the rooftop terrace.

The space was free of any other patrons, soft music tinkling around the space, the beautiful twinkling city stretching out beneath the night sky beyond the railings of the balcony. A table for two was illuminated by flickering candlelight, and I found myself quite literally unable to speak.

"For someone who boldly claims he's not a romantic," I finally said when I found my voice again. "This is giving romance."

Crossland settled in the chair across from me, his grin easy and open. “I have to say, I did have fun planning this,” he said, pairing it with a little shrug. “Maybe you bring out the romantic in me.”

I wanted to groan, to whine in agony when he said things like that. He was always so good at being charming, and I couldn’t help but wish it was *real*. But it was real enough, and he had been kind enough to plan this night for me, with no cameras and no friends watching and analyzing our relationship. Just us.

I wouldn’t waste those efforts.

The servers brought us a pre-selected dinner course, complete with a mushroom risotto appetizer and champagne. We fell into easy conversation between bites of what was the best food I’d ever tasted, and I found myself slipping just a little bit more in the resiliency of shielding my heart from him.

“I love that your mom was a baker,” I said after he’d recanted a story about her impulse baking at two a.m., and him waking up to the smell of sugar and chocolate in the middle of the night. “Especially when she could have had any desserts she wanted brought in.”

“It was the process for her,” Crossland said. “She loved exploring new recipes, and then watching us devour every bite. She was a marvelous cook too, but baking was where her true joy was. Beyond the businesses that her and my father ran together.”

“They sound amazing,” I said, marveling at the stories he shared with me about his parents.

“Bristol and I were lucky. We had the best parents anyone could ask for.” He visibly swallowed, his eyes apologetic. “I’m sorry if that sounds like I’m bragging.”

“Please don’t apologize for something like that. I love hearing about your past, especially the pieces that made you so happy. And it’s not your fault that my parents were the complete opposite. If anything, I should be the one apologizing to you. It’s not fair that people like my biological

parents are still here and yours...” My words stumbled over the emotion building inside me.

I had no experience with grief, not in the way that Crossland did, and I had no idea if I was miss-stepping with my words. I didn't want to take the trust he'd given me by blundering my responses.

“I suppose there's nothing we can do about either of our situations,” he said. “The only thing we can do is make the best with the time we have. I learned that the day I lost them. How quickly something can end.” He pushed his food around on his plate, not really seeing it. “I also learned that sometimes things can be avoided, if only the proper preparation had been in place.”

“How so?” I asked.

“My parents died because there wasn't a level one trauma center nearby,” he explained, and my heart twisted in my chest. “I've been doing my best to support local hospitals, giving them the funds they need to ensure they have the best resources possible. I'm actually dedicating a brand-new trauma center at a hospital in upstate New York in their memory in a couple weeks. It won't bring them back, but I feel like they'd be proud.”

“They definitely are,” I said, swiping at the tears that had pooled in my eyes. “They'd be beyond proud of you, Crossland. You took a tragic situation and turned it into something so beautiful and you help so many people. Not everyone would have done the same.”

He smiled at me, reaching across the table to grab my hand. “You did,” he said. “So maybe we're the same.”

I chuckled softly. “Yes, I am the most esteemed of baristas in all the land, using my trauma as a work ethic, where you expanded an empire from yours.”

He flashed me a chiding look, but smiled at my tease, knowing that I did it because that's what he liked, a proper balance of serious and silly.

After dinner, Crossland took the long way home, music filtering through the speakers in the Ferrari as a comfortable silence fell over our previous non-stop conversation. It felt absolutely magical to be in this car with him after the stories he told me, heading back to his apartment like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I spent nights over there more often than not, so much so that I had everything I needed at the edge of my fingertips.

The sweet silence came with us as we rode up in the elevator, and walked into his apartment, my heels clicking on the hardwood floors as I made my way to his bedroom. I was more than ready to get out of this dress, no matter how pretty it was.

I slipped out of my heels, padding barefoot into the walk-in closet that now had a whole section just for me.

Crossland followed me inside, his fingers grazing the back of my neck as he reached for my zipper to help me out of the dress.

A warm shiver followed where his fingers lingered as he brought the zipper down with such patience and gentleness, the move indicating that we had all the time in the world.

Right now, in this moment, there was no ticking clock, no expiration date.

There was just Crossland, this incredible man helping me out of a dress.

The straps of the dress loosened once he reached my lower back, the thin strips of silk sliding down my shoulders. He took a step back, giving me the space to choose what to do next.

I could change into a pair of my favorite pajamas, the ones he'd stocked a drawer with for me, and head straight to bed, turning on Netflix for good measure.

Or I could forget about the clothes and head straight for a nice long bath.

Whatever I wanted, I knew he'd support. I knew it as easily as I knew I could trust him with the darkest parts of myself, the ones others had run away from.

But not him.

Never him.

I let the dress fall in a mess of silk at my feet, stepping out of it and turning around to face him.

His chest rose with his intake of breath, his icy blue eyes widening as he took in the sight of me. It was nothing he hadn't seen before, except for the new matching underwear set that was made of black lace, but he still looked at me like he'd just unwrapped a brand-new present. Like I was something he'd been looking for his entire life.

That look was everything—exhilaration and need, heat and comfort. I *lived* for that look, for his praise, for the way he made me feel like an absolute queen.

“You're stunning,” he said, his voice rough and low.

A flush raked my body, but I smiled, doing my best to take the compliment. I was almost getting used to it after being with him for two months, and I was certainly getting better at accepting them. Of course, he made it so easy to believe his words.

He undid his tie, chucking it behind him before I helped him unbutton his dress shirt, sliding it over his muscled arms until it dropped to the floor. I took my time grazing my fingers along his broad chest, my touch unhurried.

We'd had plenty of times where clothes were torn and ripped in a desperate need to get to the other, but tonight... tonight felt different.

I kissed his chest, my fingers trembling slightly as I undid his belt, then his zipper, and he stepped out of his pants before cupping my face in his hands, capturing my mouth in his.

The kiss was slow, almost sweet compared to the ones that had come before it. And I wasn't sure if it was because we'd

laid ourselves bare earlier, opening up subjects that tore at both of our hearts or if it was just us, but I was here for it.

Here for him.

Here for all of it.

Crossland broke our kiss only long enough to unclasp my bra and slide my thong down my legs, then made quick work of his own boxer-briefs. A breath later and I was in his arms, him sweeping me off my feet and kissing me before carrying me out of the closet and to his bed.

The city sparkled in the night outside of his floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating the room in the softest silver glow as he laid me gently on the bed.

He kissed me again, his tongue gliding against mine in a way that continuously made me ache in places I never knew could ache, and I wrapped my arms around him, beckoning him to come closer.

I shifted, spreading my legs to make room as he settled between them with the most delicious weight.

“Crossland,” I whispered, like speaking too loudly would break this charged moment we were in.

“Mmm?” he murmured against my neck where he was currently laying a line of soft kisses down.

I arched against him, my heat just grazing his hard length.

“I want you,” I said, breathless as his touch roamed over my body, every graze a strike to a match.

“Do you?” he asked, leaning up to smile down at me. “Let me be sure.” He slid his hand over my stomach and between my thighs, dragging his fingers right through my slit.

I gasped, my back bowing slightly as I arched into the touch.

His smile only deepened. “You do want me, don’t you, kitten?”

“Mmhmm,” I answered, reduced to incoherent responses.

“How bad?” he asked, pumping his fingers inside me, his thumb teasing my now pulsing clit.

My eyes snapped open, a new need unfurling inside of me. “Now,” I said. “I need you now, Crossland.”

He laughed softly. “So demanding,” he said, stroking me again before shifting slightly, his body leaning toward his nightstand—

“No,” I said. “Just you.”

He went still above me, eyes returning to mine as he looked down at me. “Aspen?”

“Can we?” I asked. “You know my history, I know yours. I’m on the pill. Can I have all of you, Cross?”

Something guttered in his eyes, and he shuddered slightly above me.

“I’ve never done that with anyone before,” he said, and my heart stumbled over itself.

“We don’t have—”

“I want to,” he said, spreading my thighs wider as he slicked his thick head through my wetness. “If you want me. If you’re sure.”

I gripped his back, my nails digging into his muscles there as he teased me.

“Please,” I begged, not caring at all how desperate I sounded. I *was* desperate, the need to feel all of him inside me an unruly hunger demanding to be sated. “I want all of you and nothing else.”

“Fuck, kitten,” he said when I clenched my thighs around his hips, urging him inside me another inch. “You feel so damn good.”

“More,” I demanded, my voice breathless as my heart raced against my chest. I’d given myself over wholly to the demands of my body, to the begging of my heart to be as close to him as humanly possible.

Crossland held my gaze, his fingers gently pushing my hair back as he sank in another inch, then another and another until he finally bottomed out inside me.

“*God,*” I sighed, wetting my lips as I tried to catch my breath.

Sensation sparked along the edges of my body, the feel of him inside me with no barriers between us shaking something loose that felt a lot like a pulsing explosion waiting to fire. “You’re amazing,” I continued, moving beneath him until he trembled.

“Fuck, Aspen,” he growled, slowly thrusting in time with my movements. “I...goddamn, you feel so fucking good.”

I reached up, gripping his neck to bring his mouth to mine, needing to touch every inch of him I could reach as he slid home inside me over and over again.

Our kiss was an intense tangle of tongues and teeth and ragged breaths as he rocked into me, me arching to meet his every thrust.

We collided together, each time we made connection only feeding the building fire inside me. My pleasure stretched and purred and pulsed, growing larger with every kiss, every touch, every word that spilled from his lips.

“Aspen,” he groaned, drawing out of our kiss to hold my gaze. “*Aspen.*”

I cupped his face as he emphasized my name, wanting so badly to confess every emotion racing through my heart at that very moment, but all I could do was silently show him instead.

Tingles built along my spine, everything inside of me coiling so tightly I was certain I would combust any second.

So much...there was so much of him, so much of the way I felt, so much of the way I needed him.

“Cross,” I said, sighing his name as I felt my release climbing up my body. “God, *Cross.*”

He upped his pace, his eyes on me and conveying too much for me to process while he slid an arm beneath my lower

back, hauling me up as he continued to thrust into me.

The angle had him stroking those places deep inside me that set off a chain reaction that tore through me so thoroughly I couldn't help but cry out. I clenched around him, fluttering around his cock as I came, arching into it to ride it all the way through.

"Fuck," he groaned, hardening inside me another degree before his own release followed mine.

He dipped his forehead, leaning it against mine as we caught our breath, our bodies involuntarily shivering or jolting from the aftershocks.

"That was..." I breathed the words.

Sex with Crossland was always incredible, but this time? This time—

"Everything," he said, gently shifting off of me and rolling to the side, keeping me close. "Everything," he repeated, his chest rising and falling quickly.

Everything.

Yeah, it had been absolutely everything.

It had been *all* of me.

I'd given him every piece of me, and now I had no clue what he'd do with them in the end.

Crossland

“I understand that,” I said into the phone as I headed out of my in-home office, the smell of something cooking drawing me out even though I was still on the phone with my publicist.

“This is the sixth time you’ve been caught by the paparazzi with Aspen,” she said. “And you’ve barely given more than a bland statement that she’s your girlfriend. I’ve got requests from nine different media outlets wanting to know if the perpetual billionaire bachelor Crossland McClaren is officially off the market.”

I rolled my eyes, coming around the corner and stopping when I entered the kitchen.

Aspen was in front of the stove, wearing one of my button-down dress shirts and nothing else, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows as she flipped something in a skillet.

“I have no interest in that,” I finally said but my voice was rough.

How could she look so good while she was doing nothing more than simply cooking her grilled cheese?

“I get that, Crossland,” my publicist continued. “And I’ll do my best to keep them off your back. But I wanted to give you a warning, the press is getting anxious. They’ve been feeding off of your escapades for years. And now you’re giving them something new to talk about. They’re getting desperate, and if you don’t come out and make a statement then they’re going to make one up for you.”

“Don’t they always?” I asked. I understood where she was coming from and I really did appreciate it, but this was the same gossip-hungry press that claimed I’d had some kind of ritualistic orgy on my yacht two summers ago. Fact-checking wasn’t a thing for them, because if they did, they would’ve known that it wasn’t an orgy or a ritual, just me and some friends having a good time on the ocean. I’d only had *one* date at that event, and they painted me out to be some sex-starved fiend.

“I appreciate you looking out for me,” I voiced my gratitude out loud. “And I’m grateful for the heads-up. I don’t have a statement to make right now, but if I ever do, you know you’ll be the first one to know.”

There was a heavy sigh at the other end of the line before she said she understood and hung up.

I set my phone on the kitchen island, briefly rubbing the spot along my forehead that had started throbbing since she called. I understood all of this came with the territory, but lately it had felt overwhelming in a way that it never had before.

“Everything good?” Aspen asked, sliding a sandwich onto a plate and setting it before me. She served herself next, then leaned against the kitchen island as she tore little bits off her sandwich and popped them in her mouth.

“Business as usual,” I said, and she gave me a pointed look. I shrugged. “It was my publicist. I guess the media outlets are a little more interested in our relationship than I thought.”

“Oh?” Aspen asked, taking another bite of her grilled cheese.

I joined in, taking a good bite out of mine as well. It was domestic as fuck, but I really liked it. I’d learned that lately. I liked doing just about anything with this woman. It didn’t matter if we were dressed to the nines at one of my charity events, cheering on the Calgary team I owned, or sitting at the kitchen island eating grilled cheese. I just genuinely loved being around her.

“Yeah,” I finally said. “I need to give you a heads-up. My publicist says they’re getting desperate. It’s not enough that I’ve stated publicly that you’re my girlfriend, they want more details. They’re catching more shots of us out in public, and I guess the way we’re looking at each other is making people think that I’m officially off the market.”

Aspen’s eyes flared for a moment before an amused smile shaped her kissable lips.

I laughed with her. “It’s not funny,” I said.

“I’m not laughing at you, Cross,” she said through her giggles. “But you have to see it from my side. It’s like you’re Batman or something. They have to know if you’re available or not and the world loves reporting on it. It’s one of the most surreal things about being with you.”

“If I was Batman I’d at least have some seclusion.” I shook my head, a more serious thought tumbling over me. “My publicist is under the impression that if I don’t give them more details they’re going to come up with a story of their own. I don’t want that to affect you.”

Aspen arched brow. “Why would that affect me?”

“I’ve seen it play out a dozen times before,” I explained. “Either with athletes on my team or even my friends. The press has a way of twisting stories and photographs, or taking quotes out of context. Some can be downright hurtful. And that’s the last thing I’d want you to experience.” I wanted her to fully understand. “Hell,” I continued. “They could take an old photo and make it look like it happened yesterday. I don’t want some picture with me and one of my previous companions to pop up and make you question things.”

Aspen set down the piece of grilled cheese she’d been about to eat, her brow crinkling just slightly. “I appreciate that,” she said, but she looked at me questioningly. “But, this is still a contract between us, isn’t it?” she asked.

I swallowed around the sudden rock in my throat, trying like hell to ignore how it felt like the rug had been ripped from beneath me. Technically yes, we were still under a contract,

but if the last two months had proven anything, it was that there was way more to us than some ink on paper.

I wasn't saying I knew exactly what to do with that, but I'd been working on figuring it out ever since I first started thinking about it weeks ago.

"Yes," I finally said. "But I think we can both admit it's a little more complicated than that now." Aspen nodded, and I continued. "And just because we have a professional arrangement doesn't mean that I have no regard for your feelings. And maybe you wouldn't be jealous or hurt or offended if the media made up a story about me or you or anything regarding us, but I just wanted to let you know now that I have no intentions of ever hurting you. If something comes out, I just asked for your trust enough to come talk to me about it before you make any conclusions on your own."

Aspen glanced down at her plate, shifting a little bite of grilled cheese around as she nodded, the slight hint of a smile on her lips.

"I promise," she said. "If the press prints something about you getting engaged to a prima ballerina or two, I'll make sure I ask you about it first before I attack you in a fit of jealous rage."

Her tone was teasing enough that I gaped at her, barely able to hide my smile as I raced around the kitchen island and scooped her into my arms.

"Are you saying you wouldn't be jealous? Have I made such little impact on your heart that there wouldn't even be a flicker of anger?"

She giggled, wiggling in my embrace as I shifted to drape her over my shoulder. "Not in the slightest," she teased.

"Damn," I said. "I guess that means I need to work a little harder." I playfully smacked her ass as I carried her through the kitchen, down the hallway, and into my bedroom.

"Didn't you just say you *didn't* want me to be jealous or hurt?" she asked, laughing as I plopped her down onto the mattress, planting an array of kisses along her neck.

I grinned down at her as I worked it out in my head. “Technically speaking,” I said.

That got her laughing even harder, and I dipped my head down to kiss her some more before falling to my side next to her, so we were facing each other. I smoothed some of her colorful hair back, content to study the lines of that beautifully open smile.

“We could feed them a story, you know,” she said. Her hands slid casually over my chest, the intimate comfort we shared something I never experienced before. Normally if I dragged a woman into my bed, it was all teeth and clothes off and carnal sex. And while I’d had that with Aspen, this was different. This was more. And of course, I wanted her. I always wanted her. But just laying here, talking and teasing each other? It was the kind of joy I didn’t know I’d been missing.

“Oh yeah?” I asked. “And what story would you like to give them?”

“It could be anything we want,” she said. “You could tell them the truth, and it wouldn’t change anything would it?”

That felt like a dangerous question, but I answered as honestly as I could. “It would make my integrity look questionable,” I admitted. “Not only to the public and possibly my business partners that I have ventures with, but to my friends.” I already hated lying to them enough, but the longer I’d been with Aspen the less it felt like a lie.

“Oh,” Aspen said nodding. “Of course,” she continued. “That’s why you had me and Jesse sign an NDA before this all started. Because we’re in a contractual agreement to be with each other and talking about it would be a bad thing.”

Something like sadness flickered over her eyes, and I had to wonder if I’d said the wrong thing? Or did the truth mean something different to her now?

Anxiety clawed up my throat with a heavy dose of anticipation as I felt the confession of my conflicting emotions

dancing on the tip of my tongue. Maybe I should just tell her, maybe I should just tell her what I wanted. Which was...

What was it that I really wanted from her? Beyond her not going anywhere, I really didn't have a solid answer, and I didn't really feel like that was fair to her.

"Aspen," I said taking a breath.

"Do you ever get tired?" she asked, the question completely throwing me off guard. "I feel like you do, Cross. I know I've only been in your life for a couple of months, but watching you constantly work on so many different facets of your life, not just business or your hockey team but with *everything*. I feel like you never sit still, and with the media and the press and the constant access to your life, don't you get tired?"

I nodded, my heart aching in the center of my chest. "I do," I answered. "Remember when you asked me about what I really wanted that had nothing to do with growing the empire?"

She nodded, never taking her eyes off mine.

"I told you I'd get back to you when I figured it out. And I think I have. I'm tired of spending my time bouncing from Calgary to New York and back again and everything in between. I'm tired of paparazzi constantly waiting outside my apartment hoping for a picture of me in some precarious position or with poor company. I'm tired of being hounded by the need to continue to expand and expand until I don't even know what I have my hands in anymore."

Aspen smoothed her hand comfortingly over my cheek before gently massaging my temple.

"Bristol is taken care of and living out her happily ever after with her husband. She doesn't need me anymore. And I can see my friends whenever I want. And lately I've been considering selling off half of my assets and moving to some small town like Cedar Rapids, Iowa, or Sedona, Arizona. Somewhere paparazzi aren't as prevalent, and the pace of life is a little slower."

Aspen's grin was breathtaking. "You could wear jeans more often," she said, then her eyes brightened. "No, sweatpants. You could wear sweatpants all the time."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, kitten?" I asked, grinning at her. "Unrestricted access to me."

"Won't try to deny that," she said, then sighed. "I've always pictured myself in a smaller place too. Somewhere with a bookshop that serves coffee and signature cocktails in a small town where everybody finds comfort in hanging out. Now that Brecken is doing so well on her own, the possibility seems closer than ever."

Especially with the end of our contract coming up and her large payday that she was about to get. Her sister would be set up and she would have the means to do whatever she wanted. And I could only hope that included something to do with me. I needed to tell her that, but I was terrified.

"I can see us there," I said, making my words playful and my face to match. It was easier for me to hide behind the mischief and the games and the jokes than it was to be real. Because in reality, I had no idea how to navigate what I was feeling, and I hated the fact that I felt like I was going to fuck it up any second.

"Really?" she asked. "You think we'd be suited for small-town life?"

"Absolutely," I answered. "I could help you in your bookstore, and you could teach me how to make lattes. Maybe we could even sell boba, even if it's just for me to enjoy it every day."

Aspen laughed, resuming her stroking. "I didn't mean to get you hooked on those," she said. "But they are quite addictive."

"I love it," I said, my eyes trailing over the curves of her face. "We could live in a loft over the coffee shop, our place constantly smelling like roasted coffee beans and freshly bound books."

“Now that’s one hell of a dream,” she said, a little bit of seriousness coming back into her eyes. “But if I’ve learned anything from life, it’s that it delights in laughing at you while you make plans.”

“You think it’s easier to not make plans?”

“I don’t know if it’s easier, but for me the only the plans I’ve ever been able to make are the goals I need to hit in order to help Brecken be okay.”

“And you’ve done that,” I said. “She’s thriving, and she will continue to. So when are you going to start thinking about yourself?”

She laughed roughly, then shrugged. “I’m not sure I know how to do that.”

I slid my hand over her cheek, and she leaned into the touch. From the time I’d known her, she was selfless. Taking care of herself was one of the hardest things she’d ever have to learn how to do.

I’d been lucky to help her these past couple of months, ensuring that she put herself first on occasion. Hopefully over time she’d get better at it and realize that she could better take care of other people if she took care of herself first.

Over time.

I just hoped she’d give me the time I needed to figure out a way to make these dreams we teased each other about become our reality.

Aspen

November tenth.

I loved New York in the fall. There was something magical about the city in the season where the leaves changed colors and there was a crisp autumn bite to the air. It'd always been my favorite season, ushering in the prospect of an upcoming new year with new goals and new aspirations and it symbolized another year survived.

But as I sat outside, cozy inside a warm jacket, my hands wrapped around a piping hot paper cup filled with coffee as I sat across from my sister on campus, I couldn't shake the sense of dread building in my stomach.

"Okay," Brecken said, sitting up a little straighter. "You've barely touched your coffee. I know something's up. *Talk.*"

The chatter of college students hustling to and from classes created a chaotic energy around us.

"Brec, I don't want to put my problems on you."

Brecken rolled her eyes, a slash of anger flaring in them. "That might have worked when I was ten," she said, planting me with a serious look. "But I'm nineteen now, Aspen. And we're sisters. At some point you're going to have to start treating me like an adult and allowing me to take part in this give-and-take. Because for the last *all of my life*, it's been nothing but give from you. Let me help you if I can."

"I know you're an adult," I said, emotion clogging my throat. "As much as I would like to still see you as my baby sister who needs me every second of the day, I'm completely

aware that you're a grown woman now. And you're doing amazing." I motioned to the awesome campus around us, the one that we'd worked so hard to get her into. "But that doesn't change the fact that you're juggling a more-than-full-time class schedule."

"And you've been carrying double shifts, sometimes triple, plus side hustles, all to keep me here. And that's never stopped you from helping me if I had outside problems. So, we're both in agreement that I'm an adult and I'm doing well, so now it's time for you to let me be your sister and share some of the burden. Whatever's bothering you, I can tell it's big. Our parents didn't reach out again, did they?" Brecken's eyes flared, worry and fear mixed together.

I quickly waved her off. "No, it's nothing like that," I said, wanting to assure her. "I haven't heard from them in over a year. And I sure as hell hope that trend continues."

Her shoulders relaxed, and she took another sip of her coffee. "I'm guessing it's Crossland then?"

My eyes met hers. I could never lie to my sister, despite my desires to leave her in the dark about my current emotional dilemma.

"Crossland then," she continued, nodding to herself. "I know you usually go to Jesse for this stuff, but I'm here. So talk to me."

I scrambled around in my mind, trying to figure out where to start. Brecken unfortunately was still in the dark about our arrangement, but today was technically the end of our contract, which meant I was free to tell her whatever I wanted.

Hesitance clung to my insides, making my tongue heavy. But if there was anybody I could trust, it was her.

"I need you to swear not to repeat a word of this," I said, and Brecken's eyebrows raised.

She glanced around as if somebody might be listening in on our conversation, though nobody was paying any attention to us or was close enough to overhear. Still, she leaned over the little table we sat at, drawing closer.

“I swear,” she said. “What’s up? Oh my gosh, he didn’t try to induct you into some weird rich people cult, did he? Blink twice if you need help.”

I laughed, the intensity of her words matched by her playfulness was just enough to shake loose some of the heaviness that I’d been carrying around all day.

“No,” I said reeling in my laughter. I took a deep breath and laid out the story for her in the most basic and quick way I could fill her in. Brecken listened with rapt attention, not interrupting or even making faces that would give me pause. And when I came to the end of it, she had practically finished her coffee and was shaking her head.

“You have over a million dollars?” she asked.

“Not yet,” I said.

“But you will? And you took this role...all to ensure I could stay here?” She glanced around the campus, baffled. “Aspen, you didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to,” I cut her off. “And even though I may have questioned it in the beginning, you know me. I wouldn’t have stuck around if Crossland had given me any bad vibes. But he never did. He’s amazing...”

“And today’s the day?” she asked, her tone drenched in sympathy.

I nodded, my heart returning to its heavier sensation in my chest.

“And you haven’t told him?” she asked.

I furrowed my brow. “He’s fully aware that today is the end of our contract. He’s a brilliant businessman, and there’s no way he’d forget—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” she cut me off.

“Oh,” I said. “No, I haven’t told him that I don’t want things to end. I’m not exactly sure how to bring up the subject.”

Brecken chuckled softly, flashing me an almost pitiful look. "I'm talking about the fact that you're totally in love with him," she said without a hint of hesitation.

A jolt went through me at hearing the secret I'd kept spoken out loud.

I dropped my head in my hands and looked at my sister through my fingers. "Is it that obvious?"

Brecken reached across the little table, drawing one of my hands away from my face and gently squeezing it in her own. "Only to me," she said encouragingly. "You're my sister, I can read you better than anybody. When did this happen?"

I blew out of breath and cast my mind back over the last three months I'd been with Crossland. When had I fallen for him?

"I'm not sure of the exact moment," I said. "It's like little instances over the last three months when he's given me pieces of himself that nobody else has ever seen before. It's the times where we're laughing all day, just enjoying each other's company instead of upholding some rules we laid out in the beginning. He's everything I never knew I wanted. Funny and smart and just cocky enough to pull off every smirk, every bold claim. And he cares," I said, my eyes glittering. "He cares about those around him. He's a genuinely good man."

"Then tell him," she said. "Why wouldn't you just tell him? He obviously cares about you too or he wouldn't be in this situation."

"I'm afraid," I admitted, even as pathetic as it sounded. "What if I tell him, and he says that everything that's happened the last three months has just been part of the contract. It's just been some role he's immersed himself in, a fun little challenge in order to win a bet against one of his best friends?"

"Do you really think he'll say that?" Brecken tilted her head.

I shook my head. "No, I don't think so. He's not cruel. He's never once been cruel to me. It's just a fear I have. The

more realistic fear of mine is that when I meet him for dinner tonight, he'll either thank me for my service, saying that he isn't the monogamist type and he doesn't want things to continue unless it's in a super casual way, or..." I swallowed hard, the real and true crux of my fear bubbling to the surface.

"Or?" Brecken urged me to continue.

"Or," I continued. "Tonight at dinner he'll present me with another contract. An extension of our time together with rules laid out for another ruse, complete with more money and more bonuses as long as I continue to uphold my role as an employee in his life."

"Speaking from somebody who has been studying family law, I can attest that contractual relationships, while unconventional, can be beneficial for both parties. And especially protect the assets each one has."

"I don't have any assets," I said.

"Clearly you do, or he wouldn't have entered into a contract with you in the first place."

"I don't want another contract," I said. "I just want him. I want him so badly that I'm afraid if he *did* offer an extension to the contract, I would take it despite knowing it's not what I genuinely want. And that scares me most of all. What I'm willing to do in order to keep him in my life."

Brecken nodded, understanding shaping her features. "Then you have to tell him. There's no other way around it."

"That simple, huh? Just lay my heart on the table and hope he doesn't rip it to shreds? You know I'm not good at that."

"I know," she said. "But he isn't our parents. He isn't the exes you've had. He's nothing like any of those people who have taken your compassion for granted and used it against you. If he was, you wouldn't have lasted this long. You wouldn't be sitting here agonizing over this dinner tonight. You wouldn't have introduced him to me."

She wasn't wrong. I never introduced her to any of my other exes, some part of me never fully trusting them enough with something as precious as my little sister. But I had

introduced her to Crossland, which had to count for something.

Some buried instinct inside of me that told me it would be okay. That it wouldn't end badly. But even knowing that, even feeling that in the very marrow of my bones, I couldn't imagine putting myself out there completely for him to crush.

“What if he feels the same way?” she asked. “What if he's with one of his friends right now, having the same exact conversation we're having? What if he's worried that you're only in it for the money? What if he's worried that tonight at dinner you're going to ask for more money in exchange for more time?”

“I would never,” I quickly said. “Honestly, I'm already feeling awkward enough as it is about the money situation at the end of all this. If I didn't need it so badly, I would tell him to keep it.”

“I know,” she said. “But you signed a contract, Aspen. You fulfilled your obligation and now that paycheck is due. But the next decisions are up to you both. You just have to talk to him; it shouldn't be this difficult.”

I sighed, laughing a little darkly at myself. “You're right,” I said. “It really shouldn't be this complicated. But it's me and it's my history and it's all the instincts screaming at me to protect my heart at all costs. Instincts that failed me the minute Crossland and I blurred the lines between fake relationship and casually intimate friends.”

“I get that,” she said. “Probably better than anybody. I know that you've been betrayed one too many times by people you were supposed to trust. But honestly, wouldn't it be better to know now? If he is going to do that to you?”

“I guess you're right,” I said. “Doesn't make me any less terrified.”

Brecken squeezed my hand again. “You're the strongest person I've ever met,” she said. “The last thing I want is for you to get hurt, but then if anybody can survive it, it's you.”

And then in the end, it would be much better to know than to continue living in a perpetual state of unknown.”

“When did you get so insightful?” I said, swiping at the two tears that had escaped.

Brecken laughed, shrugging. “I learned by watching you.”

My heart expanded in my chest, and I got out of my seat, rounding the table so I could hug her. My baby sister was no longer a little girl I had to take care of. Although I would always take care of her, she was her own person, her own woman, crafting her own future that was genuinely so damn beautiful. I didn’t know how I’d gotten so lucky to get a sister like her.

“I love you,” I said, finally releasing her from my near suffocating hug.

“I love you too,” she said. “See, that wasn’t that hard, was it? Now just go tell him.”

I knew she was right. I knew honesty was going to be the best way to move forward, one way or another.

I just had to hope that when the time came, I had the courage and the voice to do it.

* * *

Turns out that I needed longer than a two-hour dinner, which had been incredibly delicious at some secluded little restaurant downtown, and more than the car ride home in order to find my voice.

And I wasn’t the only one. Crossland had spoken about everything *but* our contract. He’d talked about the upcoming poker game, and the antics of Ethan’s relatively new dog. He talked about his restlessness and even brought up those small-town dreams we joked about in his kitchen the other day. Not once had he even tiptoed toward the conversation he had to know that we were due to have.

There was no way he didn’t know that today was the last day of our contract.

“Do you want to order in dessert?” Crossland asked as he slipped off his suit jacket and laid it over the armchair in his bedroom.

I was doing the same after-dinner routine, slipping out of the cocktail dress I’d been wearing, and the incredibly beautiful strappy heels as well, reaching for my pajamas like this was any other night. Like this wasn’t the last night that I’d be spending with him according to the piece of paper we signed at the beginning of this whole thing.

I settled into my pajamas, turning to face him, my nerves on edge. “I don’t think I could eat another thing,” I said, willing the adrenaline in my body to calm.

Ask him, ask him, ask him, the voice inside my head was begging me to put us out of our misery. But coward that I was, I was desperate for *him* to bring it up. I felt like if he would just open that door, I’d be able to walk through it with a little bit more strength, but for some reason I couldn’t bring myself to be the one to open it.

“Okay,” he said, reaching for me from where he’d settled on the edge of the bed, a pair of dark blue silk pajamas the only thing covering him.

I went to him without hesitation.

He tugged me between his thighs, the two of us eye level even though he was sitting and I was standing. My fingers fluttered to his bare shoulders, greedy as I savored each touch in case it was my last chance to do so.

His lips found mine in a lazy sort of connection, one that screamed we had all the time in the world to do exactly this. And I swear I almost whimpered at the familiarity in it.

Crossland pulled back, that effortless smile on his face. “Is there anything in particular you’d like to bring tomorrow?”

I furrowed my brow, tilting my head.

“I mean, you haven’t packed, so I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to pack for you or if you wanted me to bring in the team so you’d have something special to wear,” he continued,

shrugging. “I don’t care what you wear,” he added. “I was just wondering what you wanted?”

When I still stared at him blankly, he laughed softly, his hands gently squeezing my hips.

“You didn’t forget, did you? Tomorrow, upstate New York? You, me, Bristol, and her husband, the level one trauma center dedication?”

“That’s tomorrow,” I said, my mind churning around his insistence. “As in November eleventh,” I said, stating the date out loud thinking it might jog his memory that November tenth was the end of our contract. November eleventh would mean that there was no contractual obligation for us to continue seeing each other.

One of his hands slid up my body to cut my cheek. “Yeah,” he said. “November eleventh. You didn’t make plans, did you?” Those Arctic blue eyes of his almost looked worried, so I quickly shook my head.

“Of course not,” I said, leaning into his embrace. “I just...”

God, just say it. Just bring it up.

But it was so hard. It was just so damn hard to bring up something as drastic as that when he was holding me so intimately, that hope in his eyes that I would be by his side tomorrow for something that was so incredibly important to him.

Maybe I didn’t need to bring it up right now.

Maybe with how important this dedication was to him, he’d forgotten about the deadline.

Maybe bringing it up would only cause him stress that he didn’t need, especially when this was going to be honoring his parents.

The more I thought about it, the more relaxed I felt.

I could ask him about it after the dedication. I could do that for him.

“I just didn’t realize what day it was,” I said instead of laying my heart out and forcing a choice on him that he probably wasn’t in an emotional state to make. “What would you like me to wear?” I asked, shifting easily into the role I’d played the last three months. The role I was quite certain I could play every day for the rest of my life.

Crossland’s smile was brilliant. “Whatever you feel most comfortable in. There will be media there, but I don’t care if you wear yoga pants and a sweatshirt. It just means everything that you’ll be there for me.”

My heart fluttered in my chest, and I smiled at him before kissing him softly. “Of course,” I said. “Of course, I’ll be there for you.”

Because that, at the heart of it, was the truth. I would be there for him. Whenever he needed me. Because Brecken was right, I loved him. And maybe I didn’t know where he stood right now, but maybe I didn’t need to. And just the mere fact that he wanted me there gave me hope that I was overthinking the situation in the biggest way.

Crossland returned my kiss, the sweet innocence in it turning carnal as his hands roamed over my body in a way that sent sparks shooting across my skin

I splayed my hand on his chest, gently pushing him until he laid on his back on the bed. I climbed atop him, barely breaking our kiss as we shifted on the bed, a tangle of lips and tongues and need.

Rocking against him, I let go of every doubt, every question spinning in my mind, losing myself to the visceral sensation of being touched by him.

I took off my top, then shed my pajama bottoms, him doing the same until there was nothing between us, our mouths crashing together once we were free of the clothes.

I kissed him with everything I had, just in case it would be the last time.

I showed him with my hands, my lips, my body how badly I’d fallen for him.

I rolled my hips, shivering as his hard length slid through my wetness, teasing us both.

His hands roamed over my body, cupping my breasts as I ground against him, not taking him in and instead delighting in stretching out the moment.

“Aspen,” he groaned. “Fuck, kitten.”

I smiled down at him, feeling drunk from the way he unraveled beneath me. He made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. Made me feel like I was the only one capable of making him shudder like that, groan like that. I fed off of that bliss, that power, reaching between us and guiding his cock inside me an inch before lifting up again.

Over and over.

I teased him, putting him in and taking him out. The tease making me liquid, making me ache so sharply it almost hurt. My thighs shook on either side of his hips, but I relished every muscle that clenched, every groan he let slip, every grip of my hips in an effort to get inside me.

Exquisite.

The torture was purely exquisite.

I leaned down, pressing my lips against his before licking into his mouth. He sighed between my lips, then playfully smacked my ass, making a shiver of delight ripple up my spine.

“Tease,” he groaned, nipping my bottom lip. “You love doing this to me, don’t you, kitten?”

“Yes,” I said, breathless as I rocked over him, his hard cock grinding against my throbbing clit. “I love...” I gasped as he thrust upward, the move making him slide in an inch before I moved to make him pull out.

“You’re drenched for me,” he said, squeezing my ass and moving me over him, back and forth until I trembled. “But you’re making me wait.”

I grinned, kissing him harder before pushing against his chest to rise up. “I never want this to end,” I said, allowing

myself that admission, even if he didn't understand the full context.

He bit his lip, thrusting upward again, and I moaned at the way he slid in so easily before I lifted up again. "It doesn't have to," he said. "You can ride my cock all night." He squeezed my hips again before drawing his hands up and tucking them behind his head, smirking up at me with pure male pride.

"Cocky prick," I breathed the words, digging my nails into his chest with just enough pressure that he hissed, pure lust churning in his eyes. "You want this?" I asked, dropping down on his cock so he was fully seated, rocking against him once before pulling all the way out again.

"Fuck," he groaned, but kept his hands behind his head. "Yes."

"How bad?" I asked, anticipation curling beneath my skin as my pleasure built. I was already riding that sharp edge, but I was content to keep drawing it out.

Crossland wet his lips. "I want to watch you ride me. Now, Aspen."

I shivered atop him, the dominance in his tone making me grin in delight. "Like this?"

I sank atop his cock, lifting up and down on it a few times before stopping.

"Goddamn," he growled. "Yes."

"Or like this?"

I took him all the way in, rolling my hips, the move allowing my aching clit to grind against him.

"Yes," he said, a muscle in his jaw flexing. "Like that. Any way. Just ride me, kitten."

I caught his gaze, holding it, the moment charged between us. Being his sole focus was like nothing else in the world and having him beg for me? Jesus, it took my breath away.

"Please," he said.

I lost the game, sinking atop him.

I moved on him, alternating between lifting up and down and rolling my hips to grind against him.

“Cross,” I gasped when he finally let his hands free, gripping my hips as I rode him. “You feel so good. I love...” I was breathless. “I love the way you make me feel.”

“I love making you come,” he said, his voice strained as I increased my pace, chasing that release I could feel building like a storm inside me.

Heat curled beneath my skin the harder I rocked against him, everything in me tightening in the sweetest way.

“Aspen,” he groaned. “Fuck.”

I watched the strain ripple over his face, relishing the way he was already there. I’d done that. I’d driven him to that point.

I loved it.

Loved him.

“Cross,” I gasped as my release sharpened. “I’m coming,” I breathed. “God, I’m coming.” I rode him harder, giving my throbbing clit all the attention it needed.

“Yes,” he said. “Fuck, *yes*,” he groaned as he came right along with me.

“Ohmigod,” I sighed, my entire body shivering as my orgasm rolled through me in waves of pleasure that made me absolutely liquid above him.

Little jolts of pleasure made me shake as I leaned down, kissing him as we caught our breath.

He smoothed my hair back, looking up at me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered to him.

And I knew in that moment that he’d thoroughly ruined me for any other person. Just like he told me he would.

Crossland

“Hey, man,” Ethan’s voice came through as I held my phone to my ear. “Sorry I can’t make it to the dedication tonight, but I wanted you to know that I handled my end of the bet. Congratulations, I really love Aspen.”

Guilt sliced through me, and I worked my fingers through my hair.

Aspen had gone with my driver to pick up Brecken. She’d been surprised when I told her that I’d invited Brecken to join us tonight, but when I reiterated how important tonight was for me, and that I wanted her sister included, she’d kissed me and rushed out the door.

“Yeah, I need to tell you something about that,” I said, taking a seat at my kitchen island. “Fuck, man, don’t tell me you’ve blown it with her. She’s literally perfect for you.”

“Not yet,” I said and was shocked as hell to be saying that.

I’d waited all last night to see if Aspen would bring up the contract end date, but she never did. And she didn’t hesitate when I asked her to be at my side today, either. It meant something to me that she was willing and excited to attend such a big event even though it had nothing to do with the initial terms we’d set up at the beginning of this.

“Then what is it?”

“Promise you won’t get mad?” I asked in my most playful voice.

“Jesus, just tell me.” Ethan’s tone took on a level of concern that I hadn’t heard in a while, so I cut to the chase.

“I may have, sort of, *hired* Aspen to be my girlfriend because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing my dad’s car.”

The line went silent, and my heart thumped hard against my chest.

“I know it was stupid,” I hurried to continue. “And I’m sorry, but I wanted to come clean with you. I don’t like lying to any of you, but I couldn’t lose my dad’s car, man. I know it was my dumbass fault for betting it, but you know me. I was going to do anything to keep that car.”

“I would never have kept the car,” Ethan said. “Would I have driven it around the block? Hell fucking yes. But I would have never taken that from you. Not for longer than an hour. But that’s beside the point,” he continued. “You’re telling me every time we saw you two together, it was an act? Because if so, she deserves a fucking Oscar.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “In the beginning? Yes. But now...”

“Holy fucking shit. You fell for her, didn’t you?”

“Yep,” I answered, no point in denying it. “I’m crazy about her. I don’t want anybody else. Can’t picture myself with anybody else and I have no idea where she stands.”

“So, ask her,” Ethan said, like it was the most obvious answer in the world. “What are you waiting for?”

“I don’t know how to do this,” I said. “And how the fuck am I supposed to approach the subject when our entire relationship was based off of a contract? I *paid* her to be my girlfriend, and now what? Should I renegotiate the terms—”

“She’s not a business deal,” Ethan cut me off. “Not anymore. Clearly. Hell, from the way you were acting around her, I doubt she was a deal one week after you struck it. It was clear to all of us that you were crazy about her, and now what? You’re just leaving it in limbo?”

“Apparently,” I said. “Living in the unknown is easier than venturing into uncharted territory. I’m terrified,” I admitted. “What if I tell her and she says she just wants more money in order to be with me?”

Ethan sighed and took a minute before he responded.

“I get it,” he finally said. “Neither one of us thought we were cut out for this kind of life. And despite your jokes and your past, I know there’s a lot in you that questions whether someone could want to be with you for the long haul. But I can tell you from experience that when it’s the right person, there’s no question. There’s no hesitation. Alex changed my life, and yeah it was hard as hell getting to where we are, but with her, everything feels easy. And from the way you were behaving around Aspen, it seems like that’s the case for you too. Am I wrong?”

“No,” I admitted.

“When was your contract up?”

“Yesterday.”

“And she’s going to the dedication with you tonight?”

“Yes,” I answered.

Ethan chuckled softly. “Well then, what are you worried about? If she’s going with you, that’s a sign that she’s in. The fact that she lasted this long and hasn’t strangled you is another. How many more signs do you need before you can work up the courage to tell her how you feel?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “How long did you need before you and Alex got your shit together?”

“Fair enough,” he said. “But no amount of tossing my own shit at me will help you with yours.”

“Fair enough,” I conceded.

“I get that feeling of being completely tossed out to sea and not understanding which direction you need to go. But if it was me, I’d ask. There’s literally nothing else you can do.”

“I know you’re right,” I said. “I plan to after the dedication tonight. Just the thought of her asking for a check and never wanting to see me again makes me feel like shit.”

“Aspen doesn’t seem like that kind of person,” he said. “But if she is, I’ll get on a plane. You’ve always been there for me. I won’t hesitate to be there for you.”

“Thanks,” I said. “And you’re really not pissed about the bet?”

“Nah, man. Like I said, I was never going to take that car from you. But I’m glad you’ve learned where your line is. What you aren’t willing to lose. Does Aspen now fall into that category?”

“I think she does,” I said.

“Make sure you know,” he said. “No *thinking* about it. Before you put yourself out there like that, you better *know* she’s what you want. I think all of us are fond of that girl, and if you break her heart, we may just have to kick you out of our little club.”

I laughed, and he joined in, the light jab exactly what I needed to shake myself out of my thoughts.

“Thanks,” I said. “Aspen just pulled in, so I’ve got to go.”

“Let me know how it goes,” Ethan said before we both hung up seconds before my security cameras showed Aspen and Breckon heading up to my apartment.

The pep talk from my friend gave me the confidence I needed, so I shoved the thoughts of where Aspen and I stood to the back of my mind, and concentrated on what really needed my attention right now. And that was the dedication.

After that?

Well, after that, I’d know.

* * *

“Bristol, I said, tugging my sister into a side hug as we made our way inside the hospital. The media was a frenzy, cameras

flashing as I reached behind me and grabbed Aspen's hand, Brecken trailing behind her. "You look beautiful."

"You look pretty good yourself, brother," Bristol said, her massive husband acting almost like a bodyguard as we made our way inside, him at the helm. It was a lucky thing that he didn't have a hockey game tonight. I knew Bristol wanted him there, and luckily the schedule worked in our favor.

Certain media outlets that had gotten special permission from us followed us inside, documenting everything from the head of the hospital greeting us and guiding us to the newly constructed level one trauma center, to the nurses and doctors who would be taking the first shift there giving their thanks for the new space.

Having Aspen's hand in mind meant everything to me. Especially on a night where my parents' death felt so close.

How would their lives have gone if there'd been this kind of resource when they'd gotten into their accident? Who would Bristol and I be now if they had survived?

"I love that piece on you," Bristol whispered to Aspen.

Aspen smiled at her, running her hands lovingly over the glittering black dress that my sister had made just for her for this occasion. It'd been a welcome surprise when it showed up at my apartment this morning, and Aspen practically squealed at the sight.

"Thank you," she said. "It's remarkable. And I'm just glad to be here to support you both."

Bristol hugged Aspen, then flashed me a knowing look that screamed in her sisterly silent way *you better hang on to this one*.

I kissed Aspen on the forehead before leaving her side while Bristol and I were beckoned by the head of the hospital. A beautiful gold ribbon had been ceremoniously hung up over the main entranceway to this wing, a symbol of what this place stood for.

My throat tightened slightly, something I wasn't particularly used to when it came to public speaking. I never

had a problem before, but tonight was different. Tonight was closer to my heart than any business deal I'd ever done before.

This was more important.

This would save lives. Save sons and daughters from a lifetime of grief.

The crowd before me hushed as the head of the hospital put a pair of scissors in my hand.

"I want to thank you all for coming tonight," I finally managed to say, doing my best to ignore the cameras that were recording my every word. "Some of you know mine and my sister's history. You know we lost our parents to a fatal accident that might have been prevented had there been a trauma center like this nearby. It's been my sister's and my dream to ensure that hospitals and smaller cities have access to the resources they need to save lives. And I'm honored that all of you are here in order to witness that dream come true," I said, clearing my throat when it cracked. "And we can only hope that this center will be the place that saves many lives to come." I looked down at Bristol, feeling as if we'd come to a pinnacle in both of our lives. Cutting this ribbon would be a healing moment in grieving our parents.

We'd always miss them, but there was something monumental about achieving this goal of ours, and when I reached out to the ribbon, I made sure that Bristol helped me cut it. The fabric fell apart, and the crowd erupted into applause. I wasn't sure how my heart could feel so heavy and so light at the same time.

Bristol and I hugged before we welcomed everybody into the new center, doctors and nurses walking inside.

And when I released Bristol, despite all the reporters asking for more questions and more details, there was only one person I wanted to see, to talk to, and that was Aspen. I made my way to her through the crowd, effortlessly catching her when she wrapped her arms eagerly around my neck.

"I'm so proud of you," she whispered into my ear.

I couldn't speak. I just leaned my cheek against hers, closing my eyes as I inhaled deeply.

Having her here tonight, having her support, and holding her against me truly felt like I was holding my heart in my arms. She'd become a safe space for me, this non-judgmental and fully accepting space. She never asked me to change.

She may have started off as a business deal, but she'd quickly become something so much more.

"All right, everyone, we need to clear this space, but we're having a celebration on the lower level in the conference room. We hope all of you can attend," the head of the hospital announced.

I interlocked hands with Aspen and smiled down at her as I followed Bristol toward the elevators, waiting our turn to attend the celebration that would commemorate this great achievement of ours.

By the time we made it down to the party, I was surprised at how packed the room was. Benefactors, press, some of Bristol's friends, and obviously me, Aspen, and Brecken made up only a small portion of the crowded room of attendees.

And it wasn't until I'd mingled with a few of the people who approached me that I finally found my voice.

"I don't know what I would do if you weren't here," I whispered into Aspen's ear, sliding my hand along her lower back.

"You're doing amazing," she said, looking up at me. "Once this is all over, I'll be here. I know how hard this must be for you, so I'll be there when you need to let the mask down."

"Aspen," I breathed her name, leaning closer to her, my heart racing as the words I needed to say rose in my throat. "I—"

"There's my daughter," a crass masculine voice cut over my words, seconds before a man inserted himself between us.

Aspen's eyes flared wide, fear and shock swirling together as she stepped away from him. A woman quickly followed, stepping up to his right side and wearing a saccharine grin as she looked at Aspen.

"Why do you look so surprised, sweetheart?" the woman asked. She reached toward Aspen, like she meant to push some of her hair back, but Aspen flinched away from the touch.

It took me seconds to put two and two together. The final piece of the puzzle clicking together the second Brecken gasped as she returned from the drink table. Aspen immediately put herself in front of her little sister.

I quickly stepped to Aspen's side instead of doing what my instincts were screaming at me to do, which was shield her entirely.

"You are not welcome here," Aspen said, but her voice was a version of soft and shaky that I'd never heard before.

"Why wouldn't we be welcome here?" her father asked. He brought a champagne flute to his lips and downed the contents in one gulp. From the way he was slurring his words, he'd already had more than his fair share. Her mother too.

"It's an open party," her mother said. "And to our surprise, when we saw the coverage on the event, who else would be on the arm of this man, but *our* daughter?" She leaned closer to Aspen, and I could smell the alcohol on her breath. "Such a smart girl to put your hooks into someone like him. I always said you were." Her eyes trailed to Aspen's stomach. "Are you pregnant?" she asked, her eyes shining with hope that had nothing to do with the joys of potentially being a grandparent.

Jesus, these people.

"Leave," Aspen said.

"No," her father said loudly enough to draw the attention of the people closest to us. He snatched another champagne flute from a tray a server was carrying, nearly causing the young man to drop the rest of the drinks.

“If there’s something we need to discuss,” I finally spoke up. “I would be happy to speak to both of you outside.”

Aspen’s father’s eyes met mine, hazy with drink. “Oh, we do have things to discuss,” he said. “But right now, I’m trying to talk to my daughter.”

“You have *nothing* to discuss with him,” Aspen snapped. “You shouldn’t even be here. I’ve told you every time you’ve ever come around, we want nothing to do with you.”

“You ungrateful little bitch,” her mother whispered. “Is that how you treat your family?”

“Careful,” I warned.

“Why?” Her father asked. “You afraid of us making a scene in your fancy ass party? That’s the least of what we’ll do.”

“Cross,” Aspen said, drawing my attention down to her. “We should call security.”

I nodded, making eye contact with the security details that had blended into the crowd across the room. One nod and they started making their way over.

“Security may throw us out,” her father said. “But we’ll keep coming back. You know that, Aspen. And you *owe* it to us. We raised you. If you want us to leave you alone, your new boyfriend is going to have to pay.”

“Jesus Christ,” Aspen muttered under her breath, her hand trembling in mine.

Brecken was in tears behind her, but kept her spine straight as she stood behind her sister.

“That’s right,” her father continued. “You finally did *one* smart thing in your pathetic, idiotic life. You hooked yourself a good one here. We looked him up. And if you don’t want us knocking on your door every day, all you have to do is write a check.”

“I’m not paying you anything,” I said calmly.

I worried about this situation happening since the moment Aspen told me about her parents. Honestly, I was surprised it'd taken them this long to find us.

“You can lay your empty threats on us all you'd like,” I continued. “But you will not receive one dime from me.”

Her father's face screwed up like he tasted something sour. “She's not worth it to you?” he asked, sneering at her. “You may have dressed her up to look like one of your dumb debutants, but under underneath all that fancy fabric she's still what she's always been, a selfish little whore—”

I swung.

Aspen

The sound of Crossland's fist connecting with my father's jaw was so audible every single person in the room looked our way. Not only were all eyes on us, but so were the cameras who'd been documenting the experience.

Adrenaline racked my body as I leaped between anger, shame, and the protective instincts swirling inside me.

My father grinned, that same sadistic smile that I'd grown up with.

He'd just gotten exactly what he wanted, and he knew it, even as blood dribbled out of the corner of his mouth. Even as the security detail hauled him off the floor.

"I'm going to press charges, you stupid son of a bitch," my father spit out the words, my mother fawning over him as if he was the most important thing in the world. Like we didn't all know that she'd sell him out for a few zeros if anyone cared to make the offer.

Brecken sniffled behind me, and I whirled around, torn between begging for Crossland's forgiveness and the need to take care of my baby sister.

Crossland shook out his hand, following the security as they dragged my parents out of the room.

I focused on Brecken, smoothing my hands over her cheeks, her tears getting caught on my fingertips. She was trembling, and her eyes were distant like she wasn't here at all but reliving some horrible experience that I hadn't been able to protect her from years ago.

“You’re safe,” I said, drawing her a little closer. “Brecken, I need you to breathe. I need you to know that they can’t touch you. I’ve got you. I’m going to get you out of here.”

She blinked a few times, the light coming back to her eyes as her bottom lip shook. She sucked in a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

“We’re safe,” she said, repeating the words a few more times as she did her best to get ahead of the panic attack I could see lingering on the edge of her features.

She hadn’t had one in a couple years, but the last one had sent us to the emergency room. I didn’t want that for her, didn’t want that to happen now, and I fucking hated my parents for putting her through this.

Concern rippled over her features as she spotted Crossland following our parents outside. “You have to go after him,” she said, her voice carrying every ounce the strength she possessed as she held herself together.

“I’m not going to leave you like this,” I said, even though every instinct in my body was roaring at me to go after Crossland.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I promise. I’m doing my breathing. We can break down about this later. You have to go see what’s happening out there.”

I nodded at her assurance, wrapping her in a tight hug before I hurried through the crowd who was already looking at me with judgment in their eyes.

I couldn’t really blame them. It was more than obvious who those people belonged to, what brought those people here, and it sure as hell wasn’t Crossland. That’s not the company he ever kept, and I could see it on so many of their faces. My presence here ruined what this night was supposed to be about.

Guilt ate at me with every step I took, but I finally managed to make it out of the room, and out of the hospital where I stopped dead in my tracks, watching as Crossland scribbled on his checkbook before tearing out the paper and shoving it into my father’s hands.

“This is just enough,” my father said, pocketing the check. “I won’t press charges tonight, but you better believe this isn’t the last you’ve seen of us.”

My entire body went cold, dread slicing through my veins.

Security shoved my parents unceremoniously into the back of a cab that I was sure Crossland paid for, and even as they drove away, even as I felt the distance between us, I couldn’t move.

Their presence, their words, the scene they’d caused, it reduced me to nothing but that weak little girl who couldn’t escape them all those years ago. That same girl who fought tooth and nail to get her sister out of the same situation.

I was no longer the confident twenty-nine-year-old who had proudly gotten my sister into college, I was just the daughter of trashy people who’d just ruined what was supposed to be a monumental night for the love of my life.

After getting the nod from Crossland, the security detail went back into the building, but kept him in their sights.

Crossland paced the length of the pavement, shaking out his hand.

“Let me get you some ice for that,” I finally said, finding my voice. If I could count on anything, it was the protective instinct I had for somebody I loved, and despite feeling awful for being the cause of this, my need to make sure his pain was eased outweighed my shame.

“I don’t need ice,” Crossland snapped, using a tone he never used with me before.

It made my entire body lock up and tears prick the backs of my eyes.

“I’m sorry about the money—”

“I don’t care about the money,” he cut me off, continuing with his pacing even though I came closer to him. “I care about the fact that tonight’s publicity was supposed to be for this hospital and my parents, and it’s been replaced with me

being unable to control my temper and causing a scene with those lowlifes.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, every word he vented to me making me curl in on myself.

He stopped pacing, looking up at the night sky as he shook his head. “And Bristol,” he said. “She’s here. This is going to tarnish her image too. *Goddamn* it.”

He had every right to be angry. Every right to be saying the things he was, but it didn’t stop the pain that radiated through my chest with every word.

None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for me. His night wouldn’t have been ruined if my parents hadn’t found us, and I hated being the cause for so much frustration, so much embarrassment.

I thought I’d moved past that situation in my life. The one where I was worried about embarrassing the people I was with just because of where I came from.

I’d been wrong.

I’d been so fucking wrong.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and absolutely meant it.

My heart was already breaking into pieces, instinct understanding the situation better than my mind did.

“None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for me,” I continued, letting the tears roll down my cheeks.

Crossland finally looked down at me, confusion fluttering in his eyes. “Aspen,” he said, almost apologetically. “None of this is about you.”

“Of course it is,” I said, trying my best to swallow the shame making me feel two feet tall. “Don’t you get that? Don’t you understand that if you were here with somebody like Brynn or Daisy or *any* of your other socialite friends that none of this would have happened? The night you’ve been building toward for years came crashing down because of *me*.”

Crossland stepped toward me, and I stepped away.

My parents would never stop. Especially now that he'd paid them off to keep himself out of jail tonight. They would never stop coming after him for as long as I stuck around.

And I loved him too much to do that to him.

"Aspen," he said, worry lining his eyes. "I should have asked you how you were. I should have checked in with you before going off on that tangent. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make it about me—"

"You didn't," I cut him off, feeling like I was ripping my heart to shreds. "It's me. It's always been *me* questioning how I managed to be lucky enough to be in your world, how I managed to fit into your extravagant lifestyle. Always me questioning if what I'm doing was okay, if it's up to standard. The thing is, I would never be asking those questions if I hadn't been put into those situations." I shrugged. "But it doesn't matter right? Our time is up anyway, isn't it?"

"Is that how you want to play it?" Crossland asked, looking equal parts shocked and hurt.

I glanced over at the glass door of the hospital, seeing Brecken waiting patiently for me. I swiped at the tears on my cheeks.

"If that's all you have to ask," I said, my entire body shaking. "Then it looks like it's already played out."

Crossland flinched at my words, and I hated that his pain radiated right alongside my own. And it took all of the strength I possessed to walk over to the door, grab Brecken, and leave.

Crossland

I threw in my chips, some muscle memory inside of me checking the cards I'd been dealt.

I couldn't believe I was sitting here, that Aspen wasn't in the spot she should be, resting in that open space near Daisy, Alex, and Brynn. The girls chatted quietly across the room, everything so incredibly familiar and yet so different at the same time.

It'd been two weeks since Aspen had left me at the hospital. Throwing the contract in my face in what was no doubt a defense mechanism after the scene her parents had caused.

I'd tried to talk to her several times since, but every time she insisted she needed space.

And while I respected that, it hurt like hell.

She even blocked the transfer of the money she was owed per our contract when I tried to send it. She texted, saying she didn't want it.

Everyone in the hand folded except for Doyle, and I nodded to myself, more than happy to battle against him. If there was anyone who deserved the anger boiling in my gut, it was this asshole.

Asher dealt the flop, giving me the nut straight. With the flush draw too. I had a strong as hell hand, but I wasn't about to show Doyle that, so I checked.

Doyle shook his head, throwing in a bet that I quickly matched.

Asher dealt the turn.

I checked again, wanting to give Doyle all the rope to hang himself.

“You know,” he said. “I’ve watched that clip of you knocking that guy out over a dozen times. It gets funnier every time. It’s all anyone is talking about.”

“You’re crossing a line, Doyle,” Ethan said in a warning tone.

Doyle laughed. “How am I crossing a line when I’m just stating facts?”

Weston parted his lips like he was about to get in on defending me, but I raised a hand to my friends. I knew what he was doing, and it was working.

“I’m already pissed off,” I said. “But you knew that already didn’t you, Doyle? You want to keep pushing me? That’s fine. Put your money where your mouth is.”

I didn’t give a shit anymore. Not after everything that had happened in the last two weeks. Not after realizing that I’d somehow found the love of my life and lost her in the span of an hour.

“If you’re so confident, why don’t *you* put your money where your mouth is?” Doyle threw that back at me, and I rolled my eyes. “Put the Calgary team on the line. Or are you still too chickenshit?”

“Are you trying to get thrown out of the game?” Asher asked Doyle.

He huffed at him. “You can’t throw me out. The only way to get me out of this game is if I lose my seat or I die. It’s all written up in that delightful little contract/NDA that you guys made me sign at the beginning of this. Deal with it. If McClaren can’t handle the bet, he should get out of this hand.”

“I can handle the bet just fine,” I said. “If you want Calgary on the line, put your own team up for grabs.” I figured that should be enough to get him to calm the fuck down. The

NHL Bangor team was one of the only legit establishments he had in his pocket.

“Fine,” Doyle said, scribbling something down on a blank chip. “Bangor may suck, but at least we have the number one draft pick. That should be more than enough to stand against your Calgary team, if you have the balls to call.”

“Don’t bet your team, Crossland,” Weston said, shaking his head.

“Yeah, it’s not worth it,” Ethan said.

“Doyle is just trying to rile you,” Asher added.

I looked at Gareth, who silently told me to take him to the cleaners if I had the goods. Which I did.

I grabbed one of my own blank chips and wrote the Calgary team on it. A tiny piece of me screamed that this was a stupid idea, and that I should have learned my lesson betting things that I wasn’t willing to lose.

But after everything?

I’d already lost the one thing I couldn’t live without, and I would have traded my father’s car if it would help me earn Aspen back.

I tossed in the chip, and Asher let out a heavy sigh as he dealt the last card on the river.

There was only one card that could beat me, and I highly doubted Doyle had it. I wrote down another bet for one of my favorite yachts.

Doyle instantly called, laughing as he declared he had a straight.

It was lower than mine.

I flipped over my higher straight, smirking at him.

Serenity grasped behind him as she read the cards, her eyes flickering to her father with just a little bit of fear as he slammed his fist down on the table.

“Son of a bitch,” Doyle snapped, glaring at me. He pushed away from the table. “You never bet first. How the fuck did you not bet on those cards? I could’ve had the ace-high straight.”

“You didn’t,” I said.

“Whatever,” he grumbled. “You’re doing me a favor. Bangor is the worst NHL team in the league, and everybody knows it. Good luck with that. I need a fucking drink.” He stormed out of the room, snapping at Serenity to follow him when he made it to the door and she hadn’t moved. His daughter quickly jumped out of her chair and hurried after him, the two of them disappearing.

Asher pushed the chips toward me, and while I was ecstatic to have won the hand, the one person I wanted to tell was Aspen, and no matter how many times I looked at that space by the girls where she *should* be, she wasn’t there.

“Jesus,” Weston said. “That was close.”

“And reckless,” Ethan said. “I thought you learned not to bet things you weren’t willing to lose?”

I shrugged. “I knew I had him.”

“And now you have two in NHL teams to deal with,” Asher said, shuffling the cards. “Want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I said. “I know how to handle an NHL team, even one as poorly trained as Bangor. Same shit, different day.”

Ethan whistled. “Now I know you’re lying. You love your Calgary team, and I know that you’re already calculating how to fix Bangor. But you’re brushing it off?”

Another shrug.

“You need to talk to her,” Wes finally said.

“I’ve tried. I can’t make her think differently of herself. I’ve told you all this. She blames herself for what happened, and maybe I handled the situation poorly, but she doesn’t want to hear from me.”

“Shit happens,” Ethan said. “I’ll be the first one to say that. We make mistakes. It doesn’t mean that you get an excuse to tap out, unless that’s what you’re looking for?”

I fastened him with a glare that screamed he knew better.

“Then tell her.”

“Tell her what?” I snapped. “Tell her that I never wanted her to question herself in my world? Tell her that I’m having a hard time breathing when she’s not around? Tell her that I don’t care who her parents are or how many times they try to crash our events, I just want her with me? Every time I reach out, she tells me to give her space. And that tells me everything I need to know. She doesn’t feel the same way about me as I do her. If she did, she wouldn’t have bailed.”

“Did it ever occur to you that she bailed because she didn’t want her family to continue to bring you down?” Daisy asked, inserting herself into the conversation from where she sat with the other girls behind us.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said.

“Is it?” Daisy challenged. “What would you do if you felt like you were putting her in positions to be publicly embarrassed or at the very least, situations that create emotional danger? Would you continue to be around her? Would you continue to let your environment hurt her?”

“I…” I couldn’t answer that question, not honestly. Because I would do anything to keep her from hurting.

Was that what she was doing?

Did she think that by keeping her distance from me, her parents would leave me alone?

Did she honestly think that I would care?

I replayed the after aftermath of the scene at the hospital, my memory serving me with a crystal-clear vent-session on my end. One that could easily be interpreted the wrong way. One that could make the scene look like it affected me more than it should have.

Damn.

“Either way,” Asher said when I’d been quiet too long. “You won’t know until you have an honest conversation with her. She needs to know the stakes.”

“And what if I tell her? What if I tell her everything I’ve told you guys, and she laughs in my face?”

“Then she laughs in your face,” Gareth said. “And you move on.”

I studied my friend, noting the way he kept glancing over his shoulder as if he expected Serenity to come back any moment. It looked like not knowing if she was okay was driving him nuts.

“So, you’re saying that it’s worth it? The possibility of getting rejected just to know?”

“Yes,” Asher, Weston, and Ethan said at the same time.

“I’m pretty sure you said something similar to me,” Ethan added. “When I was floundering.”

“I’m not floundering. I’m *drowning*,” I admitted.

“Then fight,” Asher said. “If you tell her everything, and she tells you that she needs space, then you respect it. But at least then you’ll know that you did everything you could.”

I nodded, the advice of my friends sinking in. Even if she *did* reject me, I guess a final break would be better than the constant agonizing.

“I’m done with cards,” I said, shoving away from the table.

“I think we’re all done,” Asher said.

“Want to go get a drink?” Ethan asked.

There was a collective nod.

As much as I wanted to call Aspen and beg for some time to talk, it was already late in the evening, and the last thing I wanted her to think was that I was hoping for some late-night action.

I’d call her tomorrow, and hope that she’d give me the time I needed to lay my heart on the line.

Aspen

For the longest time I'd prided myself on being a survivor. Therapy had helped me learn that my survival instincts ran deep, and that there was nothing I couldn't overcome. But somehow, these last two weeks had felt like hell. I'd never experienced heartbreak like this before, never experienced this kind of longing before, and I had been *unable* to snap myself out of the wallowing cycle.

Crossland had not only tried to reach out, but he'd tried to *pay* me for the contract. And while I still needed the money, I didn't want it. Not from him. Because our time together didn't really feel like a business transaction. It felt more like the best time I'd ever had in my life.

A time I'd never been happier.

I'd told him I needed space, and that was absolutely true.

But now that I'd taken that time, I felt like I might have blown it.

He hadn't reached out in days, and I'd stayed away from the news and social media outlets, terrified that I'd see him with somebody else. Even with a city as big as New York, I was scared of running into him while he was dating somebody new.

Sure, it had only been two weeks, but the Crossland *before* me? He barely waited two days before moving on to the next partner. And while I knew he was a good man, I couldn't blame him if he *did* move on.

I was a complicated person still dealing with trauma I thought I'd long since healed from. I'd taken a really shitty night and made it worse when I left with Brecken that day. I thought it would be under the guise of protecting him, but really, I'd been protecting myself.

Protecting myself from the shame and embarrassment that my parents had once again brought on me. Protecting myself from having to feel unworthy. Even though Crossland never made me feel that way. Not once.

It was all on me.

And to make matters worse, Brecken had called me earlier today to tell me that the account balance on her school account had been cleared. Not only for this year but for the next five.

Crossland may have conceded to me rejecting his transfer into my bank account, but he'd taken matters into his own hands and paid off the rest of Brecken's tuition.

And how the hell was I supposed to thank him for that? Especially after the complete ass I'd made of myself that night?

"Babe," Jesse said, snapping his fingers in front of my face, drawing me to the present.

The very real present where we were sitting at a little table near the bar in some hot nightclub I couldn't remember the name of.

The one that Jesse, Sophia, and Maple had dragged me to all in the name of shaking up my wallowing routine.

"Do you want another drink?" he asked, sympathy shaping his features as he looked at me across the table.

I nodded. "Can you get me another soda water and lime, please?"

"Of course," he said, winking at me before he headed to the bar.

Sophia and Maple were somewhere on the dance floor, having a great time, no doubt. They'd tried their best to get me to dance, but I just wasn't in the mood. I hadn't been in the

mood to drink either, hence the soda water. The last thing I needed was to use alcohol as a crutch to numb my emotions.

My parents had at least taught me that much.

I did my best to take deep breaths, and center myself in the present, not wanting to make my friends feel like their kind gesture was all for nothing.

It was hard as hell though, watching all these people have a great time, seeing everything continue on even though it felt like my world had completely stopped.

I scanned the crowded spaces, mostly looking for Sophia and Maple to give them some kind of smile or thumbs up, but my eyes snagged on a familiar face and a bolt of lightning shot through me.

Crossland was sitting in the VIP section all the way across the room with Gareth, Ethan, Asher, and Weston. His normally neatly trimmed goatee was looking scruffier than normal, but he was breathtaking as he sat there, sipping on some amber liquid while listening to whatever Ethan was saying.

He hadn't spotted me, and I quickly tore my eyes away, wondering if I should make a break for the exit? What were the odds he was at the same club I was? Wasn't the city big enough where we wouldn't run into each other?

I got up from the table, heading toward the bar to tell Jesse that we needed a bolt. The last thing I needed was Crossland thinking that I was stalking him.

Before I could make it to Jesse, a man stepped directly in my way, stopping me. I backed up a step, saying *excuse me* as if I was the one who had just gotten in the way.

The stranger stepped into my space again, smiling down at me. "Hey, not so fast," the guy said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"I'm good," I said, trying to be as friendly as possible. The guy was clearly drunk, and while it was flattering that he'd sought me out, I was not even remotely interested. "Thank you anyway," I added for good measure, not wanting to insult him.

I tried to move around him again, but he blocked me again.

That's when I decided I didn't need to be nice anymore.

"Just one drink," he said. "I've been watching you. You've been sitting alone for more than an hour. I can keep you company."

"I said *no*," I said, wondering why he couldn't have taken my polite dismissal and moved on to somebody else. I was all about everybody finding their person, but goddamn, I'd said no twice.

I glanced around him, hoping to spot Jesse and give him our signal, but instead found a very angry-looking Crossland heading my way.

Crossland

I'd spotted Aspen across the crowded club. Some primal instinct had me standing up and leaving my group of friends despite Ethan being mid-sentence.

I cut through the crowd of people, my eyes only on her and the asshole who kept getting in her way every time she tried to move around him.

"There you are," I said the minute I reached her.

Said it like I'd been looking for her all night.

All my life really.

I let my eyes rake over her, her beauty damn near sending me to my knees, but my attention snagged on the purple under her eyes, like she hadn't been sleeping well.

I turned to the man who was still standing in her way. "Can I help you with something?"

The guy looked from me to Aspen and back again, then quickly shook his head and turned on his heels, disappearing into the crowd. Clearly seeing the claim I silently laid on Aspen, even though I didn't really have one to lay.

"Cross?" she asked, sounding partially surprised and partially relieved.

I swallowed hard. "I'll take a yes and five minutes," I said, offering her my hand.

She immediately took it, and relief barreled down my spine at the move.

She glanced behind her, and I followed her line of sight until she made connection with Jesse. They had a silent conversation, one where she assured him she was okay with me, and then nodded at me.

I tugged her through the crowd, each step making my heart ratchet up another notch until I pulled her into my office and locked the door behind us.

“So you own this club too?”

“It seems you love to pop up at the clubs I own,” I said, smirking at her. The energy between us was palpable, and we were easily falling into the same roles we’d played for the last three months.

“I have good taste,” she said.

I didn’t let go of her hand, and she didn’t try to tug it away.

She seemed as drawn to me as I was to her, her body practically flush with mine as I moved to the leather couch pushed up against the wall, the floor-to-ceiling glass one-way, allowing us to see the crowd below.

“Why haven’t you returned my calls?” I asked, unable to stop my hand from grazing down her bare arm.

She gasped at my touch, leaning into me like she just couldn’t help it.

“I didn’t know what to say,” she admitted, her eyes meeting mine as they danced between my mouth and back again.

I pulled her closer, relishing the way my lungs opened with her in my arms. “What were you saying to that guy before I came over?” I asked, our lips a breath away from each other.

“No,” she said. “I was telling him no.”

“And why would you do that, kitten?” I traced the line of her jaw with my fingertip.

“Because I’m not interested.”

A bit of pride rumbled through me, and I smirked down at her, at the way she was leaning against me, her hands splayed

on my chest.

“It looks like you’re interested in me,” I challenged.

“I never said I *wasn't* interested in you,” she said.

She shifted against me, and I almost groaned the contact.

“It seems like I’m not the only one,” she said.

“I think you missed me,” I said, blood throbbing hot through my veins.

“Of course, I missed you, Cross,” she said like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“But missing you doesn’t erase everything that happened.”

“I’m here,” I said. “Let’s talk.”

Her eyes flared wide. “Is that what you want to do right now?”

She shifted against me again, drawing me even closer, her lips are breath away from mine.

And I crumbled underneath the look she planted me with.

The one that was needy and hungry. The one that I’d seen so many times before. The one that we both shared, mirrored in our *need* for each other.

“Why don’t you tell me what you want, and I’ll make that happen,” I said.

Something churned in those eyes of hers, something deep and emotional and open. I half expected her to pull away from me and launch into all the reasons that we couldn’t work as a couple, but instead of pulling away, she got closer, crushing her mouth against mine.

I completely snapped, all instincts turning carnal as I took control of the kiss, reading her cues as my hands slid down her body. She needed our bodies to do the talking? Then I’d make sure there were no mixed signals.

I licked into her mouth, the kiss claiming and intense as I pushed her backward until she hit the desk. Her fingers were

frantic as she pushed off my jacket, then my dress shirt. I pulled off her top, our moves hurried as we shed our clothes.

“Aren’t you going to ask about the view, kitten?” I asked against her mouth.

“I don’t care,” she said, breathless as she sucked my bottom lip into her mouth.

I growled, laughing darkly. “It’s one-way glass,” I explained anyway, not wanting her to think I’d fuck her where the entire club could see. I bent slightly, gripping her hips and propping her up on the desk, spreading her thighs to step between them.

“Cross,” she moaned my name, and it sounded like fucking heaven to my ears. “I need you.”

“Yeah, you fucking do,” I said, doing my best not to crumble at those words. Her body absolutely needed me right now. Her heart? That was still to be decided.

I dragged my hard cock through her slick pussy, watching her shiver at the tease.

“Slow or hard?” I asked, wanting her to be in control.

“Hard,” she answered instantly, spreading her thighs wider, hooking her ankles around my back.

I squeezed her hips, dragging her to the edge of the desk, lining my cock up with her entrance, holding her there as I savored the taste of her kiss.

“Cross.” She wiggled her hips, needy as she tried to get me inside her.

“I missed you,” I groaned against her mouth. “I missed you so fucking much.”

She kissed me harder, whimpering as we punished each other with anticipation.

“I need you,” she said again. “Cross, I need you so badly.”

I flicked my tongue in her mouth, curling it against the roof the way I knew she liked while I slid home inside her.

She gasped, throwing her head back at the connection.

I pulled out and did it again.

And again.

I gripped her hips, holding onto her as I pounded into her, each stroke harder and faster than the next.

“God,” she moaned, her nails digging into my back. “Yes. Yes. Yes.” Her words matched the pace I fucked her with, and I pulled back enough to look down between us at where we crashed together.

“Fucking perfect,” I growled, watching as I speared my cock into her pussy over and over again. “You see that?” I groaned, watching her look between us. “See how good you take me? See what you do to me?” I slowed down, dragging out the pleasure building between us both before speeding up again.

“Cross,” she sighed my name. “I’m—”

I instantly pulled out, not wanting this moment to be over so soon, wanting to edge her, to make it so intense for her she’d never forget it.

Aspen whimpered as I moved back, tugging her off the desk before spinning her and bending her over it.

“So damn beautiful,” I said, smoothing my hand over her back as I lined myself up with her again.

I thrust into her from behind, reaching around her hip and dipping my hand between her thighs.

“Ohmigod,” she groaned as I rubbed her clit while pumping into her. “Cross, that feels so good.”

Primal pride swarmed my chest, and I pumped into her harder, faster, working her back up until she was breathless, until she gripped the desk and pushed back into me every time I sank into her.

My muscles clenched as she drenched my cock, her walls fluttering around me as her pleasure rippled along her body.

“Cross,” she moaned as she came, clenching around me so good I lost myself and came with her.

I draped myself over her back, breathing heavily as we crashed down.

But I so wasn't fucking done yet.

Gently, I pulled out, turning her around to face me. Her eyes were wide and lust-hazed, but hope shaped her features as I pulled her toward the couch.

“We're just getting started,” I said through ragged breaths.

Aspen

I awoke suddenly, the events of the night before crashing over me as I realized where I was.

Crossland's chest was my pillow, and the leather couch in his office in the club he owned worked as a bed.

I had no idea what time it was, and now that I wasn't lust-starved and needy, I *cringed*.

Seeing Crossland last night had flipped some internal switch inside me, reducing me to the baser instincts of need, wanting to use our bodies to work things out instead of our words.

But that's not how life worked, and even though I was laying against him now, I didn't know where we stood.

Had last night simply been triggered by a sense of territory claiming because some other guy hit on me? Had it been our last time together as some sort of closure? Breakup sex?

I didn't know.

And I chided myself for not even bothering to ask before I had fallen into him.

Sex had always been easy between us. Mind-blowing and electric, but easy.

Words were harder.

But I couldn't hide behind the struggle anymore.

I shifted against him hard enough to wake him up.

His eyes blinked open, and he stretched beneath me, an easy smile shaping his lips.

“What the hell are we doing?” I blurted out the words, unable to soften them.

Crossland blinked a few more times and then sat up, dragging me with him.

“Bangor, Maine,” he said.

I furrowed my brow. “What?”

“I hear it’s the best small town in America, and it also happens to be where I own my second NHL franchise.”

Shock radiated through me.

“I love you, Aspen,” he said. “If you hadn’t shown up last night, I would’ve been at your door this morning. These past two weeks have taught me how much I need you in my life. It’s been agony not waking up with you, not laughing and joking with you, not exploring the city with you, not being able to touch you anytime I want. And I know I handled that night poorly. I know I was venting and in my head, worried about how this would affect me and my sister’s image. I shouldn’t have reacted that way. I’ll work on it. I’ll—”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I cut him off. “I did. I got so scared. I closed off because I didn’t want my parents to keep using you like they did. Using *me* to get to you. The last thing I ever wanted was to drag you down or ruin a night that was so special to you. It wasn’t fair to you, but I shouldn’t have left like that. I should have stayed and talked to you—”

“We both should’ve done a lot of things,” Crossland said. “But now we know. We *have* to talk these things out. We can’t assume what each other is thinking. So, I need you to know that I don’t give a shit about your parents and their hopes to squeeze me for more money. I have people who can handle situations like that, but what I can’t have is you trying to distance yourself to protect me. *If* that’s what you’re trying to do.”

“I thought you’d be better off,” I admitted, tears stinging the backs of my eyes.

Crossland cupped my face, shaking his head. “The only way I’m better off is *with* you,” he said. “However that life looks, I don’t care, as long as you’re in it.”

I took a deep breath, shuddering slightly as he wiped the tears off my cheeks with his thumbs. “Bangor, Maine?”

He grinned. “I can buy a coffee shop,” he said. “If you want to be a barista. Or we can build that bookshop bar you’ve always wanted. Or if you want to do nothing but self-care for the next decade, I don’t care. I just want you with me. I want you to live with me, not because of any contract between us, but because you want to. And if you don’t, I’ll understand. I’ll find a way to make sure I’ll leave you alone—”

“Crossland, these last two weeks have been hell,” I admitted. “The last thing I expected was to fall in love with the billionaire who hired me to be his girlfriend, but I did. I fell in love with your playfulness, your heart, your ability to take care of those that you love. I don’t want to spend another second where I’m not yours.”

Crossland’s eyes guttered and he captured my mouth, kissing the breath from my lungs.

I pulled away, concern still lingering in my soul. “But what about my parents? Even if we move, they’ll figure it out. They’ll try—”

“You don’t need to worry about them anymore,” he said. “You don’t need to waste one more second of your energy worrying about them. It’s time to let someone help you for a change, and in this, I assure you, they will *not* bother you again.”

A deep sigh of relief slipped from my lips, and I leaned my forehead against his. “I’ve never lived away from Brecken.”

“If you’re not ready,” he said. “Then we’ll wait. We’ll wait until you are. Bangor isn’t going anywhere.”

“You’d do that for me?” I asked, my heart expanding in my chest, his words knitting together every break that had been there before.

“I would do anything for you.”

My smile hurt, it was so wide. "I love you," I said, and it was so freeing to finally say those words. "And I'm ready. I would love to move to Bangor with you."

"Really?" he asked, his eyes hopeful. "No contract required?" he teased.

I shook my head. "No contract required. I just want you."

Crossland kissed me again. "You have me."

Epilogue

ASPEN

I couldn't help but smile as I looked around the quaint restaurant, all lit up with golden twinkle lights and red and pink hearts decorating the walls for Valentine's Day.

"You know, for someone who *swears* he's not romantic, tonight has been epic," I said.

Crossland smiled at me from across the small table we sat at before he shook his head. "I think I'm done claiming I'm not romantic," he said, holding up his champagne flute to me. "It comes naturally with you."

I clinked my glass against his before we both took a sip, the waiter clearing our plates before we ordered dessert.

It'd been two months since we moved to Bangor, and we'd fallen into this effortlessly wonderful domestic rhythm that I couldn't help but thrive in.

We were still drawing up plans for my dream coffee-bar-bookshop, and simply enjoying every single second we could together. It'd taken me a hot minute to adjust to not being so close to my sister, but we talked every day, and it helped to know that she was safe and doing what she wanted to do at NYU.

It also helped that it was only a six hour drive when I got to missing her just a little too much. Which had already happened. We'd driven out last week—not wanting to use the jet more than necessary—or a quick visit to see her and catch up with Jesse and the girls.

Crossland had needed the break too, especially since there'd been a learning curve with his new NHL team. It was nothing like Calgary, and he had a whole new roster of people that he was responsible for, but I was so happy to be able to be there for him during the stressful times. He was still getting used to having someone in his corner, just like I was still learning how to be able to depend on him and allow him to help me.

“How did I get so lucky?” I asked Crossland like he was included in the thoughts storming my mind.

“I'm the lucky one, kitten,” he said. “Or at least, I hope to be.”

I furrowed my brow, but then he nodded behind me. “I think the server just dropped your dessert.”

I glanced over my shoulder, hoping that the server was okay, but turned back around when I didn't see anyone.

Crossland was on one knee before me, an opened red velvet box in his hands, an elegant diamond ring sitting in a bed of white silk.

“Aspen,” he said. “I know how we started off wasn't the usual way, but that doesn't change how unquestionably you stole my heart. You're my best friend, my light when things go dark. You make me want to be better every single day, and you have this incredible way of always knowing how to make me laugh. My days would be so dull without you in them, and I would love to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

Emotion stalled any coherent reply I might make, and I could only get an unintelligible squeal out as I threw my arms around his neck, nodding profusely.

“Is that a yes?” he asked, standing and pulling me along with him.

I pulled back, smiling at him. “That's a yes,” I said before kissing him.

I was vaguely aware that the entire restaurant was likely watching the scene, but I couldn't find an ounce of energy to

care. The love of my life had just asked to spend the rest of our lives together, and it meant more to me than I'd ever be able to describe.

Crossland gently set me on my feet before he slid the ring on my finger.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” he said.

I shook my head. “And all I got you was something to wear.”

“I’m sure I’ll look amazing in it,” he said.

I grinned up at him. “I didn’t say it was for *you* to wear,” I said. “It’s actually for you to take off.”

His eyes scanned my face. “Are you wearing my present now, kitten?” he asked.

I nodded, a little thrill rushing through me.

“Check, please,” he said to the passing server.

“What about dessert?” I asked teasingly.

He laid a stack of bills on the table that had to be at least three times the check’s amount before grabbing my hand and tugging me out of the restaurant.

“Forget dessert,” he said as we hurried into his car. “I want to see what my fiancée has in store for me.”

“Fiancée,” I said, the word clanging through me, only adding to the bubbly giddiness the night had created.

A night Crossland had curated himself, planning it down to the last detail.

“I love you,” I said as he navigated the streets toward home.

Our home.

“I love you,” he said, reaching over with his free hand to take mine.

We finally made it inside our house, and I felt more at peace than I had in my entire life. And it was in that moment I knew, as the rest of our forever stretched out before us, that it

wouldn't matter if we were in New York or Calgary or Maine or anywhere in between.

Crossland was my home, and it'd never felt sweeter.

THE END

Thank you so much for reading! It means the world to me that you picked up this story!

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Samantha Whiskey is a wife, mom, lover of her dogs and romance novels. No stranger to hockey, hot alpha males, and a high dose of awkwardness, she tucks herself away to write books her PTA will never know about.