



*Faking It* WITH THE  
**BOSSY BILLIONAIRE**  
LEAH MAHON

# Faking It with the Bossy Billionaire

Enemies to Lovers Age Gap Romance

Leah Mahon



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# Playlist

**F**or Harriette Moon  
Thanks for the amazing things you do!

*Claire de Lune* – Claude Debussy

*Prelude in C Major* - Johann Sebastian Bach

*Canon in D* – Johann Pachelbel

*Gymnopédie No. 1* - Erik Satie

*La Vie en Rose (from Wall-E)*

*Witchcraft* - Frank Sinatra

*Salut d'Amour Op.12.* - Edward Elgar

*Samson and Delilah: "My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice"*- Camille Saint -  
Saëns from the opera

*Pavane, Op. 50* - Gabriel Fauré

*Étude: A Heartfelt Letter* - Andy Zhan

*Heart and Soul* - Hoagy Carmichael

*Nocturne in E-flat Major, Op. 9, No. 2* - Frédéric Chopin

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EPILOGUE

Also by Leah

## CHAPTER ONE

# Matthew

I checked my phone over my sunglasses and saw that I was twenty minutes late. But my parents had called from Boston, asking if they could come and visit me within the month. And my mother had talked my ear off about marriage.

“You need to find yourself a wife, Matty dear,” she had said. “I’m not getting any younger and want to see my grandchild before I kick the bucket.”

I told her that nobody was kicking any bucket any time soon. But I told them what they wanted to hear, that I had been seeing someone for almost a year and it was so serious that I was planning to marry her.

I knew it would backfire and bite me in the ass one day. For now, at least I had them out of my hair, and my father seemed proud enough to maybe agree on our little ultimatum.

“You get yourself a wife, son. And when you do, you can have all my hotel chains in Boston. You can do whatever you want with them.” I remembered his words that day.



Kristofer Parker was the owner of fifteen hotel chains in Boston. It all started with a small motel he called Lucille's in honor of my mother. But the establishments thrived and grew to be Boston's favorite places to stay.

But times were changing, and his business wasn't doing well in the past five years. So, when Parker Villas rose to become the hotel giant that it is, I was determined to turn things around for my father and buy his company, make it profitable again while keeping the name, maybe call it *Lucille's by Parker Villas*.

The elevator pinged, and the double doors opened. I hated being late, but some things are just inevitable. I went inside just as I received a text message from Clair Sullivan, my childhood friend and our Chief of Human Resources.

Clair: *Where TF are you? Your new employees have been waiting here for 20 minutes.*"

I let the curse slide because she was a dear friend, and she had been so good at hiring our hotel employees that service had become a trademark at Parker Villas.

Matthew: *On my way. Relax.*

I pressed the button for the ninth floor, where the employees had gathered in Clair's vast office. The HR department was supposed to be on the lower floors, but she had begged to be assigned to the upper floors with the rest of the offices, the VIP Banquet Hall, and an additional kitchen.

Just as the elevator doors were closing, a radiant and enthusiastic voice called out.

"Hold the elevator!"

I quickly extended a hand to stop the elevator doors from closing completely, allowing the person to enter before the door closed, forgetting about the new text from Clair.

The first thing that caught my attention was the smell of dahlias. It wasn't the cloying and pungent smell that would cause a headache. It was the expensive kind of scent, the one where it's subtle, yet sexy. The kind that if I buried my nose in her neck—

“The weather outside is so hot,” she complained, breaking my trance.

“What floor?” I asked, daring a glance at her. Her curtain bangs were stuck on her temples thanks to sweat, and she was fanning herself with her hands.

Her blonde hair was down, and she was wearing an expensive-looking pleated dress. I reckoned she was a guest just by the way she looked. She was the most stunning woman I'd ever met.

Femininity oozed from her when she opened her eyes and answered, “Ninth floor.”

I didn't question her choice of floor even though it was usually a floor for staff only. Sure, there were a few rooms there, but we don't give them out to the guests when we have a lot of vacancies because there was so much stuff going in and out of there, and the banquet hall was loud when we had events.

I returned my focus to my phone again before I lost my cool and struck up a conversation. The last thing I wanted was to get involved with a guest.

“Shit,” I heard her curse. “I'm late.”

Now, that got my attention. She was late, and she was going to the ninth floor. There were no other booked activities there, and I didn't have other meetings aside from with the new employees.

“Are you a new hire, too?” she asked. I could hear the nervousness in her voice. And when I looked up at her, she was looking at me with her green eyes. I noticed that when the elevator lights shone on them, they looked almost light blue. “Because at least I have someone with me to come in there this late.”

It should have offended me that she thought I was an employee with the Armani suit I was wearing, but then again, she was wearing a Dior dress. I guess it was best not to underestimate people.

So she was a new employee, I took note. I hated tardiness, and I sure as hell didn't want a lagging employee, not when we were supposed to have the best staff around.

"I'm new here as well," I said, giving her the benefit of the doubt. "It's my first time here, actually."

"In the hotel or in Florida?" she questioned. She was almost jumpy, yet she still stood in an elegant way. Before I could answer, she continued, "Because it's my first time for both."

"You've never been to this hotel, either?"

"I'd never even heard of this place before a week ago."

Hmm. Interesting. Little Blonde didn't know about the hotel. That was another red flag. She was tardy, and she was clueless. I wondered why Clair decided to hire her at all. She didn't even look like the staff we usually hired. God, she seemed out of place even in this elevator.

"I don't know what all the fuss is about this place," she pointed out. "I've been to better, more beautiful hotels back in California. I mean, the lobby seemed too pretentious with all the flowers and the vases. You know what would make it stand out from the rest?"

"What?" I asked. I couldn't find it in me to be mad at her remarks. It was amusing, though.

"A fountain. And paintings. Maybe even a complementary bowl of chocolates. That sounds fancy," she giggled. I hated the fact that she was right, at least about the painting. A fountain was too much, and it would be inconvenient for the guests if we started renovating the lobby.

“And you know what else? The AC is too low. With the heat outside like this, they might as well just shut the thing off.”

Well, fuck me. I rapidly texted our facilities manager to crank up the AC in the lobby. I didn't want to hear a single complaint from someone about how hot my hotel was. Even from an employee whose stay at my business was questionable.

“A bar in the lobby is a good idea, too. It could attract pedestrians even if they wouldn't book a room for—You know it's rude to be texting on your phone. I'm here talking.”

I looked up again just as I received a confirmation that the AC in the lobby was blasting.

“Do you ever shut up?” I snapped at the guest beside me. The elevator was finally close to the ninth floor.

“Excuse me?”

“It's clear that I don't care about what you're saying, and yet you're blabbing nonstop.”

It was a lie that I didn't care. I cared so much I wanted to sit her down in my office so she could tell me what else I could improve. It was the reason why this hotel thrived even though it was new in the market.

Our guests were our priority. We listened to what they wanted and needed, and we made sure that these requests were met the next time they were here.

They wanted a pet-friendly hotel? I made sure all the rooms were pet-proofed and had pet-friendly amenities, and I even had pet foods on the menu.

They wanted live music? I bought a high-end piano for the banquet halls even though no one had played the thing for months.

The point was I listened to people. And even though I wanted to cut my

ears off because of the chatty Cathy beside me, she still made valid points. I listed the points mentally so I could bring them up at our monthly staff meeting.

“You could shut me up politely, you know,” she complained with a frown. And even if she was in a tight spot, her sophisticated demeanor remained. It might just be the only thing helping her to get this job. I value people with good taste, and she clearly had it.

Yet, I couldn’t help but think again of all the red flags I had gathered about her just from our quick ride up in the elevator. She was tardy, which we had already established, and she didn’t give a single fuck that the other employees had risen at the butt crack of dawn to arrive here at least thirty minutes early.

She didn’t do her research about my hotel—who wouldn’t know Parker Villas? People in California, apparently. Then I’d make sure another Parker Villas would rise there before the year ended, even if it meant seeing Ryan St. James there. I’d make sure that bastard would see me thrive.

If this Malibu Barbie knew about the hotel, if she had done an ounce of research, she’d know that she was talking to the owner and wouldn’t be so nonchalant about her tardiness.

And lastly, her smart mouth was going to be her fatal flaw. She’d either annoy the guests or talk her way into getting fired.

The elevator came to a halt with a ping, and the double doors opened into the lobby.

“I’ll see you in there, Barbie,” I said before stepping out, leaving her behind with a disbelieving look on her face.

I couldn’t wait to see the look on her face when she saw who was going to interview her.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Reagan

I complained to myself when I walked out of the elevator, following Mr. Obnoxious out and to the interview venue.

And I thought he was good looking when I entered the elevator and a gentleman when he held the door open for me.

But who was I kidding? The man, even though he was basically twice my age, was gorgeous. He maintained himself well enough to look very, *very* pleasing in the eyes. He had dark, striking eyes, and his hair was a wave mess of jet-black.

His mere appearance was enough to add to my nervousness because I had arrived twenty minutes late for my interview with the boss.

To say that it was a struggle living by myself in Florida was an understatement. It had been an excruciating two months filled with tears and desperate phone calls to Heidi, our housekeeper, about how to cook meals or pay the bills.

Florida was an entirely different world than Calabasas. Not only was Florida humid at this time of year, but it was also a tragedy to commute,

especially when I didn't have a car or know which road to take. But I was learning.

Because I didn't have a choice but to leave home, thanks to Daddy. And even if it was months ago, I could still vividly remember why I was here to begin with.

*Reagan – 20 years old*

*Daddy was screaming again, and I flinched at his loud, authoritative voice that vibrated from the living room to the kitchen island where I had laid my books to study.*

*I knew I should have gone home for Spring Break. My apartment in New York would've offered more solitude than this house.*

*"I swear to God, Ryan!" he yelled on the phone. I didn't know what was happening because I didn't get involved with the family business. I grew up with my mom always saying I could do whatever I wanted, and running a real estate company wasn't my plan.*

*"You're going to fucking jail, and I'm not going to help you this time."*

*The words jail and Ryan in one sentence got me on my feet, and I pushed back the stool to get up and walk toward the living room.*

*Our home in Calabasas exuded luxury, but my late mother had always made sure that it still felt homey with family portraits on the wall and cozy reading nooks. Grand chandeliers made of glass hung from lofty ceilings, casting a warm, inviting glow over marble floors and intricate moldings, plush furnishings, and exquisite artwork which adorned the spacious rooms.*

*My brother and I were close growing up. He was my protector and the man of the house when my father was too busy working. We had a fifteen-year age gap between us, making him more of a guardian, really. But when he went to*

college, we hadn't spent much time together like before, and it was something I really struggled with.

When my mother died four years ago, our family started to fall apart. My father drowned his sorrows with alcohol and cigarettes. I'd hide from him in closets and dark cabinets when he came home drunk. My therapist pointed out that this was the root of why I wasn't too fond of close spaces.

"What's the matter, Daddy?" I asked. On a good day, Ricardo St. James was the typical workaholic father. But losing the love of his life had turned him into someone I could barely recognize.

He hung up the phone, and I could see the fury all over his face thanks to whatever my brother had done. They stopped seeing eye to eye when Mommy passed, but Daddy tolerated him because he was to become the next CEO of the family business.

"Your brother is what happened," he accused, loosening his tie around his neck before throwing himself on the couch and massaging the bridge of his nose. "His friend filed a lawsuit against him. He embezzled over a million dollars from their business."

"Which friend?"

"Matthew Parker."

I didn't know anything about Matthew Parker except for the fact that Ryan met him during college and they immediately clicked because they both loved doing business. I met him once when he visited, but I was too young to care, and we never really talked. I didn't know what a guy like him would say to a young girl like me.

During my brother's second year in college, they started a bourbon business called Parker St. James. The company had boomed even though they were new to the market.



*“Is he going to be okay?” I asked. The thought of my brother in prison didn’t sit well with me. It was one thing that he was away all the time. Jail was a completely different story.*

*“Your brother is a big boy, Reagan,” Daddy pointed. “He can take care of himself. But he’s not getting a dime from me this time.”*

*“But he’s going—”*

*“It’ll teach him a lesson. I’m sick of him trying to ruin what I built for so many years.” Daddy got up from the couch and went to the bar cart to pour himself a drink. I mentally decided to hide in my room for the rest of the day and try to call Ryan. “If I were you, Reagan, I’d start thinking about taking over the business. It seems like your brother isn’t so fit for the job anymore.”*

*\*\*\**

*Reagan - 25 Years Old*

*“Reagan Nöelle,” Daddy called from the kitchen, his words slurring. I had just gotten home from shopping with my friends at The Commons and carried multiple bags of designer shoes and clothes with me.*

*Shit. I didn’t know that Daddy would be home this early.*

*My senses were telling me to tread lightly. It was barely six p.m., and I knew from Daddy’s voice that he already had too much to drink.*

*“Yes, Daddy?” I answered as I entered the kitchen, and sure enough, he was sitting on the kitchen island, swaying slightly. Two decanters of what smelled like whiskey rested on the marble surface. One of the glass pitchers was empty while the other one was filled to the brim.*

*Daddy had said he would stop drinking after he trashed the kitchen a year ago, but it seemed he had forgotten his promise. I wanted to tell him that he*

*needed to see someone about his crippling alcoholism, but I had never really had the chance to talk to him when he was a hundred percent sober.*

*“Sweetie!” He took a final swig of the amber drink before refilling his glass halfway. “I just talked to your brother today.”*

*My brother had been in prison for three years since his best friend had filed a lawsuit against him for embezzlement. He decided to go through with his jail sentence even though he could’ve bailed himself out or bribed a judge to keep him from being behind bars.*

*He hadn’t called me for three years, nor did Daddy mention his name after the scandal came out and the press had a field day, my brother’s face on the cover of every tabloid and business newspaper in the area.*

*It had affected the family company, of course. Customers didn’t trust a business that a cheat would potentially run. And Daddy didn’t take it well when he had built his entire life from scratch was going downhill all because of Ryan. If anything, it only worsened his alcohol problem.*

*But since I heard that Ryan had finally gotten out on good behavior, he called me once to tell me that he was fine and would fix things with Daddy and the company. But that was two years ago, and I hadn’t heard from him since except for his occasional texts asking how I was. Besides that, I hadn’t seen him in the flesh for five years.*

*“What did you talk about?” I asked, settling the paper bags on the floor by the counter to grab a bottle of coconut water from the newly-stocked fridge. Thanks to Heidi, our housekeeper for over twenty years, we always had everything in the fridge and the pantry.*

*“He said he’s in Bali right now. Can you believe it?” Daddy wheezed, shaking his head in disbelief. “I’m here struggling with how I’m going*

*manage this crisis that has been going on for five years, and the asshole is over in Bali vacationing.”*

*What did that have to do with me? I wanted to ask but didn't. I usually didn't take part in this issue or invest effort into the company, but recently, Daddy had been hinting that I should decide about his plans to let me take over the company.*

*“I think it's time for you to step up, sweetie.”*

*“But, Daddy, I don't know anything about the company. And you expect me to run it?”*

*“That's why you need to take a business course. Get an MBA or something. I know someone who can get you into any Ivy League school you want.”*

*School wasn't the problem. I didn't want to spend my entire life being miserable, looking at the company books and fighting for investors. It seemed tiring and boring. I wanted to play the piano. It was why I went to Juilliard in the first place.*

*While Ryan followed in my father's footsteps when it came to being good with numbers and entrepreneurship, I didn't want to be judged based on how much I could earn in this lifetime. I had my mother's creativity. She believed that a person's creativity was the most powerful thing. While my father lived a fast life, his wife lived a very slow one—baking cookies, playing instruments, and painting in the sunroom.*

*Sometimes, I couldn't fathom how two such opposite people could fall in love.*

*“No,” I shook my head, earning a frown from my father. My heart skipped a beat, praying that he wouldn't yell at me or, worse, throw a glass at me.*

*“Then what are you planning on doing with your life, Reagan? You graduated two years ago, and you don't have a job. You're not looking for a*

job, and even if you have one, you wouldn't know how to do it. You're wasting time and money to go shopping with your friends.”

My father had discovered a new tactic to use against me since I had been refusing his offer to become CEO—manipulate me and hurt my feelings. But I wasn't having any of it. I knew what I wanted, and I wasn't going to compromise it to please a drunk.

I didn't want to sound whiny. But I wanted to tell him that I was making something for myself. I had planned another party for my friend's birthday next week. She knew a lot of people in the music business, and I prayed that somebody would finally notice me there.

Sure, it was like finding a needle in the haystack, but I needed to start somewhere. I just needed more time. If this plan went south, I was planning to be in every piano competition I could find. The point was not to win, really. I just wanted to play for the public.

“I have a music degree, Daddy. I don't know how it can help me get an MBA.”

“Then get a bachelor's in business. Do whatever you need to do.”

“And if I say no?”

Daddy's eyes narrowed at me. I used to be the obedient girl, always saying yes and always serving his needs. But I wasn't interested in the business because I wanted to follow in my mother's footsteps.

“I didn't take you for someone who would defy me, Reagan,” he challenged. “But if you do, you can say goodbye to your trust fund. You can say goodbye to me supporting you because with how our business is losing money and how much you're spending every day, we might go bankrupt in two years anyway.”

“But that's not fair—”

*“Life’s never fair, sweetheart. You’re an adult, but you’re still living under my roof, so you follow what I say.”*

*And that did it for me.*

*College had been the best four years of my life. At first, I thought it was because I got to surround myself with people like me who were passionate about music, but it was also because I was away from home.*

*No drunk father to hide from, no brother to worry about, and as much as it pained me to say it, there was no sadness following me every day because of Mommy’s passing. Everything in this house reminded me of her, and everything she left behind slowly lost its spark.*

*And right now, I knew that the next best thing for me was to move out.*

*“Then maybe it’s time for me to look for my own place, yeah?” I gave my father a fake smile before gathering the shopping bags and walking upstairs.*

*“You think you’re going to survive out there without my help, sweetie?” he called, chuckling. “I’ll give you two weeks at most. Then you’re going to come crawling back home.”*

*I wasn’t. Because I knew I needed to step out of my comfort zone and do something worthwhile. I didn’t want to feel like I was forever indebted to my father. Mommy wouldn’t want that for me.*

*I packed three suitcases that night after I booked a business class flight to Florida. I counted the cash in my wallet and took my one credit card that I knew Daddy couldn’t close. And as I stuffed my makeup in a pouch, Mommy’s voice echoed in my ears.*

*"Time to shine your light, sweetheart."*

*Being late today wasn’t my fault, okay?*

I had woken up at six a.m. for this eight a.m. interview. I only had coffee for breakfast and a bite of cold pizza from last night, which wasn't really the best choice, but it would do.

I ventured into the Florida streets at around six-thirty, and even that early, I could feel the growing humidity in the air along with the salty breeze off the ocean. I wasn't going to die in poverty, I was going to die from commuting.

Because this Dior pink dress I was wearing wasn't built to survive the crowdedness at the bus stop. Hell, *I* wasn't built for this either. It felt like the people around me were heathens fighting for their lives the way they were pushing and shoving just to have a seat on the bus.

Three buses stopped in front of me until I finally got in one, and it was already seven-fifty-five by then.

The hotel was supposed to be only a twenty minute drive by car, but my journey with the bus had taken hours. I knew complaining would get me nowhere, so I told myself I was going to do better next time, to learn how to navigate the current of people. It was a good workout, anyway.

Tired and annoyed and fucking sweating like a walrus, I turned into an empty hall. It was bathed in soft, dim light as I entered, my heels echoing along the white marble floor.

One long table was set up in front of the stage, and there were three chairs behind it where the interviewers were to be seated. White folders and pens sat on the table, all of which contained our resume information.

A polished, ebony grand piano graced the center of the stage, its surface shimmering in the gentle glow of the lights, and my heart skipped a beat just at seeing its beauty. I couldn't help but miss playing the piano, the soft ivory keys under my fingers, promising melodies flowing through my mind—

“Can I have everyone form a line facing the table, please?” A pretty

redhead interrupted my train of thought as she instructed fifteen of us where to go.

I spotted Mr. Obnoxious in the sea of people and jogged until I reached his side. God, he was on his phone again. Was he not taking this interview seriously?

“There’s a place for texting, and this place is not it,” I hissed beside him as we walked further into the room.

“You should mind your own business, babe,” he said playfully, still on his phone, typing something. I hoped he didn’t get the job. Some other people here deserved it more. And c’mon. He was wearing an Armani suit. I was sure he could afford to live without a hotel salary.

“Double time, people. Go, go, go!” The ginger yelled. “We’re late already. C’mon.” Her eyes then met mine, and my cheeks turned hot and red for being the tardy culprit of the day.

“She’s talking to you, by the way,” I hissed at the man in Armani, walking away before he could say another word, and I was proud of myself for getting in the last word. I jogged along with the other employees who were now in a single-file line facing the empty table as instructed.

I found a spot beside a middle-aged woman wearing jeans and a young man who looked to be barely in his twenties with the ugliest bowtie I’d ever seen. My eyes scanned the room to look for the man I left behind.

And he was still there, texting on his fucking phone by the entrance, looking all serious even though everyone was in line except him.

The redhead coughed to get his attention as she took the chair on the right side of the table. A plump woman wearing a navy blue collared dress with white hems on the sleeves, a white collar, and a white apron sat on the left, leaving the middle spot empty.

Mr. Obnoxious took one absent-minded step, his fingers still tapping the screen of his device, keeping everyone waiting. I rolled my eyes just as the redhead cleared her throat again, louder this time.

He snapped his head in attention, and his eyes grew wide in surprise when he saw that everyone was waiting.

“I’m sorry,” he said, putting his phone in the inside pocket of his black blazer. Then he started walking, but not over to where the line was but toward the empty spot in the middle of the table, his lips tugged to the side from amusement.

It was when the realization hit me. The Armani suit, the entitled actions, and the intimidating charisma. Fucking hell. Have I just ruined my chances here?

“Let’s begin,” he said, unbuttoning his blazer before taking a seat.

The redhead began by putting on her glasses.

“Good morning, I’m Clair Sullivan, Chief of Human Resources. On the other end of the table is Susana Anderson, our Housekeeping Manager. On my right is CEO and Parker Villas owner, Matthew Parker.”

Fucking hell. Not only was this man the owner, but he was my brother’s ex-best friend. The number one man on this planet who hated Ryan St. James because he had embezzled millions of dollars from his business.

And I had just disrespected him in a hundred different ways since we met in the elevator. Shit. I told him his hotel sucked!

He smiled after Clair had introduced everyone and lifted a palm in the air in greeting. His eyes scanned the line, and when his cold gaze landed on me, my stomach dropped, and I swallowed hard.

He rested his elbows on the table and placed his chin atop his clasped hands as he eyed every employee in the line. My palms started to sweat when his



lips stretched into a wicked, mischievous smile.

“You’re here,” Clair started. “Because amongst the two-hundred-thirty people who submitted their applications, you stood out from the rest. Unfortunately, there are only ten vacancies for the housekeeping department, as I said in the email.”

I tried listening to Clair’s speech, but I could feel Matthew’s eyes on me like a laser slicing my skin. I licked my lips, which, thankfully, hadn’t gotten chapped from the heat. The heat wasn’t even a problem right now because I was about to break into a cold sweat at the fact that I had embarrassed my boss by saying that he should have a fucking fountain in his lobby.

“How about we start alphabetically—”

“No,” Matthew cut in, his eyes still glued on me. Could the universe just eat me up alive right here, right now? “I want to start with you. In the pink dress.” He untangled his fingers and leaned back on the cozy-looking chair, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Please step forward.” Matthew’s voice echoed in the empty hall, and the loudness sent a shiver down my spine. But I managed to still gracefully step forward, thankful that my years of ballet and piano recital helped develop my confidence in front of a crowd. “What’s your name?”

Fuck. Goodbye, Parker Villas. You were a great, short-lived opportunity.

“Reagan St. James,” I answered, and I felt like I was under a spotlight, interrogated in front of an audience.

I heard a soft murmur behind me from people who knew my last name. Clair and Susana’s face remained unfazed. But Matthew’s eyebrows rose in surprise, and the amusement in his expression evaporated as his now-angry eyes narrowed at me.

The ginger searched for my folder in the pile, and once she found it, she

handed it to Matthew, who gladly took it and opened it.

“A degree in music,” he announced, not looking up from the document in front of him. “Juilliard. Interesting. Hosted countless charity galas. Can work under pressure. Good attention to detail, resourceful, and creative. Good leadership qualities, good communication—”

He was shaking his head when he got to the last part. Then he abruptly gave Clair a look, probably wondering why I was considered for a job as a hotel housekeeper when my résumé didn’t fit the qualifications. The woman only shrugged, smiling at him.

“Tell me, Ms. St. James,” Matthew began, massaging the bridge of his nose. God, he was going to embarrass me before he’d break the news that I wasn’t going to be hired. “How important is time to you?”

“Well,” I stammered. “Time to me is valuable. It’s a crucial part of productivity and efficiency in both my personal and professional life—”

“Do you think showing up to this interview almost thirty minutes late shows you value the time of others?”

“Well, I have an explanation for that, sir.” Sir? Mr. Parker? God, I didn’t know what to do. But I coached myself to be graceful, nonetheless. *Have poise, Reagan.*

“Please, share it with the room, Jellybean.” Huh? Jellybean? When my forehead scrunched, he raised an eyebrow. “Don’t get the reference?”

“No, sir.”

“Do look it up later tonight. You know, research. Something you should’ve done before you applied for this job. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have talked so bluntly with people in the elevator.”

Clair was enjoying my discomfort, and Susana was so disinterested that she was now yawning, probably tired of the little show Matthew was putting on.

“So please, share with the room your explanation.”

I swallowed, laughing nervously because my explanation was as pathetic as this entire thing. Me? I applied for a housekeeping position when I didn't even know how to do laundry two months ago.

Fuck it! I was going down. This application had been far-fetched anyway. I might as well go down gracefully.

“I didn't know how to commute here.” It was the truth. I didn't know how to fight my way onto a bus, and I'd probably would have gotten lost navigating this hotel itself if it weren't for Apple Maps.

The laughter that followed made me shrink to something so small I wanted to run out of the room and fly back to California. But I knew that it wasn't an option. It would mean proving my father right, that I was helpless in the real world.

“Is that a joke, Jellybean?”

“It's not, sir,” I shrugged. “I'm not from here. I'm from California. In California, I have a car I could take anywhere I needed to go. I moved here two months ago, and I still didn't know how to navigate my way around the city.”

I didn't tell him about the bus because I knew it would only make me a laughingstock.

“Some people don't know how to cook, some people don't know how to drive. Some people don't know how to swim. I just happened not to know my way around yet. But I'm learning. If you finished reading my résumé, you would've known that I'm a fast learner.”

Clair was now hiding her laugh behind her hand, and even Susana's interest was piqued at our little banter.

I knew I wasn't getting this job, and that was okay. It wasn't the end of the

world. But the last thing I wanted was another man humiliating and belittling me.

“I appreciate your honesty, Ms. St. James—”

“You want my full honesty, Mr. Parker?”

“By all means.”

“I’m an aspiring employee here, but that’s just it. I was late, and I’ll take accountability for it. But I didn’t mean to disrespect these people. I believe that my reason was valid. I have no power over any of you. You could’ve just struck my name off your list. You could’ve started without me. But you couldn’t because *you* were late, as well, and they couldn’t start without you.”

I could tell that Matthew was taken aback by the fact that I was accusing him of being late as well, but he didn’t interrupt me. So I went on.

“And you can all think what you want about my tardiness, but at the end of that day, again, I’m just an employee. If you don’t hire me, I’ll get on with my life. Your tardiness, however, sir, speaks volumes. You’re the boss, and you let your employees wait for you when you should’ve set an example and lived up to what we’ve heard about this hotel. We were all lined up here, and you were still busy with your phone.”

We stared at each other for a moment, and I anticipated him yelling at me, or kicking my ass out of the room. Or snapping at Clair, who was now red with laughter behind me, eyeing me with deep admiration and surprise.

“Is that all, Ms. St. James?”

“Off the top of my head, yes, sir.”

“Very good. Please return to your seat.”

What? That was it? No consequences? No yelling?

Clair carried on with the interviews, and this time, Matthew suggested starting alphabetically. He asked all the questions while Clair and Susana

asked follow-ups.

Matthew's calmness with my rebuttal should've made me relax. The fact that he hadn't looked at me again should've proven that I had successfully made my point. But if anything, it made me even more uncomfortable because I could sense the screws turning in his head.

He was cooking something up. And he was planning something diabolical for me. I just hoped the interviewees were good enough for them not to consider me after the stunt I had just pulled.

Otherwise, Matthew Parker was going to be the death of me.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Matthew

“**Y**ou shouldn’t have hired her,” Clair complained nonchalantly as she lounged in my office chair, smoking her watermelon-scented vape. I didn’t mind the smell because I had had vices in the past, but I didn’t encourage her to smoke inside my office.

“You shouldn’t have put her name in the top fifteen,” I answered.

Yes, due to whatever weird pull the universe Hadid brought to bear on me, I had agreed to hire Reagan St. James to work for my hotel, even though I knew that she hadn’t lifted a finger in her life to clean anything and that he was the sister of the person I hated the most.

But there was something about her that I didn’t want to see go. It was perhaps her smart mouth or her attractiveness. Or maybe because I had reason to believe that she was sent here for a reason—to spy on me? To make my life a living hell? I didn’t know.

It just didn’t sit right that Ricardo St. James allowed his daughter to leave home and do housekeeping work of all things.

Why didn't he find her some kind of job where he could bribe people with his money? Like Hollywood. Her face was beautiful enough to be an influencer or even an actress.

Maybe she ran? Maybe she got kicked out. I wouldn't be surprised at this, knowing how patriarchal Ricardo ran his family.

I had to admit that the things she said in her interview were true, and I couldn't argue with them. There wasn't an excuse good enough to let those people wait for me while I was on the phone. I should've tried harder to arrive early, even though it was my parents on the phone.

Reagan St. James had been on my mind all day, every day since last week. She had visited my dreams in the most seductive way, and when I stroked my cock in the shower every night, her face would flash in my head, which I shook off. I looked her up online just to confirm that she didn't have a modeling job or a movie career that she had recently left. There wasn't even any gossip about her to dig into.

She was a private person, too. My quick internet search told me nothing about her hobbies or interests except that she had joined various music competitions when she was in Juilliard. Her social media accounts were set to private, which was odd because she struck me as someone who was flashy in person. Then again, even when Ryan and I were still friends, she was a quiet girl who usually kept to herself. I didn't know that she'd grow up to have such a smart mouth.

"I added her as a joke," Clair said.

The Chief of HR and I have been best friends since high school. She was the only girl who didn't throw herself at me, which humbled me because she was pretty. But when I found her making out with a girl in the hallway, I knew she didn't swing that way. When we started hanging out, we realized

we had the same interests and the same sense of humor, and we decided to be friends.

“In return, she made a joke out of *me*.”

“She really did have you by the balls, Parker,” she giggled, puffing out another cloud of smoke. “I thought she’d run away or piss herself or something. Is she, like, a lawyer or something?”

“I doubt it.”

“She has a mouth on her. I’m impressed she was able to leave you speechless.”

“Try living with men like Ryan and Ricardo St. James. She probably spent her entire life proving to those assholes that she was more than just some helpless lamb.”

“Yeah, okay. She’s not a helpless lamb. But that doesn’t mean you had to hire her,” Clair pointed, putting the cap on her vape. She was done for the time being.

“Susana thinks she has potential.”

“But she doesn’t know how to fold stuff. I doubt she even knows how to use a vacuum.”

“She probably doesn’t,” I agreed. “But she’s here for a reason, and I’m going to find out why. Plus, I like pushing her buttons. Tormenting her might just be my new favorite hobby.”

“You know, sometimes I think you’re a little fucked in the head.”

“Maybe I am. Thanks to Ryan St. James.”

“Geez. What did that man ever do to you?”

If only she knew the whole story.



*I had just come back after half a year in Europe. Ryan and I had agreed to research more about our business, and I told him that in the next two years, I wanted Parker St. James, our bourbon business, to be able to spread its wings and to try selling other alcohol.*

*“Business is very slow right now,” I had said when I mentioned the idea of expanding. “People would choose our brand if we had a variety of liquor to buy. We can’t just sell bourbon forever.”*

*Ryan had agreed to my sentiments, and he suggested that we should start with wine.*

*“It’s a vast market. We can have a hundred different varieties from red to white, from Pinot to Merlot,” he had suggested, and I thought it was brilliant.*

*So we talked about visiting Europe to expand our ideas with regard to wine products and to see potential investors and suppliers. We needed to learn the anatomy of the business and the procedures that make a winery work.*

*But two weeks before our flight, Ryan had said that he couldn’t go with me, that something had come up with his sister, and that leaving for six months wasn’t an option.*

*So, I allowed him to stay behind to take care of Parker St. James while I was away.*

*As my driver took my bags from me and stored them in the trunk, I called my girlfriend Paige, whom I wanted to see immediately after being away for half a year.*

*Long distance wasn’t for the faint of heart, but I was thankful that she was understanding enough to know that I was in Europe for work.*

*I had invited her to come with me, especially since Ryan had backed out. It would be a nice European trip for us. But she said that she couldn’t have fun*

there if her ailing mother was left here, suffering. I understood, so I left on my own.

Paige Simmons and I met in college. She was what you might call an “It Girl”—rich, smart, and she knew how to carry herself in a crowd. She was in one of my classes, and I had needed to borrow an iPhone charger from her. But I had forgotten to return it, so she gave me hell the following day, calling me a thief.

She had fire in her, which I admired, and she was business-minded like I was, so she understood the hustle.

My trip was filled with us Facetiming, and even digital, long-distance sex, distant “I love yous” and “I miss yous” were not enough for me to say how much I wanted her to be by my side. It was a struggle, but beggars can’t be choosers or whatever.

God, I missed her so much. I wanted to sleep the entire day with her until my jetlag was cured.

The driver drove in the direction of my penthouse in Miami that day. I had missed the sun and the salty taste of the tropical breeze.

It was cold this time of year in Europe, and I was thankful I didn’t have to wear so many layers now that I was home.

But when I arrived at my penthouse, it was quiet and empty. This was odd because Paige Simmons wasn’t the type of woman to dwell in silence. She’d usually prefer to have music playing in the background, even at low volume.

“Baby?” I called. I tossed my keys in the bowl by the foyer as I set my bags on the floor. Paige and I moved in together two years ago, and it was the best decision we’d made together. Choosing her was the best decision I had made.

“Paige?”

It was unusual that she wasn’t home and that she wasn’t picking up her

phone. It was four p.m. on a Thursday. She should have wrapped up her date with her friends that she mentioned already and be headed home. Plus, she was never without her phone.

I dialed her number as I walked towards the kitchen, only to see two vases of wilted peonies on the counter. Another oddity. Paige never waited for the flowers to wilt before changing them. She said it made her sad to see withering flowers, so when I could, I always made sure to change them out regularly.

I touched the decaying flowers, and they crunched in my hand, implying that it had been weeks, months even, since they died.

My stomach turned as alarm bells rang in my head. Was Paige in danger? Had she been in an accident and she couldn't pick up her phone? When I dialed her again the third time and was sent to voicemail, I decided to call Ryan.

His phone rang endlessly as well, and I didn't stop dialing it over and over again until on my seventh try, he finally picked up.

"Matthew?" His voice crackled with breathless energy like he had been running before answering.

"Ryan," I greeted him.

"How are you, man? Are you home already?"

"I am," I answered, not caring about introductions. "Look, I'm at the penthouse, and Paige isn't home. Have you seen her by any chance?"

"No, man. I haven't. I'm in California right now with Reagan and Dad." I didn't know why, but Ryan's voice seemed off, like he was doing something suspicious. But again, it was not my business. Ryan was an adult and was grown up enough to face the consequences of his actions.

"How long are you staying?" I asked.

*“I’m hopping on a plane tomorrow. How about we get some drinks, yeah?”*

*“Sounds good. See you, St. James.” I ended the call, my stomach still turning, worried sick about my girl not being home.*

*I was about to dial her number again when my phone started to vibrate on the kitchen counter. A weight seemed to evaporate from my shoulders when I saw Paige’s name show up on the screen.*

*“Matthew?”*

*“Baby? Where are you?” I asked.*

*“I’m at the home with Mama.” Paige’s voice was as carefree as I remembered despite the number of calls she missed from me.*

*Her mother had mobility limitations, and Paige thought it was better for everyone to send her mother to a care home. She visited her every day.*

*“I’ve been calling you.”*

*“I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t have cell reception in her room. I just received your calls.” The service in her mother’s room wasn’t usually an issue. But I didn’t want to sound paranoid because I might just be missing her.*

*“Come home. I miss you,” I said, taking my phone with me to take it to my room.*

*“I thought your flight was tomorrow.”*

*“I couldn’t wait to see you,” I said. “Are you coming home?”*

*“I am.” I could hear the smile in her voice, and I couldn’t help but smile back. “I’m passing some stores on my way. Do you want me to grab anything?”*

*“No.” But really, I wanted to ask her about the peonies, why she hadn’t replaced them or why she let them wilt like that. Had she not stayed in the penthouse at all since I left? But I didn’t want to stir up drama. “I just want to see you,” I said instead.*

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*“I lost the ring,” Paige murmured under her breath, her eyes growing tired. I had been home for three days now since my trip to Europe, and I was so glad that she and I were now physically close again. Another trip away from her might just make me combust.*

*“What ring?” I asked, staring up at the ceiling. The duvet covered our naked bodies as we hummed from the afterglow of sex.*

*“The one you gave me for our anniversary. The diamond-studded one.” Oh. It was custom-made that ring, and although it wasn’t a big deal that she had lost an expensive piece of jewelry, I had wished that it would be too sentimental for her to lose it.*

*“Where’d you lose it?”*

*“Lola and I went to the beach two months ago in California. I must have lost it in the water. I’m sorry.” I ignored the voice in my head telling me that something was wrong.*

*She hadn’t told me about a trip. I wasn’t the type of person to berate my girlfriend into telling me all the things that she did in her life, but Paige had always been the type of girl to tell me every small detail, from a simple stain on her shirt to her buying up the last Dior accessory in the store.*

*But a trip halfway across the country? That seemed off. But again, I let it go because Paige and I were strong, and I knew that she wouldn’t do anything stupid.*

*“It’s okay,” I assured her. “Rings can be replaced.”*

*“Are you sure?” she asked, turning on her side to face me, tucking an arm under her chin. “I feel so bad.”*

*“Don’t. You’re all that matters to me. I don’t care about some stupid ring.”*

*I didn't tell her that I was planning on getting her a different ring. One that really mattered.*

*"Don't leave for Europe again without me," she said.*

*"I promise."*

*\*\*\**

*"Man, Europe was that bad?" Ryan asked. He had arrived an hour ago and went directly to my penthouse to see me. And he saw me yawning because it was clear that I was still jetlagged.*

*"It was bad because I was alone."*

*"I'll go with you next time," he promised.*

*I was on my computer, checking Parker St. James' financial statements and revenues from the past six months. I had kept that side of work from my head when I was in Europe researching because I trusted Ryan to take care of everything and I knew that he wouldn't do anything to jeopardize the business.*

*"How's Reagan?"*

*"Huh?" His head was cocked to the side, genuine confusion in his expression.*

*"You said you couldn't come six months ago because something came up with Reagan," I reminded him, and his face showed recognition immediately.*

*"Right. Right," he laughed nervously. "She's fine. You know, college life was taking a toll on her. But she's okay now. She just needed a little breather."*

*"Good. Look, Ryan, I checked our income statement last night, and Parker St. James lost a million dollars in four months."*

*"What?"*

*“I was in Europe, man,” I pointed out. “And I thought you were going to spearhead everything. I didn’t check anything because I thought you were going to handle this.”*

*“I did, Matthew,” Ryan argued, but there was clear guilt on his face.*

*“So why did we lose over a million dollars?” I asked, and I studied the way he played with the ring pendant on the silver chain around his neck. I knew that ring. The light reflected at the diamonds around the band, and one of those diamonds was darker than the rest because it wasn’t a diamond, it was Sapphire—Paige’s birthstone.*

*“I don’t—”*

*“Why do you have that ring?” I interrupted before he could make some lame excuse. Anger oozed out of my every pore as the realization slowly poured onto me like hot water.*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“That ring.” I pointed at the ring around the chain, and he stopped fidgeting it as if it had been an unconscious gesture.*

*“Oh, this thing? Reagan gave it to me before I left yesterday.” Ryan St. James was a horrible liar, which was ironic because his father was a lying businessman.*

*“That’s Paige’s,” I pointed. “Ryan, why do you have Paige’s ring?”*

*And then it hit me.*

*The peonies. She hadn’t been staying at the penthouse for a while because Paige was staying with someone else while I was in Europe.*

*“Two months ago in California, you said?” I recalled. “She said she was on a trip to California with her friends two months ago, too.”*

*“Matthew, let me explain.” His answer was explanation enough. Paige and Ryan had been sleeping together behind my back. The anger that surged*

through me was scary. I was afraid of what I might do to Ryan's pretty face.

"You asshole!" I stood up from the couch and rounded the coffee table to grab his collar with both my hands. He didn't even flinch. "You slept with my fucking girlfriend?"

"Matthew, c'mon man." He raised his palms in the air to tell me that he was surrendering and not punching back if I decided to give him the world's biggest shiner.

"You're my best friend, Ryan. Fuck! I was going to marry her!" I hissed, pushing him away. And he cowered, fixing his shirt before stepping back from me. "How long?"

"Matt—"

"How. Fucking. Long?"

"Three months after you left."

"How?"

"We were drunk at a mutual friend's party. One thing led to another, and we ended up sleeping together. And we couldn't stop. It went on for a while." There was remorse on his face, but it was too late to feel guilty now because they already did the deed. And they kept going knowing damn well it was going to hurt me.

"Jesus Christ. Yesterday, when you said you were in California—"

"I was in town. With her." At least he was telling the truth and not digging his own grave.

"Fuck you, St. James. Fuck you!" I spat. "I can't believe I trusted you. I wouldn't be surprised if you're the reason behind us losing millions of dollars."

"I am." His admission sent a chill down my spine, making my skin crawl. "I embezzled it."



*“What?”*

*“We went on a trip to Brazil two months ago. I thought I would be able to pay it back without you noticing anything.”*

*God, I wanted to punch his face right now. But I knew that a lawsuit was on the horizon and this wasn't the wisest decision. So I shook my head and decided right there that Ryan St. James wasn't my friend anymore. He and Paige were dead to me.*

*“You're a fucking monster. You're a thief. I won't let you get away with this, jackass. You'll hear from my lawyers, and I'll make sure you rot in jail.”*

*I kicked him out of my penthouse like I was kicking him out of my life for good because I was.*

*Later that night, I confronted Paige. And she didn't even feel sorry about the whole thing. She told me that she was slowly losing interest, and she should've broken up with me before I left for Europe, but he didn't have the heart to tell me. And sleeping with my best friend was the thing that made it clear to her that she was done.*

*I couldn't hate her, really. Because I loved her.*

*So, I made sure she stayed out of the narrative when the news broke about Ryan St. James' embezzlement scheme. My lawyers and I were determined to put him in prison. And we did because he pled guilty, and his admission was enough for him to be sent to prison without any trial.*

*After that, I cut ties with him and with Paige. I didn't care if he got out early or if he rotted in prison for his full sentence. His well-being wasn't my concern anymore.*

*But I was sure about one thing. I would rise again, and even if I had forgotten about Ryan and Paige, I'd make sure my name haunted them forever.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Reagan

**I**t had been a week. A week since I received the email that said that by some fucked up miracle, I got the job at Parker Villas.

*“Congratulations,”* the email had said. *“You are one of our top ten hires at Parker Villas. Please arrive on or before eight a.m. tomorrow for orientation and to receive your uniforms.”*

I had received the email in the middle of lunch, seven days after I had made a fool of myself in the interview. I was already mentally prepared for the fact that I was not getting hired and even started looking for another job option. Something that was more connected with my degree.

Let me tell you, it was impossible to find work when you were a creative like me. Not only was the field competitive, but job offers were usually limited, and pay wasn't that high. It was always a fight between practicality and passion.

After a week of starting work at the hotel, I realized I was doing a shitty job. I could barely push the cleaning cart inside the room without bumping

into something. Thankfully, I hadn't broken anything. Yet. I knew it would happen someday, though.

On my first day, I cleaned one of the Presidential Suits with someone named Tyler. He had been working in the hotel for a year. He was a high school dropout with a big dream to become a fashion designer. He was friendly and very happy to teach me how to make the beds and fold the blankets. He was so good and precise at his job that it was like he was working purely on muscle memory. I was impressed.

So I learned just by watching. When it was my time to do it, he told me that the overhangs should be tucked properly and that I should always fold in thirds. Although it wasn't half as good as his work, he assured me I would improve with constant practice.

Although I could stomach the amount of folding, vacuuming, and sweating, the only thing I still couldn't get used to was cleaning the bathroom.

Sure, the baths at the hotel were pristine with exquisite marble finishes, but the guests could be disgusting sometimes. I didn't do well with filth. It made me squeamish. And some guests, even the pretty ones, could be awful.

I once cleaned a bathtub drain filled with what looked like pubic hair. The man looked like he was in his early twenties and seemed to well enough off to afford a fancy suit. I cleaned his room after his first night and thought he was handsome with impeccable taste in ties. That was until I saw his bathtub. The jerk must have shaved and didn't bother to clean up.

Another time a woman had the smelliest trash I had smelled in my life. I didn't know what was inside that bin, but it took everything in me not to throw up.

After a week, I still hadn't developed a strong stomach, but it wasn't something I couldn't handle.

At least Alejandra, one of the sous chefs I had befriended, always prepared dinner for me to take home before my shift ended at seven p.m.

The Filipino woman with white streaks of hair under her hairnet had told me I looked like my mother, and she immediately had my attention. She shared that she once worked in a deli in California, one my mother frequented. My mother had been kind enough to give her big tips every time she visited so that Alejandra could save enough to send her son to college.

I cried in front of Alejandra and hugged her tightly after I shared that Mommy had passed away. After that, she had been preparing me dinner, and I thought how small the world was that our paths crossed.

It had also been a week since I saw Matthew, which I thought was good because I didn't know what I'd say to him when we crossed paths. Should I thank him for giving me a chance? Or apologize for the way I spoke to the *fucking CEO*?

"I got it from here, Tyler," I said, maneuvering the cleaning cart outside one of the standard rooms we just finishing tidying up. All I needed to do was get some things from the pantry to refill the toiletries.

I wiped my other hand on the white apron around my light blue uniform, my shoes clattering against the marble floors. The heels were a tad higher than the required height, but they were the only ones I had, and I still needed to save a little extra money for another set of good-quality shoes.

"Excuse me," a voice with a valley girl accent called from behind me. She sounded like one of my friends back home who, I realized a little too late, didn't care enough for me to call now that I was no longer living at home with my dad.

"Do you need anything, ma'am?" I asked, turning to see a pale girl with dark curls peeking out of the door of her room. She was wearing a red tube

top that matched the color of her clearly filled lips and gold hoops hung on her ears.

“Can I ask if there are any available VIP rooms right now?” She gave me a fake smile, her teeth too white to be natural.

“I believe there are. None of our Junior Suites are occupied today,” I said, and I didn’t know if it was the kind of information I should’ve shared, but I guessed there was no harm.

“Great,” she squealed as her phone rang in her hands. She glanced down at it, her thumbs rapidly tapping on the screen as the bangle of bracelets on her wrist clanked.

I wanted to roll my eyes at her for ignoring my presence to entertain her phone. The simple act reminded me of Matthew in the elevator and in the banquet hall. It must have been a newly developed pet peeve for me because, back in California, everybody paid attention to me.

I started walking away from her, shoving the cart away, when she yelled, “Oh, excuse me. I’m still talking to you.” Her entitled tone made me silently scoff before I turned to face her again, pressing a fake smile on my face.

“What is it, ma’am?”

“I want a room upgrade,” she said nonchalantly, still focused on her phone.

“You can approach the front desk for that, ma’am,” I instructed. “We’re not able to make room changes and accept money from guests.”

“Good,” she beamed. “Because I’m not giving you a dime.”

God, who was this woman? Thanks to my all-girls private school, I had had my fair share of mean girls to deal with back in the day. It was a jungle there, and the fights usually were in secret and very petty.

“Glad that we’ve established that, ma’am.”

“But I still want an upgrade.”

“The front—”

“Yeah, yeah.” She crinkled her forehead and waved a hand in the air to cut me off. “The front desk. You already said it. But I want a *free* upgrade.”

“I can’t do that.”

“But you just said that your Junior Suites are free for today. I want one.” When I opened my mouth to tell her that I didn’t have the right to authorize the changes, when she interrupted me once more, annoyance started to crawl up my skin. “I want one with an ensuite bathroom and a bigger bathtub.”

“As I said, ma’am, staff are prohibited from making room changes for the guests. And I’m sure even the front desk wouldn’t authorize the free upgrade you want.”

“Excuse me, missy,” she hissed, finally stepping out of the room. Her risqué top was paired with high-waisted denim jeans that were so skinny it was almost like a second skin. She wore the ugliest pair of shoes I had seen in my life, and her posture was horrendous. “But do you know who I am and what I do for a living?”

“Am I supposed to?” She looked offended by my answer.

“I am Maddison Chambers,” she scoffed.

“Doesn’t ring a bell.” I knew that we were past formalities now and even though this woman was a guest, and Susana said that they were always right, I wasn’t going to stand here and let her ridicule me.

“I am an influencer.” She raised a finge, a grimace painted her face as if she was about to cry in front of me for not knowing her name. “I have over three-hundred-thousand followers on Instagram, a hundred-thousand on TikTok, and over fifty-thousand on Twitter.”

With the status my family had in California, I knew a lot of influencers. Some were even my friends, and for a short while, I had thought of becoming

one, too. But it required hard work and thick skin to face rude people on the internet who believed they could comment about your body or what you should do with your life. I knew it wasn't for me. Just by her number of followers, I could tell that Maddison Chambers was new in the field.

"That's good." I smiled, praying I could wrap the conversation up and leave. But she wasn't done.

"Do you know what that even means?"

"Enlighten me," I said.

"It means that I could post this hotel on my socials and write the ugliest review. Zero stars on accommodations, zero on the room, and negative one hundred stars to the pathetic staff." When I had gone quiet to digest her words and try not to get pissed, she thought she had won. "That's right. So I suggest you make the upgrade and hand me my Junior Suite key *now*."

"Look," I started. "Where I come from, entitled *baby* influencers like you with unrealistic beauty standards and obvious bad taste are cancellable. Do you know what *that* means?"

She shook her head. I guess she needed a crash course on what cancel culture was. Although I wasn't a fan of that, she needed to learn her lesson. Better from a hotel staff member than someone who could ruin her career before it could even start.

"It means that with one post from a *pathetic staff member* like myself, your big influencer dream might just be short-lived. No one likes a privileged girl who's rude to blue-collar workers who work hard day and night to make ends meet."

Her eyes grew in horror as my words sank into her brain. That was the thing about working for social media and content creation, you needed your followers' engagement. So it would be a good idea if Maddison learned a

thing or two before she did something stupid and got put on trial by the public.

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s reality.”

“Your boss will hear about this.”

My stomach dropped at her words. The last thing I needed was to get Matthew involved in this little debacle. It would mean that my job hung on the line. I wasn’t supposed to talk back to the guests, and if my superiors heard about this, I was dead.

But I also wasn’t going to cower from Maddison. If I was going down, I might as well make a show out of it.

“By all means.” I smiled at her one last time, turning to push the cart away from her room. But before I could leave, I was going to bruise her ego one last time. “And you know what else, Maddison Chambers?”

“What?”

“I have over *four-hundred and fifty-thousand* Instagram followers,” I stated, and she gasped. “And I’m not even an influencer, as you would say. I suggest you start partnering up with brands and maybe collaborate with a few people.”

I heard her grunt, stomping her ugly heels on the floor as she slammed the door shut.

That was worth it.



## CHAPTER FIVE

# Matthew

“We would like to stay and chat some more, maybe even have dinner, but I’m afraid it’s getting kind of late, and we have a flight to catch in an hour and a half.”

Mother and father had been in Florida for eleven hours, and already, I knew I was behind on a week's worth of work just by clearing my schedule for the day and touring them around the hotel and the city.

Thankfully, they insisted on not staying even though I told them they could have the presidential suite for the night. Father said he didn’t want to leave Percy, his seven-year-old German Shepherd, alone for the night.

“You know, son,” my father added. “I would have to say that I was disappointed.”

“In what?”

“Well,” my mother chirped in. “We were kind of hoping to meet this girlfriend of yours. But both of you seemed too busy to make sure we met her today.”

“I’m telling you, Lucille. Matthew is faking it just so he can take my hotels,” Father accused.

“Believe whatever you want to believe,” I said nonchalantly. I should probably be freaking out that they were doubting me, but I knew that if I remained calm, they’d believe my bluff. I had known that this was going to bite me in the ass eventually, but I didn’t realize that it would be this soon. “She’s a woman with her own hobbies, and she’s busy with work.”

“Which is?”

“She’s in business like me. Running her father’s real estate company.”

“What—”

Before Father could finish his question, a knock interrupted us. Like muscle memory, my mind immediately ran through my schedule for the day. But then I remembered I had cleared my entire day because of my parents.

“Are you expecting someone, son?”

I glanced at my wristwatch and saw that it was seven sharp, and I realized that I had asked Clair to send Reagan to my office after her shift.

A guest had reported to Clair that staff had been rude to her, and the former was asked who it was. She said she didn’t get her name except that she was a blonde, beautiful, and had a mouth on her, which—and I quote—would be the death of her.

Another knock came before Clair complained. “C’mon, Matthew. I don’t have all night.”

The idea came when I was walking towards the door, and while I turned the knob, I knew that I was digging my own grave right now. But I needed to make my parents believe.

Reagan St. James didn’t look like she just finished an eleven-hour shift. I was stunned at how beautiful she looked. Her hair looked like she had just

come from the salon, and her light green, long-sleeved cashmere top made her look classy, especially when paired with her white floral skirt. She wore little to no makeup, yet she radiated natural beauty and confidence.

“Can we get this—”

“Oh!” Mother exclaimed, clasping the pearls around her neck.

“Shit,” Reagan cursed, low enough for me to hear. “I’m sorry. Did I interrupt something?”

“No, darling, you’re fine.” Reagan gasped quietly at my endearment. But I didn’t give her enough time to complain before I grabbed her waist and pulled her towards my side.

“This is Reagan, my girlfriend. Reagan, meet my parents.”

“You owe me, asshole.” I let the insult slide because I really did owe her one. Sure, I could have chosen someone else, but my years as a businessman taught me that great opportunity knocked only once. And this time it seemed to be true. Literally and figuratively speaking.

“Is this really her, Matty?” Mother got out of her seat and extended her arms towards my employee. “She looks so beautiful. You look so beautiful, dear.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Parker.” Reagan pressed friendly kisses on both my mother’s cheeks, and I wondered if my mother could smell the dahlias like I could. Her scent alone sent a cold shiver down my spine towards my cock.

But I reminded myself that Reagan was an employee, and the last thing I needed was to mingle with one. I was just thankful right now that Reagan decided to play along.

“Please. It’s Lucille. And this is my husband, Kristofer.”

“Mr. Parker.”

“Tofer, please,” Father insisted as he offered to shake Reagan’s hand. “You

know, I thought my son was making shit up that he had a girlfriend. He never told us about you, Reagan. No photos, no nothing.”

“We’re just keeping things quiet right now, Tofer,” Reagan said, casually striking up a conversation with my father as if they had known each other for a long time. “With how busy we are, we barely have time to see each other. Why don’t we have dinner tonight?” she suggested. “Then we can talk about me and Matthew.” That was a terrible idea, I thought to myself. This was just a split-second decision, and I knew that it was a recipe for disaster if we told different stories.

“That’s a wonderful idea, dear,” Mother exclaimed, clapping her hands once. “But I’m afraid we have a flight at nine. And I don’t want to rush dinner with you.”

“That’s too bad, Lucille.” Reagan’s shoulders slumped in pretend disappointment.

“Maybe we can schedule some other time,” my father suggested. “When we’re not in a hurry to catch a flight. Percy will be devastated if we don’t go home.”

“Percy?”

“The dog,” I answered for them, and Reagan nodded in understanding.

“Well, I’ll remind Matthew to schedule a day for us. He’s always busy and all about the hotel.”

“Takes after his father. We’d love to stay and chat some more, but we’ll probably miss our flight if we don’t go now.”

“It was lovely meeting you, Reagan.”

“Likewise, Lucille. I see where Matthew gets his good looks from.”

“I like her already, son. We’ll see you next time, Reagan.”

“I’ll see them out, babe. Just make yourself at home.”

“Nonsense, Matthew. You don’t let women wait. Your mother and I know the way out.”

“Are you sure?”

“We are, honey.”

With that, my parents left, and I thought about my mother beaming joyfully as I introduced her to my fake girlfriend. If I had known that a woman was the only way to make my mother smile that big, I would’ve brought home a woman years ago.

I closed the door behind me once I saw my parents get safely on the elevator, and I saw Reagan still standing where she was, her mouth ajar and confusion written all over her face.

“Please take a seat,” I said, not meeting her eyes as I walked towards my desk.

Just now, I noticed her porcelain legs and her well-polished nails. That the blonde in front of me was a pretty sight might just be an understatement.

Yes, she was gorgeous at first glance, but what I really found striking about her was the tiny, subtle things. Her delicate French tipped nails were just the right length, not long enough to hinder her work. Her pearl earrings stood out because they were not the cheap kind.

Nothing about this woman was cheap. I bet that even her cashmere top cost more than her monthly salary. So I couldn’t help but wonder why someone who could afford luxury jewelry would settle for a job like hers.

“What was that?” she asked once she had taken a seat in front of me.

“You just became my girlfriend. At least in front of parents,” I pointed, leaning back against my chair, intertwining my fingers and resting them on my stomach, the chair protesting at my weight.

“You told your parents you have a girlfriend?” She narrowed her eyes at

me, tossing her white Prada bag on the vacant chair beside her. Again, not cheap.

“I also told them that it was so serious that I had thought of proposing,” I informed her nonchalantly as I admired the small wrinkle on the bridge of her nose. What was it about Reagan St. James that I found her so alluring? Like a siren singing her tunes, I was the naive fisherman about to get lured to his death.

“Proposing?”

“Relax, it’s not real.”

“And if they found out that it’s fake?”

“You’re smart enough to successfully fake it until the end, yes?”

“Is that why you called me here? Because you needed a fake girlfriend?”

“No. I called you here because you fought with a guest.” Yes, that was right, I thought. I needed to get things in order and send her out before I lost control. “For two years, I have never had an employee act like that.”

“My boss never told his parents that I’m his girlfriend, either. I guess there’s always a first time for everything.”

God, that mouth of hers. I felt admiration and surprise at her words, and I couldn’t help but narrow my eyes at her. I couldn’t put a finger on whether she was challenging me or if she was just being straight-up rude. Nonetheless, I was entertained.

“You’re so much like your brother, you know?” The surprise that painted her face was short-lived, immediately replaced by apathy.

“Did you have a fake relationship with my brother too?” she jested, cocking her head to the side, her doe eyes enticing me.

“No, you’re both a pain in my ass.” I pointed out. She scoffed and shook her head at my remark as if to tell me I didn’t know what I was talking about.

“Why are you here, Jellybean?”

The nickname seemed to confuse her once more, and I could tell that she hadn't done the research like I told her to. This didn't surprise me because she was young, and people her age usually didn't care about things like that.

“You literally called me here.”

“I mean into my hotel. You don't think I know who you are?”

“You don't,” she challenged, and I was somewhat proud that she was headstrong. “You know my brother, my father, maybe. But you don't know *me*.”

“I know that the blood running through your veins is the same blood that ran through Ryan's when he decided to embezzle my money.”

“Blood has nothing to do with principle, Matthew.”

“So you're not here because your father told you to spy on me? See how my business is doing so you could ruin it again?”

“Like I said, I never heard of your hotel before two months ago. And you can't accuse me of something my brother did. That's not fair.”

“Explain to me why you snapped at our guest so I can decide what consequence is fair.”

“She called me pathetic.”

“Are you twelve?” Surely, she wouldn't get offended by that remark alone, right? And didn't Susana brief them that the guests were always right? Yet, Reagan looked taken aback by my words.

“I'm not,” she complained. “But she told me she wanted an upgrade, and I told her that it couldn't happen—”

Before she could continue, my phone rang, and I grabbed it only to see a message from my mother. “But she can get an upgrade, Reagan,” I said as I read her text saying they had arrived at the airport.

“For free?”

“Did you tell her she could go to the front desk?”

“I did.” I was typing my reply to my mother, asking them to let me know once they landed in Boston when I heard Reagan snap. “Can you please put down your phone when I’m talking? It’s really rude.”

I murmured an apology. A fucking apology because she now genuinely looked upset.

“Carry on, Jellybean,” I said, turning off my ringer before putting my phone face down on my desk.

“I told her I couldn’t upgrade her room for free, and she threatened to give her followers a bad review of the hotel. She said she’s an influencer.” Reagan rolled her eyes, and it might have just been the most adorable thing I had seen all day.

“Are her followers significant enough to affect my business?” I didn’t know anything about influencers, but I knew that the larger their online following, the more significant their impact could be. We had guests who stayed here that did increase our occupancy rate with their videos and posts.

“Three-hundred-thousand? In my experience, that couldn’t make a difference.”

“Is that what put her off? Because you told her she couldn’t get a free upgrade?”

“No.”

“What was it then?”

“I told her—more like threatened her—that a post from a worker at a hotel about how entitled she was could ruin her career.”

“You threatened our guest?” How could something so petty escalate to this?

“I also told her I had four hundred and fifty-thousand followers on



Instagram. That pissed her off the most.”

I was speechless—dumbfounded, really—that this was happening. Over social media followers. But that was Reagan, I guess. She couldn’t keep her mouth shut when she knew she was being wronged. And it was an admirable quality I wished more people possessed.

But that didn’t change the fact that I had a loose cannon working for my hotel. A beautiful, blonde cannon.

“Okay,” I finally said, having decided on a verdict about all of this. “I can understand that some guests can be impolite and demanding, but we’re a hotel of a certain class, and we’re known for our elite staff who know how to handle guests.”

Reagan listened patiently, yet she looked like she wanted to give me more of what was running through her mind.

“So for a week, you’re going to be an hour early here. I think that’s fair enough.”

“Seven a.m.?” she complained, her jaw dropped. “You expect me to start work at Seven in the morning.”

“You’d rather I suspend you?”

“I’d rather you give a first warning.”

Then I recalled her interview, saying that she still had trouble navigating the city. Besides, a tired employee would be of no use to me. I didn’t know how Reagan got her way out of this, but the next thing I knew, I agreed with her.

“Fine. You’re right. This is your one and only warning. The next time I hear about you arguing with the guests, you work starting an hour before your scheduled shift for a month.” She opened her mouth to complain, but I

raised a finger to keep her quiet before she could persuade me again. “You may leave my office, Ms. St. James.”

She glared at me, grabbing her bag and stomping her way out of the office. And as she did, I watched her body sway seductively until she was out of sight.

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Twenty minutes after I sent Reagan out, I also cleared up my office. I knew I didn't do a lot of work today because of my parents' surprise visit, but I was physically exhausted. And the thing with Reagan ran through my mind all day.

She was always on my mind these days. And even though I opened the window on my small balcony, her scent still lingered in my office. I thought that maybe it was my mind playing tricks on me.

I knew she had me wrapped around her fingers. Even my cock was responding to the way I was thinking about her right now as I stepped out of my office.

The sweet melody of the piano made me halt mid-step. The tune was familiar, serene, and graceful. It was Clair de Lune by Claude Debussy.

I stepped towards the empty banquet hall where the sound was coming from, and if I hadn't been attracted to her before, I was now.

Reagan was sitting in front of the piano, her back towards the door so she couldn't see me admiring her from the entrance. Her head was bobbing freely along with the dreamy tune as it echoed through the walls, her fingers expertly dancing along the piano's ivory keys.

And before I knew it, I had stepped deeper into the room—towards her.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Reagan

**M**y hands itched to grab my credit card and go to the nearest mall. It was such an insufferable day—first, the guest, the fake girlfriend stunt, and then Matthew. I couldn't believe the asshole expected me to start work at seven in the morning.

Jesus. I didn't know working for Matthew could be so exhausting that I wanted retail therapy this badly. But I knew my bank account wouldn't let me, not if I wanted to survive the month.

On the bright side, at least Matthew wasn't so bad to look at. The man was fit as fuck, and I couldn't believe that I was still able to think straight with him in sight. I was physically attracted to the man, I admitted to myself. I could fantasize all day about his muscles under his crisp suits. But the way he used his phone in front of me was pushing my buttons, and I couldn't seem to get past his overbearing behavior either.

I was walking out of Matthew's office to see Alejandra about dinner when the majestic grand piano winked in the dim light of the empty banquet hall,

its lid closed. I stopped on my feet, carrying my bag in one hand and pushing the double French door, praying it was open.

The door wasn't locked, and my heart skipped a beat as I stepped into to the room. My white, square-toed heels clattered against the pristine marble floor. It had been so long since I played the piano, or even touched one.

I climbed the stairs and saw that the fallboard was a little dusty, but once I lifted it, it revealed ivory keys that hadn't seen the light of day for quite a time. They were calling my name. And the next thing I knew, I was sitting on the piano bench.

Then, the gentle caress of the melody began like moonlight shimmering on a tranquil lake, an ethereal dance between the A and the D keys. I didn't need a music sheet to play Clair de Lune because I knew it by heart. It was one of the complex pieces I learned with Mommy.

I closed my eyes and let my body sway along with the dreamy and calm sounds of the piano, even though the keys had uneven volume and sustain issues. I couldn't complain because I needed to play so badly.

When I left home, I didn't realize that this was one of the things I needed to give up. I was missing the comfort of having a piano nearby, something that could help me clear my head. This week came as a shock, and I didn't allow myself to process everything because I knew I would spiral. But for a week, I knew I had gone a long way from who I was before I got this job.

Then, all of a sudden, I missed home. Not the one where Ryan was in trouble, or Daddy was drunk. I missed the home where Mommy would play the piano in the sunroom while I did my homework or how we celebrated Christmas together. I missed how the kitchen smelled like cinnamon and nutmeg during the holidays. I missed the crackle of fire when it was raining, and Mommy composing a new piece of music for me.

I didn't stop, even when I felt my eyes sting as tears started to build. I kept playing, humming with the tune, forgetting that I was probably trespassing in the banquet hall and touching a precious piano.

"You know you're not supposed to be here." The booming volume of Matthew's voice echoed across the room, startling me so much that I pressed the wrong key.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw that he was standing by the stairs, wearing his usual black suit. He looked beautiful in this lighting, his eyes a mix of admiration and something else that told me that I shouldn't be in here.

I returned my gaze to the piano keys and sniffled silently, wiping the lone tear that rolled down the side of my face. I squared my shoulders, cleared my throat, and met Matthew's gaze again.

"Why?" I asked, my voice small. "Nobody's in here anyway." Matthew narrowed his eyes at me but didn't take a step toward me.

"You were playing Clair de Lune," he pointed.

"You know Claude Debussy?" I raised an eyebrow, surprised.

"I know of him from my music lessons as a child." Matthew drew in a long breath as he finally took a step closer, and I felt like, as he did, that he was literally taking my breath away. "Unfortunately, music wasn't my calling, unlike you."

I didn't expect Matthew to see me in such a raw and vulnerable state, not when he just called me out for being rude to a guest. But here we were, forgetting about the fake relationship he had presented to his parents and the fact that a guest had complained about me. Matthew's eyes didn't leave mine as he closed the gap between us.

"The piano needs tuning," I pointed out when he reached my side, towering over me. I snapped my head back to the porcelain keys, my fingers dancing

against the porcelain surfaces. “It’s a beautiful and expensive piano. You need to take care of it.”

“No one has played it for months. I didn’t see the point.”

“Why get it then?”

“A guest requested live music for the hall. I thought it was a good idea until we couldn’t find a pianist in the city to commit full-time to the job.” Something told me that he didn’t look very hard. Musicians wouldn’t pass up an offer like this—even me. If Matthew told me to play the piano for his guests every single night instead of cleaning rooms, I wouldn’t say no to that. But I didn’t question him.

“A waste then,” I sighed, begging God to let Matthew leave because the electricity dancing in the air right now was dangerous. Was there something about the music that made me feel like this towards Matthew right now, even though I had just been thinking that he needed to work on his personality.

“Reagan?” God, even the sound of my name on his lips was something else tonight. It must be because I was hungry and tired, right? It must be that.

“Yes?”

“Why are you here?” Again, it was the question he had asked me earlier like he was expecting something bad from me. Like what? Was he looking for a valid reason to punish me? I wanted to tell him why I had moved out, but I didn’t want anyone to pity me because I chose to look out for myself.

“Who knows,” I joked, looking up at him. He was still standing beside me, his height covering the sole fluorescent light illuminating the hall. “Maybe I was really sent here to spy on you.”

Matthew was handsome. If I didn’t know he was my brother’s age, I would say he still looked like he was in his thirties. But he wasn’t. But the fact that he hated my brother’s guts and that he was off-limits only piqued my interest

more. It might have something to do with me always wanting things I couldn't have.

“Is that the real reason why you decided to be rude to my guests?”

“I was just standing up for myself.” Because who else will if not me? I wondered to myself. There was no one here for me. And even if I called my brother to come visit me, I knew that he wouldn't because Florida was Matthew's territory, and after the scandal that they had, it wasn't wise for him to set foot here. That was probably why Matthew hadn't visited California in years either.

“Still doesn't go along with our hotel's principles.”

“I'm not going to compromise my own principles, Matthew.”

Matthew hummed his response as he rounded the bench and took the vacant space beside me. He smelled good, like crisp citrus and shave lotion. I almost wanted to lean my head against his shoulder, which was crowding my little frame on the seat.

“I don't want more staff and guests complaining about your behavior. Because then I'll have to let you go.”

My stomach turned, and I knew it wasn't because I still hadn't had dinner. Matthew letting me go wasn't on my list of things I could deal with right now, especially because I needed money. But I had a feeling that to him, letting me go meant something completely different.

Suddenly, the banquet hall was too hot for my cardigan sweater, and the tension in the air was palpable. I just wished Matthew felt it like I did, too, because the next thing that I felt like saying would be embarrassing if he didn't.

“Are you going to punish me if I behave like that again?” I played with some of the keys as I said it, and I felt Matthew go stiff beside me. I dared to

glance at him under my long lashes and saw him looking down at me, his eyes dark and filled with lust.

“I have no idea if I’m going to punish you for being the most horrible employee I have ever had or for the fact that you’re Ryan St. James’s sister.” It should probably have stung, his words. But I couldn’t find it in me to be offended because I was distracted by his beauty and his presence as he sat beside me, his fingers pressing some keys he leaned way back.

“Maybe you should punish me because I’ve been a bad girl,” I whispered under my breath, but it spoke volumes about how much I wanted Matthew right now.

My core tightened, and my heart skipped a beat as he brought his hand to my chin and pulled my face so that I could meet his eyes.

“Is that what you want?” he asked. “Because if it is, you have to tell me. To fool around with an employee would go against *my* principles.”

“My shift ended almost thirty minutes ago. Which technically means I’m not your employee anymore. At least for the night.”

God, did I need to spell it out for him? I had never made the first move before in my entire life. Boys usually were the ones who threw themselves at me. Matthew was different, and it gave me a surge of empowerment to have the upper hand because I was the employee, and he didn’t want to take advantage of me.

“Use your words, Reagan,” he said, his tone low and seductive, and my pussy clenched at the sound of it. “Tell me what you want.”

I gulped, thankful that I still hadn’t eaten yet because otherwise, I would’ve thrown up.

“You,” I said. And it was the only word Matthew needed to hear before he brought his lips to mine, which tasted like mint, thank God. He cupped my



face with both his hands, and I grabbed his biceps. And let me tell you, those things were huge. I literally couldn't wrap my hand halfway around them. "What if someone sees us?"

The wildfire of desire that ignited when our lips touched consumed us. It was like I was longing for this kiss for so long, and I didn't even know it. I was yearning for a connection. In this moment, time stood still as we devoured each other.

"The ninth floor is empty after seven," he pointed out in between kisses. He sucked my mouth deliciously before tucking away a strand of hair from my face.

Then, all of a sudden, Matthew pulled away. "Tell no one about this. Otherwise, you're out the door."

"You're really threatening me right now?" I complained. "Is that how you treat a woman you just kissed?"

"You're my employee, Reagan. I don't want people misinterpreting this. You especially."

"How should I interpret it?"

"That this is purely physical. You can't deny that you and I already had an initial attraction to each other that first morning in the elevator."

"How do you know that the attraction isn't just hatred?"

"Same thing, really." Matthew licked his bottom lip, and it took a lot of control for me not to combust. "So tell me right now if you want something more because I'll walk away if you aren't honest with me. If you want something purely sexual, then that can be arranged."

"Matthew Parker," I started, smirking at him, my eyes turning dark at the promise I was about to make, "there's nothing I like about you, so you don't

need to flatter yourself. So rest assured that you and I dating was never going to happen.”

“Good,” he nodded, and to my surprise, he signaled for me to remove my fingers from the keys as he closed the fallboard. Then, he patted the top of the piano. “Come here,” he instructed, and I obeyed, standing on the chair with my shoes so I could sit on the top of the piano. I felt a momentary surge of guilt for treating such a nice instrument in this way, but the feeling evaporated when I looked at my boss.

His eyes were glued to mine as he moved to the middle of the bench, my bare legs in front of him. “You can say no, Reagan, you know that, right?”

“I do,” I breathed, knowing where this was going.

“And I’m not coercing you to do something you don’t like just because I’m your boss. That this is cons—”

“Yes, yes. Consensual. Get on with it, Parker.”

The man chuckled as he kissed my knees and removed my shoes, allowing them to fall on the floor, and my toes hit the cool surface of the fallboard.

“Your mouth is going to be your downfall, Jellybean,” he said to me, and then I knew I had to ask why he called me that. “It’s President Reagan’s favorite, the jelly beans. You’d know if you had done your research like I told you.”

I wanted to tell him how ancient he sounded referencing a former US president, but I didn’t in fear of spoiling the moment.

“Is that why you call me that? Because I’m your favorite?” He smirked and planted one more kiss on my knee before spreading my legs.

I yelped at the sudden movement and couldn’t help but giggle when Matthew’s eyes grew wide and he told me to go quiet. And then, my laughter

halted when Matthew buried his face between my legs after he had hoisted my skirt upward.

My breath caught as he planted a kiss on my pelvis, and I felt his arms find the waistband of my lace underwear.

“Up,” he instructed. He rolled the thing down my legs, removing them completely before bringing the delicate undergarment up his nose.

Fuck! My face felt like it was burning just by looking at him doing that. He tucked the lace panties into the pocket of his jacket and said, “For safekeeping.”

Then he returned from eating me out to oblivion. His tongue was an expert as he flicked my clit, his saliva lubricating the sensitive spot.

“You’re so good at that,” I gasped, arching my neck back as I felt his mouth devour my pussy. I grabbed a fistful of his soft hair as I slightly pushed him further in.

“You smell and taste amazing, Reagan,” he hummed, and the vibration sent a chill up my legs and my back. “I could make you come like this.”

His hands traced my calves as his eager mouth slurped the juices from my pussy.

“Jesus, Matthew,” I moaned and rode his face as best as I could. Then he inserted one finger inside, curling it upwards. My knees buckled at the pleasure of him finding my G-spot. And he slid it in and pulled it out. In and out. And every time he inserted it back inside my wet pussy, he’d curl in upward, teasing me.

“We’ll be quick. I’m not going to fuck you yet.”

“Wait—what?” I pulled away, but his finger remained inside me. I could see my juices glistening on his lips as he looked up at me, a grimace painted my face.

“I’m not going to fuck you in the banquet hall on top of the piano, Reagan. You think I’m a heathen?”

“But I need you to.” God, I needed him to fuck me into oblivion so I could forget all my problems—my father, Ryan, and my slowly deteriorating bank account.

“When I fuck you, Reagan, a piano wouldn’t be enough to support us,” he pointed, licking my release on his lips. “Now take what you can because this is your punishment.”

Well, fuck me.

I still hadn’t processed his words in my head when he opened my legs wider. He shoved the piano bench back, and it slammed on the floor, the noise like a loud drum in the empty hall. Now that he was standing between my legs, he brought his lips down to mine and kissed me so deeply that I thought I was going to melt on the piano.

“Keep quiet when you come, okay?” I nodded, and without any more words, he inserted two fingers in my pussy, hitting my G-spot again and again and again. Until I was thrashing against his fingers with euphoria, my eyes seeing stars. I yelped before I could cover my mouth.

“Matthew,” I begged, my heart pounding against my ears as the squishing sound of my wet pussy filled the room.

“You’re soaking wet, darling,” he cooed, but he didn’t stop fucking me with his fingers. My head was the first to give up, and I was thankful that Matthew was there, a wall of muscle, so I was able to lean my head against his chest. And with his free hand, he cradled my head, one of my hands fisting his suit and the other grabbing his forearm like I would fall over if I didn’t.

“Oh, my God. I’m going to come.” I felt the warmth of my fluids run down

my thighs and into a puddle on the fallboard. Fucking hell.

“Ask politely,” he teased, his pace only increasing, and I knew that the wave of orgasm was coming.

“Can I come, Matthew?”

“Say ‘please’.”

“Please!”

“Come!” he whispered harshly in my ears. “Listen to your wet pussy as I fuck you with my fingers while you come.”

And I did. I could hear myself around his fingers, soaking wet. Matthew didn’t stop. His fingers continued to move while I rode out the orgasm, and for the first time in my life, the dam broke, the squirt was minimal, thank God, but I could feel it running down my legs, and I could see it stain Matthew’s black suit.

Holy fucking hell!

I sat like that for a moment, my head still against Matthew’s chest, listening to his thundering heartbeat. I gave out a whimper when he removed his fingers, and I could hear his lips smacking, telling me that the bastard decided to have a taste of them. Yet he didn’t move, didn’t pull me away.

I could see the hard bulge against his pants from below me, and I wanted to reach for it to undo his zipper.

“You’re quite charming when you follow the rules, Reagan,” he panted, finally grabbing my shoulders to pull me up straight. My head was loopy, and I felt high. Without the support, I gripped the side of the piano for balance as I spotted the mess we made on the piano and on the floor.

“I’m as surprised as you are,” I said, stepping on the piano bench to stand. But when my feet touched the floor, it was like my body wasn’t my own. I

braced myself before I could fall, and in a second, Matthew was there beside me.

“I’d help clean you up, but I’m afraid I don’t have anything that would help at the moment.” Right. Because there was no toilet paper nearby or a towel. Blushing, I told Matthew that it was fine. I wanted to ask him for my underwear when I shimmied down my skirt in place, but something told me that Matthew wanted to keep them.

“Why don’t you go to my office and use the restroom there,” he offered, handing me a set of keys he retrieved from his pocket. “I’ll clean up our mess here.”

For the first time in my life, I was quiet and so mentally short-circuited that I couldn’t think of a comeback. Instead, I did as I was told and strutted with pride out of the banquet hall and towards his office, leaving him me while cleaned up my...puddle.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Matthew

I thought before that Reagan St. James had invaded my brain somehow. But after what happened in the banquet hall, she might as well put me under a spell. Because that woman was something else.

After cleaning up the piano, my dick was so hard I thought I would explode. I sent her to my office to clean up so I could give myself enough space to think because the siren had hypnotized me into her trap once more. And don't get me started with her pink lace underwear that was burning a hole in my pocket.

We left the building together that night, and I walked her towards the bus stop. I wanted to offer her a ride home, but I knew that with how horny I was, I was going to jump her right then and there. And I didn't want to look like a teenage boy unable to control his urges, even though Reagan was making me lose all my shit.

When I got home that night, I went straight to the shower and jacked off. Her face was all I could see, her moan was all I could hear, and the way she

gushed around my fingers replayed in my mind like a broken record. But I wasn't complaining about it.

Thankfully, there was still some control left in me because if I had allowed myself to fuck her that night, then I wouldn't be able to stop, and we could get in a lot of trouble.

Reagan had become my personal hell—my personal obstacle. I still trusted her so little because I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that Ricardo St. James would allow his daughter to lift a finger to work. She was a difficult puzzle. A challenge. Good thing I loved challenges. And I didn't usually lose when it came to games.

That thing that happened in the banquet hall two days ago was a mistake. A very tempting mistake. And I'd make sure it didn't happen again.

But every time I saw Reagan around the hotel, it was like my dick had developed a mind of its own. I usually didn't look twice at who I'd bump into, I just smiled at them and let them be.

Yet, after our little rendezvous, I hoped that every blonde employee I bumped into in the hall was Reagan. But most of the time, it was someone else.

There was one time, though, when she was helping prepare the banquet hall for an event, and I thought it would be fun to taunt her. She was jumpy most of the time at work, but still, her gracefulness was something that couldn't be easily taken away from her.

At least nothing was awkward between us when we made small talk in the hall. She still had her smart mouth with her to act as our little buffer. I could freely scold her for being late, and she'd promise not to do it again. And after the complaint about her, she hadn't fought with a guest. Not that I knew of, anyway.



Susana told me that she was getting better and that one of the sous chefs, Alejandra, was fond of her and was making her meals three times a day. I told the housekeeping manager to let it be and not to mention it to anyone.

Food was not an issue for me. The employees could have free food if they wanted it. And I wasn't about to forbid her from eating. We threw away food every day like it was nothing, so it was better that Alejandra could feed another mouth with our supplies.

I was leaving the hotel three nights after me and Reagan's little get-together. It was pouring, which probably explained the intense humidity earlier. There was almost zero visibility down the street when I turned my car toward the hotel exit.

As I drove straight down the street, a white thing moved from the side of the road by the bus stop. It was a person, and with how intense the rain shower was, I was sure that the person was soaked.

I slowed my car to a halt, and when I was across from the bus stop, I saw Reagan in a white spaghetti-strap top and denim shorts. Was she out of her mind wearing something like that at this temperature? With the way she was rubbing her hands on her arms, I knew she was cold.

So I turned the car, the lights guiding my way down the street. When I was by the transit stop, I honked before opening the passenger seat window.

"Reagan!" I shouted over the torrential rain. And Reagan, who was indeed wet, peered down at the person behind the wheel.

"Matthew?"

"Get in!"

"No," she yelled back, squinting rainwater from her eyes. I could see her cleavage barely restrained by her top, especially now that she was dripping wet. "It's fine. I'll wait for the bus."

“Don’t be an idiot,” I called. “You’re freezing. Get in, and I can take you home.”

“I’m really all right—”

“Don’t make me say it again.”

“I’m all wet.”

“Nothing I haven’t already seen,” I jested, but I knew that she meant something else. “It’s fine.”

She stepped closer into my car, and I reached for her door, unlocking it for her. She was drenched, her hair was darker, and was sticking to the side of her face. I saw that her teeth were chattering when she got settled in her seat. When the doors were closed, I rolled up the window as she buckled herself.

“I’m going to ruin your car,” she pointed out. I turned on the car heater and turned the vent in her direction. I removed my blazer and tossed it to her.

“Put this on.” And she did so without complaints. She sagged against the seat as it slowly warmed her up. “Why are you wearing something like that with this rain?” Not to be the person who liked to tell people what to wear, but I had to ask her.

“It was hot earlier,” she pointed. “I didn’t think it was going to rain this hard.”

“Always carry a jacket, Reagan,” I said as I turned the wheel. But she wasn’t listening to me. Instead, she was looking at her shoes, which were making a loud squishy sound. They were white and expensive, and the logo on the side told me it was Givenchy. She really did have style.

“Great,” she exclaimed. “Now my shoes are ruined.”

“Nothing you couldn’t tell your daddy to buy for you,” I said. “So where are we off to?” She told me her address, and we drove in silence.

I couldn’t ignore the fact that my car now smelled like her, and the aroma

of her dahlia perfume would probably linger inside for a week. And I knew that by then, I would probably lose my shit trying to tell myself that Reagan was off limits.

But then we got to her place, and the rain only got stronger, the streets harder to see. I halted the car in front of her building, and it wasn't the type of place I was expecting.

She lived in the busiest part of the city, which I knew was a nightmare to commute from in the morning—no wonder she was late sometimes. I reminded myself to give her some slack next time.

“Are you going to drive home in this rain?” she asked, unbuckling her seatbelt. “It's zero visibility.”

“I could just wait here until it stops. Or until it's safe enough to drive.”

“You could come up to my place. Get warm. I could make you coffee if you want.”

That to me, sounded amazing. But the way my dick snapped to attention told me that it was a risk.

“Thank you, Reagan, but—”

“Don't say no,” she said, looking at me with her doe-like eyes. “It's the least I could do for you after you drove me home.”

“I'm fine right here.”

“Fine, then I'm not leaving,” she challenged, and I frowned at her as she buckled her seatbelt again. “I'll wait with you here.”

“You're going to catch a cold. Don't be stubborn.”

“I'll go if you go.”

This woman really knew how to be irresistible and persuasive. I didn't want to be the reason she got a cold. I couldn't lose my favorite employee even for a week.

“Jesus,” I complained, wiping my face with my palm. “Fine. I’ll go with you.” She beamed, and together we ran from the car and into her building, the rain pounding on the pavement.

Reagan’s place was very *Florida-ish*, if that made sense. It was tropical-themed, with seashells everywhere, windchimes, and a large window facing the sea's direction. Some of the walls were a light shade of blue-green. It told me that Reagan didn’t have the time to decorate her place. Or maybe the money. Everything looked cheap and touristy, which surprised me.

“Your place is—”

“Horrible?” she continued as she removed my blazer and hung it on one of the kitchen island chairs. It didn’t look much, her apartment. But it was clean and tidy. She hopped to the kitchen, still shivering, as she turned on the coffee maker.

“I was going to say unlike you.”

“What did you expect?”

“Something more expensive. Classier. Neutral colors.” A penthouse, I said to myself. There was something not right here. Why would Reagan’s father allow her to stay in a place like this when they could clearly afford a much bigger place?

“Well, it was the only thing I could afford when I got here, so it’ll do,” she said, as she paraded back into the living room before walking in the direction of the bedroom, her feet squishing on the floor as she walked. “I’m just going to shower really quick. Make yourself at home.”

I wasn’t nosy, but when Reagan closed the door behind her, I roamed her kitchen to check for the coffee, and when I opened the cabinets, they were empty. So was the fridge except for a carton of coconut water and a half cup of a Starbucks coffee.

It crossed my mind that maybe Reagan ran away from her father with no money on her, which explained why she started working in housekeeping when she didn't have a single clue how to fold a blanket. It also accounted for the lack of food in her kitchen, and why she was settling for a cheap apartment like this one.

Reagan returned wearing a gray tank top and shorts so low they might as well just be underwear. She had no bra on, and her nipples pierced through the soft material of her top. My dick twitched. Fuck. The last of my self-control was slowly deteriorating at the sight of her.

A towel was wrapped around her hair. Her pale legs almost illuminated the room as she strutted toward the kitchen to check on the coffee.

What was the harm in allowing myself to enjoy the view? I thought. I knew what Reagan was doing. She was trying to push my buttons to see how far I would go to not fuck her tonight. She was testing the waters.

"You shouldn't be wearing that," I told her, leaning against the kitchen island. I produced my phone from my pocket as a habit to distract myself and to let my cock relax for a moment when I suddenly remembered that she hated it when I was on the phone.

"Why not?" she complained innocently, but I could see the humor in her eyes. "It's the only thing I've got right now. The rest of my clothes are in the hamper. Why? Are you tempted?"

I shook my head at her as I walked from the kitchen and to the living room, sitting on one of the couches, the rain still raging outside.

"I'm your boss, Reagan," I called.

"We're not working right now, Matthew. Besides, you've seen more of me than this."

I had, but that didn't mean I was going to allow another thing to happen

between us. Not when she was slowly etching her mark on my brain. She would send me to perdition, this woman.

“Look, Reagan, what happened between us at the banquet hall isn’t going to happen again. It was a mistake.”

I knew on my part that it wasn’t actually a mistake. I had enjoyed it—enjoyed her. But she was my employee, and most people would find it taboo that an employee was sleeping with the boss. It would send alarming signals to the staff once word got out. Fuck. Clair was going to kill me. But then again, this was her fault. She put Reagan on the list in the first place.

“You and I both know nothing about that night was a mistake. You liked it. So did I. It’s a physical thing. You can’t deny that. The only mistake was that you didn’t fuck me.”

Oh, what the hell. She was right. There was no point in denying the attraction. There were just some things you couldn’t control.

My initial thought was to give Reagan what she wanted. Maybe then my head would clear once I quit denying myself. But I thought of her brother and the fact that she worked for me. I also reminded myself that I wasn’t sure if she was spying on me or not. I glanced over at her where she was staring at me coquettishly, and gave in to what I really wanted.

“God, Reagan,” I sighed defeatedly. “Come here.” And she did, slowly. She walked like a vixen toward where I was on the couch. With my legs apart, she could see the bulge of my cock in my pants. “On your knees.”

Reagan smirked at me, her eyes filled with lust and hunger as she removed the towel from her head and tossed it to the side. “I’m going to fuck that smart mouth of yours, Reagan.”

I traced my thumb over the corner of her lips, and she closed her eyes and moaned at the sensation. I wasn’t about to tease her, not when I also needed

her tonight. Every time I jacked off in the shower, and in my bed, she was all I could picture.

I unbuckled my belt with my free hand as Reagan sucked on my thumb, her lips plump and pink. She dragged her hands to the button on my pants and undid the zipper for me. Lifting my waist, she dragged down my trousers and my boxers, revealing my hard, erect cock.

“Hmm,” she moaned at the sight. “Someone’s excited.”

God, this side of Reagan was different. At first glance, she looked innocent with her blonde hair and designer clothes, but I knew she knew what she was doing. And she was good at it.

She brought her hand to my cock, and the coolness of her palm made me groan in delight. God, what was she doing to me? Her strokes along my length were enough by themselves to make me come. But I wasn’t going to embarrass myself like this.

I grabbed her chin and bowed down to kiss her lips. She tasted like mint because she had just brushed her teeth. She had known this was going to happen.

“Suck while you stroke my cock,” I whispered against her lips before letting her face go and letting her get back to work. She didn’t need to be told twice. Reagan was hot when she obeyed, but she was exquisite when she was in power.

She sucked my dick, her mouth tight and warm around my shaft as her other hand massaged my balls.

“Reagan,” I moaned. “Fuck, your lips are so good wrapped around my cock.” She moaned when the tip of my cock hit the back of her throat, and she gagged a little bit. Then she bobbed her head up and down, up and down along my cock. I watched her in awe as my dick disappeared down her throat.

Then she slurped my precum mixed with her saliva, and the sound was intoxicating. I was going to explode. What she did next surprised me. She looked up at me, chewed absently on my semen, and spit it down on my penis.

“Jesus. Your mouth is incredible, baby.”

“You should meet my pussy then.”

“I’ve already—Oh, God, Reagan. Shit.” I didn’t get to finish my sentence when she returned her mouth to my cock, her tongue swirling at the tip, her hands twisting and massaging me there. “I’m going to come down your throat.”

“Yes, sir,” she giggled, and she increased her pace, up and down, twist and turn. I grabbed her hair to get it off her face and slowly pushed her face down deeper along my shaft. I moaned her name, and my toes curled as the wave of orgasm went through me.

She kept bobbing her head, and I held her cheeks steady so her mouth settled on the tip, and I jerked myself off, my legs shaking as I shot down my cum down her throat. She moaned in pleasure, her tongue dancing inside her mouth, touching the tip of my dick.

Then she stood from the floor and straddled me. The motion surprised me, my cock still hard beneath us as I cupped her ass with my hands. Then Reagan blew my mind.

She pressed a kiss on my lips, and when I began to open my lips, she spilled my cum from her mouth to mine. The metallic taste coated my mouth. And we made out for a second like that, our lips drenched with my semen and her saliva. I had done a lot of dirty things before. . But this one was new. It was hot, and it turned me on so much I wanted to pin Reagan down the couch and fuck her until she couldn’t walk anymore.



“Swallow,” she whispered against my lips, and I did. And she planted a kiss on my cheek, on my face, on the side of my neck. And I allowed her to take control me for a little bit just as she pulled down her shorts. Yep, she wasn’t wearing anything under them. And I remembered her underwear that was now in one of my desk drawers for safekeeping.

“No condom?” I asked.

“I have an IUD, and I’m clean.”

“I’m clean, too. And I have had a vasectomy.”

“What?” She pushed herself away to look at me.

“What?” I echoed. “It’s reversible. I can reverse it if I’m ready to have kids.” I thought it was the responsible thing to do at thirty when I wanted to sleep with women without worrying about surprise pregnancies

Reagan nodded at my words without any further complaint before she positioned my cock by her soaked entrance, and she slowly buried my cock inside of her. And I watched her moan in pleasure, her eyes closed and her lips a perfect O as she took my entire length in one go.

“Your dick is so big, Matthew,” she breathed, and I cupped her ass as she took me. But I was an impatient bastard and I thrust upward to surprise her. She yelped, balancing herself with an arm on my shoulder.

“Your pussy is wet and ready for me, baby.”

She moaned out her response as she pushed herself up my dick and down again. Her pussy was making so much noise as she bounced on top of me. She put her hands against my chest for support as I removed my shirt. And when she saw me naked underneath her, she also removed her top, smiling at me.

Her breasts were beautiful. Full and perky. I brought one to my lips and sucked. “Yes,” she moaned, throwing her head back and wrapping a hand

around my head.

“Ride me until you come,” I instructed her. With the way her pussy tightened around my dick, I knew she was close. And she could come whenever she wanted. She needed it—deserved it, really. We could work with power play later.

“Matthew, I’m so close,” she groaned. God, she was so good at this, like she was an athlete unfazed by the physical exhaustion. Her legs didn’t tire from bouncing, and her hips didn’t stop thrusting. She was an expert at this, and I recalled the first time I met her in that elevator. Who would have thought?

“You can come, baby.”

“Play with my clit.”

“Say, please.”

“God, please.”

And I did. I laid back and fingered her clitoris until she squirmed and her muscles contracted around my cock. And I came again inside her, and I watched her orgasm in front of me. It was the most beautiful thing I had seen in my life.

She sagged against me, our bodies still connected. I stroked her back as she pulsed around me, her breath jagged.

“I never pegged you as a sex fiend, Reagan.”

“Never pegged you as a complainer.”

“Complainer? I had been called many things, but complainer wasn’t one of them.”

“You have not seen me in action yet, baby.”

“I haven’t?” She faked a surprised look. But then she pushed herself up from me. And as she did, our cum spilled down her thighs and to the floor.

She didn't care that we were making a mess. She was used to this. I wanted to hunt every man who she had slept with for the hell of it. But then again, I only wanted her to be like this with me and nobody else. "Why don't we try one more time? Maybe then I could see how you do it."

She offered her hand to me, and I took it. We headed toward her bedroom, and I showed her how nasty I could get. She screamed until her voice was hoarse, and we fucked until the rain was just a drizzle. And Reagan didn't grow tired. She grew feistier, and eventually, she grew softer. And it was something I didn't know I would enjoy.

When morning came, I left before she could wake up. But that was before I wrote my cell phone number on a piece of paper and left it on her bedside table. Reagan wasn't going anywhere. She was mine to enjoy now.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Reagan

I woke up feeling like I hated everything and everyone in the world. My phone had been ringing since four in the morning, thanks to my father. If I was back in California, I would usually go for a run. Maybe go straight to the mall and get Starbucks on the way home. But right now, I simply didn't have the time and the money to do these things.

Matthew and I had continued our little fuck sessions on the side, which was entertaining, I guessed. He had lived in my mind twenty-four-seven after we slept together at my place for the first time. That was a week ago, and we had fucked in his office twice now. All of our sessions were kinky. I had enjoyed them more than I cared to admit.

But I rode the bus with a sick feeling in my stomach. The thing between Matthew and I hadn't even crossed my mind this morning at all, which was a miracle despite how much he seemed to invade every other aspect of my life.

To make matters worse, today was my mother's death anniversary. And usually, at home, I'd visit her grave and bake her favorite butter cookies, which this year wasn't possible. Being away from home for the first time

during her death anniversary felt like I was away from her for good. But I reminded myself to get flowers later for her—peonies because they were her favorite.

The hotel today had a party by the pool. It looked like it was a business launch because it was all fancy, with mauve-colored towels and an open bar. I figured it was probably a crystal business launch, given that there were bowls and bowls of different colored gems and crystals everywhere.

I was assigned here today along with three other people from housekeeping, and we were all busy arranging glasses and folding robes for the guests later.

I was cleaning the lounge chairs by the pool when a voice called out to me from behind the pool fence.

“Reagan? Reagan St. James?” I would know that nasal, high-pitched voice anywhere.

“Hi, Eloise,” I greeted when I turned to face her direction.

Eloise Giovanni and I knew each other from home. But we weren’t friends. Far from it, really. She was bitch. She thought that every woman in her vicinity was competing with her, that they were jealous of her bleached hair, lip fillers, and gigantic boobs courtesy of her stepfather.

Today, she was sporting a maxi dress that was identical to the theme, and it didn’t take me long to process that this was her business launch. She had made a reputation back in California for her admiration for crystals. She knew which one was for luck, which one was for love, and which one was going to draw negativity away. I only wished I had one right now. Then maybe I could throw it at her to wish her away.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. I was surprised that she could still do that despite the Botox she had had. She was only a year

older than me, yet she had had nearly every kind of plastic surgery and beauty procedure you could think of.

“I work here,” I said in a flat tone of voice. I admitted to myself that I was embarrassed by the fact that I was working here. And the fact that Eloise, of all people, knew that I wasn’t at home anymore and I was working at a hotel made me want to cower behind a fucking tree. “Did you need something?”

Ignoring my question, she sized me up, glaring at my blue uniform and black shoes. “Wow,” she whistled. “How the mighty have fallen. You see? Pretty girls like you don't always win in life.”

Eloise had made it abundantly clear that she didn’t like me. Even back when we were in high school, she enjoyed tormenting me. She’d start the sickest rumors about me and some guys I had gone out with, which was a nightmare for a high schooler.

But I guessed what really got to her was that I wasn’t fazed by her attempts to make me feel insecure. She wanted to make me feel bothered, and when it didn’t work, she hated me even more. Which was why, right now, she thought this was a competition.

“I don’t have time for this, Eloise. I’m going back to work,” I said, attempting to get my supplies off the chair so I could leave and beg Susana to replace me. All of this was too close to home, and everything today already reminded me my dead mother, which wasn’t good for me right now.

“Your mother would be so disappointed with you if she saw you like this, Reagan,” I heard Eloise chirping behind me before I could leave. And she might have just as well have punched me in the gut. Like I said, Eloise wanted me bothered, and I probably shouldn’t fall into her trap, but mentioning my mother on her death anniversary made me feel queasy.

“What did you say?” I slowly turned to her, my eyes narrowed, challenging

the platinum-blonde woman. She had a smirk on her face that I made me want to punch her.

Matthew's warning about me not fighting with the guests went out the window. I could take them being rude to me. That was okay. But for Eloise to drag my mother into this was low. And today, I was willing to stoop down to her level, even if my job was on the line.

"All I'm saying is your mother worked hard for you to have everything you ever wanted. And for you to end up working at a hotel, of all things? It would crush her."

Would it? I wondered to myself. Mommy always wanted me home and to wear the best clothes and have the best food. She had sheltered me, yes. Would she be crushed if she saw me like this? Struggling in Florida and giving Daddy the cold shoulder?

"You don't know anything about my mother," I hissed at her, closing the gap between us. I reminded myself that Mommy was still proud of me whatever I did in life and that Eloise didn't know shit about our relationship or her death.

"Why are you working here anyway?" God, this woman was nosy. "Did something happen with you and your father? Did he finally realize how much of a burden you are?" She laughed at her comeback, but I could only raise an eyebrow at her. I wanted to hide away so I could cry, maybe throw up a little bit.

The wave of emotion was like a punch in the stomach. To see Eloise and for her to talk about my mother. It was too much for me. It made me miss her even more than usual. It made me question my decision to move away. It almost made me want to grab my phone and apologize to Daddy. God, it made me consider his offer so I could return home and go shopping again.

But my pride wasn't something I could swallow. It must have been a St. James trait to have to prove people wrong. And that was exactly what I wanted Daddy to see. That I could take care of myself without his help and that I was just starting my journey in the real world. What did Eloise know? Did he fucking crystals make her a success?

So I squared my shoulders and swallowed the lump in my throat. "You know what, Eloise? Don't talk about my family like you know them, okay?" I gave her a fake smile, which she returned with a grimace. "And second, at least I'm working at something for myself."

She mumbled something to herself to mock me—typical, immature Eloise. "Working on something for myself," she echoed. "What do you want, a fucking medal?"

"No. I want you to get out of my face and shut your mouth."

"Aww." She gave me a fake pout. "Is that the way you speak to your guests?"

"You're wasting my time." I shook my head. As much as I wanted to put Eloise in her place, I didn't want her to see me getting riled up. That would mean she had won.

"That's right, walk away, St. James. How I wish the other girls were here to see this."

"Goodbye, Eloise."

"Your mother would be turning in her grave right now," she called one last time, hoping to get in the last word. One thing she needed to learn about me was that I always got the last word, and she didn't have a right to talk about my mother—to even think about her.

"Do you want to fight right now, Eloise?" I tossed the basket of supplies to the side and marched up to Eloise, ready to pounce.



“Because I don’t give a fuck about this job really. I could take you down right now.” And I would. I wasn’t afraid to get physical with her, especially when I knew which parts of her plastic body would be more damaged if I had to swing a fist at her.

“All bark and no bite, St. James?” she challenged. I told myself not to make the first move, but if she dared lay a finger on me, that was it for her. And the next time she talked about my mother, I was going to bust her lip. I could take care of a lawsuit.

“You don’t know jack shit about my family,” I hissed at her, closing the space between us in one stride. She was taller than me, so I had to look up at her, but that didn’t mean I was going to back down.

I was so close to her that I could smell the margarita on her breath. She had to take a step back.

“Get away from me.”

“No!” I snapped. “You want to fight me, Eloise? Let’s fight. You chose the wrong day to mess with me.”

“I don’t have to fight with you to prove my point.”

“Which is what exactly?”

“That you’re a nobody now. That I’m so much better than you.” Like I said, she thought everyone was competing with her. But I wasn’t. I didn’t care if she’d won the lottery. Her attitude was trash, and no amount of money was going to fix that for her.

“You’re not going to live off of your stepfather’s money forever, are you?”

“It’s my mother’s money, too.”

“Really? So tell me, Eloise, will your mother be coming to this party of yours today?” The smile was wiped from her face at my statement. I didn’t

want to be the mean girl, but Eloise was giving me no choice. She wanted to push my buttons using my dead mother? Then, I was going to push back.

“She’s in Japan for a business trip with her husband.”

“When is she not on a trip?” I grew up knowing that Eloise’s mother was always away, and I didn’t know if it was for business or if she just wanted to get away from her daughter. But everybody knew that Eloise longed for her absent mother to be at school activities. More often than not, she didn’t come, and Eloise was left with her nannies. “It looks like she’s avoiding you.”

“She’s not.” The look on her face was priceless. Now, she was the one being bothered. Two could play this game, then. I didn’t have it in me to feel for her right now, especially when she was the one who had started this.

“Whatever you say. At least when my mother was alive, she loved spending time with me. Unlike yours.”

“She—”

“And is your father coming? Oh, that’s right. Yours was a deadbeat. At least mine wasn’t the type to run away from his responsibilities.” There it was—the bullseye. I could see Eloise’s lips tremble, and she desperately tried to square her shoulders as if to act like she wasn’t bothered. But she was. Big time. “What, no comeback? I thought so.”

I turned to leave, shaking my head at what had just happened. If Eloise reported this to anyone, Matthew might just not give me another chance and would finally fire me. And I knew that the fact that we were sleeping together wouldn’t be enough reason not to.

A scream caught me off guard. Before I knew it, Eloise had pulled my hair. The pressure yanked my head back, making me drop the cleaning supplies on the ground. The sudden pull made my scalp hurt as well, and I yelped in response, earning a look from the guests and the staff by the pool area.

“Get off me!” I yelled, trying to get her hands off my hair. But she was strong, I’d give her that, and she wasn’t letting go. So, I grabbed what I could reach, which was her hair. And the next thing I knew, I was pulling her back, too.

“You think you’re so perfect with your little family, you bitch!” she screamed in my ear. In defense, I pushed her mouth away from me using the heel of my hand, and I swear I heard something crack. That earned a slap across my face.

“Eloise,” I called. I couldn’t see what was happening because I had turned to face her, our hands at each other’s hair. And I didn’t need a mirror to know what my hair would look like once this was over. It was one thing to argue with a guest, it was another to get physical with them. I was definitely getting fired.

“At least I don’t have to work my ass off at a stupid hotel.”

“You’re literally having your party here.”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Eloise slapped my head with her palm over and over again, and I knew she had the upper hand right now. So I walked to the side towards the pool, and she followed. When we were close enough, I tossed my body into the water and dragged her with me.

The people around us gasped as we splashed in the water, Eloise finally letting me go as we floundered to stay afloat.

“Reagan!” I heard Matthew’s voice booming in the middle of the crowd surrounding us. Fuck. Did he just see that? He stood by the pool handrail, looking furious. At me. “What are you doing?” he yelled.

“She pushed me into the pool,” Eloise complained. But Matthew’s gaze didn’t soften when he turned to the guest. I could only roll my eyes at everyone. Well, this was a shitty day.

“My apologies, Ms. Giovanni. I’ll see that the rest of your party goes according to plan.”

“Make sure you teach your staff how to take care of your guests, too, Mr. Parker.”

“We take full accountability for this. And I’ll personally see to it that she is disciplined.”

“Good,” Eloise approved. “Did you hear that, Reagan? Proper consequences. You might not have a job after this.”

“Fuck you, Eloise.”

“Reagan!” Matthew snapped, and the sound of his angry voice was enough for the staff to disperse and return to their tasks. But I was still fuming, still mad at the woman beside me, who was now trying to swing to the edge of the pool. And to put the cherry on top, Matthew was lecturing me—yelling at me in front of everyone.

“You keep pushing it, don’t you? I told you not to argue with the guests anymore. It’s embarrassing for you and everyone working here!”

“She was always too stubborn for her own good, even when we were in California.” Why was she still here? I wondered. But then I saw one of the staff coming to help her up from the handrail.

“I’ll show you stubborn—”

“Ah, ah,” Matthew interrupted before I could threaten Eloise again. “My office. Right now, Reagan.”

## CHAPTER NINE

# Matthew

**I**t had been a week since I spent the night with Reagan, and the way she sucked me off lived in my head rent-free. I couldn't get her out of my head, and I knew that I needed to regain control. But every time I found her in the hallway arranging the cleaning cart or whenever she'd be in the banquet hall, my control was out of the building, and the next thing I knew, I had her in my office, naked.

Her fire didn't dull down despite our *situationship* and she hadn't told anyone about us. Like I had said, our thing was mostly physical, and Reagan knew where to draw that line. But that didn't mean I wanted her to be shy about herself. I wanted to know things about her.

She had been the sexiest woman I had ever shared a bed with, and I had pushed so many of my rules to keep seeing her. Thankfully, Clair hadn't said anything yet, which meant word hadn't gone out yet that Reagan and I were fooling around on the side, and I prayed that it would be that way for a long time.

I was in the middle of a management meeting when the head of our security burst into the conference room. All heads snapped in his direction, and I stopped mid-sentence impatiently. The staff knew meetings were important and that someone should be dying if they dared interrupt me.

But the security person had been red in the face, and sweat beaded down his cheeks when he told me there was a fight by the pool. When I asked who it was, he told me it was Reagan.

Angry, I ran to the elevator, praying that I wasn't too late and that whatever Reagan was doing wouldn't escalate to a lawsuit.

When I got to the pool area, staff and guests alike gathered around the deck, phones out, and I heard the screaming of two people, one hoarse and smoky. The other voice belonged to Reagan. And I could tell that she was the one struggling.

"You think you're so perfect with your little family, you bitch!" I heard the guest yell, and I could hear Reagan gurgling and panicking as the other person threatened to push her underwater.

Reagan yelled something that was supposed to be comedic about the guest's words, but no one was laughing. Me, especially.

"Reagan!" My voice was loud enough to compete with the hum of activities, and both heads snapped in my direction. The guest was Elouisa Giovanni—Eloise to the public—daughter of Vittorio Giovanni who had made a name in the oil and energy business, and a name of being the infamous deadbeat father to sixteen of his children, each from a different woman.

"She pushed me in the pool!" Eloise complained and I didn't give two shits about who pushed who, or a fuck about who started it. Reagan wasn't supposed to be laying a finger on the guests even if she was in the right.

So, after I had apologized to Eloise and noted in my head to tell the front desk that the entire party was on us for compensation, I yelled at Reagan to go to my office. The public scolding was unnecessary and unprofessional, but I was fuming at her and couldn't do anything about it.

“Start explaining yourself,” I demanded, slamming the door behind me, not caring that the entire floor could hear my outburst, nor the fact that Reagan was wet as a rat, dripping in my office, her hair sticking to the sides of her face.

I walked towards my desk, leaned against it, and crossed my arms across my chest as I waited for her response. And it killed me to see Reagan shivering like a leaf in the wind in front of me. Her blue uniform clung to their body like a second skin, saturated from head to toe.

“Did you have to embarrass me in front of everybody like that?” she snapped, sniffing water from her nose, and I could see the unmistakable sign of a busted lip from my spot. She reached up and touched the sore spot and then winced.

“I embarrassed *you*?” I seethed, grabbed a white handkerchief from the inner pocket of my suit, and swung it at her. She barely grabbed it, but it landed on her chest so she was able to keep it from dropping to the floor. “You’re the one who’s embarrassing yourself, Reagan. And *me*. You’re lucky I haven’t fired you yet.”

With a scowl on her face, she grabbed the handkerchief, oblivious as to why I tossed it in the first place. I motioned at her lip, and when she dapped the fabric on her mouth, blood stained it.

“Why haven’t you, then?” she snapped, unfolding the cloth and wiping her entire face. Great. I guess that would have to go in my drawer along with her underwear I had kept. It would smell like her, and I wouldn’t have the heart

to launder it. “I fight with your guests, and I’m probably your worst employee to date. It’s only going to go downhill from here.”

“Just because we fool around, that doesn’t mean I can turn a blind eye,” I told her. I knew that when I started this thing with her and I knew that there would be no special treatment, no promotion for her because of it. Everything at the hotel had to remain as it was. “And yes, you are my worst employee. Do you think I don’t know how horrible you do your work around here? Your supervisor has complained to me many times about how careless your work is.”

“You can call me out, you can put me in place, you can scream at me all you like when we’re alone. But please don’t embarrass me in front of your staff because I’m not stupid. I’m not just skilled enough.”

“That isn’t an excuse, Reagan.”

“Then you could just fire me. If you don’t think that my work meets your expectations, just say that word and I’m out of here.”

That took me off guard. One, because I thought she’d beg to keep her job. And two, because I actually didn’t want to fire her ass. She had kept me entertained and on my toes for weeks. Sure, I was enjoying her silliness and how much she struggled to keep a civil tongue in her head, but now I could see how hard she was trying to excel at her job.

She might be sheltered, maybe she hadn’t lifted a finger to work her entire life, but she was here now, and if my speculations were right about what had happened and why she had left, then she was doing a tremendous job at surviving on her own for the first time.

Reagan crying was the as last thing I had expected to experience today. I expected her to fight back, to explain herself, and tell me what had gone down. But the tears were unexpected. It made me feel bad. But I didn’t let my



guard down. If she was having a bad day, it wasn't an excuse to treat people like shit.

It looked like she knew the guest, maybe she was a rival back in California. I didn't know. And she could take the other woman down all she wanted, just not here in my hotel.

"Do you know what happened, Matthew?" she asked, wiping a tear from the side of her face. She was still wet, still shaking. A gentleman would have offered a change of clothes or a towel, but I wasn't feeling like a gentleman right now. Besides, it could be a good punishment for her to enjoy the consequences of her actions for a little while.

"She said that my mother was going to be disappointed that I ended up working at a stupid hotel." Reagan was trying to gasp in air as her voice shook from frustration. "And maybe she's right. Maybe I should've just stayed home and submitted to whatever my father wanted me to do. Because I was better off that way."

"You got upset because someone insulted you about your mother?" I asked, trying to comprehend where this was all coming from. She was genuinely upset, and in the few weeks I had known her, she wasn't petty.

"My mother is dead," she said with a stoic expression, breathing deeply, thick tears still rolling down her cheeks. But her shoulders remained upright, her head high. She looked up for a moment and breathed out through her nose. "Today's her death anniversary. So I apologize for being such a bitch about it to our guest."

That explained it. "I'm sorry about your mother," I said. But she shook her head at my apology. Clearly, it wasn't the only thing she was mad about. And I might be pussy whipped because I was letting her be mad when in fact, I was supposed to be the one angry at her for, once again, jeopardizing my

hotel's reputation. "But you need to try harder, Reagan. It's not an excuse to be rude to my guests."

"And do you know why I'm here? Working for your hotel when my father can buy this entire establishment?"

I didn't dare answer her. Instead, I waited for her to spill everything she was keeping to herself. Clearly, she was upset and it looked like she needed to vent to someone. But my silence was mostly because I didn't know what to say to a crying woman.

"I'm here because when my brother was in jail, and my father thought I was the best candidate to take over his business. So I left because I didn't want my father to control me. I left and I didn't have a single clue how I was going to survive on my own. I went from having Starbucks every day to not being able to afford a cheap-ass coffee from McDonald's. Trust me, Matthew, I am trying."

It was very petty to hear about her coffee situation but it was still a big deal that she had to leave home, partly because of me. I had pushed my lawyer to make everything public so that Ryan's reputation would be forever stained, and that whatever business he decided to build would crumble.

I didn't think about the collateral—Reagan. She was suffering the aftermath of it all. And it was like a punch in the gut for me to know that she went from being able to afford everything she needed to struggle to wipe shit from toilets to afford to live.

"I walked away, Matthew," she said. "When I knew she was pushing my buttons, I walked away. But she jumped me. She pulled my hair, and the only way I saw that could get me out of her hands was if I jumped on the pool."

"Thank you for telling me. And I'm sorry to hear about what happened with your father," I said. "But I can't let this one slide. Not with who that guest is,

not when she has connections. I will apologize to her on your behalf, but next week you start at seven a.m.”

“But you—”

“Ah, ah.” I held up a hand to stop her from saying anything else to persuade me not to go through with my decision. “My mind’s made up. I let this slide once, but I’m not going to allow you to keep doing this kind of thing. Next time, I’m suspending you.”

“I was going to say that you don’t have to apologize on my behalf. Eloise is not a nice person. She’s conniving and vindictive. Besides, she wouldn’t believe in an apology.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. I didn’t like being caught in the middle of this high school fight, but I was going to take her word for it. Still, I needed to see to it that Eloise wouldn’t press charges and that the hotel’s reputation wouldn’t get dragged down by this. I could only pray that my PR team was already brainstorming about a solution for all of this.

I nodded at Reagan, the woman who was turning this hotel upside down. The goddess, and also the chaos, all in one beautiful package. And still, even with all my hard work on the line, it was my instinct to let Reagan stay. I wouldn’t hear the end of this from Clair later.

When she turned to leave, I called to stop her. “Reagan.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let there be a next time. Because it’ll be hard for me to let you go.”

Her stare lingered for a moment, and she nodded her head.

When she left, I contacted Susana to shadow Reagan for a week to make sure she knew everything there was to know about housekeeping. And it was when I hit send that I realized Reagan had taken my handkerchief with her.

## CHAPTER TEN

# Reagan

**I**t had been a month since I started at Parker Villas and another since Eloise and I fought by the pool. My second month in the hotel felt like the longest month of my life. In four weeks, I had developed a sense of respect for hotel staff, an intense fear of getting shit on me, and mixed feelings for my boss.

I didn't know what Matthew had done to shut Eloise up after the incident, but knowing her, she'd do anything to have her name up in any news or media. I'd give the PR team a much-needed raise if I were Matthew.

My relationship with my boss hadn't changed. We were still fooling around on the side when we had time. He'd come over to my place to spend the night, and like the first time, I'd wake up without him. We barely cuddled, barely even kissed when we were fucking. He was wild, assertive, and dominant in the bedroom. Once in a while, he'd give up his control, but he'd always end up reminding me who was the boss.

Honestly, I wouldn't complain about being put in my place as long as we were tangled up in the sheets.

But regardless of the nasty things we did with each other, Matthew had remained professional at work. The staff didn't have a single clue about us. Matthew had made sure that we wouldn't be awkward in the halls, and that no unnecessary promotions and increased pay were on the calendar for me anytime soon.

Trust me, if I had the power to sway Matthew because of the fact that I was sleeping with him, I'd tell him not to put me on bathroom duty forever. Yet here I was with my face in the toilet bowl at least twice a week.

This morning, when I got to work, the hotel was buzzing with energy and it seemed like the staff had doubled. The housekeeping staff usually weren't included in event meetings except on days if there would be VIPs staying over.

"Someone booked the banquet hall last minute," one of the housekeepers, Daisy, said when I asked what was going on as we quickly changed into our uniforms.

"How last minute?" I asked as I tied my hair up for the first time in years because the humidity was going to be the death of me.

"They booked late last night and their event is tonight."

"And someone allowed that?"

"Parker Villas never say no to guests until they're fully booked."

As we walked out of the room and towards the banquet hall where every staff member was called for a meeting, I was in awe at what Daisy had said. The way this hotel valued its guests was like no other. Matthew would move mountains just for them to be satisfied.

The banquet hall was bare, unlike the last time I had been here. Dust particles danced in the sunlight coming through the windows. Some of the cleaning staff were on a ladder cleaning the glass already.

Clair was on the stage with the rest of the managers talking to each other over the loud buzzing noise of the employees in the room. I couldn't help but look at the man in glasses behind them who was removing the piano action from its case. And my mind wandered to Matthew, who I realized was not present.

“All hands are on deck right now, people!” Clair said in the microphone. The redhead was stunning in her green sleeveless turtleneck and trousers. The light from the room highlighted her red hair like it was a halo. It looked like she was used to the hotel bustling with this much activity. “Housekeeping will be lending their time to help with the waitstaff and ushers. Susana is currently choosing the best in her team to help us with this need.”

I knew that I wasn't the best of the employees at the hotel, so there was zero chance for me to work here tonight, even though I really, *really* wanted to. I have to say, I missed being at formal events and galas. And I thought that it would be good to see the glamour of it all again.

“All the housekeeping staff,” she continued. “Are expected to work at a hundred and ten percent, especially the team members working with the VIP and luxury suites. All rooms will be booked tonight and we want everything in perfect condition.”

The meeting went on for another ten minutes where Clair instructed each department about how they were going to help pull off this event with so little time. Thankfully for me, I wasn't assigned to any of the luxury rooms, and I wasn't chosen to be one of the waitstaff either. That meant I had a little room for my usual mistakes.

When the Chief of Human Resources said we were dismissed and were expected to get to work immediately, everyone went towards the exit,

cramping up the space. I took a step back, afraid to be caught in the middle of the stampede, and waited until the crowd was gone.

As I stepped aside from the stage, I looked at the man still tuning the piano, wanting to be there beside him to see what he was doing. We had learned basic piano maintenance back in Juilliard but I was still curious about what the man was doing.

“Ah,” Clair called. She stepped down from the stage, holding an iPad against her chest. “Ms. St. James, just the girl I wanted to see.”

The Chief of HR and I had never really met formally before. All I could remember about her was that she couldn’t stop herself from laughing at the interview at what I was telling Matthew. I guess I should probably thank her and Susana for giving me a chance to work here.

“Mr. Parker wants to see you in his office right now,” She said, her tone stern and her eyes filled with disinterest.

“Why?”

“Something about the gala tonight.”

My cheeks burned as my thoughts went to Matthew telling Clair about how he would keep me under control and make sure that I didn’t fight with the VIP guests. That must be why he wanted to see me, right? And that must be the reason why I wasn’t assigned to any jobs related to the party.

I nodded my understanding and Clair took off as she answered a call. Thankfully, she didn’t stay and chat because I didn’t know what to say to her. At least I knew from the way she talked to me that she didn’t have a clue about what was going on with me and her boss.

As the crowd finally thinned out at the door, I walked towards Matthew’s office, knocked once and turned the knob.

Matthew’s face was clean shaven this morning. He had shaved off the 5

o'clock shadow that usually peppered his face. I knew it shouldn't be the first thing I noticed, but it was attractive. It made him look years younger.

He wasn't wearing a suit today but rather a cream-colored ribbed polo that emphasized his biceps. Today might just be the first for many things. He was on the phone with someone, writing notes down on a piece of paper, and when I walked in, he looked up at me and motioned for me to sit on the chair in front of his desk.

"I'm going to have to call you back," Matthew said as he hung up his phone and tossed his pen aside.

The energy in the air immediately intensified around us, and it zapped me when Matthew leaned back against his chair and started fucking me with his eyes. I locked mine with his, and he smirked.

"Good morning, Reagan."

"Morning, boss," I greeted him casually. The thing between Matthew and I was that we knew which lines not to cross. We could say whatever we wanted to each other when we were alone, but when we were not, we remained professional. I couldn't complain to him then, couldn't make fun of him. And in return, he respected me as his employee. Maybe it was the reason why he allowed things to continue.

Matthew slid a venti-sized iced coffee my way. The Starbucks logo was pebbled with condensation. "For you."

"You called me here for an iced coffee?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. Since Matthew and I had started hooking up, neither of us typically made any effort to intentionally do something considerate towards the other. Which was why Matthew offering me coffee was new.

"It's Starbucks."

"I can see that," I pointed out. I wasn't going to complain that I could



finally drink Starbucks again after months. It was like a reward—a delayed one, but a reward nonetheless. The first sip almost made me melt with ecstasy, the sweet and cool liquid hitting the back of my throat.

“I didn’t know what you wanted, so I got what the barista suggested. I hope it’s to your liking.”

“I can’t complain.” I continued sipping the drink as I relaxed on my chair like I didn’t have a single care about what was going on. It was just me and this coffee. And for a quick moment, I longed for the days when I didn’t have to worry about other things aside from what I wanted to buy next. I knew those days were gone now, but I couldn’t help but wonder what it would have been like if I had stayed in California.

I heard Matthew’s phone ringing and vibrating on his desk, and I saw him switch off his ringer without looking at the screen. It was weird, given that Matthew was a busy man. He was probably the busiest one I knew. He was always on his phone, always in a meeting, always talking to investors and his staff.

“Aren’t you gonna get that?” I asked, shaking the ice in my coffee, the sound rattling around the room.

“Later,” he said nonchalantly. “Look, Reagan. I called you here because I need something from you.”

“How kind of you to ask first.” I smiled.

Matthew was an attractive man. God, he was gorgeous. I had never met a man like him back home. And the sex? Well, let’s just say that he had ruined every other man for me. Even my trusty old vibrator. He was the only man who had given me the best orgasm in my life. In fact, I didn’t know what a real orgasm was until we started sleeping together.

“I know you know about the event tonight,” he said. “And it’s a big deal

that even I can't say no to it despite the fact that the managers thought it was a suicide mission."

"It is a suicide mission," I agreed. "Nobody in their right mind would risk something like this." The hotel's reputation was on the line here, so I understood why it was such a big deal. And I knew Matthew was all about his business having the best image. It was his way of pleasing the guests.

"I know," he nodded. "The guest asked for live music tonight, and I couldn't find anyone last minute."

"What does that have to do with me?" I asked with a frown.

"Well, I'd appreciate it if you would do it."

My eyebrows raised at Matthew's words. Me? Play in front of all the guests tonight? I should probably feel ecstatic to touch the piano again in front of a crowd. But the thought only made me nervous.

I hadn't practiced the piano in months except when I played in the banquet hall. But that was hardly practice. That was merely me being in my feelings and in my zone. To perform, as Juilliard had taught me, I should have asked for a good amount of time to prepare.

"I—"

"I hear you play in the hall every night, Reagan." He did? I didn't think he would, given how thick the walls are, and the banquet hall was vast enough to eat up the noise. I didn't know how to feel about that. "I keep my door open to listen. You play beautifully."

I never thought I'd live to see the day that my brother's nemesis would compliment the way I played the piano. And I couldn't help but be proud of myself to hear such words from my boss.

"I'd love to play for your guests, Matthew. But I'm not prepared," I said, sitting straight on the chair, the blood roaring in my ears, telling me to take

the opportunity. It was the fear of playing in front of so many that was making me hesitate. “I don’t have anything to wear, and no offense, but your piano is in dire need of tuning.”

“Reagan,” he started as he scoffed with amusement. “I’m having someone tune the piano right now. And if you’re worried about what to wear, then I’ll take care of it. I’ll give you my card so you can shop for something—”

“No. It’s okay,” I interrupted. The last thing I needed was to be indebted to Matthew. “I don’t trust myself not to screw this up, Matthew. And if I do, your name and your hotel is on the line. This looks like a very important event.”

“It is,” he nodded, his tone firm and reassuring. “But I trust you. You’re a product of Juilliard, and I can tell that you’re already considering it. It’s just that you’re afraid.”

“I’ll be sloppy.”

“You won’t.”

“Matthew—”

“If it makes you feel any better, Reagan, you’ll be well compensated for your participation tonight. And I mean, being-able-to-afford-your-coffee-everyday type of well. I pay my talents handsomely.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. It wasn’t a secret that I needed money, and thankfully, Matthew wasn’t the type to spend money on me even with our predicament. Like he had said, what we shared was purely physical. Money wasn’t something on our discussion list.

With that said, it was nice having to be compensated for doing something I loved for once.

“And bear in mind that these guests are VIPs. All it takes is for one person to spread the news that Parker Villas has an exceptional pianist, and soon

enough, other guests will be eagerly requesting your performance."

Well, if he put it that way, I couldn't say no to that. Because this was it. This was the moment that I had been dreaming of. This was the reason why I didn't want to settle for running Daddy's business. This was my dream coming to life. And I had Matthew to thank for it.

"You really are a businessman to the core, Matthew Parker."

"Negotiating is what I do best, Jellybean." I shook my head in disbelief. I couldn't believe that after months of everything going downhill, Matthew of all people, was handing me my dream on a silver platter.

"Fine," I finally said. "I'll play for the event tonight. Only because of the staggering pay you promise." That was a lie because I didn't care about money. If Matthew hadn't told me about the money, I still would have played regardless.

"Great!" Matthew exclaimed, his smile big. It was different. Like he was proud more than he was happy, and I was, too, proud of myself for taking this leap. "I know someone who has a piano studio downtown. You can take the rest of the day off so you can prepare, maybe practice if you have to. But I'm expecting you to be back by six tonight."

Matthew handed me a piece of paper with the studio address, along with the printed list of the guests' requests for their couple's dances later tonight.

"I appreciate this, Matthew. Really," I said as I got up to my feet, grabbing the paper from him. What should I do? Should I give him a hug or something? A kiss? That seemed inappropriate. So, instead, I extended a hand to him. He frowned, amusement graced his face but he shook my clammy hand.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Ms. St. James."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Matthew

**T**onight, the VIP banquet hall looked extra luxurious as it exuded opulence and sophistication, the perfect atmosphere for the event.

I personally didn't know who our guests were but after they visited my office last night, basically begging for me to cater their event, I discovered that they were apparently celebrity lawyers who were celebrating their golden anniversary.

With research, I learned they previously had a reality show about their work. Although I was clueless about that type of niche, I knew they were a big deal in their field.

The walls were covered in elaborate tapestries and were illuminated by crystal chandeliers that cast a gentle, golden glow in the room. Each place setting reflected the hotel's unwavering dedication to detail with polished wooden tables tastefully decorated with exquisite linen and delicate china. A beautiful floral arrangement with golden roses and ivory lilies adorned the room's center, just as the couple wanted.

The atmosphere in the room was charged with anticipation as guests in their best garments mingled with each other. Three bartenders manned the open bar as guests ordered their drinks, and the waitstaff roamed the floor carrying trays of champagne and appetizers.

When Victoria and Daniel Hartman, the couple celebrating their anniversary, had visited me in my office, they already had their program planned out. It was like they knew it was last minute so they wanted to make our lives easier. Thankfully, they wanted a short program, nothing too formal—two hours max.

A simple dinner, with a toast and speech, their couples dance, an open bar, and an open dancefloor throughout the night. It was nothing too extravagant. But they had requested a live piano with tunes they had picked out as a family, which was a mix of classic pieces and modern ones. This was why I had asked Reagan to take the rest of the day to get ready. It was a challenge to be the one responsible for the ambiance of an event.

Speaking of, it was almost six PM and Reagan was still nowhere in sight. The couple had requested background music during the introductory and early parts of dinner.

I was at the back of the massive hall, sitting on a vacant chair away from the crowd, which meant I could see everything and everyone in the room. There was no sign of her. And trust me, I would know if she was around.

Reagan's presence alone wasn't something I could ignore. It was like my body was called upon when she was near. I could feel her in before I could see her. In a span of one month of us sleeping together, Reagan was starting to make her mark.

She was incredible in bed, and I couldn't last a day without seeing her, or without thinking about her. But I kept on reminding myself that what I had

with her was nothing but sex.

Right on cue, I spotted the assigned host walking by the stage, a sign that told me the program was about to start. The host was a man in his early twenties, probably a family member who was doing a gig for the guests, given how young he looked.

I could see that he was talking to someone behind the stage and that he was nervous despite his crisp suit. Uninterested in the event slowly starting, I grabbed my phone to check on Reagan.

Grabbing her phone number from the employee records was completely unnecessary, and it was putting me in a dangerous spot. Reagan was just supposed to be a mere fuck buddy, not someone I exchanged texts with at random hours of the night.

But there was nothing wrong with a boss having his employee's number, right?

*Matthew: I thought I said six.*

*Reagan: ?*

Even through a mere text, she was giving me attitude. But I liked that about her. She was feisty and strong-willed. She didn't care what people would say about her outbursts because what could they do? She didn't care what people would say about her as long as she wasn't doing something wrong.

Part of me pitied her because I got the feeling that Reagan had learned to stand up for herself the hard way—because her father would push her buttons.

*Matthew: Please don't tell me you're late, Reagan.*

*Reagan: Will you chill? I'm at the apartment changing.*

*Matthew: Are you serious right now? The party is about to start. I said six.*

She was adorable and all but I hated her tardy ass. This was Reagan's world

and in the short amount of time we'd been sleeping together, I had learned that I was just living in it. Usually, I had no complaints. But when it came to compromising my business, that was a different story.

Reagan: *Relax, boss* 😊

I was about to reply to her about getting her ass in the hall this minute when the host got a hold of the microphone and started with the introductions. He talked about the couple, about how they met, about their family. And just as I was about to hit send, the soft and faint melody of the piano filled the room.

I couldn't believe that she would joke about something like being late at an important event. I'd make sure she'd love her punishment for this.

Looking up, I saw my blonde goddess sitting on the piano bench. Her hair was curled in a messy, yet elegant way, with loose strands in the front framing the sides of her face. But what I couldn't look away from was the back of her dress. It was low, with thin straps crisscrossing against her pale skin.

I wanted to trail my hands along her bare back and plant a kiss on her shoulder. To say that Reagan was gorgeous was an understatement. She was the most beautiful woman in the room if I did say so myself.

With the way she sat on the chair, and how her body softly moved along with the music, she was born to be on that stage—she was born for the spotlight. No matter what she was doing, even if she were to come in this banquet hall carrying a tray of food, all eyes were going to be on her. Like mine were.

From my position, I could barely see her, but she was in a striking white dress glinting against the stage's delicate light. She stood out conspicuously in the midst of the crowd wearing black, and the wife wearing red. Her dress



contrasted against the gleaming ebony piano, a sole spotlight shining down on her as she created the ambiance.

Immediately, the hall was wrapped with the soft tunes of the song the guests had requested. If my memory served me right, it was *Prelude in C Major* by Johann Sebastian Bach, one I knew solely by listening to the opening notes.

Over the chatter of people and the loud words of the young host, all I could hear was Reagan, the enchanting melody flowed from her fingertips, putting a spell on everyone—especially me.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her and the world around me seemed to fade into the background as she lured me in. I didn't even think that the people around me were listening to the host anymore.

I sat still on my chair, and my skin prickled with pleasure just listening to her play, blood rushing through parts of me that should not be responding to music alone. Not tonight when there was a crowd and there were so many of my employees in the room. The last thing we needed was for them to figure out there was something going on between me and Reagan. I wouldn't hear the end of it from Clair.

I sat on my chair at the back of the room, allowing myself to feel the music. And my thoughts immediately went to the nights I had spent with Reagan. Nothing but sex, I kept on reminding myself every time I was inside her. Whether we were on the bed, on the couch, on her kitchen island, or in my office.

Just sex. Purely physical.

But Reagan was someone who was so pure and so wild at the same time. She was not experienced in the real world. She barely knew how to ride the

bus, yet she was determined to learn and her perseverance was something I admired. She wasn't afraid to learn, wasn't afraid to ask questions.

In the span of a month, I knew things about her that I probably shouldn't be remembering. It was a dangerous game trying to give meaning to the little innocent and mundane things she did.

Like how she was constantly looking for coconut water when the weather was too hot.

She showered almost five times a day because she got too hot too often and she couldn't afford to have the AC on the entire day.

When she was not good at something, she was determined to figure it out, and when she did, she made sure she was the best at it.

She frowned when she needed to focus, and she was a very smart person when it came to memorizing things.

And I liked that she wasn't lazy, and wasn't usually tardy, either, despite me giving her shit about it. I knew she had her valid reasons when she wasn't on time, and she was not intentionally doing it out of sloth.

With my eyes still glued to her, she changed the song to another, *Canon in D* by Johann Pachelbel. And I couldn't help but recall all the times she had played in the hall thinking nobody was listening.

It was true that I kept my doors open when the clock chimed seven every night, and Reagan, without failure, played the piano right on schedule. Some pieces she played were classical, some modern, and some I believed were her own compositions.

She was musically inclined, and I knew that not giving her a chance to play in front of influential people was a waste.

It wasn't true that there was no one to take the pianist spot tonight. I had several people's names in my phone to help me with that, and I had

connections to musicians who could only dream of playing in my hotel. But I knew Reagan was the right person for the job.

I was no piano expert. I learned to play solely because I was sent to a private school and music was something my mother wanted us all to learn. Although I didn't play a single instrument, I knew the classics. Like Reagan did. The classics were her favorite.

Reagan played three more songs, putting her own personal style into them. I recognized one of the two—*Gymnopédie No. 1* by Erik Satie. The piano was subtle and delivered a relaxing atmosphere until dinner. The couple barely noticed the music because they were having too much fun walking around and chit-chatting with their family.

Once the host called the couple of the night for their couple's dance, it was my cue to stand up my spot and get a front row seat to watch Reagan play.

As the crowd cheered for the couple who was getting ready to go in front to dance, I walked out of the banquet hall to go to the other room where I could access the side wing without having to disturb the event.

Thankfully, I hadn't bumped into anyone on my way. When I entered the room, it was empty. It was solely built for wing access. It was snug in here, with only enough space to fit about ten people, and nobody usually used it aside from people who needed access to the stage.

From here, I could see the beautiful woman at the piano and the crowd down below without being seen myself.

In the dimly lit stage wing, hidden in the shadows and breath held in anticipation, my eyes were fixed on the exquisite pianist. The stage was softly lit as her fingers danced gracefully across the keys, the hauntingly beautiful notes of her own rendition of *La Vie en Rose* hung in the air, creating a mesmerizing spell that almost stopped time.

My heart quickened just watching her doing something she loved. An unfamiliar warmth spread through my chest, my stomach, and then to my groin. She was captivating, her melody a delicate symphony of grace and passion. It felt like Reagan was whispering her secrets, and I was the only one who could see them—understand them.

From the moment, Reagan St. James had become the embodiment of every love song ever written, and I simply couldn't tear my gaze away from her. As the final notes of the song faded into the hushed silence of the hall, I knew I was fucked.

She was going to be the death of me. Sex aside, the woman who was smiling as the crowd applauded, made me feel alive again. And I didn't give a shit about who her brother was. Reagan was her own person, and she was starting to break the walls I had built for so long.

She started another song, sweat pebbled on her temples as they glittered under the light. It was surreal watching her as she went to another song, *Witchcraft* by Frank Sinatra. She bobbed her head as she played, her eyes focused on the keys, and she bit her lower lip at the same time.

Then, her green eyes locked on mine. She might as well have just shot me in the face because I almost stopped breathing as I saw the evident ecstasy in her eyes.

She was sexy as fuck. And I'd never seen her look this happy—not when she orgasmed, not when I gave her treats, and especially not when I told her about tonight's pay.

She was surprised for a moment, and then lust filled her eyes as her lips fell slightly apart. She wasn't even looking at the keys. I smirked at her, tall and proud.

“You look beautiful,” I mouthed.

“You too,” she answered.

The rest of the night, she played. Her green stare never left mine except when she needed to transition to another song. My cock was fucking growing hard just by the way she was staring at me.

And I was just there, glued to the ground as the siren slowly lured me into her trap.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Reagan

The contentment in my gut shifted, morphing into something deeper and more primal when I found the dark, captivating eyes hidden in the dim glow of the stage wing away from the guests and the crew. Our eyes met, and immediately, an electric current passed between us.

I carried on with the final notes, my eyes still locked with Matthew's. My core started to pool with heat just by looking at the handsome man in front of me, fucking me with his eyes. I knew for a fact that he could feel the desire dancing between us.

He complimented me, and we shared a sliver of intimacy like no other for the split moment.

Then the performance was finished, and I found myself standing up from the piano, my ass almost numb, and there was a subtle wave of applause from everyone. I bowed, my cheeks flushed with both embarrassment and the exhilaration of the successful performance.

And I started walking off the stage. Towards the wing. Towards Matthew who wore a three-piece dark suit that made him look—magnetic. And I was

the fool being drawn to him.

“Beautiful performance, Ms. St. James,” he said beaming at me, taking me in from my curled hair to my Christian Louboutin white crystal ankle-wrap shoes. “And you look majestic.”

“Thank you, Mr. Parker,” I murmured slyly, blushing. “It’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

“Pleasure’s all mine.” Matthew stepped closer to me and we could hear the faint chatter of the guests as the event came to an end. He cupped my chin and directed my gaze to his as he towered over me.

“They’ll see,” I said, referring to his staff who could walk in at any moment and catch us red-handed.

“They won’t,” Matthew assured me as he lowered his face to mine. Was he going to kiss me? Kisses outside of sex were intimate, at least for me. But my skin was already itching to touch him, so if he was going to indeed kiss me, I was taking it. But instead, Matthew brought his lips by my ear. And he whispered, “Wait for me in my office.”

Then he was gone and out of the room to tell the guests goodbye like the doting hotel owner that he was. So I gathered myself and my things on the vacant chair and paraded towards Matthew’s office, praying that no staff was going to see me.

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I threw myself at Matthew when he entered the room and closed the door behind him. My lips craved his taste like a kid craving chocolate.

Matthew’s hand wrapped around my waist to support me, but he didn’t complain. Instead, he kissed me right back deeper. Wetter. Sloppier.

Good. At least it wasn't just me feeling the growing lust on the stage earlier.

"Jesus Christ, Reagan," he moaned in between kisses. And I could smell the tinge of his cologne, and I could taste the mint on his breath. "I brought champagne to celebrate first."

"Later," I demanded as I grabbed the bottle from his hand and placed it on the table by the door. I was so turned on right now I might actually combust. "First, we fuck."

It took Matthew two strides to reach me, and I heard him growl at my words.

Fucking in his office wasn't something new. He was a very resourceful person and he knew a lot of ways to make me come without being on the bed. And I was there to enjoy these little endeavors.

He brought his lips to mine, groaning against my supple, hungry lips. The tension was palpable and my nipples were so hard they could cut glass.

It was like my body knew Matthew's touch, and was responding on its own. It had been a couple of days since we last fucked. I could almost say I was being deprived.

Sex in the past for me was not as exciting and wild as this. But then again, Matthew was a man. He was experienced, and he knew how to worship my body like no other.

"Untie my dress," I demanded as I slowly pulled away. The faster we got naked, the faster he could be inside me. And tonight, I didn't have time for drinks and sweet words.

This was what we had established. Physical. Nothing emotional, nothing too intimate. We fuck, we talk, we go on our merry way. And even though I



wished it didn't have to be like that, I knew it was the best way for us to handle things.

In fact, there was nothing intimate about me and Matthew other than when we were having sex. It was always distant, vulgar—detached. He didn't stay in my place and didn't do small talk. The truth was, I didn't know anything about Matthew. At least not the things that mattered anyway.

He knew about my situation but that was it. The only thing we had in common was Ryan. And I could hardly call that a bond.

I turned, grabbing my hair to the side so that Matthew could find the knot of the strap at my nape. With one pull, the top of my dress dropped, exposing my breasts.

He cupped them from behind, massaging them as I leaned my head against his shoulder. He brought his lips to nibble my ear, his body bowed to reach my height.

“Someday soon,” he whispered, palming my full breasts and erect nipples. “I'm going to fuck your tits and come all over them.”

My breasts weren't that big—average at most. But it would be fun to watch his cock slide between them. Matthew had a lot of tricks up his sleeves, and that was what I liked most. The spontaneity of our sex was incredible. He knew how to treat a woman well with his filthy mouth. And I wasn't complaining.

Sex was something I was fond of. I liked to do different, risky things as well. It had been a bummer that the men I had slept with in the past were too vanilla, too boring.

But then Matthew came into the picture and he had set the standard. He was dominant and in control. Yet he allowed me to do whatever I wanted. He embraced my dominance, craved it.

“Hmm,” I hummed. “Promising me things as always, Mr. Parker. But I’d rather you fuck my pussy instead.”

“I will. After I fuck that smart mouth of yours.” He kissed my shoulder once and tugged me away from him.

I turned, and I saw that he was unbuckling his belt. Enjoying the sight, I looked up into his eyes and bit my lower lip.

Closing the gap between us, I reached for his waistband, and before he could undo the button, I inserted my hand in his pants over his boxers and I grabbed his hard, erect cock.

“Fuck, Reagan,” he moaned, his body bent in the middle from the firm grip of my hand around his shaft. I moved my hand up and down his length.

“So hard, Matthew,” I purred as his mouth formed into an O. His breath caught. “Who are you hard for?”

This was always how sex unfolded with us. Matthew would allow me to take control, to test the temperature—to know how far he could go. It was almost sweet of him to prioritize my needs above his. And in return, I made sure I pleased him.

“Just for fucking you, Reagan,” he hissed through gritted teeth as I licked and bit my lower lip, stroking his cock in his pants.

“That’s fucking right, baby.”

Matthew brought his mouth to mine once more and he bit my lower lip as he pulled away. He groaned and took a deep breath as my hands teased the tip of his dick.

“On your knees,” he demanded, soft and slow, yet the tone of his voice told me to obey.

So I went on my knees, removing my hands from his pants, not breaking eye contact. With my tits exposed in the cold room, I pulled his pants down

along with his boxers. His cock was hard and erect in front of me, veins bugling as his length pulsed.

At least it wasn't just my body reacting.

“Spit on my cock, Reagan.”

My saliva drooled down his cock as my hands stroked his length and I could almost see his legs buckling at my touch.

I coated him with my spit as I licked the tip of his dick. His pre cum tasted tangy in my mouth. Then I wrapped my lips around him.

Matthew was a big man, and so was his cock. But I was a spontaneous girl and I never backed down from a fight. So, I pushed my head further forward. In and out. In and out. With each bob, I took him deeper down my throat, testing my limits as his penis invaded the back of my mouth. Then, all of a sudden, I gagged, coughing around his length, tears escaping from the corners of my eyes.

I felt his hands on the sides of my head, slightly pulling me away, allowing me to breathe.

“At your own pace, darling,” he urged.

God, was it pathetic of me to feel safe around this man who was basically a stranger? Perhaps. But I didn't care. The fact that he wasn't pressuring me to do something I wasn't comfortable with only made me want to be better at this—for him.

My pussy was flattered as well and I could feel her getting wet.

I released Matthew, licking the side of my lips as I looked up at him. His eyes were locked with mine, passion and sexual appetite laced his stare, his mouth gaping.

“All good?” he asked and I nodded. “Good girl. One more because I want to come in your mouth.”

“Yes, sir,” I jested, smirking at him.

I cleared my throat, shaking my hair away from my face and I guided his cock into my mouth once more.

This time, I wasn’t stopping until he’d erupted. I sucked him dry, grazing my teeth slowly against his veiny cock. As I did, my hands twisted around it.

“You suck my dick so good, darling,” he moaned, gripping a fistful of my hair for support. But I was determined to make this feel good for him because I knew that he would be returning the favor tenfold later.

I moaned against him, the vibration in my throat made him inhale sharply.

“Touch yourself, Reagan.” I could hear the strain on his voice and the way his cock was twitching told me that he was close. “Let me watch you play with that clit.”

I obeyed like a good girl, pulling my lace underwear aside to access the most sensitive part of my body. I could feel how soaked I was, and the smell I emitted was intoxicating.

*Gluck.*

*Gluck.*

*Gluck.*

I slurped him in, my saliva mixing with his semen. His office filled with our smell and our moans. I just prayed that nobody would walk by and hear us.

“I’m gonna fucking come,” he announced, and I could only moan my answer. I wanted him. All of him—his touch, his cum, his dick. Everything.

Matthew screamed my name, and I didn’t care if it would cause a ruckus because I was over the moon with the amount of power I had over him.

His knees buckled and his dick pulsed in my mouth as he came, the warm spritz of his seed filling the back of my mouth.

In one swift decision, I buried him deeper in my throat, my eyes watering as I choked. But I pushed through anyway as I swallowed every last bit of him. He guided my head off his cock, and I sniffled, my face hot and my cheeks wet.

Matthew offered a hand to help me stand, and when I brought my semen-covered mouth to his, I could feel him still hard against my stomach. God, the stamina of this man. But then again, Matthew was not the type of man to be satisfied with one orgasm.

I moaned against his mouth as he devoured my lips, and he didn't care even that he could still taste himself on my tongue.

“Over the desk,” he pointed. And I didn't know if it was possible, but his eyes went darker like he, too, was going to implode if he didn't take me. “On your stomach.”

He cupped my ass, as I shimmied out of my dress. I stepped away from Matthew and over the pool of white satin now on my feet, then turned away and walked towards his table. The things on his desk, as always, were tidy and in order. But I guess not for long.

This wasn't my first rodeo in his office. It was, however, my first time being taken in this position. Something told me that this was going to be quick. But rough.

“The shoes?” I asked as I positioned myself against the sleek mahogany, swiping away things that were in my way.

“Leave them,” he said. I couldn't see him but I could hear the soft ruffle of him taking off his clothes. Then in a swift movement, I felt Matthew behind me—naked, his dick erect against the curve of my back. And my body arched, my head resting on his shoulder. And he traced my neck with his hand, down to my breast, my waist, then my hips.

He planted a kiss on my ear, his tongue playing with my lobes. Electricity danced between us, and with each touch he gave me, I felt like sparks danced against my skin. I didn't know where this thing was headed, or how I was going to stop it when the time came. Because Matthew wasn't the type of person someone would just get over. And after he set the bar so high for me and sex, I didn't know what I would do then. But I guess I'd cross the bridge once I was there.

For now, I was going to indulge.

"I said on your stomach," he murmured, his breath warm on my skin. "Hands on the edge." He tugged my shoulder, urging me to bend forward. The surface of the table was cool underneath my skin, and it only sent my body into overdrive. "If you let go, you don't come."

It was always a challenge with Matthew. He knew how to press my buttons and how to use them in his favor. He knew I wouldn't back down from these tests. And in return, he could do everything he wanted with me.

So I gripped the edge of the table, my ass up thanks to my heels. And before I knew it, Matthew was grabbing onto my butt cheek as he positioned his dick by my entrance. Then he froze.

"Matthew, please," I begged. It was a regular occurrence that I begged for him, and I was more than happy to play my part as long as I got rewarded.

"Because you played so well tonight, consider this your reward."

Then he entered me in one delicious thrust. His dick was hard and big even though I was soaking wet. A whimper escaped me when I felt him stretch me as my leg rose involuntarily.

"Your pussy is so wet yet so tight, Reagan," he grunted as he pushed out of me and entered again in one quick move, sending me forward. The desk's legs scraped against the floor. "All wet for me?"

“Yes, baby. All for you,” I moaned, the sensation too much. I knew I wasn’t going to last long.

He gripped my waist, and he pulled back before slamming into me again. This time, he didn’t stop. He pounded me like he had been deprived of this for months or years.

Skin against skin—sweat, cum, saliva. Everything was interlocked. I could hear my pussy squelched as his huge dick entered me. It was euphoric to hear, and even more euphoric to feel. There was no man like him. No cock like his. No mouth as filthy as Matthew’s.

“You know what I thought about while you played tonight, darling?” Darling. It was darling when he fucked me, Jellybean when he was teasing me, and Reagan when he was pissed. I loved my nicknames from him, but I liked it more when he screamed them.

“What?” I whispered, my stomach flipping as the orgasm lurked nearby.

“You played like you squirted on the piano. So well, so beautifully.” God, the memory of that night was forever etched into my head, and it didn’t help in keeping me upright. “That piano belongs to you now, Reagan. Nobody is going to fucking touch it.”

Mine. Because I had marked it. And no one would ever know but us. God, it was so hot to know that he had imagined me like that earlier. If only I had known that was what he was thinking about earlier.

My hands struggled to hold on, but I adjusted it, and the jewelry I wore clunked against the wooden material.

“Oh my God,” I cried. Matthew’s movement escalated as my pussy fluttered around his dick. “I’m going to come, Matthew.”

“Don’t you fucking dare come,” he growled, bowing down against my body, his weight pressing me harder against the table. Then he whispered to

my ear, “Not yet.”

And he thrust deeper, faster—harder. I could feel our wetness running down my thighs as he continued to fuck me from behind. Sweat stuck between our bodies, and it pebbled on my temples.

“I know you’re close,” he grunted, shifting his position. He straightened his back, circled his hands around my spread legs and he found my clit without any problem. God, this man. He was going to be the death of me.

“Matthew, please.” He rubbed me there, my body hypersensitive and hyperaware of his warm touch. My legs shook from the sensation, and a shiver went up my body as the orgasm drew near. “I need to come.”

He was silent for a minute, matching the pace of his fingers with his movement inside me. And I squirmed under him, gasping for air and sobbing in delight. I squeezed the edge of the table harder. I wasn’t going to let go, not when I was this close.

But my knees weren’t built for the type of pleasure. They trembled once again, stronger this time. And even Matthew knew that my body wouldn’t be able to support me. So he grabbed my arms, telling me to let go of the table as he spun me and directed us to the carpet of the floor.

I didn’t care what was happening. I trusted him, and all my body wanted was to get to the point of release.

Now Matthew was on top of me and I lay on my stomach beneath him. My hands were flat on the floor as I let my boss do all the work.

Then Matthew barked, “Come, Reagan. Come for me.”

And I let go, my entire body shaking at the swift orgasm that washed through me as Matthew’s kept fucking me through the rapturous climax. My teeth chattered, my legs shook, and in victory, I brought my hand towards the delicate dip of my back atop my ass, longing for a touch.



Like clockwork, I felt Matthew lock his warm hands around my trembling ones and thrust into me one last time before he turned us to our side, his dick still in me. I craned my neck for a kiss, which he gave, before planting a kiss on my shoulder, my neck, and then my cheeks.

We stayed like that for a moment, before he pulled out from me. I whimpered at his absence. His touch still lingered as he stood, stark naked for me to see, as he went to get the champagne. He popped the bottle, and with no glass whatsoever, he offered me the bottle.

It was time to celebrate a little more.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# Matthew

I was fucked.

That was the first thing I thought when I watched Reagan dressed after she had cleaned herself up in the bathroom. She had asked me to tie her dress behind her neck as she reapplied her lipstick. Despite our activities, her dahlia scent lingered and I wanted nothing but to bury my head against her collarbone to take everything in.

We laid on the floor and finished the champagne before Reagan decided that she was starving. So I had offered her to take her somewhere she could eat before I drove her home.

There was something else in the air tonight, and I didn't know if she felt it too, but I didn't want to say anything for fear that I would push her away.

I wasn't ready to see her play the piano like that. I had seen her naked and angry, but I had never seen her in this intimate light before. And it stirred something in me that I didn't like.

Just staring at her right now, I wasn't noticing her skin or supple lips, or the way she finger-combed her hair back in place. Instead, I wondered what she

was thinking, which didn't cross my mind often because if I did wonder what was running through her mind, what she was feeling, then everything we did would start to mean something.

"How about we go to McDonald's," she said out of nowhere as she blotted her lips on a tissue . I wanted to push her against the wall right there to have a taste once more. She was so irresistible, and she knew that she was doing something to me with that subtle act.

"I could take you to somewhere fancier than that," I offered. I was sitting on the chair by the door, my ankle on my knee as I waited patiently for her to finish.

She spent a lot of time in the bathroom, and even more time fixing herself after she put on her dress. She was vain, and I wasn't going to berate her because right now, we had nothing but time on our hands. That and I enjoyed every second of it.

I glanced at my wristwatch to see that it was almost ten p.m. All the good restaurants were closed, but if luck was on my side, we'd find something.

Reagan grabbed her bag from one of the chairs, a white Yves Saint Laurent leather envelope bag with gold chain straps. It was elegant and expensive. Perhaps something she brought from home.

"But I'd like a greasy burger," she argued, fluffing her hair one last time in the mirror before finally turning to face me. It was like we didn't just have wild sex over my desk and on the cold floor.

With the amount of sex we were having in my office, I should probably opt to get a couch in here. It wasn't gentlemanly of me to allow her to lie on the floor. Then again, there was nothing gentlemanly about how she liked to be taken.

"All this sex is making me hungry," she added.

“Didn’t peg you for a fast-food type of woman,” I jested, raising a playful eyebrow at her. She rolled her eyes.

“I’m not. But with the amount of cardio I’m getting from you, I’d say it wouldn’t matter how much I eat.”

God, her mouth was going to be my undoing. I didn’t take it personally the way she talked and joked around me when we were together like this—alone. But when we were working, she made sure she’d be respectful enough not to draw attention.

“Are you health conscious?” I asked as I opened the door of my office, letting her go out first. The party was over hours ago and all the staff on the ninth floor had signed off for the night, leaving a few of the night shift and some security.

Reagan was cautious when she stepped out, looking in both directions in fear that she might be seen.

“No one’s here,” I whispered gaily as I locked the door behind me, assuring her that there was no reason to tiptoe. I pocketed the keys, and I realized that Reagan hadn’t been carrying anything to cover her rather showy, yet sleek dress.

I noted also that she was only wearing white lace underwear and nothing else under her dress. There was no trace of her bra earlier or even the type that stuck on. Trust me, I’d know because my eyes had not left her a single second when she was getting dressed.

“Did you leave your coat inside?” I asked, halting in case I needed to go back and get it for her.

“What?” She gave me a confused smile as she opened her bag and produced a sleek and clear perfume bottle filled with something amber. In embossed detail, I could see the gold font of Givenchy below a text that said

Dahlia Divin. “I didn’t bring a coat,” she added as she spritzed perfume on her neck and her wrist.

So that was the little culprit for the smell that was making me go insane.

“Why not?” I asked, ignoring the fact that her scent just hit my senses like a truck. And now, I felt like a fucking cartoon character floating in the air, tracing the imaginary gold trail of her aroma. “Didn’t I say that you should always carry a jacket with you?”

“But it’s hot. I don’t like being hot.”

She didn’t. She didn’t like to sweat because she felt like she needed to shower. She didn’t like the humidity or the heat. Which to me was a surprise because she decided to stay in Florida at this time of year when the heat could be relentless.

Still, I didn’t like the idea of her wearing solely her dress while her nipples puckered behind the material of her dress. But that was Reagan for you. She didn’t give a single fuck about what I thought, or what others might think of her. She was running the show and we were just blessed enough to be in her presence.

I didn’t do anything more, except shake my head at her.

We walked towards the elevator, our shoes clattering against the marble floor in the empty hallway. I pressed the elevator button and we waited for the lift.

Reagan hummed beside me. I couldn’t decipher what it was but when I peered down at her, she was slightly swaying, her fingers tapping on the side of her leg as if she was still playing on that piano.

She might have noticed me looking at her because she looked up, and when her green eyes locked into my dark ones, she beamed, her eyes heavy.

“Tired already?” I joked, pulling her against me, my arm wrapped around

her bare shoulder.

“Uh-huh,” she murmured, her body sagging against mine. “Tired and hungry. Mostly hungry.”

“You know we can go to the kitchen and ask Alejandra to whip us up something to eat.”

“You can do that?”

“Of course, the hotel has 24-hour room service. That includes food.”

She considered this for a moment, but she shook her head. “I’m not risking being seen with you. No offense, of course.”

“Of course.”

Then, the elevator arrived with a ping, and we walked inside. I pressed the button for the basement parking lot. And when Reagan and I were settled, leaning against the handrail of the elevator, I felt her head leaning against my shoulder.

When the elevator doors closed, and I felt our descent, I leaned mine against hers.

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I popped the trunk of my Tesla as Reagan waited, holding the paper bag filled with our food. She was basically bouncing on her feet at the smell of her double cheeseburger, twister fries, six-piece McNuggets, and our drinks. We had gotten bottled water for me and Diet Coke for her.

The parking lot was empty when we arrived, but thankfully, the nearest McDonald’s was open 24 hours. Unfortunately, because of its odd location, there wasn’t a drive-thru.

Reagan was not kidding when she said she was hungry. She ordered everything on the menu while I ordered one cheeseburger for myself. But I

didn't question her. Instead, I paid for our little dinner and we decided to eat in the parking lot.

"Why can't we eat inside?" I had asked her when she proposed the idea.

"The next thing we need is people recognizing you and taking photos of us."

Right. Because a boss and his employee couldn't be seen being friendly at this time of night. So I shut my mouth and agreed, even though I hated the part where Reagan was basically saying that she didn't want to be seen with me.

Purely physical, Matthew, I reminded myself inwardly.

Reagan was also wrong about the weather tonight because when we left the car to order inside, a breeze flew by, causing her to yelp at the sensation while covering her breasts, her nipples growing hard at the chill.

So like the gentleman that I was, I offered her my coat and reminded her one last time to take a jacket with her when she went places.

"Are you sure you can finish all that, Reagan?" I asked once the trunk was all set. She took a step closer, as I let her take a seat first and settled the food on the back of the floor of the car.

I nestled my broad shoulders beside her and she got right to it, opening her fries and popping the greasy, twisted potatoes in her mouth. She moaned when the flavors hit her mouth, and my dick twitched at the sounds she was making.

"I can't remember the last time I had these," she said, taking our burgers out of the bag. She handed me mine after she unwrapped it for me without noticing what she had just done. Perhaps it was something she had done for her brother back home, too.

"I swore off these things years ago," I agreed.

“What, McDonald’s?”

“Fast food.”

“Why?” she asked as I had killed her dog, taking a big bite from her burger at almost the same time. I did too and I allowed myself to indulge in the fatty, oily patty.

“It’s unhealthy.”

She scoffed, chewing silently beside me before downing it with her drink.

“You sound like Ryan,” she grumbled. And for a second there, something reminded me that whatever this thing was between me and her, it could not progress further because of who her brother was. She must have felt the shift of the energy because when she lowered her soda she added, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Ryan was indeed a health-conscious bastard.” I flushed the memories of Ryan from my head before it could completely ruin my nice night with his sister.

“Yeah,” Reagan nodded. “He’d scold me when I take home junk food. So I stopped eating it completely.”

“When was the last time you ate McDonald’s?”

“I don’t know. But I remember eating some with Mom when she was still alive.” Sadness laced her words, but she let out a chuckle nonetheless.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Every memory I had with her was fun. There was never a bad day when she was still alive. Sometimes I do things that we did together just so I could remember her.”

“Is that why you decided to eat this tonight?”

She sighed, stretching her legs out beside mine on the pavement. I wanted to touch her, to console her. Instead, I finished my one last bite of burger before finishing my drink.



“Yeah.” She nodded, offering me her fries. God, this woman could eat. I grabbed one and bit it, savoring the fried potato. Two forbidden meals in one night. First Reagan, now this. “There was a McDonald’s near the building where I did my piano lessons when I was a kid. She’d take me there once a month as a treat.”

I hadn’t known Reagan’s mother. I didn’t even know she passed until Reagan told me the other day. Ryan wasn’t the type to talk about his family when we were still in college, and I wasn’t one to pry.

Just listening to Reagan told me that her mother’s passing caused a big strain on her family. And it made me wonder if maybe Reagan wouldn’t have gone through what she was going through right now if her mother had been there. Jesus. Maybe Ryan wouldn’t have stolen and cheated.

“Your mother would be proud of you, Reagan,” I pointed out. I watched her crumple the burger wrapper, then reached out, grabbing it from her. I collected the garbage and kept it in one of the empty McDonald’s paper bags. Then I watched her eat the nuggets.

I realized that there was something enjoyable about watching her fill herself up. She was happy when she was eating as long as she wasn’t hot and wasn’t paying for it.

“Regardless of what that Eloise girl told you, when I saw you play, anyone would be proud.”

“You liked it, huh,” she grinned, licking the remaining dip from the corner of her lips.

“I’m no piano expert but I’ve never seen someone play with that much emotion. I even think the crowd was watching you play more than they watched the couple dance.”

“Really?”

“I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.” Her cheeks heated up, and I didn’t know why I was telling her this. Maybe because I wanted to show her that somebody cared about the things she was passionate about? “Why do you think I was standing in the wing?”

“Because you’re creepy?” she joked and I chuckled.

*Because I wanted to see you up close,* I wanted to say.

“Because it was nearly impossible to play that perfectly. I thought you had set up your phone or something.”

She gasped at my words and then smacked me on the shoulders playfully.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said. And it was. She could be on any stage and people would be in awe at her beauty and performance.

“Hurry up,” I said, and she popped the last nugget in her mouth. She put the container in the paper bag along with the wrappers and finished her drink.

Then I threw them all away in the nearest bin.

When I returned to the car, Reagan was waiting for me, a smile of contentment painted her face.

“All good?”

“All good.”

Then I brought her to her side of the car, opening the door for her.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Reagan

I couldn't get Matthew off my mind even though three days had passed since I played in front of over two hundred guests in the banquet hall. Three days since I felt something turn in my stomach every time I saw my boss.

It was not the usual feeling of arousal I got when we first started fooling around. It was like a hiccup in my stomach and a gallop in my chest. Like a high school fucking crush.

My reputation in the housekeeping department had taken a turn from the person that was always in trouble to the employee who wowed the guests with her performance at that event. Some of the staff, especially those in the banquet hall that night, had spread the word about how beautifully I played. Some were in awe while others had complained about how I was sucking up to the boss.

I ignored them because I knew that they would flip if they knew I was *actually* sucking him.

Although Matthew remained nonchalant and respectful in the hallways and in meetings, there were stolen glances, secret smiles, and soft touches when he was feeling extra frisky.

He knew my schedule even if it rotated every week, so sometimes I had reason to believe he was asking Susana for it. Why would Matthew Parker suddenly find himself in the pantry when I was assigned to inventory because he suddenly needed cleaning supplies for his bathroom? Or he'd suddenly be outside a room I was cleaning, hovering over my cleaning cart because he needed a broom for his office.

Matthew was a smart, sought-after businessman, but he didn't hide his feelings well. I was just praying that the other staff wouldn't notice that he and I had gotten close over the last few months.

My second month's salary had come so I was able to pay my bills and finally had my finances in order. I opened a new bank account and had coconut water—finally—on hand in my fridge. I was able to get Starbucks, too, but not as frequently as before. But twice a month was better than nothing. Tyler, my friend from work, had also shown me the beauty of thrift shopping. It was basically like buying vintage items.

Overall, I was learning to save my money and was only spending it on the things I needed, while saving some for the future. It was amazing how much I had learned over the past couple of months. I was proud of myself, and it took everything in me not to call Daddy up and tell him I was doing just fine on my own.

This morning, though, proved to me that life wasn't easy, especially with the goddamned traffic. I still hadn't completely gotten the hang of commuting. Sure, I knew how to slither my way on the bus with a bunch of

people, and how to bat my eyelashes so the man next to me would give me his seat, but sometimes it was just relentlessly hard to get to work.

So I came to work twenty minutes late one morning with no breakfast or caffeine in my system. But that was the last thing on my mind as I ran towards the closing elevator. My shoes might have been clattering too loud because the person inside the elevator stopped the door before it could close completely.

“Reagan.” My name rang inside the small space. And when I looked up to the owner of the voice, I whistled, spotting Matthew inside the elevator. He was holding his phone in one hand and a cup of Starbucks in the other.

“Matthew,” I laughed nervously, hoping that he would take it easy on me. Instead, he eyed me up and down. I had on green shorts and a white button-down shirt, and a touch of dewiness stuck my hair to the side of my face.

He glanced at his watch as I stepped inside the elevator, waiting for the doors to close before pressing the button for the ninth floor.

“You’re late,” he pointed out to me. “Twenty minutes.”

“Speak for yourself,” I countered, shifting on my feet. I should have just taken the punch and accepted that I was at fault here. But where would be the fun in that?

“Two months ago, we were in the same spot and since then I told you not to be tardy.”

“Matthew,” I started. “You’re late too. And you’re the boss.”

To my surprise, Matthew chuckled. “Here,” he said handing me the cup of iced coffee that I had tried not to look at when I entered. It was a tempting thing and my stomach complained at the sight of it. “I got this for you on the way.”

“How’d you know I’d be here anyway?” I asked because it was difficult for

me to understand why he suddenly had coffee for me on a random Monday morning. I knew he knew about my rotation but it couldn't be a coincidence that he knew I was going to be in the elevator at this hour.

“You're always late on Monday, Reagan.”

“I am?”

“Based on the employee time clock, yes.”

I grabbed the coffee from him without any more complaints because I simply didn't have the heart to decline it. The thoughtful gesture moved me, so I murmured my thanks to him.

It was the same coffee he got the last time. It was a little too sweet for me, but beggars couldn't be choosers and I was raised to be grateful. Besides, the drink was growing on me.

“Does Susana tell you these things? My schedule and my rotations?”

“She doesn't need to tell me anything. Every movement, every bill, and everything about this hotel is in records that I can look up.”

“So you know how often I'm late?”

He nodded. “Mondays. More or less twenty minutes. But I'll let this one slide. Mondays are the most hectic time of the week. And in your area, I could only imagine the traffic there.”

“I appreciate it.”

“But try harder next time. It's not fair for the rest of the employees. There's no salary deduction for the employees when they sign in late and in exchange, everybody comes on time. If I turn a blind eye on you, the others will ask questions.”

“And we wouldn't want that.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, I'll do better next time.”

“Thank you,” he smirked. That weird feeling in my gut appeared again but I ignored it, thankful for the cold caffeine that would probably fuel me until lunch. And I didn’t know if it was just me but the elevator ride up was taking forever.

“So, what else have you been checking up on me about?” I asked, trying to make small talk. Then I heard Matthew’s phone vibrate in his blazer pocket. He pulled it out and declined the call before he could read who was calling him.

“You can get that, you know.”

“I know. I just didn’t want to.” Matthew turned to look at me, and my heart skipped a beat. And my cheeks burned. As our eyes met, his gaze locked onto mine with a magnetic intensity. It was as if the bustling world around us had faded into a distant murmur, leaving both of us suspended in time. “I have access to camera records and employee schedules, and I have access to guest records, too.”

“Huh?”

“You asked me what else I check up on?”

“Right.”

“And you know what I’ve learned?”

“What?”

“There are no cameras in this elevator.”

I was never the girl who dared to do it in a place so public like the elevator. But something about Matthew made me feel like I could conquer the world. At least if we did get caught, I wasn’t going to be the only one in deep water.

In one sudden move, Matthew grabbed my waist and turned me to face him. The ice in the venti cup rattled at the movement. Even I was caught off guard by his movement.

“Watch the coffee, sir,” I mewled as he brought his nose to mine and I smelled the mint on his breath. God, I wished my breath didn’t smell like coffee!

“What if someone catches us?” But Matthew wasn’t paying attention. He took a deep breath and pushed his pelvis against mine, nuzzling his lips against my neck. And the feeling of his lips against my skin sent a shiver down my spine.

I craned my neck to give him better access and I felt his hands snaking up my thigh, caressing the bare skin there. Nothing would make my morning better than this. Coffee and Matthew. God, I loved Mondays.

He brought his lips to mine and moaned my name against them. “You look mighty beautiful today, Ms. St. James.”

“Just today?”

“Every day, Jellybean. Just a tad extra today.”

His hands roamed around every inch of my skin—my ass, my tits over my shirt. And the fact that anybody could walk in on us at any time only made it better.

It brought me back to my teenage years when I had my first boyfriend. We’d sneak out every chance we got just to make out. That was what this felt like with Matthew. The energy was youthful and exhilarating. Almost addicting.

There was nothing tender about this kiss, only lust and heat. He cradled my neck, his thumb brushing away a stray strand of hair, and my eyes fluttered closed, surrendering to the electricity coursing over our bodies.

The world outside the elevator ceased to exist as we lost ourselves in each other. I opened my eyes to glance at the floor indicator and discovered that



we were only on the fifth floor, gliding toward the sixth. And I let out another moan against his delicious lips, and our tongues tangled together.

The jolt came out of nowhere as the elevator came to a halt. And I yelped as the force of it stopping between the seventh and eighth floor made us both jump. Matthew steadied me with his hands.

“What the fu—” Matthew didn’t get to finish his words because the lights went out, replaced by the very dim emergency light.

Immediately, my heart sunk to my stomach as panic laced my entire body which was now unable to move. I was immobile as a chill went up my spine. My heart pounded against my chest and my ears as my palms started to go clammy, and cold sweat wrapped me like saran wrap.

Raw fear consumed me and Matthew’s voice was nothing but mumbled sounds as my heightened emotional state interfered with my ability to process and understand his words. My ears rang, and my chest tightened, making it difficult for me to breathe.

Memory and reality mixed as my knees buckled and eventually gave out.

“Fuck!” I could hear Matthew yell, my vision doubling as he guided me to sit on the elevator floor.

The dim lights cast eerie shadows on the confined space, and the once-familiar walls of the elevator seemed to close in on me. With each passing second, the room felt like it was getting smaller and smaller, suffocating me with its oppressive presence.

I tried to take a deep breath to steady myself, but the darkness around me seemed to have a life of its own. It was as if the shadows were creeping in from all sides, threatening to engulf me as my chest tightened. The claustrophobia intensified its grip on me, making me feel like the very air was becoming heavy and unbearable.

I felt numb and broken, my mind betraying me with images of my past. I trembled and tears and sweat soaked my face.

“Please, no,” I begged with a sob. Because now, we weren’t in the elevator, and Matthew wasn’t in front of me anymore.

Instead, it was my father. And he was very, *very* drunk and angry, thrashing all of Mommy’s china on the floor.

And I wasn’t in the elevator.

I was back in California, and I was the scared little girl hidden under the kitchen cabinet in fear that he would find me, yell at me, and curse at me because I looked just like my mother.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Matthew

I wanted to break the elevator doors open when I heard Reagan's pleading voice. But it was pointless because the arrow that was pointing at the floor numbers told me we were somewhere between the seventh and eighth floors.

Her breathing hitched immediately when the car rattled and the lights went out, and I could tell that she was panicking. Her eyes were out of focus, her stare blank and her chest rising rapidly.

"Reagan, are you okay?" I asked when I saw her lips going pale under the dim light. Fuck! I knew I should have prioritized that battery backup and that emergency intercom. But the budget didn't have room for elevator upgrades this year and the board had decided to postpone the elevator maintenance until next year. Guess we were now making changes to that choice.

The backup generator usually worked immediately so I didn't know why the power wasn't back yet. I wanted to call Clair and see what was happening but my mind was elsewhere.

The panicking blonde beside me had my attention and right now, and instinct told me that I needed to prioritize her safety. Was she afraid of the dark? Was she having a panic attack? I couldn't help the surge of frustration that coursed through me.

"Reagan," I called again. But she wasn't responding, it was like she wasn't hearing me at all. Her lips were shaking, and it didn't take long before her knees started to buckle.

So I held her as she slowly sunk onto the floor, panting, as if there was no more air left here. I grabbed the coffee cup from her hand and put it to the side before it could spill on her shirt.

I tried to call her name again, to no avail. I held her cheeks as panic washed over me when I saw that her eyes were blank and empty. Then a sob escaped her, followed by her distressed voice.

"Please, no," she begged. And for a moment, I thought that she was talking to me. That she no longer wanted my touch. But then her next words crushed me. "Daddy, stop."

The world shattered in front of me as Reagan, the woman I had always seen as strong and outgoing, was broken in front of me, trembling and weeping. And her father was the culprit.

"C'mon, darling," I murmured under my breath as I grabbed her chilly hand and brought it to my lips. "Your father's not here. It's me."

Her breathing was still labored, and a soft wheeze followed every time she inhaled, and it worried me that she might pass out.

What the fuck was happening with that generator?

When her sobs grew loud and thick, I turned on the flashlight from my phone, hoping that it would help her make sense of her surroundings.

The sting of the bright light grabbed her attention, her doe eyes focusing on

me, recognizing me.

“Matthew?” she mewled, more tears rolling down her cheeks. She closed her eyes in relief as she buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking in even more frustration.

“Hey, hey, hey,” I crooned, grabbing her shoulder to assure her that she was safe with me. “You’re okay. Your father’s not here. And even if he was, I wouldn’t let him hurt you.”

She looked up at me, her nose and cheeks pink from the crying. I had seen her cry before. In anger and frustration. But I had never seen her weep in such distress.

Something in me wanted to protect her, to never allow anything or anyone to make her cry like that again. It almost made me want to hunt down her father.

She bit her lower lip to stop the sob that was about to come out. Then she threw her hands around me, holding on to me like she was hanging on for dear life, her hand fisting in the fabric of my blazer.

“I heard you mention your father,” I pointed out when she didn’t say anything else. I couldn’t help but snake my arms around her, my hands stroking her back, praying that it would calm her down. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She sniffled, her breathing slowly coming back to normal. Then she pulled away from me, wiping her cheeks with the sleeves of her top.

I waited for her to answer because I didn’t want to push her and make her feel uncomfortable.

Then my phone rang, the thing vibrating in my hands. I saw that it was the head of building management, perhaps finally coming to his senses to inform me what was happening.

And although I promised myself not to touch my phone when I was with Reagan, I knew that I needed to take this call. So I stood from my crouching position, and with the flashlight still on, I answered the call.

“What the fuck is happening, Bobby?” I snapped before the manager could say anything.

I checked Reagan on the floor, and she had brought her knees to her chest, her arms on top of them while her head rested on her forearms.

“There’s something wrong with the generator, sir.” Bobby had been the building manager for over a year now. And usually, he did a pretty good job at making sure everything went well. I didn’t know why this elevator issue had not been addressed.

“No shit, Bob,” I snapped. It wasn’t my habit to snap at my employees even when they were in the wrong, but I was pissed right now. So sue me. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Something with the electrical control system, sir. Tech support has arrived and they’re working on it to get it started.”

“Look, Bobby,” I said. “I have an employee here who’s having a panic attack in the elevator, and I’m supposed to assure her that this hunk of metal will start working soon, but I don’t want to lie to her. So tell me how long until they get the generator back up.”

“You’re trapped in the elevator, sir?” Bobby asked, cursing under his breath, genuinely sounding concerned for my well-being. But in reality, he knew that my dilemma was his responsibility because that backup generator was also his responsibility. And he shouldn’t have waited for a power outage to make sure that the thing was in mint condition.

“Damn right,” I hissed. “So tell me a timeframe.”

I heard him relay my questions to the technicians in the background. And

one of the latter answered with something I couldn't decipher.

"Sir."

"Well?"

"They said they could get the generator up and running in five minutes and the elevator in six."

"Good. Now let's pray that your guess is right," I said rudely. I wasn't going to fire him, and I probably owed him an apology for the way I had just talked to him, but right now, I was willing to do anything to get Reagan out of there.

I hung up the phone and walked towards where Reagan was sitting. I squatted down to sit in the empty space beside her, settling my phone between us, the flashlight casting a light on the ceiling.

I heard Reagan sniff, her head still down. When she felt my warmth beside her, she squared her shoulders and straightened her legs like mine.

Then she sighed deeply before resting her head on my shoulder, her hand crossed against her chest.

"Reagan?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you good over there?"

"Hmm."

I was taking that as a yes, so I crossed my legs on the ankle, patiently waiting for both the elevator to turn on and for Reagan to say something.

"You know you can talk to me, right?"

"I know," she whispered. "I'm scared of small spaces," she admitted in a whisper. It came as a surprise to me. Something told me that talking about her family wasn't easy for her, except when she was talking about her mother. Even when we were together, she didn't talk about Ryan or her

father. “It isn’t usually this bad but with how fast everything happened, I panicked.”

“You’re all right now,” I pointed out, resting a hand on hers before rubbing her skin with a thumb. “Do you need to see a doctor after we’re out of here?” I didn’t know if she was seeing a therapist back in California, but I knew that with her financial issues, she wasn’t seeing one here. But I was happy to provide her with anything she needed. She just has to say the word.

“No,” she said. “I’m fine.”

A thick, deafening silence followed, forcing me to ask her more questions.

“Can I ask why you’re afraid?” I asked, not just to distract her from her panic but because I was genuinely intrigued and wanted to understand her. Her vulnerability made her more real to me, and the connection between us deeper. I knew this wasn’t going to end well for me. I was in too deep now.

“When Mommy died,” she started, her voice thick and shaking. “Daddy wasn’t the same man. He was drunk every night he came home. He couldn’t accept the fact that his wife was gone forever. He was an angry drunk, Matthew.”

My chest ached for Reagan as I watched her take a deep, shaky breath. She fidgeted her fingers as she pursed her lips together, gathering the courage to carry on. I took her hand and wrapped it with mine, my thumb stroking the back of her palm.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head. “Not physically, anyway. A month after Mommy’s death, I was in the kitchen studying when he arrived and I knew that he was too drunk to remember what he said to me.”

“What did he say?”

“That he hated looking at me. That I reminded him too much of her. That



thing would have been better if I was the one who died, not her.”

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath, but in my head, I was cursing Ricardo St. James. And what was worst was that he didn’t remember this shit, and Reagan had carried it with her for most of her life.

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Jesus. I’m sorry, Reagan.” I dragged my hand across my face in exasperation as if attempting to physically scrub away the frustration that had etched into my skin.

“All these years, I thought he was right. Because she was picking me up from a school dance in the middle of the night. Daddy said I couldn’t go because he was going to a business gala that night and he wouldn’t be able to pick me up. So Mommy offered to do it. And I waited for her in the parking lot hours after the dance. She didn’t come.”

“Reagan—”

“Then Daddy came for me, picked me up from school, and brought me to the hospital to see her body. I couldn’t even recognize her, Matthew. She looked like she was beaten into a pulp. The doctors said the other driver who crashed into her was drunk and that he was dead as well.”

“You know it wasn’t your fault.”

It really wasn’t. Ricardo St. James was an asshole to say that to his daughter. And he shouldn’t have prioritized a stupid event over family. How hard could picking up his daughter have been?

“I know that now. But I hid from him every night after that. I didn’t want him to say more things about me and Mommy. I hid wherever I could. And one time I was getting water from the fridge when he arrived so I hid under

the kitchen sink. Then he started trashing everything he could lay his hands on—plates, glasses, all of Mommy’s Versace mugs.”

I wanted to shut Reagan up, pull her into an embrace, and take all her trauma away. But that wasn’t how things worked so I sat there in silence and in pain as I listened to her pour everything out.

“I hid there until I fell asleep. But I heard everything, saw everything in that little crack of space between the doors. I woke up to one of the maids pulling me from under the cabinet and bringing me to my bedroom.”

“Is that why you—”

A nod. “For a second there, I was under the kitchen sink again, and I was listening to him break everything. I went to see a therapist when I was eighteen, and she said that the claustrophobia wasn’t serious, but it could be triggered from time to time.”

She cleared her throat as she rested her other hand on top of our intertwined clasp. And I listened to her now steady breaths before I said anything else. I didn’t really know what to say. But the silence was so heavy. And it continued for another second, during which I had to acknowledge the soft tug in my chest.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said again. “Your father is a jackass for saying that. He should’ve been there for you instead of blaming you for it. And Ryan, too. Where was he when all of this was transpiring, anyway?”

Thankfully, the atmosphere had lightened up. Reagan had relaxed and we were getting cozy in our little elevator corner. But I was also getting impatient because the elevator hadn’t yet started. And there was a big meeting I was supposed to be in charge of that was going to start soon.

I was sure that Clair was flooding me with messages and calls, wondering where I was but I had promised Reagan I wouldn’t look at my phone when

she was talking to me.

“He was with you,” Reagan chirped beside me. “He was what? Thirty, thirty-one? Your business was booming at that time. He went home a week after later.”

“Ryan was free to leave whenever he wanted,” I pointed out. “I wasn’t tying him down or anything. He was a grown man and could have made his own decisions.”

Parker St. James Bourbon was skyrocketing in the market at that time. We had built that business when we were in college. But I didn’t know that Ryan’s mother had died then as well. He said he was leaving home to see his sister, and I wasn’t about to stop him. Family was family, and our business was flexible. He could still do his part as long as he had internet access.

“Are you close with him?”

“I was. He was way older than me and he always protected me when we were younger. He didn’t like it when I met his friends because I was just a kid. He spoiled me when our parents were too busy. Then he went to college and I barely saw him, but he called when he could.”

“What happened after the news broke?” Ah, yes. The news about him stealing from our business. He should be thankful that I didn’t publicize the news about him and Paige.

“I haven’t seen him since. He barely texted me. The last I heard he was vacationing in Bali. I don’t even know if he knows I left home.”

“Why don’t you call him?”

“I tried. Countless times. But he doesn’t pick up. I don’t even know what he plans on doing now that he’s out...” Now that he was out of jail, she meant.

“I’m not going to apologize for what happened, Reagan,” I said. “Our business was flourishing. We had big plans for it. Then he had the nerve to

steal from it. It was his fault that we went bankrupt.”

“I’m not asking you to apologize for him, Matthew,” she snapped. “He’s responsible for what he did. I just wished that he’d tell me how he is.”

I didn’t care. I *shouldn’t* care. Anything related to Ryan was not my concern. He could be dying in Bali and I still wouldn’t give a shit about him.

It was like someone had thrown a bucket of ice-cold water at me as the realization hit me. I could not allow my growing feelings for Reagan to win. Because that would mean I needed to care about Ryan again. Because the fall of Ryan St. James was a part of the the life and history of his sister too.

“My relationship with Ryan—”

She didn’t get to finish because the elevator jolted back to life, and her head snapped in attention at the sudden movement. Then the lights started to flicker on, and the familiar hum of the elevator’s motor filled the air.

Reagan pushed herself to stand without my help. Was she pissed because of what I had said?

She ironed her top with her hands and straightened her spine, clearing her throat as if to muster up the strength to once again fake a smile for the world.

I got to my feet, grabbing my phone to turn off the flashlight. Sure enough, there were several missed calls from Clair, and a bunch of messages asking me where I was and why the generator wasn’t working. I ignored them and grabbed the now watered-down coffee.

I handed it to her and pressed the stop button on the elevator panel. The sudden halt made Reagan stumble a bit, but she was able to catch herself.

I sized her up, wanting to meet her eyes. She looked up at me, and I was unable to read the expression written there.

“Are you okay and ready to go?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said and rolled her eyes, her arm reaching for the button

behind me. Then the elevator hummed again, signaling that we were nearing the ninth floor.

There was a ping and the elevator doors opened. Reagan walked out first, grace and poise radiating from her entire being as if she hadn't had a panic attack a moment ago. Then she walked straight to the meeting without acknowledging me.

*Great job, Matthew, I thought to myself. You really have a way of pissing off anyone with the last name St. James'.*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# Reagan

I realized I was pissed at Matthew as I listened to Clair talk about the Global Business Gala.

It was supposed to be the event of the year in the business world. Every big tycoon of national and international fame was invited. So were the press and other celebrities.

I didn't dare look Matthew in the eye as he stood in the front with the Chief of HR because something in me said that he was already staring a hole into my head. I knew I'd fold if I looked at him.

We were okay in the elevator despite my episode. I was thankful for that, at least.

But then he said something about Ryan and it rubbed me the wrong way. I didn't like the way he talked about him. It pissed me off. He was still my brother, after all.

Something in the back of my mind blamed Matthew for the fallout I had had with my brother.

If only Matthew hadn't gone public with the entire thing, then we wouldn't have been in this excruciating situation. Our family business wouldn't have been jeopardized, and then maybe Daddy wouldn't have pressured me to take over. Maybe that was why I was pissed.

Matthew didn't consider anyone else when he made that decision. Humiliating Ryan meant humiliating me and my family. And the issue had caused a massive strain on my family. It wouldn't hurt if Matthew felt at least a little bit guilty about it, but he seemed proud that he had held my brother up for public shaming.

But then again, embezzlement was a big deal. I mean, it was a felony and it had caused their business to crumple to ruins, after all.

My anger at my boss was short-lived because he found me after the meeting, cornered me by the entrance, and said with authority to meet him in his office. And he strode away before I could say anything. I wasn't angry anymore. Now I was just confused.

So here I was, standing outside of his office door at eight p.m. I had allowed myself to play the grand piano for an hour. It was my way of revolting—of keeping him waiting. And, of course, I needed some of the managers and the staff to leave first before I met with him.

I debated whether or not to quit my job.

“You don't owe him anything,” I whispered to myself as I paced outside his door. “If you leave he's not going to do anything about it. You can absolutely —”

“I can hear you pacing out there, Reagan!” His voice was muffled and distant on the other side of the door. And I knew that there was no point in leaving or quitting now. The earlier that I talked to him, the earlier we could finish this argument.

Nervous, I twisted the knob and pushed his door open after I double-checked the hallway. Prying eyes would question why I spent so much time in my boss' office. And the last thing I needed was word getting out that we were doing something out of the ordinary in here. Even if we literally were.

"What do you want?" I asked with a deep sigh when I was standing in front of his desk. I wasn't in my uniform anymore and was back in the same clothes I had worn this morning.

"Is that the way to talk to your boss?" Matthew challenged. Perhaps he could sense the tension brewing in me because there was no amusement in his tone and his eyes. Great. At least he was taking me seriously. He knew I was pissed just like me.

"I'm sorry." I forced out the apology, along with a fake smile like I was his doting, obedient employee. "Are you in need of my assistance tonight, *sir*?"

He narrowed his eyes at me, then he shook his head as if to tell me that he didn't have the time to deal with this contest. Did he even know why I was pissed at him? Or was he just trying to boss me around me because he was a man and all that?

"That's better," he nodded. "You know about this gala, yes?"

"Of course," I said, pursing my lips and giving him a look saying I wasn't interested. In reality, though, I was looking forward to the event even if my name wasn't on the list to wait or usher the guests. "I was paying attention to what Clair was saying."

His eyes grew dark at my words, and he shook his head again. "The committee wanted like music. So I wanted you to play again for the gala."

"Okay," I shrugged. I would love to play, and there was no point in prolonging this.

"That's it?" he questioned. "That's all you have to say?"



“Do you want me to say no?”

“No.”

“Do you expect me to jump in joy? Did you want a hug? A kiss? A referral fee?” Matthew didn’t need a referral fee. The man was loaded. But I was furious at his arrogance and wanted to make him aware of it. And from the looks of it, it was working because he looked taken aback right now.

“You’ll be playing with a violinist. So you wouldn’t be the star of the show.” Like I gave a shit. As long as I was playing, I was fine.

“Fine by me.” He clicked his tongue, disappointed that his plan to piss me off even further didn’t work. I could see the screws in his mind turning as he brewed a plan to get under my skin.

“Have you eaten dinner?”

“I have,” I answered. “Alejandra was kind enough to whip something up for me.”

“Good, then I take it you’re ready to go home?”

“I am, actually. I would be home by now if it weren’t for this. You know you could have just texted me, right?”

“Now where would the fun be in that?”

Right because sometimes, Matthew’s version of fun was tormenting me.

“Does that mean I can go?”

“We can,” he nodded, glancing at his watch. He shut his laptop and grabbed his coat that was hanging behind his chair. I frowned at him before he grabbed his phone and car keys on the table.

“I can get home just fine,” I pointed out. “No need to be all chivalrous.”

“Who said anything about chivalry, darling?”

I opened my mouth to protest but shut it because I guess he wasn’t offering to drive me home. Instead, I forced a smile at him and nodded, not saying

anything else.

The elevator ride was quiet. But the tension that was dancing in the air was restless and almost aching. I didn't know if it was tension because I was mad at him, or if it was lust. At this point, I didn't know how I was going to differentiate them.

I side-eyed Matthew to see that he was on his phone again, tapping on the screen as his keys jingled, the keyring looped around his index finger.

I let out a sigh in frustration, shaking my head as I mustered up the strength not to say what was on my mind because right now, this was a competition about who was going to break first. And I was sure as fuck that it wasn't going to be me.

The elevator pinged when we reached the ground floor, and it was my cue to leave as soon as the doors opened.

“See you around, asshole,” I whispered to him before I stepped out, not giving him the chance to say anything to retort.

As I walked away and heard the elevator ping, my mind came up with a theory. If Matthew was indeed pushing my buttons, then I was going to push back.

So I tested my hypothesis as I sat on the lobby couch and waited.

About ten minutes later, my phone pinged and my smile almost reached my ears.

Matthew: *Where are you?*

I ignored him.

Matthew: *Reagan?*

Then my phone started to vibrate with an incoming call from Matthew. I ignored the first two calls and answered him on the third.

“Hello, Matthew,” my voice sang out. I was grinning like the fucking devil

because I was right. Matthew had planned to drive me home and he was just trying to see how far I'd go before I'd ask him for a ride—jokes on him.

“Where the fuck are you?” he snapped. Anger laced his voice.

“What do you mean?”

“I'm in front of the bus stop and you're not here.”

“Maybe I'm already on the bus?”

“You're not. Because the next bus doesn't arrive in the next twelve minutes. So where are you?”

“What's it to you?”

“What do you mean ‘what's it to me’?” I could hear that he was mad, but I was determined to push him even further.

“I'm on my way home, Matthew.”

“I swear to God, Reagan.”

“What, Matthew?” I challenged.

“I'm not going to repeat myself. Where. Are. You?”

I remained quiet.

“Reagan.”

“I'm in the lobby waiting for you, jackass.”

He hung up without saying anything and for a split second there, I was nervous at how he was going to react.

My heart was pounding as the elderly bellman called my name in the lobby three minutes later. When I got out of the building, Matthew's Tesla waited for me. The concierge opened the door for me. I just prayed he wouldn't talk about seeing an employee getting a ride home from the boss.

When I got in the car, Matthew was pissed. *Really* pissed this time. He wasn't just playing along with my game. He waited for me to get settled in the seat before stepping on the gas.

“What happened to your ‘no chivalry’ BS?”

“I just didn’t want you to get killed in the middle of the night trying to get home,” he answered sternly. “Given that I was the last person you were seen with, I didn’t want to be on the news when you went missing.”

*He knew.* He knew I was pissed about the way he talked to Ryan, and he was doing it again.

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The car ride to my apartment was quiet and the tension was palpable. I was sure that somewhere in there, lust danced with anger.

When the car halted in front of my place, I was ready to leave. I didn’t say anything to Matthew as I unbuckled my seatbelt and got out of the car, slamming the door behind me.

And the idiot drove off before I could enter my building. I flipped him the bird with a scoff.

“Screw you, Matthew,” I murmured under my breath as I shook my head and went upstairs.

God, that man was infuriating. It was different when Matthew was mad at me, it was another when I was mad at him.

Fury crawled over my skin when I unlocked my door, my thoughts racing at the frustration of Matthew getting the last word. I never lost in a fight like this, and I always got my way—always threw the last punch.

Matthew? He was something else.

I was murmuring to myself about the vile things I wanted to do to him when the knock came. I threw my bag on the couch and marched towards the door, already deciding that I was going to snap at the intruder on the other end. They had chosen the wrong time to bother me.

But when I opened the door, big, calloused hands grabbed my cheeks and pulled my face into his. Matthew's lips crashed into mine as he pushed us deeper into my living room, kicking my door shut behind him.

Feral—the kiss was feral, passionate. It was like I was on fire. Our bodies were pressed against each other, our tongues touching as we inhaled heavily. As we struggled to undress each other, I could taste our breath and feel the thud of our overlapping heartbeats.

“Two strikes today, Reagan,” Matthew said in between kisses. “You called me an asshole and a jackass. Don't think that I'm going to let it slide.”

I pulled away from him, pulling my shorts and underwear down before removing my top in under a second. I threw my shoes to join our clothes scattered on the floor.

I didn't realize how much I needed him until I tasted him and felt him against my body.

He hurriedly removed his clothes, too. And in a quick minute, he was stark naked before me, his cock erect.

“Shut up,” I murmured under my breath before I jumped onto him, my arms wrapped around his neck as he grabbed my ass, catching me. My legs snaked around his waist and I could feel his hard dick beneath me.

And I devoured this man like I was going to die if I didn't. His tongue danced around mine, our moans filling the room as he started walking in the direction of my room, carrying me in his strong arms.

The next thing I knew, he was tossing me on my soft mattress. My hair flew all over the place as he towered over me before sinking to his knees. He spread my legs and we watched each other as he put his tongue to my pussy.

A single swipe of his tongue on my clit sent a cold shiver down my legs, and I attempted to close them.

“Hm-mmm,” Matthew hummed against my sensitive area as he pushed my legs wider against the bed. My chest rose, and my breath labored as sexual arousal built inside me. And he devoured me, his tongue an expert, quick and hard against my core.

I have never felt this type of lust in my life before. Raw and primal. The feel of his tongue alone almost made me want to pass out.

The first orgasm came fast and I could only thrash beneath Matthew’s mouth as it slowly crashed through me. He pinned me down with his hand as he inserted two fingers inside me with the other.

I squelched against his fingers as he curled them upward, grazing against my G-spot. It was like a release button because the wave of climax surged within me.

“I’m going to come,” I announced, whimpering with how good I was feeling with Matthew’s strong fingers inside me, curling—up and down.

“Come all over my fingers, darling,” he ordered me. And I didn’t need to be told twice. I let the release out, and my body trembled as Matthew pulled out his fingers, watching me curl into a naked ball as I turned to my side, shaking.

I whimpered as I caught my breath. But before I could gather myself, I felt Matthew’s hand on my shoulders, turning me on my back.

“We’re not done here, darling,” he growled, spreading my legs once more. With sleepy eyes, I watched him do all the work.

He bent forward to lick my lips, and I could taste my release in his mouth. Pulling me at the edge of the bed, he pushed my thighs against the mattress and he looked down at my glistening pussy.

He let go of some saliva from his mouth and I watched it fall on my clitoris. It was warm against my skin and I jolted when he pressed a thumb on my

core to spread the wetness.

“You think you can get away with anything because of that smart mouth of yours, Reagan?”

“I was just playing your game, Matthew,” I moaned.

“Then let’s see if you get away from this after I’m done with you. I doubt you will even be able to walk straight tomorrow.”

And without any warning, he thrust his cock inside me. I screamed at the sudden sensation but he buried my sounds with a deep, sloppy kiss.

He moved his hips and his hard dick slid out of me. Then he slammed it back home. I yelped but allowed him to take me however he wanted.

Forget about makeup sex. Angry sex was better. Especially with Matthew.

In and out.

In and out.

Faster. Deeper. Each thrust made me see stars, and Matthew’s grunts were music to my ear.

“Your pussy is fucking perfect, Reagan,” he grunted against my ears as his forearms rested on either side of my face.

“Matthew, please,” I whispered, my breath hitching.

I was going mad. He felt so good, and I loved the way how tight my pussy felt around his big shaft.

He pushed harder into me, the headboard slamming against the wall, and for once I was thankful that the unit beside mine was empty.

“Are you going to come again for me, darling?”

“Yes. Oh, my God. Yes,”

“That’s right. Beg for it. Tell me what you want.”

But I couldn’t. For the love of God, I couldn’t say it. Because this was a power play. If I said those words, it meant that he had won. And I wasn’t

going to allow that.

So I kept my mouth shut, and moaned with pleasure, trying to get ahold of the orgasm that was building in the pit of my stomach.

“Beg, Reagan.” Matthew kept moving. Faster and faster. Beads of sweat dropped onto my body as he thrust some more.

“No,” I hissed as I moved my hips to his rhythm. And I watched him slowly come undone. He was going to climax eventually. I just needed to hold on a bit longer.

“Fucking—”

“Your dick is good, baby. Like it was made for me. Deeper,” I commanded.

“I said beg.”

“I said no.”

He was so close. I was so close. We were going to be the death of each other.

Matthew let out a scream, his dick pulsing inside me as my walls contracted around him. I bounced and I moaned as my hands grabbed the sheets from under me.

“Come, Reagan!” he instructed and I did. I came, and I came, and I came as he continued to fuck me relentlessly as the raw, primal orgasm washed through us.

He buried his head against my shoulders, our breathing haggard, our bodies sticking to each other.

My eyes were growing heavy by the time Matthew calmed down. His dick was still inside me when he pressed a soft kiss on my shoulder, then my lips.

“I won,” I whispered in the air, my body going limp. I only heard him growl before he pulled out of me. He didn’t say a word as he positioned me properly on the bed, my head hitting my soft pillow.



He left to get his pants from the living room and when he returned, I mustered enough courage to say my piece.

“I’m mad at you, Matthew,” I mewled under my breath as I pulled the covers over my shoulders.

“Why is that, Jellybean?” Matthew asked when he sat beside me on the bed, tucking a loose hair behind my ear.

“Because of the way you talked about my brother,” I admitted and I saw him nod, telling me that my reaction was valid. “I know you hate him.”

He let out a cold laugh and nodded. “I hate Ryan St. James with everything I have.”

“Why?”

“Because he stole from me and ruined my business.”

“And now you have the best luxury hotel in the world. And he has nothing. I call that a win,” I pointed out. “But it’s more than that, isn’t it?”

Matthew was quiet for a second, and something about our conversation hurt. Maybe it was because of how quietly we were talking. I wanted us to be yelling at one another instead.

“He slept with my girlfriend while I was away.” I blinked at his words, and I forced myself to sit up from the bed. I brought the covers to my chest as I rested against the headboard.

I was going to beat my brother when I saw him.

“He said he used the money he stole from me to take her to Brazil. I was in Europe at that time for work. He was supposed to go with me but he said he couldn’t because you needed him back home.”

“I didn’t.”

“I know.”

I didn’t know what to say. All I could think about was the fact that he had

omitted this part of the truth from the public. And suddenly I felt guilty for my thoughts earlier. About him not letting publicize things without realizing that he had already kept part of the story quiet.

“Stop trying to mend things with me and your brother, Reagan. It’ll only happen once I have my revenge.”

“Am I it?” I asked, finally letting out the question that had been bugging my mind for weeks.

“What?”

“Your revenge?” I clarified. “Are you sleeping with me because of that? To get even? To hurt me so you could hurt him?”

His truth didn’t come as a surprise. I just wished it didn’t hurt so much. “That was the plan.” He might as well have punched me in the stomach with his words.

“And if I told you that whatever this thing between us is more than just physical for me?”

There it was. The real reason why I was pissed off this morning. Because I was afraid that he wouldn’t allow himself to look at me the way I was starting to look at him because of my brother.

“Then maybe we need to stop.”

“Why? You can’t live your life hating him forever, Matthew.”

“That’s exactly why we need to end this if you’re starting to want more from me. Because I will hate him for the rest of my life. Even if that means I have to hate you, too.”

“That’s not fair,” I pointed out, as tears stung my eyes. “You can’t punish me for something my brother did.”

“It’s simple collateral I’m willing to live with.”

Translation: You didn't matter enough.

I shook my head at him in disbelief, as heavy tears rolled down my cheeks.  
“Fuck you, Matthew.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Matthew

A week before the gala, the hotel was hectic. It wasn't the same as our last-minute golden anniversary party before. This one didn't make anyone panic like last time. Instead, everybody in the hotel, waitstaff or otherwise, was feeling a surge of something close to wedding-day jitters.

Posters of the Global Business Gala were posted in the lobby, emphasizing that Parker Villas was hosting it this year. And now that our marketing department had posted said poster on the internet as well. It was what everyone was talking about in the business sector.

I, for one, couldn't get my head around the idea that after only two years, my hotel had been chosen to host the world's biggest business gala. But I couldn't find it in me to be as ecstatic as I probably should have been because, for seven days, my mind had been revolving around Reagan.

It had been a week since our confrontation at her apartment. Seven fucking days since I told her that we should end our relationship because she admitted that her feelings were starting to get involved. And I didn't need that. Not when she was the sister of the man I hated most in this world.

Reagan had taken my words personally and I didn't blame her because I knew it had hurt her. I mean, I fucking admitted that I meant it to hurt her at first. I didn't know how to tell her that since I had started sleeping with her, it had never crossed my mind to intentionally hurt her to get even with Ryan. It might have been part of the plan at the beginning, yes. But I didn't have the heart to go through with it now.

But it was better, I guessed, that we stayed away from each other so we could contemplate what was really happening. Perhaps after this gala, we could sort things out.

I was signing a few documents when a single knock came from the other side of the door before it opened. Clair wore a green cowl-neck blouse and white trousers, her red hair loose behind her as she paraded into my office.

She carried a white folder with her and she handed it to me before she took the seat on one of the chairs in front of my desk.

"What's this?" I asked.

"The performance appraisal summaries you wanted," she said, producing her new vape of the month before she inhaled the thing and blew out smoke tricks from her mouth.

"It's a month overdue," I retorted.

"Yeah. You should read the one I wrote about Reagan."

Even the sound of her name made me internally flinch. Was it possible to feel this way over something so stupid? Jesus. Perhaps it was because this past week had been the longest I'd ever gone without having to have sex with anyone. I couldn't find someone to scratch the itch. All my body and my mind were looking for was the blonde employee who was on floor sixteen at the moment, cleaning rooms.

Clair raised an eyebrow before giving me a knowing look. I forgot that my

friend could read me like an open book. It was both a blessing and a curse to have been friends with her for so long.

“Are you okay?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at me.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I pretended to read her report about the new employees, and true enough, I saw that Reagan’s was almost a page long.

“I don’t know, you seem a little...off.”

I scoffed at her choice of words and shook my head. “It might be because of this business gala we’re hosting. I mean, didn’t you feel it when you entered the lobby this morning? The place is buzzing.”

“Is it because of her?” she asked, ignoring my sentiment about the gala.

“Who?”

“Reagan St. James,” she clarified.

“Why would Reagan St. James bother me?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Maybe because I’ve seen her countless times entering your office after her shift. Or that you’ve been lingering outside the banquet hall a little too long when she’s playing the piano. She’s good, by the way. You have a nice ear for that sort of thing.”

“Reagan St. James would be the last person I’d allow to disrupt me.”

“Really?” Clair narrowed her eyes at me, challenging me. I had forgotten she had known me since we were teenagers.

“Really.”

“So you picking her up last week was nothing?”

“How did you—”

“The bellman is my friend, too, Matthew. And he talks. Only a fool wouldn’t know the type of Tesla you drive. It’s not difficult to put two and two together.”

Sometimes, I wondered why Clair Sullivan didn’t go into law with her

evidence-gathering and interrogation talents. I saw that there was no point in lying to her, not when I was practically digging my own grave.

She beamed when I sighed in defeat.

“We were sleeping together.”

“Ha!” she yelled as she pointed a finger at me, hiding her vape in her pocket, happy that she had gotten that out of me.

“‘Were’ as in past tense.”

“Was it serious?”

“You think I’d be in a serious relationship with Ryan St. James’ sister, Sullivan?”

“Well, no,” she said.

“Exactly. I ended things with her. It wasn’t the best idea.”

“You didn’t think of that *before* you slept with her the first time?” she joked, but she didn’t judge. I was lucky to have a female friend like her who I could talk to. And Clair was proud of her bluntness, even though sometimes it could sting. “So why are you sulking when you’re the one who ended things with her?”

“I’m not sulking.”

“You are. Like a fucking child.” She was silent for a while as the cogs of her brain started working, her thoughts racing to a conclusion. “You like her, don’t you, Matthew?” the smirk on her face was devil-like and it caused me to frown at her. She was such a gossip.

“I can’t,” I sighed, leaning back against my chair before tossing my pen on my desk in aggravation.

“That’s not a no.”

“It’s not,” I admitted. And even my own words surprised the living shit out of me. Maybe that was why I was feeling so upset lately. I was mourning

what happened between me and Reagan.

I found myself telling Clair everything from how we started sleeping together until the things that unfolded last week. And she listened to me without critique—with zero intention to judge me.

“Why can’t you like her?”

“Because of her brother.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Hey, it’s valid.”

“I can’t believe I’m defending our most disruptive employee, but Reagan is her own person. She’s not like her brother. And you can’t punish her or yourself because of Ryan. You’re doing well in your life, Matthew. You have this big-ass hotel. You’ve put him in jail, for crying out loud.”

“It’s more than that, Clair.”

“Is it because of Paige? The girl you wanted to marry?” I regretted telling her about everything in my life now. “Tell me to my face that if she didn’t cheat on you, you’d be happily married by now.”

Her words struck deep. Would I have been happily married to Paige? We had a lot in common. She was beautiful and smart. She was everything that I was except that she was a woman. Sure, she had her bad moments. She would’ve helped me with my businesses, though, and maybe—just maybe, she would’ve been the mother of my children.

But as I pondered on Paige and all the what-ifs, Reagan’s face appeared in my head. And it hit me like a wrecking ball that Paige wasn’t Reagan. Reagan and I had nothing in common, but the latter challenged me to no end. She was innocent and yet so conniving. She was determined to step away from the things she was used to know because she wouldn’t let anyone tie her down to something she didn’t want.



And she was the most insufferable and infuriating woman I know. And I hated each day that passed that she wasn't bothering me, pushing me—defying me.

I shook my head slowly. No, the gesture implied. I wouldn't be happily married to Paige, regardless. Because she was not Reagan. Clair gave me a soft nod, telling me she understood.

“What if she's like her brother?”

“She's here, is she not? It meant she left the comfort of her home because she didn't want any part of her family drama. She's not going to cheat or lie to you. Don't let your hatred get in the way of your second chance in life, Matthew.”

Clair was a fucking prophet. She knew the right words to say, and when to make her dramatic exit. Because after she said those words, she stood from the chair and walked out of my office with a smirk on her face.

I pondered her words. She was right. I was conflicted about how I was going to approach Reagan. Confrontation wasn't my strong suit. But I decided that I'd talk to her *after* the gala was over. It was ample time for me to gather my thoughts and my emotions.

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It was barely afternoon when I got a report that Reagan had ended her streak of playing nice with people at work.

Clair: *Your little girlfriend just got in a fight with a fellow employee. At least we know that you're not the only one who's pissed at this entire ordeal.*

I rolled my eyes at the text and instructed her to send Reagan to my office.

My feelings for her weren't going to stop me from calling her out. They didn't give her freedom to cause chaos if she was having a shitty day today.

So I waited for her to come into my office as I contemplated things. I decided that today I was going to be firm with her. That my feelings would be put to the side and I wasn't about to coddle her. We could properly talk after we had cleared our schedules and minds.

She stormed into my office without knocking, her eyes glinting with rage as she tried and failed to iron her blue uniform smooth with her hands. An entire fantasy in my head developed just seeing her in it. But I shook the thoughts away because right now, I was her boss. And I was putting her in place.

"You know you should stop summoning me into your office like I'm some kind of peasant," she snapped. God, I missed her voice. Hearing it made my senses tingle.

"You'd rather I correct you in front of everybody? You said yourself you didn't want that."

All she could do was roll her eyes in frustration because she knew I was right. There was nothing joyous about her, nothing that showed a chance of her mood improving. She was furious through and through.

"I'd rather you talk to all the people concerned and not just me." And I was going to. I just didn't want her to know that.

"Tell me what happened so I can weigh who's in the wrong."

"She called me the boss' pet," she complained and I assumed that the 'she' Reagan was referring to was the other employee.

"Are you a child?"

"What?" she yelled, her mouth gaping in shock at my response.

"Do you have no control over your emotions, Reagan? Why do you have to retaliate every time someone pushes you?"

"Because I have to take care of myself, Matthew," she said, hissing the words at me. And I realized that it was true. She had gotten physical every

time her family was brought up or someone indicated she couldn't take care of herself. Because she didn't like people talking shit about her or her family.

“What else did she say?”

“That I'm still here in your hotel despite everything because of who my father is. And that you're only allowing me to perform in front of the guests because I am the daughter of a renowned businessman.” I wanted to tell her that her father wasn't as big a deal as he was in the past. But I bit my tongue instead. I didn't want Reagan to feel like everybody was going against her.

“Maybe it looks like nepotism,” I said, pondering that idea. But I knew it wasn't. Reagan wasn't given any special treatment while she was here, not because of her father, and not even because we were sleeping together. But I wanted to hear her response to my accusation.

“It's not.”

“Maybe I'm favoring you because I know your family.”

“You hate my family.”

“I don't have a beef with your father,” I pointed. “Maybe I'm favoring you because he's big in business.”

She held the tears back as she took a deep, shaky sigh. “I am my own person, Matthew. I'm not going to be defined because of who my father is and the mistake my brother made. I'm not a bad person and I've made big choices because I didn't want to be told what to do, and who to become. I'm in fucking Florida, for God's sake, because I didn't want to be like them.”

I stared at her, and there was no trace of anger there. Only pain.

I dismissed Reagan without giving her a punishment. Maybe it was because of the guilt I felt for being so angry with her. Because when I watched her leave my office, I regretted everything I had said to her.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# Reagan

**T**wo days had passed since the incident in Matthew's office and I had allowed myself to stop thinking about him. I hope that maybe if I freed my mind of him, I would realize that I was not falling for him after all and it was nothing but sex. Just like we had agreed on.

But for the two days after I started staying clear of him, of deliberately hiding in hallways, and taking the stairs, my boss turned out to be a very difficult person to forget.

It was like my body was seeking him, craving his warmth and taste. I tried my best to distract myself by cleaning the rooms, the pantry, and the closets. But I jolted every time I would hear footsteps and I knew I said I was avoiding him, but I yearned for those footsteps to be his. Each time I was proven wrong, I felt disappointed.

This proved my feelings to be true and that perhaps, despite the casual sex and Matthew's general politeness, there was such thing as soul ties. Maybe sexual intimacy could lead to real bonds that went beyond the physical and could eventually influence emotions.

I also realized that I was screwed because Matthew didn't feel the same way, and I knew I needed to do the hard thing and start moving on. Even if it was easier said than done.

But I had come to realize that the universe has a wicked sense of humor. I was usually a sucker for it, in the front rows crying in laughter. But right now, I was nowhere near smiling as I was cleaning one of the honeymoon suites on the tenth floor, fluffing the pillows when I heard the door creak open behind me.

"Hello, Jellybean," Matthew's voice sent a shiver down my back, and it jolted me up, straightening my posture as I slowly turned to face my boss.

Oh, how I had missed this man. I wanted to run and throw my arms around him. I wanted to feel his warm hands on me and his lips against mine. But I stopped myself because Matthew had made it perfectly clear that he didn't want me. That he hated him more than he could ever like me.

"What are you doing here?" I snapped, turning my back at him and returning my attention to the bed I was making. Then I heard him lock the door and a wave of panic hit me.

He must have sensed it because he said, "Relax. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Said every serial killer," I pointed out, not daring to bring my attention back to him because I heard him take a step closer to me, and I could feel his eyes lingering on my skin. "What do you want?" I asked again.

"Here," he said. When I turned, I saw he had bought me another iced coffee. I frowned, glaring at him. As tempting as that looked, my pride wasn't having it.

"You can't buy my submission with that, Matthew," I whispered. My plan was to be unbothered, to not show Matthew how much his words affected

me. But then I knew how unsettled he was going to be if he saw how evidently pissed I was. And I guess it worked.

“It’s a peace offering,” he pointed, bringing the venti-sized drink in my direction, shaking it to tempt me with the goodness of the creamy, cold caffeine. “Take it or I’ll have to throw it away.” The thought was offensive. So I took it and drank. The coldness of it hit home in my stomach.

“What are you sorry for exactly?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“For what I said to you that night.”

“Which is…”

“That you were mere collateral to my situation with your brother. That wasn’t the truth.” He took a deep breath before he walked past and sat on the bed. The one I had just fucking made. I wanted to complain but didn’t because the need for me to listen to what he had to say had won. “But I’m not going to apologize for what I said about your Ryan. I just vow not to talk about him like that in front of you—hell, I promise not to talk about him at all.”

I rolled my eyes at his last statement. “What’s the truth exactly?”

He didn’t hesitate to say it. “I didn’t think about the aftermath of what I did. I had tunnel vision and at the end of that tunnel was making Ryan pay.”

“And how did it feel after you learned that he was sent to jail?”

“Like a million bucks,” he gave a cold chuckle. “For like a day, anyway. It wasn’t worth it, I realized. Which was why I didn’t tell anyone about him and Paige.”

I took a deep sigh and sat on the foot of the bed beside him. He scooted a little to give me space.

“You felt sad about it?”

“About Ryan? No. I just didn’t recognize myself after that. I had gone to

such lengths to punish him. It's not in my nature to be vengeful. Even if I said that to you last week, I didn't want to hurt anybody."

"Your feelings are valid, Matthew," I assured him. "Ryan got what he deserved. And in return for you not talking shit about Ryan, I'll stop questioning why you did what you did."

"When the gala is over, Reagan," he started. "I want to talk to you about... us."

"Is there an us?" I queried. "You said you—"

"I know what I said and this is me eating my words, okay?"

"Okay. So after the gala."

"After the gala," he confirmed. "When all this hectic shit is behind us."

"Agreed."

"So am I forgiven?"

"Partially. Why?"

"I came to see you about another thing." He took a deep sigh as if he was mustering up the courage to say what he needed to say. "I'm promoting you."

"What?" I exclaimed, almost choking on my drink. "Is this because you pissed me off? Coffee is a good apology. A promotion is too much—"

"As my fiancée."

I wrinkled my eyebrows at him before I threw my head back laughing. Was he out of his goddamn mind? "Nice one, Parker."

"You think I'm kidding?"

"You better be because this might just be the lamest proposal ever. And even if it were real, I'm not going to say yes."

He smirked at me as I finished the last of my drink. "You remember that time when you became my fake girlfriend?"

Oh. That one. How could I forget about that one? I gave him a puzzled look

and I got a feeling that I wouldn't like where this was going. So Matthew told me about the deal he had with his father.

*A wife. For crying out loud!*

A wife meant he'd get his father's hotel business in Boston. It meant having the option to expand Parker Villas there.

Suddenly, the fake relationship became too serious for me. It would mean that I needed to lie to his parents. And not just lie in omission but lie to their faces. I couldn't do that.

"A fake girlfriend is okay," I pointed at Matthew, standing from the chair to throw the empty cup in the garbage bag I brought in earlier. "But a fiancée? A wife? Don't you think that's something too serious to lie about to your parents?"

"My parents would believe me if I said that Clair is my wife," he said. "My father is just giving me a hard time. Testing me if I'm domesticated enough to secure a wife."

"Why does wifing up even matter?"

"Wives play a big role in networking, Reagan. Father's business wouldn't have blown up back in the day if it weren't for my mother talking about it during her mahjong sessions with her friends."

"Look, as much as I'd like to help you get that business in Boston, I couldn't lie to your parents like that."

He sighed, scratching his cheek as he rested his elbow on his knees. I could see that he was thinking a way around it. "I knew you'd say no."

"They why'd you ask?"

"Because I knew that the only way you'd say yes to this is if we turn it into a little game."

"Look," I scoffed. "I'd love to play games with you all day, Matthew. But I



have work to do. And you just ruined the sheets.”

“Hear me out,” he insisted. His voice was deep, his eyes glued on mine as he revealed a pink and green box from behind him. He opened it, revealing a pink cashew-like device. And my eyes grew as I realized what it was.

My core clenched beneath me and my breath hitched. “We’re going to play a little game, okay?”

I nodded.

“Do you trust me?” he asked as he stood from the bed and turned to face me. Casting a shadow onto me, he closed the gap between us so that I had to spread my legs for him, giving him the space he needed. Then he was between my thighs and I had to look up at him to meet his eyes. He touched my cheeks with his hand, his thumb toying with the corner of my lips.

I nodded at his question as he parted my lips with his finger. I sucked on it, my eyes not leaving his. My nipples were erect from anticipation, and I could almost feel myself pooling down there. I hadn’t had sex in almost ten days and since I met Matthew, that was a brand-new record.

“Lay down and spread your legs for me,” he instructed and I obeyed, my back resting against the bed that I now had to start cleaning all over again.

Matthew kneeled, tugging down my underwear just by my knees before kissing my pelvis against my uniform. I squirmed at his soft caress on my legs. His kisses went lower and lower until he hoisted up my uniform and revealed my naked lower body.

“God, I missed you,” he moaned as he buried his nose against my pussy. “Let’s not fight again, okay?”

“Hmm,” I hummed. The sensation of his nose against me felt majestic. I was going to climax just thinking about what was to come. Then he closed his lips around my clit and my hips buckled. Matthews steadied me with his

strong arms, pressing down on both my legs. I panted at how amazing it made me feel.

“Oh, my God,” I whispered a moan, afraid that someone might hear us from the hallway. “I missed your tongue on my clit.”

“I missed how you fucking smell. How you fucking taste. Hmm.”

I reached between my legs and grabbed a fistful of his hair as I closed my eyes and let the euphoric feeling fill my gut. Then Matthew hummed against my sensitive clit before inserting two fingers into my wet pussy.

His mouth moved away from my body and my eyes flew open to the object in his hand. But he was peering at me from down there, his fingers curling and uncurling inside. In and out. And upwards. I moaned, my lips falling open.

I kept eye contact as he fucked me with his fingers. “Are you close?” Fuck I wasn’t. But I desperately wanted to come right now. I needed the release after days of drought.

“Keep doing that,” I begged, telling him I needed more. He rose from the floor to get a better grip, and when he bent a little so he could reach my wet, needy cunt. Then his fingers went into overdrive as fucked me with them from a better angle. Faster. Slower. And then faster again.

He unzipped his pants with one hand and lowered his trousers enough to release his hard, throbbing cock. And he jerked himself off as he finger-fucked me.

I could hear my wet pussy in the room, its squishing sound filled our ears. And I could only bite my lips to stop myself from screaming. I reached for his arms by my dripping vagina to tell him to go deeper. And he did. I shook on the bed, my hips rising from the mattress as my body begged for release.

“I’m so close,” I mewled. Please don’t stop. Keep going.” And he did.

“Come when you can, darling,” he instructed, licking his lower lips as he watched me break into a million tiny pieces. His jaw clenched as he tried to control his orgasm.

Then I was coming undone as the vicious orgasm hidden in the pit of my stomach for over a week were set loose. And I shook on the bed. Once. Twice. Three times. I let the wave of release go through my body as Matthew pulled his fingers away from me. Then he brought his fingers to his mouth. It was enough for me to orgasm again.

My boss tucked his still-hard dick back in his pants, shifting the big shaft so it wouldn't be uncomfortable.

“You didn't finish?” I asked weakly, my body limp on the bed, my underwear still by my knees.

“I'll take my turn later,” he assured with a smirk, zipping back his pants back up. It was my sign to do the same, but he stopped me. “I'm not done with you.”

He didn't allow me to protest as he grabbed the cashew-looking device from the box and kneeled again between my still-open legs.

“What are you doing, Matthew?” I asked as my gaze followed his every move. Then I felt him spread my pussy lips. My hips jolted as his skin touched the sensitive spot. He settled the round end of the device in my clitoris and a cold wave of air went down my legs.

When the device was set, he kissed my inner thighs and rolled my underwear back in place. I raised a confused eyebrow at him when he rose and offered me a hand.

“Is this thing supposed to be doing something?” I asked as I got to my feet. The thing felt alien between my legs and shifted on my toes as I got used to the feeling.

“Patience, darling,” Matthew cooed, plating a quick kiss on my lips before grabbing his phone from the inside pocket of his blazer. And with the little space between us, I could see what he was doing. We both peered down at the phone as I grew confused about what was happening. “How does it feel right now?”

“Well, it’s not doing anything,” I said, wobbling on my feet, feeling a little full. “But it’s weird.”

He opened an app and waited a second for it to load. And he pressed something on the app.

The vibration almost felt like a shock as I doubled over, grabbing Matthew’s arms as support as my knees buckled.

“Oh, my God,” I moaned as I crossed my legs. My entire body shook.

“How does it feel now?” Matthew jested as he chuckled at my situation. The vibration felt so good against my clitoris. It almost made me want to piss myself. I slapped Matthew’s arms twice, telling him to stop it. And he did.

I gathered my strength to straighten my spine and for a quick second, the vibrator came back to life at max speed before it went dead again. I yelped, glaring at my boss who had discovered his new favorite way of torturing me.

“This is your idea of a game?” I snapped.

“Admitting defeat already?” Matthew challenged and the asshole knew I wouldn’t back down.

“I’m not.” I cleared my throat and squared my shoulders, giving Matthew a confident look.

“Here’s how it’s going to go,” he said. “I control that vibrator in your cunt with my phone. If you win, I’m not going to ask you again to be my fake fiancée for my parents at the gala. If you lose, you’ll be introduced to them as future Mrs. Parker.”

Matthew was a smart man. And he was intelligent enough to think of a game only he could win. But I wasn't going down without a fight.

"You come, you lose," he continued. "I'll know if you come. You're not allowed to lie to me about it. You can't touch yourself. You can't beg me to fuck you."

"This isn't a game," I pointed out. "This is torture."

He pressed the phone screen again and I whimpered as the vibrator came to life. Three seconds, I counted. And then it stopped.

"No talking back." I stared at him, my heart racing. I had never been this horny in my life before. And I didn't think I'd last a day with this thing turning on at random times. What if I was in the middle of a conversation? I needed to practice how I was going to control my face later. "Questions?"

"No, sir," I said, painting on an unbothered expression.

"Good girl," he said, pressing a kiss on my lips before stepping back and walking towards the door. "Be in my office at seven o'clock tonight."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# Matthew

Who would've thought that thing I was going to love most in this world was teasing Reagan? I was glad that she had accepted my shitty ass apology and we had started talking again. I knew she deserved better than iced coffee and Vibease. And I was planning to give her that once the Global Business Gala was over.

I couldn't fathom the joy that I felt knowing how much the O was making her squirm right now. I loved the amount of power I had over her just at the tip of my fingers.

She had been such a good sport about the whole thing the entire morning and I had already planned on rewarding her later even though she'd break the rules and come. And even if she'd win this game, which I completely doubted, I wouldn't force her into this whole fake relationship shenanigans if she chose to say no again tonight.

I was just having a little fun. And I knew she was, too. Because she loved the games, she loved winning. Most importantly, she loved the prizes that came with it.

So the entire morning, as I was having Zoom meetings and conferences in my office to meet with committees and event donors, I toyed with my phone, my imagination as my companion as I thought about how Reagan was squirming with the vibration on her clitoris.

I'd have that thing on for three minutes straight, adjusting the tremors of the device. Of course, I wasn't a total sadist because it was more off than on. I didn't want to disrupt her job and didn't want people looking at her.

When lunch came, I called her to my office. Today had been the happiest I'd been in a week. I reminded myself not to get on her bad side again because the days that followed our fight were the most excruciating days of my life.

"Hello, Reagan," I greeted her when she entered my office looking all unbothered. She gave me a sweet, innocent smile as if to tell me that nothing was out of the ordinary. But her eyes sparkled against the noon sun in my office, telling me that beneath her calm demeanor, she was feeling the carnal hunger as well. But patience was a virtue, and anticipation was good for sex. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," she breathed, her voice soft. I could hear the hint of sexual frustration in her tone so I gestured for her to sit.

"You say the word and we'll stop, okay?" I assured.

"I've come this far. I don't see the point in stopping." She beamed, all high and mighty. So I brought the vibrator back to life. She squealed from the sudden sensation, her mouth forming a big O. She looked so hot as she gave me a sultry look before I turned the device off.

"Speaking of, did you come yet?"

"No." She cleared her throat, straightening her posture. I could see it in her face that she wasn't lying. So I made a mental note to push her a little further

in the afternoon.

“Okay,” I nodded. “Well, since you’ve been a good girl, I bought you lunch. I thought you might want this.”

I slid the chicken wrap in her direction and a bottle of the same coconut water brand she had in her fridge. I wanted her full for later because she was going to need it.

Reagan had struggled financially a couple of weeks back, but I could tell that she was starting to adjust. And like her work performance, she was improving at managing her own life. I could see that she was getting used to the independence. It was a good look for her having her life and finances in order.

“Coffee and lunch,” she said, mouth watering at the sight of the food. This woman could eat, I thought to myself, and yet she kept her figure like she was worked out six times a week. I know she didn’t work out because we could be talking a walk in the parking lot to my car and she’d complain about how far away I had parked. But at least she was getting enough cardio with me. “I could get used to this.”

It was the first time we had lunch in my office, and like that time in the McDonald’s parking lot, it made me happy to watch her eat and take delight in her food.

There were a couple of things I had learned about Reagan that made me feel attracted to her. Like the way she didn’t use her phone as often as the rest of us, especially when she was she needed to socialize. Perhaps it was the reason why she hated it when I was on mine. She valued talking to people, and she had this sense of responsibility to listen to whoever was talking. She was respectful that way.

She liked to talk, and I liked listening to her. Which might be why she



preferred it if the people around her were present. Exactly why it had become routine to turn off my phone ringer when she was with me.

Lunch came and went, and I had informed Reagan that the violinist she'd be playing with at the gala was visiting tomorrow and had asked to rehearse. So I permitted her to take a few hours from work to do so, promising her that I'd personally tell Susana why she wouldn't be helping with work for the time being.

I watched her leave my office, her ass swinging from side to side. A sexy minx, that woman. I was excited to see her return to my office tonight and claim her reward.

The rest of the afternoon, it had become my mission to push her over the edge. I had deliberately turned on the vibrator for longer periods of time, giving her barely enough time to recover before I toyed with the screen, making the device pulse inside her.

And I knew for a fact that she wasn't going to win this game.

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Reagan slammed the door shut behind her when the clock hit seven sharp. I jumped as I looked up from my phone. She wasn't in her uniform anymore. She was in a yellow-green sundress and a white, knitted cardigan, her hair loose behind her.

With flustered cheeks and hungry eyes, she marched around my desk, and I smirked at her, eying her white sandals as I turned my chair in the direction where she was coming from.

I spread my legs as she sat before she grabbed my face and passionately kissed me. I could almost taste the need in her as her soft lips parted my mouth and her tongue found mine.

She sucked on it as she moaned.

“Never *ever* put me through that again,” she groaned in between kisses, her thumbs stroking my cheeks as her nose grazed against mine. I snaked a hand around her waist while the other caressed her legs beneath her short dress. How convenient for me. “Please, Matthew.”

I opened my eyes as she helped herself, making out with me. I reached for my phone without her noticing and used the thumbprint feature to unlock it. Opening the Vibase app, I turned it on to max to snap her to attention.

The device made a muffled sound from beneath her, and I felt the strong vibration of it against my legs as Reagan fell off my thighs and to the floor, yelping in surprise as her knees bent underneath her.

“Jesus Christ!” she sobbed, cupping her vagina against the material of her dress. And I watched her struggle for a minute before lowering the tremor and eventually switching it off. Her chest rose and she caught her breath, looking up at me with vengeful eyes.

She was getting frustrated.

“On your feet, darling,” I commanded, waiting for her to gather the lower body strength to stand. She shook a little as she did and when her back was finally straight, she crossed her legs, looking into my eyes, her jaw twitching.

“Please, Matthew,” she whispered, crossing her arms against her chest.

“Please, what?”

“I need you.” She wiped my saliva off her mouth and I noticed her hands were shaking. It was a sign that I shouldn’t drag this out too long and give her what she wanted.

“First things first,” I started. “Did you come, Reagan?”

She bit her lip and her index finger started to scratch the inside of her thumb, fidgeting. “No.”

I brought the vibrator back to life and she doubled over, her palms resting on her knees as she tightened her legs together. “Let’s try that again,” I said as I killed the device that was against in clit. “Did you come?”

Still bending down, I saw her nod.

“Eyes on me.”

She was grimacing when she straightened. “Please, stop that. I’m giving everything not to combust here. Don’t I have like a safe word or something?”

“Do you need a safe word?”

“Right, now, yes. Because it’s either you fuck me right now or I’m going to make myself come right here, right now.”

I smirked at her, enthralled by her bluntness. I loved unhinged Reagan. But I guess she was right. It was time to give her what she wanted. And I couldn’t help but imagine her words come to life.

“How many times did you come without me?” My cock was growing hard just at the sight of her long legs and her subtle cleavage that was showing on top of the straight neckline of her dress.

“Three times,” she answered.

“Did you touch yourself?”

A nod, as she bit her lower lip.

“Where?”

“In one of the bathrooms in the VIP room.”

“Where else?”

“In the supply closet on the twelfth floor.”

“And?”

“Inside the pantry.”

“I hope no one was there.”

“You think I’m stupid?”

Her attitude made me reach for my phone just to let her know that I was in control tonight. But she yelled for me to stop, and the look in her eyes was telling me that she was seconds away from pulling that thing out.

“It’s been quite a taxing day for you, hasn’t it, darling.”

“You have no idea.”

“What are you waiting for?” I grumbled. “On your knees.”

She beamed as she got to her knees and crawled between my legs. The view alone sent a rush of blood to my cock, and I moaned as I grabbed a fistful of her hair from the nape of her neck to pull her head softly backward.

“Unfortunately, you lost,” I whispered as I devoured her mouth once before pulling away, her teeth biting mine as I went as if she didn’t want me to leave her hanging. “And I’ll have to introduce you as my fiancée during the gala. But since you’ve been a very good sport, I’m going to make you feel so good.”

“Yes, please,” she said softly.

“Now let me fuck that pretty smart mouth of yours.” But just as I thought that I was the one in power, Reagan took control without warning as she removed her cardigan and lowered the straps of her dress and bra from her shoulders, pushing them down to her waist.

She massaged her tits with her hands, her nipples pink from the bra she was wearing. She pinched her nubs, stretching them. And I took it upon myself to unzip my trousers and, lifting my hips from my chair, I tugged my pants and boxers down to my ankles.

I was hard as a fucking rock when I grabbed my penis, wet with precum as I watched Reagan massage her boobs. I stroked my dick, slow at first, feeling the veins against the palm of my hand.

“I think it’s time to cash in on that promise about fucking my tits,” she

chirped before pushing her breasts together. They weren't huge, and they weren't small either. They were big enough to fit in her palms.

She tasted the tip of my cock first, her tongue circling it before she directed it against the space between her tits. And she sank her chest against my length, the end slowly appearing on top of her pale breasts, her hands circling the gap around my cock where her boobs couldn't reach.

I groaned, leaning back against my chair at the new sensation. Closing my eyes, I intertwined my fingers on the back of my head, my mouth forming a big O.

"That feels so good, darling," I breathed as she tightened the grip of her body around my shaft. Upwards. Downwards. Deliciously hard and excruciatingly slow. She played with it—with me. And just like that, I allowed her to take away all of my self-restraint.

"Do you like that?" she whispered seductively, her breasts bouncing around my length.

"Yes, baby. You're going to make me come fast."

Then I felt her lips around the tip of my cock, and my eyes snapped open at her. And when I thought it couldn't get any better, her tits moved and she started giving me a blowjob. I grabbed onto her hair, urging her deeper, her tongue dancing around my cock.

"Jesus—"

"Are you close?" she asked, her mouth popping off of me, her lips plump. And she bounced her breasts faster around me, my cock twitched as my semen started to pour out. "Are you going to come in my mouth and all over my tits?"

"Reagan," I whisper-yelled, guiding her face up and down my length as she returned her mouth to my cock. "I'm going to come. Ugh. Inside your

mouth.”

“Hmm,” she hummed as I released my cum in her mouth, her breasts still fucking me.

“Don’t fucking swallow,” I demanded. “Ugh. Yes. Yes. Yes. Fuck. Reagan. Show me.”

She released my cock from her hold and she opened her mouth to show me my seed under her tongue.

“Very good,” I praised before I added my spit down her throat. And the little minx only smiled, her mouth still gaping. “Now spill it down all over your tits. And I’m going to watch.”

And she did. She pushed my cum and saliva out of her mouth, spilling it from the corner of her lips, dripping down her chin to her neck. And finally, her tits, where she reached at the wetness before spreading it all over her body.

“Look at you, Reagan,” I gasped in awe as her eyes never left mine, her hands playing with her nipples. “Filthy girl. Sit on the table and spread your legs for me.”

I pushed myself to the side, giving her space to move onto my desk. She sat her ass on the mahogany surface, twisting to clear something behind her so she could lie back.

Once she was positioned and had her beautiful legs apart, I moved my seat to face her center like she was a feast ready to be devoured.

I kissed her inner thighs first before pulling down her pair of white lace underwear that was barely covering her mound. I hoisted up the skirt of her dress, revealing her shaved pussy and the vibrator against her clit.

I discarded the latter and she yelped at the sudden jolt and absence of the thing. Her clit was puckered, still excited and ready for what was to come.

I pressed a kiss against her sensitive core, and Reagan moaned, her back arched in pleasure. She moaned again, biting her hand. “Is this clit spent already, darling?”

I played with it using my tongue. Side to side. Up and down. Around in circles and back. She was going mad, her hips buckling from my touch as her juices started to leak from her pussy.

“You smell so fucking good, Reagan. And you taste just as sweet.”

“Please, Matthew,” she whined. “Make me come like this. Fuck me.”

“All right.” I inserted a finger inside her, my tongue working on her clit, and my other hand stroking my cock. The feeling, the scent. Everything about this was making me go feral and I was afraid that maybe I wouldn’t be able to get enough of this—of Reagan.

I felt her pussy flutter around my finger. “You can come.”

“Harder, please,” she demanded, squirming from my touch. I inserted another finger and I curled them up against her wall. She queefed, wet air coming out of her hungry cunt. “Faster.” She panted like a dog in heat. And I felt the wetness against my finger.

“Come, Reagan!”

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” She squealed as she came and squirted against my still-moving fingers, drenching my desk, her wetness dripping against the floor. “Matthew! You’re so good at that!”

I didn’t give her time to recover before I buried my cock inside her pussy, leaning forward and bending my body down against her, kissing her lips.

I slammed into her, and she locked her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck like she was hanging on for dear life. And I fucked her relentlessly without halt. Harder, faster, and deeper.

Tears rolled down the side of her face as sweat stuck all over her body.

“Look at me,” I demanded when her eyes started to go heavy. “You think you’re going to win tonight, Reagan?”

“I did,” she grinned, her mouth ajar so she could catch her breath.

“You lost our bet,” I pointed out.

“Fuck you,” she hissed against gritted teeth.

“Fuck you, huh?” I challenged before pushing back from her and slamming home. Once. Twice. Three times. She threw her head back, her hips grinding against mine.

“One more, Reagan,” I called. “One more. One more.” Burying my head against her neck, I kept on fucking her until I could feel the orgasm dancing inside us. “Let go, darling. Fucking let go.”

She thrashed, trying to pull me away as the euphoric release possessed her. But I pulled her down as I continued to move inside her. Another orgasm came, and Reagan was sobbing in pleasure, her entire body shaking.

And I watched her, listened to her helpless whimpers.

“Good girl,” I said, kissing her forehead as she was catching her breath, her walls still pulsing around me.

When she finally calmed down, I pulled myself out of her slowly, and I saw our release dripping onto the floor.

I helped pull Reagan up from the desk, her body limp and heavy. She sat up, her chest still rising and falling a little bit, her messy hair framing the sides of her face.

I put my pants back on, and Reagan only stared at me with tired, happy eyes, a coy smile painted on her lips. Then I pulled her dress and bra back up, helping her with the straps. Once her upper body was covered, I straightened the skirts of her dress once more.

“Are you going to keep my underwear again, you weirdo?”



“I am. Consider it my price.”

I opened my drawer and threw in her lace undergarment alongside the first one I kept. Closing it, I opened another drawer and produced a red velvet box. That got Reagan’s attention.

She watched me silently as I opened the box and picked the diamond ring out of it. It was a Parker heirloom, my mother had said. Passed down from generation. How else was I going to convince my parents that I had a fiancée if I wasn’t going to give her this ring?

I kissed the back of Reagan’s hands twice before I slid the ring on her finger. The thing fit her like it was meant to be in her hands. Like it belonged there. And Reagan lifted her hand in the air, the diamond winking at her against the lights. Then she smiled.

Today, I could say, was a win-win for us both.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

# Reagan

The baby pink dress I was wearing was probably not the best choice for this gala because many of the guests were wearing dark and neutral colors. There was nothing on the invitation about color coding, only formal and black tie optional.

So I went with the pink Atelier Versace lace dress with intricate embellishments and haute couture detailing. Heidi had helped me ship the dress all the way from California two days ago, telling me she wouldn't let my father know.

I hadn't worn the dress to an event yet, but I had gotten it personally made for a hefty price as my graduation gift for myself. Thankfully, it still fit me like a glove.

The ring on my finger glinted against the light as I started the second song of the night, Edward Elgar's *Salut d'Amour Op.12*. The violinist, Roberta—she insisted on being called Bobby—wore a gray satin dress with a straight neckline, her tanned skin and Brunette hair accented by the lights above us. She was three years my senior and was working as a part of the orchestra at

Walt Disney World when she got the call from Clair asking if she could perform tonight with me.

We hit it off immediately, and I was so impressed at how well she played the violin and how she was able to do her own spin with the music without overpowering the piano.

She said that she knew Matthew because she already played here for an event once, and she was even more excited tonight because she knew that the piano and violin would go beautifully together. And our rehearsals proved this to be true.

The crowd was busy, and it was impossible to see what was happening in the hall when there was so much light shining down on us. But the ring reminded me that Matthew was in the crowd somewhere watching me. I was disappointed that he wasn't at the wing tonight, but then again, it would be weird if we eye-fucked each other when Bobby was on the stage, too.

So I played through the night—timeless pieces we had arranged together, mixed with modern ones. We set the ambiance of the gala even if it was almost difficult to see and hear the crowd. Bobby and I were so lost in the music that we didn't care and we didn't stop.

We played *My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice* by Camille Saint-Saëns from the opera *Samson and Delilah*, and one of my favorites, *Pavane, Op. 50* by Gabriel Fauré.

I was so busy enjoying my work tonight that I didn't hear the auctions or the speeches. I didn't even notice that we had entirely skipped dinner. But neither one of us complained.

Perhaps that was the thing about music. It made you lose your sense of time and just follow its flow—its rhythm.

All my problems at home were gone, and all my confused feelings from my

boss were forgotten. Here on this piano, I was at peace. I was safe. And no one was going to hurt me.

The entire night felt magical. Almost like I was living in a fairytale and I didn't want to leave even as my hands hurt from playing the piano and my back strained from sitting. It was the beautiful type of pain I was willing to endure forever.

Eventually, we finished playing, and as the host introduced us, a loud stream of applause and whistles echoed from the crowd. And Bobby stretched out her calloused hands to help me up on my feet. We bowed in front of the people, as cameras from the press who were invited flashed. And I gave a wave and smile.

When I looked at Bobby, her eyes shone with joyous tears as she threw kisses to the audience.

I jolted as a hand snaked around the small of my back. My head snapped to the side to see Matthew handing us both bouquets. Mine were blue and pink hydrangeas, while Bobby's were pink and white roses, both wrapped in elegant wrappers and ribbons.

We stayed a while and posed for photos before Matthew escorted us both to the wing. The formal part of the party was over, yet most of the guests still lingered at their tables and on the dance floor to talk and dance to the music from the speakers.

Some even lingered on at the open bar to maximize their alcohol intake for the night. I reminded myself to grab a dirty martini later.

My blood was still singing after our performance. And when Bobby parted with us to grab something to eat from the buffet table, I couldn't stop grinning. I was so over the moon I wanted to cry. Nothing—absolutely nothing could ruin this feeling.

Matthew, who was wearing the crispest suit out of all the guests, chuckled as we left the wing and returned to the main hall, where the chatter of people filled my ears.

“You got me flowers? You didn’t get me flowers the first time I played,” I pointed out as he guided me to a vacant table on the side of the room. The food was still steaming, telling me that Matthew had reserved it for us, and I was touched that he had waited for me. At the smell and sight of the heavenly-looking dishes, my stomach growled, finally realizing that it was starving.

“I got you both flowers,” he corrected me, pulling out a chair for me. I settled my bouquet on the vacant chair to my left while Matthew took the spot to my right. “But yours were the expensive one.”

He poured me a glass of champagne and the bottle reminded me of the last time I had played. The same expensive champagne, but us naked on the floor. My cheeks burned and Matthew grinned, perhaps remembering the same thing.

“You look beautiful tonight, Reagan. That dress is something else.”

My left leg was showing thanks to the generous slit the dress had. It was classy but in a very sexy way. I was glad that Matthew liked it because as I tried on the dress yesterday, all I could think about was Matthew taking it off me.

“Is it a little too over the top?” I asked coyly. “If I had known that everyone was wearing black, I would’ve worn something else.”

“You’re perfect. It’s not your fault you have better style than anyone else here.”

We talked as we dug into our food, and I didn’t care that we were the only ones eating except for Bobby on the other end of the room, holding her plate

awkwardly as she laughed at something a friend of hers said.

“I always want to be the center of attention,” I joked and Matthew chuckled. I wondered if Matthew was also looking at me like I was the only person in the room, but that was exactly how I looked at him.

And I didn’t give a shit that some of the staff was seeing us dine together like we’d known each other our entire lives. Or that Clair Sullivan was somewhere in the hall and she might catch us. Tonight, I decided I deserved to be carefree.

“And you should be,” Matthew agreed. “I heard some men talking by the bar. They thought you looked beautiful. So I interrupted their little party and told them that the diamond on your finger says you’re already spoken for.”

“Possessive are we, Mr. Parker?”

“For you, Mrs. Parker, always.”

Before I could throw in another sassy reply, a familiar female voice interrupted us, calling out to her boss from the crowd.

“Matthew!”

Clair wore an emerald silk dress that made her red hair glow. She looked years younger. Behind her was a man who looked to be the same age as Matthew, wearing a navy suit, his onyx hair framing his face and his jaw strong as he walked smoothly towards our table, an uninterested look painted his face.

“Oh, God,” Matthew muttered under his breath as he wiped his lips with a napkin.

“What?”

“Go along with me, okay?” he said. He didn’t give me enough time to register his words before he stood by his chair and extended a strong arm

across the table to the other man. They shook hands and it looked so formal I almost thought they weren't friends.

"Montgomery." The man gave a curt nod.

Then Matthew sat down beside me, signaling the two visitors to take the other two empty spots. The man in the navy suit took the empty chair beside my flowers and the Chief of HR took the only remaining one between the two men.

"Sullivan," Matthew stared down at his employee as he finished his drink. "I see you're having fun tonight. Shouldn't you be in the kitchen seeing to it that nobody is screwing up?"

"Isn't it time to get that stick out of your ass and let people have a good time?" the redhead playfully snapped back.

"Yeah, Parker," the other man jumped in, his voice deep and resonant, his lips stretched to the side as he lazily stared at Matthew. "Just because you're a miserable fucker doesn't mean we all have to be."

As I stared at the two men, I couldn't put a finger on whether they were friends. Were they business rivals? But Clair had been grinning nonstop since she sat down, indicating that the three of them knew each other.

"How have you been? The last time I heard about you, your other business went down the drain. Some asshole stealing from you or something." I stiffened at Montgomery's words because I thought it would rub Matthew the wrong way. But the former only scoffed and shook his head as his hand went to my thigh under the table.

"I'd rather not talk about it," Matthew answered. "But how'd you find out about my new business, Mont? Best in the state."

"So I've heard. Could use a bar in the lobby, though." The amusement that was now slowly lacing their words told me they were old friends who didn't

do well with pleasantries.

I couldn't help but exhale a laugh at our guest's words because that was the exact same thing I had said to Matthew when we first met in the elevator. But my laugh earned me Montgomery and Clair's attention, their eyebrows raised.

"Reagan," Matthew said, breaking the split-second silence. "This is Vincent Montgomery. A high school friend of mine. Vincent, this is Reagan."

"Pleasure to meet you, Vincent," I said, extending my hand that wasn't holding a flute of champagne. Vincent took my hand and brought it to his lips.

"Pleasure's all mi—woah! That is one big rock you got there, Reagan." My eyes grew wide in stunned silence, my mind racing at how I was going to handle this situation because Clair, was studying me. And Matthew needed to keep this ruse from his parents.

A light squeeze on my thigh told me what I needed to do.

"Yeah, well. Matthew's not very frugal," I said coolly as though my mind hadn't stuttered at all.

"Damn right, he isn't. He's never really been the humble type either."

"You didn't let me tell you had proposed already," Clair complained, her attention on Matthew, and her words told me that she knew about us. I reminded myself to ask my boss how that happened because we had agreed not to tell anyone.

"Oh, I did." Matthew bobbed his head, a proud look on his face. "Just a few days ago. We didn't want to tell anyone before we told our parents. So, we'd appreciate it if you guys keep it on the down low for a while."

"How'd he propose?" Montgomery asked, still holding my hand, studying the exquisite diamond just like I did the first time Matthew gave it to me.



“Well, he and I were in a—”

“Don’t tell him that, darling,” Matthew interrupted, reaching across the table to tug my hand out of his friend’s grip. “He might steal my idea when he proposes to his girlfriend.”

“My girlfriend and I broke up, so...”

“Too bad,” Matthew mumbled. “I was hoping that you two wouldn’t find each other. This is a formal event, and the last thing my hotel needs is a commotion coming from my Chief of HR and whatever your position is in your daddy’s business.”

Clair smirked like she was remembering something due to Matthew’s words. But she didn’t say anything. She looked cool like she was used to the banter of these men. She looked at me, and her smile spread, telling me that she wasn’t bothered about me being at the table with the boss.

“Hey, I run things now because Mont Sr. kicked the bucket last year. And it’s a security company—Montgomery Wards and Security.”

“Whatever.”

“You could hire us, you know. We have the best security detail in the field. Some of our men used to work for the President. It could be our little partnership or something.”

“I think I’ll pass on anything requiring me to partner with you. But I’ll think about it. And I’m serious about the commotion. No drinks for you two until all the guests leave.”

Clair rolled her eyes and shook her head, still smiling. “Look, I need to go back to work before my boss here fires me.” She cocked a head in Matthew’s direction before turning to look at Montgomery. “How about I’ll see you after work and we’ll get a drink from that bar across the street?”

“As long as Matthew doesn’t come, I’m in.”

“Wasn’t even interested.” With that, Clair left and it didn’t take a moment before Montgomery left as well, slamming the table to signal that he was done with his friend.

“Well,” he said, standing from his chair. “It was nice seeing you again, Matthew. I’m happy things are working out for you. Congratulations, Reagan.”

“Thank you.”

We watched Vincent leave and go to the bar, defying Matthew’s word about them drinking. The former turned to look at us, a wide smirk on his face as he gave our table a subtle salute before the bartender slid a bottle of premium beer his way.

“He looks fun,” I observed, eating the last of my lamb and I watched Matthew refill our drinks.

“Wait till you see him drunk,” he said.

For the rest of the night, Matthew told me about his friends, about the incident where Montgomery and Clair got so drunk at a party they were kicked out.

He told me about his friend’s security business and how Matthew was surprised that his friend had broken up with his childhood sweetheart when they were dating since they were high school freshmen.

And for a little while, I felt so blissfully normal listening to Matthew’s stories about his life like we were a new couple getting to know each other at dinner.

I didn’t want to leave this bubble, the one where we didn’t have to worry about my brother or what the staff would say about our relationship.

After twenty minutes of talking about our past lives and childhood friends, I told Matthew I wanted to have a martini, and we went to the bar, where

Montgomery had just left his post earlier, whistling at Matthew to bid farewell as he and Clair left the building.

I noticed that only a few people remained, but only the ones at the bar and the ones attempting to leave but who were caught up in a chat with an acquaintance. Even all the press were gone.

I was leaning my back against the counter when I felt Matthew's eyes on me. I was gracefully sipping my drink, and he was leaning his forearms on the marble surface beside me as he swirled his bourbon around his glass. He smirked at me, the intimacy of his wordless stare made my cheeks blush.

"Oh darling!" yelled a woman from across the room. My heart pounded in my ears as Lucille, in a black dress, came into view, her arms outstretched and her husband trailing behind her. "Look at you! You look beautiful."

"I have to say, Reagan," Tofer hollered before he could step up beside his wife. The color of his necktie matched the earrings in his wife's ears—ruby red. "I've been to Vienna and listened to the Philharmonic Orchestra, and let me say that you play just as well as any professional. Even better if I do say so myself."

"Thank you, Tofer. I appreciate it."

"We'd love to have you in one of our hotels in Boston to play sometime this year. How does that sound?" My heart sang in joy at the offer.

"I'd love to. Just say the word and I'm there."

"Great! I believe the holidays would be the perfect time to visit. It's the busiest time for our hotel, and Boston is beautiful during Christ—"

"Oh!" I jumped at Lucille's exclamation but Matthew touched my back to balance me. Even Tofer was surprised by his wife's interruption.

"What is it, dear?"

"Matthew—is that... your grandmother's ring?" Her eyes watered as she

pointed at the ring on my finger. She grasped her necklace as joy filled her eyes, staring at me and Matthew.

“It is,” Matthew smiled sheepishly as he pulled me closer to him by the waist. “Mother, father. You’ve just met Reagan. My fiancée.”

“Oh! Come here, dear! Congratulations!” Lucille was crying now as she grabbed my shoulder to gather me into a hug.

I hugged her back, and I felt even guiltier that this was all a lie. Because Matthew’s parents were genuinely happy about this. How would Matthew explain to them that this was fake?

“I didn’t think you had it in you, son. I honestly thought this was all a ruse to get your part of the business.” Tofer patted his son’s shoulder, giving him a one-sided hug.

“Well, this is as real as it gets, old man,” Matthew jested, his face painted with pride as if this was true. And I played the doting fiancée as Lucille yapped about the ring, and how she was excited about planning the wedding and getting to know her future daughter-in-law.

“I can’t believe you’re getting married,” Lucille laughed, holding my hands and hugging me like a mother. And I didn’t want her to stop because her touch made me miss my mother. Right now, I was happy, but I wondered what it would be like if Mommy was here to witness this—fake or otherwise.

“Me too.” The crass voice that came from beside us made the hairs on my arm rise. And my head snapped in the direction of the man.

He looked the same. His blonde hair was almost white, his mustache well-trimmed. Wrinkles showed his forehead, an indication that he had suffered.

His eyes, whose hue was the same as mine lingered on me. And a smirk slowly grew on his lips.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell your Daddy you’re getting married,

Reagan.”

And to make matters worse, there, standing a few paces behind him in a black suit and pink tie, was Ryan.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# Matthew

I saw the way the color in Reagan's face drained away. The way the smile she had had on her face the entire night disappeared into a fearful look. When I followed her line of sight, my back snapped straight attention because Ricardo's silver hair and smug look weren't the first thing I laid my eyes on.

It was the blonde man behind him who shared the same blonde hair as Reagan. He looked thinner compared to the last time I saw him, which was ages ago. Prison had not treated him well if the strange look in his eyes was an indication. It told me that they'd seen many things, things that would be forever etched on his mind.

But I couldn't find it in me to pity him, even if he looked so much like my feisty employee. All I could remember was the look on his face when I found Paige's ring around his neck.

"What are you doing here?" I sneered, stepping in front of Reagan on instinct. The stories she told me about her father were enough for me to feel the need to protect her. I quickly glanced at Reagan over my shoulder to see that she was frozen in place, her mind trying to digest the sight before her.

“We were invited, Matthew,” Ricardo answered, cockiness oozing from his voice as he gave my parents a wicked smile. “Hello, Kristofer. Lucille.”

“I didn’t know you’ were still in business,” my father retorted, narrowing his eyes at Reagan’s father. He knew about what had gone down between me and Ryan and the former had made it a personal mission to curse the latter to hell.

“Tofer,” Mother warned, pressing a calm hand on his shoulder, reminding him that this wasn’t his battle to fight.

“Our business is up and running, Tof. You don’t need to worry about that.”

“How have you been, Reagan?” Ryan’s voice was like claws on a chalkboard. He stepped out from behind his father and towards the woman behind me. Now it was me and him at the center of the group, and the only thing stopping me from grabbing him by the collar and punching his face into a bloody pulp was my respect for his sister.

“Why are you here, Ryan?” asked Reagan, her voice laced with worry as he stared down at her brother. She took a step from behind me to confront her family and now we were standing shoulder to shoulder.

“I’m not here to see an old friend, that’s for sure,” Ryan answered sarcastically. A hint of worry swept across his face as he sized up his sister, as if he thought I had hurt her or kept her here against her will.

“Then get the fuck out,” I grumbled as I shot a withering look at them. “Both of you.”

“When did you get back?” Reagan chirped, determined to get answers from her brother who had ghosted her for years and was now suddenly back home.

“When Dad said you left home, I came back two days later.”

“I’m giving your brother another chance to be CEO, given that I have no use for you. You didn’t make a single contribution to the St. James name,

Reagan. You're worthless."

"Watch it, Ricardo," I warned, my voice cold as I pointed a finger at him. Thankfully, there weren't a lot of people left in the banquet hall except for the ones trying to mind their business across the room but failing. At least there were no cameras left for her to see this.

"Or what?" the old man challenged. "You going to send me to jail and make a fuss out of this? Let's see how that will turn out for your fancy hotel."

"Why didn't you call me?" The longing in Reagan's voice almost physically hurt me. There were tears pooling in the corner of her eyes, but she kept them at bay, not letting the men in her family see her so vulnerable. "You got out of prison, you went to Bali. You came back home and it didn't cross your mind to say something to me?"

"Reagan—"

"Why else would he call you, Reagan?" their father interrupted. Why did he like tormenting his daughter so much when he was the only parent she had left? "You're not loyal to your family. After what happened to your brother you're going to marry the man who put him in jail?"

"You deserve it, Ryan. And more." I could see that my girl was trying so hard not to look her father in the eyes. She was only looking at Ryan. She clenched her jaw at her father's words but ignored him, yet he continued to push her buttons.

"And now you're defending him? I knew I shouldn't have let your mother coddle you. You're weak."

"You left home for him, Reagan?" my former business partner asked, trying to understand why Reagan did what she did. If he had communicated with his sister, he might understand why.

"She left home because your father was coercing her into covering for you.



And she didn't want that," I answered on her behalf as my hand snaked into Reagan's. Her hands tightened their hold around mine as if telling me she needed it. My other hand itched to form a fist to punch either man square in the jaw. I thought about hitting her brother first.

"Yeah. And she proved to me repeatedly how much of a failure she is. Your music isn't going to feed you, Reagan. With the amount you spend daily, it's not gonna cut it."

"I'd rather cut *you*."

"Matthew, please." The pleading words came from my mother, her tone telling me to stand down.

"Let's just go," Reagan shook her head, the men in her family disappointing her once more. "It's not worth it. Everyone's watching."

"That's right. Leave again, daughter. That seems to be something you're good at. The going gets tough and you flee."

"And I'll flee every damn time I can," she spat, finally talking to her father. And the old man seemed to be taken aback by the way his daughter answered him. "If that's what it takes to be away from you. Form both of you."

"Your mother would be so disappointed in you, Reagan. Remember that it's your fault she's dead. So if I were you, I'd give something back to the family to compensate."

"She would be *proud* of me for standing up for myself. I'm happy here, Daddy. I don't need you. And if you think I'm coming back, you're wasting your time."

"Then come back home for me, Reagan." I almost threw my head back laughing at how pathetic he sounded. He thought that trick was going to work on her. After he left his sister to fend for herself in the hands of their asshole of a father while she was grieving the loss of her mother?

“Making an excuse again, Ryan? The last time you did this, you slept with someone you shouldn’t have.” She smirked at her brother, knowing damn well it would be a hit to his ego. Then she squeezed my hand, pulling me along with her. And we made our attempt to leave. “Let’s go, Matthew.”

“So you’re turning your back on your family so you can continue to warm this fucker’s bed?”

I couldn’t stop myself as I let go of Reagan’s hand and twisted my body to swing my fist at the man who had once ruined everything for me. He stumbled back, surprised at the impact of my angry strike. Then he fell on his ass, but I didn’t give him the time to register what was going on before I grabbed him by the collar of his suit and forced him to stand.

“Matthew!” I heard Reagan yell but I wasn’t going to let these men talk to her like that. She had been so busy protecting herself here from rude guests and nosy staff, that I wasn’t about to let her lose her feisty spirit over this one.

“Son!” my own father yelled, grabbing my shoulders, and pulling me away. But I shrugged him off. “Stop it!”

“You don’t come into my hotel to disrespect me and the people I love, Ryan!” I spat at his face before I shoved him back. At least he didn’t fall on the floor again, otherwise, I would have had secondhand embarrassment for him. I turned on my heel again, which was a mistake because Ryan had taken the opportunity to throw in a hit.

“You asshole!” he yelled and just as I turned to see what was happening, his knuckles collided with my cheek, and my head snapped to the side. All I saw was red after that, and chaos exploded as I threw countless punches towards Ryan.

I heard the screams of people telling me to stop. But the asshole had done

it. I had spent years longing to hit this fucker in the face. And it felt mighty fine to do so now.

“Ryan! No! Stop it!” Reagan called when Ryan tried to throw in another punch. “Call security. Please! Someone, call security!”

“You’re going to wish you didn’t come back from Bali.”

We were now on the floor, me on top of him, his nose bleeding and his lips busted. I wasn’t going to kill him. A lawsuit wasn’t on my to-do list right now. But a little graze on his face wasn’t going to hurt.

“I’m going to make you rot in jail. Just like what you did to me,” he threatened.

“Daddy do something!”

“Stay out of this, Reagan.”

The shrill note in Reagan’s voice told me she’d had enough. Her sobs filled my ears and I stood up from the floor and moved away from him. But the asshole stood up from the floor and he wasn’t stopping. He charged and I tried to shield myself with my arm. I didn’t know how it happened, maybe Ryan slipped or somehow lost his footing but his fist went past me and the thing I heard next was Reagan’s yelp, followed by a loud thud. A collective gasp echoed in the room.

“Fuck! Reagan—” Ryan yelled and when I looked down, Reagan was cupping her face, terror and pain on her face as she looked up at her brother before tears started to roll down her cheeks. The impact of Ryan’s punch sent her to the floor.

“No! Get away from me!” she sobbed.

“You fucker!” I pushed Ryan away from us and he stumbled back, staring at his sister who he had just punched in the face. “Are you okay, darling?”

She didn't answer me but she grabbed my hand and pushed herself up, her body shaking.

Then she gave her family one last look furious look, and shook her head in disappointment before storming out of the hall, crying.

"Look what you just did, Matthew," Ricardo called.

"I didn't do shit."

"You'll hear from our lawyers first thing tomorrow, boy."

"Try me, St. James," I challenged. "I know secrets about you that would make Ryan's scandal look like a joke. I know that child neglect is punishable by law, Richard. And so is physical abuse." I stared as I said this.

And as I left the hall to find Reagan, I saw security escorting them out of my building.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# Reagan

I hid in the pantry, and thankfully, nobody was there. My heart ached more than my face. I couldn't believe that Daddy and Ryan showed up to ruin my night. I wasn't surprised at how my father handled the situation, but I expected more from Ryan. My brother who had been my protector for so many years, but now he had become an antagonist.

I sniffled, wiping the tears away from my face, careful not to touch the tender spot on my cheek. Then I heard someone come in, and a hand appeared on the side of my face, offering a pack of ice for my cheek.

My shoulders shook and my lips wobbled as tears started streaming again.

"It's okay, darling," Matthew massaged my back as I wept, the coldness of the ice pack a saving grace against my skin. He sat down on the pantry bench beside me and I turned when I felt his warmth, burying my head against the crook of his neck.

He snaked his hands around my waist and carried my lower body towards his lap.

“Matthew,” I cried, my shoulders shaking from shock and pain. And for a moment he held me like that, and I silently bawled, feeling every pain in my body and my chest.

“Let me see,” he said, his hand guiding my chin up so I could meet his gaze. He was hot, I thought to myself as I stared into his eyes. I felt a lone tear roll down the side of my face and Matthew carefully wiped it away. His jaw clenched as we looked at my face. “Fuck. I want to kill him.”

“Are they gone?”

“They are.” He pulled me into a hug one last time, cradling my shoulders with his strong hands. And I felt so safe in his arm like this. Like nobody was going to hurt me if he was here. “I’m so sorry, Jellybean.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“No, but I shouldn’t have exploded like that.” Matthew shifted on the bench, grabbing something from his pocket. And I watched his every move as he produced his phone, texting somebody with one hand. He said, “We need a doctor to see you, okay?”

“I just need ice—”

“Don’t argue with me, Reagan. Please. Just not on this.”

“Okay.”

“Good girl,” he praised, kissing my forehead before I wiggled out of his lap. “Now let’s go home.”

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The route Matthew took wasn’t the way to my apartment and I turned my head toward where we were supposed to take a right.

“You just missed the turn,” I pointed out. The drive was silent until now. Matthew let me have the chance to think, to let things sink in as he held my

hand, bringing it to his mouth from time to time to ground me—to remind me that I was safe.

“You’re staying at my place,” he told me, his voice calm and quiet. I was so tired that I just wanted to close my eyes, sleep, and forget about what happened tonight. I was over the moon when the event started. And for three and a half hours, I was the happiest that I had been in a very long time, and I thought no one would be able to take that away from me.

And my family, of all people, were the ones to pop the bubble.

“I’ve never been to your place before,” I said.

“I know. There’s always a first time for everything. But I’m not going to risk it knowing they could barge into your apartment at any given time. There’s a security detail in my penthouse.” I simply nodded because I didn’t have the energy left to argue with Matthew, even though that had been something I had loved doing lately. Tonight, I was leaving things to him. I was going to trust that he would take care of me.

“I’m sorry security wasn’t quick enough to alleviate the situation. It shouldn’t have escalated like that,” he croaked when the silence went on a little too long.

“Maybe you should take Mont up with his offer,” I jested. But no one was laughing at how things unfolded tonight. I didn’t know how I was going to face my brother after this. I knew he didn’t mean it, but tonight the pain was too much.

“Maybe I should.”

Five minutes later, thanks to the absence of traffic, we arrived at Matthew’s building, nestled among the towering skyscrapers of the city. It oozed luxury and exclusivity, a world where Matthew Parker thrived. But he kept on driving until I saw the entrance to the basement parking lot.

Not a lot of cars were parked there, and the lights were dim like in a horror movie. Matthew parked under a number which I guessed was the number of his penthouse. Then his Tesla purred to a halt, the ignition dying.

Matthew unbuckled himself from his seat before getting out, rounding the car, and opening the door for me.

He helped me with my dress as I turned to hop out of the car. With a hand, he cupped the edge of the door with his hand.

“Watch your head,” he said, patiently waiting for me to get out. When I successfully peeled myself from the car, I slammed the door behind me, grabbed Matthew’s hand and we walked together towards the elevator.

“I don’t have extra clothes,” I said when the lift pinged and opened for us. Matthew stepped aside to let me in first, making sure my dress wouldn’t get caught. Then he pressed the code to his entrance.

The doors closed in front of us, and I sighed as I stared at our hazy reflection. Not once did he take his hands off mine, even as we leaned against the handrail of the car.

“Then you can sleep naked beside me,” he joked and I smiled tiredly as his phone pinged. He grabbed it with his free hand from the inside pocket of his suit.

He paused to read the message, typed something brief, and stored the phone.

“The doctor’s already at my place. He’s a friend and the only one I could call this late.”

“Okay.”

When the elevators opened, I was greeted by an expensive-looking home.

Rich, dark wood filled the place, a beautiful choice that screamed timeless elegance. The mahogany floors and ebony furnishings contrasted with the



soft, ambient lighting which was casting an enchanting glow over the room. Three massive windows framed a view of the city's twinkling lights, a stark contrast with the opulent darkness within.

On the dark suede couch sat a tall man wearing a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbow. Dark hair peppered his chin and his eyes were hazel. He looked up from his phone when he heard us enter and stood from the couch, walking towards us and shaking Matthew's hand.

"Hey," he greeted, throwing a smile my way.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice, Ben. I hope I didn't interrupt family time."

"It's okay," he smiled as his mind drifted away at the mention of his family. "The wife is all happy and glowing from the honeymoon still."

Matthew nodded, and they momentarily shared a brief conversation where the former asked about the doctor's wife and children. As they did, I took the time to borrow clothes from Matthew to change my dress. I grabbed the first pair of boxers I found in his drawer and the shirt I picked from his closet was black and it was huge on me.

Finally comfortable, I returned to the living room where both men waited for me. And with the look Ben was giving me, I could tell that Matthew had filled him in about what happened.

"Reagan, this is Doctor Benedict Hayes."

"Nice to meet you, Doctor," I said, stretching a hand towards him.

"Ben, please," he insisted, shaking my hand.

"Are you feeling okay?" the doctor asked, shining a light in my eyes. I wanted to say that I wasn't because dear, God, I was so tired that I just wanted to curl into a ball and weep until my eyes grew heavy. Instead, I nodded.

“Do you feel dizzy?”

I shook my head.

“Nauseous?”

Another shake of my head.

“Confused?”

“No,” I answered, and the doctor nodded. He turned off the light. I blinked, adjusting to the change. Matthew stayed behind me, looking at me with intense worry. I wanted to tell him I was fine, that all I needed was to curl up beside him and sleep.

“She doesn’t have a concussion,” Ben finally said.

“Are you sure?” Matthew asked.

“She’s not showing any signs, so she’s clear. But sometimes, it takes time for symptoms to develop. If she shows signs within the next twenty-four hours—dizziness, nausea, confusion—you should take her to the hospital to have it looked at.”

“Thanks, Ben.”

“But with the bruise that’s already showing, she’s going to have a nasty shiner tomorrow. So, put a cold compress on the area and pain relievers. And rest. Lots of it.”

“Copy that, doc,” I nodded, and thankfully, Ben didn’t linger. When he stood from the couch and gathered his things, I lay on the soft suede material of the sofa as my eyes drifted shut.

“You give me a call whenever something comes up, okay? And if you want to talk, you’ve got my number.”

“I appreciate it, man.”

“Thank you, Ben,” I called, my body hidden from his sight but I raised a hand and waved. They chuckled.

“See you around, Reagan. Hopefully not in the hospital.” With that, Ben entered the elevator and was off to his family.

Before sleep finally consumed me, I felt Matthew’s hands on my shoulder prying me awake.

“Let’s get you to bed.”

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When we finally settled in the bed, I noticed in a vague way that Matthew slept with a pair of pajama bottoms on while his chest was bare.

I lay my head on his stomach, my arms outstretched around his torso. And we lay there in complete, comfortable silence, our heartbeats synchronized.

“I don’t think I can face them again, Matthew,” I admitted, breaking the silence. There were no more tears left to cry, and even if there were I had decided not to cry over my family ever again.

“You don’t have to,” he replied, his fingers dancing against the skin of my shoulders. “Not right now, at least.”

“I thought I was going to die when Ryan threw that punch.” My voice shook when I said the word.

“Me, too,” he sighed. “When I saw you fall, Reagan, I thought you’d be another person Ryan was going to steal from me. The world stopped for a moment.”

“I’m not going to leave you, Matthew,” I promised. “I know you wanted things to be purely physical between us—“

“I don’t,” he interrupted. “At least not anymore. When Ryan demanded that you go back home, I thought you were going to say yes. And I thought I wouldn’t have the chance to tell you how I feel about you.”

“What do you feel, Matthew?”

“That you were never just collateral, Reagan. And you never should have been after what I did to Ryan. What I said to you, about how I hated him more than I’ll ever like you, that’s not true either. Because my hatred for Ryan is nothing compared to how much I love you.”

“You love me?” I raised my head from his chest to meet his eyes, and I smirked at his words before leaning my ear against his chest again. A pool of something warm swarmed my belly.

“I do. And I should have noticed it sooner. But when we fought, I realized how I hated not seeing you. Clair said I was sulking. Jesus. I love the way you stand up for your truth, how you didn’t give a shit about what people think of you.”

“When you said those things about my brother when you pissed me off, I told myself that it shouldn’t have bothered me. I shouldn’t care what you thought or how you felt about my family. But I did. And that was when I knew it was something deeper than us just sleeping together.”

“It infuriated me that you were mad at me at that time,” Matthew said, chuckling to himself at the truths we were blabbering out. “And usually, I didn’t give a shit. I spent twenty minutes deciding on what Starbucks coffee you’d like. I almost wanted to call Ryan and ask. But I asked the person behind the counter instead.”

“Twenty minutes?” I gasped, laughing, imagining Matthew staring at the menu board wondering what I wanted. And it made me giggle just thinking that he thought of me while he waited in line. “I’m not picky about Starbucks, you know. But don’t worry, I’m growing on the one you get.”

“How about let’s never fight again over something so stupid?”

“Let’s never fight again. *Period.* And never leave me, okay?”

“What about the staff?” I asked.

“What about the staff?” he countered.

“Well, I’m sure they heard about what happened tonight. And you surprised Clair when you told them I was your fiancée. I should probably return this—”

I attempted to remove the ring Matthew gave me but I felt him shake his head, his hand stopping me.

“No. Keep it. Let’s keep up the ruse,” he demanded. “And I don’t give a fuck about what the staff says. We’re not doing anything wrong, and it’s not like I’m giving you special treatment and unnecessary promotion.”

“You should,” I joked. “Because I don’t like cleaning toilets.”

“I could make you permanently the hotel’s performer. No bathrooms to clean.”

No toilet cleaning sounded like music to my ears, and the thought of playing piano permanently for the hotel sent a happy jitter all over my body.

“Yeah, but you get, what? Two events a month?”

“When you’re not at the hotel, you can play somewhere else. One of the guests tonight had messaged me about you and Roberta. He thought you played beautifully and wanted to know if you were for hire.”

“Bobby,” I corrected. “She likes to be called Bobby.”

“Bobby,” Matthew complied. “Anyways, this friend of mine has a cruise company and wanted to know if you’d be willing to go on a month-long cruise trip to Europe sometime next year.”

He had booked me a gig on cruise ship! I always wanted to go on a cruise but didn’t have the time nor the right people to go with. I guess now I had the perfect plus one.

“Yes! I’m willing!” I squealed too enthusiastically despite my situation.

“Okay, darling,” Matthew chuckled.

“I owe it to you, Matthew. This had been a dream of mine.”

“It’s always a pleasure doing business with you, darling.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# Matthew

Reagan sat on the kitchen counter as I cooked us breakfast—nothing special, just eggs, bacon, and toast with butter and jam. Then I learned that she didn't like jam so she opted to make her own avocado toast and a bowl of Greek yogurt with honey and fresh berries because she needed something sweet.

I forgot how much this woman ate and that she needed variety. I was just thankful that my pantry was full for her.

She was still wearing my shirt and I had to say that it was a good look on her. It told me she was mine, and after our confession last night, I knew that she wasn't going anywhere.

The quality of sleep I had last night was amazing, knowing that Reagan was safe by my side. Her warmth was soothing, and the sound of her calm breathing through the night was music to my ears.

And those damn dahlias, now a permanent part of my sheets, my shirt, and the pillow that she had used. There was no way I was going to let her walk away from my life now.

My heart had ached for Reagan when I saw her on the floor last night as fear crept into her eyes. And I wanted to take her somewhere far away from here, from her father and the brother that dared lay a hand on her. I wanted to bring her where she could forget what happened, where it was only the two of us—a place where no one knew who we were, maybe change our names.

Her face, once vibrant and full of life, bore the aftermath of the encounter from the night prior. The area around her eye was shrouded in an unsettling shade of purple, a stark contrast to her pale skin. Some swelling had also set in, making her eye a little puffy.

She stared at herself in her compact mirror as I turned to set the bacon on the counter beside her yogurt. She poked at the tender spot, a grimace on her face. “Stop that,” I complained because if there was anything I had learned about black eyes, it was that the more you touched it, the more it would hurt.

I grabbed the ice pack from the freezer and tossed it to her. “How do you feel?” I asked.

“What do you think?” she complained, reaching for the ice pack on the counter. “God, it hurts. Remind me to punch Ryan back when I see him.”

“I’ll happily do it for you.”

“I can’t leave here until this heals.”

“You can stay as long as you want. I’m not going to complain,” I chuckled.

“What will people say if see me like this tomorrow?” Reagan and I had decided to play hooky today given what happened, and I contacted Clair to get ahead of whatever talk was going to circulate about us. Knowing that she had power over the employees, I knew I could count on her. Thankfully she didn’t ask any questions and promised that she would take care of it.

“They won’t. My PR team is handling the situation, no charges were brought, and Clair will take care of the rest.” I should give them all a raise,



Clair, and my PR team. The latter had taken care of that little hiccup with Eloise last time as well.

“Does Clair know you have a fake relationship with me?”

“She doesn’t. But she knows that I have a real relationship with you.”

“What?” she gasped, her eyes growing wide.

“Clair knew about us,” I admitted and her frown only deepened.

“Did you tell her?” I understood that Reagan was afraid of HR knowing about our relationship, but Clair had known this fact through me, and she was my friend, so she wouldn’t do shit to jeopardize my relationship as long as I wasn’t stepping out of line.

“No. She figured it out on her own. She confronted me about it. Believe it or not, she was the one who advised me that maybe what I felt for you wasn’t just limited to the bedroom.”

“She knew but she didn’t say anything?”

“No. She cares about me. We went to high school together with Mont. We went to the same college where I met Ryan. Besides, it’s not really her thing to be up in people’s business.”

“Remind me to thank her, then.”

“You can thank her by not fighting with her staff.”

“Fine. I’ll try.” She winced because she knew that although her work quality had improved, it hadn’t really gotten up to Susana and Clair’s standards.

“Good girl. Now do you want your eggs runny or well done?”

“Well done.”

We ate breakfast at the counter and I loved the way she was eating. It meant that she was feeling better, and so far, she hadn’t developed any signs of

concussion which was a good thing, so I reminded myself to send a message to Ben that Reagan was feeling better.

We talked about a few mundane tasks that didn't include work. She talked about her time in Juilliard and her friends in college she hadn't seen in a while. She talked about her previous boyfriends and I changed the subject every time she mentioned them because I didn't want to think about other boys touching my woman.

I told her about my days in high school with Mont and Clair, and how I found the latter making out with all the girls she could reach. And she was surprised to learn this about the Chief of Human Resources. I probably shouldn't have said those things but Reagan and I weren't keeping things from each other anymore.

We sat in the kitchen for over thirty minutes with nothing planned for the day but to rest and to see how the hotel would take the news and I just prayed that it wouldn't reach the press. The last thing I needed was for my hotel to be in jeopardy, thanks to Ryan. It would be the most horrible *deja vu*.

Reagan's phone vibrated on the counter beside her, and her streak of ignoring messages when we were together was broken when her brother's name appeared on the screen. She stopped talking mid-sentence as she cocked her head to see the caller.

"It's Ryan," she announced, a look of uncertainty painted on her face, clearly internally debating whether she should answer.

"You don't have to answer," I coaxed because I didn't want her to feel like she was obliged to do whatever the men in her family wanted her to do. Because Reagan was a big girl and she didn't owe them shit. "You can give yourself another day."

"He's my brother," she argued. She had told me that even though her

jackass of a brother was too uncoordinated to throw a punch, she was still willing to listen to him. Her father, though? That was an entirely different story.

“He gave you a gorgeous shiner,” I said nonchalantly, shrugging, and finished her bowl of fruit and yogurt. She rolled her eyes. If it were up to me, I wouldn’t allow her to take that call because I knew that she needed a break from all this bullshit. But then I realized that Reagan had enough men in her life telling her what to do.

So, despite my disagreement, I let her do her thing. And if any of them decided to throw a punch at her again, my fist would knock them out cold before they could even swing.

“What do you want, Ryan?” Reagan snapped. She didn’t sound scared or betrayed when she answered. She made sure her brother knew that she had the upper hand, that this was Ryan’s one and only chance to say his piece before he did permanent damage to their relationship.

“Reagan.” Ryan’s voice was groggy and tired, like he hadn’t had a chance to sleep at all last night. Good. He deserved to be eaten alive by his conscience. “Shit, I— I don’t—How are you?”

“I missed who I was before you punched me in the face,” she jested coldly.

“Fuck. I am so sorry, Reags. I didn’t mean to—”

“Why are you calling me?” she interrupted. At least I wasn’t the only one annoyed at Ryan complaining and apologizing. “After years of radio silence, you’re calling me again.”

“Don’t let him get off the hook so easily,” I mouthed at her, giving her a thumbs up to tell her that she was doing fantastic as I started collecting the empty dishes in front of us.

“I want to talk to you if that’s okay. I want to apologize and explain myself.

I was a bad brother.”

“Damn right, you were.”

“Florida has made you even feistier, you know,” he chuckled on the other end of the phone. “Matthew taught you to talk like that?”

“At least I didn’t punch her, jackass!” I called, as I rinsed the plates in the sink.

“Are you at Matthew’s? I could drive up to his address—”

“Do you think I still live in the apartment I used to live in with the woman you slept with?” I should probably stop talking about Paige given that I was with Reagan now. And it didn’t matter anymore even if Paige chose to appear on my doorstep right now, I’d choose my feisty blonde. But I liked reminding Ryan what he did because it made him squirm.

“Right. So, can we meet? I really want to see you, Reagan. Please.”

“Okay.” Her answer surprised me. I turned from the sink, leaned against it, and crossed my arms against my chest, showing her I was hesitant about her idea.

“What?” I mouthed and she shrugged, telling me I didn’t have a say in this and that I could either just support her with it or be quiet. And I couldn’t stay away even if it meant I had to see her brother one more time.

“But I don’t want to see Daddy. Just you.”

“He flew back to California three hours ago.”

“He’s always been a horrible father. A good husband, but a horrible father.”

“I know.”

“Okay,” Reagan breathed, telling her brother that she was done. “I’ll text you the address.”

“And I’m coming, too. That’s nonnegotiable!” I yelled at Ryan so he’d know that if he was planning something stupid, he wouldn’t be able to pull it

off.

“Whatever, asshole.”

“Jackass!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# Reagan

I decided that being in a public cafe three blocks from Matthew's penthouse for lunch was a good idea so he'd think twice before he decided to do something stupid.

Matthew went back to my apartment with me to get some clothes since he had insisted that I stay with him for a while. And who was I to say no to that? If he and I could barely keep our hands off each other at the hotel, and it proved to be extra difficult when we were in the same room together.

And Matthew showed me that there was no point stepping on eggshells when it came to sex. "You have me, darling," he had said when we enjoyed a quickie in his kitchen after Ryan's call. "Say the word and I'll take care of you."

I loved that Matthew wasn't coddling me, that even if I had decided to give my brother the benefit of the doubt and see him today, he was vocal about his disapproval but he didn't stop me. Instead, he decided that he was coming in case my idea went south. In exchange, I gave him the privilege to knock Ryan out cold if the situation required it.

I wore the biggest sunglasses I could find in my closet, a green oversized hoodie, and sweatpants. I pulled my hair up in a ponytail and looped it through the hole of my cap. It was the laziest outfit I had thrown on in my entire life and I didn't like it. Yet Matthew had said I looked sexy and reminded me about how hot he thought I was when he had taken me in his car before arriving here.

"You touch her, you try to reach out across the table, and I'll break your hand," I heard Matthew warn when we sat in the booth at the back of the cafe by the glass wall where several pedestrians were walking by.

"She's my sister," Ryan argued, his expression grouchy. And for the first time in years, I saw my brother up close. I wanted to hug him, to run across the cafe and bury my head against his chest. He had always been my protector and the person I could talk to about everything.

So the fact that he had thrown a punch at me didn't just hurt physically, but it hurt emotionally as well. And the pain was enough to stop me from doing those things. Instead, I sat close to Matthew and he held on to my knee when I got settled, telling me he was there.

"Didn't stop you from punching her."

"That was—Okay. All right. Relax."

"Not gonna happen," Matthew answered nonchalantly as I rolled my eyes at the testosterone dancing in the air. I didn't have time for these men to fight right now. I wanted what my brother needed to say.

"Matthew," I hissed at him, giving him a warning look. And his gruff face softened.

"What?"

"Chill."

"Fine," he answered through gritted teeth before leaning back against the

booth chair.

“So what do you want?”

“I’m sorry, Reagan.” I could tell from my brother’s face that he felt guilty and that he was tired of dealing with whatever shit my father had convinced him to do. I saw the yearning in his eyes as I stared into his eyes.

He had aged since I last saw him, and there were circles under his eyes now that weren’t there before.

“You want to see your masterpiece from last night?” I challenged, wanting him to understand the severity of his act. If he hadn’t retaliated, none of this would’ve happened.

They didn’t need to fly to Florida to talk to me or even *see* me. A call would have sufficed, and it would have saved them from the trouble that was Matthew. Because the former hated them, and the fact that they had stepped into his hotel after what had gone through between them, that was an act of war.

Without waiting for his answer, I removed my sunglasses to let him see the throbbing shiner circling my eye. Thankfully, it wasn’t that dark yet. But my cheek was throbbing, and the bruise stood out like a sore thumb because of how fair my skin was.

“Jesus Christ. Fuck. I’m sorry.” I almost felt bad about how uncomfortable I was making him feel, but it wasn’t enough to make up for what he did.

“Stop apologizing.”

“Okay. I’m sor—” He cleared his throat. “Look, if it makes you feel any better, you can punch me in the face right back anytime you want to.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” Matthew raised a finger beside me and I rolled my eyes, almost amused.

“Her. Not you, Matthew,” my brother snapped. “Will you shut up and stop



with that alpha-asshole attitude?” There. Right there. A small bit of humor danced in her words and I couldn’t help but wonder.

“Both of you, please,” I begged, trying to stop them acting like little girls. “Get it over with,” I said to Ryan.

“Where do I even begin?” He wiped his face with his hands out of frustration.

“How about explaining why you stole that money from your business and cheated me?” Matthew said nonchalantly as he glanced at the menu.

“I didn’t steal the money, Matthew,” Ryan admitted, and he dared a glance at Matthew. The latter sat up straight and slammed a hand on the table, but not hard enough to cause a scene.

“Bullshit,” he spat. “You admitted that to my face when I confronted you.”

“Well, I’m taking it back.”

“You think changing the narrative is going to make this magically go away?”

“No. But if you could just let me talk.” Matthew shook his head, crossing his arms across his chest, giving Ryan a look that said he wasn’t going to believe the words he said. Tension danced in the air as Ryan continued.

“Parker St. James was losing a ton of money because of competition and we weren’t fast enough to think of an innovation. Consumers didn’t want our bourbon anymore. We were stagnant, and we were too cocky to see that was declining.”

“We couldn’t lose that much money in just six months, Ryan,” Matthew pointed.

“We can. And we did. I didn’t see the drop until three months after you left. Apparently, with economic factors, our prices weren’t reasonable. People weren’t buying from us anymore. And there were supply chain factors and

delayed shipping internationally. It was chaotic. And the money—it disappeared fast. We weren't earning anymore. And I didn't know how I was going to tell you. Not when you were in Europe to explore the possibilities of expanding to wineries."

"So you told him you stole the money instead? Like that would make any difference?" I asked, not understanding where he was going.

"I told him I stole it because I had slept with Paige."

"The ex-girlfriend?" I asked. I hadn't pressed Matthew to share things about Paige because she had been an old chapter in his life. But also, because Matthew had already made peace with what happened. Yet he dangled her name every chance he got to make my brother uncomfortable.

"Yeah," Matthew answered. "Explain," he added, turning to Ryan. Suddenly, he had my man's attention.

"I knew you wouldn't do anything crazy if I just told you I slept with her. That you wouldn't go to extreme lengths to punish me because Paige was involved."

"So you made up a story for the lost money because you knew I'd make it public," Matthew announced, the realization hitting him like a rock to the head. "You wanted me to punish you."

"I wanted you to hurt me," Ryan corrected. "Because I felt so bad about what I did. I don't have an excuse as to why I slept with her, and I'm not making one now. It was a bad decision. I'm taking accountability for it. I'm not asking for your forgiveness, Matthew. I'm just explaining it so I can get this off my chest."

"I don't have plans for forgiving you, Ryan," Matthew pointed, but something told me that wasn't true. I thought that he would eventually forgive my brother for what he did, knowing now that he lied about

embezzling the money. “But I’d have learned how to be civil with you. Eventually. For Reagan.”

“Was that why you didn’t get out of jail sooner?” I asked, a new enlightenment came.

A nod. “Dad wanted me to. But I didn’t want to cut my sentence short. I deserved it and it gave me time to think my life through.”

“Was vacationing in Bali and ghosting your sister part of that plan?” I snapped, narrowing my eyes at him. Now that his issue with Matthew was out in the open, I needed my own peace of mind.

“You think I was vacationing in Bali?”

“That’s what Daddy said,” I disclosed.

“Dad’s a selfish bastard who would go to lengths to keep his money and business. It’s all he has.”

“So, what were you doing in Bali?”

“I’m opening a travel service company there. It’s not ready yet, but I’m planning to launch it sometime late next year.”

“You were just too busy to call me, then?”

“I didn’t know what I’d say to you, Reag, to be honest,” he admitted. Unshed tears shone in his eyes. “I didn’t want to hear how disappointed you were in me for leaving you with Dad. I wasn’t always there when Mom died, so I thought you’d hated me by the time I left jail.”

“I could never hate you, Ryan. You’re my brother.”

“Even when I gave you that black eye?” Yes, I wanted to say. But right now, he needed to be put in his place, he needed to know that there were consequences for what he did.

“Well, except for this one. I’d be holding a grudge for this one. Maybe until it healed. I’ll take it.”

The air was a little lighter when Matthew offered to order for us. He didn't ask Ryan what he wanted but he got us each a sandwich and iced tea. My brother didn't acknowledge his former business partner while we ate after our order came. But Ryan had asked a million questions about me. How I thought to move to Florida and how I ended up in Parker Villas, among other questions.

Then he said he loved watching me play the piano, and I teared up when he said that he remembered Mommy when he was watching me the other night. And I realized how much I had missed him, and that I wished things didn't have to be so complicated between us.

"Are you going back to California now?" I asked later as we stood from our booth. Matthew remained quiet, but his soft touches and stolen glances told me he was still paying attention.

"I have a flight scheduled later in the evening. I'm going to talk to Dad before I leave for Bali. I think I'll be staying there for a while."

"Call me, Ryan. Okay?" I couldn't help myself. I threw my arms around my brother. And I loved how his hug hadn't changed over the years. It was still tight, assuring—a safety net that reminded me that he'd caught me whenever I fell in the past. But right now, I was good on my own. I had Matthew and a new sense of maturity for taking on the world.

"I will," he answered. "And Reagan?"

"Yeah?"

"When you're ready, talk to Dad."

"When I'm ready." And I didn't know when that would be, but I knew that it would come to me eventually. Things like that took time for me. But one thing was sure, I knew that I could never hate my family forever.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# Matthew

“**W**hy didn’t you tell me you were engaged?” Clair Sullivan asked days later after Reagan and I went back to work. She wasn’t happy about hearing about the punching fest that happened in the banquet hall that night, but she kept her thoughts to herself about it.

But the thing with Reagan, oh, she was excited to ask about that one. Which was why she was bugging me this early in the morning.

Today, she wore a white shirt under her cream blazer, black trousers, and beige heels. She pocketed her vape after I glared at her when she blew apple-scented smoke on my face.

“I’m not telling you that,” I said. I was sorting the contracts and papers on my desk that had been piling up for five days, and it was a miracle that I didn’t snap at Clair to get out of my office because I was behind work.

But at the end of the day, nothing was more important than prioritizing Reagan.

“You just introduced her as your fiancée to me and Mont a week ago.”

“Oh, that was fake. I just needed my parents to see that I was in a committed relationship.”

“So you’re *not* in a committed relationship?”

“I am.”

“I—I’m confused.”

“Well, as it appeared, Reagan’s my girlfriend now. But she’s not my fiancée.” Still, a puzzled look was on her face. I wanted to laugh at her. It was confusing come to think of it. But if Reagan and I were on the same page, I was okay with it.

“You met her what—two, three months ago?” I understood where Clair was coming from and that all her interrogation was coming from a good place. She cared about me and she wanted to check that I wasn’t out of my mind.

“Soul ties, Clair. Reagan said it’s a real thing.” Yes, Reagan had talked my ear off about what soul ties were, and I knew there was no such thing as that. I had fallen in love with her because of who she was, not because of some stupid tie.

Even if Reagan hadn’t ended up in Florida, or even if her family and I hadn’t crossed paths, I knew that I wouldn’t have settled for anyone who wasn’t her. Eventually, I would find her no matter where in the world she was. It was just inevitable. Because that woman was made for me.

“And what about Ryan St. James? Are you two okay now?”

“No. But he’s in Indonesia now, which means I’m not going to see his face any time soon.”

“And the father?”

“I don’t give a shit about him as long as he doesn’t come to my city.”

“And Reagan?”

“What about her?”

“The staff are talking about her. That she’s sleeping with the boss.” I had anticipated this since the first night we slept together. It was something I didn’t have control over. But I knew that Reagan and I weren’t doing something that wrong. Everything was fair between us.

“But Reagan *is* sleeping with the boss. That’s a fact, but I guess that she doesn’t need to confirm or deny that. Besides, nothing has changed with her employee status here except that she’s asked to play the piano for events.”

“Don’t you think that’s enough reason for the staff to have questions? After all, you’ve given her a pass to play for the VIPs and receive a much bigger salary.”

“If any of the staff can show themselves to be a better pianist than her, then we can talk. But knowing that there is no one here better than her, she has the right to play. Don’t you think?”

“Right.” Clair nodded, unconvinced. I got the feeling that she wasn’t entirely sold about my excuse. But she didn’t say anything because she had known me since we were teenagers. I was a calculated man, and I didn’t make decisions irrationally. But Reagan? Well, let’s just say that I was sure of her from day one. It just took a little more time to understand what my feelings were than it should have.

“Clair?” I called before she could leave.

“Thanks for your discretion. And please, cut her some slack. I told her that you knew and that she could repay you by not fighting with the other employees.”

“As long as you’re happy with her, I’m going to give her the benefit of the doubt. But if she starts more fights, you’ll be hearing from me.”

“And I’ll make sure she’s going to be held accountable for that.”

The rest of the day was busy for me. I was able to finish reading half of the

paperwork on my desk. And for once in my life, I didn't worry about anything. And the fact that Ryan St. James had told me the truth, made my hatred for him less intense.

I did my research on Parker St. James, and again reviewed all our finances, the deliveries, the imports, and the exports—Ryan was right. There had been a strain on sales, and the delayed deliveries to the international market only made the decline worse. The evidence was difficult to find, it was a marginal error that had a major effect. A very minor error had cost us millions.

And when I discovered it, I didn't feel like shit. Because Parker St. James was over. And sure, I had great hopes for it back in the day, but I was young then. And I didn't know how to be a good businessman. I didn't take care of it. Now that I had experience, now that I knew where I went wrong before, I wasn't going to let it happen again.

Because this hotel meant the world to me, it gave me a good network of people and good friends in the business. And it gave me Reagan.

And Reagan kept me on my toes. She gave me a reason to live again. She had been this feisty ball of energy that I could never get enough of. She challenged me, she calmed me. She was my anchor and my sail, keeping me steady and pushing me forward.

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“Can you believe this is our first date ever? Like a legitimate date,” she said, grabbing her glass of wine before sipping at it. Tonight, she wore her hair up, and her eye was almost healed enough to be covered up by foundation. She looked exquisitely delicious in her berry-colored, ruched dress that sculpted her figure to perfection. I couldn't wait until we got home later tonight.



The date was spontaneous. It was our first day back to work after making it official, and I thought it would be nice to celebrate. She had shared her complaints earlier about some staff that whispered about our relationship in the halls or in the kitchen. But she said she didn't care. She was happy and nothing would ruin it for her.

"That's not true," I corrected, slicing my medium rare steak. "We went to McDonald's that night and ate in the parking lot even if it was a total inconvenience."

"That wasn't a date. I doubt you even liked me then," she teased, smirking at me. She was breathtaking. And I didn't know if it was possible that my love for her only intensified every day. Each morning, when I woke up with her arms around me, I thought to myself how much I loved her more than yesterday.

"I think I liked you since *Clair de Lune*. And I loved you since *Prelude in C Major*."

She froze at me naming the tunes she had played that night. And I couldn't help but remember the first time I heard her play. It had stirred something in me that glued me in place outside that banquet hall. I immediately knew that she belonged there. Playing that piano. On that stage. The next course of action was simply deciding which event I was going to let her start playing at so the world could see how great she was.

"You know all the pieces I play?"

"I learned them in school before, and you gave a deeper meaning to them. Because I fall in love with you even more when you play the piano."

"I love you, too," she smiled an endearing grin, her lips quivering as she was moved by my confession. "Every tune I play, I play for you. Remember that."

“Even the sad ones?”

“Even the sad ones.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# Reagan

*Two Months Later*  
**T**he chandeliers glowed, bathing the elegant emptiness of the banquet hall.

My elbow rested against the piano as my other hand played with the keys, a pencil tucked between my fingers.

A half-empty music sheet was perched on the desk. Notes, lines, and names were scribbled on them, and the corner doodles were made by Mommy when she'd have trouble writing music. She'd hum while she drew little hearts or flowers on the sides. And when inspiration caught her, she'd continue adding notes.

Although this sheet was the last one she wrote, she had been planning that we write this together. But then the accident happened. I didn't have the heart to pick it up and finish it. Yet I had packed it with me to Florida when I left home, thinking that it would make me feel like she went with me.

And when I woke up this morning, I asked Matthew if we could stop by my place. And I dug this sucker out of one of my boxes and brought it to work

with me so I could start adding notes until I finished it.

“I’ve been waiting for you to play a piece for ten minutes.” I jumped at Matthew’s voice, my elbow slipping and hitting a few keys.

“You scared me,” I gasped as my hand went to my chest to steady my heartbeat.

I had been waiting for him here until he’d finished whatever it was he was doing. And sometimes, I thought he intentionally dragged his work out to let me play for a while.

It had been two months since the fiasco. Two months since Matthew said he loved me. Two months since Ryan left and went back to Bali. Two months of contemplating whether I should call Daddy. But I had made a mental decision that I was going to try and talk to him on the holidays, which gave me ample time to think about how I wanted it would go.

“Keep playing,” he demanded. He was wearing his coat now, telling me he was ready to go. But I wanted to show him this piece. Because it was like introducing my mother to the man I loved, and I couldn’t think of a much better way.

“Come and sit,” I said, tapping the space on the piano bench beside me, scooting a little to the side for him. “Tell me how this sounds,” I asked as my fingers started playing the tune. It took a lot of courage to play it because the melody, when played nonstop, made me remember Mommy. And how the music had echoed in every corner of the sunroom when she was alive.

I could hear her say, “It’s not done yet, baby.”

“I’ll help you.”

And that was that. I’d sit beside her every afternoon to complete it. Until we couldn’t write anymore.

“I don’t know this one,” Matthew said softly once I was done playing the

unfinished melody.

“It’s a personal composition. Mommy and I started writing it but she died before we could finish it. And then I didn’t have the heart to finish it.”

“And now? What changed?”

“Well, I’m happier now. I have you. Ryan’s okay. A lot has changed.”

Matthew tucked loose hair behind my ear, kissing me softly on the cheek. Perhaps he could sense the sorrow in my heart from yearning for my mother. But even so, I was blessed to have him here, and I didn’t want it any other way.

“What’s it called?”

“I don’t know yet,” I breathed. “Maybe I’ll think of the title once it’s done.”

“If I had known I’d met you in this lifetime, Reagan, maybe I would’ve put more effort into learning to play the piano.”

“You never learned to play?”

“I did the basics. Nursery rhymes, a little of Mozart,” he shared, his fingers moving perfectly over the keys. “But then I stopped and forgot about all of them.” He brought his right hand to the fifth octave and his fingers perfectly pressed the keys.

“Do you want me to teach you something?”

“You can’t teach me *Clair de Lune* in one sitting,” he joked, chuckling. And I laughed with him. “But if it would make you happy, I’m going to try and learn.”

“It’s not *Clair de Lune*,” I said. And I showed him the five keys to press for the octave he was in. “C, D, E, F, G. Those are the keys you need, okay?” We practiced a few more times until he perfected it. And I clapped my hands at him.

“That’s it?” He beamed like he had just learned the most difficult song of

all time.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I want you to keep playing that.” As he played the melody part of the song, I went to match it with the base. And I never thought I’d be playing *Heart and Soul* by Hoagy Carmichael with someone who meant the world to me.

“Maybe I should just be on the sidelines watching you play,” he laughed when he missed a key and we stopped. Joy rushed through my bloodstream at the short time we had shared the piano.

“And fall in love with me over again?”

“Again and again.” He smiled as he slowly lowered his lips to mine.

# EPILOGUE

MATTHEW

**7** *Months Later*

The moon glinted against the ocean as I listened to Reagan play Frédéric Chopin's *Nocturne in E-flat Major, Op. 9, No. 2* in a silver dress that rained down from her waist to the stage below. And the crowd of people who were dining in the three-story hall, all looking at her, listening to her tangle them in her web of music.

I wore a tailored suit and a necktie to match her dress as I sat at a table amidst the throng of guests.

The atmosphere was filled with an air of elegance, and the clinking of silverware against fine china filled the background of Reagan's soft tunes, a sign that the passengers were enjoying dinner.

She played like an angel on the stage, the light casting a low, seductive glow on her hair. My girlfriend. My Reagan. I had never seen a talent like hers.

So did my friend apparently, because Adrian Blackwood had been so mesmerized with the way she played during the Global Business Gala that he

invited her to perform on his cruise ship.

And that was exactly where we were.

It was a one-month cruise to Europe for the month of February, and Reagan was going to play every night. She was ecstatic at the chance and loved every second of it. Because she knew in her veins that that was what she wanted to be doing for the rest of her life.

She was slowly and surely making a name for herself. A lot of my business colleagues had called me to ask about her availability and if she would be willing to play for them in establishments, at their homes, and at their parties. If Reagan could have done so, she'd have said yes to them all.

And she did try. Except for the ones that would conflict with her booking schedule. And even then, it broke her heart that she had to cancel.

As for me, she had been my personal music box. Because I convinced her to move in with me after weeks of begging. Promising to get her own grand piano for the penthouse was the thing that did it. And it was worth every penny. Because day and night, Reagan filled my home with not only love but her music.

The current song came closed out two and a half hour set. The dining hall was filled with applause and cheers, boosting her confidence that she had done a fantastic job. Not that she needed this confirmation. She knew she was good. All she wanted was to play for people.

And that was my cue to stand from my chair.

When my woman played her music, it was non-negotiable that I personally handed her a bouquet of flowers every time. It was the first thing on her contract. And everybody who wanted her to play had to allow me to be the first and only person to touch her on stage.

I felt the weight of the thing in my pocket. The small velvet box had been in



my possession for five months. I had only needed the perfect place and time to do it. I even made the move to contact Ryan from Indonesia to tell him I was going to marry his sister. Reagan would want that. And I was willing to put aside my pride so I could show her how much I respected her.

Inside the box was a symbol of my promise that I would love her and spoil her until I died. And when I did, I'd make sure everything I owned would go to her.

Tonight, there were no flowers.

When I climbed to the stage, whistles from the guests continued, and flashes of cameras snapped in her direction.

I snaked my hand around her waist and she leaned into my touch, knowing that I'd be the first person to greet her once she was done.

She turned with muscle memory to grab the bouquet that wasn't there, and then she'd usually take a step back and give it back to me. It was a gesture of love and loving in return.

She looked at me now, her brows softly furrowed at the absence of flowers. Reagan loved her flowers. She kept them in multiple vases in our room and in the penthouse. Now that she was here on the ship, our luxury room smelled and looked like a garden.

"Where's my flowers?"

"You'll get them, darling."

And I went on one knee as the crowd hummed with awe, and whispers of surprise filled the room, knowing where this was going.

Reagan's eyes grew wide as she gasped, pressing a hand on her chest, her eyes watering. She was shaking in nervousness and bliss.

"Reagan St. James," I proclaimed, her name the sweetest thing that had ever graced my lips. "Your music has filled my life with unforgettable

serenity. From the day I first heard you play, I knew you were going bring me to my knees.”

Her lips wobbled as tears streamed down her face. She didn’t even care about the crowd that was flashing their phones at us, watching us. Suddenly, the world was quiet and she was all there was—she was all that mattered. I continued. “You are the most beautiful, smartest, infuriating woman I know.” An echo of laughter followed. “Challenge me for the rest of my life, darling. Ground me. Let me hear your music every day. Marry me, Reagan.”

And she wept, nodding her head. “Yes! Yes, Matthew.” Then I rose to my feet, kissing her on the lips in front of everyone. Although I had wanted a more intimate proposal than this, I thought that the world needed to know Reagan was mine. And I was not letting her go.

I slipped the diamond ring on her finger, her hands shaking as she watched. It wasn’t the same ring I gave her when I proposed. This was more expensive, of course. Etched inside the band were the words “Au Clair de Lune”.

Because she caught me at *Clair de Lune*. And she would forever be my light in the darkest of nights.

THE END

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*Love,*

*Leah*

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