

Fake Marriage, Real Love

TYLA WALKER

Resort Romances

FAKE MARRIAGE, REAL LOVE

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ALSO BY TYLA WALKER

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AEISHA

There are big families, and then there's my family. I can hear the chaos before I've even knocked on the door. The large, impressive drive looks like a parking lot, so I know I'm probably the last to arrive – great.

It's not often I make the trip back to my family home. As a busy manager of a tech company in Redwood City, work nearly always comes first. That's the way it's always been for me.

"Aeisha! It's Aeisha everyone!" cries my mom when she opens the door.

"Hey, Mom," I say, kissing her on the cheek. "It's good to see you." From behind her, faces begin to appear, most of them welcoming until I step inside and see Emily through the oval doorway to the dining room.

The house screams wealth, both sprawling and tastefully decorated. From the huge dining room, I hear even more of a commotion and see that most of it is focused on her. Of course it is. Everything must always be centered around my spoiled half-sister.

"Oh, hi," she says, looking me up and down as if I'm something the dog has just dragged in. "We were wondering when you might arrive." She smooths down her hair and picks up a champagne flute, taking a sip before smiling at me in that inauthentic way that grates on me.

"Well, I'm here now," I say, trying to remain calm and classy. That's not easy around Emily. Surviving this family and its politics isn't easy, either, but one thing it has done is made me more determined not to let them bring me down.

"Good, you can help us celebrate," she says, a look of triumph on her

face.

“Great,” I reply, somewhat dryly. “What’s the occasion?” I honestly don’t want to know, but there’s obviously something going on, and it’s not like I’m going to be spared it.

She steps towards me and extends her hand. At first it seems like she’s waiting for me to kiss it – not something that would surprise me given the size of her ego – but then I see what the fuss is about. On her ring finger is a quite spectacular engagement ring.

“Congratulations,” I say through gritted teeth. This is *just* what I need.

“Thanks, Sis,” she says, admiring her new ring. “It’s antique, you know. Only the best, right?”

Please, spare me.

Before I can say anything, my father steps in with my mother on his arm. He welcomes me warmly with a hug and a kiss, telling me how glad he is that I’m here for the family gathering. Especially now that Emily has made this announcement.

I smile and try not to say anything too sarcastic – like the fact that my half-sister has declared she’s bagged herself a husband on more than one occasion. On each of these, nothing has progressed. Although now, it seems the ring on her finger may mean she’s actually telling the truth this time.

My mom’s eyes are trained on me, her glare so intense it’s almost burning holes in my skin. I know why – Emily’s announcement has gotten to her. And if it’s gotten to her, then it’s going to become an issue for me.

As my father’s fourth and current wife, she’s determined that I’m the one who should be making such announcements. Not just because I’m her daughter and Emily isn’t, but thanks to the larger concern of the inheritance issues in this family.

She’s already been on my case, forcing me to look for a fiancé and to announce my own impending nuptials, but that’s just a step too far for me. I get where she’s coming from, and I feel just as entitled to my father’s wealth as any of my siblings, but I can’t just marry for money. Nevertheless, fighting for the inheritance is something I’m prepared to do.

I get that my Mom doesn’t want to be overlooked. With three ex-wives and their children, it’s important for her and her child to be acknowledged. The other kids all received their inheritance when they walked down the aisle. For some reason, this is the only rule in the family, like marriage is the most important thing in life.

Now, as my mom glares at me, I feel her frustration more than ever. If it weren't for the fact that it was Emily sucking up every ounce of air in the room, I might be able to forget it. But when I look at her and see that self-satisfaction painted on her face, I can't.

"Actually, I have an announcement of my own." My heart thuds in my chest, but I've started now. I look over at Emily, her chin now raised in defiance. She hates anyone taking the limelight from her, especially me.

"Thing is, I'm also getting married." It's as if the room takes a collective gasp. A few split seconds of nothing but a sudden intake of air.

"Honey!" cries my mom. "Congratulations!" She throws her arms around me, pulling me close as if telling me how important this is for both of us.

When we break our embrace, I'm shocked to see everyone else just staring at us, including my father, though I shouldn't be. As far as they knew, I didn't even have a boyfriend – because I don't!

I'm suddenly overwhelmed by the lie I've just told, caring less and less about Emily and her reaction while the seconds pass by feeling like hours.

What the hell have I done?

But there's no going back now. "It's been a whirlwind romance," I say. "I'm sorry I haven't told you about him. It's just with work being so busy and then meeting him, things have just taken over."

"Well, I'm very much looking forward to meeting the young man, now that he's going to be joining the family," my father says.

"Sure," I continue. "I mean, he's really busy at work, but I'm sure I can arrange something for next week."

"That's settled, then," my father says, smiling. "What a day this has turned into!"

My stomach churns, watching the results of my lie sweep across the room – the smiles, the raised glasses and the talk of two upcoming weddings in the family. More than anything, there's the triumphant look on my mom's face as she takes in the information and the scene before her. This is everything she's wanted, and she has no idea it isn't even real.

My mind is now somersaulting.

Where the hell am I going to find a boyfriend – no, a husband – within a week!

LOGAN

“We’ll take another round of tequila shots,” I say to the very attractive VIP area server. She smiles at me flirtatiously, garnering some withering looks from the other women huddled on the sofa with Jack and me.

“Sure,” she says. “Anything else I can get you?”

I resist the urge to say something I shouldn’t – I’m with these other ladies after all. Sure, I promised them I’d pick up the tab for the drinks and the food that’s been arriving constantly all evening, but even I know where the line is. I’m a player, but not a complete dick.

Knocking back the last of my beer, I can feel the buzz starting to hit, and I’m here for it. The club, one of the best in California, is pumping. I’m surrounded by beautiful women, and there’s a never-ending supply of liquor.

When the server comes back with a bottle of tequila and some fresh glasses, I thank her. Then I play the host, pouring and handing out the shots, limes and salt as we all let loose before taking to the dance floor again.

It’s nights like these, and there’s plenty of them, that really help shift the weight of the pressure that inevitably builds up when you’re someone in my position. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining. Being an heir to a hotel chain is one hell of a ride, even if heading up a global brand like Miller Hotels and Restaurants comes with the responsibilities that it does.

Work hard, play hard.

Whoever came up with that motto knew what they were talking about. It’s not exactly the lifestyle that my grandfather approves of. But after losing my parents in the plane crash the way I did, I’ve learned that you have to live

life on your own terms. It's too short and precious not to.

"Bro, I'm done for the night," says Jack when we finally sit down again, one arm draped around an attractive brunette.

"You bombing on me?" I ask, teasing him even though I'm probably done for the night, too.

"It's almost 3 a.m.," he says, scrubbing his hands over his face. "I think we did okay."

"Really?" I ask, knowing that I'm going to feel shit tomorrow if I don't at least get a few hours sleep. I call the server over to tell her we're leaving and that I need to pick up the check and hand over my credit card.

When she comes back a few minutes later and tells me it's been declined, I'm more angry than embarrassed. Money is never an issue, unless for some reason my grandfather has decided it is and cut off the supply.

I take the heat from Jack, who is furious at having to pick up a check the size of a month's salary, and head home, determined to take this up with my grandfather tomorrow.



IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY, and my head still hurts, even despite the number of painkillers I've necked. But this needs to be done. I pull up at my grandfather's house, determined to have this out with him.

As usual, I find him in his study. The open fire is lit as always, and he sits reading in the chair next to it. "To what do I owe this honor?" he asks, taking in my less than healthy demeanor today.

"I think you know why I'm here," I say, entering the study and taking a seat opposite him.

"Do me a favor, and don't get too close to the fire," he replies. "I don't want you going up in flames with all those alcohol fumes coming off of you."

Always with the smart remarks.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on?" I ask sharply.

He puts down his paper and looks me straight in the eye, his eyes still sharp despite the fact he's turning eighty very soon. "You mean why I cut off your funds?" he asks.

Even though this is what I suspected, his words still almost knock the wind out of me. He gets up, walking over to his desk and reaching for the

drawer.

“Here,” he snaps, slamming down a file. The force of it slaps against the wood and shocks me out of my hungover daze.

I walk towards him and pick up the file, opening it to find his last will and testament. He watches as I flick through it, my tired eyes straining against the dim light.

Fuck!

Looking up I find him smirking, and I know that look all too well. My grandfather is a good man, someone who raised me and wants the best for me despite the horrific events of my childhood. But he is also shrewd and very, very determined.

“It shouldn’t surprise you. I’ve been preparing you and warning you about this for a long time, Logan.”

His voice is more serious than I’ve ever heard it, and that’s saying something.

“I won’t be here forever or even for much longer. Before that happens, I need to make sure you’re taking life seriously. Taking this *business* seriously!”

“I do take this business seriously,” I snarl, my nostrils flared.

“Like this!” he snaps, pointing at the state of me. “If you’re to inherit all of this, and this business, then I need to make sure you’re ready. In order for that to happen, I want to see you settled down with a good woman who can give you some stability. Hell, even a few little Logans running around the gardens!”

He can’t be serious.

I’ve never done it before, not even as a teenager, but I can’t hold in the rage I feel and don’t want to say something I regret. So, I pick up the damn papers and walk out on him, wondering how he can do this to me and where the hell I go from here.

Marriage!

It’s the last thing on my mind. Sure, there are plenty of women, but none of them are serious. Not even relationships, just fun. Commitment isn’t my thing. It never was, and I don’t imagine it ever will be.

As I speed away from my grandfather’s home – my family home – I rack my brain trying to think about how I can get out of this. Being controlled isn’t something I take well. If I have to take back control, then I will.

If marriage is what he wants, then that’s what he’ll get, and the only way

I'd be willing to deliver it is by faking it. All I'd have to do is find a willing partner.

Pulling up at a club, I eye one of the last hundred dollar bills that I had in my drawer at home. With my cards shut off, it's the last spending money I have until who knows when. I can't wait to get inside for a drink and a chance to think about my plan.

Where the hell am I going to find a fake girlfriend?

AEISHA

The club is small, but that doesn't mean there won't be a good selection of prospective boyfriends. At least, not if the amount of people packed into it is anything to go by. The dance floor is full, as well as most of the booths.

I make my way inside confidently, glancing around at the men that attract my attention, and taking note of the admiring looks that I get from them. I'm used to it, of course. It's not something I've ever wanted for. The problem has always been finding the right one.

I push my way to the bar and take a seat on one of the stools that I find open. It's a large crowd with plenty of people needing a drink, but when one of the bartenders sees me, I know I've already cheated the queue.

"What can I get you?" he asks. I can tell by the look he's giving me he likes what he sees, too taken with me to notice the angry looks from the customers that have been waiting longer than I have.

He's cute, younger than me I'd say, and I almost think about asking him if he's single. But it's a full house, so I'll take my chances for a while and see what's on offer. "A vodka-tonic," I reply. "Plenty of ice."

"Sure thing," he says, a twinkle in his eye and a longer than necessary amount of eye contact. He sets about making my drink, looking up at me every few moments. It's nice to know that I shouldn't find it too hard to get myself a boyfriend.

Hopefully, he won't be the only one impressed with my efforts tonight. I'm wearing the most figure-hugging dress I could find, and my dark, waist-length hair spills down my back in loose curls. There are plenty of admiring

looks from around the room, and they only add to my confidence.

When the bartender returns with my drink, he flashes me a smile that I can't help reciprocating. I thank him and pay, slipping down off the bar stool, ready to do what I came here for. Feeling on form and hoping to enjoy my time here, I set to work.

Taking a walk around and sipping on my drink, I just hope I'll be able to find myself someone I can introduce to my family. It can't just be *anyone*, there are standards that both I and they will expect.

Why I've done this to myself is beyond me, but there's no going back now. Just the thought of my mom's reaction if I told her the truth is enough incentive to follow through with this ridiculous plan.

While I'm berating myself for my hot head and eager mouth, I notice a guy sitting alone in one of the corner booths. Maybe this is my chance, but I need to get closer to see what he looks like. Though from here, it's looking good.

"Hey, handsome. Drinking alone?" I ask, my voice confident yet still soft.

But my throat goes dry before I can say any more as he looks up at me with eyes I could drown in, and for a moment, I'm stunned into silence. Hoping I'm not standing there looking like a fish out of water and gasping for air, I try to collect myself.

Damn!

How this guy is alone, I have no idea. He's hands down the most gorgeous white man I've ever seen in my life. I'm guessing early to mid-thirties with a face that should be carved out in marble. The bluest of eyes stare back at me. Even though the light is low, I can pick out the sheen of the blonde hair that is pushed back from his face.

Swallowing hard, my eyes travel downwards, noticing the large, domineering frame. With his shirt sleeves rolled up, I can see the strong forearms that I know are attached to a body to die for – inch after inch of pure muscle.

I only realize I'm biting down hard on my bottom lip when a sharp sting radiates from it, but I just can't help it. This man is the finest thing I have ever seen. I can just imagine Emily's face if I brought him home as my boyfriend. Hell, maybe I could even get him to be a pretend husband.

"Need any company?" I eventually manage, coming back to my senses. My stomach flips a little when I see him looking me up and down, and he pats the space next to him where I willingly take a seat.

“So, you here alone, too?” he asks.

His voice is a deep baritone, and I swear it goes straight to the parts of me that have been abruptly awakened by this perfect specimen of a man. I press my legs together, almost worried that he may be able to tell the effect he’s having on me.

“I’m always alone,” I reply, letting him know that I’m absolutely one hundred percent available. His eyebrows shoot up, obviously glad to hear my answer, and this gives me another thrill. What comes next is an even bigger shock to the system.

“In that case, can you be my wife?”

At first, I think I’ve heard him wrong. Or that maybe I didn’t, and he’s just messing with me. But the way he’s looking at me – just so matter of fact – I think maybe he’s being serious.

I mean, I know I’m hot, especially tonight. But this guy is off the charts good-looking, and he doesn’t need to ask the first person that walks up to him tonight. He could have his pick of anyone. In fact, I’m surprised to have found him alone and not with a queue of women battling for his affections.

“I need a fake marriage,” he says. “Can you be my fake wife?”

Out of nowhere, a long, deep laugh escapes from the pit of my stomach. It’s like a much-needed relief of pressure, something so welcome after everything that’s been worrying me since that fateful visit back home to my parent’s house.

Just when I thought the universe was working against me, I’ve found my faith again. Perhaps I was right to have done what I did and to have decided to come here tonight and approach whoever the hell this is.

Somehow, I’ve managed to find someone who is in the exact same position as me. Surely, this is meant to be.

LOGAN

The stranger at my table is unexpectedly laughing, causing me to raise an eyebrow at her. I was more prepared for a slap than laughter, if I'm being honest.

Why is she laughing? Is she laughing at me or the random, crazy idea? Maybe I need to quit while I'm ahead. Pay my tab and walk away before I make a complete idiot of myself, I think as my brain runs a million miles an hour.

Under different circumstances, if a random stranger in a bar asked me to marry them, I'd probably laugh, too. It is a lunatic thing to say to a stranger who was just asking if you're drinking alone.

My brain is totally off the rails now. I understand why she's doing it, but it'd be nice if she'd quit laughing and just agree to it. It's embarrassing enough to be in such a pathetic position at all.

I sit back in my chair, looking at her as I wait for her to finish. I can't help but feel like I have lost control of this situation which annoys me. I can't stand not being in control.

After her brief moment of roaring laughter, the beautiful woman finally regains her composure. I stare at her, surprised she hasn't left yet, and find myself meeting the gaze of her beautiful hazel eyes.

Damn, I don't think I have ever seen such beautiful eyes...

I'm not sure what to make of this conversation, though, and it's not entirely helpful that she laughs and then says nothing. I'm not really sure where to go from here. My cards are all on the table.

She probably thinks I'm fucking crazy. I mean, who offers to marry a

random woman in a bar?

After a brief pause, the woman offers me a smile and reaches over the table, snatching my glass in front of me. She quickly pulls it back to her, and I watch as she raises it to her perfect lips, downing the entire thing in one drink.

She sets down the empty glass. For a moment, her faraway expression tells me that she's thinking about my statement.

Is she really contemplating it? Don't get me wrong, it would be great if she did. Is this really all it's going to take?

I flag down a server, ordering myself another drink and buying one for her, too. Hopefully, this way I can avoid her drinking mine again. As I wait for my drink, I can't help looking over this woman. The longer my stare lingers on her, the more I notice how beautiful she is from head to toe.

She has a perfect body, which I can appreciate, but the thing that's drawing me in the most is her stunning hazel eyes. I can't get over how her beautiful brown skin complements them. I noticed she was attractive when she first came over, but I hadn't fully processed just how gorgeous she was when I asked her to be my fake wife. Well, good for me if she says yes, I suppose.

"Are you serious about your offer?" she asks suddenly, catching me off guard and filling me with hope.

Good. Agree with this, because marrying you will be the easiest decision I ever make.

She bites her lip. It's a nervous tic of mine, and I wonder if she's like me – the biting calms her nerves. She must really be seriously considering it.

"Yeah, I'm serious. Be my fake wife," I respond, raising my eyebrows again, saying it almost the same way someone would present a dare.

"What do you mean by fake?" she asks, her voice laden with curiosity as she raises an eyebrow back at me. As she does this, I can't help but notice her flawless eyes widen, meeting mine confidently.

"Exactly what I said. It'll be a sham of a marriage that allows me to meet the conditions of an inheritance as a newly-married man. I'll have a contract drawn up for a marriage that will terminate after a year's time. You are free to do whatever you'd like during that time privately, but in front of everyone else, we act like a husband and wife," I say.

It'll be easy to call my attorney tomorrow and have this drawn up. It's not like things are going to be that much different if we're still doing our own

things elsewhere. What's the worst case, this beautiful woman comes with me to a few social occasions? Like that'll bother me, I think sarcastically, glancing down at her figure.

"What do you think?" I ask.

Nothing will change for me other than in social settings. I'll be rich and can still live my life in private. I just have to convince my grandfather that she's my wife so he thinks I'm getting more responsible or whatever it is he wants. And I'll give her a share of everything for helping me out. Everybody wins!

The waiter brings our drinks, fulfilling my request. The woman sits silently, distractedly playing with the straw in her cup. I sip on my own drink carefully, my eyes never leaving her face.

I can almost see the offer bouncing around in her head, mulling it over. I'm starting to get a little bit frustrated at the lack of response. *I'm an impatient man regarding my money, and she's toying with me at this point. If you're going to say no, just say it so I can find someone else.*

Suddenly, I notice the corners of her mouth turning up, smiling at herself. It gives me hope again that maybe she really isn't going to tell me to get lost, for whatever reason. She isn't communicating her thoughts, so I still don't know what she's thinking. But the fact that she hasn't poured her drink on me yet seems like a good sign.

She's insanely hot, and her smile's incredibly perfect. I know the reason I came in here tonight was to find a wife, but I in no way anticipated that a perfect ten would be the one to walk in here. A stunning, gorgeous Black woman who happened to approach my table in the nick of time. Is this amazing luck or what?

I can't help thinking of everything I want to be doing to her as my eyes wander down her perfect body, following her sexy curves. Suddenly, my cock stiffens slightly at the thoughts flashing in my mind.

Not a chance, little buddy. I need to be serious. This is when I need to control my urges because I need this to work. If I get her to agree to this, I can't screw it up right away by sleeping with her and making a mess of everything. Even I know I'm not going to be able to find an endless supply of women willing to be my fake wife.

I'll deal with the hardness that's now grown fully in my pants later. I've got plenty of women for that, but right now, with her, this isn't the time or place.

Suddenly, she faces me, eyes piercing mine in a way that makes me wonder if she knows where my mind's trailing off to. *Damn it, I hope I don't blow this before she gives me an answer.*

She reaches her hand out, offering it to me with an irresistible smile on her perfectly shaped lips. "It's a deal," she says excitedly.

Before she can take it back, I stretch my hand out and firmly grasp it. The warmth of her smooth skin sends chills up my spine. *Quit it! Again, not the time or the place.*

"Deal!" I reply quickly. *Holy shit, no way. I offered it as a half-assed joke, not expecting her to agree. No take-backs,* I declare silently to myself. Then I pause, my own quiet thought sinking in. *Jesus, what are you, Logan? Ten years old?*

I can't believe it. Suddenly, this beautiful but obviously half-crazy woman wants to be my wife with a simple offer. No begging or persuading needed.

What game show am I on? I think, slightly overjoyed with the turn of my luck. A large smile appears on her face and we carry on in a casual conversation, beginning to discuss the terms and expectations of our unconventional arrangement.

AEISHA

I'm in shock, hearing the handsome stranger in front of me's proposal of a fake marriage.

It's almost like he knows exactly what I need to get me out of a tight spot. Besides, he isn't exactly hard on the eyes...

After thinking it over for a few minutes, I conclude and decide I'll accept the offer.

How bad can it be? I mean, I hate the idea of a fake marriage. I've always been against fake love. But usually that means lying and pretending to love someone. In this case, we both know it's fake and that's what we both want. Plus, there is so much riding on this for me...

I stare at him briefly, watching his bright blue eyes run up and down my body like he's in a trance. It doesn't take long before I find myself doing the same thing to him, taking every detail and admiring his perfectly sculpted jaw.

He's very handsome. His muscular jaw and bright ocean-blue eyes catch me off guard. Not only that, he looks rich and powerful, and I like that idea.

I have his wealth figured out from the second I saw his clothes and choice of drink. I also can't help noticing his immediate order for more, and the server bowing to his demands.

Hell, it's the most expensive stuff they serve! My family will be blown away when I bring home a rich man, calling him my husband, I think to myself. I can't wait to see their faces when I bring him into the house and they realize my success and totally regret their lack of faith in me.

I break the ice a little further, realizing we're agreeing to marry each other

but haven't even introduced ourselves.

"By the way, my name is Aeisha. What's yours?" I ask, hoping to gain some knowledge of the handsome stranger. I'd really like to know the name of the man I'm staring at in awe.

"I'm Logan," he says, straight to the point.

He doesn't offer any more details, just Logan. No matter his lack of words, it's perfect.

This will work out amazingly, I think, becoming lost in my thoughts as my mind trails off to the fact that I need him to meet my family, and soon. I instantly become anxious, wondering what he needs from me to make this work on his end.

"So tell me, Logan, why do you need a wife?" I ask. I hope this question will give me more insight into his situation. He's almost mysterious, and I want to know more.

Logan seems to be thinking about it for a moment, looking as if he's trying to form the right words to explain whatever situation he finds himself in. Finally, he speaks.

"It's a long story. My grandfather raised me, and he's hell-bent on me getting married and having kids before he passes. He went so far as to put it in his will and froze my bank accounts. He says he won't unfreeze them until I get married."

Jesus, I can't believe I think my family's a mess... Although, he just needs a piece of paper to show his grandfather. I need a little more than that... which might make it complicated for him.

Suddenly I'm feeling a little anxious about his reactions to my needs.

"I see. I'm sorry to hear about your dilemma. Your grandfather sounds pretty rigid. It's so weird to me how adults think they can control us... I'm in a similar situation. Unfortunately, mine might be a little more complicated as to the help I need," I say carefully, hoping he doesn't back out.

"Hit me with it. I'm betting I can handle it," he says with a slight tinge of arrogance.

I like his arrogance... Why is it so sexy? I wonder as a slight tingle climbs up my spine.

"Okay, how would you feel about meeting my family next week?" I ask, dropping the bomb. *Hopefully, this goes well because he's perfect...*

Logan bites his lip absentmindedly, and I can't help staring at it. *Okay, that's a cute quirk. I think I can get used to someone as handsome as him*

being my husband!

After a moment, Logan flashes an attractive smile, his bright blue eyes gazing into mine.

“Sounds to me like the deal doesn’t change one bit, dear, so long as you’re willing to meet my grandfather,” he says confidently.

His words feel like a thousand pounds lifting off my shoulders.

Oh thank God! He’s willing to meet my family! He’s attractive as hell and has plenty of money, so clearly, he’s successful, I think to myself, managing to push aside my thoughts to answer.

“Say when and where, and I’ll be there,” I say, matching his confidence. I can’t believe my luck.

I’m here looking for a boyfriend, and I manage to find someone in the same boat as me. What are the chances?

“Great, let’s talk about strategy. We can get down every single detail tonight, so I can have my attorney draw up the paperwork. Plus, we can work out the kinks now, so we don’t stumble over answers when we meet the families. First things first, where did we meet?” he asks calmly, causing me to rack my brain with ideas.

I love how much he’s committing to this! Suddenly, a perfect idea crosses my mind.

“What do you mean, babe? You seriously forgot when we met at one of our business meetings and instantly fell for each other?” I say, playing into the situation.

Logan grins, revealing his devastatingly handsome smile yet again, giving me a slight tingle in the pit of my stomach. “Sorry darling, you know how bad my memory is,” he responds.

Oh my God. Why is it cute how he calls me darling? No, No. Get your shit together, Aeisha!

“So we are going to sign the contract tomorrow, right?” I ask, trying to change the topic quickly.

“If that works for you! I was thinking the sooner, the better. That way, neither of us develops cold feet. Why? Are you ready to back out already?” he asks jokingly.

“No, not a chance. I was just curious how soon you wanted to do this!” I say.

There’s no way I’ll back out from this. I have exactly what I need. I’m all in, so let’s do this. At this exact moment, Logan, the handsome stranger, is

precisely what I need.

Logan raises his glass toward me. “To our marriage!” he toasts with a mischievous smile on his face. I can’t help but smile back as I tap my glass on his.

“To our marriage!” I respond excitedly.

The rest of the night is a blur as I drink with him. We consume more and more alcohol as we continue working out the rest of the fine details. As we get drunk together, it relieves me to finally have a solution for my problem.

LOGAN

I wake up to the sun shining through the window directly into my eyes. The sunlight certainly doesn't help with the pounding in my head, which makes me want to pull the blankets over my head and be a hermit.

Something feels off about the bed, though. For a moment, I can't quite put my finger on it. Before opening my eyes, I lay peacefully and think back to last night's events. All the details start flipping through my brain like a slideshow, ending with Aeisha and me drinking to the point of being completely wasted.

My recollection of everything after that point is blurry...

Fuck, I really know better than to drink so much! I think as I slowly peel my eyes open, already starting to sit up. My head throbs in agony, and I'm slightly annoyed with myself for drinking so much.

As soon as my eyes open fully, I feel a wave of a panic jolt through my body as I stare at the woman in my bed. Someone is peacefully sleeping right next to me, and I quickly realize it's Aeisha!

What the fuck? I wonder, panicking as I struggle to comprehend. I can't seem to remember anything after I hit a certain point of intoxication.

How is she here with me in my house? Panic really sets in. *I certainly hope she doesn't freak out when she wakes up.*

My mind quickly shifts gears without hesitation, raising an entirely new concern.

Okay, what the fuck? Did Aeisha and I have sex? I certainly hope not, as much as I'd like to. Something tells me that sleeping with her at this current point in time will more than likely throw a wrench in our agreement. She

doesn't seem like the type to be friends with a one-night stand. My head is really pounding now.

Leave it to me to have a solution to my problems and promptly let my sex drive ruin it. One night. The one time I need to not sleep with someone, I blow it. Why am I so stupid?

Wait a minute. She's incredibly sexy and my dream girl. If I don't remember anything about it, did I blow it? How can I know that if I'm not even sure we had sex?

I slowly pull back the plush comforter, unsure if I want to know the answer to my question. I can't help but sigh in relief when I see that she's not naked under the covers.

False alarm, thank God. I need her to trust me first. If we have sex in the future, it'll be fucking fantastic, of course. I mean, she's an absolute smoke show. The fact that I didn't have sex with her last night shows that I have an ounce of restraint!

I absolutely want to have sex with her, and she's so sexy it's intoxicating. But not under the influence of alcohol, and not until she wants it, too. For now, I need her to trust me or this will never work. We need to focus on things like meeting each other's families and not lose sight of the goal.

I leave bed carefully, not wanting to wake her, and rush to the closet. Throwing on a pair of gray sweatpants and a T-shirt, I walk to the bathroom as soon as I'm dressed.

Aeisha's stirring as I walk back into the bedroom. Finally, she opens her eyes after a minute, and we make eye contact. Her eyes widen and suddenly she shouts, catching me off guard.

"What are you doing here? Why are you in my room?" she shouts in a panic. I watch as she instinctively balls the blankets up under her chin, almost like she's trying to avoid letting me see her naked.

Two things darling. You aren't naked, and this isn't your room, I think, causing me to laugh.

Through my laughter, I watch Aeisha's eyes darting around the room.

"Good morning to you, too. Would you like some coffee? Or breakfast in general? Oh, and don't worry, we didn't sleep together. I checked," I say, trying to make casual conversation. Aeisha makes eye contact with me, still trying to work out exactly where she is.

"I was also thinking since you are already at my place, we should sign the contract immediately while you're here."

Who knows if she's even still willing to sign it? But, I figure it's best if I jump on this opportunity. It'll be perfect if we do it now, with no interruptions.

After a brief pause, Aeisha shoots me a half-smile. "Yeah, that sounds great. Can you give me a moment to freshen up?" she asks politely. Her demeanor seems to have changed almost instantly when I assured her we didn't have sex.

"Of course, no problem. I will go get breakfast started," I respond happily.

So she's still willing. Perfect!

I call my lawyer on the way out to make breakfast, and he tells me he'll be over as soon as he can. I quickly make some eggs and throw some bacon on the stove, hoping to impress Aeisha with the fact that I can cook.

Aeisha quickly scarfs her breakfast as soon as I serve it to her. She seems to enjoy my cooking, at least. I study her as she nurses her cup of coffee with a slight smile on her face.

My lawyer shows up about fifteen minutes after breakfast and doesn't waste any time, immediately presenting the agreement to us. I quickly read it over, satisfied that it has everything I asked him to include.

I mean, I really only ask for one thing. I want a fake wife who is devoted to me publicly, who will cultivate the image that everything is good between the two of us. She's free to do whatever she pleases in between. I just need her around when it's time to pretend in front of everyone.

I know one thing isn't too much to ask, but seeing it in the contract is reassuring. No surprises. It's exactly what we discussed in the bar. I'm not trying to pull a curtain over her eyes. I don't need to.

I watch Aeisha as she reads the contract and is seemingly as satisfied with the contents as I am. She immediately picks up the pen on the table and signs her name without hesitation. She tells me the contract is everything she needs it to be, too.

She hands the pen to me with a smile on her perfect lips, and I add my signature without delay.

After my lawyer leaves, we stand in the living room quietly. She's smiling at me, her stunning hazel eyes sparkling,

"Well, I guess it's official. You're my fiance!" she says brightly.

I return the smile, as my lucky strike truly excites me, and I'm happy to have found such a beautiful answer to my problems.

“I sure am, betrothed !” I respond back teasingly.

We talk things over for a bit, revisiting the meeting of relatives. It’s almost uncanny how well we get along as if we’ve known each other for years. My mind quickly wanders back to the contract, and everything seems to be falling into place.

Great, it’s legal and on paper. Now there’s absolutely no reason for my grandpa to hassle me, and I can get my cards and accounts unfrozen. I’ll have it all back soon, and I won’t be poor anymore!

AEISHA

The days fly by, completely catching me off guard when the weekend rolls back around. It's finally the big day that I have discussed with Logan more than any other topic. He's meeting my family today, and my nerves are sizzling slightly at the thought of bringing him home to meet them.

I glance down at the large ring on my finger in admiration. *It's truly gorgeous, and I can't help but fall in love with it a little. I hope when I get married for real one day, my husband will have as good of taste as Logan, I think, a smile forming on my face as I stare at the perfectly cut diamond.*

He had it delivered to my house the other day with a dozen roses. Even though an engagement ring does make our whole story more convincing, I genuinely hadn't seen it coming.

I'm waiting for Logan to pick me up while I gaze appreciatively at it. I want to wait till we're in person to tell him how beautiful it is, but I can't contain my excitement anymore. I quickly pull out my phone and text him.

Hey, I just wanted to say that this ring is beautiful. You have amazing taste, and I can't wait to show it off!

I hit send, smiling to myself like a schoolgirl as I wait by my phone for his answer. I'm immediately feeling giddy when my phone vibrates, revealing his response.

I'm glad you love it. I don't have great taste, though. I just chose the one that I thought suited you. I looked at it as if I was actually proposing and marrying you. I tried to think of which one you'd be happy wearing for the rest of your life

Even though this is a fake marriage, the sentiment is very sweet. I find myself distracted by what he would be like, in a real relationship. What would he do in a genuine proposal? What would it be like to marry someone like him, for real?

Suddenly, the appeal becomes all too real. I start imagining an actual wedding before I quickly shut myself down. *Come on, Aeisha, get your shit together and focus. This is temporary, not real*, I remind myself. *Still, though, it's a sweet statement.*

I fumble with the ring on my finger, sliding it back and forth absentmindedly as I wait. It doesn't take long for Logan to show up, and I quickly stumble out of the house as he opens the car door for me.

"That's sweet of you," I say with a smile.

"Just getting in some practice," he says as he winks at me, shutting the door behind me.

Practice for what? He doesn't seem to need any practice being a gentleman...

As we drive in the direction of my family, I become a little more anxious with each mile. Consider we have a two hour drive ahead of us, it's taking everything I have to keep it together. I keep glancing at Logan, seemingly cool, calm and collected.

I don't have any reason to worry if he thinks he can pull it off. He's playing the part well. What's there to worry about? I think, glancing down at the ring again.

"So, what exactly is this event we are headed to?" he asks, seemingly trying to memorize a few last-minute details.

"Just a family gathering. My brother closed a business deal last week, so of course, we have to celebrate his big accomplishments," I say briefly.

It seems like the perfect time to announce that I have a boyfriend. Everyone will be there. Besides, it takes the spotlight off my siblings for a moment. Not that I want the spotlight to be on me, but it's precisely what they need.

We arrive right on time. The car is hardly shut off when Logan jumps out and runs around to open the door for me, causing my heart to melt slightly.

Everyone rushes to meet Logan immediately, curious as to who the handsome man that I cling to is. My siblings act dumbfounded that I actually have someone with me. Let alone such a successful and wealthy man.

If Logan hadn't come, they would never have believed me. I hope you are

all blown away, I think to myself as I kiss Logan on the cheek, sealing the deal. I couldn't choose a better boyfriend if it were from a catalog!

We stroll around the house while I introduce him to everyone. Everyone's jealousy and annoyance are apparent on their faces as I walk arm and arm with the handsome millionaire.

I notice my sister, Emily, pouting silently from across the room. My brother already explained earlier that her boyfriend isn't here today as he's away on business. So I'm sure my bringing him here absolutely chaps her ass. The fact is that I'm taking the spotlight from her and proving my success with such a sexy man.

My mother approaches us, ecstatic to see the handsome man on my arm. "Mom, this is my fiance, Logan Miller," I say.

"Oh, this is him?" she all but shouts, trying and failing to conceal her excitement.

I nod and excitedly show her the ring on my finger, presenting it so that Emily, who is now gritting her teeth, gets a good eyeful. My mother squeals and gives me a massive hug. After she releases me, she quickly turns to Logan and hugs him, too.

Logan's face turns as red as a tomato as my mother embraces him excitedly, causing me to laugh. Emily makes eye contact with me and quickly storms away.

Probably back into whatever cold, miserable hole she climbed out of.

After my mother finally releases Logan, she turns her attention toward me again. Logan quickly grabs my hand, interlacing his fingers in mine, which causes me to smile broadly.

I don't know why I keep getting so damn giddy at his actions. *It's just for show.* I tell myself, practically scolding.

"Aeisha, I am so proud of you! I am so happy you have found a man that is so good for you. And good for the inheritance," she says, winking.

My father meets my eyes quickly, smiling. "I am beyond thrilled for you, baby, and I can't wait for you to get married!" he says before regarding Logan, too.

"You two have my blessing to be married whenever you want," he says kindly.

I hug him. "Thank you, dad. I love you," I say happily. Logan shakes his hand firmly, thanking him.

The rest of the afternoon flies by, and the family slowly congratulates us.

The men speak with Logan, inquiring about his job, while the women come to gush over my ring. All but Emily, that is.

Not long after, Logan and I leave, heading back to my house. We talk about everything under the sun on the way home. *I'm so glad it's over, and everything's going perfectly! He presents himself so well.*

Logan drops me off, and I thank him with a smile. "Please drive safely home, Logan. Goodnight!" I say sweetly.

Logan returns my smile. "I will, and I'll text you when I make it if you'd like. Goodnight, Aeisha."

I get out and walk to my door, but I can't help noticing he waits until I make it safely inside before leaving. His kindness makes my heart throb a little as I close it behind me.

LOGAN

I have been anxious all week thinking about the events of today. Thankfully, I'm an only child, so Aeisha only needs to meet one person. My grandpa. He's the only one I have to turn to, raising me after my parents died.

A lot is riding on this meeting going well between them, I think as grandpa and Aeisha are talking about everything under the sun, almost forgetting I'm present.

I'm trying to play it cool, but deep down, I'm panicking. I'm only attempting to hide it because I know it'll do more harm than good to show my stress. I don't know her well enough to know how this will go, yet my entire future rests in her hands. It's terrifying to think of the possible ways this could play out.

If she blows this for me, I'll lose everything. Possibly even the relationship with this man altogether. But if it goes well, and he loves her, everything returns to normal and sets me up for life!

Thankfully, they are getting along remarkably well and bonding very quickly, which relieves some of the stress. Although, it surprises me in a way how she fits right in.

To someone looking at them and not knowing the situation, it could seem like they have known each other for years, I think as they laugh together about some nonsense topic.

Suddenly the topic changes to that of a serious one. "So, where did you two meet?" Grandpa asks, bringing gravity to the evening. I panic at his question for a moment before remembering our conversations about this

exact topic and how to answer it.

“We actually met at a business meeting,” I answer quickly. “Actually, we felt an instant connection the second we met each other. Before the meeting was over, I managed to convince her to give me her number. As we began to talk more, the spark between us grew, and we began to develop feelings for one another. It didn’t take too long before we became a couple!”

My grandpa smiles at the lack of hesitation in my statement and asks another.

“Are you guys willing to get married, or is this more of a fling?” he asks bluntly.

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can, Aeisha pipes up. “Actually, sir, we wanted to talk with you about that. Logan proposed!” she says, glee in her voice.

God damn, she plays the part well, I think, not upset with how easily she’s jumping into the conversation. Grandpa’s smile tells me he already seems to like her, so this coming from her will probably seal the deal.

Grandpa’s beaming with excitement as his gaze shifts back and forth between the two of us. “Congratulations, you guys! I am so excited for both of you! Although Logan, I wish you would have introduced me to this wonderful girl much sooner,” he exclaims with pure joy.

Holy shit, we’re pulling it off! Grandpa believes it, and I guess if the only thing he can be upset about is me not telling him sooner, I’m doing pretty damn good.

Aeisha shoots me a reassuring smile, appearing as confident as I am that our story’s succeeding. Then she stands with a smile on her face. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I am going to find the restroom,” she says, kissing my cheek before she leaves the table.

Good call on the kiss, Aeisha. Way to sell it. I’ll have to give her significant props on it later, I think as I meet my grandfather’s joyful gaze across the table.

“Logan, you continue to surprise me. Here I was, being a hard ass on you for not giving me grandchildren, and you could have saved yourself from being yelled at by telling me about her. But you waited to introduce her at the right moment. I respect that.”

I ponder this before I respond, wanting to find the right words to sell it. “I just wanted to be sure she was the one. I didn’t want to get your hopes up and let you down,” I say softly.

“I understand now why you did what you did, Logan. I do have to say, though, I really like her, and it appears that you have found a loving and kind woman. I think you need to hold onto her dearly,” he says with kindness and adoration.

We exchange smiles as Aeisha reappears at the table, sitting next to me with a giant smile on her perfect lips.

“I’m sorry, where were we?” she asks kindly. I watch my grandpa practically melt into a pile of goo at her manners and interest in the conversation.

“I was just telling Logan that I am glad he found such a beautiful, kind and loving woman,” my grandfather exclaims happily.

Aeisha looks down at the table with just the right blend of humble embarrassment and modesty. She’s fantastic at this. She’s even making me smile genuinely at her adorable self.

“Well, thank you, Mr. Miller. You are far too kind.”

“You know what I think?” Grandpa asks. “As suitable as you two are, you should get married immediately. I’m beyond excited to see my grandson settle down, especially with an amazing woman like yourself.”

Aeisha and I exchange glances and smile. “Don’t worry about a thing, Mr. Miller. We will announce the engagement and plan the wedding as soon as possible. We just wanted to tell you first,” she exclaims happily.

God, she always knows exactly what to say.

The rest of the night goes smoothly. Soon, we find ourselves in my car as I drive her home.

“That went well,” Aeisha says, smiling. “My family and your grandpa are pretty sold on the idea of us getting married, it seems like.”

“I would have to agree, honestly. I can also say that I am pretty sure my grandpa loves you,” I shoot back, smiling from ear to ear at the success of the evening.

“Do you blame him? What isn’t there to love?” she says, a sass echoing in her voice.

I think about this for a moment, carefully choosing my words to avoid making our situation completely weird.

“You make a very fair point. That must be why I fell in love with you in the first place,” I say, joking about our arrangement. “It seems all there is left to do is plan the engagement party and get married.”

We laugh as I pull into her driveway. “Thank you again for coming. You

pulled it off flawlessly,” I say meaningfully.

Aeisha winks at me as she opens her door. “Goodnight, my soon-to-be husband.”

“Goodnight, soon-to-be wife, ” I respond. My heart pounds with the excitement of our successful evening as I wait until she makes it inside safely before backing out of the driveway.

It couldn't have gone any better than it did. Aeisha played the loving partner role so well and sold the whole thing. Thanks to her, I will have my money back in no time! I think to myself as her house fades in the distance.

I head home quickly, anxious to get ready for bed. *We have a lot of planning to do!*

AEISHA

I'm finding myself buried up to my neck in paperwork at the office, and I can't help feeling overwhelmed as I look at the clutter on my desk.

Suddenly, there's a knock at my office door, and my secretary peeks her head in slowly.

"Is now a good time?" she asks quietly.

"Yeah, come on in. I'm just trying to catch up on this mess." I try to keep the frustration out of my voice, as it isn't her fault my day is so stressful.

She doesn't seem bothered by my tone anyway. She steps in with a gift box in her hands, setting it on my table by the door. "This was just delivered for you," she says, and I shoot her a look of confusion. She flashes me a smile before heading back out to her desk.

"Thank you!" I shout, remembering my manners as the door closes behind her. Then I wander over to the box, curious and still not quite sure where it came from.

I pick the card up on top of it, examining it for a moment. A smile appears as I look at the pretty note and read the script at the bottom. *It's a gift from Logan! That's awfully sweet of him to think of me while I'm at work, I think, as butterflies suddenly appear in my core.*

I can't help wondering if he thinks of me often. *I mean, he does think of me enough to remember to send me gifts at work, it's probably not a one time occurrence.*

The thought of him thinking of me throughout the day hasn't crossed my mind before now. But now that it has, I'm giddy with excitement. I let myself go, almost feeling like a lovestruck teenager until I catch myself.

What the hell are you doing, Aeisha? You're acting like he's really your fiance when you know damn good and well all of this is because of the contract. Get yourself together and quit acting like a schoolgirl, I think, scolding myself mentally.

I know I can't start feeling something for him. It'll only end badly, and I'll be the one who gets hurt while he moves on with millions of dollars and forgets I even exist. We made a deal, so stick to it.

I sigh heavily and open the small box. My sadness is instantly replaced with glee to see white gold, heart-shaped earrings. Inside each earring sits a diamond, dead center for the world to see.

Holy shit! These are stunning! I don't even want to begin to imagine how much they cost. More than likely an outrageous amount, but it's still a lovely gesture, I think happily as I snag my phone sitting on my desk.

I quickly tap his name, appearing at the top of my recent calls list. The phone only rings twice before I hear Logan's attractive voice on the other end.

"Hello?" he says. But, following his greeting, I hear a woman in the background. Not just any woman – she's talking in a low, sultry voice, and I instantly wonder just who she is and what they are doing.

It suddenly feels like I'm hit in the stomach, and can't breathe. As rattled as I am, I don't want to comment on it. We have a contract, and that's all this is. And the contract says he can do whatever he wants in his free time.

He's doing other women in his free time. But is he not even going to attempt to hide it?

The realization devastates me and feels like a white-hot knife to the back. I can hear her giggling and trying to get his attention as he waits for my response, but I no longer care to be on the phone.

"Oh, I didn't realize you were busy. I just called to say thank you for the gift!" I panic and blurt out, trying not to cry. I quickly end the call before he can respond or explain himself.

I don't need to hear another word from him, and I can tell that the woman's voice was laden with lust and seduction.

What the fuck, Logan? Why would he even pick up the phone if he was with another girl? I wonder as my jealousy starts to flare up.

Wait a minute, Aeisha, calm down. You don't even have the right to be jealous. I try pulling myself together. Remembering the terms of the contract, I try shoving the anger and hurt back down.

The contract states that when Logan and I are not together, we are free to do as we please. Plus, the fact there is even a contract in the first place should tell me I have no right to be upset. Get a damn grip, Aeisha. I continuously try to contain the rage and devastation I feel.

For now, Logan can fuck whatever girl he wants, and I can't let it bug me. At least not until we're officially married. Then I can put a stop to it. If anything, just to avoid a massive scandal with my family.

I try reasoning with myself as I set the earrings down and sit back down at my desk. After a while I finally talk myself down, pain no longer boiling inside of my heart, and I busy myself with sorting through the paperwork again.

A few hours go by, and I'm flying through my to-do list. *Having something to take my mind off the phone call is excellent!* I think as the mountain of papers slowly disappears.

I occasionally glance over at the earrings throughout the day, smiling to myself. I feel it's a sweet gesture, whether it means anything or not, because he's still thinking of me enough to have a gift delivered.

Come to think of it. A man has never surprised me with gifts at my office...

My office door flies open, interrupting my thoughts as I glance up quickly to see who didn't bother knocking. I'm shocked to see my childhood friend, Carl, standing in the doorway.

"Hey, Carl!" I say, greeting him. I'm curious why he's here, but it's nice to see him after so long.

Carl ignores my greeting and shoves his hand into his pocket, producing his phone as we make eye contact. He practically shoves it in my face after it unlocks. My eyes dart to the screen, but it's too close for me to read.

I grab the phone from his hand and lower it. *What the fuck is he so angry about?* I wonder, allowing my eyes to focus on his screen. His frustration quickly makes sense as I read the beginning of the news article he's pointing to. *Announcing the engagement of the famous business tycoon. Miller and Williams are tying the knot!*

I gasp to find out there's already a wedding announcement circling that I'm unaware of, and my chest feels like it might explode.

AEISHA

Carl stands at my desk, anger radiating off him. In all the years I've known him, this is the first time he's ever kind of scared me. As he looks at me, there's a rage in his eyes I really don't understand.

I rack my brain, trying to decide what to do. I haven't seen Carl in so long, since he confessed his lifelong feelings for me that I don't reciprocate. I guess I should have seen it coming, that he might be a little upset about this.

But it's not like he has a right to be. I told him I wasn't interested, and as far as I'm concerned, that's all there is to it.

He had been a good friend of mine for a long time, though things have changed lately. He used to be the person I always came to with my problems because he was always willing to listen. But, the news of his feelings for me, beyond our friendship, shocked me. I never expected him to fall in love with me.

For a while, he kept trying to court me. Bringing me flowers, and trying so hard to get me to change my mind and fall for him. But everything we've been through just makes it too awkward to think of us as lovers. He's more like a brother.

I can't like him the way he wants me to, and I only love him as my best friend! But having to reject him doesn't make him happy, and I try to do whatever I can to help ease his pain because I don't want to lose him.

I keep telling him I want us to still be friends, and he seems happy about it for a while, but it's hard not to wonder if he's only hanging around in an attempt to persuade me. It's been an awkward time since, and things feel different between us at times now.

I can't help wondering if something's off with him. The man standing before me right now, angry and bitter, isn't the boy I knew. *Is he even the same Carl I know anymore?* I ask myself as he paces around the front of my desk.

His anger continues radiating off of him, and I can hear him mumbling something under his breath. I can't determine what he's saying and work up the courage to ask him.

"What're you saying, Carl? I can't quite hear you."

He looks at me with a glare in his eyes I've never seen before. "I said! Is that true? It can't be true, right? Is it someone messing with you? Are you in trouble or something?" he asks at an unexceptional speed.

I stare at him, trying to process what he's saying and how to answer so I don't upset him even more. But, as I'm getting my response ready, he shouts again.

"Aeisha, I asked if it was true or not!" he yells, startling me.

"Yes! It's true!" I blurt out. "Carl, please calm down..." I watch his eyebrow raise and my pulse jumps, unsure of what he's going to do next. Suddenly, he chucks his phone across the room, slamming it against the wall with a terrible crash.

My whole body flinches at the sound, and the phone's glass shatters all over the floor. My pulse races, and I'm shaking at his sudden outburst. This new side of him is terrifying, and I don't know what to do as he goes back to pacing.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself as he turns to me again. "Come on, Aeisha! How can you do this to me? You know how I feel about you. You need to be mine and stop looking for anyone else. You belong with me! Don't you realize how much this hurts, knowing you can't even give me a chance?" he shouts.

I stare at him for a moment, deciding what to do and say. Finally, I choose to try and ignore his attempts to shame me. "Carl, you know I don't mean to hurt you. I'm not doing anything to you on purpose! I was honest with you. If you want to be my friend, you need to be happy for me!" I say as my voice shakes.

He scoffs. "Be happy for you? Are you kidding me? I want nothing more than for you to be happy. But you'd be happier with me! We belong together!"

I attempt a smile, trying to de-escalate the situation. "You need to stop

feeling anything other than friendship for me. I can't love you back, Carl. I was honest when I told you that, and you need to respect that. I want you to be my friend, but that's all."

He interrupts, shouting again. "No! Aeisha, I can't do that! I love you with all my heart..."

Suddenly, my door flies open, and my secretary peeks her head in, interrupting us. "Ms. William, there are a ton of reporters outside. What should I do?" she asks.

Oh my God... Only one person comes to mind when I wonder who'd do this to me: Emily. How dare she do this! She set all of this up. She put out the announcement, she showed Carl knowing he'd come here, and then she sent the reporters so that they'd catch be here with another man.

I sink down in my chair, the reality of the situation making my head spin. *All to make me look like a cheater in front of Logan. I know she's conniving, but this is an all-time low. If only she knew he isn't going to get jealous over Carl.* Still, I don't want this all blowing up in our faces, so I begin racking my brain for an answer.

"Thank you for letting me know. I'll gather my things and just go home for the day!" I tell her. Leaving kills two birds with one stone because it gets me away from Carl as well.

She nods and closes the door, leaving Carl breathing heavily in front of me. He's standing a lot closer now, and I'm feeling uncomfortable. I slide my phone under my desk and onto my lap, quickly texting Logan for help. I hide it out of Carl's sight, not wanting him to see me on my phone and lose his cool again.

I stand up, gathering my things. "Carl, I think you should go home," I say, sliding my purse strap over my arm. He immediately shakes his head.

"No! I can't, especially if you're going to be flooded with reporters as soon as you leave. I can't allow that. I'll follow you and ensure you get to your car, okay?"

God damn it. Why does he have to be so hard-headed? Just leave me alone!

I open my office door, not saying a word to him, and walk out. As my feet reach the pavement, I hear his footsteps close behind me. I'm heading to my car and notice the reporters make sure to get as many pictures as possible as they come running toward us.

I do the best I can to give them no ammunition. I'm not even talking to

Carl, much less standing close enough to give the impression of cheating. If they manage to twist these photos into anything scandalous, it's only thanks to some excellent photoshopping skills.

Still, they don't give up. Instead of getting bored and wandering off, the reporters draw even closer. Soon they completely surround us, blocking us in. My claustrophobia starts picking up as they jam their microphones in my face.

AEISHA

I'm standing next to Carl as the reporters circle us, pushing us closer together as they fight for a spot and block me from my car. I can hear cameras clicking all around me as they're taking pictures.

I can only imagine how they will paint this picture for everyone, I think as a reporter shoves her microphone in my face. I jump as it nearly touches my mouth. flinching.

"Are you getting married, Ms. Willams?" she asks. I don't answer her and turn away, shoving the microphone back at her. As I turn, there's a new reporter in front of me. Her eyes widen as we make eye contact, and she launches into her own question.

"Aeisha, who is that man with you?"

I hear the blonde reporter behind me ask a reciprocating question. "Is he your lover?"

My God! Maybe they're all being paid by Emily! What awful assumptions... I don't understand how these people live with themselves! My sister must have planted at least some of them to make me look bad. I'm sure of it by the way they are picking their questions.

Carl's hand suddenly appears in front of my face, blocking both me from seeing them and them from getting any additional pictures. His gesture only pisses me off. *You don't get to save me after how you treated me! Plus, why do I have to hide in the first place? I'm not a criminal!* I think and step out from behind his hand, bravely facing the reporters.

"Look, you and your questions need to wait for my formal announcement!" I shout over the top of them. Several try talking at once,

insisting I might as well speak up because they're streaming live.

My irritation and anger grow as their behavior gets ruder and ruder. I'm stuck and can't get through when suddenly I feel an arm wrapping around my waist, yanking me from them. I turn around, and surprise hits me when I see Logan's face.

Oh, my knight in shining armor, Logan! My heart pounds at his appearance and rescue mission, and it's shocking how my heart is racing in his presence. It's comforting to know I don't have to deal with this alone anymore. He's here to save the day, and it's so sexy!

I'm silently staring at him as he defends me, mesmerized by his attempts at clearing away the false accusations. He looks mature and manly as he delivers his speech. But, to them, it's an interview. They'll take every single word and break it down until they find a way to twist it and make him or me look bad.

As he talks, explaining the situation enough to satisfy them, I can't help thinking about how I'd like his speech on a recording.

His voice can sell audio books... I'd pay a fortune to listen to him talk while drowning in his ocean-blue eyes... And I think many other women will agree with me on this one. His tone is entrancing, and I can't help getting lost.

Suddenly, Logan's arm curves in front of his face, covering himself from them as he pushes through. He makes a path through the crowd for the three of us to exit, and I can't stop thinking how sexy it is watching the reporters bow down to his demands to exit.

I'm holding onto his arm as he's pulling at my waist, yanking me free of them. I watch as, one by one, they put their cameras down, giving up and walking back to their news vans.

Holy shit! It actually worked!

We head quickly to Logan's car, and I'm satisfied to see him open the door for me, gesturing me inside. *This will be so much nicer than walking... Or taking an Uber in an attempt to rid myself of Carl. Plus, it'll give us some quality time together too!*

I start to climb in when Carl suddenly grabs my arm, stopping me. "Aeisha, I'll take you home. Please? I wanted to talk with you for a minute anyways, so it'll be hitting two birds with one stone!" he asks, practically begging but still trying to joke.

Don't try to play it cool now that Logan's here watching you, I think. My

anger boils as I remember his attempts to scare me and realize I don't know if I'll ever look at him the same way again. I can't take it and say what I think will get him to leave.

"I'm okay, thank you, though. Logan can take me home," I say.

"No, really. It's no big deal at all. Come on," he says, pulling my arm. I snap it back, but before I free his hand, Logan grabs it, yanking it off my arm and stepping between us.

"Look, I'm not sure who you even are, but it doesn't matter. You're a man. So, you should know the rules. When a woman says no, she means no. That's not an invitation to badger her into saying yes," he says sternly.

Carl's expression changes from shock to anger as Logan is talking. I'm starting to worry about it, hoping it doesn't boil over and start another tantrum. I don't think Logan will be as calm and patient with him as I am.

Suddenly, he steps toward Logan, and my heart drops. *Please, Carl. Don't do this. Just walk away.*

"Look, I'm her best friend. I've known her for years. I'm just a concerned person who cares about her and wants to make sure she gets home safely, okay?" he says, attempting to grab my arm again.

Logan stops him before he makes contact. "I'm not going to repeat myself. I don't care who you are. I'm her boyfriend. We don't need your help. You can leave."

He turns and helps me into the car, shutting the door and walking around the front, away from Carl. I can see the death glare Carl gives him as Logan opens his door and climbs in beside me.

I throw on my seatbelt, wanting to get the hell out of here. I can still see Carl in the rearview as Logan speeds off. Just as we're about out of the parking lot, I hear Carl scream. "Fine, you asshole! You can take her home. But don't think you're getting rid of me that easily!"

I glance at Logan, seeing if he heard him, but I'm happy to see that he isn't even looking at him. I sit in silence as he speeds down the road, and I don't know what to do. I want to bring it up and explain what's going on, but I'm still in shock and jumpy from Carl's unexpected outburst.

He doesn't look at me as he drives, and I can't help wondering if he's upset. *Does he think something's going on with Carl? Does he suspect that the reporters were actually catching something suspicious?*

LOGAN

I drive down the road, happy to be out of the media storm. I feel furious and confused on so many levels. My hands shake as they grip the steering wheel.

When I got the text from Aeisha asking for help, I didn't understand what it meant. My friend Jack was the one to fill in the missing piece of the puzzle, letting me know she was being accosted on a live stream. Of course, I ran to her rescue as fast as I could, even though I still didn't understand exactly what had happened.

I look at her as my mind still spins at the events unfolding before me. *Who's doing this to us? I wonder. It's not on my end because I called my grandpa on the drive down. He seemed like a possibility at first. But his confusion confirms that he's not the culprit and settles my nerves a bit. But it still leaves the question of who's doing it.*

I bite my lip, trying to think of who else could be behind this. *It's pretty evident after this that someone intends to sabotage the wedding between Aeisha and me. But who the fuck can it be? I want this to be perfect, and nobody will stand in the way of that.*

I glance at Aeisha again. She's sitting silently in the passenger seat, staring at her feet. I can't tell if she's looking down because she's purposely avoiding my gaze, or if she's genuinely upset over the situation itself like I am.

"I-I'm sorry about Carl," she finally says.

"Him?" I glance at her. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm just glad you're okay."

"I didn't know he was going to be there today," she insists.

I soften my voice. "I believe you." And I do. I don't think anything untoward was going on.

She's pale, undoubtedly shaken up from the entire incident. I immediately start regretting dragging her into this shit show. *I mean, I'm sure she had no idea the contract would gain her so much attention...*

My demeanor softens slightly for her, and I want to say something. Something that will make everything seem like it'll be okay again. I'm just not sure what words to use.

"My grandpa didn't leak this, and I'm not sure who else would have done it. I'm sorry this has blown up so badly, Aeisha," I say suddenly, my voice heavy with regret.

Aeisha stares down at her toes quietly. "I've got a pretty good idea who it was," she says quietly, not changing her gaze.

My head quickly snaps to face her again. She finally looks up, her breathtaking hazel eyes meeting mine. "What? Who?" I ask, beyond confused at this point.

"My treacherous bitch of a half-sister. God forbid the spotlight is on me instead of her. I saw the look in her eyes the night I introduced you to my family," she says, venom in her tone.

I think about the suggestion for a bit. Her eyes are filling with tears, and it's apparent that she's on the verge of letting them flow. I feel my heart get heavy, and it hurts me seeing her this way.

Her being saddened or embarrassed by this is the absolute last thing I want, I think, my heart softening even more. We will figure this out, but it's apparent she needs me right now.

"Listen, please don't worry about any of this. I will support you through this, and we'll be okay. If it hadn't been her, it would have been someone else. People have a hard time allowing happiness in others. But I won't let anyone ruin our plans, okay?" I say, reaching out and momentarily placing my hand on hers. I squeeze it gently, trying to be as reassuring as possible.

I watch her visibly relax, and my words appear to slightly take stress off her shoulders. "Can we go to the mall and play arcade games? Please. It'll help me calm down," she asks, almost pleading with me to take her.

That has to be one of the strangest requests I have ever heard. She wants to escape publicity by going to a public mall and playing arcade games. Okay, now I've heard it all, I guess, I think to myself, incredibly confused.

I glance at her again, and her eyes plead with me. *Fuck it. If that's what*

she wants to do, I'm with her, so what is the worst that can happen?

I quickly change course, pointing my car toward the mall. I smile softly. "You got it," I say.

Aeisha smiles back at me happily. "Thank you," she says.

We make it to the mall and find our way to the arcade. As soon as we walk into the large room, her face lights up like a Christmas tree.

Okay, it may be a weird request, but after seeing her reaction, it's worth it. I'm thoroughly enjoying her amusement as she quickly runs to Galactica. *A woman after my own heart!* I think, and I quickly follow.

Three hours later, we can both hardly hold our heads up. *My brain is fried, but I kicked Pac-Man's ass!* I think with a sense of accomplishment at how we spent our evening together.

Aeisha's mood is now a total one-eighty, smiling and happy again as we leave the arcade. My heart's strangely content, seeing the light in her stunning eyes restored. We're walking out to my car, and I'm pretty sure she's thanked me at least twelve times for taking her.

It's my pleasure, honestly. I'm not sure how much video games relieve my stress, but watching her smile and laugh sure does!

I'm happy and oddly content as we reach the car. I open her door for her swiftly, assisting her as she slides into the passenger seat. After she's in, I shut the door and quickly get in on my side. Starting the car, the engine roars to life.

We take off out of the parking lot, talking aimlessly about the games we played. After a few moments, though, silence overtakes us both.

Suddenly, Aeisha breaks the silence. "Don't forget about the get-together between our families this weekend," she says, reminding me entirely of the occasion. "My dad is thrilled to talk with your grandpa to plan the engagement party," she says, a smile now riddling her face.

Damn, I forgot about it. But, it means I'm one step closer to completely controlling my money yet again! I think to myself happily.

I check my bank account later that night out of pure curiosity. Surprise fills me as I see that it's unlocked. Not entirely, though. It seems that only about fifty percent is accessible.

I guess that's a start, I think to myself.

I quickly text my grandfather, and he confirms that half's unlocked. He tells me that I'll see the other half the day Aeisha and I are married.

That's okay. I can work with fifty. For now.

AEISHA

My nerves are rattling as we approach the hotel, but there's something about Logan's presence next to me in the driver's seat that is comforting in some way. After the way he intervened with Carl and the reporters the other day, I can't help but feel somewhat protected when he is around.

The gravel crunches as we pull up on the drive. He settles the car into park and turns off the engine. My stomach turns as I see the other cars that have already arrived. It looks like everyone is here, waiting for their guests of honor.

"Here goes," he says, flashing me that smile, his ocean-blue eyes sparkling.

I can't help but smile back at him, even though my heart is racing. I'm not usually prone to nervousness, but then again, I've never faked an engagement and marriage before!

"What's up? You getting second thoughts?"

"No, what makes you think that?"

"Well, the terrified look on your face for starters," he replies, grinning as though this is obvious.

"What? Does it show? I mean –"

"Look, I know this isn't something that we would usually be into, but there's no reason why we both can't get through this, is there? After all, we're used to playing people every day in business."

"I know, it's just that those people aren't usually our families," I explain.

"True, but I have faith in you. Besides, my grandpa loves you, and I'm

pretty sure I can say the same about yours with me.”

I roll my eyes playfully. “So arrogant,” I tease. But hearing his words makes my chest swell a little. He obviously believes in my ability to do this and that feels...nice.

“Just telling the truth,” he says, shrugging his muscular shoulders.

I swallow and trace my eyes over the muscles that press against the fabric of his shirt. *Oh, my God. This guy is going to be the ruin of me.*

“Come on then, let’s do this.” He gets out of the car and appears at my door, playing the doting and gentlemanly fiance as he opens it for me to step out. A bolt of energy travels up my arm when he takes my hand and walks me into the hotel and toward the ballroom.

With any luck, this party shouldn’t be too difficult. I’ve already met his grandpa, and he’s already met my family.

This is just a chance for some of the more extended family to meet and us to plan the official details regarding our upcoming engagement party. That one will be more of a spectacle, and likely more nerve wracking.

Because my family lives about two hours away, Logan’s grandpa made arrangements for us to meet in one of his many hotel chains. He reserved the ballroom for the party, promising everyone who attended a room for the night. That way, we could all relax and enjoy the evening without anyone having to worry about a long drive on top of it.

When the ballroom door opens, I can already hear the voices inside begin to soften as my father announces the happy couple. Behind him, I can see Logan’s grandpa, Lucas, and the rest of my own family, smiling and raising a glass as we enter.

A kiss lands on my cheek from my father, and he then shakes Logan’s hand heartily.

“We have just been getting acquainted with your wonderful family,” he says.

It’s obvious my father is impressed and is doing his best to do the same to the Miller family, especially Logan’s grandfather Lucas. I can’t blame him really. Who wouldn’t be impressed by someone as wealthy and powerful as him?

Lucas also kisses my cheek and then takes Logan’s face in both hands. “Who’d have ever thought we’d see the day when a woman as wonderful as Aisha managed to tame my grandson,” he exclaims.

I can feel my cheeks heat under the scrutiny. *Dear God, please let this go*

well and be over soon. Logan smiles back at his grandfather, and I wonder what is really going on behind that smile.

“So, let’s all enjoy this time getting to know each other. There’s plenty of champagne and the company of wonderful people. What else could anyone want?” says Lucas.

The next few hours aren’t as excruciating as I’d imagined but the champagne certainly helps. It’s nice to see our families getting along, and I try not to think about the trick we are playing on them.

Nevertheless, my father can’t help but point out that he’s glad I’ve finally settled upon a decent man, having so many failed relationships under my belt. *Thanks, Dad!*

Logan takes no notice, though. In fact, he seems to recognize the way my father is treating me about this and steps in to defend me.

“Well, we’ve all had our share of unsuitable partners,” he says, calmly. “I’m just glad we finally got around to finding each other. My only regret is not finding Aeisha sooner. It would’ve saved both of us a hell of a lot of heartache.”

“Indeed,” says my father, clearly taken in by Logan’s charm.

I’ve got to give it to him – the man is good. He can sure work a room and is completely working my father. Maybe this won’t be so hard after all.

“Well, Daniel,” Lucas says, approaching us after a while. “Now that we’ve been suitably wined and dined, maybe we should get down to business and get this engagement party settled.”

“I agree! After all, that’s why we’re here. So, thoughts?” says my father, beaming.

As if I would expect anything less, Emily pipes up about her upcoming event. The look Logan gives her is something to behold, but I just ignore her and the display that she and her fiance are putting on. There’s no way I’ll let her steal the attention away.

I lock arms with my own fiance and look up at him sweetly. “I can’t wait to announce the date,” I say. “Then everyone will know just how much we mean to each other.”

Logan brushes my hair over my shoulder. “Me too.”

We spend some time discussing what would work for all of us, before finally deciding on a date. I’m relieved when this is done so that we can all enjoy the party that my father has put on for us, glad for the chance to let off some steam by dancing.

“I’d be honored if I could have the first dance?” says Logan.

He’s so ridiculously handsome, I can’t imagine any woman ever refusing him anything. “But of course,” I say teasingly.

He sweeps me onto the dance floor, and I’m once again reminded how much fun this guy is. Arcade games, dancing, we could really have a great time together.

In no time our families join us. Even Lucas, who at the age of seventy-nine can still bust some moves.

“I need some air,” I say after a while. I leave the floor to find myself another drink and take a breather.

My cousins are gathered together and catching up. I join them, enjoying their company and hearing about what’s going on with them. That’s when I see Emily approaching Logan. She pulls him through the crowd, and he seems slightly unsteady on his feet.

Panic starts to grow in me – she is definitely up to something. I follow them out of the function room and towards one of the guest rooms. And that’s when I see her placing a finger on his lips and tracing a hand down his chest.

What the hell!

AEISHA

The anger I feel surprises me. I can't work out if it's because Emily is trying to get one over on me or if I actually feel jealous of her with her filthy hands all over him. I mean, this is just supposed to be an arrangement, not the real deal, but even so.

They disappear into the room but before the door closes shut, I manage to reach it. I jam my foot in the small gap and burst in. "Stay away from my fiance!" I yell.

Logan looks back at me, confused. It doesn't even seem like him. He's usually so in control but now looks completely drunk, and it feels weird. He wasn't like that when we were dancing just a few minutes ago.

Emily's laughter drives the rage of the devil into me. She really is a disgusting piece of work, and I'm ashamed to share even some of my genetics with her. She draws a hand softly over his perfect face

"Tell him that. It's me he wants," she says, the smugness oozing from her. "Maybe this engagement won't be going ahead after all."

I look at him, astonished. But he says nothing, as though someone has stolen his tongue. I don't think for a minute she's telling the truth, but his lack of action surprises me. What the hell has gotten into him?

It takes everything I have not to launch myself at her. No one has ever had this effect on me, but this girl could challenge a saint. I won't let her reduce me to that, though. Wouldn't that just make her day?

The smirk on her face genuinely makes her look ugly, in a bitter kind of way. How did she get to be so awful? How am I related to someone so vile? I wish our father could see her now. Then he'd know exactly who she is.

“Is that so? Or maybe *you* just wanted to cause a scene, create a scandal for us. Well, I won’t let you ruin my wedding!” I yell.

Logan slumps onto the bed resting his face in his hands. I didn’t even realize he’d drunk that much. I mean, we’ve all had a good time with the champagne, but I know that a few glasses of that wouldn’t affect him like this. He could drink me under the table any day.

“Oh, lighten up, Sis. It’s a prank. I just want to let you know that you will never win against me, my dear sister! It’s just the beginning.”

A prank. All this just to get to me. There’s no way she will ever just let me have my moment. This girl is a narcissistic bitch. It makes me even more determined to make this arrangement between Logan and I work.

When she walks past me, I have to close my eyes and take a deep breath. I can’t even look at her, or else I won’t be able to control myself. Thankfully, I hear the door click shut, and I finally let out a long, deep sigh of relief.

I couldn’t bear to stand another second in her toxic presence. Tears of anger and frustration start to well behind my closed lids, but there’s no way I’ll spill any on her account. She’s caused enough harm, and I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

When I open my eyes, Logan is standing before me. The smell of his cologne is delicious, and it gets stronger as he leans down and takes my face in his hands. I look up into those eyes of his before he kisses me.

What the hell?

His mouth is firm but not forceful, and I find myself wondering what this is about. Is it just because he’s drunk so much? I should pull away, but I don’t. The feel of his lips against my own is just too good.

Oh, God, I shouldn’t be doing this.

My head spins and my body melts under his touch, and when his tongue sweeps into my mouth I moan deeply into his. There’s no going back now, this just feels too damn good. Wrong, maybe but so very right.

I reach up and hold the back of his head, his golden hair soft beneath my fingers. I tease his hair between my fingers, utterly caught up in the feeling of being so close to him. I move down his neck and to the top of his strong shoulders.

I’ve wondered how he would feel in my hands, but the reality is a thousand times better. He’s firm and strong, and perfectly sculpted. The picture-perfect image of a man and, even though it’s just a contract, he is mine.

“Aeisha,” he moans as I pull back before plunging my tongue into his hot, wet mouth.

He tastes of champagne and pure masculinity. It’s not something I can explain, just something I feel and sense and want to dive into.

This man is so hot, it’s ridiculous. I mean, if you needed to find a fake marriage partner, he would definitely be at the top of the list of candidates. Lucky for me, I found him.

The way he kisses me is wild and desperate, as if he’s been wanting to do this for a while. Maybe he did, maybe I wanted this too. Who wouldn’t want to be this close to someone so perfectly formed?

His hands grab at my waist, pulling me ever closer to him, and I can feel how much he wants me. His breath is short and ragged, as is my own. I can barely breathe as he owns my mouth.

He runs a hand up my back, then seeks out my curves with the other. *Oh, God, Logan.* Next he cups my ass, pulling me close to his hardness, and I’m almost undone. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anyone as much as this. What is happening here?

I enjoy the feel of his hands on my body, his moans getting deeper as he likes what he finds. A hand slips inside my dress, and the sensation of his bare skin against mine sends shivers over my whole body.

But suddenly I’m jolted out of this absolute state of ecstasy. I can’t do this, not now. My head is spinning at a thousand miles an hour, vividly replaying the party, the champagne, my sister!

It’s all too much, and he’s not even in his right mind. There’s no way this can happen, not here, now like this. I’m not sure it should even be happening under any circumstances. This is nothing but a business agreement!

Pulling away from him, I push him back on the bed. “Sleep if off, Logan,” I say, before straightening myself up and leaving.

AEISHA

All I can think about is last night and how I felt under his touch. His lips on mine and the sounds of his moans as I stroked my tongue against his...

“So, we’re agreed, we’ll go and get fitted for our engagement outfits today?” Logan says over breakfast.

He seems surprisingly bright and not hungover at all. If I’m honest it’s slightly annoying, as I can feel the champagne headache coming on.

“Sure,” I say, pulled away from my thoughts of us and what happened yesterday. “Where?”

“Don’t worry, I know just the place,” he says reassuringly.

Of course he does, he’s Logan Miller. There’s something so safe about knowing he is there to always see to tasks in his effortless way.

“You okay to go in the next hour?” he asks. “It’s just I have some work to take care of later. I want to get back home before it's too late.”

“Sounds good to me.” I look at him across the breakfast table and wonder what is going on in his head today. Does he even remember much of our kiss last night?

He’s digging into his eggs and coffee and when he catches my eye, I look away. He’s made no reference to what happened, and I don’t know how to deal with it. It doesn’t seem to be bothering him though – he’s the usual Logan.

Except then he surprises me. He leans over the table, his complacent face suddenly twisting into a confused scowl. “That was weird last night, wasn't it?” he asks quietly, his eyes darting around to make sure no one else can

hear.

"I didn't mean to go with your sister," he continues, sounding apologetic. "I can't explain it. I didn't feel like myself. You don't think she did something to me, do you?"

With Emily, anything is possible. But neither of us know for sure, so eventually we drop the matter for now. I'll deal with Emily later.

He finishes eating while I head back to our room. I finish packing up the few things I have to put in my overnight bag before we check out of the hotel. Then I say goodbye to my family, thanking them for taking the time to attend our little get together here. Well, everyone except Emily, that is.

As requested, I'm ready an hour later and am more than impressed at the exclusive boutique that he takes us to. I shouldn't be surprised, of course, but it keeps on happening where this man is concerned.

"Ladies first," he says to the attendant, who takes us through to the fitting rooms and brings a selection of the most beautiful gowns I have even seen. I'm used to the finer things in life, but even I don't dare to see the price tag on these pieces.

There's so much to choose from but the one I settle on is navy blue satin. With just a hint of a green undertone, it sets off my hazel eyes and curves perfectly.

I emerge from the fitting room to find Logan on the plush sofa waiting for me. My heart skips a beat to see the reaction on his face when he sees me, his jaw visibly slackening. I feel amazing in this dress, but seeing his reaction makes me feel a million dollars.

"So, I think this one," I say. "Erin has shown me the most wonderful gowns, but this is the one I'm the most fond of." I spin around slowly, looking back over my shoulder seductively, knowing exactly the type of effect I'm having on him and enjoying every single second.

"Logan?"

"Huh?" he manages to say.

He's speechless, and I try not to laugh. "What do you think of this one? The right decision?"

He swallows and eventually speaks. "Oh, yeah, I'd definitely go with that one."

"You sure? I want to look my best for our big night." I'm enjoying the tease.

He nods, his jaw still almost on the floor. "That one. One hundred

percent.”

“Perfect. It really is stunning and looks perfect on you,” says Erin, the attendant. “I’ll get that all arranged for you, Miss Williams.”

“Thank you, Erin, and thank you for all of your assistance,” I say, beaming. I truly feel like a knockout in this dress, and Logan has just confirmed that for me. In fact, it’s the first time I’ve seen the confident Logan Miller lost for words.

“You’re welcome. So are you up next, Mr Miller? I’ll call for Miles who can assist you.”

“Yes, thank you,” says Logan, regaining his composure.

I take off the gown, looking forward to seeing Logan suited and booted. He always looks great, but seeing him in a tux will be a treat, I’m sure.

I’m not disappointed at all when I see him standing in front of me in a black tuxedo with a blue tie that perfectly matches the dress I picked out. This man oozes sex appeal. He is like a Greek god. Any woman would collapse in a heap at his feet. After last night, that includes me.

After a busy morning, we head for some coffee before going back home. There’s something that’s been on my mind, and I’m glad as this gives me a good chance to speak to him about it.

“So, I was wondering about some things,” I say hesitantly. “The engagement is almost sealed and then there’s the wedding, and I think we need to talk about other people.”

“Other people,” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, you know, *seeing* other people. It’s just I overheard a woman at your office thanking you for a gift and I wondered if you two were... you know?”

My stomach turns when he says nothing, but I think it’s because he can sense I haven’t finished yet. I almost don’t want to put this to him just in case he refuses, and then what would I do?

“I know in the contract it says we can do whatever we want, but I was wondering if we could make an amendment?”

“Go on.”

Oh, God, this is torture.

In the end, I just decide to spit it out. “I wondered if we could stipulate that we should be exclusive for the year and not engage in any other relationships.”

There’s a small silence, and I almost don’t want to hear the answer. But

I'm taken aback when he very calmly puts me at ease, because it's not what I expected at all.

"The woman at the office you're talking about is nothing but an employee. I'm not sure what gave you the impression otherwise. Plus, I'm engaged to you now, and you're the only woman I'll be paying any attention to, believe me."

My stomach flips with relief and excitement but I'm suddenly reminded of him with Emily last night. If I hadn't seen them and burst in, would he have been kissing her the way he kissed me? Could something more have happened between them if they weren't busted?

But the intensity with which he's looking at me melts all of those thoughts and feelings into a pathetic puddle on the floor. Because there's something in his eyes that's telling me I have nothing to worry about, and that Logan Miller really does only have eyes for me.

LOGAN

The engagement party a few weeks later is in full swing, with luxurious decorations, gold trimming, a glass swan as a centerpiece, and booze free flowing. It is taking place at the main Miller Hotel and Restaurant, naturally, and business tycoons from all over the world have been invited. I walk into the dining hall, astonished by the elegance and the sheer number of faces, both familiar and new.

Aeisha seems more calm now after we went over the contract again. I officially added a clause agreeing we would be exclusive for a year, just as she requested. The curve hugging blue gown, too, has softened my resolve. I find myself slipping in a glance every now and then that may not have been a requirement of our contract.

I hold her hand as people around us cheer and congratulate us. Music blares as we travel to visit various pockets of people, each at their own dining table. I greet each and every person, which takes some time, my face plastered with a permanent look of plastic satisfaction.

Aeisha, of course, knows that this is all part of the deal. If we are going to make this look real, we have to do it in front of the people who are going to judge it most harshly. My grandfather, of course, is the king of the castle, with the keys to my inheritance resting solely in his hands.

But something else is moving inside me as I introduce Aeisha to each and every business man and woman who deals with our company. Her dark brown skin sparkles under the opulent light, her lipstick a deep purple glow over her enchanting smile. I find myself feeling an excitement that transcends physical attraction each time she looks at me.

“Doing okay?” I find a moment to check on her when we are alone at our designated table. It is brief, but I want her to know how impressed I am that she is taking all of this in stride.

“It’s a marathon, not a sprint, right?” Her tone is playful and serene, and she shoots me a cute wink. Something moves through me, and I clear my throat to ignore it.

I pick up my drink and speak into it like we’re on a covert mission. “They are going to call us up to the center of the room for some engagement party games,” I murmur. “I’m not sure how long all of that is going to last, but I wanted you to know.”

Aeisha looks at me, her posture impeccable, the squeeze of her bra presenting some delicious cleavage. I notice it, but I am taken by her eyes. Those hazel, forest green eyes, both mysterious and intriguing.

“If you go to the circus, you have to play with the animals,” she says, smirking.

“You’ve got all the metaphors going tonight,” I jest.

Just as we finish talking, the MC of the night, my friend Jack, calls us to the center of the dining hall. Aeisha moves in powerful, dominant strides, not a single moment of hesitation passing through her body.

We participate in a few trivia games about each other and our relationship, which is something I saw coming. I had a paper prepared for Aeisha outlining the fictionalized story of our romance, as well as a few small facts she may not know about me.

It all goes down swimmingly, but our guests holler and chant the entire way through. We play something called ‘the shoe game,’ where we switch shoes, then have to answer questions about who has the better taste in music, who is neater and who is more adventurous.

The fact that booze is flowing most certainly helps. Aeisha doesn’t hesitate in any of her responses, with only a few slip ups that go unnoticed by the intoxicated crowd. I am relieved when it is over, finally able to have a seat and relax with a few drinks.

“You’re incredible,” I whisper to Aeisha back at our table. She is holding a glass of champagne near her lips, and she smiles mischievously. I start to think about our contract when a woman approaches the table.

“Care to join me for a dance? For old times sake?”

We shoot our gaze up at the same time, and my heart drops in my chest. The woman standing there is an ex-girlfriend of mine named Raven. She is a

formidable woman with long hair the shade of her name, eyes dark and menacing.

“We just sat down,” I quip. “Give me a second to recover.”

Raven was nothing but a fling, like all of the women in my life. She wanted more, but I wasn’t willing to give her that. She stands still now while the music blares, waiting patiently and unmoving.

Aeisha stays silent and respectful, which is her nature. But I don’t want her to think anything of this woman, or really, any other one. Not only is it in the contract, it is what I want.

“I will speak to you later, Raven. Just give us some time, okay?”

Raven nods, her eyes perceptive and penetrating. “I look forward to it.”

She spins around and hovers over the dance floor, the flash of neon lights painting some color over her drab but sensual attire.

I immediately look over at Aeisha and touch her thigh. She freezes for a second, and I pull it away. “Sorry,” I confess. “I don’t want you to think that she means anything to me. That was all a long time ago. I don’t know who even invited her, or let her in, to be honest.”

I try to laugh it off, but Aeisha isn’t laughing. But she also doesn’t seem bothered or offended. “I know Logan. I trust you, we signed the contract and talked it out. You don’t need to reassure me.”

I gulp, feeling like that is exactly what I need to do. But I leave it for now, turning back to watch the guest frolic and interact on the dance floor.

For most of the night, the contract doesn’t come up again, and we stay lost in the moment. I catch myself looking at her when she isn’t looking at me. I admire her, in ways beyond her obvious goddess of an appearance.

“Such a beautiful couple!” my grandfather exclaims, one of the few who isn’t drunk. “I am going to be so proud to call you my daughter-in-law.”

He shakes Aeisha’s hand dramatically. He has liked her since their first meeting, but it still pleases me to see that his approval continues. At that moment, I know we have made it through the night, and I have this in the bag.

Once my grandfather leaves, Aeisha tells me that she is going to the bathroom. I pull her in by the waist and kiss her forehead, not wanting to cross the line, but also wanting to keep our appearance of a lustful, nearly newlywed couple.

“Hurry back now,” I growl.

She doesn’t push me away but flashes me an understanding grin. I watch

her hips sway back and forth as she walks out of the dining room, hypnotized by her flawless figure.

When she's gone, I start to feel empty. It is a strange feeling that I have yet to encounter. But I shake it off, focusing on the performance of the night at hand. Our mission is to keep everything thinking we are actually madly in love.

I move back to our designated table, lost in thought and reverie.

AEISHA

I move out of the dining hall and into the bathroom, feeling lighter and far more positive. Despite all of this being fake, the celebration feels real. I am trying not to get too caught up in it or to lose myself in over analysis. So for now, as far our agreement goes, everything is working out right.

The appearance of one of Logan's flings could have thrown me off my game, but I was feeling confident and calm, especially after the performance of a few engagement games. She is beautiful, of course. I'm sure all of the women Logan has been with are lovely.

But that doesn't matter as I'm willing to let the past lie. We made a deal. For at least one year, we wouldn't look at anyone else. Whatever happens after that will come up on its own, and I will deal with it then. Worrying about things that happened before we ever even met seems foolish and over dramatic.

I do my business in the stall and come out to wash my hands. I am lost in the moment, smiling to myself as I think about the silly games we just played. I enjoyed all of it, despite the fact that I had to study information on my fiance like a cheat sheet before an exam.

"I never thought this day would come."

I hear the door of the bathroom push open lightly, while a gorgeous, voluptuous woman walks in. I turn around, shocked by her attractiveness like any man or woman would be.

She has red flaming hair held up in a neat ponytail, is nearly six feet tall, and has curves for days. Even I am starting to feel flustered as I glance at her waist, her hips, that bursting bosom. The blood red dress she wears is skin

tight, highlighting the figure of a woman who might as well be Aphrodite.

“Sorry?” I say, trying to find the dryer without taking my eyes from hers.

She smiles. It is pretty, sexy and conniving.

“I never thought Logan would be the type to finally settle down. With a good woman, too,” she says, her heels clicking towards me. “In my experience, he’s always been the ‘hit it and quit it’ type. You know, the boys that never grow into men.”

I cannot find the dryer, so I wipe my hands stealthily on my dress. The woman floats towards me, and I feel a mix of anxiety and annoyance as her glare doesn't waver, eyes as deep and blue as Logan's.

“My name is Christina,” she says, holding out a hand to me. “I’m Logan’s on-again, off-again girlfriend.”

I have never been a woman who is jealous of other women, especially when it comes to possession of a man. It’s all very old fashioned and the opposite of what women should actually be doing, which is supporting each other.

But standing here in the bathroom, this woman holds out her slender hand to me while her cleavage meets my eye line, big enough to smother me. And for the first time, I start to feel an irrational anger.

I take her hand anyway, trying not to let myself get too riled up. I raise my eyebrows, playing stupid.

“Oh, his on-again, off-again girlfriend?” I say, shaking her hand. “That’s interesting. Last time I checked, fiance is a notch above that, isn’t it?”

We let go of each other, and she begins to chuckle, but it sounds like a threat. Our gazes are locked, and I don’t want to be the first to break it. That would be like submitting to a bull, ready to charge.

“You are certainly clever, I’ll give you that,” Christina says, sauntering with incredible posture toward one of the stalls. “How did you do it?”

I cock an eyebrow, suitably irked. “Do what?”

“Bag a man like that,” she says, leaning against the stall. “These ones are like wild animals, you know the type. You catch one in your trap and hold onto it for dear life.”

I turn away, checking my makeup in the mirror in hopes that she would just let it go. But I see her come up behind me and lean over into my ear, her breath warm and ticklish.

“Or maybe you’re the perfect capture. Waiting patiently for the right man, the right season. Like a Venus flytrap.”

My skin prickles from the sensation of her breath and with a frustration that is causing me to see red. I shouldn't be this mad. He isn't actually going to be my real husband, after all.

But I spin around, leaning away from her with a look of utter indifference. She stares at me, a ghost of a smirk on her lips. She clearly is a woman used to getting her way.

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Christina. But I am going to do you a favor and give you some advice. Don't get involved. It's a done deal now, and you've lost the race."

She then, out of nowhere, emerges into cackling laughter. It echoes in the bathroom so high pitched that my ears ache.

"Oh you are one of the more interesting ones!" she says, raising her voice.

I really don't want anything drastic to break out at this party. I already have enough bullshit to deal with in my own family. A couple of women fighting in a bathroom is altogether boring and unoriginal, isn't it?

I hold my hands out to her, waving the white flag. "Let's just leave it, Christina. We don't want this to get out of hand."

Her eyes narrow at me, darkening in the storm of her malevolent thinking. I have never seen anything so intimidating in my life.

"We will see."

She finally closes the stall door, and I bolt out of the bathroom as fast as I can. Of course, on the way back I must look frazzled, because Emily stops me.

"Are you okay, honey? What happened?" she asks with fake sincerity.

I stand in the hallway, feeling breathless. I can't confide in Emily. She is already trying to work against me, anyway. So I shake my head, and try to walk back to the dining hall. "Nothing, it's fine," I say, pushing her away.

It is then that Christina emerges from the bathroom, her voice higher, angrier and assertive. If she wasn't directing it towards me, I would have felt a little impressed.

"Good luck keeping a guy like that!" she says in a firm tone. "Logan isn't husband material. I hope that you know that beforehand."

I cringe and slide my jaw back and forth. People are looking at us, holding their drinks as they sway and snicker. I know that this isn't something Logan needs, either. Every person who he had ever had dealings with is here tonight. If they see his new fiance and ex-girlfriend squabbling

like two stupid teenagers, there is surely going to be repercussions.

So I try to approach Christina with empathy, seeing her as a woman whose heart was likely broken by a Logan who wasn't the most kind. I hold my hands out again, speaking like I am approaching a lion.

“Christina, let's not do this, okay? This is really not good for either of us.”

I hear someone come out of the dining hall as a wash of music from the eighties blares through the opening door. Instantly, I can somehow intuitively sense that Logan has entered the vicinity.

LOGAN

I sit at the table, watching with amusement as our guests interact and dance happily. It takes me nearly a full ten minutes to realize that Aeisha has been gone for a while. I get up, not out of concern, but a simple desire to be near her.

I walk casually with my hands in my pockets, then push the door of the dining hall open. I walk into the hallway, the music disappearing behind me as the door seals closed.

I see Aeisha immediately with her hands held in the air, walking toward someone familiar. My heart drops when I realize it is another ex, Christina, who for whatever reason was invited to the party.

“Christ,” I whisper to myself.

Emily is looking at me, which doesn’t help the situation. Her eyes are similar to Aeisha’s, except far more judgmental. I scurry past her before she has the chance to harrass me.

I can hear Aeisha speaking, but I slide right in, interrupting whatever chaos had been ready to ensue. “What’s going on here?”

I stand half between the women, half not, not wanting to cause more of a scene than what has already progressed. Aeisha gives me a scowl that could cut through any man’s heart. “We’re just talking,” Aeisha says with wide eyes. “No need to worry.”

I gaze over at Christina. She looks incredible as always, but that doesn’t seem to matter anymore. I motion with my chin to the smoking area, where there seems to be no one for the time being. “Let’s talk, Christina,” I say, beginning to walk away.

“Logan...”

“Come with me.”

I cut off Christina and begin to walk away. I touch Aeisha’s wrist before disappearing out onto the terrace. “I will handle this.”

Her scowl has melted away, but there remains a flicker of something else. I choose to deal with it later and walk out into the brisk night.

“You’ve really pulled yourself together, Logan...” Christina begins, pulling a cigarette pack from her side. “Everyone else might accept it, but I see it for what it is. Pure theater.”

I lean against the stone of the balcony and let out a heaving sigh. When I turn back to the woman I’d had several passionate nights with, I see her light up, the orange glow of the cigarette bringing back some familiar memories.

In the past, I would have enjoyed these memories. They would even have been enough for me to sneak away with her, indulging our bodies again and again until I’d had my fill. But looking at her now, all I see is a nice painting, with very little emotion attached to it.

She raises her eyebrows as she huffs in a draw, then puffs out some air into the night. “What are you thinking?” she says in a sultry voice.

“I’m thinking that you should stop whatever you are doing,” I say firmly. “This is a done deal. I am committed to Aeisha now.”

Christina brings the cigarette to her lips again, taking a long, dramatic drag. When she blows it out, she is grinning.

“A done deal, eh. That’s an interesting way to describe marrying the love of your life.”

I clench my fists, and I move toward her. She doesn’t waver, of course. Christina isn’t a woman who is easily intimidated.

“I don’t want any of this shit anymore. What can I do to get you to leave and never come back?”

Christina grasps her chest in an animated fashion, the ash from the cigarette swirling to the ground like snow.

“Ouch, Logan. That really got me,” she jokes, still grinning. “You really think I am the kind of woman who can be bought?”

I look around, making sure no one is looking. I then take out my wallet and count out three hundred dollars. I can feel Christina drooling at the mere sight of it.

“I know you are that kind of woman,” I say in a low tone. “Both of us know it. It’s your prerogative.”

She takes the cash and stuffs it into her bra, also looking around to see if anyone had seen. But I know that she doesn't really care. That is why we worked out so well in the past. We were carnally focused, neither of us getting attached to the other.

"Fine, Logan. But just know that you look really sexy tonight." She comes toward me, reaching to touch my tie. "And I could ride you until the sun blushes at the moon."

Her voice is low and sultry, but it does nothing for me. At first, I start to wonder if my dick is broken, but deep down, I know the truth. This isn't who I am anymore.

I take her by the wrist before she gets a chance to touch me.

"You should go now, Christina."

She sighs, then butts her cigarette out on the stone. Then, without looking back, she leaves the terrace. I watch her dramatically sway her hips as she flounces away.

It would have been a glorious sight in the past, just looking at her ass move, but now, she may as well be made of cardboard.

What is wrong with me?

I go to leave the terrace then spot someone hurriedly walking away. I'm not surprised to see Emily, who was likely trying to eavesdrop on our conversation.

That is another situational drama that I will have to deal with later.

I go back into the hallway and don't see Aeisha. I return to the dining hall, all smiles and laughter, to find her sitting back at our designated table.

She looks more forlorn than she did earlier. It makes me sad and pissed off.

I move to the table and sit next to her. I curl my arm over her chair and speak quietly.

"Hey."

She peers over at me with one side eye. That is enough.

"I'm sorry about all of that. I spoke to her, and it isn't going to happen again. I can promise you that."

Aeisha lifts her nearly empty glass and downs the rest of her drink. She swallows hard, and I can sense her frustration boiling up.

"It's fine, Logan. Really, it's okay."

She then gets up suddenly, moving back to the bar alone. I sit for a while, ruminating about what just happened, but then try to put on the mask of a

happy engaged couple.

I get up and begin to mingle around again, trying to distract myself. As I do that, I can see Emily always in the background, watching me. I try not to let her know that I can see her.

She likes to think that she is stealthy, but she really isn't. She is a selfish person wanting her sister to fail at all costs, just so she can win.

That in itself makes me want this to work. Even if it is just for a year, it is going to be the most believable fake marriage that anyone will ever see. I look around through the dark of the dance floor for Aeisha, missing the grip of her hand on my arm.

AEISHA

The wedding is happening today.

Never in my wildest dreams would I have believed someone if they told me I would be having a wedding at this young, tender age. I would have believed them even less if they told me that I would be doing it due to a contract, not true love.

Alas, here I am, getting ready for one of the grandest events I've ever been a part of. I feel like I am having an out of body experience as the girls around me fawn. All of my step-sisters, including Emily, hang on me.

A part of feels the sharpness of her jealousy with great pity. The other part is vengeful and thankful that all of this is working out for solely me.

We get married on a hill just outside a decadent church, under a massive cherry blossom tree. The pink petals sway and glide in the air like colorful snow. It is all very romantic and expensive looking, appealing in its dreamlike essence.

It is so beautifully orchestrated that I start to think about how I would feel if this actually was my wedding day. I look down the aisle at the gorgeous specimen before me in his tuxedo, a dome of a blinding blue sky backdropped behind him. Logan, the man every woman has wanted at some point in their lifetime.

I walk down the aisle to the sound of a harp playing. My dress is luxurious and flowing, a vintage piece from the most sought after stylist in Paris. Logan had insisted on it, even if it was only going to be used for our performance. "It has to be a believable performance," he had said.

The way I feel as I approach my husband-to-be is far more than

believable. It transcends beyond acting, beyond pretending, and morphs into something almost resembling reality.

Logan is a devilishly handsome man with a playboy reputation. That, in itself, would have been enough for me in the past to write him off. But the way he is looking at me right now, reading his vows with those deep ocean blues, I can see why every woman who comes into contact with him wants to spend every aching hour with him.

I say my vows, which we had written together. We didn't want them to be too over the top, but they still had to be somewhat personal. Crowd-pleasing, as Logan had said.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife!"

The minister stands by eagerly, waiting for us to kiss. Logan takes my hands and steps forward, planting a kiss on me with firm passion.

I don't even hear the applause of the crowd beyond us, because his lips on mine simply take my breath away.

When we part, we hold hands and then climb into the limo that will take us to the reception hall. In the car, he is beaming and touches my leg on impulse.

It feels strong and warm, sending electricity through my veins. He quickly snatches it away.

"Oh, sorry," he mutters.

"You can leave it there," I say softly.

He returns his hand to my thigh, placing it a little too high up to be platonic. But I like it there. Plus, it does make us seem more like a couple who cannot keep their hands off each other.

When we get to the reception, I am stunned by how dazzling it looks. There is a gold and silver theme to it, which may sound tacky, but it works in a modern, minimalist aesthetic.

Logan holds my hand as we parade inside the reception area, everyone around us fondly cheering with love and sincere joy. I make eye contact with my mother through all of this, whose smile is small but still present.

We participate in the usual newlywed traditions that are expected of us – first dance, first cutting of the cake, the bouquet toss and more. Emily doesn't even participate in the bouquet toss because her most recent fiance canceled the wedding. All because he was unfaithful to her. I try to focus on my own enjoyment as the night goes on, not letting any drama get to me.

Through the process, I take on drink after drink at the free, open bar.

Logan made a point in having one so the guests could enjoy themselves without thought or worry.

I don't drink often. When I do, it is hardly ever heavy. But looking at Logan as we dance together, sit together, him leaning into me and kissing my neck like I am his real wife... it all starts to get to me. I drink more, hoping it will soften the growing thorns inside my stomach.

We dance the night away, and everyone is enjoying themselves. There are photographers there, who are going to publish a few of the photos and release the story across the news line. This doesn't bother me as I am fuelled with liquid courage.

Logan takes me by the hand, leading me with a smile back to the table. Everything looks blurry, but I can still see his handsome face.

"Aeisha, are you all right?" he whispers to me, away from the cameras."I'm worried about you drinking too much. I know this is a lot to deal with, but don't worry, it will all soon be over."

The sentence draws up venom inside me. A part of me wants to slap him, while the other part wants to kiss him until he can't breathe. So I lean on his shoulder, taking in deep breaths before returning back to the entertainment.

"You are so...so hot...Logan," I say, hearing myself stutter. "I wonder why you picked me, but then I realize...I'm hot, too!"

I start to laugh, and a few people look over. I barely notice because Logan is patting my head and encouraging me to drink water.

"You are definitely hot, my darling," he says, pouring the jug in front of us. "Let's sit here for a bit and talk. Tell me what you are thinking."

My mind is a freight train of thought. I can't tell him what I am actually thinking, can I? Everything is so confusing and blended together into some terrible blob of existence.

I shake my head and settle into his shoulder. He strokes my hair, which calms me down for the time being.

I don't want to embarrass myself or him, so I stay put for a bit, only chatting with people who come up to us. I feel Logan sneak his hand onto my leg, and lust blasts through me like a volcano ready to burst.

"Do you want me?" I ask.

"What was that?"

I lift my head and rest my chin on his shoulder. His eyes are bright still, but with more panic this time.

"Do you want me? Like tonight. You said I was hot, too."

Logan turns away and doesn't answer me. He brings water to me multiple times, which I turn away from. He isn't looking frustrated, but something more like mournful.

I keep away from the booze for the rest of the night, until it is time to go to our honeymoon suite. I can feel my body giving into desire, which in itself is a massive breach of contract.

LOGAN

Aeisha and I make our way to the honeymoon suite reserved for us. My head spins, and I quickly realize I drank too much while serving our guests. Judging by Aeisha's stumbling, she has, too. We laugh with one another wandering up and down the hall, looking for suite 405.

I look forward to spending the entire night in her company. *We have grown to be close, and I enjoy her company. The wedding with her was so much fun, and I can't help but wish it was real in a small way. I really hope that having too much to drink isn't going to spoil the evening,* I think to myself, the idea sobering me up a little.

We finally find our suite. After trying to get the key card to work for five minutes, we figure it out and stumble into the room. I happily swing the door shut behind us, enjoying the smell of a clean hotel room.

I turn around to talk to Aeisha, curious about what she wants to do this evening. I am hoping it involves greasy snacks, movies and cuddling.

"Hey, what do you want to do tonight?" I ask gleefully, happy to finally be out of the crowd and just in her presence. Aeisha's silent as she thinks about it for a moment.

Suddenly, a mischievous smile appears. "I have an idea of what we can do," she says. I detect seduction in her voice and immediately get apprehensive. We make eye contact, her beautiful hazel eyes glimmering at me as she inches closer.

Aeisha wraps her arms around my neck. I pull her into me, hoping to distract her with cuddles instead of what her actions tell me is on her mind. It doesn't take long for her lips to find my neck and land passionate kisses, her

tongue making contact with my skin.

Fuck, neck kisses are my weakness. I can't allow this to happen when she's drunk, I think to myself, almost in a panic. I quickly try to distract her by asking if she wants me to run her a bath. Maybe the warm water will relax her enough to fall asleep, allowing her to sleep off the alcohol.

"No, I don't think so unless you'd like to join me," she says, winking at me. *A tempting offer. Under any other circumstance, I'd be carrying you into the bathroom right now. But, as badly as I want you, I can't give in. It'll just feel dirty like I'm taking advantage of you when you're drunk.*

"I don't think that's a great idea, hon. Why don't you see if you can find us something to watch? I'm going to use the restroom quickly, and then we can watch it," I say to her. The sexual tension in the room is growing by the second.

I can't have sex with her. That's absolutely a no-go, especially tonight. It's not fair when there's a possibility she won't remember it tomorrow.

It's taking everything in me to stop myself, especially with her sexy comments and neck kisses. But I know it's not a good idea, I think to myself as I use the restroom. The amount of self-restraint I'm exercising surprises even me.

The old me, before meeting Aeisha and starting to care for her, wouldn't have thought twice about this.

I finish my business, zip my pants back up and look at myself in the mirror. I adjust my shirt and splash cold water on my face before I leave. As soon as I open the door, I find Aeisha sitting on the bed waiting for me.

She quickly stands as I walk out and approaches me. "Logan, we just got married. Will you please just kiss me?" she begs, throwing her arms around my neck again.

I contemplate it for a moment. *I have no problem with just kissing her. My problem is that I feel like she will try and take it further. Would kissing hurt anything if I stop myself before it becomes an issue?*

Before I can come up with an answer, though, I hear the distinct sound of a zipper. Suddenly, Aeisha's beautiful wedding dress falls to the ground, revealing a set of incredibly sexy red lace lingerie. My cock suddenly springs to life, stiffening in my pants.

God damn it. She's so fucking attractive, and I want her so badly. I can't help eyeing her perfect body. My mouth begins to water as my jaw hits the floor. The lingerie fits her supermodel body perfectly, some of which is see-

through.

Stop it! You know better than this! You can't have her, and you know it! You need to restrain yourself.

I shake my head, thinking. *This isn't something I can let myself do. Drunk or not, she'll have to understand. I don't want her to feel I'm taking advantage of her. Jesus, what a dilemma...*

"Logan, I'm so hot," she says seductively, her tone almost moaning. Before I can even react, Aeisha pulls me into her, kissing me deeply and passionately, causing my cock to push against her leg.

"Please fuck me, Logan."

Why is this happening to me? This is all I've been able to think about since we met because she's so attractive. And the night she wants me, I can't do it. She's so seductive... What I wouldn't give to make her moan my name.

I can't, though. I refuse to have sex with her while she's drunk. No matter how badly I want to fuck her, I must resist. I know she'll respect me more in the morning if I stop this. I think to myself. The battle inside my head is in full swing now.

We can't have sex. But I can taste her lips, I finally decide, my morals winning over my lust for her.

She quickly kisses me again, and this time I give in, kissing her back. Her tongue parts my lips, causing our tongues to dance together as we make out passionately. The tension between us is building, and my mind screams to distance myself.

Suddenly, I'm watching her strip out of the lingerie, exposing her perky breasts and perfectly tight ass. Aeisha walks over to me, grabs my hands and presses them against her soft ass.

I can't help biting my lip as the sensation takes over me, and I throw her on the bed. Our kisses get stronger and more intense as I grind on her. My cock throbs, wanting to feel her so badly. Suddenly, she pushes my hand toward her thighs, and I stop.

Fuck. Logan, what're you doing? I jump off, nearly throwing myself against the wall, forcing distance between us.

"What happened?" she asks, sitting up. "You don't want me?" She's rubbing her hands along her sides and over her breasts. My breath catches in my throat as I try not to pounce.

"Of course I do. I want you so badly. But I can't. Not tonight..."

"Oh, come on, tonight's perfect. It's our wedding night, remember?" She

gets off the bed and walks toward me. "Come on, come back to bed."

I let her pull my hand, yanking me back to the bed with her, and she kisses my neck again. I lean back, feeling fantastic and forgetting why I can't do this. At least, until I feel her kisses moving down my chest.

"Hey, I'm sorry. But we can't do this tonight. Can I tuck you in? Maybe lay beside you and cuddle?" I ask, moving toward her side of the bed. She sighs and drags her feet to her side of the bed. I laugh at her appearance of a tantrum and help her under the comforter.

Before climbing into bed, I strip down naked. *Hopefully, this doesn't make her uncomfortable when she wakes up, but I get far too hot to sleep with clothing on,* I think as I crawl into bed next to her.

I gently lean in and kiss her cheek, careful not to disturb her peaceful slumber. I quickly shut the nightstand lamp off and throw my arm around her.

"Goodnight, my beautiful wife," I say softly before drifting off to sleep.

AEISHA

The sun shines through the curtains, waking me and warming my face. I notice the memory foam mattress feels like a cloud underneath me, and I lie on it, not wanting to move an inch. The pillow engulfs my head, forming it perfectly, and I want to lie here in this position all day long.

Why does the bed always feel so damn good in the morning? It comforts me in a way it never seems to do at night when I'm lying here trying to sleep. But then, when I have things to do in the morning, it feels like I'm floating on a cloud.

I stretch my arms, soothing my tingling muscles and resting my hands on the comforter underneath me. I grip it in my fingers,

This is so soft! I think until I realize it's softer than the comforter on my bed. *Wait a minute...*

My heart starts pounding as I slowly open my eyes, panic setting in as the room comes into focus. I realize I don't know where I am. *What the hell?*

I quickly sit up, my eyes darting around the room, looking for any sign of familiarity or a hint as to where I am. I turn beside me, and my heart settles momentarily as I spot Logan lying beside me.

Well, at least no one's kidnapping me, I think, smiling at him sleeping peacefully. My head starts to pound. I rub my temples, remembering how much I drank last night.

Oh, right! Logan and I ended up here after drinking too much. I remember laughing and joking with him about being in the honeymoon suite as we climbed into bed. Oh, my God. Wait a minute. Did we...?

I'm holding a blanket tightly in my hands and start to panic when I think

of my possible reason for holding it. I begin slowly lifting it. *Please don't be naked... Please don't be naked...*

I rip the blanket off, and panic washes over me at the sight of my nakedness underneath.

Oh no....

Reaching over to Logan's side of the bed, I reach for his covers, pulling them back slightly and noticing he's also naked.

Fuck. What did I do?

My hand flies to my mouth as I rack my brain in a panic, trying to remember anything after we got into bed. I don't remember a single thing. The unknown is worrying me, but then a thought occurs to me.

We're in a king-sized honeymoon suite, naked in bed together. There's no way we didn't have sex, I think, allowing my head to fall in my hands.

My first time, and I don't even remember it. How don't you remember it? I assume there's some evidence after the fact, right?

I walk into the bathroom, wanting to see if I look any different. As I get to the mirror, I'm saddened at the same reflection staring back at me.

I don't look older or wiser, I think, partially laughing as I recall everything anyone tells you about no longer being a virgin. I walk back to the bed, thinking about it, and it hits me.

Wait, if we did have sex, why don't I feel any different? There are too many stories about waking up the morning after a night of passion with tired legs and a pulsating sensation between them. If we had sex, why don't I feel anything?

Climbing back into bed, I tuck back into the covers as Logan rolls toward me. He's still sound asleep, and I can't help staring at his long eyelashes. I follow his nose down to his perfect lips and imagine how they feel on mine.

A feeling of relief washes over me as I realize there's no way we did anything in here. *He's too sexy, and just staring at his lips awakens my vagina. There's no way if we had sex that some part of me wouldn't remember it.*

I'm happy, not because I don't want it with him. But, because I do want him so badly, I want to remember it. I want to fully enjoy every inch of him and tease him, making him crave me...

Suddenly, I find myself inching closer, wanting to feel his lips on mine. *No! Aeisha, stop! You can't have him. No matter how badly he gets to you, you have to be stronger than this.*

I urge myself to sit back down, backing away from him and kneeling again. My gaze shoots to the wall in front of me. I try focusing on anything other than the gorgeous man lying next to me and my craving for him.

I'm counting the lines in the wallpaper until I hear him softly moan. My eyes dart to him again, noticing he's now on his back. I'm mesmerized by the noises he's making as I listen to the sounds of his soft breath and his body recharging.

My God, he's so sexy. How will I control myself when I know what his lips taste like and how they feel pressing against mine?

I can't help myself and slowly inch toward him. I slide my legs beside him, resting on my elbow as I watch his chest go in and out. His defined pecs force my eyes to follow them to his eight-pack abs.

Then, they inch farther, following his belly button down to the seam of the sheet. It stops just before it exposes him completely, leaving my imagination to run wild. I can't stop thinking about how soft the skin above it looks. I wonder how it'd feel, pressing against me as I sit on him.

Fuck, he's taking over me.

My mind keeps screaming. *Stop! Stop! Stop!* But I inch closer to his face anyway, and my hand presses against his warm chest, preparing to kiss him. As my eyes start to close, they suddenly jolt back open as Logan's eyes meet mine.

He stares at me for a moment, and his handsome eyes only make me want him more. "What are you doing?" he asks, sending a wave of panic through my body when I realize I'm inches from his lips, nearly resting my whole body on him.

AEISHA

“**I** -I don’t know!” I exclaim, confused. My hands are still lingering on his pec, and I don’t put any distance between us so our lips are still inches apart. I can’t stop looking at his own lips, wondering how they’ll feel on my skin, and I start imagining all the places they might go.

He doesn’t say a word, staring at me as I feel his breathing getting heavier until a grin appears. His handsome smile shows off his pearly white teeth, and it’s intoxicating.

Oh, my God. Why is Logan so sexy?

I can still smell his cologne from the night before. It’s turning me on even more and reminds me of why we’re here. Our honeymoon has been fake up to this point, but every single cell in my body burns for him, and I want to make at least one part of the experience real.

The longer I stare, taking in all of him and smelling his cologne, only intensifies the want I have so badly for him. It feels paralyzing because I know I shouldn’t feel this way. And it’s confusing me because I’ve never felt like this before. I know I can’t have him, he’s not mine to want, but the tension between us is almost too much to bear.

For some reason, the longer I contemplate my feelings and attraction for him, the worse it gets. *How can I want him so badly when I’ve never felt this way about men with whom I’ve actually been in relationships? Aeisha, you’re a virgin. You don’t even know what you’re doing, and he has experience in this department well beyond your knowledge. What if you disappoint him?*

The thought lingers in my mind for a second but is quickly tossed out as I look at his beautiful ocean-blue eyes. Amazingly, he’s here with me, and now

we're married. All I want is for our honeymoon to be authentic and for me to finally experience this with someone. He's the perfect man to show me what I've been missing.

I can't believe we're in the same bed. He's so sexy, and our faces are so close I can feel his warm breath. I really don't think I'll disappoint him, and he seems too lovely to compare me to others he's been with, anyways. Plus, if he's anything like how I imagine him to be, he'll teach me what he likes, and it won't be an issue.

He starts to speak, but I don't let him. Watching his lips move slightly is enough to make up my mind. I grab the sides of his face, pulling it into mine and kissing him passionately. My entire body gets a rush of pleasure as our lips meet. His lips feel hesitant for a moment until I use the tip of my tongue to part them, bringing our kiss deeper.

Any hint of hesitation he has melts away the second my tongue finds his. He lunges at me, biting my bottom lip and throwing me onto my back.

Oh my God, how does he do that without even a hint of struggle? He's so sexy.

His kisses start moving down my neck, hitting my collarbone. I feel his tongue emerge, sending a wave of goosebumps across my skin. He chuckles at the sight of them, but it seems to fuel him as he immediately moves to my breasts.

I feel his tongue circling my nipple slowly, and it's a rush. Every nerve is on fire, and it's making me want more. I grab his hand and slide it down my belly toward my clit. His hand gets right to the edge of touching it, and suddenly he stops.

The licking stops, too, and he looks up at me. "Does that feel okay?" he asks gentlemanly.

Does it feel okay? It's mind-blowing, and I'm trying not to fly off this bed, I think. Instead of answering, I nod aggressively, using my eyes to beg for more until I feel the tip of his finger making perfect circles on my clit.

He goes back to licking my nipple. My eyes close, as the passion's almost overwhelming.

Suddenly, his finger enters my opening, and I moan softly. *Oh, my God. That feels so good!*

He lets his fingers dance for a few minutes, teasing me and making me want more. Soon, I can't take it anymore and grab his cock.

He bites his lip, and it sends me over the edge. I let go of him, wanting

him to show me what he wants to do to me. He grabs his cock and starts sliding it up and down my clit, forcing me to grab his back. My nails scratch with frustration.

I'm about to tell him I can't take the wait any longer when I feel him slide it inside me, moaning as my wetness engulfs him. He starts thrusting upward, and a finger still circles my clit as he does. My volume increases the closer I am to finishing, and I don't know how he's getting me here so fast.

His thrusts get faster and harder until I feel him tense. He rubs faster as his body starts to shake. I get an overwhelming warm feeling in my vagina, and it starts to pulsate as I cum for him.

"Oh, Logan!" I yell as the pleasure consumes me. As soon as the words leave my lips, his body tenses. He moans, cumming just seconds after me.

Once he finishes, he slides out and lies beside me on the mattress. I'm staring at the ceiling, sweating and breathless, trying to wrap my mind around what just happened.

I've never done it before, but I don't think it's this fantastic for everyone or no one would ever leave the bedroom! I think as he grabs my hand. My legs are tingling, my toes are still numb, and I'm finding all these new senses exciting.

"So, that's what everyone's always talking about!" I giggle, playing with his hand. He's quiet for a moment, and I'm unsure if he doesn't hear me or is contemplating my statement.

"Wait, what do you mean?" he finally responds.

"Is it that good all the time? Or were we just really good at it?" I ask, not understanding the true intent behind his question right away.

"What do you mean, is it that good all the time? You would know!" He laughs. I'm silent, trying to find the right words to tell him that he's the one out of the two of us that knows what they're doing.

"But, yes. We were just really good at it. You were fucking amazing!" he exclaims, making me blush.

"Really?" I ask excitedly. "I'm so glad! I was so scared I would disappoint you. With your experience, I'm sure you've had some great sex."

"My experience?"

"Yes! I don't mean anything bad. I just mean, like, you know what you're doing, and I don't. So, I was just worried you wouldn't like it!"

"Did you?" he asks, looking confused.

I laugh breathlessly. "Oh, my God, yeah! You were amazing! I'm so

lucky to have been with someone like you my first time, who gave me an unearthly mind-blowing experience. Like, how am I supposed to –”

He interrupts and sits up quickly. “Wait, what do you mean the first time?”

I stare into his eyes, suddenly looking at him differently now that our lines have been blurred. “You were my first time, and it was amazing!”

He stares at me with a lost look on his face, and I’m awkwardly waiting for his response. *Damn, I must know more about sex than I think I do if he couldn’t tell. But, it feels so good to see what it’s like. We’re almost closer now, and the experience is definitely one I’m glad I waited for him to show me.*

LOGAN

There's no way Aeisha's still a virgin. I can't be hearing her correctly. She's definitely the best I've ever had. I don't understand how it's not from experience.

“How are you still a virgin? You have six ex-boyfriends! You didn't have sex with any of them?” I ask.

She smiles shyly. “I know, it probably seems weird. I mean, I'm 25. But I'm serious. I've been serious with guys a couple of times, but no one has made me want to go all the way. I wanted to wait for the right person,” she says.

Something about how she says it, like hinting that she's letting me be the right person, creates a new feeling inside me. I can't shake wanting to care for her outside our contract.



IT'S BEEN days since our amazing night in bed together. Since then, she's been cold and distant. I can't help wondering about the reason behind her actions. I want to get closer to her because our night together means more to me now that I know how big of a deal it is to her.

Aeisha walks into the kitchen, not making eye contact with me as I eat breakfast. I offer her a plate.

“No, thank you,” she says, “I'm going to shower and get ready for work.”

I sigh as she walks into the bathroom, and I stare at my plate. I'm contemplating what the matter might be, and I come to a solution. I slide my

chair in and walk into the bathroom, knocking as I enter. “Hey, are you busy tonight?” I ask.

Not even a second later, she shuts me down. “I am. Sorry!” she says, not giving me an explanation. I stand in the doorway momentarily, wondering what the hell is going on with her. What should I do if she won’t spend time with me? This is the third time she’s declined my date proposal by saying she’s busy, and I don’t understand why.

I walk back to the kitchen, trying to have patience with her. *Is she challenging me? Does she want me to get more creative? Because if that’s what she wants, I can give that to her!*

I start making phone calls and deciding my plans to spoil her, and I hear the shower shut off. I head into the bedroom, so she won’t listen to me placing a flower order. There’s a feeling rising inside of me, worrying me.

Why does it matter so much? Why is it bothering me? Usually, the second a woman shows a hint of wanting me to chase her, I run in the other direction. But something about her has only worsened since our night together. It’s like I’m glued to her.

Maybe it’s my need to keep her safe. She gave me one of the most important things a woman can trust a man with, and I can’t let it go.

Near the end of her workday, I put on a nice pair of slacks and my favorite button-up shirt. It’s a teal blue and brings out my eyes.

I climb into the car and head to her office to surprise her. I think she’s saying no to my proposals because I’m not being direct enough. I’m not giving her a chance to say no this time, because I genuinely think a romantic date and a night together is just what we need.

Time flies by, and I pull into her work parking lot. My heart pounds as I park and wait for the delivery man to meet me. Suddenly, the flower van pulls in and parks next to me, following my instructions perfectly.

He walks up to me with two dozen long-stem roses, and I hand him the cash. I give him a big tip for coming to me and use his van mirror to adjust my collar.

“Good luck, bud!” the driver says as I walk into her building. Aeisha’s secretary gets a massive smile when she sees me, and she runs to Aeisha’s office. She bangs on the door and throws it open. Aeisha’s eyes widen as she looks out the door and sees me.

She slides her chair in, walks out to me and smiles. “What’re those for?” she asks, smiling at the roses.

“Uh, they’re for my favorite woman. I thought they complimented her beautiful hazel eyes,” I say, handing them to her. “I was wondering if she’d want to come to dinner with me tonight. I have a few things planned for afterward as well, because she deserves to be spoiled!”

The crowd in her office gathers in the doorway, gawking to see she’s not answering me. She stands, twisting her hair in her fingers nervously. I don’t know why she’s toying with me, but it makes me want her even more. Her coworkers cheer and coax her to say yes to me, and a smile appears on her face.

“Okay, okay!” she exclaims. Everyone cheers at her agreement and walks off.

She rolls her eyes playfully and nudges my arm. “You really had to come down here and present this in front of everyone so that you’d finally get the answer you wanted, huh?”

I raise an eyebrow seductively at her. “Yes. I had to get an answer out of you. Well, I was getting an answer, but it wasn’t the one I wanted.”

“You’re an ass!” she says sarcastically. “Okay, I’ll go with you. But can we stop and get me a new outfit first? Because you’re dressed a lot fancier than I am. I’ll be insecure all night.”

I laugh. “You never need to feel insecure. You’re gorgeous. But, yes, we can stop and let you change!” I say, taking her arm and helping her out to my car.

AEISHA

I'm sitting in the car next to Logan, and I don't understand what I'm feeling. My heart is beating fast, and my nerves are all over the place. The butterflies in my stomach are going so fast it's making me nauseous.

With all the different emotions, I can't sort out what they mean. I've been avoiding him, because I don't know how to be around him after giving my virginity to him. He hasn't done anything wrong. In fact, it's almost making him treat me even better than before.

Which only confuses me more... The thought of continuing this charade, knowing how I feel now, is too much. I don't think I can do it. Everything's changed. We're only on this date right now because I know I can't avoid him forever.

After days of being avoided, he still shows up in a button-up. Not to mention, holding a bouquet of red roses which is the sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me. Plus, he drives me home to change my outfit before we go out to the fancy restaurant he made us reservations for.

A woman would be crazy to say no. But, with everything being so different between us now, I don't even want to go.

He pulls into the parking lot of the best pasta place in town, and my stomach growls. He opens my door and holds my hand on the way inside. Once we tell them the reservation name, we sit in a corner booth looking at menus.

It's such a romantic setting. He keeps asking me questions, trying to make me feel special, wanting to know more about me. But the whole date is just awkward. I want more from him than he wants from me, and I don't

know how to hide it.

Ever since our night together, I can't stop thinking about how much I like him. No, I love him. And being in the same space with the man you love, knowing he doesn't feel the same way about you, is too hard.

I know for a man, sex is just an act. It's a natural part of life, especially for a rich man like Logan. But for someone like me, it's much more than that. It signifies how much I trust him and how much he means to me. But, I don't know why I wasn't thinking about what my feelings would be like after the fact.

I dove in, head first without floaties, and now I'm sinking, I think as the waitress brings our drinks.

"Are you guys ready to order?" she asks sweetly.

"Yes, I think we are," Logan responds. He gestures at me to go first, and I panic.

Shit... I haven't even looked at the menu. I've been too lost in my own mind.

I say the first item I see and end up with Chicken Alfredo.

Well, at least I know I'll like it, I think as Logan tells her his selection. She leaves us to talk, and Logan reaches for my hand. My heart swells the second our skin touches, but there's nothing I can do.

I shove the feeling back inside, ignoring its urge to bubble to the surface. I spend the rest of dinner trying to make light conversation. *You want him to know you're listening and involved, but not enough to accidentally say something you'll regret.*

"So, I was thinking about our plans after dinner and wanted to get your input. I know you don't like movie theaters. So what if we go to the store, buy a new DVD and go to my place to watch it?" he asks.

That sounds amazing, cuddling and watching a movie! But remember not to sound too excited.

I nod. "Yeah, that sounds like fun," I say, keeping my calm tone. Inside, I'm screaming, wanting to tell him I'd love to do more than just watch the movie. *Stop, Aeisha. You can't think like this. This is what's gotten you here in the first place!*

The food is delicious, and I'm completely stuffed when the check comes. She offers us dessert, but neither of us takes up her offer. He helps me out to the car after we pay and opens the door. I watch him walk to his side and can't stop thinking that ignoring my feelings for him isn't working.

We're driving home, and Logan keeps looking at me until finally he speaks. "Are you okay?" he asks.

I immediately snap to attention. *Just say yes. You can't tell him what's wrong because he can't know your feelings for him! It goes against the agreement, and he might run if you tell him the truth.*

I don't want to lose him, even if I can't have him in the way I want. So, I smile and nod. "Yes, of course! Why wouldn't it be?" I ask.

He grins. "I just wanted to check. You seem a bit distant, especially the last few days. So, I thought if something's the matter, we should talk about it! It'll make it a more enjoyable evening if there's nothing awkward between us."

Yes, the fact that I want nothing between us is the entirety of the problem, I think, but push the intrusive thoughts out before responding. "No. I'm okay, I promise. Thanks for dinner, by the way! It was so good, and I'm stuffed."

He laughs. "Good! I'm glad. They definitely know what they're doing when it comes to pasta. Do you know what movie you're in the mood for?"

I spout off some random title circling the internet right now because all I can think about is his actions toward me. He's so sweet and loving, and it's like he's even more over the top tonight. He's killing me with his kindness and trying to make me feel heard.

Come on, Logan! I'm trying to push my feelings aside, and it doesn't work when you're the perfect boyfriend!

We pull into the parking lot of Walmart, and he helps me to the entrance. We've been in the movie aisle for far too long, both of us being hard-headed and indecisive. He's playfully making fun of my chick flick choices, and I'm turning down his requests for horror.

"I don't want to be scared all night, Logan!" I exclaim, taking the scary movie out of his hand and tossing it back in the bin.

"Why not? The whole point is to be scared!" he says, picking it back up.

"No, it's not fun being scared and covering my head all night."

"Oh, come on. It's perfect. You can get scared and then spend all night in my arms. I'll help you feel better, and you'll warm me up. It's a win for us both!"

My heart skips at his statement, and goosebumps spread across my entire body. I stare into his eyes, unable to form words, and feel my cheeks get hot.

How can I fight my feelings when you're being cute and flirting with me?

AEISHA

Although there is a part of me that is still confused about all of the emotions moving through me, there is another, more prominent part that is utterly titillated by what has transpired. I can still taste Logan on my lips from his goodbye kiss that morning as I get into the elevator of my condo, numbers increasing neon yellow as I float up into the sky.

The condo needs to be maintained every now and then while we keep up the appearance of a wedded couple. Logan had hired a few movers to bring some of my things to his home before the wedding, but there are some more personal items that I need to retrieve myself.

Plus, I think I need some time to process this whirlwind of a situation I have found myself in.

I tap in my heels down the hallway to the condo and pull the key out of my pocket. I have a strange feeling, and instead of sliding the key into the slot, I try the door knob. When it clicks open, my heart drops.

I roll my bag into the condo furiously, letting it slam into the love seat nearby. I stomp down the hallway into the bedroom. Lo and behold, who is there to greet me?

Emily stands there sifting through the bookcase next to the window. I tap on the door sarcastically. She turns, eyebrows raised with curiosity and not an ounce of alarm expressed.

“Can I *help* you?” I exclaim in annoyance.

She snaps the book she is holding in her hands shut, then slides it back into some random slot on the shelf, likely on purpose. She spins around and folds her arms, giving me her trademark smirk.

“You really should get rid of those cookbooks,” she quips. “It’s not like you need to pretend you can cook anymore.”

I close my eyes, feeling my anger rise inside me like lava stirring around. I don’t want to get into an argument right now, mostly because I had just been feeling so dreamy, but also because it will make it look like I have something to hide.

Which I really do.

“What are you doing here, Emily?” I snap.

She saunters towards me, giving me a condescending look. She is, without a doubt, devastatingly good looking. It’s something she knows, and takes full advantage of when it comes to getting whatever it is she may want. And there is no space within that ego of hers to allow anyone around her any kind of satisfaction.

“I came in to check in on the place,” she says casually. “I know you and the husband are all shackled up together. I wanted to make sure nothing of value was missing.”

“Missing?” I snort. “You really do talk some bullshit.”

Emily moves past me, and I hear her heels clicking against the hardwood floor. I follow her, trying to find a hint that will reveal the truth about her intentions.

Her face will never betray her, but if she was concealing something on that tiny frame, it could be noticed. But I spot nothing as she gets to the front door, grabbing her purse that had been hanging up in the closet.

“You really shouldn’t speak to your sister with such an attitude, Aeisha. I know you just got married, but don’t think that means you’ve climbed any form of ladder.”

She swivels around to face me, and my eyes narrow. In her eyes reflect my own, a feature of our shared father that is as comforting as it is haunting.

“Just tell me, Emily,” I say, sounding defeated. “Don’t play games with me.”

Emily began to cackle, taking the door handle and whipping it open. I’m glad to see her go because this conversation was certainly going to dissipate into childish insults soon enough.

“Oh, Aeisha. I do hope Logan helps you grow up a little. You need it.”

As Emily walks into the hallway, she gives me a quick wink. It surges anger through my bones, a painful electric current. But I manage not to let it control me, other than a satisfying door slam when I hear her get on the

elevator.

“Fucking hell,” I mutter.

I begin to look around the condo like a crime scene investigator. There is absolutely no way Emily came around just to see if things were in place. She doesn't have a selfless bone in her body. There is always something else going on inside that conniving mind of hers, one that thrives upon the mischief and misfortune of her own sisters.

My biggest fear, of course, is that she somehow found the contract between Logan and I. I could have put it somewhere like inside a safe, but that would be like neon signs pointing directly to my secret. Emily could figure out the combination, or at least, would use her connections to find someone who could.

So I put it somewhere no one would likely think of as a 'secure' hiding place.

I walk into the bedroom and go to my bookshelf, heart nearly beating into my throat as I shuffle through the various cookbooks that are indeed there for decoration. They had been gifts from my mother, a sad attempt at female bonding. Even though I had little to no interest in the culinary arts, I had kept them, mostly out of guilt.

The book Emily had been holding was at the center of the shelf, a mere few inches from the place of the contract. I finger through the books and yank out one about baking and dessert decorating, my heart ready to burst like an alien out of my chest.

I open the book to a recipe about vanilla cake. Thank God, the contract is still there.

My knees buckle under my feet with relief, and I have to move backwards to rest on the bed. The book rests against my legs as I breathe in and out. I take out the contract, flipping through it to make sure everything is still intact.

As far as I can tell, everything is still here. But Emily was close, too close I think, to finding out the truth about mine and Logan's relationship. So I take the contract into the kitchen and hide it among the bakery bowls, more cookware that have yet to see the light of day.

I tuck it under a massive stirring bowl and close the cupboard dramatically. I look over the apartment some more to check for evidence of Emily searching, but everything still looks immaculate. I sit down on the couch and let my face fall into my hands.

Despite the fact that the contract is still here, there still exists an eerie stillness about the condo. Like there is an energy of mistrust, something that I have felt from my half sister as long as I can remember. I try not to let it get to me and get back to getting my things packed for Logan's.

Doubts are like fungus. A little bit can go barely noticed. Other times, they can grow and grow into having a life of their own, choking out everything that grows nearby.

LOGAN

I decide that since my feelings for Aeisha are becoming real, it's only fair for me to court her. She deserves the best, even though sometimes she makes that problematic. My frustrations grow slightly, but they should not deter me.

I never expected to actually fall in love with her, but that's all that matters. I will do whatever it takes to make her feel like a queen, I think to myself happily.

Truthfully, I feel anxious, given that I have never worked to impress a woman. I just hope that what I am doing is correct and that she can see how sincere I truthfully am. My feelings for her are genuine, so if I have to learn how to do this, I'll happily do it for her.

Aeisha smiles at me as she walks into the kitchen this morning, undoubtedly smelling the frying bacon on the griddle. A fresh stack of pancakes awaits her, turning the kitchen into a disaster in the process.

I know I just want to please her, and truthfully, I worry I'm not doing it right. I'm humbled by my emotions toward her.

As she sits at the table, I bring her a cup of coffee the way she likes. "Thank you," she says softly.

It doesn't appear she's fully awake yet, and I can still see the tiredness in her eyes. I smile at her as I set down a plate of pancakes and bacon in front of her.

"Good morning, hon. I wanted to make sure that you had a good breakfast before work," I say sweetly.

"Morning. Thank you very much. I really appreciate it. I'm not a huge

breakfast person, but I appreciate the effort you put into it very much,” she says genuinely.

Damn it, I struck out on that one, I think to myself as I watch her nibble on a piece of bacon. She doesn't even make it through a second piece of bacon before she decides she's done eating.

“I'm sorry you put in all this effort, and I didn't even eat it,” she says, a frown on her face.

I quickly try to cheer her up by brushing it off. “Oh, that's okay. I definitely should have asked if breakfast sounded okay. How about a ride to work, though?” I ask sweetly.

I'm trying, here. I need some sort of edge. I really want to do this right. Small bouts of frustration are beginning to run through my mind.

Aeisha smiles at me genuinely. “I would love that. Will you be free to pick me up afterward, though?” she asks, a look of slight concern crossing her face.

“I will make sure I am free for you,” I respond, a grin on my face as I quickly clean up the mess from breakfast before I need to get ready for work.

I'm happy she's allowing me to drive her. Besides, her office is on the way to mine, so it almost just makes sense.

It turns out that traffic is horrible today as I glance at my watch. *Damn, I really hope I don't make her late,* I think, horrified to run into this difficulty the first time I try to drive her.

Aeisha seems to sense my frustration as she smiles at me. “Logan, please don't worry. If I am a few minutes late, it's not the end of the world,” she says, comforting me.

I glance at her, and the sweet look in her eyes is reassuring as I navigate through traffic. I finally reach her office and smile as I pull to the front door, glancing at my watch again.

Holy shit, three minutes early. That must be a new record for me. Of course, I did drive like an absolute maniac as soon as there was a lull in traffic. Hopefully, I didn't scare the shit out of Aeisha in the process, I think to myself.

She seems unfazed as she opens the car door, smiling at me. “Thank you for the ride, Logan. You've done a ton for me this morning, and I just want you to know that it does not go unnoticed,” she says, carefully kissing my cheek before getting out of the car. “I'll see you as soon as I'm off?” she inquires.

I flash her a genuine smile, my heart thumping slightly against my chest as my heart rate picks up. “Count on it,” I say, winking at her before pulling away from the office building. I wave and smile like a lunatic as I leave the parking lot.

I suppose that went well, I think to myself. Although, I’m a little sad about the pancakes. It’s okay, though. I have a few tricks up my sleeve still to use on her, I think as I drive to my office.

As soon as I arrive, I hop on the phone, calling my favorite florist. Within ten minutes, I have another dozen long-stemmed roses scheduled to be delivered to her office today at about noon. I recheck my watch, finding it to be a quarter past ten.

It’s going to be a long few hours as I await her message letting me know she got them, I think to myself. I quickly bury myself in paperwork, hoping to avoid it altogether. Within a blink of an eye, my phone vibrates on my desk. I check the time and quickly realize that it is 12:35 in the afternoon.

That means it might be Aeisha. I unlock the home screen, a smile crossing my face as I reveal a text message from her.

Thank you so much for the flowers. They are beautiful. I find it incredibly sweet that you were thinking about me.

I quickly message her back. My heart fills with joy to think that I brightened her day, even slightly.

It was my pleasure. I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you. I’ll see you tonight, sweetheart.

After I send it, I find myself whistling a joyous tune around my office, and my mood slightly improves as I go back to busying myself with paperwork. *The day just needs to fly by now, so I can go get her, I think to myself. I can hardly wait to be with her again and make her happy.*

Five o’clock rolls around rather rapidly. I don’t hang around the office. Instead, I race out to my car to be there before she gets off. Somehow, my luck is better this evening, and I miss traffic altogether.

Thank God for that, I think happily as I pull into the large parking lot of her office ten minutes early.

I patiently wait for Aeisha to come out, and I meet her at the passenger side door when she does. She smiles at me broadly as I open it for her, taking her hand to assist her.

“Good evening, my dear,” I say, eyeing the beautiful roses clutched in her opposite hand. Aeisha's smile grows even more prominent as I slide into the

driver's seat, starting the purring motor once again.

“Good evening. Thank you for picking me up. It's nice to see you straight away after a long day,” she says happily, her hand sliding into mine.

“I am glad I could. I can't wait to hear about your day,” I say excitedly.

I must be doing something right, I think with a joyous smile. I feel like we are growing closer, and I have never wanted anything more.

AEISHA

It is certainly nice sitting around a dinner table with Logan, after his chef had made us some incredible steak, potatoes and marinated broccoli. I have experienced some incredible meals with my own wealth and privilege. But this one tasted different, more succulent and thorough, with the sight of Logan across the table from me.

Things have been going swimmingly since the wedding. We are getting to know each other like a real couple, despite the fake terms binding us together we had agreed upon. I sit, cutting up the last piece of delicious meat on my plate as Logan sits back in his chair, grabbing his gut dramatically.

“God, I don’t think I could eat any more if you paid me,” he mutters.

I chuckle to myself as I consume the very last slice. We have been chatting about lighter subjects, like Logan’s plans for expanding his home and what the inheritance from his grandfather will look like tangibly.

It is an enjoyable and pleasant talk, of course. But something else is moving inside me, something that longs to be heard, seen, felt. I can feel it when our eyes lock, those deep ocean blues regarding me combined with a to-die-for grin.

“Was that enough for you, honey?” he says, voice low and gritty.

Ever since we had sex, the looks he gives me have become all the more palpable, and because of that all the more dangerous. I squeeze my legs together under the table, then lean forward on the table, staring into his eyes deeply.

I could get lost in those pools and be happy about it.

“That’s enough, for now,” I say in my own low, sensual timbre.

It is Logan's turn to chuckle, interpreting my remark for the flirty attempt it was. He takes my plate with his, his musky forest scent wafting past me, and places them in the sink.

"Well, do feel free to let me know if you require any dessert later."

It really, really, is not in the contract to be having sex. It wasn't restricted, of course, but I know that it complicates things. Yet, I cannot resist, my body swirling around the chair with my legs crossed, posture impeccable to showcase my generous bosom.

"I think you're the one who should let *me* know if you want dessert."

My voice sounds otherworldly, hypnotic and seductive. Logan looks a bit dumbfounded as he leans against the counter, flashing me that sexy smirk, then walks over to me with strong strides and thick muscles rippling.

"I will certainly do that," he whispers, kissing the top of my head.

My heart flutters in my chest while my entire body trembles. If I wanted to, I could pull his head down to mine and start the dessert early by tasting his lips.

But soon enough, he stands up. He starts walking into the living room, where we usually spend time watching TV together, reading, talking, or a mix of three. Tonight, though, he scratches the back of his head and motions toward the kettle.

"I think I'm a bit beat from the time change, but I want to get some work done first. I will be in my office and probably head to sleep early. Did you want me to put on some tea for you?"

This would be an opportune time to tell Logan about how I have been feeling. To tell him that I don't want to have separate bedrooms anymore. That I long to wake up next to him, to feel his naked body upon me 24/7.

But my nerves get the best of me, and I give him a small smile while shaking my head. "I'm full up right now. Thank you, honey. I can make myself some later."

He nods then blows me a kiss. I catch it, dizzy and confused.

"Well, I hope you sleep well. Goodnight, Aeisha."

He doesn't come to me to touch again, and I wonder if he possesses the same worries that I do. He smiles and disappears away from me, and I hear him walk upstairs to his office. When the door closes, I let my head hang low, kicking myself for chickening out.

I decide to make myself some tea after all and get comfortable in bed. I carry up the Earl Grey, get changed into more comfortable clothing and sit

the TV on playing something mindless and comforting. I go through my emails on my phone at the same time, trying to distract myself entirely from the energy of Logan working away in the other room.

I have an image of him, tapping away at his computer, the window beyond him caped in darkness of the inky night. I then see myself sneaking in while wearing nothing at all, draping my body over his and taking him with a power I have never imagined possessing before.

I am shaken from my daydream when my phone next to me on the bed buzzes. My heart begins to rattle in my chest when I see that it is from Emily.

The text is only an image. I zoom in, squinting at the screen with my heartbeat feeling like a rhythmic drum.

“Fuck.”

The image is a photo of an article, set to be released the very next day. Within the text, Carl is being interviewed, confessing his awareness of our contract.

I scan the article, feeling out of touch with reality as I try to find a way to share this with Logan. I move frantically through it, zooming in, swiping. Embedded within the article are actual quotes from the contract.

Then, I remember Emily, deceptive and wicked Emily, being inside my condo earlier.

I slam my phone down on the bed, then hop out of it, ripping off my comfortable clothing and returning back into the blue and slack combo I had on earlier. There is nowhere else for me to go but to find Emily and confront her once and for all about her sneaky bullshit.

I race down the stairs, moving with agility, hoping that I won't disturb Logan. I don't have the energy to deal with him yet. First I will deal with Emily, then we will see how he feels about the entire situation.

I get into the car, my body feeling both weak and hot with anger at the same time. I really don't want to be the one responsible for him losing his inheritance. That is a load to bear, especially since my feelings towards him have already gone outside the limit of our agreement.

I move through the night to my mothers' house, knowing that Emily will likely be there. She is a selfish, materialistic person who doesn't care about anyone but herself. She takes advantage of our mother, who feels an obligation to take care of all of her husband's daughters, all because their rightful mothers have abandoned them.

I step on the gas, ruminating, enraged, and finally, able to feel that rage

completely. The mansion is quite a distance for a late night drive. Still, I rip through the night, headlights pouring through the dark like swords cutting through string.

This has to stop. There is no way that I can continue like this. Emily has to be stopped.

AEISHA

I pull into the driveway around 9:30 p.m., whipping the car around like I'm in an action film. I feel my body moving on its own like I have no control over it, hovering out of the car, up the long driveway and to the front door.

I knock aggressively, knowing that both Emily and my mother will still be awake at this hour. They often spend time drinking whiskey and gossiping, a past time I get very little pleasure from.

“Open up!” I bellow.

The door swings open, and it is my mother. As expected, she is holding a whiskey in her hand and looks suitably outraged. She must have seen the copy of the article, too, hand-delivered by good old Emily.

“How dare you show up here with your demands,” she says, seething at me. “Do you have any idea what you have done?”

I have never been a person who gets violent when angry. It all seems rather infantile and pointless. I look at my mother, not wanting to strike her, but feel the desire to hurt her with venomous words, ones that she won't forget any time soon.

I swallow the impulse and push past her. She lets out an offended gasp as I stomp through the hallway, yelling out Emily's name and clapping my hands in an animated fashion.

“Emily!” I scream into the long void. “I know you are here! Show your face, you piece of garbage!”

My mother is trailing toward me, still holding her glass of amber liquid, willing and able to scold me in her stunning outfit and confident stride. The

foyer of this big house has a chandelier hanging above us, a bright yellow orb illuminating our sins in the dead of night.

“Emily!” I scream again. “Stop hiding!”

My voice sounds like a screech, which even frightens me a little. My mother takes me by the arm, and I snatch it away. I don’t look at her, assuming she is giving me a scowl of intense offense.

Emily finally decides to reveal herself, standing at the top of the spiral staircase that leads to the bedrooms and lounge. She is smirking, of course, looking down at me like a queen looks down upon her peasants.

“What a pleasant surprise, Aeisha. I thought you’d be busy tonight with hubby...”

“Cut the crap, Emily,” I bellow up to her. “What the hell is your problem? Why can’t you let things be for once in your pathetic life?”

I am digging through the welling of offensive language, trying to find something that pierces through the thick armor of Emily’s resolve. I know that it will take a lot to get through but for the first time, I am searching avidly for the right and proper weapon that will do the job.

She snickers, beginning to drift down the stairs. She is wearing the same dress that she was wearing at my condo earlier today. A form fitted dress with a black belt around her waist, highlighting the hour glass shape that both men and women fawn after. It is a deep shade of royal purple, the same shade of a modern witch stirring at her cauldron.

“Aeisha, I have no earthly idea why you are showing up here like this, coming up with these sad and terrible insults.”

I have a desire to run up the stairs and grab her by the shoulders. This could likely just get me thrown out of the house, maybe even have charges laid on me. So I begin to ascend them slowly, which stops Emily in her tracks.

“Aeisha, calm down!” my mother yells.

I am locked eyes with my half sister, the identical shade in our iris swimming with emotions that have been left in us by our genetics and our upbringing. Mine were stored inside me as a quiet resentment, whereas Emily’s were born into a malevolence and a pension for chaos. I stop a single stair before her, looking up into her eyes, trying to find something to grab onto that will stick.

“I know you found the contract,” I say with a sneer, whispering sharply. “I know you took photos of it, and you helped get that article published. Just

admit it. You have nothing to do with your life other than to meddle in someone else's."

Emily's smirk grows, but it's starting to look forced. I know I am heading in the right direction, stretching my bow out, ready to strike directly at the heart.

I lean my head forward and speak like I am talking to a child. Below us, our mother faintly encourages us to stop fighting, a blur in the background of our battle.

"I know now why he cheated on you and left you, Emily. You are a weak woman. You do not have the strength or compassion for love. I finally understand it all now."

Emily, for the first time in her life, began to falter. Her lip quivers and she gazes away, squeezing the railing of the stairway. She is trying to come up with someone to say back to me, to one up me, but she cannot locate it through the swarm of emotion attacking her insides.

"Like I said..." she says, her voice quiet and sad. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

I can say more, but I don't want to. The damage is done, and I have no regrets.

I then feel my mother take me by the wrist and pull me back down the stairs. For an older woman who hasn't exercised a day in her life, she sure has some damn strength.

"You two need to stop!" she yells, echoing through the foyer.

I let her guide me into the kitchen where she finally plants down her glass. It makes a loud smacking sound against the marble, likely hinting at a split in the glassware.

"When are you and your sister going to finally get along? Don't you know that you are blood and need to work together?"

I am feeling oddly calm, so I come toward the counter and pick up my mother's glass. I lift it up, holding it in the light to check for a split. Light from the glow of the oven lamp pours through the crystal, casting an unintentional rainbow over the hardwood floor below.

And just as I thought, I find a split at the bottom of the glass. I gaze at my mother, who looks exceptionally irritated by my nonchalant behavior.

"You broke the glass," I say plainly.

"What are you talking about?"

I sigh, then shoot down the rest of the whiskey. It is strong, likely from a

vintage barrel, and only enhances my sense of ease.

I then move languidly with the glass over to the garbage bin, flip it open, and drop the glass into the can. It makes a clunking noise, dull and highly undramatic.

"You don't want to cut yourself or ruin the drink, do you?"

My mother is still looking at me, not enraged but concerned. I go back to the marble counter and search for splinters of glass, but alas, only find a pattern I remember the decorators labeled 'ocean breeze.'

That is how I feel now. Like an ocean breeze.

AEISHA

My mother stands there with a look of disgust on her face. It isn't the first time I have seen it. In fact, it's a look I have grown accustomed to seeing. But it isn't until now that I realize how dumb I have become to it, trying desperately not to feel the keen insult of her oppression upon my personhood.

My father has, as he puts it, fathered many children. But he hasn't actually been a father to any of them. Nor has my mother, the one that I am connected to biologically, standing before me in this dim kitchen.

It's something I've let infect my heart and soul for far too long.

I lean against the marble counter, waiting for her retort. She steps closer to me, gazing up at me like a drill sergeant.

"What you did, Aeisha," she says, sounding stern. "Is irresponsible, scandalous, immature. You have humiliated the entire family. What do you think your father is going to say?"

"I don't know. Why don't you enlighten me?" I snap back. "Where is the big guy when things start to go south anyway?"

My mother steps back, eyes wide with shock. Most of my life, I have been agreeable. An agreeable child, a loyal woman, a valuable member of the Williams family. Only because I have kept my mouth shut.

But no more.

"Your father is on a business trip, as I'm sure you know," my mother says, eyeing me cautiously. "What does he have to do with this?"

"He has everything to do with this, mom."

My fist comes down on the marble countertop, moving slowly as if

underwater. For a moment, it feels separated from my body, like a phantom limb. I don't even feel it pounding hard into the surface and making a cracking sound like snapping bone.

I don't feel a thing for a good five seconds, which makes me feel elated. For once, numbness is working for me.

"You keep those emotions contained, young lady! You know there is no room for rage in this house!"

"What about dad, then?" I hiss, bringing a hand to the bridge of my nose. "What about dad yelling and leaving for days with no end in sight, hmmm? What about you for putting up with it and blaming your daughter for it? Hmm?"

My mother peers at me, a look of fear flashing through her eyes. Those eyes that men like to call stormy and intriguing. But when it comes down to the nitty gritty, they really cannot weather the storm.

"I don't know what you're talking about," my mother says in a low tone.

I start to feel the side of my palm throbbing. Ah yes, sweet pain. I am not completely numb after all, which is a relief.

So I lean forward, giving her a condescending look generally reserved for parents. Her eyes go as wide as the moon, not ready for the offense my words are going to cause to her mind and body.

"Mother, I have met some terribly selfish people in my lifetime. Comes with the territory, right? Being a woman in business, you will always be second tier. But now I know why I can recognize them from miles away. I have had a template since the day I was born."

My feelings burst out of my heart and finally align with my words. It is the first time I have articulated them out loud in my entire existence.

"You are the most selfish and greedy person I have ever known, mom. Forcing Emily and I, along with all the other children dad has also selfishly spawned, to fight for his wealth is positively conniving. You need to take a good look at yourself before saying that I'm humiliating."

She is struck into silence, even bringing her hand to her chest like a woman swooning in a romance novel. Her eyes swell up with tears, but she tries to shake her head to lose them.

"Aeisha, how dare you speak to your mother that day!" She is yelling now. "You are disgusting!"

I can tell that she is hurt. It is the Williams way, especially with the women, not to show or express what one is truly feeling. But I have said my

piece, and I have entirely zero regrets.

“You have heard what I’ve said,” I say, taking my throbbing hand from the counter. “Think about it for a bit. You’ll be surprised by what you find.”

I speed past my mother, and she doesn’t reach for me. I can hear her, though, tirading around me, yelling obscenities that are now like water off my back. Emily is still at the top of the stairs, petrified into stillness by what has come out of my mouth.

“Aeisha! Get back here!”

I smile to myself as I move outside into the darkness. I feel like a cloud after having thrown all of that negative weight off of my shoulders. I start the engine as I see my mother whip the front door open, coming out to continue her yelling spree.

She shakes her fist in the air, and I flick on the headlights. They stream into her face, and she responds like a vampire walking into daylight.

It’s immature, but it makes me chuckle. I then back out of the driveway and head back to my home. Our home, Logan and mine.

I drive on, not a care in the world. The drive back is far more leisurely than the drive there, which had been desperate and angry. I have said my bit to the people who have hurt me the most in my life. The one who never were forced to face the wretchedness behind their actions.

I expect to receive multiple phone calls and texts about the interaction, along with a media frenzy about the exposure of the fake marriage. It fills me with dread, but I now feel like I can handle it.

When I get home, it is nearly midnight. I creep inside as quietly as I can, remembering that Logan had said he was going to sleep earlier than usual. I walk by his room, notice the door is ajar and take a little peek inside.

I see him through the darkness, sleeping away. His breath is soft and gentle in the air, a beautiful sight for my weary heart. I want to climb into bed with him, wake him from his slumber, and make love to him until the rise comes up.

But our relationship has become ill-defined, and I don’t want to catch him off guard. I sigh, closing the door behind me, and head back to my own room.

I take a bath and make myself some more tea. As expected, my phone is blowing up. I decide to ignore it for the rest of the night, knowing that it is something I will have to deal with tomorrow.

I get into bed after bathing, feeling oddly relaxed. Maybe it is the lavender bath salts or maybe it is the healing expression of pain. Maybe it is

both.

I fall asleep, imagining Logan spooning me and whispering into my ear that everything is going to be all right.

LOGAN

I am glad that I went to bed early because waking up this morning was utter bliss. The sun pours in, bright and delicate, and I wake up feeling rested for the first time in weeks. For a moment, I feel like I catch a scent of Aeisha lying in bed next to me. When I jolt up and she isn't there, I am tragically disappointed.

But the day must go on, and I don't have time to deal with whatever is going through my heart, mind, and body. So I get up, happy to be so energetic. I shower, get dressed, and head into work with a tasty hazelnut coffee to go.

Driving into work, I can feel my phone buzzing. This isn't anything abnormal, especially on a day back from my vacation. I ignore it, humming some tune that has been stuck in my head for days, and head into the office with a pep in my step.

It is when I walk into the headquarters of Miller Hotels and Restaurants that things start to get weird. People are looking at me cautiously, almost seeming terrified of my wide, stupid smile. I greet them happily, then start to notice a trend as I head down the hallway to my office.

Everyone is kind as usual. After all, I am their boss. But there's a fear there that I am not so fond of.

I head into my office, trying not to let the feeling get to me. I place my coffee down and open the curtains wide, letting the rosy sunlight pour in.

I continue humming the unnamed tune when Jack comes in, breathless. "Logan!" he exclaims, voice high-pitched and panicked. "Logan, please don't worry. We have this under control!"

I turn to him, grinning ear to ear. He gives me the same look that everyone has given me this morning, and I let out a snort with my hands raised in the air. “Did I give everyone a pay deduction I don’t remember doing?” I say, chuckling.

Jack does not laugh. He doesn’t even smile. I frown, starting to feel concerned.

“Logan, have you not looked at your phone yet this morning?”

I had turned off the notifications in the car, knowing that when I got into headquarters any problems would be there for me to deal with. I slide the phone out from my pocket, go to unlock it, and Jack touches my wrist frantically.

“Wait!” he yells, taking out his phone. “Look at this first, then look at your phone. You’re blowing up.”

I take his phone, my heart beating hard and moving up into my throat. I read the headline, then start to feel faint with confusion and frustration.

Fake Love! Fake Marriage! See the Contract that Explains It All!

I scan the article, and realize that someone most certainly got their hands on the real contract. I move into action immediately. The only response I know is to be practical and proactive.

“Get Raven on the phone,” I say to Jack, moving to my desk.

He stands there for a moment, dumbfounded. “Who?”

“Raven, the woman from the engagement that someone invited for some reason.”

Jack looks around, clearly stressed out of his mind. I sigh. “The one with the long black hair. Her number is probably on the guest list.”

Jack nods, sprinting out of the office and connecting me to a call with Raven only three minutes later.

Her voice is sultry on the phone, but I have no time for games.

“Raven, I’m sure you’ve heard about this contract business...”

“Contract?” she says sarcastically. “Oh, only everyone in the entire world with a phone knows about that.”

I grit my teeth and tap my fingers against the desk.

“I don’t have time for this. I need to know how you got your hands on it. Give me that, and this conversation will end.”

Raven begins to laugh maniacally on the phone, which only further enrages me.

“You think I have a copy?” she says, still giggling. “Why don’t you ask

that sorry excuse of a wife what she did with it?”

I squeeze the phone in my hand, ready to launch into a million insults. I realize, though, that it is pathetic to be shouting names at an ex who is only trying to get a rise out of me.

“Just tell me, Raven,” I say firmly. “I need to get a grip on this fast. Don’t block me out just because of our history.”

She continues to deny her involvement over and over again until I am exhausted. So I hang up, feeling useless to handle this chaos exploding in my face.

I try to call Aeisha, turning off the notifications, the calls for interviews, the tags, the emails, but she doesn’t reply. It is likely that she knows about this, too. Like Raven said, anyone with a connection to social media knows now that our relationship is a marriage of business.

I keep trying to call her as the employees go about their business, giving me careful looks the entire day. When I still can’t get her even on text, I decide to head out to her office myself.

Aeisha works in the downtown core which can be a bitch to get to during the day. It’s not far from the headquarters and main Miller Hotel and Restaurant, but I know I cannot show my face on the street. It will only stall my efforts in getting there fast enough.

So I do the irritating thing and hop into my car, driving through the busy downtown area. It is always busy here, no matter what time of the day. I hold onto the steering wheel, impatient and afraid.

The fear feeling is new for me. I normally am able to see problems as they are, laid out before me with actions that can be taken and actions that cannot be taken. But when it comes to Aeisha and I, things are far more complex.

I sit with my phone on the dash, hoping she will respond. I just need to know that she is okay about all of this. It’s a stupid hope, but it’s all I have right now.

Another part of me wants to see her, pull her into my arms and tell her that everything is going to be okay. I don’t really know how true that is but if she is there with me, then it is something worthwhile to consider.

I sit in downtown traffic, thankful for the blacked out window of the car. My notifications continue to ding in apps and email chains I didn’t even know I had. My fingers strum against the steering wheel, and I want to scream but manage to keep it to a dull roar.

Finally, I get to her building, pulling into the lot like a race car driver. I run through it, ignoring people in the lobby, and head directly inside trying to avoid any pointless interaction.

I move with a sense of longing, a keen sense of doom. I don't enjoy feeling these things, and I know the only way they can be remedied is by looking into the magnificent eyes of Aisha Williams

AEISHA

I awoke this morning with a terrible realization. Despite feeling the horrible nature of it, I knew that it was the truth, a truth so loud that it was pushing into my ears, heart and soul. I don't like it, but it's an arrow that must be fired. Straight into the core of the only man I have been able to let myself be vulnerable with.

I get up before Logan and set the coffee machine. I take my own to go and head to work as rain begins to patter against the house. It is mere sprinkles as I get into the car, but then it begins hammering down, thick and pummeling the car.

I go to work, knowing that Logan is going to see the news, likely as soon as he wakes up. I considered staying there home with him, waiting for him to wake and to break the news. But that would mean me sitting inside his home, giving a flat announcement of disaster. I am not entirely sure I could take his reaction from a personal perspective.

Some may think that it is a pathetic and weak decision to go into work and wait for him to come to me. But what I am about to say to him isn't something that should be told while sitting in bed. And announcing it will not change the inevitable, so I decide to let the cards fall where they may.

Sitting at work for the first few hours feels like a normal day. The rain darkens the sky outside, the sun sliding into the chrome gray and fading away like perhaps it never really existed at all. I try not to let the symbolism of the day erode my resolve.

At around 10 a.m., which is usually when Logan decides to go into work, my phone buzzes. I look at it at my desk, letting it go to voicemail multiple

times. I have turned off everything on my phone, which includes social media apps, email and the news. I know that it is exploding everywhere. I don't need to see it.

Logan is a practical, hands on man, so I know he will be coming in soon to see me. So I adjust my clothing, just the way I would if I was going into a big business meeting. Then I stand up, positioning myself to sit on the front of my desk.

I close my eyes, breathing deeply. I don't like what I am about to do. But it must be done, and I cannot let my blooming emotions get in the way.

Behind me, the sun parts through the sky. I can feel it on my back, warm and delightful. For a moment, it makes me start to think things over again. But then I see Logan walking toward my office, his stride dedicated and desperate.

I hold a piece of paper in my hands, clutching it like a weapon. He storms in, and we lock eyes.

"Aeisha," he says, sounding out of breath. "Why aren't you answering your phone? Don't you know what is going on?"

I smile at him, trying not to be condescending and hoping I am succeeding.

"I know what's going on, Logan. I had to delete multiple apps on my phone just to get some peace."

His eyes, that deep blue shimmering like the sea at dawn, find something in my own eyes. I have to look away to avoid the heart inside me from breaking apart like it is made from paper mache.

"Logan, I can't do this anymore. It's too much to deal with. My sisters, my mother, the selfishness, the deception. The marriage."

I look up at him, noticing his eyes remaining locked on mine. I wait for a moment. When he says nothing, I continue, trying not to babble.

"Everyone knows now, so there's no point in keeping up the image. I'm sorry that it has to be like this and that you don't get your grandfather's inheritance, but I've decided."

I hold out the piece of paper I have been clutching for dear life. It is a contract for divorce, something that I have had with me since our marriage began. I had also kept it locked away in some secret cookbook no one would ever read or use in my condo.

Logan barely regards it before holding his hand up in the air. He closes his eyes, his lips trembling as he speaks. "Just...hold that thought, please. If

you can do anything for me in all of this, just put that off for a little bit. Please.”

He opens his eyes, waiting for my reply. I frown at him, not being coy in the slightest.

“Hold off getting a divorce? But why?”

“Like you said, everyone knows it's fake, so what is the rush?” He speaks to me in a way that is casual, which both hurts me and irks me. I let the hand that is holding the divorce papers tap against my thigh, letting out an impatient sniff at the same time.

“There isn't a rush, there is just a precedent. I can't do this anymore.”

It is now Logan's turn to sigh, and he takes a step toward me. I can feel his power, his presence. It all softens me, just the way I was worried that it would.

His hand comes to my shoulder and rests there while he gazes around. I know now that he really doesn't have anything in mind. He is stalling as much as he can.

“Please, Aeisha. I am going to fix all of this. Please trust me.”

For a moment, his voice breaks, and this causes my eyes to glass over. I am trying not to look at him because the view is too striking, too influential. Seeing those ocean blues will push me over the edge into oblivion.

“Okay, Logan.” The words pour out of my mouth like water. “If you think you can... I can't wait very long, though.”

“I know.”

For a moment, we sit in silence. His hand rests on my shoulder, standing over me the way he has many times before. In another world, I would take him by the face. I would kiss him, destroy him with my mouth, and everything would be peachy.

But this is the real world, and the real world has consequences.

Logan then brings his lips to my forehead and gives me a gentle kiss. It stains my heart and soul, nearly dissolving me into a puddle.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

Without another word, he is gone, out of the office. When I know he isn't coming back, I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, emotion erupting inside me in a way that I hadn't predicted.

I have no idea what his plan is going to be. There is a part of me that hopes he will be able to 'fix' it, as he claims, while the other part doesn't want to allow such thoughts. We are not really married, and we are not in

love, so why let hope spring out of me?

I try to go on with the rest of my day, but my mind is elsewhere. All I can see is Logan's gorgeous face, telling me that everything is going to be okay.

I indulge in it, even for a few moments.

LOGAN

My heart and body ache, but none of that matters now. I move through the hallway like lightning through a clear sky, with two goals in the front of my mind – changing Aeisha's mind and setting the record straight about the fake marriage.

The look on her beautiful face was one of defeat and exhaustion. There is no doubt in my mind that she feels it keenly, which is why I want to do everything within my power to sweep it all away. To sweep her away. To be with me in our own paradise.

So, I pull some strings with various connections I have nurtured through the years of working at Miller Hotel and Restaurants. I set up a press conference, right outside the main restaurant in the downtown core. It has stopped raining for the time being, but Jack comes with me, holding an umbrella and speaking frantically.

“Are you sure this is a good idea, Logan?”

We got in contact with all of the most renowned newscasters and networks, all of whom had already covered the story on the fake marriage that morning. I am moving with Jack, the umbrella hovering over my head with a dark bleak sky casting us all in shadows. I can already see groups of people forming around the front of the restaurant, where meal prep for the dinner rush has already begun.

They all hold microphones and chatter like clucking hens. There was a time in the past where I may have hated them, but now I know they are only doing their job. I have no idea how the contract slipped into the social media sphere, but all I know now is that I have to fix it.

I have to fix it for Aeisha. For us.

“It might not be,” I jest to Jack, who doesn’t take it lightly. “But that doesn’t matter. I know why I’m doing this.”

Jack wrinkles his nose at me but stays quiet as the horde of reporters finally notice us. They begin running, but Jack holds out a hand and guides me to the front of the restaurant where a makeshift stage has been set up. It is actually just a few apple boxes placed in a row, which makes me chuckle darkly before stepping upon them.

They are all yelling over each other, a sea of faces, microphones, and thirst for that hard hitting story. I can’t blame them. I can’t blame them at all.

“Please hold your questions until the end of the conference!” I shout, drawing their attention. Jack stands next to me, still holding the umbrella despite the lack of precipitation. The chatter quiets down until it is completely silent. The reporters stand there frozen, sticking out their microphones like a sword mid-battle.

I breathe in and look up into the sky. It is still that indifferent gray, but I know somewhere, there is light behind it.

Here goes nothing.

“I am here today to talk about the story that has hit every major news feed on the planet. My name is Logan Miller, manager of Miller Hotels and Restaurants. I am here to report to you that the rumors are true. Aeisha Williams and I, indeed, had a fake marriage.”

Reporters gasp, cameras flash, and the chatter erupts. Jack lets out a high-pitched shout which settles everyone back down again. I try to go on, not speaking to anyone directly who is present.

“But that is not the entire story. The truth is that yes, at first we had a deal, one that was mutually beneficial. Then, something else happened, something magical.”

I find a camera in the crowd that is recording, likely live, and stare directly down the lens like staring into the barrel of a shotgun.

“I fell in love with Aeisha. I fell in love with her, and now all of this mess has come out, disrupting her life. All of it is my fault. So please direct your questions, the blame, the stories, all of it, onto me.”

A swarm of questions come out as cameras once again flash, and Jack helps me navigate the inquiries smoothly. A few of them ask things that are intimate, which I blow off, while another asks what my next move is going to be. I look at the reporter speaking. She is a young woman with a glint of

hopeful romance in her eyes.

“My plan is to tell her,” I say with a grin. “My plan is to tell her how madly in love I am, and that I want to make a life with her. For real this time.”

Everyone chatters, and some of the reporters applaud. I answer a few more questions when it begins to pour with heavy rain, sending the journalists running for their car like ants on a plant being watered.

Jack and I go inside the restaurant, where the workers all start clapping for me and cheering. I am damp from the rain and give a bow, while Jack shakes off the umbrella in a strike state.

“Well, that was devastatingly romantic,” he mutters.

I wipe some rain out of my face, feeling renewed. I had no idea the words were going to come out like that, but I am beyond content that they did.

“Now what?” Jack asks.

“Now, we are going to get that bastard Carl,” I say, pulling out my phone. “Call me a lawyer and get them to draw up a lawsuit. He isn’t getting away with this.”

Jack nods, putting the instruction into his phone note app. He then looks up at me, frowning like a little wet puppy. It makes him even more endearing to me.

“What’s that look?” I say, full of glee.

“You just told a woman on live television that you are in love with her,” he says. “I think you have something else in mind that you want to do before meeting with the lawyer. Isn’t that right, Mr. Miller?”

I take Jack by the shoulders, pull him in tight, and pat him on the back. He is slightly shocked, but begins to chuckle when I let him go, taking the folded umbrella out of his hand.

“You’re right Jack, as usual. If anyone calls, tell them I’m busy. I am very, very busy.”

He nods his head, smiling ear to ear. I run outside through the pouring rain, bolting to my car. I feel like I am in a romance novel, barely able to see through the thick droplets with only a single care in the world.

Aeisha.

I get into the car, laughing at myself for not using the umbrella at all. I toss it into the back seat and start the engine, on fire with love, excitement, and hope. I rarely let myself hope for anything, but Aeisha has planted that inside me, and it is blooming like a rose.

I take out my phone, ignoring all of the missed calls from my grandfather. I text Aeisha, asking her to meet me at her condo. I don't bother waiting for a reply. I just know that she will be there.

Hope is that thing that we cannot define. It is belief without evidence, without practicality. It is something that Aeisha has gifted me, along with the gift of opening up my frozen heart.

AEISHA

The news conference was everywhere. If I wanted to avoid it, I certainly wouldn't have been able to. I noticed it on one of my social media pages and watched it live, my entire heart and soul on the line.

When Logan declared he was in love with me, I felt my knees buckle under me. I was sitting in my office, breathing rapidly, everything around me feeling like a daydream.

Logan Miller is in love with me. And he is taking all of the blame for the fake marriage, diverting the attention so I don't have to deal with the onslaught of harassment from reporters and journalists.

But, there still remains one thing that Logan still cannot protect me from.

As the conference ends, I feel my body start to get weak, mixed with joy. I realize that I hadn't eaten that morning, so I try to quietly leave, perhaps to pick up something in a nearby cafe.

A couple of texts come in, from both Emily and my father. I am in the elevator, Logan's romantic confession dancing around my head while these snakes continue to shoot their venom at me.

I have seen what you have done, dear Aeisha, the text from my father reads. *We need to settle this with everyone. Family meeting tomorrow, be on time.*

I read the text from Emily as I hover through the lobby, noticing the stream of rain pouring outside and beyond me. *Your mom hates you even more than before. You are shit out of luck with that inheritance now!*

My heart then glows as I get a text from Logan, the only person who I want to hear from right now. *Meet me at your condo. I need to see you.*

So I walk through the pouring rain, feeling like a soaked rat as I sit inside my car. I am not sure if it is the chill of the water, but my body feels numb. The sensation of hunger has dulled into nothingness.

When I get back to the condo, I feel that I am in a state of shock. I peel my clothing off and hang it up on the balcony, watching the rain continue to pour relentlessly. I then sit on the edge of the tub, leaving my phone in the bedroom, locked and silenced from my family's judgment.

My body is naked but doesn't tremble. I gaze between my feet, trying to figure out what on earth I am going to do. The thought of Logan's confession warms me, like tea on a cold rainy day, but how long am I going to be able to live like that?

I decide to take a short, warm shower, then nestle into a comfortable robe when I emerge. I feel less numb, but my mind still swirls, the reality of my inheritance slipping away from me like a paper boat in a flood.

I let my hair sit wet on my shoulders as I sit down on the couch. Rain continues to slam against the windows when I hear a knock on the door.

I snap my head towards it, knowing the sun in my storm has arrived. "Come in," I mutter.

Logan walks in. He is soaking wet head to toe, clothing sticking to him tightly. He looks around frantically, then sees me on the couch wearing only my robe. He has rarely seen me, if ever, in such a state.

But my name comes out of his mouth like he is making love to it. "Aeisha."

Logan Miller, this tall drink of water, an infinite essence to my dull heartbeat, comes over to me slowly then falls to his knees. I am struck by the drama of the moment, freezing my body as he curls his arms around my waist and rests his head on my knees.

"Oh, Aeisha. We have wasted so much time already. Will you let me make it up to you?"

At first, he nuzzles his head into my robe, and I begin to part my legs for him instinctively. My heart picks up the pace when he settles between them, gazing up at me, those ocean blues filled to the brim with tears.

I take his chin in my hand, feeling the most intimate moment of my life when his eyes close to my touch.

"My heart, Logan," I whisper, no longer holding back my own tears. "It hurts so much. I want out of all of this. But I want you. I want you so badly."

He nods, understanding as always, then begins to kiss my fingers, pad by

pad. The rain outside scores the quiet moment between us, my chest moving up and down rapidly as he does this to all ten of my fingers.

“I know, I know,” he says in a low voice, sending a shiver up my spine. “I want to make all of this better. I just needed you to know the truth first. I meant what I said out there.”

He is holding both of my hands in his, breathing in their scent like it is oxygen. His eyes peer over my fingers like the sun over the horizon. They are gorgeous beyond comprehension, but I know he is not manipulating me. He is telling me his whole truth, and I feel honored to hold it all within me.

“Logan...”

He lets go of my hands, then raises his body up to mine. We come face to face. He strokes my hair out of my face, cupping my cheeks in the most tender way I have ever been touched.

“Aeisha...”

There is no way to avoid it anymore. We collide, kissing one another, moans being let out with a quiet relief. My body relaxes, and I curl my legs around him as we wander over each other, having missed the taste and feel of one another at the crest of desire.

But before we go too far and I lose myself in him, I pull away, breathless, as he kisses my neck with his soft lips.

“Logan, I still need time to sort out this family shit. I want you, but I need that time.”

He nods as he moves to kiss the insides of my collarbone, then sits up, rubbing my thighs compassionately.

“I understand, darling. I am going to help you out with all of that, if you want me to.”

It is my turn to push his hair out of his face, which is dripping onto the couch. He smiles, and I kiss each of his cheeks.

“You are freezing...” I whisper.

I take Logan by the hand, turning on the hot water in the shower. We climb in together, wallowing in the warmth and the touch of each other’s naked bodies. We kiss and explore without another word being spoken until we both climax in each other’s arms.

He spends the night with me in the condo. I lay awake, not out of fear anymore but bliss. I hold his hand as he dozes, and I watch the moon part from behind the clouds that had permeated the sky the entire day. It illuminates the city below, carving out a glowing road of promises unearthed.

AEISHA

This morning, waking up with Logan next to me is bittersweet. There is so much love and adoration in my heart for him, and I would do anything to have all of this bullshit with my family go away. Yet it remains, weighing heavy on my mind. It is something that must be dealt with rather than ignored.

When he wakes up an hour later, I tell him specifically what kind of space I need. Making love in the shower last night was delightful, but I have to meet with my family before we make any decisions about our future together.

He touches my hand tenderly in bed, his mountainous shoulders the only thing exposed from his naked body hidden under silk sheets.

“I know, baby. Let me know how it goes, and we can talk.”

We kiss at the door, with me just in my robe again and him wearing only his pants and dress shirt half unbuttoned to show off some chest. We linger, peeling ourselves away from each other with agony.

I close the door behind him, catching my breath. If I could, I would let him sweep me off my feet. He could take me away from this chaos and fly me to the Mediterranean. There we would start a life of our own together, making a personal paradise.

But that wouldn't be responsible. Emily would win but in a less petty way, and my father and mother would be even more disappointed in me than they already are. I had given Emily and my mother a piece of my mind. I plan to do the same to my father, all while participating in the balancing act of keeping my inheritance.

So I get dressed, wearing a low cut blouse and a pencil skirt that makes

my ass look like a pumpkin. I spin around, admiring myself. Then I apply some fierce cat eye makeup and blood red lipstick and head out to the family home.

I start to get nervous on the drive there, my fears getting the best of me. But when I pull into the driveway on this damp morning, I see Emily, wearing her chic rain jacket as she walks inside. She doesn't turn to me, but even the vague sight of her makes the anger wash over the fear flawlessly.

I head inside, and the maid greets me at the door. She doesn't say anything as I am led into the lounge upstairs. The fire is roaring madly, and a council of judgment sits ready to hear my plea.

The sight of Emily, my mother, and my father would have been comical if it wasn't so sad. My father sits at the head of the room next to the fireplace, swirling brandy and wearing a three piece suit that must have been tailored for him in the 1970's. My mother waits by his side like they are sitting for a portrait to be painted of them, touching his hand and her lips turned down in complete disgust.

Emily is smirking, of course, sitting on a couch. She pats it as I enter, her eye peering over the hood of her malevolent eyelids.

"Come now," my father says. "Let's get this over with."

I move to the couch and sit next to Emily, but I do everything I can to not to meet her eye. I know that it will only fill me with a rage so hot, I just may blackout from it.

My father places down his glass of brandy, then leans forward in the chair. He peers at me. Within that look, there is love, which is something my mother doesn't have for me. That alone is something I know I can count on.

"You know you have to be punished for this," he says firmly. "I know you don't like the rule I have set since you were young, but that doesn't matter. I am the head of this family, and what I say goes."

The inherent sexism and absurdity of it all isn't lost on me, but I nod, accepting my fate. Talking now would only result in more yelling, which will likely land me with even less of the inheritance.

I feel Emily next to me, happy as a clam. She can barely contain the energy that moves through her body like a clapping seal.

"So, here it is, straight-forward. You are only going to receive half of the inheritance because of this stunt you pulled. You tried to trick me, and I don't take that lightly."

I nod along, feeling Emily's smirk get bigger and bigger. My mother is

looking at my father like he rules the sun and moon. I know how she feels because that is how I would feel about Logan, in an entirely, far more respectful manner.

“It’s been trying for all of us to watch this unfold, Aeisha,” my father continues. “But behavior has consequences, and I know that you know that.”

“Understood.”

I stare at my father, giving him a look of indifference. My stomach is rolling around with anxiety, but I try not to show it. He is old-fashioned in the way of not showing emotion, which is why our family is so messed up.

He sighs, then reaches for his glass. He shoots it down, cringing.

“We had a deal since you were young. So now when you get married, for real this time, you will only get half. That is the end of it.”

I nod, smooth out my skirt and stand up. Three pairs of eyes watch me, surprised by my sudden movement.

“It is understood, Father. Is that all?”

Suddenly, Emily begins to laugh next to me. She sounds like a child who was told a dirty joke for the first time in her life.

“Emily, get it together,” my father snaps. “That isn’t mature of you.”

She wipes her eyes, continuing to laugh maniacally. I squeeze my fists, then regard my father once again.

“Done?”

He nods.

“Indeed. Thank you for coming.”

I spin around and make my way back to the foyer. I can still hear Emily laughing and my father scolding her. My mother, of course, doesn’t say a word. It somehow manages to break my heart, even after all of this time of pain.

When I go to the driveway and climb into my car, this all still somehow feels unfinished. I pull my phone from my pocket, wanting to call Logan, but I feel pathetic seeking his help. So I only stare at it.

Then, a few seconds later, a car pulls in behind me. I crane my neck to see that the car is Logan’s.

He has come to be with me, to be there for me. He must have felt it in the air – my shame, my pain, my embarrassment.

I jump out of the car just in time to fall into his arms. He pulls me in tight, stroking my head as I let out a few tears that I have been holding in all morning.

When I pull away, he wipes my face with his thumb.
“How did you know?” I say, sniffing.
He grins, eyes sparkling in the morning light.
“Something in the air, I suppose.”

LOGAN

I know that Aeisha has never wanted a knight in shining armor. Nor have I ever thought of her as a damsel in distress. But when I got into my car, thinking about her sitting there with her family being judgmental and hurtful, I couldn't take it. I spun the car around and decided to follow her, following an intuition in my gut that was as strong as anything I've ever felt.

I waited outside the mansion, watching her go inside. I tapped my fingers against the steering wheel impatiently. Finally, not even thirty minutes later, I saw her emerge.

It was then that I knew I had to do something. Maybe it was her body language, maybe it is the love I have for her swelling inside me. But something pushes me to move my car into the driveway and step out into the cool air, coming to her side as she jumps out of the car.

She smells like lemons and lavender as she embraces me. I know that things didn't go well, judging by the tears I feel pouring onto my shoulder.

"You came..." she whispers.

When she pulls away, my heart feels like it has been punched. I wipe her tears with my thumb, crouching down so our eyes line up. "What happened?"

She wipes her nose, looking away from me. "They set the inheritance to half now, for whenever I get married..."

I shake my head back and forth, then kiss Aeisha on the forehead. I have the impulse to run inside and scream at them, but I hold back, only for her. "Do you want me to go give them a what-for?" I jest.

She smiles, that tint of glorious forest green returning from the depths of her stormy orbs. "That would be a sight..."

Aeisha then peers at me, almost pleading. She hesitates, so I rub her shoulders, encouraging her to say exactly what she means. “But we are still married, right?” she finally gets out.

My body feels like a cloud as I pull her in close, my wife, my soulmate, my forever person. I flutter my lips over her with kisses and then take her by the hand, leading her back up the driveway and to the front door.

A maid answers, looking confused. I go inside the majestic home, hearing people laughing and glasses clinking together. When I enter the upstairs lounge, three people who I barely recognize from our happy engagement party and wedding dart their eyes at me.

“Let’s not celebrate too soon, shall we?” I say, moving to stand at the center of the room.

I feel like I can do anything with Aeisha at my side, holding my hand and cheering me on silently. I can feel her strength and energy as the words flow out of my mouth like a beat poet.

“I know you all think that this is still some kind of sham, a trick done to get money out of you,” I say, moving my eyes around three people. “And you’re right. It was at first.”

“What the hell...” Emily mutters.

“Shut up for a second,” Aeisha snaps at her sister.

The fire crackles in the quiet, with Emily bringing a hand to her chest out of offense.

“But now, I am madly in love with her. We got to know each other through our deal, and, well, true love bloomed out of it. I know she feels the same way.”

Her father is holding a glass of what is likely brandy, looking me up and down with pursed lips. He looks young for his age, handsome, a man not used to being spoken down to. He sighs and places the glass down, finding a seat right next to the fireplace and looks at me like a king on his throne.

“What exactly is it that you want, Mr. Miller?” he inquires.

“The inheritance,” I respond. “She deserves the entire thing. It was promised to her once she got married. Now she has, and she is in love. That was the deal.”

He shakes his head, starting to chuckle. “No, that was not the deal. She got married under false pretenses. It doesn't matter now if she is magically and legitimately in love.”

He looks at Aeisha, and his eyes soften. I know that there is still

something, some kind of glow left in his heart for his daughter despite the aesthetics of the situation.

“You are a businessman, Mr. Miller, so you understand that I cannot go back on my word. What is done, is done.”

I want to get angry, but I know it will only make things worse. I squeeze Aeisha’s hand, trying to reassure her when Emily takes a step in front of me. She holds out an accusatory finger, wagging it back and forth in front of my face.

“Why are we expected to believe some man-whore who tried to take *me* to bed while supposedly engaged to my sister, huh?”

I smile, then lift a soft hand to push her finger down and out of my face. She stares at me in shock and awe.

“Oh, Emily. I’m afraid you have gotten it all wrong,” I say, eyes shifting to Aeisha’s parents. “I know now that it was *you* who put something in my drink to mess with me, to flirt with me, to violate me. I’m sure all that flies in the face of your own inheritance, doesn’t it?”

“Emily!”

Aeisha’s mother speaks up for the first time. Emily backs away, pointing at me, voice stuttering and pathetic.

“No! Dad! He’s lying, I would never!”

Her father shakes his head in his seat, then lets out another sigh. I look all of them over, feeling confident, brazen and brave.

“None of that inheritance is going to matter, anyway. I have an endless supply of money that is going to give Aeisha everything she has ever dreamed of and more. You can keep all of it if you want. Because we are together, in love.”

I feel Aeisha sigh, smitten next to me, and we turn together to leave the house once and for all.

None of them come after us, but the maid has an amused look at her face. “That was something,” I mutter as we get back outside. “Something new for sure.”

Before Aeisha gets back into her car, she pulls me up against it. Pressing against her, I feel my cock harden instantly, and her leg curls around me. We make out against the car for some time before our lips part, breathless, and she whispers in a sultry and sensual tone. “Thank you.”

I grin, biting her bottom lip, giving it a light suck. She moans under me, and I force us to separate, the look in her eyes that of a woman who knows

what she wants.

“Meet me back at mine?” I say, walking down the driveway.

She gives me a nod before jumping into the front seat of her car. I jog to my own vehicle, full of glee and excitement for this new and enticing chapter of our lives together.

AEISHA

I drive back to Logan's place, feeling over the moon. I am not a woman who requires a man to defend her – I never have been, and I never will be. But there was certainly something about watching someone as beautiful and strong as Logan stand up for me to the people who have hurt me the most in my life.

It gave me an illuminating glow at the center of my chest. It showed me how he feels about me, and it proves that my own feelings for him are certainly ones that go outside the deal we had initially made.

It's the fake part of it all that now feels like a bleeding wound. The world now sees it as a sham, but what they don't see is the seed that was planted when we decided to give it a go.

That seed has bloomed into something gorgeous, something that could hopefully turn into a rose of love and a lifetime of adventures. I just need to know if he is on the same page, or at least, willing to get there with me. He has professed his love, but now I can't help wondering what that means in a more mundane way.

So when I pull into his driveway, the flutters of anxiety return. The kiss up against the car had soothed me, feeling the warmth of his body and the fire of his passion. Passion is certainly something I would require in a relationship, but it doesn't necessarily indicate something outside the carnal.

I am reminded of it when I climb out of the car, and see his glorious, angelic face, the dying light of day reflected in his sea breeze eyes.

“Are you okay?”

His voice is soft and delicate as he approaches me. He takes my hands,

eyebrows knitted with concern.

I breathe in with a sigh, doing my best to find the right words to express myself. He gives me that time, which makes me want him even more.

“I...I want to talk about the marriage” I say, hearing my voice cautious and dim in the cold. “The fake marriage, I mean.”

He nods and begins to guide me inside.

Everything feels different, despite the fact that we have been cohabitants for months now. I have called it our home to keep the appearance of a married couple, but never in the sense that other people assumed I had meant. Standing here now, looking around the foyer, the golden trimmed sconces, the long leather couch and elegant fireplace, it starts to feel like something that could really be ours.

“Would you like some tea?”

I smile, nodding at him with a glint in my eye. “That would be lovely.”

Logan goes into the kitchen, and I follow. His chef and maid are gone for the day, so we are entirely alone. The silence pulses as he boils the kettle, then pours hot water over a few bags of orange pekoe to let the tea steep.

The tension between us isn't uncomfortable but still nevertheless present. He doesn't meet my eyes when he pours a cup and puts in some milk and a dash of sugar before placing it down in front of me on the kitchen table. A part of me thinks he is delaying the conversation out of fear. Then I realize that my heart is rattling in my chest like a broken taillight.

Finally, Logan sits with his own mug of tea in front of me, letting out a long, arduous sigh. He raises those deep blues up to me, looking the most afraid I have seen him look for as long as we have known each other.

“Tell me what you are thinking,” he whispers softly, touching my free hand.

We hold each other, each of us with the other hand on our mugs. Like an anchor for support.

I just have to get it out. “It's all this attention we are getting about the fake part of it all. It's all been so difficult for me. I...I want to end it.”

I see Logan swallow, his grip tightening on the mug. “You want to end the fake marriage?”

I nod steadily. He doesn't smile when he leans forward, still holding my hand.

“I completely understand, Aeisha. I don't want you to go through all this bullshit that comes with being with me. I don't want a fake relationship.”

It is my turn to swallow, realizing that my mouth has suddenly gone dry. When I open my mouth up to respond, he uses his other hand and touches my forearm. I look at it but when I meet his eyes again, they are glassed over with tears.

“Aeisha,” he says, voice breaking beautifully. “I may not want the fake marriage anymore, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want you. Can we try this again, start at the beginning?”

A smile the size of the moon grows on my lips. I cup my hands over his, eyes never leaving his, hearing my own voice breaking.

“That is all I have ever wanted to hear, Logan.” Hearing he loved me was one of the most touching moments of my life. But this agreement to start fresh feels more real, more tangible.

All at once, we both begin to cry. Tears stream down our faces as we let out all of the built up fears and anxiety over the last few months, the frustrations with our separate families, and the entrance of a sensitive public image. My heart is exploding inside, spilling out light and laughter.

“God, I am so happy to hear you say that,” Logan says, wiping the tears from his eyes. “I know that we have crossed a few lines but I...I...”

I stand up from the chair, go over to Logan, and I sit on his lap. He looks at me, awestruck, then I wrap my arms around his head. He lays his head on my breasts, and we begin to rock back and forth together.

We sit together for God knows how long, holding each other, with me running my hands through his hair and him rubbing my lower back. There is nowhere else on this Earth that I would rather be than right here, right now.

Eventually, he sits up from my chest, looking up at me and smiling like a little boy. He stares for a moment before I give him a mocking scowl. “What are you looking at, mister?”

He doesn’t waver. He never has, looking at me directly, reading right into my soul. It makes me feel reborn.

“Oh, just the most stunning woman in the entire world, the one who wants to be mine...”

Logan tilts his head to the side, admiring me. I feel my cheeks heat up. Although I have been conditioned to look away from such compliments, this time I don’t.

“You *are* mine, Logan,” I say, running my fingers through his luscious hair. “And I am yours. That is all it will ever be.”

Then, the words finally come out. “I love you. I have loved you so long,

Logan.”

The tears return, and he takes me sweetly in his hands, bringing his lips to me. We kiss for the first time as a real, honest couple, madly in love, ready to take on whatever the unpredictable universe wants to throw at us.

LOGAN

Ever since the story about the fake marriage hit the news wire, my phone has been ringing off the hook. Well, at least it would have been if I had kept it on, along with the notifications and such. But the moment Jack told me about the story breaking, I turned everything off, shutting off the power of my phone at the source. I turned it on long enough to send a few texts to Aeisha, ignoring everything else.

I also haven't been near my computer, so I haven't had to deal with the hurling of shit at me and my reputation. Unfortunately, that also has meant that my grandfather hasn't been able to get through to me.

After having an emotional conversation with Aeisha in the kitchen, we drink our tea, talking about the decision to dissolve the fake marriage and to start off our relationship fresh. Then hours pass by before I even put my phone back on.

When I do, I feel like it is literally going to blow up. It buzzes, chimes, vibrates, makes every sound known to the human ear, sitting there on the kitchen counter and blaring to me and Aeisha while we cook together.

"I don't think your phone is going to be able to take all of this," she says, leaning over the screen. "Good lord."

"What?" I ask, stirring eggs around the pan.

"Your grandfather has called you thirty-two times."

"Oh, shit."

I had gotten lost in Aeisha's eyes, her love, her magical presence, and had forgotten all about the practical part of our initial union. I excuse myself and move into the living room just off the kitchen as Aeisha takes over making

breakfast for dinner.

I hold the phone in my hand, breathing in deeply. It is something that has to be done, so I will do it. For us, for Aeisha.

I push my grandfather's name on the contact list, and after only one solitary ring, he picks up. His voice is gravelly with outrage.

"What in the *hell* have you been doing, son?" he sneers at me, and I can see him in my mind leaning over whatever surface he is pressed upon. "I have been trying to get into contact with you for two days! No call! Not in your office! I couldn't even reach you at home!"

I lean back on the couch, rubbing my eyes. I can already smell the delectable scent of fried eggs and bacon. I turn slightly to see Aeisha, wearing her slacks and low cut blouse, humming along as she cooks.

It is the most beautiful sight in the world.

"I have been busy," I try to say firmly but reasonably. "Pops, I want to talk to you about what you have been hearing. It's not entirely true..."

"Oh, the part about you getting into a sham of a marriage so you can fool me into your inheritance?" He snaps at me, but I understand. He is a prideful man, so finding out that his grandson thinks he is clever enough to outsmart someone who has been in the business game his entire life must have been like a dagger to the heart.

I sigh, trying to be empathetic. I look over my shoulder again at Aeisha, who is still humming to herself gorgeously. It calms and centers me.

"That is all true, Pops, but please, hear me out," I say, taking a brief pause. He snarls but stays quiet. I go on.

"It started out that way. She needed an inheritance, and so did I, all based around getting married. So we made a deal. But Pops, I swear to you, once the deal was done we started spending more time together and well...I fell in love."

Silence comes between us on the phone. For a second, I think he's hung up on me.

"Pop?"

"I'm here," he sighs. "So you are saying to me that you are actually in love with this girl now?"

"I am. I am madly in love with this woman, Pops. We are going to share a life together."

"God, Logan. You are really giving me whiplash here."

I chuckle, and he doesn't chuckle back. I don't care, though. As long as I

have Aeisha, I have nothing else to concern myself with.

“I know that it is your rule to be married before I get the money. But I want you to know that none of that matters to me anymore. I can make my living as a manager, and Aeisha can contribute at her work, too.”

“Hmm.”

I can see him in my mind, rubbing his beard and considering what his next move is. He is also likely shaking his head back and forth, annoyed and amused by the musings of the younger generation.

“You aren’t pulling my leg again, are you, son?” he asks, solemnly.

“I swear to you. It was fake at first, and I am sorry that I tried to deceive you. I hadn’t planned on falling in love, it just happened.”

“That’s how it usually happens, my boy. When you are busy making other plans.”

I let the conversation go quiet again. I hope that I have been able to appeal to the romantic side of the old man, the part that loves sunsets and believes in buying a woman flowers for no reason.

He chimes in finally, as I sit on the edge of the couch with anticipation.

“She is a wonderful woman. You are right about that,” he says pensively. “Let me give it a think, and I will get back to you. Thank you for your honesty.”

I thank him and then hang up the phone. I sit on the couch, leaning my head back, and close my eyes.

I go back in time, thinking about who I was when I was so desperate to get that money. I had been sitting in a bar when a gorgeous woman found me, and we had a mutual goal in mind. I had been so driven, so thirsty for something so incredibly shallow, and look at me now.

Now, I am gazing over the couch looking at the most incredible woman to ever exist. She is cooking us fried eggs, along with some delicious bacon, watching the toaster all at the same time. She is humming some tune I don’t recognize, her hair down and brushing across her back, a lightness in her aura that would make me run for miles just to catch a whiff of it.

Right now, it doesn’t matter if I don’t get the inheritance. All that matters to me now is that I put all of my heart and soul into rebuilding this relationship with Aeisha, a person who deserves more than something fake or something entirely half-assed.

I get up and quietly sneak into the kitchen. I lean against the counter, watching her as she continues to hum. “Should we go crazy and have some

coffee too?" I inquire.

She turns to me, smirking. "God, what wild animals we are!"

We laugh together, in this little corner of the universe that acts as our bliss. A place where dreams will be forged, fears conquered, and love will grow like little daisies peeking out of the darkness.

She is mine, and I am hers.

LOGAN

We eat our breakfast for dinner in the kitchen, constantly touching each other's legs and backs and skin. We laugh, and in these moments, I know that I have made the right decision when speaking to my grandfather. There isn't anything else in this world that I want more than spending each and every moment with Aeisha – the good, bad and the ugly.

I don't want to apply any pressure on her, so I don't make any moves toward the physical. I hold her hand as we walk to the living room and watch a few silly TV shows. Then, when we go up the stairs to what was once our separate bedrooms. I take her by both hands, kiss them and kiss her forehead.

“I know I said I want to start from the beginning,” I say softly. “But that sounds a bit too far away for me. I want to show you how I feel, but I will never make you rush.”

She smiles, bold and beautiful, then kisses each of my cheeks. She speaks proudly, never wavering away from looking at me.

“I appreciate you saying that, honey. I want to be in bed with you...just, nothing else.”

I nod, and I take her hand. We get into bed and hold each other, stroking each other's hair and bodies. Eventually, we fall asleep together, her head on my chest. My heart is beating only for her.

I wake up in the morning, knowing exactly what I am going to do. Aeisha is lying next to me, sleeping softly. A gorgeous goddess who wants to be with me, for reasons I may never fully fathom.

I push her hair out of her face, and she settles into the pillow. I plant my lips on her forehead, her skin as velvety smooth as a rose petal.

I climb out of bed, careful not to wake her. I call up Jack, and he helps me plan out the perfect evening. I also ask him about the best jewelry store that is nearby, and he sends me to one that is only twenty minutes away. When I get off the phone, I am smiling ear to ear, so hard that it hurts sweetly.

I scurry up to the bedroom and write a note to Aeisha, telling her that I am getting some takeout and not to start breakfast. I put it next to her head and kiss her one more time. I cannot get enough of it.

I get changed in the guest room and head off to the jewelry store. I had previously given Aeisha a ring she wore at the wedding ceremony, simply for optics purposes. But this time, it's going to be a completely different story.

I speak with a woman there, who gives me multiple looks of recognition. I tell her about Aeisha, and she picks out a pink, radiant, diamond, double halo ring. It is square shaped, thick, and as bright as the moon over the ocean.

"I think your lady is going to love it," the woman says. I buy it on the spot and tuck the little box into my pocket.

I am bustling with excitement. I spend the entire day not letting Aeisha do anything for herself, which she frowns at, asking me what on Earth I am up to.

"I'm trying to romance you," I say, nibbling on her ear. "I told you, I want you, and I am going to show you how much."

We go out that night to one of the Miller restaurants, reserving a private room in the back for VIP guests only. It is dim, with walls layered in soft silk, tiny sconces of light flickering at the center of the table.

Aeisha is looking stunning, as always, wearing a low cut, tight fitted, lilac colored dress. I pull her chair out for her, and we order some expensive wine.

"Something vintage," I say to the server.

Everything is going as planned. The server comes over with the wine, and I ask him to place the bottle down on the table. He faces the label outward, so it is within Aeisha's eye line.

She catches it in the light and then does a double take. We are alone in the room. The only sound is the rhythm of our heart beats and the gentle hiss of the candle.

"What?" I say, smirking.

"Are you serious..."

She stares at the wine bottle, and I turn it around to me, acting oblivious. Carved on the bottle are words in flowery writing, with a future date accompanying the vital question.

“Will you marry me?” it reads.

I turn the bottle back, smiling. Aeisha’s eyes fill with tears. I reach out across the table, touching her wrists with a tenderness I never knew I was capable of.

“Aeisha, I know we are both going through so much right now,” I begin, feeling frantic. “You with all of your family crap, me with mine. Things financially are as uncertain as they are going to get. But none of that matters to me. All that matters to me is that you are by my side, and I know we can weather any storm.”

“God, Logan.”

Aeisha lifts up one hand to dab her eyes, carefully not disrupting her makeup. My heart is going a mile a minute, knowing that I had just told her the day before that we could go slow. But I need her to know that my love is real. I want our lives to begin as soon as possible.

She leans her hand on the table, looking at me thoughtfully. My heart skips a beat when she sighs, and I imagine my heart splitting apart like a frozen apple.

But it puts itself back together when she smiles, as bright as the sun. “Logan Miller, you really are something else,” she says, in that outrageously wonderful low tone of hers.

It is time.

I take the ring out of my pocket and go down on one knee. I hold it up, and it shines like it has its own gravitational pull. Aeisha looks from me to the ring, eyes widening, and she slaps her hands over my mouth. Tears stream down her face, and my heart is ready to burst open.

“Logan, what have you done?”

“Aeisha Williams,” I say, clearing my throat. “You are the most spectacular, lovely, kind, intelligent, beautiful, sexy, hilarious woman I have ever met. We started out this journey on the wrong foot, and I want to make it right. Will you do me the incredible honor of becoming my wife?”

The time waiting in silence for her answer feels like decades. I see my future going down two pathways, one with her and one without her. I cannot fathom life now without having her by my side. It looks wrong, feels wrong, fate would decree it wrong.

But a life with her? Perfection. Children. A home wherever we want it to be – by the ocean, under the stars, in a forest, floating in the sky. It doesn’t matter.

I wait, feeling sweat bloom under my arms and on my chest. The love of my love is looking me in the eyes, my life entirely in her hands.

AEISHA

When Logan popped open the small velvet box, I thought I had gone temporarily blind. The diamond ring shone in my eyes like a blazing sun, the circumference the size of my thumb pad, with intricate little whimsical flashes of pink embedded into the rectangle shape overlapping the silver band.

I am in shock, not only by the size and potential cost of it but the gesture in itself. He had just said yesterday that he wanted to take things slow. Now, he is on one knee again. Except, the look in his eyes is that of a man head over heels, a promising future reflected in his eyes.

I move my hand down from my face, gazing into his without fear for the first time in my life. I can go through all of the practical elements in my mind, or I can run with what I am feeling. So I let the thoughts dissipate, like rain into a pond, and simply allow myself to feel.

Meanwhile, I notice that Logan's look of adoration is fading into desperation. His hands are shaking, and my heart skips a beat.

I know what I am feeling. Like the flow of a river running, it is all natural, real, potent, and entirely mystical. So I smile, my face aching from how hard it stretches and grab him by the wrists.

“Of course, Logan! Of course I will be your wife!”

Logan leaps up into the air, pulling me into his arms at the same time. I feel his strength and his tendency toward tenderness at the same time. I feel light as a cloud as he spins me around, the both of us laughing and crying in the sweetest blend of sounds.

We eat together afterward with makeup streaming down my face, him

passing me some tissue to clean it up. I enjoy the food, of course, but it is difficult to focus on anything beyond wanting to get home and have his body pressed against mine.

I see it across the table, that glint in his eye. When the server leaves for the bill, he leans over, whispering in a sultry and sexy tone.

“I can’t wait to make love to you,” he says.

Chills run up my body in a way that transcends simple carnal delights. It is something I have glimpsed before but never completely experienced in my life before. I squeeze my thighs together while a warm sensation pools in my core, like fireworks out spreading out in a clear sky.

As soon as he finishes paying the bill, Logan grabs by hand and we run to the car. We giggle together, unable to keep our hands off one another even for the twenty minute drive back. We start by making out in the car, eventually moving into the backseat for some sexy touching and teasing, his hands wandering my body like a sculptor over their latest masterpiece.

I have never felt more alive in my entire life.

He runs his hands up my dress, teasing at the waistline of my thong. When he begins to dip down slowly, easing his fingers between my legs and stroking the sensitive skin near my pelvis, my breath hitches in my throat.

He smiles under my lips, then whispers to me with tenderness.

“Let’s get you home and comfortable, Goddess.”

We move into the front seat, and I stare at him for the entire drive. I stroke his leg, easing my way towards the clear bulge in his pants, the tension of sexual energy palpable and exquisite. There isn’t a rush, but the feeling that he cannot wait much longer to have me makes me feel like the sexiest woman on earth.

Logan whips the car into the driveway, and we run up to the door, laughing in rapture. He then scoops me up and carries me to the bedroom, the one that was initially deemed his, and lays me down on my back.

I wrap my legs around him instinctively, and we proceed to kiss passionately once again. I can hear the faint taps of rain against the roof, a soft ambience scoring our lovemaking.

Logan quickly runs his hands up my legs, starting at the thighs, helping me remove my dress in a languid but sensual manner. He places it aside gently, then I help him do the same with his clothing. The only light in the room is the emerging moon, and his silhouette looks haunting once he is completely naked.

His cock is hard and at attention, and I lick my lips as I gaze up at it. He helps me shimmy off my thong, then brings his mouth to my nape, shoulder, between the valley of my breasts, then my mound.

My back arches, and my breath escapes my lips the moment his tongue touches my pulsing wetness. I immediately start rocking back and forth against his face as he thrills me, easily bringing me closer to the edge of oblivion in record time.

I grab him by the head just before I climax, wanting to look into his eyes the first time I reach the pinnacle as real lovers. He smiles as we come face to face, watching me intently as he slides his cock inside me.

He fills me up, and I am once again breathless.

“Oh, Logan,” I moan.

“Aeisha...” he murmurs.

He begins to thrust inside me, and I move with him. We quickly become one single being, like waves crashing against the shoreline, moving with harmony and a love that nearly makes my heart and body burst open. I stare into his eyes, happily getting lost in the moment as we reach the top of physical pleasure.

“Logan, yes!” My orgasm nearly splits me in half, running from the bottom of my toes and up and down my body like a shooting star. My muscles tighten and then release in rapid movements as I try to house the erupting pleasure flooding my body.

Logan holds onto me, encouraging me to feel it all, to relish it. I bury my face into his shoulder, breathing in his glorious scent as his own explosion builds to a crescendo.

He moves his face to mine, kissing me deeply and passionately as I feel him spill inside me. He lets out a small grunt, and I swallow it.

“Aeisha, oh my God.”

We absorb each other and our own pleasure as our bodies slow down from the rapid and tantalizing bodily delight. Our breaths move to an even pace, our slick forms resting against each other while the neurotransmitters dance like sugar plums in our heads.

Then, all is quiet. The peak of the moon from the dark sky pours over our bodies, casting us in a subtly erotic light. Logan has his face on my breasts, eyes closed, taking me in as much as I am taking him in. There is no need to speak. There is only love here, and I know within the depths of my heart that is all there will ever be.

His eyes open, a cobalt glistening blue, to regard me, his chin resting against my collarbone.

“I love you madly,” he whispers.

AEISHA

The second wedding, or the wedding that actually matters – what Logan has said a few times – is taking place only a week after Logan’s daring and romantic proposal. We plan it together at the one place that can accommodate us in such short order. The location is a beautiful resort in Malibu that caters especially to luxurious, low-stress weddings called the Clearwater Ocean Resort

As the resort exists primarily as a place for hosting wedding weekends, they take care of virtually every arrangement in short order. We simply spend some time on the phone with our wedding planner, who reviews our options and guarantees we will have exactly what we desire upon arrival.

When we get there, we are not disappointed. Just like promised, everything seems to be just like we wanted. Dwayne, the director of guest relations, takes us on a quick tour. Michelle, our wedding planner, shows us everything that has been arranged, verifying it meets our expectations. It does, and then some.

His grandfather has since put aside his frustrations from earlier and agreed to give Logan the inheritance promised him with this marriage. He seems genuinely excited despite our previous troubles and pulls out all of the stops as far as elegance and luxuriousness goes.

I have been dazzled in my own life by the privilege and wealth of my own family. Still, nothing prepared me for the beauty of a wedding in the big gardens just outside the hotel, with the dazzling sights and sounds of the ocean in the background.

We choose different outfits and an entirely different layout compared to

the previous wedding. It is sweet and fragrant, the scent of lavender mixing with the salty ocean air. A sense of zen spreads throughout the sunny ceremony.

We invite only the closest members of our families this time, plus allowing a few people from the resort magazine. Every month, the resort releases a promotional article specializing in unique love stories. When Michelle heard our story, she asked if we'd consider being the feature next month.

A photographer and journalist, two lovely young women, are scheduled to attend our ceremony and reception for that purpose. The photographer is snapping pictures before the ceremony of the display while I prepare myself in a beachfront cabana.

The journalist sits with me, interviewing me as I have my makeup applied. My dress is that of a close-fitted mermaid style that sweeps around my feet, showing off as much cleavage as I deem sexy.

She asks me about the initial deal I had made with Logan and whether or not I could have anticipated finding true love.

"I was attracted to him, of course," I say, giving the young lady a wink as a man named Alejandro applies some blush. "I mean, who wouldn't be? But no, I didn't think this was ever going to happen. I thought he was too handsome and interesting for me. Plus, I had heard things."

"Heard things?" The journalist says, raising a curious eyebrow. "What kind of things?"

I lick my lips, having expected this kind of questioning. Logan and I had spoken about it beforehand, and we had agreed on complete transparency.

Because really, who cares anymore? We are too in love to care.

"Yes, indeed," I say, grinning. "I had heard that he was a playboy who had no interest in ever settling down. So why would I let myself get caught up in someone who just wanted to have fun?"

The journalist nods, scribbling down some notes as I continue on.

"So, I kind of made myself not let it happen at first, of course. There was attraction there, but I tried to focus on the deal, which was all about the money we wanted from our families."

"So what made it all go wrong?" she asks.

I chuckle as Alejandro moves to apply some dramatic mascara. "I mean, Logan did. He wasn't what I thought he was going to be like at all. I thought he would look like a Greek god, then open his mouth and sound like an

asshole. But it wasn't that way, and that ruined my resolve."

I could feel myself brightening. Being able to look back without regrets is helping me heal from past slights.

"And that made me open up to him, because then he was opening up to me. There is nothing more powerful than two people being vulnerable with one another."

She scribbles away as her own smile grows, clearly a person who adores their job.

"And love happens that way, doesn't it?" she adds, her emerald eyes sparkling in the midday light.

My makeup artist is finished. I turn around, gazing at the writer. She is young but vibrant and hopeful, just like me.

"Exactly," I say, smiling widely. "Once we both gave into the desire to be around each other, love came naturally. And that is what brought us here."

The journalist nods along, then lets out a long, satisfying sigh.

"I adore hearing these kinds of stories. What you two have, it doesn't happen very often. I'm so glad neither of you gave up on it. I love working at this resort just because I hear the best love stories, and yours is amazing."

My heart glows, not only with love for Logan, but love for all of the experiences being with him has given me. I give the journalist a tight hug before the ceremony, posing for a few photos with the official magazine photographer.

I feel like a queen today, and I know that this is going to be how I feel for the rest of my life.

When I walk down the aisle, my father holds me. I am thankful for his presence, despite his energy of disapproval. None of that matters anymore, though. All that matters is the man standing on the end of the line, the man bathed in sunlight.

Under a tangerine sky, we say our vows and profess an undying love for one another. It feels like the first time didn't happen at all. When we kiss, I am engulfed in him, losing all feeling in my limbs.

We go to the reception, which is in a special glass event room with a gorgeous view of the ocean. It is a lot smaller than the first time, but I am glad. A female DJ named Heidi plays music that we both grew up with, and we talk and laugh about the nostalgia of it all.

But for most of it, Logan and I are together, moving as one person, socializing. We step outside for a breather, looking up at the sky as the sun

slips below the horizon and the moon emerges, victorious. We are one in dialogue and even in silence. There is no need to talk constantly to feel his love for me.

We dance together, swaying with energy moving like an infinite feeding loop. Even my family gets into it. Everyone but Emily, of course, who continuously sulks in the corner like a five year old.

I have let go of my animosity towards her. I feel like that went away when the other half of my inheritance went away, too. I no longer am attached to the money, so anything surrounding it isn't going to matter.

I take her by the hands and lead her to the dance floor, her face mocking and confused.

“What are you doing?” she implores.

I pull her into the neon lights, getting my groove on. Her hips begin to sway without her realizing it, then she tries to storm away.

I pull her back again and whisper into her ear. I see the way she looks at me afterward, which changes everything about our relationship.

“I forgive you,” I say.

She looks at me and gives a small nod. Emily is rarely vulnerable, so I give that nod the respect it deserves. She eventually gives in and begins dancing with me, like we were close sisters the entire time.

Logan notices, of course, then stands behind me once the song is over, and Emily has moved to the bar.

“I guess miracles do happen, right?” he says.

I turn to him, wrap my arms around his neck, and press my head to his chest. The rhythm of his heart is all the guidance I need.

“You are proof of that, my darling.”

He kisses my neck, and I am gone.

AEISHA

Making love for the first time after being married for real was supremely magical. The sex before it was sensational, of course. But once we had both expressed our undying love for one another, something inside me opened up like a floodgate.

Logan flies us out after the wedding to Europe, landing in Copenhagen, Denmark. We are going to stay here for a few days, then drive out to Berlin. From there, we will explore the vast lavender fields of the French countryside.

I have traveled before with my family. I have grown up with an exceeding amount of privilege, having explored most of the continents before I was twenty years old. But this time, holding onto Logan's hand and seeing the world through both of our eyes, makes me feel like I am doing everything for the very first time.

Flying into Copenhagen, everything feels colorful, and I am mesmerized by the sight of the ancient homes. We stay in a little cottage dwelling by the sea, which is incredibly rustic and romantic.

We make love there as soon as we get our bags inside the door. It is a gray day. Still, feeling Logan's touch, seeing the way his eyes glimmer under the faint stream of sun – it is enough to brighten anyone's day.

The fireplace crackles beyond us, having been set by the owner just as we arrived. We are on the floor with Logan on top of me, making steady love with the harmony of the waves and shoreline.

When we are spent, he kisses my neck, my chin, my breasts, moving his way down to rest his immaculate mouth between my legs. He teases me,

licking my core lightly so I begin to shake from the sensitivity.

“Baby,” I moan. He chuckles, and I can feel his warm breath tantalizing my bare thighs. He kisses them then rests his cheek on one, looking up at me.

The sight of such a handsome man sitting on your thigh, eyes as stunning as the moon and bright as the ocean after having some astounding sex, is truly something otherworldly.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t keep my hands off you,” he whispers. “I want to make love to you everywhere we go. In every city, in every country, on every surface...”

He trails off, moving between my legs again. My back arches when his tongue delicately moves from the center of my pulsing pussy to my clit.

“Oh, Logan!” I cry out, laughing joyfully. “On every planet, too?”

He looks up at me, surprised and amused. I raise my pelvis closer to his mouth, and he wraps his lips around my clit and suckles on it like it is the only thing giving him life. I quickly and easily have another orgasm, my cry of pleasure likely making the small town inhabitants blush.

When we aren’t finding new ways to explore each other’s bodies, we explore the area, participating in tourist activities and taking photos that will last forever. I haven’t felt a single second of anxiety about my father or Emily, not since standing under the archway at the Clearwater Ocean Resort.

Perhaps that is truly what love is, isn’t it? It softens all of the edges of life.

After a few days in Denmark, we rent a car and drive out to Berlin. It is a very different vibe in comparison to Denmark, more bustling and full of bright, vibrating neon. But it is the versatility of it all that I adore, the ever-changing paces of a life with Logan.

We stay in a large condo that Logan rented over a boutique. It overlooks the big, bright city that never seems to sleep. That works for us because we don’t sleep much, either.

We make love near the big wide window, getting our thrills from not only each other, but the honking and screaming and presence of the humans outside. We explore the dirtiest part of ourselves in Berlin, which strengthens our bond, empowering me to find myself in every corner of my being.

In the mornings, we sleep in, listening to the constant movement of cars and people outside. Logan makes me breakfast in bed, and we sit and talk about the future, no rush to move until the city darkens.

We go to a few clubs that Logan has frequented before. I feel lively and

bold thanks to having him by my side. We dance sensually, teasing each other like people who have just met on the dance floor. It is the prequel to the inevitable fireworks that will arrive later on in the dark of our condo.

Berlin is beautiful, but soon it is time to move onto the rolling hills of France. We drive out from the city and take a train, watching the buildings morph into lovely fields of lilacs and vivid green. It is a welcome change from a hectic city, and Logan holds my hand the entire ride out, sipping coffee in loving silence.

Logan has once more outdone himself, having rented a cute cottage home that sits at the center of a farming community. The owners grow potatoes and livestock, while also managing to keep the landscape looking like something from a cinematic, surreal world.

We spend the rest of our honeymoon here in this quiet place, with food and provisions a mere ten minutes walk away. At night, we sit outside in rocking chairs, looking at the stars and talking about the movements of the moon.

“I could stay here forever,” Logan says, a steaming cup of Earl Grey in his hand. “Just sitting here, looking up at the sky with you. Until I grow old and wither away.”

My chest fills with a glow as strong as the sun. I gaze over at him, his eyes darkened but calm and serene. “That is probably the most romantic thing you’ve ever said,” I say, beaming at him.

He turns, flashing that smoldering grin that never fails to make my knees weak. “Oh?” he says. “Even more than my vows?”

I lift up my free hand and tilt it back and forth in an ambivalent ‘so-so’ gesture. Logan opens his mouth with feigned offense, and I begin to cackle boldly.

“Wow!” he exclaims. “I spent hours writing that! Literally, my blood and sweat and tears went into those vows!”

I wipe my eyes from laughing, my stomach aching beautifully. “Literally?” I quip.

He shakes his head back and forth and takes a sip of his tea. I take his hand and kiss it, tracing my lips along his knuckles.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you, sir,” I whisper, switching from playful to sultry in an instant. “How in the heavens can I repay you?”

He slides his eyes over to me, then arches an eyebrow. It sends shivers down my spine.

“Hmm. How about you get into that bedroom, take off all your clothes, and wait for me on your back?”

I bit my lower lip, then give his knuckles a nibble. He begins to chuckle when I run inside, the screen door slamming behind me.

“I should let you insult me more often!” he bellows.

I run inside, smiling and ecstatic. If this is how our lives are going to be from now on, I know that I am going to be the luckiest woman on this planet.

And every other one, too.

LOGAN

Getting back from the honeymoon is bittersweet. There is nothing more incredible than spending time with Aeisha, especially with the backdrop of the moon, stars, stunning landscapes and sweeping skylines. Work, family, and daily stresses do not get in the way on vacation. This is when our true selves, our relaxed selves, come out to play and shine.

But I have heard before from other coworkers and friends that it is the life outside the vacation – real life full of work and inconvenience and mood swings and frustration – that will show you whether or not your relationship can withstand in the long run.

I think about this but only vaguely when we get back to Redwood. Work calls me the second we get off the plane, bothering me with questions about one thing or the other. I feel the anxiety creeping up my spine, running my hands through my hair already. But I also feel Aeisha's hand on me as we drive back to our home.

I get back to work quickly, putting out a few fires at more than one location of Miller Restaurants and Hotels. Aeisha and I have discussed working together at the business, with her leaving the tech company and coming on as a manager herself. That is something else that I have been forewarned and forearmed about – mixing business with pleasure.

But I cannot think of anything better than spending every waking hour with the love of my life. Sure, we will spat. But at the end of the day when we curl up on the couch, we know what is real. It is the love that will last, not the anger.

For the next few months, all of my apprehensions are proven wrong.

Aeisha leaves the tech company and now works with and for me. It is often in her own home office, but sometimes coming on location with me. She is an exceptional business-woman, which makes me somehow even more attracted to her and deeper in love.

She has moved out of her condo completely, still staying in touch with her family but no longer interested in anything phony. I can see her confidence is at its height, and all it makes me want to do is fall at her feet and worship her.

And worship her, I do.

Our lovemaking has many themes, moods and structures to it, and I have yet to become bored of her incredible form, power and passion. Spending more time together has only enhanced our physical chemistry. Sometimes we even get time to fool around in the office and during work hours at home.

The maid and the chef have come to notice when we are starting to rev each other up, taking the time to leave and take their lunch breaks. Aeisha finds it amusing, her laugh as contagious as the rest of her alluring features.

On this particular morning, I wake up, noticing that Aeisha isn't in bed. Most of the time I wake up before her. So it is curious and odd to find the bed empty.

I get up and go into the bathroom, my heart lurching into my throat when I see her hunched over the toilet. "Aeisha?" I call out.

She is heaving, but nothing is coming out. I go to my knees and rub her back, asking her hurriedly about what is going on.

"Is it food poisoning? Stomach bug?"

She shakes her head and is smiling for some reason. I stand up and soak a cloth to wipe her forehead and eventually her mouth. She is still smiling when she closes the lid of the toilet and leans up against it, a glimmer in her hazel eyes.

"It's not food poisoning," she says, out of breath. "Or a stomach bug."

I frown at her, feeling utterly oblivious. She takes my cheeks and looks me dead in the eyes, her smile looking nearly slightly deranged. "We've been having a lot of sex. Without protection, might I add," she whispers.

Finally, it dawns on me. The idea of children didn't cross my mind in the past, other than the necessary stipulation my grandfather has placed within the contract of his inheritance. Kids as a concept seemed fine for other people but not for me. I thought that I was someone who couldn't be bothered with being responsible for another little life.

But looking into Aeisha's face right now, her smile growing into that of a bright sunrise, there is nothing else in the world I could want more. "You're...pregnant?"

Aeisha doesn't say yes or no. She tells me that she is only a few days late in her menstrual cycle, but she didn't think it was much of a big deal. We had used protection in the past but ever since getting married, the fever of the moment had left us tossing it aside.

So we decide to make an appointment with the local doctor, getting some blood tests done along with a urine sample. We thought about getting tests from the drug store, but we wanted to be certain about what we were getting into.

The next day, we drive to the doctor's. I hold Aeisha's hand, sensing her anxiety. She looks at me, her free hand picking at the material of her shirt as she speaks.

"I know we haven't talked about it much," she says cautiously. "But I had assumed when I met you, initially, that you didn't want kids. I had made that connection with the whole single lifestyle."

I nod, knowing what she is getting at.

"But I also know that things are...different now. We are married and in love. But I know that doesn't mean you want kids..."

She trails off, looking at me fearfully for an answer. In the past, I would have been terrified to disappoint a woman like Aeisha, but I would still have been honest.

But now it's different. I am different, in all of the best ways.

I squeeze her hand and give her a brief look as we pull into the clinic parking lot.

"Aeisha, you don't have to worry. I want everything with you. I am in this for the long haul."

She brightens up, giving me a kiss on the neck, then lips, before we head inside. We hold hands the entire time, waiting for the doctor and the results that will change our lives.

I can feel Aeisha's leg bouncing up and down with anticipation. "It's going to be okay," I whisper to her, planting a tender kiss on her forehead. "I'm here, no matter what."

The doctor calls us in together, and I already know what he is going to say before he says it. He is an older man looking at us both back and forth, trying to gauge the mood. He holds his hands up like he is celebrating New

Year's Eve.

“Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Miller! You are pregnant!”

The news runs through me like a warm wind. I turn to Aeisha, whose eyes are filled with tears. She falls into me, not in fear anymore but relief and elation.

“Logan! We’re going to be parents!”

Never in a million years would I have thought that having a child with the woman of my dreams would be everything I would ever want and need.

AEISHA

The sun is shining, and I listen to the birds chirping outside the open window as I stand at the sink doing dishes. I have my favorite music playing in the background. Distractedly, I enjoy the blissful breeze of the afternoon air when suddenly there's a knock at the door.

I shut the faucet off and listen for a moment, making sure it isn't the sound of the music I'm hearing. But then the doorbell rings, and I know there's someone here to see me. I dry my hands and walk toward the door.

Who is it? I wonder as I twist the knob and slowly open it. The sun is bright, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the person before me. When they finally do, my heart drops. It's my mother...

What the hell is she doing here?

My voice catches in my throat, and I can't say a word. She's smiling at me with her pearly white smile, making me nervous.

Oh, God. Is she here to do some more yelling? Because I can't take any more of her yelling today. My morning sickness is officially more like an all-day sickness, and I don't have the energy nor the patience to deal with her shit today.

"Hello, Aeisha!" she says excitedly. Her enthusiasm confuses me. The last time I saw her, she was a complete jerk, yelling and screaming at me as if she could control her adult daughter's life. And now she wants to come here and act as if nothing happened? What the hell is she thinking?

"Hi, mom. Is everything okay?" I ask, wondering what is possibly bringing her here like this.

"Yes, why wouldn't everything be okay?"

I stand in the doorway, raising a brow and wondering if I have just entered an alternate universe where she isn't controlling and manipulative. Or if she has lost all recollection of her actions.

"Oh. Right. I was wondering if you had a few minutes to spare. I wanted to talk to you. No yelling involved this time, I promise." She smiles again, and I gesture for her to come inside.

We walk into the living room and sit on the sofa across from one another. My heart is pounding, and I don't even know why. I offer her a cup of coffee and pour her a cup when she accepts. We're sitting and sipping our coffee in silence for longer than I'd like before she starts explaining why she's here.

"I'm so sorry, Aeisha. I know I was harsh on you. I was blindsided and thought you were making a fool of us all. But, instead of lashing out, I should have asked your reasoning and about your feelings. But I didn't. I just blew up, and I'm so sorry," she admits.

She takes a deep, fortifying breath. "Now I know it's clearly real – you're married now, expecting your own children. I just wanted to come here and say how sorry I am. And I hope you can forgive me because I would love nothing more than to be here for you along the way and be a fantastic grandmother to your baby once it's born."

She's tearing up, and I'm unsure what to say in response. A part of me wants nothing more than for my mother to be a part of my pregnancy and a part of my child's life. But at the same time, I know the woman she is. It's hard to forgive the things she said.

Your mother is supposed to love and support you. To make you want to be just like her. But I have spent my whole life fighting for her to be proud of me and fighting for attention from my siblings. It's just hard to believe that she will be a better grandma than she was a mother.

But the fact that she's here today, apologizing, is enormous. She is growing as a person, and I can't ignore it. I must push past my anger and resentment to allow my child the grandparent they deserve.

"Mom. I appreciate your apology. It means the world to me that you came here and acknowledged the things you did. It's going to take some time to completely forget it and remember the person I know. But I want what's best for my baby, and I want you involved. So, as long as you promise to work on yourself and continue including yourself in my baby's life, then we will be fine."

As soon as the words leave my lips, a vast weight is lifted off my

shoulders. I can breathe again. Despite everything, I want her in my life. She hugs me, and we continue sipping our coffee and conversing.

“You are absolutely glowing! How are you feeling?” she asks, and my heart flutters. I have always wanted to have this kind of conversation with her, but it was starting to look like it wasn’t going to happen for me. So, now that it is, I want to take it all in and enjoy every second.

“I’m okay. Just getting through the days. Each one has new aches and pains!” I laugh. “Oh, the sickness is no longer just in the morning. We’re making mom struggle all day now so it looks like someone will be stubborn!” I say, rubbing my belly.

We continue on about how pregnancy is supposed to be a glowing and glorious time, but it’s really not. We laugh about all the people that lie and say it’s the biggest blessing in the world, when every single mother knows it’s hard to consider being bloated and feeling horrible every day a miracle.

“The blessing is when the babies are born. Finally, you can see that the pain and suffering were worth it!” she says.

Once we finish our coffee, I show her the nursery and discuss names with her. Logan and I have picked out a few because we don’t know what ones we like best and want options.

Over the next few months, she shapes up. She calls after every appointment to make sure everything’s going okay. She brings dinner some nights, even if it’s takeout, to help ease my workload and give her a chance to say hello.

It’s a side of my mother I really appreciate, and it helps me build a connection with her. I can start healing now that she’s more involved, and I know she’s happy for me. It’s hard letting go of the past, forgetting the person she was and the things she said. But it’s healing to know she’s truly working on herself.

I want to be the bigger person and focus on her strengths. I want to treasure the person she’s becoming after her apology. I feel that way, when I have my baby, I can be the best mother I can be.

LOGAN

I watch Aeisha slip on my favorite teal sundress and can't stop imagining what I'd do to her if we weren't heading to meet her father and sister.

"What are you looking at?" she asks. "My huge pregnant belly?"

I walk over to her and snuggle her into my chest. "Of course I'm looking at your belly. It's gorgeous, just like you! You're seriously the most beautiful pregnant woman I've ever seen, and I can't wait to see what motherhood does for you, darling," I say, kissing her on the forehead.

"Oh, God. Why are you being so sweet? Are you nervous about brunch? Because you can't be nervous, or I'll get too nervous, and then –" I interrupt her with a passionate kiss on the lips and grab a handful of her ass.

After a moment I let go, and she steps back.

"Okay. Never mind, you're back now. That's good!" She laughs and walks into the bathroom for one last look in the mirror. When she's ready, I help her into the car, and we make our way to brunch.

Aeisha's quiet the whole way, and her heart's beating so fast I can feel her pulse in her palm as she squeezes my hand. As soon as we pull into the parking lot, she looks nauseous.

"Are you okay?" I ask, rubbing her back. She nods, not saying a word and staring at the building in front of us. I shut the car off and walk around to her side, helping her out and squeezing her hand the whole way in.

Emily and their father Daniel are sitting in a booth in the corner of the coffee shop and see us immediately. Daniel gestures for us to come to sit down, and I help Aeisha into her chair across from Emily. I squeeze her hand under the table, letting her know I'm here for her.

“Nice to see you both. Thank you for coming!” Daniel says.

“Thanks for the invitation!” I reply, trying to be as friendly as possible. It’s an uncomfortable situation, but I want to be as kind as possible for Aeisha’s sake.

I’m watching Aeisha, but she doesn’t say a word. She’s staring at the table, and I can’t tell if she will cry or vomit when I hear her father speak again.

“Aeisha, thank you for coming. I know it’s probably not fun to leave the house these days, but it means a lot to us that you came,” he says.

“No. It’s not,” she says simply. They’ve been on speaking terms for awhile now, but it’s mostly just an occasional, casual phone call. The relationship has never been the same since their big blow out when they found out about our sham marriage.

Daniel must be thinking a similar thought. He takes a deep breath, and then comes right out with it.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t see what was going on right in front of me. I didn’t realize what Emily was doing, and I should have known. I let you take the brunt of it all, and she got away with everything for way too long. I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” he says, reaching forward and placing a hand on her shoulder.

Aeisha’s eyes dart toward him, and she smiles. “Wow. I’ve never gotten an apology like that from you before. Especially regarding her behavior,” she exclaims, looking at Emily.

“I know. I’m sorry. I truly am. You deserve the world, you both do, and I want the two of you to be happy. I’m so glad you have Logan.”

She smiles again and looks at me. “So am I!” Her hand squeezes mine even tighter than before, and my heart swells. It’s so lovely to hear her tell him she’s happy. I know she is, but to hear her say so to him is a whole new level of excitement I didn’t know I needed.

“Aeisha, can I talk to you for a moment?” Emily asks her. Aeisha looks disgusted but nods in agreement. Emily starts to stand, but Aeisha stays in her spot next to me.

“Okay. We can do it here. That’s fine. I just wanted to apologize for everything. I know I’ve been terrible to you, and every part of me regrets it. I know it doesn’t excuse my behavior, but I’ve always thought you were perfect, and I let my jealousy get the better of me instead of allowing myself to be close to you. After everything that’s happened, I truly see where I was

wrong. I went about it all wrong, and the things I have done are unforgivable. But, I just wanted to say how sorry I am..."

She starts to tear up. I watch Aeisha's reaction, trying to see if her expression will give me any hint as to what her response will be.

"Why the sudden change of heart?" she asks. Her tone is surprisingly calm, non confrontational and curious.

Emily takes a deep breath. "I've wasted enough time being angry and bitter. I'm ready to put my jealousy aside. I don't want to spend the rest of my life not knowing you. And now that you're bringing a child into the world, I want to be here for my niece or nephew," she admits, sounding sincere.

"I am truly sorry, Aeisha. It was all me. None of this was your fault at all. I should have communicated my feelings years ago, I should have handled it more maturely. But I didn't know how. I know my apology won't heal us overnight. But, I hope this can help us start to heal and move forward."

Aeisha snuffles and wipes her eyes. I comfort her the best I can, but I know she needs a minute to process. I don't want to send her into a spiral by crowding her. As she gathers herself, I keep glancing at Daniel and see him smiling at them both.

"Emily, this doesn't change anything. You have been so harsh for years," Aeisha responds. "And the things you did to Logan and me are unspeakable. But, the fact that you are here, trying to sort it out. It means a lot to me. It will take some time to move on and let everything go. But I want to start trying, and I want you in our baby's life. So, I forgive you!"

They embrace each other across the table, and Daniel joins in. I sit watching them, and my heart swells because I know how much this will help heal Aeisha. She doesn't talk much about her relationship with Emily because there has never been much of one, but I always know deep down, sisters want to bond.

We spend the rest of brunch eating, conversing, and joking about Aeisha's cravings. It's the first time in a long time that she looks happy to be around her family, and it makes me so glad to know that we're moving in the right direction.

Our baby will be born into a family of love, not bitterness and hate. That's all we can hope for moving forward together.

THE END.

For sneak peeks and a slice of life about Aeisha and Logan, join my

newsletter: <https://www.subscribepage.com/tylawalker>

AEISHA

The day has finally come, and I know it as soon as I wake up from my slumber.

Sleeping hasn't exactly been easy with my body feeling like twice the size it was nine months ago. I usually end up sleeping on one side, a pillow tucked between my legs. Then I get a cramp and move over to the other side. I wake up today like any other day, feeling heavy and achy, yet beaming with the joy of having my and Logan's offspring inside me.

I lay on my side for a moment, eyelids fluttering open as the sun spills onto the hardwood floor. I can feel Logan next to me without even looking. He has an energy that I can simply sense after spending so much time together.

His hand crawls up my lower back, massaging it gently, then moves over my arms. I close my eyes, wallowing in his touch. "Good morning, beautiful," he whispers.

Logan kisses my cheek as I breathe in deeply. For a few glorious moments, I am comfortable and serene. Then, three seconds later, I feel a massive twinge that feels like my uterus is being torn apart.

"Oh, *damn!*" I call out.

I clutch my gut, knowing instinctively that what I felt was a contraction. It disappears away from me, the after effects leaving a dull ache.

Logan springs into action, sprinting to my side of the bed and taking my hands in his. "Are they coming, baby?" he says, eyes bright with concern and excitement.

We had found out a few months ago that we were having twins, but we

chose not to have their gender revealed beforehand. Even if we hadn't found out about the twins, I had a feeling there was more than one Miller child kicking around my insides.

I nod frantically, and another contraction hits me like a Mac truck. I grunt and curl myself into a ball while Logan goes for the pre-packed overnight bag, along with my pregnancy pillow and snacks.

"We can do this, baby," Logan says, rubbing my shoulders. "Let's get you to the hospital and meet our children, together."

There is zero sense of fear in his voice, which gives me the wherewithal to get out of bed and head downstairs. With his guidance, of course. He leads me along the way, helping me put my coat on. Then he settles me into the backseat of the car, tossing the overnight bag beside him on the passenger's seat.

The contractions are coming at an even pace now, moving through me like striking lightning. I start to worry that I am going to pass out from the pain, leaning my head forward on the seat in front of me as Logan begins to drive insanely fast.

"Oh, God. This kills!" I scream.

Logan reaches behind him for a moment, touching my knee for support. "You're going to be okay!" he yells back. "Breathe through it, and we will get there!"

The hospital is thankfully not very far away from our home. We had a pre-consultation with the OBGYN doctor who will be delivering our babies. I have confidence that things will be okay, but the pain surging through me is trying to make me think otherwise.

But I focus on the movement of the car and soon enough, the touch of Logan's stable hand. He tells me that he has called his family and mine, letting them know what is going on.

"I hope that's okay with you," he says as a nurse places me in a wheelchair.

I give him a sarcastic scowl, humorous even through the pain. "As long as they behave," I jest at him.

Logan grins ear to ear, moving with me into the room where our babies will be born. I can focus on nothing else but the pain, along with the stirring color variations in Logan's eyes.

I think about him as a father and how much he has already changed as a man, just for me. The labor that I proceed to go into lasts nearly ten hours.

Logan stays there the entire time, even when the nurse suggests he get some rest outside the room.

“My wife is in pain,” he replies. “I am not leaving her side.”

The time has finally come to give the final push. I am more exhausted than I have ever felt in my entire life, likely looking like shit, but none of that matters. Logan holds my hands as the doctor tells me to keep going, supporting me through the long and arduous process.

Then, it is the quickest pain ever promptly forgotten. A cry is heard, a baby wriggling around in the doctor’s arms. Then, another one emerges from my body. The product of our love, an eternal image of the promise we have made.

“Well, congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Miller,” the doctor announces. “You are both now parents of a beautiful baby boy *and* girl!”

I break out into hysterical tears. Barely hearing myself, I focus solely on the healthy cries of our new children. Logan is weeping as well, almost like a little boy. We lean our foreheads against one another, words barely audible as we laugh and cry all at the same time.

“Aeisha! We are parents!”

I laugh madly, the adrenaline leaking out of my body. My arms feel suddenly empty without my children. The doctor encourages Logan to cut their umbilical cords. He does, weeping and giggling the entire time.

Our baby boy and girl are cleaned up and handed over to us. The doctor leaves the room to inform our family about the birth, and we hear a loud and gleeful cheer from the waiting room.

Logan is holding our son, while I hold our daughter. He sits on the bed. The babies coo, eyes closed from the sudden presence of so much light outside the womb.

I look at them, and I look at Logan. He is gazing back and forth between them, a beautiful look of overflowing love etched onto his face. Somehow, it makes me fall even more in love with him.

“Well, here we are,” I say sniffing, staring at our baby girl and boy. “This is life now, baby. Look at what we have created.”

Logan runs a thumb over their foreheads like he is touching a delicate masterpiece. He knows he is. “What are we going to call our little things?” Logan whispers, starting to rock the child back and forth.

I touch Logan’s hand, and we look at each other. We are overwhelmed, overjoyed, over the top about every little thing that will happen for the rest of

our lives.

“Dante and Dedra,” I say without hesitation.

The names are ones we had previously discussed, the names of two people in our lives who had a positive influence over us. Tears roll down Logan’s face as we lean in to kiss, our first time as parents.

We welcome our family in, and everyone is joyous. I don’t care how I look in this moment because it is pure bliss, transcending all of the physical elements of existence.

I know that my life is a dream, and I will never, ever take that for granted.

PREVIEW

Please enjoy a preview of another novel that I wrote, called *The Price of Passion*. It's available on Amazon and you can get to it by clicking [here](#)!

JENNIFER

The light chirping of the birds stirs me from my sleep, and I open an eye to the muted light washing into the room through the curtains. I snuggle comfortably into the pillow on my side, throwing the warm comforter over my bare shoulders as I allow sleep to take over once again.

Not for long, however, as I feel a soft pair of lips press against the back of my neck.

“What the *fuck*?”

I push myself up, confused and hungover, a wave of dizziness washing over me at the abrupt action.

“Good morning to you, too, beautiful,” the man beside me greets, sitting up with a lazy smile on his face. “I trust last night’s activity left you satisfied?”

“God, what even happened? And why am I in bed with you?” I dumbly ask, rubbing my temples with my fingers as I try to remember what happened. Yet I only see flashes of light, music, and people, which really doesn’t help with my situation.

“Let’s just say you invited me for a good time, sweetie,” he comments. “And I *did* have a good time if you’re curious.”

Oh God, not another cocky nobody.

“Save the effort of wooing me, it won’t work.” I leave the bed and make my way to my vanity to grab my bathrobe from the chair. “Now, please leave. I have to work at eleven.”

“Good company in bed and a hustler? I think I hit the jackpot,” he says as he pulls his boxers up.

“Believe me, you’re not getting anything from me after this.” I wait as he fixes himself up, focusing on my phone as I go through messages and emails. When he’s fully clothed, I lead him out of the apartment.

“Call me if you want to have another good time.” He leans in for a final kiss, and I turn my head away, scowling at him.

“Go,” I say, jerking my head to the door.

Dismayed, he leaves, muttering a string of curses on his way out.

I slam the door shut and make a beeline for the bathroom to take a shower. I strip out of my bathrobe and hop in, the warm water calming my nerves despite my growing headache.

Once I’m done, I towel myself dry on my way out of the bathroom. I walk into my closet and dress in my favorite black pencil skirt and blazer that goes well with a simple white top. I take out my black Louboutin heels and then head towards my vanity to do my makeup.

I hastily fix my hair, thankful for my recent pixie cut, before putting on my favorite pair of emerald huggie earrings.

Giving myself a final once over, I grab my bag and make my way out of the apartment. I take out my phone and make a call as I descend the stairs.

“Jonathan? I’m on my way out. Can we meet by the bakery at the end of the street?”

Jonathan’s booming laughter startles me. “Running late today, miss?”

I sigh. “Unfortunately. I have a slight hangover, and I’m meeting a client in an hour.”

“Got it, miss. It’s already rush hour anyway.”

“Thank you! I’ll treat you to a croissant,” I gratefully reply, stepping out of the complex and into the bustling area of Saint-Germain-des-Pres.

“I’ll hold you to that, miss.”

With a click, Jonathan drops the call. I stuff my phone into my bag and head to the bakery, silently praying that today would be a good day despite the rocky start.



I SPOKE TOO SOON about smooth transactions, I think to myself, hardening my gaze at the old lady before me.

“I simply can’t sell this for a lower price, Miss Allair. The fairest price I

can give for the piece is €506,120,” Mrs. Dupont argues, placing a gloved hand over my desk.

“Mrs. Dupont. If I may retaliate, our museum curates and buys *high-quality* pieces.” I take a look at the painting on display before us, a work of Mrs. Dupont’s husband, who is surprisingly regarded as a rising artist in the art world, despite his old age.

“And? What is your point, Miss Allair?”

“My point is Mr. Dupont is still a rising artist despite his amazing works. It would be too much for our museum to acquire it at such a price,” I reason, trying to keep my cool about the bargain.

Usually, clients would be easier to deal with. They’d approach me with their best interests, yet with limited knowledge about how art and money work. Mrs. Dupont is the same, except that she’s persistent about her husband deserving more than what he can offer.

Obviously, I beg to differ. But I’m not about to bring my personal thoughts into the matter. Work is work, and personal relations aren’t needed here.

Despite my advice, however, Mrs. Dupont is relentless.

“This is one of my husband’s life works. Can’t you be kind enough to buy the piece?”

I hum. “Lower the price to €340,900 and we have a deal.”

“No! I will not settle for that low of a price.”

I sigh, already anticipating where this is going. “Do you want my honest opinion, Mrs. Dupont?”

“Yes. I would like to know why you refuse to buy the piece for the price it obviously deserves.”

I push myself out of my revolving chair and walk over to the painting.

“Despite the intricate details of the piece, Mrs. Dupont, the quality of the materials seems, for lack of a better word, cheap.”

“How dare—”

“I’m not done, ma’am,” I warn, smiling sweetly despite my irritation. “While oil paints *are* indeed expensive, I can tell they were not recently bought. In fact, most of the materials used were accumulated from Mr. Dupont’s years of being an artist. Even the canvas.

“Not only that, but this frame is something I’ve seen countless times before. *Some* artists unreasonably double their artwork’s price by choosing this.” I cross my arms over my chest and lean my head to the side. “Now, if I

were to be asked, the price I'm offering is still much more generous than its actual marketable value."

With a shaky voice, Mrs. Dupont asks, "And what price might that be?"

"Only €206,080. And that's something for a piece from a...lesser-known artist."

Mrs. Dupont's eyes grow wide. "T-That can't be right!"

"That's the reality of it, ma'am." I lean on my desk, itching to strike the final deal. "Now, will you take my initial offer, or will you leave and look for another museum to take it in?"

"But... But I *need* the money," she mutters, her eyes swelling with tears.

"Mrs. Dupont, for whatever price you settle for, you still get the money," I tell her. "Please make the decision now."

"Alright. I'll sell it for your initial offer," Mrs. Dupont says hesitantly.

Delighted, I present her the contract, read her the terms, and watch as she signs it. I go back to my desk and write the check, smiling as I send her off. As she leaves, I hear a bit of sniffing from the other side, and I sigh.

What can I say. I have that killer instinct. I got it from my papa. When most other Black men back in the day who managed to get into college were going into accounting or law or engineering, my Papa graduated from an HBCU, made his way to France, and put his Art History degree to good use.

He used American gumption and bootstraps and built a Black owned art museum in the heart of the lily white art world. And people flocked to him for it.

He taught me that if you work hard, no one will be able to pull you down.

"Such is the life of a person married to an individual in the arts," I tell myself. As I begin packing up the papers, my phone rings. I pick it up, greeting, "Allair here."

"Jenny! Wonderful timing! Is the sale finished?"

"Yes, Papa. Just finished."

"Excellent! Let's talk about it over dinner. Fancy eating at Chez Diane?" At my hum of agreement, he continues, "For now, hurry over to the other branch to meet me. I have something big to discuss with you."

"Right now? I still have two clients left for the day."

"I already asked Ainsley to take over for you. Please hurry as this is something that can greatly affect the museum."

Interested, I pause in my task and reply, "I understand. I'll be there in ten or fifteen, depending on the traffic."

I place the last stack of papers on the side of my desk, pack up my stuff, and exit my office in record time.

REN

I groan as I put my alarm to snooze, stuffing my head under the covers and shying away from the sunlight. Painting until three in the morning is never a good idea, but it also never stopped me from doing so.

I turn my alarm off completely after it goes off the second time, and I make a move to sit up. I run my fingers through my long hair, yawning despite the late hour.

“How long was I out?” I murmur, checking the time on my phone as I scratch my head. The screen flashes 12:13, and I sigh at the thought of losing half a day to sleep.

I get up and stretch languidly, allowing my muscles to relax. Walking to the middle of my room, aka my art studio, I observe my surroundings and laugh at the mess I’ve accumulated in the past few weeks.

It’s about time I tidy up, I guess.

I make quick work of the brushes, storing them away carefully in my brush jar, and placing them on the table beside the easel. I then move to my balcony doors and open them, letting the cool breeze in and pull the pungent smell of oil paints and linseed oil out.

The streets at this time of day are quiet, save for the kids playing downstairs and the occasional gathering from the neighbors across my apartment complex.

“Today’s a good day,” I muse to myself before returning to my task. I begin organizing my materials and equipment. At the same time, I take out scraps of paper and tissues and dump them in the trash bin by the door.

Once I’ve made my room look decent, I step out of my sleep clothes and

head for the shower to wash off yesterday's grime. My hands are spotted with oil paint, their colors mixing on my skin. I turn on the faucet and do my best to get the paint off, taking a small bit of glycerin and dabbing them on the painted areas before scrubbing them clean.

After most of the dried paint has come off, I strip off my clothes and take a proper shower. I take my time, stepping out thirty minutes later and drying myself off as I walk to my closet.

I throw on a simple oversized shirt and some denim shorts. Sitting cross-legged on my bed, I take out the hairdryer and begin to dry my hair, brushing it as soon as I'm done.

I head to the living room, sighing as I weave through the countless paintings around me. Despite my luck of getting an apartment with a balcony, the space is still too cramped inside, especially with the number of paintings displayed everywhere.

But I keep this place even though I can afford something bigger because Dad got this for me when I decided to move out. Nothing can ever easily replace emotions and memories. This place is my home.

My stomach grumbles as I take my wallet from the couch, and I leave the apartment, descending the stairs in hurried strides. Immediately, I find myself in the quiet streets of the village.

But before I can get anywhere, Antonio bumps into me, a grin plastered on his boyish face.

"Ren! You're finally awake!"

I chuckle, ruffling the boy's curly hair. "What do you mean 'finally?' I was awake ages ago!"

"No, you weren't!" he retaliates, matter-of-factly. "You weren't listening to Laura Pausini on the balcony like you always do, so I figured you were still asleep."

I laugh heartily, amazed by the kid's observation skills. "Do I listen to *that* much of Laura's music?"

He nods enthusiastically. "Yeah! I hear it every time you call me over." Antonio perks excitedly, bringing his hands behind him. "Anyway, do you need me to buy you lunch?"

I shake my head. "Nope. I'd rather buy something myself today, Antonio."

"Aw, so no tip for me?" Antonio exclaims, pouting.

I chuckle at the kid's words. "I'll get you a cookie on the way back. How

does that sound?”

“I’d like that very much. Thanks, Ren! You know where to find me!”

I watch him as he joins his friends before I take off for the other side of the street. I head towards Trattoria d’Abruzzo and enter the quiet restaurant.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Angelino!” I greet, walking up to the counter and taking a seat in front of the man. “Are you done serving lunch or did I make it just in time?”

“You’re just in time, Ren,” the old man informs, booming with laughter as he leans over the counter. “What will you be having today?”

“If possible, I’d like to have the day’s special?”

“You’re in luck! We’re having *cacio e pepe* today.”

I beam at the news. “Then *cacio e pepe* it is! I’d also like to have a *pizza al taglio* and one cookie.”

“Will you be having it here?” Mr. Angelino asks expectantly, eyes shining.

I shake my head. “I’ll be taking out today’s special,” I say, already expecting his disappointment.

Sighing, Mr. Angelino punches in my order and rings up my bill on the cash register, clicking his tongue.

“You’re always working, Ren. Come eat here sometimes! The regulars miss your stories, you know?”

I laugh, delighted by the sentiment. “I’m sorry, sir. I’ll make time in the next two weeks. I just have to finish this piece.”

“Well, whatever it is, I hope the piece is going well.” He barks orders for someone at the back before turning to me with a quiet smile. “The kids at the elementary school miss your art sessions as well, or so that’s what my daughter tells me.”

“I’ll be sure to pay them a visit some time,” I promise. He gives a silent nod and goes back to polishing glasses while I wait for my order.

When my food arrives, I take it gratefully from Mr. Angelino and leave the place after promising to visit again soon. I pass by the playground to give Antonio his cookie before I make my way back to my apartment.

I go straight to my bedroom and place my food on the high table next to the balcony. I then take the covers off the piece I’ve been working on tirelessly for weeks. I stare at it, marveling at how the colors are finally coming together.

“This part still looks wrong, though,” I murmur, closely observing one

area of the painting.

I open my takeout box, and the salty smell of the dish hits me. I smile in delight as I take a small bite, the creamy texture blessing my tongue.

“Oh, that hits the spot,” I say, taking another bite of the dish. After I’ve momentarily satisfied my hunger, I make a grab for my materials and resume last night’s work.

With practiced hands, I squeeze small blobs of oil paint onto my palette. I dip the brush into the paint, and once the brush hits the canvas, I lose all sense of time and begin painting the hours away.

It’s like a trance. The feeling is akin to floating on water, letting the waves guide me while the sun keeps me energized.

When I finally stop to rest, the sun is already beginning to set, the sky tinted with hues of reds, yellows, and oranges. The food beside me is gone, and the colors on the painting make more sense than they did a week ago.

I step back and admire my work, a calm feeling suffusing me.

“Wish you were here to see this, Dad.”

With a sad smile, I take the brush again and go back to work, never wanting to lose the trance I’m in.

JENNIFER

“N early there, miss. Just around this corner,” Jonathan tells me as the car circles around, and I look up from my phone to see the museum up ahead. Jonathan parks the car just across the main entrance, and I step out of the car nervously.

It’s out of character for my father to call me in when I’m still working. Usually, he’d wait after I’m done with the day’s deals, and we’d talk over dinner at our favorite restaurants. So whatever he has to say right now, it’s something really important to him.

Before I can walk to the entrance, Jonathan lowers the car window and sticks his head out.

“Would you want me to wait for you and Mr. Allair?” he inquires.

“No. You can take a short break first. We’ll probably be out in time for our scheduled dinner,” I tell him. I wave goodbye as I cross the street and head for the museum.

At this time of day, Musée du Allair is bustling with art enthusiasts and art students alike. There are also couples trying to get into the arts or pretending to have a good time for the sake of aesthetic photos on Instagram.

I smile in amusement as I tear my gaze from the visitors. Nodding at the museum guides as I step into the lobby, I march toward the elevators on the left side and shoot Papá a message, telling him I’m here.

I get off on the office floor, then hurriedly make my way towards the executive’s office. My father’s secretary comes out of the room and greets me on the way.

“Here for Mr. Allair, ma’am?” Xavier inquires, holding a cup of coffee in

his hand. “He just finished a call with a big shot abroad. Seems like he called you in for that.”

“I do recall him telling me something along those lines,” I explain to him. “Thank you for the heads up, Xavier.”

“My pleasure, ma’am. Would you like some coffee as well? I’m actually on my way to refill Mr. Allair’s cup.”

I shake my head. “No need. Coffee ruins my appetite, so I try not to drink it before dinner.”

“Very well. Best not to keep Mr. Allair waiting,” he comments as he walks away.

I approach my father’s office and knock twice before entering.

“Papa, I’m here,” I greet, going over to his desk. I lean over to kiss his cheek, and he smiles in reply, motioning for me to take a seat.

“You called me over despite my busy schedule,” I begin as I sit down. “What’s the rush, Papa?”

“First, I’d like to ask about your deal in the other branch. I trust that everything went well?” he asks instead, even though he’s the one who said we’d talk about that sale over dinner.

“Yeah,” I answer, matching his relaxed demeanor. “Although the customer was relentless. How could she insist that something of that quality be paid more than it’s worth?”

Papa leans back in his chair. “But you managed to close the deal. For how much? I’d say €406,500?”

“Lower. €340,900,” I sigh, easing into my chair. “It was supposed to be lower than that, given how the artwork wasn’t of high standard at all.”

My father chuckles, tapping his finger on his desk. “I *did* teach you right, Jenny. And I’m proud you didn’t yield to her.”

I beam, feeling shy at his praise. “Thank you, Papa. I’ll continue to do my best.”

“That’s great! Because I have a new project, and I need your expert skills in making this dream of mine a reality.”

There it is.

I shift in my seat, bracing myself for the news. Whenever Papa wants something done, he sees to it that it becomes a reality, and in that regard, we are two peas in a pod. We get sour whenever things don’t go our way, so I understand his excitement about his plans.

Except, this time, there’s a feeling in my chest I can’t shake off. I trust

my intuition more than anything...but I'm not about to deny Papa what he wants.

"So, what's this project you're excited about? I can feel your energy from where I'm seated," I tell him, trying to keep calm.

"As you know, Musee du Allair only takes in the best artworks out there," he begins, walking up to the side of his desk. He leans on the edge and looks at me with a glint in his eyes. "And currently, I have a painting I want to acquire no matter what."

"And what is this painting?" He rarely ever gets worked up about getting a piece for the museum, so this artist must be an incredibly well-known figure in the art scene.

"Well, if you've been keeping up with the art scene online, you'd have read articles about this mysterious artist from Italy called Ren." He crosses his arms, his eyebrows furrowing as he engages in deep thought. "And the piece Ren is currently working on has got all of the critics talking about it."

I pique with interest. A mystery artist whom critics hold in such high regard?

"How come?" I say, sounding my thoughts out unintentionally.

"In an interview, Ren claims it's the culmination of his life's work. Although—get this—no one has even *seen* the artwork itself!"

"Are you serious?" I ask, my eyes bulging. "How can critics flock to the artist and the piece when he hasn't even shown it to the public yet?"

"From my sources, I've heard that he hasn't finished it yet." Papa brings a hand to his chin. "Although it *is* indeed peculiar that critics would be interested in it as early as now. Even museums and collectors are already haggling prices to get their hands on it."

My eyebrows shoot up in wonder. "That will soon include us."

"Correct! As you may have guessed, this is exactly what I'm dreaming of, Jenny." He claps his hands together, smiling brightly. "And I need your assistance in getting *The Ephemerality of Seasons*, Ren's masterpiece that has the entire art world clamoring."

"So when do you want me to meet this artist? I'll have my office arranged immediately for his arrival."

Papa stares at me and then booms in laughter, reaching out to clap a hand on my shoulder. A funny feeling settles in my stomach as he looks me dead in the eyes.

"My dear child, you'll be going to Italy *personally* to convince Ren to sell

the piece to us.”

REN

A knock on the door breaks me from my creative trance, and blinking away the confusion, I put my brush down to answer it.

“Coming!” I yell after the second knock. I wipe my messy hand on my art smock and pull the door open.

“Tonio!” I greet, moving aside to let the kid enter. “You’re back so early. Weren’t the lines long?”

Antonio shakes his head. “Not really. Dinner time just started, you know. The restaurants were still a bit empty,” he informs, handing me the plastic bag of food.

The smell of vegetable soup and another serving of *cacio e pepe* wafts through the air. I hum in delight as I walk to the kitchen to place the food on the counter.

“Thanks again for this,” I tell Antonio, reaching into my shorts for some money. “Here’s today’s tip.”

“Awesome! You’re the best, Ren,” he cheers, pocketing the one-euro coin.

I’m glad he isn’t the type to demand so much. Antonio’s father raised him right, which is something I’m happy and thankful for.

“Are you going to eat now?” he asks me, placing his hands behind his back as he roams around the cramped space. “Man, you really have to sell these paintings, Ren. What’s the point of keeping them around anyway?”

“Well, for starters, they hold a lot of sentimental value.”

“What does that mean?” he inquires, tilting his head to one side.

“It means they mean a lot to me.” I walk up to him and begin going

through each canvas. “Do you want to see some of them?”

“Oh, yes! You draw really well!”

“That’s just the product of practice, Tonio. You can be an artist, too, if you’d like,” I say, fondly smiling at the kid. I pull one canvas out from the rack beside my couch and hold it up, Antonio looking at it with awe.

“What’s it called?”

“I honestly have no idea,” I admit. “Whenever I paint, I paint whatever feels right until I get the desired result.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I have a lot of feelings to convey, and I...don’t have anyone to share these feelings or memories with.”

“Hm, being an adult must be hard,” Antonio muses, taking a canvas and giving it to me.

“That’s my dad’s town,” I say, laughing at his innocence. “Here, this is the plaza on top, and these are the stairs and the alleyways,” I tell him as I point to each area in the painting.

“You’re right! That’s amazing, Ren. You draw more things than people, though.” He takes another canvas and holds it up, his face twisting as he tries to make sense of it. “And you like drawing muddles of colors too.”

“In my opinion, they’re easier to draw than people or landscapes,” I tell him. Then in a quieter voice, I explain, “I drew this when Dad died. I was confused about my feelings, and I couldn’t think straight. *This* happens to be the result. Something abstract and unexplainable.”

“This mess really matter to you?” Antonio asks curiously. “I don’t understand.”

I hum, thinking of a way to explain it better.

“Well, let me ask you this: If you receive a gift, or if you create something because of your own decision, you’d want to keep it close to you, right?”

Antonio’s eyebrows furrow, then realization dawns on his face. “Yeah! Because it’s mine!”

I laugh, relieved he was getting what I mean. “Then that’s exactly how I feel about these pieces here.” I take the one with muddled colors, remembering the painful days after my dad died. “For example, this piece is dedicated to my father and his memory.

“This piece here.” I take the landscape painting of his town from the couch. “It’s dedicated to my dad’s town. He helped me paint this when we

went there for vacation, and I wanted to enclose the memory in a painting.”

“What about this one?” he asks, excitedly pulling a medium-sized canvas out. The portrait bears the image of my mother, but in place of a face were her favorite flowers.

“That’s the piece my dad dedicated to my mother. He, too, liked painting memories and feelings...because he loved her.”

“Uh, you’re confusing, Ren.”

“I know. I get that a lot. But this is why I never want to part with my paintings. Here, I’ll show you one more thing.” I place a guiding hand on his shoulder and lead him to my bedroom.

“Here’s my latest piece. The reason why I haven’t gone out in weeks,” I tell Antonio, proudly huffing my chest at what I’ve painted so far.

“This is amazing!” Antonio exclaims, getting close to the painting. “This is bigger than the other pieces, and it’s also the prettiest!”

“You flatter me too much, kid,” I say. “Although it isn’t finished yet. I still need to refine the details, so I’ll be finished by tomorrow.”

“Do you have a name for it? You do, don’t you?” he insists, looking at me with wide eyes.

It’s refreshing to see this kind of excitement from a child. It’s much different from the judging eyes of art critics. After all, I only want my art to be enjoyed by those who see it, yet so many ‘art enthusiasts’ ruin the experience for me.

“I do have a name, but I don’t think you’d understand it,” I joke.

Antonio crosses his arms over his chest. “Come on! I want to know, Ren!”

“Well, it’s called *The Ephemerality of Seasons*,” I tell him, and as expected, he merely tilts his head in confusion. I laugh at his efforts to take that information in.

“What does e-ephem—What does that word mean?” he manages to say, dumbfounded.

“Well, to compare it to a word, it means short-lived,” I explain, ruffling his curly hair. “A moment.”

Antonio hums. “I think I get it,” he tells me. “If it’s for your father, I think I understand.”

He doesn’t say anything after that. Instead, he walks up to my balcony and leans on the railing, resting his chin on his hand, looking out the night sky with an unreadable expression on his youthful face.

I stay silent as I look at the piece. Whatever the child was thinking, it was probably because of the silence he can feel from the piece. But this isn't entirely about sadness.

My fingers itch with the need to finish the painting as my memories resurface.

Not for the first time, I think to myself, *I wish Dad was here to see this.*

JENNIFER

“Papa! Surely you’re not being serious?” I protest, my mind abuzz with thoughts of countless deals and deadlines I’d be missing. “I have work piled up. I can’t just *leave* for Italy.”

“Of course you can! This is work, too. And you’ll be generously compensated, Jenny. Don’t worry about that!”

I pull back, still doubtful about my father’s plan. “But why do I need to convince Ren? Can’t he just fly over and talk?”

He laughs before saying, “For an artist who’s never shown himself in public, I doubt he’ll simply ‘fly over and talk.’”

“We don’t even know what he looks like?” I exclaim. “Papa, are you sure he’s worth the trouble?”

He nods. “He is, Jenny. Ren’s piece is the equivalent of Johannes Vermeer’s *The Concert*.”

My mouth hangs open at the mention of a highly prized piece.

“And you’re my best bet for this. I trust no one but you to make this deal for me, sweetie. None of my other subordinates are as assertive and determined as you. On top of that, you’re not easily emotionally swayed. You can take whatever excuse Ren throws at you.”

I sigh, still dumbfounded he compared this mysterious artist to someone as highly acclaimed as Vermeer. Now I’m curious as to *who* this Ren person is.

“Before I agree, I’d like to know more about the specifics of the project, Papa,” I argue, not letting him get to me easily. “What am I getting into? How will I find, let alone, talk to this artist? What are the terms for our

negotiations?”

“Relax, Jenny, you already sound more excited than I am,” Papa jokes, taking out a file case and sliding it over to me.

“Everything you’ll need to know and more is there. You can read them on the plane. As for other matters, shall we discuss them at our scheduled dinner time?”

I shake my head, knowing I wouldn’t be able to focus on my dinner anymore.

“No, Papa. We should cancel dinner.” I take a quick look at the report, and the sales projections make my eyebrows shoot up in question.

“*This* is how much we’re selling it for?” I ask incredulously.

Papa nods. “That’s how I know you won’t take no for an answer from Ren.” He leans over his desk and presses his hands on top of it, saying, “This piece could sell for billions of euro, and I’m not about to lose it when we have the chance.”

There’s a shift in the air when Papa holds my gaze, and I look back at the projected price for the piece, perturbed at how far he’s willing to bet on it. At the back of my head, an annoying feeling kicks in. Why on earth doesn’t Ren want to sell his painting if it could potentially make him live off of riches for years.

“Okay, fine. I’ll travel to Italy for this,” I concede, rubbing my temples. There is simply no stopping my father when he gets invested in an art piece, and this is undoubtedly something he’s been dying to get his hands on.

The mystery around this Ren person is making me feel excited about this entire endeavor all of a sudden, and I can’t help but think about how our meeting will go once I finally lay my eyes on him.

“That’s perfect!” Papa exclaims, grinning as he claps his hands together.

“I expect that I will be compensated properly?”

“I already promised you, didn’t I?” His smile fades when he continues, “Now, I expect you to make the sale *immediately*.”

“I understand. Where will I find him?”

“I believe the details of his neighborhood are also in those papers.”

“Alright. So I just have to talk to this Ren person, strike a deal, and leave with the painting?”

“Pretty much,” Papa says, shrugging.

“I doubt he’d be trusting of me, Papa.”

“It’s not like you’re out for blood, Jenny. You’re nice and sociable,” he

reassures, smiling sweetly. “Any other questions?”

With my eyes on the papers, I curtly answer, “No.” I pack the file case inside my bag and stand. “I’ll be departing tonight, if that’s okay.”

“That’s more than okay!” he booms, smiling proudly. “I’ll have the jet prepared for you. Just tell me when you’re ready to go.”

“Thank you, Papa. I’ll be back in no time,” I say, smiling as I go over to his seat to give him a hug.

Then I exit the museum in a hurry, my phone pressed to my ear as I contact Jonathan.

“Jonathan? Are you nearby?”

“Yes, miss! Do you need me to pick you and Mr. Allair up for dinner?”

“No, change of plans. I need you to immediately pack a bag for a week. We’re going to Italy.”

There’s a noise on his end, and I hold back my laughter.

“W-what about you, miss?” he asks eventually.

“Arrange for someone to send clothes that’ll last me a week. I have no time to go back to my apartment and pack,” I say, checking my watch.

“Of course, miss. Where do we rendezvous?”

“Come pick me up at the park after you’re done packing,” I reply, briskly walking to a bakery to buy two croissants. “Then we’ll immediately leave for the hangar.”

“Understood, miss. I’m on my way.”

“Thank you, Jonathan.”

I hang up, pay for the croissants, and walk to the park to study the information on Ren while I wait.



ONCE WE GET to the hangar, Papa’s trusted pilot is already waiting for us.

“Miss Allair! So good to see you!” Mr. Lavigne greets, kissing both sides of my cheeks. “I trust you two are ready for your trip tonight?” he asks me and Jonathan with an excited smile.

I nod, returning his grin. “Of course we are.” Then, not wanting to sound bossy, I ask in the most polite tone, “May we leave now?”

“Of course, miss. Right this way, if you please.” He leads us to the private jet that’s already prepared on the runway.

We climb up the steps and enter the cool aircraft. I settle on my favorite velvet seat, sighing as my head hits the plush couch. Jonathan takes the seat across from me after placing his bag on the overhead compartment, crossing his legs over his knees as he sinks into his seat.

To relieve some of my stress, I request a bottle of whatever available wine they have. A service crew approaches us, minutes after the plane takes off. He places two wine glasses down and begins to pour us the drink.

“Today’s selection is the *Cannonau di Sardegna* from Sardinia,” he announces. “I hope it fits your taste.” He places the bottle down and leaves, telling us that he’ll be ready at the call whenever we need him.

“Well this is nice,” Jonathan remarks, already taking a sip of his wine. He swirls the drink inside the glass and proceeds to take another sip, nodding approvingly at the taste.

I reach out to take my glass and smell the drink. After swirling it a bit, I take a small sip. Contrary to what I’m used to, the sweet flavor of the wine surprises me but doesn’t excite me any further.

“French wine tastes better,” I mutter, diverting my attention from the wine to the clouds outside.

To be continued. To read more click [here!](#)

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