



**HIS  
BRIDE**

*Bargain*

LAYLA VALENTINE

# HIS BRIDE BARGAIN



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## Epilogue

Also by Layla Valentine

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## CHAPTER 1

## CANDICE



**T**he red light of the sign declaring this building to be Fletcher Tech HQ leaks down the glass and I take a deep breath. I've imagined this tower a hundred times and dreamed of what it must be like inside. I've spent so many nights in my shitty student apartment on the other side of the country knowing that it's my fate to come here, knowing that I would step through those doors and find myself surrounded by success.

Inside this building are some of the most intelligent people and some of the most cutting-edge tech in the world. And now I get to be part of it.

All my hard work has been leading up to this point — to be an intern at one of the world's top tech companies. One of only six interns chosen for this year's competition.

It's a pretty big deal.

So here I am, in my most expensive pantsuit that I took to the dry cleaners and everything, fresh out of college, in a new city, wavering on the threshold of my new life. I take another breath. I won't be intimidated. I have dragged myself through years of struggling and built myself up from nothing. I can do this.

The revolving door does another loop. I count to five, and the next time an opening swings past me, I step in.

As I walk into the cavernous atrium, my heels click against what looks like a solid-granite flooring. I'm sure it is, honestly. It's not like Fletcher Tech

couldn't afford to be made of gold if they wanted to be. There are certain pros to being one of the biggest companies in the world.

I don't know why, but I'd imagined this part of the building to be empty, devoid of any life except for a lone receptionist, perhaps. Instead, it's bustling. Women and men dart back and forth, all dressed in smart suits and skirts and not one hair out of place. Some people travel in groups, leaning in close as they have hushed and excited discussions; others dart across the floor with armfuls of papers or boxes filled with wires and components. One woman taps her foot, waiting for the elevator, and when it finally arrives, she rushes in and jabs at the "close door" button until it obeys.

If I hadn't been nervous before, I definitely am now. Still, appearances are everything, so I hold my head high and stride across to the reception desk, hoping I don't look too much like a lost child ready to be shown the door, even if I really feel like one.

"Hello," I say to the receptionist, interrupting whatever document she's busy typing.

She doesn't look up at me until she's finished whatever thought she's busy having, and when she does she glares so many daggers that I might as well have been stabbed. "Welcome to Fletcher Tech. How can I help?" she says, but her smile and tone are anything but friendly.

I guess customer service isn't one of the things they teach the admins here.

I stand firm, resisting the urge to slouch and fold my arms or, worse, turn and make a break for the door, caving in to the anxiety in my chest. "I'm here for the summer intern program. I was wondering if you could tell me where I'm meant to go?"

She doesn't sigh and roll her eyes, but she might as well have, given the contempt with which she directs me. "Take the east elevator. Fourteenth floor. Keep going to the end of the corridor, turn right. It's the meeting room third on the left."

With that, she turns her attention back to her three computer screens and resumes typing so fast that her fingers start to blur. Impressive, if a little scary. I'm glad I don't have more questions; I don't think they'd be



answered.

Slowly, I back away from the desk and look around me as subtly as I can. Of course, neither of the two elevators are labeled, and people seem to be going into both of them pretty equally. The door opens for the one on the left, so I decide to go for it and hope for the best. I have some vague thoughts about sunrise and east and trying to remember where the sun is now, but standing there trying to work it out would have made me look like the kind of person I'm trying not to be.

I am assertive. I am confident. I am good enough.

I march to the elevator and slide inside.

A bunch of other people get in with me and I'm treated to a weird mix of expensive perfumes and pungent aftershave that would have given me a headache if I hadn't been able to escape it. Better than body odor at least. Nobody looks twice at me, which is a good thing. If people are ignoring me, then I must blend in at least a little bit.

It takes forever to get to the fourteenth floor and my imagination is starting to run wild with every creak and groan the elevator makes. About the worst thing that could happen right now is to get trapped in here. That would be a disaster for my first impressions. I'm already running kind of late as it is.

Fortunately, the elevator doors do slide open and I'm spat out along with several other people. I follow them to the end of the corridor as instructed, but I'm starting to get nervous that I've got this wrong again so I half-run to catch up to one of the wandering men.

He's tall and imposing, and though he can't be much older than forty, he's prematurely balding and graying, which gives him the look of someone who has been here for such a long time that he's integral to the operation of the place. Maybe he *is* an important guy. I don't want to talk to him, but it's this or being so embarrassingly tardy that I might as well go home.

"Excuse me," I call.

He turns, startled. His expression is one of the sternest I've ever seen, and a knot of fear twists in my gut until he says, kindly, "Can I help you, miss?"

“Um, yeah. Do you know where the summer interns are meeting? I think it’s in a room on this floor.”

He frowns, drawing his bushy eyebrows together. I brace myself for him to tell me to get lost, but then he nods slowly, as if he’s mapping where to go inside his head. “Intern time again already, huh? Follow me.”

Without warning, he turns on his heel and marches off. His strides are so long that I almost have to run to keep up, blindly following as we turn round corners that all look the same to my untrained eye. “You planning to win this year?” he asks, not looking back at me.

“Sure am,” I say, and mean it. Only one intern gets a job here after every summer, and this year it’s going to be me. I didn’t do all this work to get here only to leave in four weeks’ time empty-handed.

The man chuckles wryly. “Oh, for the confidence of youth.”

He halts suddenly outside a conference room and gestures to it. “Here you go. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I smile, and he smiles back before continuing on his way.

At least someone in this company has a heart. It gives me hope that this is the kind of place I could succeed in after all. It’s not full just of rich old men who scoff at the idea of progress and sit counting all their money, laughing maniacally as the serfs get underpaid and overworked doing their bidding.

Okay, maybe that’s a little too cartoon villain. My mind is starting to run away with itself.

For the second time today, I stand outside a door, building up my courage. I’m going to be judged from the moment I walk in, so I’m determined to be noticed in a good way. I’m going to hold myself tall and dazzle them all with my eloquence and posture. I’m going to smile and be knowledgeable and amazing.

I am going to win.

I give myself one long second to close my eyes and draw a breath, then grab the handle of the door and enter.

## CHAPTER 2

## CANDICE



**T**he good news is, I'm not the last to arrive. But I could have been earlier. Four of the six are already here, getting to know each other, casting judgments and forming alliances. Not great. They all pause their conversation to stare at me, eight eyes burning into me like they're luring me into a web to eat me.

I will not be intimidated, not by anything.

I stride over and dazzle them with my best smile. "Hi, I'm Candice," I say, holding out my hand.

"Blair," says the first boy, taking my hand firmly. He has beachy-blond hair and the kind of white teeth and obnoxious personality you only get from money. Already, I'm clocking him as one to watch, if only for the bribe money he might have on hand.

"Daniel." The second boy has a weaker grip and a softer voice, but he's turned out to perfection, his head shaved, his dark skin moisturized and flawless. He has a kind smile. Maybe I could at least have one person to be friends with here, if he isn't going to be as nasty and cutthroat as the others. I need that kind of support. The isolation is what I'm looking forward to least about all this.

"Louise." I'm glad to see another girl here, but despite her round glasses, she has sharp eyes that suggest she's going to be hard competition. I don't want to make any assumptions about her yet, but I don't think she's quite the pushover her appearance would make you think.

The final boy has the tightest grip of all. “Kyle,” he drawls. This guy clearly thinks he’s the boss. He’s wearing an expensive suit and musky deodorant. Clearly, he’s used to being the leader of his clique. He looks down his nose at me, despite only being a couple of inches taller, and sneers. “Where have *you* come from?”

I stand my ground, looking him firmly in the eye. “I just graduated from Michigan. Summa cum laude.”

Kyle raises his eyebrows in judgment at that. I let it slide over me. I have no doubt these kids all went to MIT or Berkeley or whatever, but I’m proud of my degree. I got that scholarship as a result of so much sweat and tears, so many sleepless nights, so I don’t really care what degree Kyle’s mommy’s money bought him. I worked for it, and I got the grades to prove it. No one can take that from me.

To my relief, the focus shifts quickly back to their previous topic of discussion.

The relief is short-lived though, because Kyle has started bragging about his three-month stint in Ethiopia volunteering to help the poor, starving children. I share a look with Daniel, but then he goes ahead and details his European gap year, utterly shattering any brief sense of camaraderie I’d felt. He tells us about Paris and Athens and Ljubljana, and I wish I had a map.

I decide not to add anything else to this conversation, instead resigning myself to asking the occasional question, nodding and smiling to engage. The furthest I’ve ever traveled was Canada, once.

I thought that was pretty fun.

Blair is halfway through telling us about his prize-winning teenage entrepreneur project that he directed and created and organized and bossed his friends about for when the door swings open again. We all turn to look.

In walks another young man with the straight teeth, ideal physique, the slick, styled hair of a model and the most piercingly blue eyes I’ve ever seen. It almost looks like there’s an aura around him from the way he walks with such confidence and self-assurance, and when he flashes us an easy grin, the thought *wow, he’s hot* runs through my mind unbidden.

I frown at myself for thinking it — there's no way I'm going to get caught up in anything as messy as feelings. But I'm not wrong. His suit must be tailored, because it fits him like a second skin, the blue of his shirt bringing out his eyes, the paisley on his tie suggesting he's suave but not boring.

He strolls over like this is the most casual event in the world and not something that stands to change all of our lives forever. I guess if you've got the money, opportunities are as easy to find as daisies.

“Hey,” he says. His smile is broad and, now I'm looking closer, ever so slightly crooked. It's charming. “I'm Aiden Fisher.”

We all mumble our hellos and shake his hand. He lingers a little as he holds my hand, his eyes meeting mine. When he smiles, a jolt of attraction shoots through me. When he lets go of my hand, I almost wish he hadn't.

“Where did you graduate from?” asks Kyle. I'm glad to see it's not only me whom he's treating with this much suspicion.

Aiden shrugs. “Harvard. Not that the hiring team will give a damn about that. They'll be basing their decision on how we perform here, not on our résumés.”

Kyle's face crumples like he's swallowed a lemon. He manages to recover quickly, but not before we've all seen him flounder. Aiden shoots me a wink, and I can't help but smile in relief. We're all here to win, but it's good to know I have an ally at last.

The interrogation goes no further than that because the door swinging open interrupts us again. This time, though, we stay silent. The CEO of Fletcher Tech isn't the kind of guy you talk over, especially not when you're trying to persuade him to give you a job.

“Sit,” commands Mr. Fletcher, and we all obey.

He walks slowly and deliberately to the head of the table and places his palms on its surface so he can loom over us. I bet this is his favorite time of year, scaring all the new interns. I clench my fists under the table and fight to keep my face a pleasant neutral.

“You're already the best of the best. That's why you're here. A Fletcher Tech

internship is something that looks good on anyone's résumé — job or no job. But this is business, and if you're expecting an easy ride, you should quit now. This isn't a game. There'll be no prize for petty sabotage or teenage bullshit. The job will go to whoever proves to me they can work hard enough for it."

My heart is racing in my throat. No matter what Mr. Fletcher says, all my rivals are out for blood and they won't hesitate to spill it. I guess that's what he's trying to show us — you have to look like you're in the right, even if you're doing dirty deals behind people's backs.

Am I cutthroat enough to do this? Working hard is what I'm all about. It's all I know.

"You'll be getting the full program documentation later today. I expect you all to read it. Ask questions if you have to. But don't ever be late. I expect all my employees to know exactly what they're doing every day, and for the next four weeks, that's what you are."

We all nod, mute in terror or excitement, it's hard to tell. Blair and Louise look like they're caught in the headlights about to get run over. Kyle has that same smug smirk he's worn since I arrived. Daniel and I both have the same look in our eyes: awe, fear, and determination.

Only Aiden looks at all relaxed, almost slumped in his chair. What makes him so cocky that he thinks he can slouch like that? He barely even looks like he's listening.

I stare at him for maybe a little too long, and he must notice me looking at the absolute lack of tension in his square jaw and broad shoulders because he glances over at me and wiggles his eyebrows. I look away sharply, a hot blush rising in my cheeks making them cherry-red.

Ugh! I don't have time for this!

I push all of my swirling emotions down and focus hard on Mr. Fletcher. I can work through all this stuff later. Right now, I want to know what we're doing.

"Now, who wants to sit in a development meeting for the new Fletch phone?" All our hands shoot into the air, and Mr. Fletcher grins wickedly. "Good.

We're going to have a little competition for it."



## CHAPTER 3

## CANDICE



“Fletcher Tech support. This is Candice, how can I help you?”

A sharp-voiced woman answers. “Yes, hello, I want to know why my cloud storage has been offline for three days after you *assured* me you were looking into it and you’d have it fixed as soon as possible. Don’t you know how much damage this is doing to my business?”

She ploughs through her monologue, and I listen politely, offering her bland apologies and reassurances. “Could I get your name, please?” I ask, to which she scoffs.

Day one of working at a tech firm, and I’m answering the phone. Not exactly what I expected.

But I’m handling it better than some of the others, who have clearly never had to do a day of work in their lives. I had a call-center job for a while as a teenager so I know exactly how to tune out the angry tirades of customers who think they know better about everything, especially when they don’t.

The key is to stay calm, something that Kyle’s really struggling with. He’s yelling at a customer right now.

I won’t let smugness distract me, though. I have my eyes on the prize. I want to see innovation where it happens, and that means being quick and polite. No one’s going to complain about *me*.

It takes me about three and a half minutes to figure out what’s wrong with the woman’s connection and to walk her through fixing it. She’s not as eternally

grateful to me as she should be, but at least I get a “thank you very much,” which I take as a win.

I place the phone back down in its cradle, closing my eyes to enjoy the brief moment between people’s problems.

“Hey,” hisses Aiden beside me, leaning in over the desk like he’s got a secret. “What’s up?”

“Same as you, probably,” I say, raising my eyebrow.

He has this cheeky grin that should spell trouble, but he’s the only one who actually seems to want to talk to me like a human being at all, so I decide to give him a chance.

Plus, he’s kind of cute.

“This is super annoying,” he sighs.

“Tell me about it,” I say, my own eyebrow raised. “You ever had a job before?”

He shrugs. “Kind of. My dad owns a company and I’ve done a bit of stuff for him — transcribing meetings, writing up minutes, that kind of thing.”

I nod almost in approval. I bet it’s more than any of the others have done. They all come from money. Aiden is the only one who seems like a normal guy. “What does he do? Your dad?”

“Oh, tech stuff,” he says waving his hand like I’m a crumb he’s brushing away. Interesting. The more evasive and defensive he’s going to be, the more I’m going to want to crack him open. I enjoy a challenge.

I’m interrupted by my phone ringing again, so I pick up and help walk yet another baffled customer through a set of instructions that I would have considered easy. How hard is it to figure out that you’re meant to follow the completely logic set of menus? At least this one’s not yelling. I’ll take the small wins.

“They’re annoying, aren’t they?” Aiden asks when I put my phone back down. He’s typing with one hand, lazily replying to the live chat as he looks at me.

“Yeah. Don’t you want to win the contest?” I gesture at his slouch, to which he shrugs again.

“Eh, I’ve sat in on meetings in the past. I figure it’s best to give it to someone who cares about the prize. Like you.”

I open my mouth and shut it again, not quite sure what to say until I stutter, “Well, yeah, but... it’s not about the meeting, really. It’s about the — I don’t know, the pride?”

He laughs at that and I’m not quite sure why. It’s not a nasty laugh, not at all like he’s making fun of me. But it is a weird reaction. I turn in my seat to face him. “What, you don’t care about the job at all?”

“Course I do,” he scoffs. “But you honestly think Michael Fletcher is going to give the job to someone as uptight as Daniel or as arrogant as Kyle? No way. I’ve looked at the people he’s hired. They’re not it. They might be smart and they might be going places, but that place won’t be here. I’m telling you that for a fact.”

“First-name terms with the CEO, huh?” I say, ignoring the cocky confidence he has. It’s amazing to me that these people can say such brazen things without a single ounce of humility. Not that I doubt myself, because I don’t. It’s just that, unlike some, I don’t like to brag.

Aiden’s face does something really weird at my teasing, and I put that in my bag of threads to pull on at a later date. Something about him utterly fascinates me.

“He’s not that special of a guy,” Aiden mumbles. Then, before I can ask anything else at all, he changes the subject. “Don’t you hate it when they make all these demands but don’t actually give you anything to work with?”

“Yeah,” I chuckle. “God forbid they, like, give you their name or company or anything. I think they expect us to be psychic.”

“Nah, not even that. We’re little machines to them. They’re the kind of people who would make a scene in a restaurant to get free food.”

“They’re the *worst!*” I agree, laughing with him until the phones ring again. “Here we go,” I sigh, rolling my eyes dramatically to make him smile. And

he does smile. It shines out of him, this grin that doesn't have a trace of condescension in it. Even once I've picked up the phone, he keeps looking at me, and it takes strength not to stare right back into those blue eyes.

Our conversation stays light after that, complaining about stupid customers and laughing about past hellish work experiences. Blair keeps glancing over at us and scowling like he's scared of fun, but I don't care. It's a relief to have a friend.

Even if he's a very attractive friend with the kind of honeyed, soft-spoken voice I could listen to for hours. Even hearing him on the phone is a delight.

Maybe having one or two feelings for the guy can't hurt, right?

When three p.m. rolls around, my throat hurts from all the customers I've served and I'm tired all over my body, despite having been sat down. It takes a lot of concentration to be nice to nasty people.

We're all rounded back up and taken away to a conference room while they decide who won the contest. I have to sit on my hands to stop myself from fidgeting. I think I have a pretty good chance of actually winning this — I must have answered hundreds of questions today. Despite Aiden's distractions, I worked hard. I have a chance at this.

Mr. Fletcher marches in, grinning like a shark. "Louise," he says, holding her in his gaze. She snaps to attention, blinking in surprise. "Congratulations. You get to sit in on the meeting."

She mouths a small *me?* but recovers enough to say, "Thank you, sir," without stammering.

I sink back in my seat, trying not to let my disappointment show. I guess I should be happy for her, but I can't bring myself to be. I really wanted to win.

Louise follows Mr. Fletcher out, and the rest of us are left to have a break before we move on to our next activity.

Aiden reaches out and touches me on the arm, sending sparks all the way to my fingertips. "Cheer up," he says, drawing a smile over his mouth. "It'll be you next time."

I smile weakly back at him. It's nice to have his support, but still, I have doubts. What if he turns around and stabs me in the back?

## CHAPTER 4

## CANDICE



**A**iden slides into the seat next to me in the canteen, startling me out of my daydreams.

It's loud in here, almost like being at school again, except without the teenage hormones. The cliques and mind games are much the same. I didn't hate school, but I could have lived without the gossiping — I never had the patience to care about who was kissing who, or who had been caught cheating on that test, or who had the best grades, and isn't it so unfair because so-and-so is a shoo-in for prom queen? I wasn't exactly a loner, but I've always been good at doing my own thing.

“Hey, you mind?” he asks, even though he's already sat down.

I shake my head. “Go for it.”

Had it been anyone else, I would have refused, but the others wouldn't have even bothered coming over. They all eat alone, afraid of making friends or seeming weak. To them, bonding would mean losing the lead they think they're gaining. None of them act like human beings at all, except Aiden. He's got this gorgeously kind expression, the kind of smile that you believe in, and the kind of body you only get from being a gym regular.

Not that I've been looking. It's not illegal to notice if someone looks good. It doesn't have to mean anything.

He settles into a more comfortable position and beams at me. “Whatcha got?” he asks as he pops the lid off of his lunchbox. I don't know why, but it



surprises me that he has a lunchbox.

I shrug, suddenly embarrassed by his scrutiny. “I ran out to the deli — nothing special.”

“Oh, salad?”

“Yeah. I know it’s stupid to go to a health-fitness salad place—”

“It’s not,” he interrupts, without malice. In fact, he almost looks concerned, like he wants to tell me not to dismiss myself or something. He’s like a cat — he seems laid-back and disinterested, but he’s actually paying attention. I have to be careful what I say to him, because he’ll remember.

Would it be so bad to open up a little?

“They make great subs,” he continues, taking his own sandwiches out. He lays them carefully out on the lid, arranging them into a perfect square.

“Exactly,” I agree. He’s still looking at me in the kind of way that makes me want to lose myself in his eyes, so I try to change the subject back to him. “What’re you eating?”

He finishes his mouthful and wipes his mouth with a napkin before replying, and I can’t help wondering if he ever had etiquette lessons. Despite the nonchalance with which he treats the world, he is probably the politest person I’ve ever met. There are so many things about him that don’t make sense. It makes me want to dig. “It’s a little bit away, but there’s a café on seventeenth, Broken Cauldrons. Do you know it?”

“I’ve only been in Olympus City for a couple weeks. Plus, I don’t really do cafés that much — guess I’ve always been too busy grinding to find time to go.”

“Not a café-working kind of girl, huh?”

So maybe he’s not exactly the son of parents worth billions, but I still don’t want to admit that the real reason I can’t stand the bustle of cafés is the three years I spent working as a barista during college to make rent money. I think Aiden would get it more than the others, but he’s still wearing a tailored suit and expensive aftershave. And even though it smells really good, I don’t

think this guy could understand working yourself to the bone to stay afloat.

“No,” is all I say, trying not to frown too hard. “I like my own space.”

“Can *not* relate,” Aiden scoffs, though his disdain is directed inwards more than at me. “I’d have to pull my own teeth out if I tried to work at home.”

“How come?” I ask, allowing myself to be a little nosy. He knows enough about me. Time to learn a little about him.

He takes another bite of his lunch, as if to draw the time out. “You’ve got parents, right?”

“Yeah?” I string out the syllables of my confusion. *Where the hell is he going with this?*

“There you go, then. You know how it is.”

That absolutely did not answer my question. We eat in silence for a while, staring out at all the other workers coming and going. Many of them have bought hot food from the restaurant and are sitting down with friends and colleagues over fries and pizza and some fancy Italian pasta dish I’ve never heard of before. I’ve never seen an office with this much luxury food for lunch, but I guess Michael Fletcher is renowned for treating his workforce well.

It’s also damn expensive, and that’s why I’m here with a salad from the budget deli next door.

Finally, I find the nerve to dig deeper. “So, like, you don’t get on with your parents, then?”

He barks a sad laugh, as if in disbelief that I’d say something like that. “You get on with yours?”

This habit of answering a question with a question is going to get annoying pretty fast. “Yeah, for the most part. They try hard for me, and I want to give some of that back.”

“Huh,” is all he says as if he has to truly sit and contemplate my words. “That must be nice for you.”

“It is.”

What must his home life be like? I can't imagine getting this far without my parents' support. It reminds me I have to call them, to tell them how cool it is here, to see how they are. I guess Aiden mustn't be close to his parents at all. Everything he says makes his life more of a mystery, and the more I talk to him, the more I want to untangle it.

But before I can ask anything else, he changes the subject. “How's the reading going of the documentation for the talk app? You're on that team, right?”

Much as I want to interrogate him more, it's probably best not to rile him up too much. I might never get anything out of him if I push too hard. “Yeah, I am. It's good. Interesting. Dense, though.”

“I bet!” he chuckles. “My— This company always writes stuff in way too much detail.”

“More detail's better than too little,” I argue, letting myself smile at his stutter. He does that quite a lot, stumbles over words and cuts himself off halfway. It's kind of endearing. He's way smarter than he's letting on, and the others are definitely overlooking him as competition. They're mistaken to do that.

Aiden is incredibly sharp. That's why I'm trying my best not to get involved. But it's hard when he wears shirts that fit him so well that I can see every inch of his outline in perfect detail. It's hard when he's so genuinely kind to me as well as so manifestly handsome.

“True,” he says. “But don't you find that sometimes you get too bogged down in fine detail to move forward?”

“Details make up the whole picture.”

He smiles in a way I'd almost call adoration if I didn't know better. He is my rival. I cannot get involved in this. Even if he has gorgeous wide eyes. “You're going to go far, Candice.”

What am I meant to say to that? We're competition and yet he treats me like any other person, like one of us isn't going to come out the loser and be

disappointed. We're in a race, but it's like he's slowing down on purpose to let me overtake.

How am I meant to not fall head over heels for him?

## CHAPTER 5

## CANDICE



With a sigh, I lean back in my chair, its joints creaking and bending more than I'd like them to. Grimacing, I press the heel of my hand into my forehead, squeezing my eyes shut tight. I think I'm getting a headache. Again.

It's all the staring into computer screens and living in windowless rooms with buzzing fluorescent lights. My head and my eyes are paying the price.

Worth it to be doing this, though.

I'm working with Blair and Aiden, troubleshooting some of the code that's going to go into the new Fletcher operating system. The others are taking it seriously, but they don't seem to be *excited*. Every time I look at a new line, I get a thrill, a little electric buzz — because this is it. This is as high-end as code gets, and *I'm* allowed to stick my hands in and play with it. I expected this internship to be all carrying and fetching, but they're trusting us with so much. How can it not be sacred to them?

I'm also writing a meticulous technical document that I volunteered to do when none of the others wanted to. Really, we're supposed to be doing it all together, but delegating is a part of group work, and I'm a good writer.

"How's it going, Candy?" asks Blair, leaning around my screen to look at me.

"Don't call me that," I glare. There's nothing I hate more than sickly sweet nicknames, and my name is the worst for them. "It's good."

“You sure?” he asks.

I nod, giving him my very best *why don't you leave me alone?* look. “Yeah. How's it on your end?”

Either he doesn't get the cue or he's being deliberately obtuse. “Oh, good, yeah. It's easy, not as technical as your section.”

We have a huge chunk of code that we're supposed to go through, and we split it up into thirds between us. And because I'm wrangling our notes into real words, I got the shortest section. Maybe Blair wants to do less work. It wouldn't surprise me; he strikes me as the lazy type. I can imagine him as a boss very easily, the kind of manager who barks and snarls because he has no real power and wants to feel good about himself.

“Cool,” I reply, not really sure what he wants me to say. Deliberately, I sit back up and turn my attention to my screen, the little white symbols dancing like spots on the black background.

To my frustration, he doesn't move. “Yeah, I'm actually nearly done.”

“Okay...?”

“Well, I was thinking maybe you'd want to swap. You know. In case it was too hard.”

I sit bolt upright, shooting him the dirtiest look I can summon and raising my voice to levels I normally don't allow, even when I'm angry. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? I'm more than capable of anything *you* are.”

He moves away, raising his hands in surrender and his eyebrows like *I'm* being the unreasonable one. “Whoa, cool it, sunshine. I was only offering. I'm trying to look out for you. After all, it can't be fun being in last place.”

My mouth drops open, a furious rush pounding through my head, filling my face with heat. I'm too startled to think of a witty response. I bet he was a bully at school. I bet he was the type who'd steal your lunch money and laugh when you cried trying to get it back.

Then, to both my relief and annoyance, Aiden steps in. “Hey, Blair, back off. Leave her alone.”

Blair stands up to face Aiden, getting in his space like he thinks he's intimidating. But he's barely taller than Aiden and skinny as a beanpole, so all it looks like is an angry kid trying to assert some dominance. "Why don't you back off, lover boy? We all know you're crushing; you're as obvious as a traffic cone."

Aiden's face doesn't change, a mask of stoic calm. I wonder if *anything* could fluster him. "Just because you feel threatened, doesn't mean you should pick on people smarter than you."

"What, her?" Blair scoffs, looking back at me like I'm dirt he's scrubbed off his boot. "No one from *Michigan* ever got hired to Fletcher Tech."

"And they don't hire boneheads either." A flash of fury turns Aiden's eyes ice-blue. Even if his tone isn't giving him away, his clenched fists do.

"What's it to you, man? Are you in this to win it or not?" Blair folds his arms and for a second, it really looks like Aiden is about to throttle him.

"The best person is going to win this, and right now that's not looking like you, is it? At least Candice can do her own work by herself."

It shouldn't be possible, but the temperature in the room drops another ten degrees. I want to be mad with Aiden for jumping to my rescue as if I'm some helpless wench. I didn't even need rescuing at all, really. Blair's an annoying toad, and I can cope with that. He's the kind of guy that needs to bully other people to make up for his own lack of self-esteem. His comments cut, but after the rush, it won't bother me.

But Aiden's sweet and I can't be mad at him. No one else is going to stand up for me here. Even if I don't need it, it's good to know I have it. It's something I might need someday down the line, and it's not something I want to throw away.

I jump to my feet before things can escalate any further. "All right, boys, stop. I'm cool doing my own work, thanks. Why don't we each do what we're here to do? Or else we'll all look like slackers."

The expressions they both give me could not be more opposite. Aiden's got that wide-eyed concern, while Blair looks like a muzzled wolf. I know which one would leave me in the dirt if given half the chance.



But they both back off, fortunately, and return to their screens. Aiden leans over as if to try and soothe me, but I don't need that so I ignore him, focusing on my work. We have a lot to do, and it's got to be done by the end of the day. I don't care how much they hate me. I won't let my group fail because we're too busy trying to prove something to each other. Someone has to take the lead here, and their dick-measuring contest isn't getting us anywhere.

We don't say anything else, and I barely even realize time has gone by until one of the senior technicians wanders around to check on us. "How we doin' over here?" she asks in a thick Boston accent, a complete anomaly among all these other voices. She's been supervising us from afar all week, and she really knows her stuff.

I jump a little at being interrupted. "Oh, good, I think. I'm about getting to the end of the documentation, and I'm pretty sure Aiden and Blair are finishing up."

"Great. Can I?" She gestures to the screen and I wheel away to let her read over what I've done. My heart starts to beat nervously as she scrolls through it, her eyes darting over the lines as she skims my work.

I'm not totally sure if the occasional hums and nods are a positive, but when she straightens back up, she smiles approvingly. "Great job, kid. You've tidied that up perfectly."

I flush at the praise, unable to stop myself smiling. "Thank you."

She winks at me, then heads over to the boys. I don't really listen to the conversation, but I do hear her leveling them both suggestions to do better. It's amazing what praise can do, and getting the best review in the room can — well, I'm swimming in it, dizzy with elation. My heart is so light it could burst.

Lately, it's been beating like that over two things: code, and Aiden.

As I look over and watch him put a pencil in his mouth as he gets lost in thought, I think maybe it's time to stop lying to myself.

## CHAPTER 6

## CANDICE



I keep expecting someone to come in and kick me out. I've never stayed in an office this late, and though I could go home and work on this, it's nice to have a mouse and a big screen. Sitting in bed with my laptop into the early hours isn't the right vibe.

After all, this presentation could make or break my career.

Not that this office exactly has a nice vibe. We've been given free rein of one of the IT suites on the third floor, an old one that no one else uses other than students and interns. None of the computers have updated software, and all the lights hum and crackle like they're about to burst and shower me in sparks.

Earlier, I managed to snoop over the shoulders of Blair and Kyle, and their presentations could have been copied from each other. Literally no original thought in either of them, and some really ugly design too. Which is a relief, because Kyle is probably my biggest rival here. He has that edge of determination that Blair lacks, a confidence that Louise hasn't got, the businessman-like hard edge that makes Daniel look kind in comparison, and the assurance of having grown up securely, something neither me nor Aiden ever had.

Out of everyone, I'm most worried about Kyle beating me. I'd almost respect the others if they got the job. Almost.

Anyway, that's why my presentation has to be the best.

But I'm tired and my eyes hurt and I'm not making any progress fast. Maybe I should cut my losses and go home. It is almost nine p.m. One more hour, and if I'm still not getting anywhere, I'll admit defeat.

I crack my knuckles and roll my neck, wincing at the way my body crunches and aches. I need to start doing yoga in the mornings again. When I get the job, I'll do yoga and eat a salad every day. Healthy Candice begins with employed, no-longer-a-student Candice.

Just as I'm trying to force myself to get something done, the door swings open.

I jump to my feet. "Look, I can explain—" I start, until the intruder grins at me.

"Hey," says Aiden, leaning against the doorframe like he owns the place. "How's it going?"

Relief, exhaustion, and a hundred other emotions surge through me as I drop back into the chair, slumping. "Aiden..." is all I manage.

"Bingo," he says, striding over and slinging himself into the seat next to mine. "Long day?"

"You wouldn't believe," I sigh. "I feel like I've been here forever."

"Presentation?" he asks, and I nod.

He leans in as if to look at my screen, his arm getting so close to mine that a static charge prickles between us, making the hairs stand on end. I turn off the monitor before he can read anything. I don't believe he'd copy, but I'm not taking any chances. Too harshly, I snap, "Aiden, what the hell are you doing here? I don't need your help with this."

Like he's been stung, he reels back. "Sorry. I didn't realize I was interrupting. I... I wanted to come and see you."

"Why?" I ask, incredulous, even though my racing heart is betraying the cool exterior I'm showing.

Surely there's only one reason you'd come and find someone after hours just to "see them," and it doesn't have a whole lot to do with working.

“I like spending time with you,” he says, a blush rising under his sharp cheekbones. He shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels. I’ve never seen him so flustered. “I can go if you want.”

He stands up, taking a step back towards the door. “Wait, no,” I say, rising to my feet.

It goes against everything I think I stand for to do this, but I’ve been working so hard, and he truly seems to *like* me — and I just want a little distraction. A little relief from all the fighting. Just to believe, for one night, that someone might actually want me for who I am and not some watered-down version they think they want.

Aiden freezes, planting a palm on the desk as if to steady himself. I step towards him, closing the space until we’re close enough for me to see the scattering of freckles over his nose, his pulse throbbing in his neck. God, he’s cute. And hot. And sweet.

*I’ve got it bad.*

*I’d better not be making a mistake.*

Slowly, I lean in, my eyes flicking between his own and his lips. “You wanted me?” I ask breathily.

“Yes,” he whispers, licking his lips. “Since the moment we met.”

I don’t ask any other questions because our bodies are giving us all the answers we could ever need. As our lips touch, a warm rush of joy crashes over me like waves because this is so, so right. His hands rest on my hips and pull me in, my own hands roaming his face, his chest, his arms, and they all feel so good. It’s like learning a language and having a conversation in it for the first time and truly understanding every word.

It’s like our bodies have been waiting for this moment.

His hands tighten on me and before I realize what’s happening, he rotates us to push me against the desk, the edge digging into my spine as the kiss deepens, lengthens, pulls time to a halt everywhere except for the moment we’re bubbled inside. I don’t resist it at all, instead delighting in the way I’m messing up his perfect hair, kissing his perfect lips that taste ever so slightly

of creamy coffee.

Despite the fact that the AC is blasting, I'm suddenly so hot I'm sweating, so I break away for a second to wrestle my cardigan from my shoulders. Aiden helps me wiggle free but then his hands go for the top button of my shirt and I flinch away.

It's only when he steps back that I realize how nice the pressure of his thigh between my legs was. How much I have been aching for someone to touch me. How much I want it to be him.

"You okay?" he asks.

I nod, breathless, wiping my mouth before looping my hands around his neck. "Very. I've been wanting to do that for a long time."

He cocks a surprised eyebrow at me. "A long time?"

"At least a few weeks," I rasp, leaning in to catch his mouth in a kiss again. To my delight, the thrill of it isn't dampened the second time around, tremors of want tingling down my spine, puzzle pieces fitting together in ecstatic harmony.

He runs his tongue over my lips, then trails kisses over my cheek so he can whisper in my ear, "We've only known each other a few weeks."

"Exactly." I gasp as his kisses travel back down my face and neck, his teeth nipping at my tender skin, carefully enough not to leave a lasting mark. How would it feel for him to leave proof of our union on my skin? For me to do the same? As his lips brush over my collarbone, I let my eyes flicker shut, my head roll back, relishing in all the sensations of desire. It would be so easy for him to keep going.

I'm breaking my own heart as I pull the plug on us.

"Aiden," I say gently, pushing on his chest.

To his credit, he stops at once, his face only slightly twisted up in disappointment and confusion. It's not that I want him to stop. Right now, the hormones running through me would make me totally okay with him taking me here and now in the office, with him pushing my skirt up and running his

hands over my thighs, with him sinking to his knees and making me see the stars. Thinking about it is enough to make me want to burst.

But I can't. Not here. Not now.

The consequences of being caught like this in the office of my dreams don't bear thinking about. The scandal of two interns messing around on company premises would make me so utterly unemployable that I might as well give up. Even the hot wetness between my legs won't make me throw away the career I've always wanted.

"I'm sorry," I say, my voice catching. "It's not that I don't want you, it's just..."

"The job comes first," he says, resigned, trying his best not to frown too hard.

"Yeah." I reach out to take his hand. "Maybe when all this is over?"

He twines his fingers between mine. "Maybe."

It's cowardly, but I can't bear to face his disappointment anymore. I reach over to save my work and turn off the computer, the whirring of the fan turning off the only noise besides our breathing. He moves away, and I grab my bag and cardigan. "Sorry," I say again. "See you tomorrow?"

I barely wait for his response before I'm heading out the door, straightening myself out as I go, and he barely gives one. Only an affirmative hum follows me.

Still, as I cross the doorway, I can't help but look back at him.

## CHAPTER 7



## CANDICE



“**A**nd finally, Miss Metcalf, could you please explain why you thought it wasn’t necessary to change that piece of code when your colleagues disagreed?”

I take a breath to steady myself. I was expecting this question, but my palms are still sweating. All the lights in the room have dimmed except for the spotlight I’m in — the headlights I’m caught in, shone by the unwavering stares of managers and coders and colleagues, a spectrum ranging from neutral to bored to Kyle’s vindictive, beady eyes.

Only Aiden is smiling at me. He nods, his head only moving a fraction, but it’s an anchor. It’s stopping me from being washed away altogether.

This is something I prepared for. I swallow the lump in my throat and let myself look at Aiden until he’s the only person in the room. I can give a talk to him. We’ve discussed this hundreds of times, debated the pros and cons until there was nothing else to say. This is another late night in the office. Me and him. Alone.

“Yes, well, we spent a long time discussing it together, really. They both made good points about efficiency and bloated code, and I can see where they were coming from, but, as I argued to them, it’s always better, in my view, to have too many comments and more redundancy than you think you need.”

I’m kind of rambling, but I go back to the slide that shows the complicated sequence of loops and arrays at the end of our program and try to order my

thoughts more coherently. The good news is, it worked really well — we barely had any glitches in our app at all, to my relief. So much could have gone wrong. Almost everyone else's did have some major bugs, and it took me digging my nails into my palms to not grin in delight on hearing Kyle's mistakes.

We took some risks, and it was worth it. Because the examiner is right — it wasn't strictly best practice to do it the way I did it. But I stand by it, and I can tell him exactly why.

When I finally finish my answer, he nods slightly, his face inscrutable. I was hoping for at least a smile, but he gives me nothing.

I think I'm going to throw up.

“Thank you very much for your patience, Miss Metcalf. Your presentation was very interesting.”

As I head back to my seat, my legs are wobbling. “Interesting” could be good or bad, but he didn't say it in that way people do when they're trying to be nice. He grilled me hard, but I didn't break. I did the best I could do.

And despite my nerves, I did pretty damn good.

The lights come back up in the room, and most of the company staff get to their feet, thank us again, and leave, until it's only the six of us and Maeve still sitting. Maeve is my favorite of the senior managers because she doesn't treat us like dirt.

“Come on then, team,” she says, rising and gesturing for us to do the same. “Good job today. Go rest up. It's a big day tomorrow.”

None of us really look at each other as we get up. The energy in the room is as sour and low as it's ever been, all the effort we've been putting in for the last month suddenly catching up with us all and hitting us like a freight train. Suddenly, we've all realized that this is the end and that only one of us is getting out of here with what we want. This is like a gameshow, but there's more than petty cash at risk. This will make someone's career and force the rest of us to keep trying. Only one of us will be guaranteed it all.

Slowly, we all file out. I find myself at the back of the pack, which I hope

isn't a metaphor. As I'm about to leave, Maeve taps me on the shoulder. "Hey," she says as I whip around in surprise. "I'm not really meant to say this, but I think your presentation was the best."

I gawp slightly more than I mean to and she smiles kindly. "Yeah, I mean it. Bob gave you a total grilling and you aced it. He's a nasty piece of work but you barely wobbled. It was pretty awesome to watch."

She excuses herself with a grin, waltzing away like she hadn't just said the kindest thing she could possibly have said to me, and I'm left frozen for a second, the adrenaline of the presentation hitting me all over again. The spark of hope inside me has been stoked into a real flame, bursting into life in a way I can't ignore anymore. I already knew my presentation was great, but hearing it from Maeve totally unprompted...

None of the others got that. I deserve this as much as any of them. And the chance of the job being mine doesn't seem too slim after all.

Once my body reengages with Earth, I dash to catch the others up. They're still walking in a pack, or flock, bumbling along together because, despite all our posturing, we're all so young and inexperienced and none of us know what we're doing. Aiden holds out his hand to me and I allow myself to take it. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I breathe, and really mean it. A grin splits across my face and I squeeze his hand. "Yeah."

"You did awesome," he says, returning the squeeze.

We all pass through the revolving door, back into the bustling reality of Olympus City. It's an average afternoon, but something irreversible has changed in all of us. The second we left Fletcher HQ, all of us became new people. Life is going to be so different with the dawn of tomorrow, and it's twisting my stomach into knots hoping and worrying about it.

"You were great, too," I say as we avoid some angry pedestrians.

He chuckles, shaking his head. "I tried."

Kyle glances back at us, shooting daggers at our entangled hands. "Hey, lover boy," he sneers, turning and holding the whole group up as if he really is the

boss. “You coming out tonight? We’re all going to The Anvil later, to celebrate. At least, *I’ll* be celebrating. The rest of you are welcome to come and commiserate, though.”

“Shut up, Kyle,” says Aiden, rolling his eyes. “Yes, we’ll be there. To celebrate.”

Aiden drops my hand to take a step forward, pushing his shoulders back as he squares up to Kyle. He has this kind of wildcard personality; he seems mild on the surface, but under pressure, I have no doubt he’d prove himself the true boss of this situation. I guess Kyle must realize this too, because he bristles but then backs down, sneering his haughtiest sneer ever before turning back on his heel.

As Kyle walks off with the others, Aiden leans in to me. “We are going, right?”

“What makes you think we’re going as *we*?” I ask, raising an eyebrow and folding my arms. If I’m going to let him in, I’m not going to make it easy.

There’s this cute face he makes when he’s thinking something over, a slight narrowing of the eyes and tilt of the head. “Well, I mean... you said maybe later.”

“It’s not *later* yet,” I say.

The truth is, I’m very ready to give up and fall for him, but I’m still worried about tomorrow’s outcome regarding the job. I don’t want either of us to get hurt because I for sure will not be modest if I win.

“But you are coming out for drinks?”

I shrug. Part of me doesn’t want to because I’m so tired that all I want is to crawl into bed and sleep for a week. But the rest of me wants to let my hair down and let Aiden romance me. After all, a bar isn’t work and The Anvil is a great place. They serve the best fries in town and the atmosphere is always intimate but not claustrophobic.

With a teasing glint in my eye, I say, “I guess so. I was kind of hoping some hot guys would buy me drinks.”

Aiden nods knowingly. “Oh, I see. First one’s on me, then?”

“Deal,” I say with a grin, and when he offers me his arm, I take it without hesitation.

## CHAPTER 8

## CANDICE



**F**or the first time since I met these people, it feels like we're all friends. Even Daniel has relaxed enough to smile, and now that Kyle has stopped trying to assert his superiority, he's almost tolerable. And most surprising of all, Louise is *funny*.

The bar is loud and crowded, but we've managed to grab a round table for us all to squeeze around. There's a guitarist by the window, hooked into an amp that crackles every time he moves too much. He's singing sad love songs, a vibe that's totally incongruous with the atmosphere in the place. We celebrate as everyone else moves around us, holding their own successes and heartbreaks, unheard over the sounds of other people living.

Not that we're being particularly quiet either. We're downing cocktails like we want to put the bar out of business and are talking over each other at increasing volume, all of us eating and yelling and dancing whenever a song we know comes on. If only we could have acted like this over the last month. Maybe it would have made everything fun.

I barely have time to catch my breath from laughing when the third or fourth mai tai is deposited in front of me. I'm not exactly drunk — not yet, anyway — but this has to be the last one. Otherwise, I'm going to wake up with the worst headache ever, and I don't want to look hungover when I get awarded the job.

It's a prestigious kind of event. I can't do it feeling like I'm about to vomit or, worse, looking like it.

“Cheers,” I say, lifting the glass. The others clink theirs off mine, ice cubes bouncing musically against the glass. The coldness is sharp against the hot bar, but a nice relief. If I were any more drunk, I might be tempted to tip it over myself.

Blair leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. He’s just put his deck of cards away, having solidly thrashed us all at poker. He gives us a smug look like he’s about to start a fight. “Who’s got it, then?”

“Is it a question?” asks Kyle, sipping his whiskey like he doesn’t care.

“Yes!” says Louise firmly, probably being the most assertive she’s ever been in her life, if her displeased eyebrows and folded arms are anything to go by. “We’ve all worked hard. Any one of us deserves this.”

“Go for it if you want to believe that,” says Kyle, though I noticed his shaking hands in his presentation too.

The truth is, we’re all nervous and eager to get this job. And Louise is right. We’ve each done all that we can. At this point, we can’t do anything besides hope. The decision is probably already made, and worrying isn’t going to change anything. Not that that makes it any easier to push it out of my mind.

Clearly a sentiment Daniel agrees with. “Come on, guys. Let’s talk about anything else but work, *please*. What we really deserve is to let our hair down.”

“You’ll have to grow some first,” says Louise, earning another laugh.

“Best I can do is buy you another drink,” he grins with a look that’s probably supposed to look smooth but really looks kind of dopey.

“Whoa there, cowboy,” says Kyle, raising his eyebrow, his mouth twisting into a cruel smirk. “Did you forget Aiden’s got the monopoly on being the lover boy?”

Aiden’s grip on my hand tightens — we’ve been holding hands under the table all evening, letting our fingers explore every contour of our palms. “Just because you can’t get any, doesn’t mean you have to be nasty about it,” he says, leveling his best glare of disdain at Kyle.



The others all gasp and ooh in mock horror at the comeback. “You won’t be laughing when you’re all unemployed tomorrow morning,” Kyle sniffs, but a light flush on his cheeks proves that Aiden got under his skin.

“Yeah, right,” mutters Louise, but her batting eyelashes and pursed lips give her away too. She’s been subtle, but I’ve noticed the way she’s been hanging on to Kyle’s every word, flipping hot and cold between fighting him and agreeing with him. If we were genuinely friends, I’d tell her she deserves way better than that guy. He’s the kind of guy who’d only ever see her as a commodity, something to show off at parties. I might not get on with her that well, but I would hate to see her chase a guy who would use her.

Daniel flags down a waiter and orders everyone a round of shots before things escalate into a real argument. The tipsy buzz it gives us all takes the edge off the atmosphere, and we drift back into lighter conversation. I think it’s a relief to everyone.

We’re in the middle of a heated discussion about the future of social media when Blair gets up. “You guys are great,” he says. “But I don’t want to look like I haven’t slept when I get awarded the best job in the world.”

“Arrogant prick,” says Kyle, standing too.

“Look who’s *talking*.” They stare at one another for a long while, like they’re either about to start fighting or making out, until they both back down, deciding it’s not worth it. “Let’s call a cab?”

Blair nods — of course he does. He’s seen the way that Kyle’s trying to assert himself as the leader and, like a good sycophant, he’s been sucking up to him this whole time. It’s been quite sickening to watch, to be honest. I’m pretty sure Kyle would use and dispose of Blair in a heartbeat too.

As they leave, Louise jumps up. “Hey, wait for me!”

I don’t think it escapes anyone’s notice the way she clings on to Kyle’s arm as they head for the door.

Daniel finishes the last of his lavish cocktail then grins at us. “I’d best get going too. Leave you both to it.” He winks at us, and adds, “See you guys tomorrow.”

Aiden and I both wave a little goodbye, and then it's us, alone in a noisy room where no one's looking. The lights are low, the guitarist now onto ballads, the crowd thinner than before but still enough to make us anonymous. Anything could happen.

"They're full of shit," Aiden whispers to me, leaning in to my ear until I can almost feel his lips brush over my skin. I giggle in agreement. "What do you say we get out of here too?"

I turn my head to face him, and we're so close that there's barely a breath of distance between our noses. Our hands are still entwined as they have been all evening, and every inch of my body is screaming out for him, wanting me to stop hesitating, to jump, to stop the whispers of doubt in the back of my mind that are telling me how much this is going to hurt later. The static crackle of attraction between us is making me stone-cold sober.

I know where this is leading. My mind is clear enough to make a choice. It's my heart that's complaining. It's asking not to get broken.

"And where exactly do you propose we go?"

He leans back to press his knuckles into his lips in mock thoughtfulness. "Hmm... Well, I do have an apartment that's way too big for one."

"You're asking to take me home with you?"

He cocks an eyebrow, the dim light of the bar dancing over his face in orange and purple, casting deep shadows that draw my eyes down his neck towards his perfectly proportioned chest. "If I was, what would you say?"

*One night can't hurt, right?*

I lean in again, brushing my lips over his cheek as I go to whisper in his ear. "Yes."

## CHAPTER 9

## CANDICE



I think I might have underestimated how much money Aiden comes from.

He pulls into the garage of his apartment block and turns off the engine, plunging us into darkness for a moment until he opens the car door. Almost running, he circles the vehicle to open it for me, then holds out his hand for me to take and leads me to the elevators up to his place. It's dimly lit in here, but for an underground parking lot, it's pretty nice. It almost looks clean.

He presses the button to call the elevator, and I take his hand. His knuckles are cold, so I lift them to my lips to warm them.

"Your mouth is warm," he whispers.

"Is yours cold?"

"What will you do if I say yes?"

With a wicked smirk, I slowly lean in to kiss him, a chaste brush of our lips to tease him before pulling away again. His breath catches audibly in his throat. "Yes," he breathes. "My mouth is cold."

I don't hesitate to kiss him again. If I didn't want to keep kissing him so much, I would call him out for his lie — his mouth isn't cold at all. His lips are like embers and when they press against the kindling of mine, they set mine ablaze, lighting a fire inside me like no other I've ever felt.

It's painfully hard to not make out with him in the elevator or rip his clothes off right here, but I don't want to get caught out by a stranger. I can't handle

that level of embarrassment. Instead, I focus on how clean it is — a far cry from the grungy elevator in my apartment; here, there's no unwashed carpet or mirrors with greasy handprints that stick around for weeks. This is modern, shiny; worlds away from what I'm used to.

If I were the kind of girl who gave in to self-doubt, I would wonder why the hell a guy like him would ever want a girl like me. Between the car and the suit and the apartment, it looks like his family is the kind that makes a check every month with a number of zeroes that would make me giddy. But soon I'll have a job like that too, and it'll be like I've always fitted into this gilded world of excess.

We walk to his front door and he digs in his pocket for the key, then fumbles with it in the lock a little. Is he nervous, or excited? What's making his hands shake?

Finally, he opens the door and holds it for me. I step into the place and am immediately greeted with high ceilings and hardwood furniture and a bright, wide, open-plan space, and the biggest couch I have ever seen in my life. It's an effort to not let my mouth drop open.

He has an actual chandelier above the dining table. A real, glittering chandelier with jewels dripping down from it like a waterfall.

I'm glad we came here and not to mine. Not that my apartment is *bad*. I'm just not made of the same kind of money that Aiden is.

But before I can overthink things any harder, he comes up behind me and kisses me on the neck and my whole body bursts with light, like I'm seeing colors I never knew existed. How can his lips be so *right* on my skin?

"You hungry?" he whispers, vaguely gesturing to the kitchen.

"Yes," I say, turning in his arms and kissing him hard, running my hands down his back, feeling each movement of his muscles as his arms tighten around me. He doesn't need to be told twice.

We drag each other towards the bedroom, pushing and pulling like spinning magnets, clawing at each other's clothes as we stumble into the bedroom, tearing at the buttons on our shirts as if we want to rip them off and scatter them on the floor like pearls. I cast my bag onto the ground somewhere,

blindly, not wanting to take my mouth from his.

Aiden gasps in quiet satisfaction when we pull my shirt off and throw it to the ground, his eyes raking over my body. He seems almost hesitant to touch me, but then we're kissing again and his hands are on my hips and shooting sparks down each limb that only intensify as his fingertips drag over my skin. Slowly, he reaches round to unclasp my bra, then, when his lips hit the tender flesh of my breasts, I ascend to a whole new plane of reality.

We fall down onto the bed but I feel more like I'm floating. I toss his shirt to the floor and trace my fingertips across his chest, down to his firm abs, mapping the softness of his skin, the smattering of marks that show evidence of a life lived. I breathe a deep breath and am filled with the smell of him, taking him into my lungs and willing him to take root, like a whole forest.

"You're gorgeous," he gasps, maneuvering us so I'm on my back and he can kiss my stomach. It sends little butterfly thrills up my spine, making me so wet I'm soaking my underwear.

"I need you inside me," I say, my voice husky with want.

He doesn't stop kissing me, just looks up through his eyelashes to catch my eye, his smile hovering over my belly button. "I've needed you since the moment I laid eyes on you."

"Prove it," I say, brushing my hand through his hair. It's soft and silky, falling through my fingers like sand. I'm glad he looks away from my face, though, because my cheeks are surely pink with embarrassment.

Since the moment he saw me? From anyone else, I'd scoff and roll my eyes at how sappy that is. But from him, I almost believe it. The way he's touching me so tenderly, kissing me so reverently, looking at me like I'm a sunset that he can't take his eyes off — these things can't be faked.

He shuffles down the bed, hooking his fingers in my underwear. "I will," he promises, then drags my panties down my legs to drop them on the pile of discarded clothes.

"You're unfairly clothed," I say, goosebumps rising on my naked skin while he's still got his pants on.

“What’s unfair about this?” he asks, and before I can reply, he dips his face down into my heat and makes me see stars.

He’s a little clumsy with his tongue at first but as he keeps going, his confidence grows, learning from each move he makes, glancing up at me every time he tries something new to see how I react. I reach out to grab his hand, and I’m pretty sure it’s the sight of him smiling into me that tips me over the edge.

All my climax does is make me hungry for more, though. “Aiden, I want you — now.”

“Hang on,” he says, standing up so he can finally free himself of his pants. Seeing his length spring free makes me want him more, and I watch hungrily as he rifles through his bedside drawer to find a condom.

He slides it on quickly then tumbles back onto the bed with me. He’s as flushed as I must be, but if he’s nervous, he doesn’t show it. His body is so warm and comfortable, and I hold him as he slides into me like a jigsaw puzzle coming together, our bodies aligning so perfectly that there’s no room for anything except exquisite pleasure.

I lose count of how many more times I come after that.

Eventually, we flop back into the pillows exhausted, breathing hard into the dim light of the room. We don’t say a word for a while, basking in the hormones and delightful tiredness and musky smell of two bodies combined. I stare at the ceiling for a moment, wondering how high it is, then roll over to wrap my arms around him.

“That was fun,” he murmurs to me.

“Very,” I agree.

“You’d do it again?”

I smirk at him. “I think I could be persuaded.”

He dips his head to kiss me again, his lips tasting salty-sweet and delicious. “I can be pretty convincing.”

“You think so?” I raise my eyebrow, pretending I’m dubious, but seeing as

I'm still lying here, naked in his arms, he must know I'm head over heels for him.

"I don't know how you could resist."

I chuckle at him, settling back into his arms. It's the kind of embrace you never want to leave. The kind that makes you feel so safe and loved, you wonder how you ever went without it. "I can't," I say. "But I also have a big day tomorrow."

"Just you?" he asks lightly, his breath ghosting over my head.

I flinch as a tiny twinge of guilt rears its head. "We do."

"For what it's worth," he says, squeezing me tighter, "I think it's going to be yours."

"Really?" I bite my lip, twisting to blink up at him. "You'd be okay with that?"

He gives me a curious look. "Why wouldn't I?"

His utter confusion makes me have two thoughts at the same time. First, that I really can have it all — the job and the boy — and second, that I think I might be able to love him.

But unable to verbalize any of that, I wrap my arms around him and kiss his chest and don't say a word. In the dark, I listen to him breathing and the sound of his heart until my eyes flutter shut and I succumb to sleep.



## CHAPTER 10

## CANDICE



I wake up alone.

For a second, I'm confused, wondering why my bed has changed shape, why the pillows are so soft and the comforter so downy. Then I remember and my eyes snap open.

Aiden's room is as big as it seemed last night, pastel colors tastefully accenting his drawers, his sheets, his walls. It looks like a professional designer did all of it. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that he gets a cleaner in. Everything is so immaculate that it's hard to believe he actually lives here.

A creeping dread starts snaking along my ribs, but I ignore it. If he was going to murder me, he already would have, probably. He's a rich guy. They live in a totally different world from me, the kind with cleaners and cashmere.

I close my eyes again, tempted to snuggle back down in the bed and fall asleep again, but I know we have to be at Fletcher Tech HQ by ten a.m. and it's already almost nine. For one more minute, I languish in the luxury bedding, delighting at the expensive mattress and the leftover smell of Aiden in the pillows.

Last night was too good to have been a dream.

The memory of our bodies makes a warm glow settle over me, the satisfaction of pleasure giving me that cozy postcoital hangover you get from waking in a lover's arms. Not that he's a *lover*, exactly.

Not yet, anyway.

Through the wall, I hear the sounds of a gas stove bursting to life, a muffled promise that he's still here. I don't want to assume, but cooking breakfast the morning after is maybe the sweetest thing a guy has ever done for me.

Reluctantly, I peel myself out of bed and drift into the bathroom to splash some water on my face and comb through my hair with my hands. It doesn't look as bad as it could, but it doesn't look great. Damn it, I didn't think this through at all. I don't even have a toothbrush, let alone fresh clothes or makeup. I'm going to be so embarrassed if I have to get employed wearing yesterday's wrinkled, alcohol-scented shirt.

That's a problem for later, though. Right now, I'm hungry and I want to kiss Aiden's face in gratitude.

I throw on my shirt and underwear and wander into the kitchen. He smiles when he sees me. "Hey."

"Morning. What's cooking?"

"You like pancakes?" he asks, waving around a spatula.

My heart swells. "I sure do."

"Awesome. I made enough to feed about seven people. Hope you're hungry."

I am, and for more than pancakes, but instead of saying anything I walk up behind him and stand on my tiptoes to rest my head on his shoulder. He leans back into me and I wrap my arms around him, squeezing tight like I'm anchoring myself to him.

A job and a boyfriend... by the end of the day I could have both.

"Hey, do you want to see a dumb video?" he says, pulling out his phone. "I saw it earlier."

"Sure," I say with a smile, pressing my lips into the nape of his neck and breathing him in. Did he have a shower while I slept? He smells fresh and heady, the kind of scent I could lose myself in.

I stare down at his phone over his shoulder, watching as he pulls up a video player. Before he can find it, though, his phone chimes with a notification and a text message pops up on the screen.

*Congrats, son. The job's yours. You have more than proved—*

The preview cuts off there, but before Aiden can swipe it away in a panic, I've already read enough for the dread to rise again, freezing my blood until I could shiver.

I drop my arms and step back, tasting bile in the back of my mouth. "What was that?"

Aiden turns to face me, his mouth wavering as he decides whether or not he wants to lie to me. There's a desperation in his eyes, almost a plea that I'll understand and take pity on him.

"It's... My dad is... It was his idea..."

"You're Aiden Fletcher, aren't you?" I say, each word like a dull knife in my heart. All he can do is nod. "Aiden Fisher never existed... You've been lying this whole time!"

"No!" he says, too fast, flying on the defensive for something he can't excuse. "Well, I mean, yeah. But not like that."

"Like *what* then?" I snap, my ears ringing with rage. I'm not much of a crier, but tears are pricking my eyes. It's not too unreasonable to cry when your whole life is crumbling around you. When everything you've worked for is being spat back in your face by someone who couldn't respect you enough to tell the truth. "No one else was ever in with a chance, were they? This is nepotism gone mad. Is this some kind of sick game to you?"

"No," he says, his voice weakening with every accusation. "I swear, it's not like you think. There was never a guarantee for me. It's why I got put with you guys, so I could prove to Dad that I actually want to work for this. He said he'd cut me out of everything unless I proved to him I deserved it. All the hard work was real, I swear. Everything I feel for you is real."

He reaches for my hand but I flinch away. "Don't touch me!"

"Candice, please, listen—"

"Why?" I hiss, swallowing hard to stop my eyes watering up, clenching my fists to stop myself hitting him. I've never felt this angry in my life, white-

hot, ice-cold fury running through my veins. I'm so mad I could almost laugh. "So you can lie to me some more?"

"Honestly, I didn't lie. My dad really doesn't want to give this to me. You were in with a fair chance, you all were. Really."

I scoff, the taste of bile coating the back of my throat again. He looks so pathetically desperate, like I'm a wild horse he can tame with some soothing words and calming gestures. It won't work. I want to stomp him to death with my hooves.

"Just... fuck off, why don't you?" I spit, turning on my heel to march back to the bedroom to grab my bag and pants. This is so humiliating. I'm never trusting a man like this again.

*I am so stupid.*

My entire body shakes as I rush to drag my pants on while hunting for my bag and suit jacket at the same time. Why doesn't he own a coatrack like a normal person? It's not like he doesn't have the money. It's not like he doesn't have a *good job*.

And there was me, thinking it could have been mine.

My jacket had ended up on an armchair by the window, and as I go to grab it, Aiden appears in the doorway, flustered and wet-eyed. Looking at him like this, now, with untidy hair and a loose T-shirt as he begs me to stay... it's pathetic. Even if he really didn't mean for this to happen, even if his father really was testing him, he still lied. He still knew exactly what he was and what he was going to get.

And if he thinks he's still going to get *me*, he's wrong.

"Please, Candice. Listen to me."

"I'm never listening to you again!" I snap, pulling on my jacket, punching my fists through the sleeves. "I'm never even going to touch a piece of Fletcher Tech again."

If I let myself, I'd notice how genuinely distraught he looks, at the tearful look he's giving me, the wobble in his lips as he tries to figure out what to

say. But my fury at his lies clouds all logic, so I storm past him, shoving him aside, ignoring the little grunt of surprise, the heartbreak in his eyes.

He's so used to getting everything he wants. Good for him. He sure as hell isn't getting *me*.

I tug on my shoes, and he tries one more time to talk me down. "What about the meeting?"

"What about it?"

"What do you mean, *what about it?*" He blinks at me like I've said something completely insane.

I draw myself up as tall and imposing as I can be, turn on my heel, stride deliberately up to him and stare right into his eyes. "Why on earth would I still want to come to an event that's going to be a farce? Why the hell would I want to go to a meeting where the outcome was always set? I'm not going to make a fool of myself for you and your father for another second of my life. I worked so hard for this, you know?"

"I know," he says softly, his hand twitching like he's about to take mine.

If he had been braver, there's a chance I would have cracked.

But he isn't. "I'm going to succeed and I'm going to do it on my own. I don't need you, I don't need your father, and I don't need Fletcher Tech. Goodbye, Aiden."

I don't hesitate or look back at him. I march away and slam the door behind me. This is the right thing to do, I know. It hurts for so many reasons, but my career comes first. It always has. And there's nothing left of that here.

But the face I imagine Aiden gives me as I go haunts me, and will for years to come.

## CHAPTER II

AIDEN



EIGHT YEARS LATER



The knock on the door is the only thing that stops my spiraling thoughts from going to a seriously dark place.

I look up to see Beth peering through the crack, and I gesture for her to come in. She's the greatest PA a guy could ever ask for. I wouldn't be half as organized as I am without her. She's the most well-presented and well-ordered person I've ever met. I'd hate to know how long it takes her to get ready in the morning — she never has a hair out of place and her shirts and skirts match impeccably.

I ought to give her a raise. The issue is, I'm not sure I have it to give.

"Everything okay?"

She purses her lips like she's trying to figure out how to word what she wants to say. "You know what time it is, don't you?"

I glance down at the clock on my desk. "It's one forty-six. Why?"

Almost nervously, she sighs. "Please tell me you haven't forgotten about the two p.m. meeting? You know, the one in ten minutes? The one where Nicholas is going to slash this company to shreds?"

How could I forget that?

"No, Beth. I haven't. Thank you for reminding me anyway." She hesitates in the doorway, and I raise an eyebrow at her. "Is there anything else?"

I've never seen this woman look so flustered before — and I'm not sure anyone else would notice. Even five months ago, when her job changed from being my father's PA to mine, Beth was the picture of professionalism, forging ahead and pulling me and the company along with her. Even when I was a mess, she never was.

A lot's changed since Dad died. I'm pretty sure he took my belief in Fletcher Tech with him.

Beth pushes her shoulders back and sighs, grounding herself. "I want you to promise me my job's safe. I'm sure that Nicholas is going to advise layoffs, and he'll be looking for surplus staff to axe."

I rise to my feet, smiling grimly at her as I round the desk. Carefully, I perch on it and shrug, letting my hands hang limply by my sides. "I swear," I say. "I couldn't do this without you, Beth. You're not surplus and you're definitely not useless. I need you. The only way Nicholas could persuade me to fire you would be to tell me that the whole company's going under."

"And you think he isn't going to do that?" She folds her arms, clearly heartened by my endorsement, but skeptical about the current situation.

Honestly, she's probably right. "Not yet. We're clinging on. Just about. It's not looking great, but we're not sunk yet."

"Yet being the operative word."

"Aren't you the one always saying to think positive?" I try and crack a smile, even though neither of us are really feeling it, and she throws back her own that looks just as forced as mine.

"Thinking positive and preparing for the future aren't always compatible," she says. "No amount of positive thinking is going to save this company."

"I hope Nicholas has come up with something good. We need profits now, or at least an even break. And if I can do it without losing anyone, even better."

"But what really are the chances of that?" Beth's face is not in any way hopeful.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a deep, steadying breath, trying to fill

myself with the vague plastic and paper smell of the office rather than my rising anxiety. The chances are slim. The accounts are absolutely dire.

Turns out, I inherited an enormous problem rather than a successful company. Sure, Fletcher Tech is worth billions, but the way Dad was hemorrhaging money instead of using it in any way that made sense means everything's spiraling downwards. At least he kept accounts, but they're full of stuff like fully funded business trips to Korea for three weeks, flying first class, high-end restaurant deliveries every single day for lunch, and random millions in bonuses for himself and others because he felt like it.

Adding in the hit our stocks took when he passed, none of it's a pretty picture at all.

And Beth knows that as well as I do. We're on a knife edge and I'm about to get sliced right down the middle and take the whole damn ship down with me.

None of this is my fault, but I'm going to get the blame. I'm the one in charge. I'm the one who'll have to face the firing squad if this all collapses.

I stand again, hoping I'm not visibly wobbling. "If we lose anyone, it won't be you. But I'm going to do everything I can to stop all of this falling apart around us."

Beth's face has returned to its classic professional neutral, a straight-faced sort of stern that could mean anything. Still, I know her too well and I can see the doubt behind her eyes. "I know, sir. I know."

She turns and closes the door quietly behind her. I sit for a long moment in silence.

Then a notification beeps on my computer telling me about the meeting I know I'm meant to be in. I let it beep. There's nothing in the whole world that can cheer me up right now.

But I'm technically the boss. I'm *literally* the boss, God help us. And that means I have to show my face, even when shit is hitting the fan. I hope that Nicholas isn't going to rip me apart too badly. I hope he has a way out.

Dragging my feet like it's going to buy me a little more time, I open my door,

step out and carefully close it again, then walk down the corridor like I'm about to go to my own execution.

## CHAPTER 12

## CANDICE



**B**roken Cauldrons has *the* greatest sandwiches I have ever, ever eaten. The fact that I can go out for my lunch every day and drop ten dollars on a sandwich and drink without even feeling guilty about it is one of the most freeing things that has come from owning Mettie Marketplace.

It's an old nickname from school that I despised back then, but we've been building the brand to appeal to go-getting women, so a friendly kind of name felt important. And if other people can slap their names on their products and make billions, so can I.

I swing back into my office to finish my sandwich — a glorious layering of turkey and salad and a house sauce that sparkles on the tongue — but the second I sit down and wake my computer back up, I'm bombarded with a dozen emails and a reminder of a meeting I'm meant to be in in three minutes.

"Shit," I mumble, my mouth full. I manage to force down most of my sandwich but abandon my chips for a little after-meeting snack, then jump up and hurry down the corridor as quickly as my professional dignity will allow.

When I get to the meeting room, Kelly and the gang are already waiting for me. The look of discontent she gives me does not fill me with joy.

Our office isn't huge and it isn't fancy, but there's enough space for the team to work, me to have my own office, and for us to have a little staff kitchen. It's not much, but it's real, physical proof that we're heading in the right direction: up. It does make it more embarrassing to be late, though. It's not

like I could have gotten lost.

“How’s it going?” I ask as I take my seat at the head of the table, pulling up the agenda on my tablet. In big red letters, the word *investments* stares bleakly at me.

Kelly shakes her head slightly, making her glasses slide down her nose. She pushes them back up, only for half of her thick, dark bangs to fall out into her face. To look at her like this, you’d think she was chaotic and scattered, but she’s put as much of her heart into Mettie’s as I have. It might have been my idea, but without her as my right hand, we wouldn’t be here now.

“The good news,” Kelly says, opening a presentation on the screen that shows a couple of charts, “is that people are using our site! The advertising campaign we started last month has really been helpful, showing a great increase in activity both in buyers and sellers.”

“Awesome,” I say, leaning back in my chair. Maybe things aren’t as dire as they look after all.

Kelly continues, flicking to another slide that shows how money is flowing in and out of the company. These graphs look a little less healthy, and I grimace as I read them. “The bad news,” she says, “is that my mother has made me swear to take Chinese New Year off next year so we can go to the parade, and none of you are invited to the party unless these accounts start picking up.”

There’s a faint groan of disappointment. For as long as I’ve known her, Kelly’s family have thrown these amazing New Year parties, and they’ve always been generous enough to invite me and the team. Her mother’s New Year dumplings are so legendary that whenever Kelly’s managed to bring leftovers in, they’ve been gone in seconds.

She raises her eyebrows smugly at us, knowing she doesn’t need to say anything else to make her point.

“Okay,” I cut in. “So, what solutions do we have? Opening this to the floor.”

Eddie and Pablo both frown in exactly the same way at exactly the same time. They’re not brothers. In fact they couldn’t look more different from each other — Eddie is short and pale and round-faced and has the personality

of a golden retriever, while Pablo is tall and Mexican, long-haired and bearded. But they joined the company as software developers at the same time and have acted like twins ever since.

They're damn good at what they do, but unfortunately, it's not accounting.

Gina's face isn't exactly full of sunshine either. She is my accountant, and she's been cheering us on from the start. "Well," she says like she's about to deliver terrible news, "unfortunately, we need investors. We're doing great for a small company, but it would do us a world of good if we could get some kind of deal with a bigger company. I've made a list of some potential options, but at this point, the bigger the company we can net, the better."

She pushes the list to all our tablets, and I glance over it — there's some of the big online payment companies, some of the other big online stores, and then there's the tech giants. We'd be lucky if Lockhart or Donnell's would even glance in our direction. And on principle, I ignore the fact that Fletcher Tech is on there at all.

Eddie pitches in, "We could put together a real good packet, showcase the work we've got done. Make a real professional-looking thing to show us off."

Pablo nods in agreement. "We could send it to everyone. Make a splash. Get our name out there."

"Love the enthusiasm, guys," I say, and mean it. I've been so lucky to get this team. They all work so hard and care so much. There have been multiple nights where I've had to round them up and send them home, forcibly. We've all given our everything to this.

It breaks my heart to imagine us failing.

"Enthusiasm isn't funding, though," says Gina, the voice of reason. "An information packet is a good idea, but we have to be realistic. What do we really want out of this? Where are we going next? What do we have to do to get there?"

"What happens if we don't?" adds Kelly, throwing a bucket of cold water over the already shaky mood.

We sit in silence, contemplating the questions, turning them over in our



minds. Because the fact is simple: if we don't succeed, we go home with nothing except four wasted years on a business that wasn't good enough.

I don't want to let the team down like that. But as I look at the faces of my colleagues and friends all wearing various depths of frowns, my heart sinks even lower.

The truth is, we're on a cliff edge, and if I let myself fall into the abyss, I'm going to drag everyone down with me.

## CHAPTER 13

## AIDEN



“**A**nd that is broadly where we stand,” finishes Nicholas, his droning speech finally grating to a halt. I love the guy, but he’s the picture of a generic businessman in a suit.

I take a sharp breath and blink hard, trying to wake my brain back up. With any luck, it looks like I’ve been processing what’s been said instead of zoning out, which is what I’d really been doing. I barely heard a single thing that was said over the pit of fear that’s opened up in my chest.

“So,” I say slowly, dragging my eyes over the blank faces staring at me. It’s like there’s a whole school of sharks sitting there, waiting to eat me alive. Even if none of this is my fault — which it isn’t — I’m still going to go down as the son who let his father’s business crash and burn and fail.

Michael Fletcher’s legacy deserves more than that.

“What are we going to do about it?” I ask, which receives nothing but more blank stares. I could be talking to a slab of concrete and get more out of it. “Anyone?”

A couple of people lean into each other and murmur things I’m clearly not meant to hear. I can guess what they’re saying, though, and none of it is good. I look at Nicholas with wide eyes, hoping he’ll say something else and fix everything.

He shrugs.

For the first time in my life, I am totally adrift. Nicholas has known me since

I was a kid, a weird kind of lawyer uncle to me. He's probably breached hundreds of privacy laws telling me about various cases to entertain me as a teenager, and now I'm the boss I'm realizing I should probably find that kind of disturbing. But how can I? There's no one I trust more to look pensively at me and catch me when I fall.

Except now. Now it's like he's slowly cutting all the strings one by one, and I'm crumpling to the ground, out of control, spiraling...

I have to pull myself together. All these blank-faced men and women — lawyers and investors and accountants, the vast team of people I have around me — they're meant to agree with everything I do. But nothing in the world of business is about loyalty. The second one of them starts getting ideas above their station or quietly withdraws their support, that's when dominoes start to fall. That's when I'm going to face a coup.

"Okay," I say slowly. "Let's brainstorm. I'm open to anything here. What're Donnell's doing right now? Their shares have been down recently, but now they're back on the up again. Can we learn anything from them?"

There are more mumblings and I'm getting the urge to stand up and leave — when a small, red-headed woman stands up. Her nose is covered in freckles, and her cheeks are flushed with what I can only presume to be adrenaline. I think she's a junior accountant; she's kind of familiar to me but I have no idea what her name is.

I nod in a way I hope is encouraging, and she clears her throat. "They're doing a lot of work with start-ups and charity. They've taken a hit because their new smartphone did badly, but they're covering that with some really great PR."

"So, we copy that?" I ask.

Her blush deepens, but she has nothing to be embarrassed about. I don't see anyone else helping. "No, sir, that's copying. But... what if we bought some smaller companies outright? Merged them into us and gave them a new platform to stand on. Then not only do we look good in the press, but also that gives us chance to attract new investors for everyone."

"A win-win," I say quietly.

“With respect, sir,” chips in Nicholas. “Mergers are a dangerous gamble.”

“Who’s got a better idea, then?” I say, perhaps a little more harshly than intended. I meet Nicholas’s eye, and his expression doesn’t waver from the firm, stern neutral one he’s holding me in. It’s clear enough that he doesn’t agree with this plan, but he isn’t giving me anything else.

I raise my eyebrows to try and express that, and though he doesn’t look away, his frown deepens as he acquiesces to the inevitable. If this company is on its way down, we have to at least try *something*.

No one else says a word. Most people stare down at the table like I’m a teacher about to call on them in class when they haven’t done their homework. I’m pretty sure they haven’t. After all, everyone knew that this meeting was the *how to fix Fletcher Tech* meeting. I expected at least a little bit of input.

I might not have any ideas, but that’s what I hire advisors for. To think for me.

“Okay, then. We’re not leaving this room until I’ve got a list of potential assets. I want us to make calls *today*. You’re all here for a reason, right? You’re the best of the best, right?” A couple of people have the nerve to nod a little. I let my face drop into that old, angry expression my father used to adopt to scare people. The company isn’t the only thing I inherited from him. “Then get to work. Or get out. I don’t have time for you to waste.”

There’s a brief moment of stillness, then the room bursts to life. People pull out laptops and tablets, move chairs around to form little groups that I’m sure represent whatever cliques are going on outside my sphere. A hubbub of noise rises in the air, mixing with typing and papers shuffling. Finally, it looks like we might be back on the rise.

Nicholas sidles up to me, making me jump when he speaks. “This isn’t a good idea, you know.”

I sigh. “What else am I meant to do? You know as well as I do, this company’s going to shit.”

“Your father’s reputation as a wise businessman may have been slightly exaggerated in places.”

“You don’t say?” I drag my hands over my face, rubbing my eyes. I need to shave. I want to have the world’s longest shower and sleep for a million years, but I don’t have that kind of luxury. “This is really bad, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Everything.”

Nicholas hums, not committing to an outright answer, which only proves what everyone’s already thinking. Quietly, I ask, “What do we do if this and it really does end badly?”

He places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “We try something else.”

It takes about twenty minutes for a long list of names to be emailed over to me. I skim through it, looking at dozens and dozens of companies I’ve never heard of. Suddenly this task seems utterly insurmountable. Even more impossible than before.

And then fate twists her cruel knife in my stomach, taking me back to years ago when a gorgeous blonde broke my heart because I ruined her life.

“This one,” I say. “I’m going to call Candice Metcalf.”

## CHAPTER 14

## CANDICE



I have to admit, that meeting left me with a cold, hollow pit in my stomach. Not great.

Eddie and Pablo are hard at work, putting together a showcase of all the best bits of our company. If we can attract even one investor, then that would be brilliant. We need a small win. That's all. Big wins are easier after a few small ones.

Really, I should be working too, but I'm trapped in an endless stream of cat videos. They're cheering me up, at least. Five more minutes. I let the cute tabby crash-landing down the stairs loop a few times, smiling at the look on the poor thing's face.

Then the phone rings.

I'm not expecting anyone, but that means nothing. I get an equal handful of spam, scammers, and genuine enquiries. I don't think I have the patience for the first two right now.

With a sigh, I put my cellphone down and pick up the work phone. "Mettie Marketplace, this is Candice. How can I help today?"

"Hello, Candice. It's Aiden. Fletcher."

An ice-cold bucket of water might as well have been thrown over me. Every inch of my skin freezes over, and if he says something else, the rush of blood pounding between my ears blocks it out. I'm glad no one else is here because my mouth has dropped wide, wide open.



I wish I could say that I haven't spent a single second thinking about Aiden since that night, eight years ago, but that's not true at all. I've spent way too much of my life cursing him for ruining my heart. I swore off romance because of him. I turned down a different position at Fletcher Tech because of him. I've had a ball of rage tucked inside my rib cage all this time because of him.

"Is this a good time? Can we talk?"

I wish I had another door I could slam in his face.

I should hang up. I don't need or want anything from him. But a spark of curiosity keeps me on the line, silence crackling between us as the years fall away to a memory of that night when I experienced the biggest betrayal I ever have. Surely he knows I hate him, still? What could he possibly want that would make him choose to call me?

"Candice? Are you there?"

"Yes," I croak. "What do you want?"

He takes an unsteady breath that crackles through the phone. "I have a business proposal for you. Please hear me out."

It's almost funny. I can still picture his square jaw, his strong nose, the little dimple on his forehead as he frowns, like he'll be doing now. "Okay," I manage.

This conversation could have been worse. He could have tried to catch up. Which is the last thing I want. I'll talk business, but that's as far as it goes.

I grip the side of my chair, my knuckles sheet-white from the pressure.

"We've been looking at smaller companies lately, with an eye to investing. What I'd be offering you is an acquisition: Fletcher Tech would own Mettie Marketplace, but you would still have total autonomy to run it however you want. We'd handle the accounts and make sure everything was balanced fairly, so really nothing would change except some of the legality."

"Why?" I choke out. I really have to try more than monosyllables. I shut my eyes tight, and add, "Why us? What benefit would that have for either of us?"

The truth is, I can see the benefit incredibly clearly — for *us*, anyway. The financial strength of that kind of company behind us? It's almost dizzying how much stability that would bring. I'd be able to give everyone the pay raise they deserve; we'd be able to put more into advertising, into development, into everything. And that's not even taking into account the interest external investors would have in us as part of Fletcher Tech.

The disadvantage, though, of course, is we'd have to be part of Fletcher Tech.

Aiden is clearly finding this difficult too. He sighs. "We feel it would be... prudent to expand our horizons a little, given the turbulent nature of the economic climate."

"And again, without the bullshit?"

"We want to help foster new talent and help growing businesses, like yours."

I glare at the wall so hard I almost expect a hole to burn into it. "Do you? Do you really?"

He audibly swallows. "I do. I know we have some history, but I'm willing — I'm wanting to put all that behind us, to let it go as water under the bridge. We can forge something great, going forward, if we do it together."

"You're so full of shit!" I snap.

In the background, I hear a murmur of other people — he must be in some kind of conference. I hope he has me on speaker. I want everyone in that room to know what a traitor he can be. No amount of smooth talking can fix any of what he did to me.

Aiden continues like I've said nothing at all. "I've had an accountant look at your company and value it for me. You've done an impressive amount with it."

"Thank you," I say tersely, refusing to be flattered. "Give me the figure. I know what I'm worth."

Softly, he chuckles. "I know you do."

The numbers he quotes at me aren't bad, and I think for anyone else I might have caved, but I want him to fight for me. If he really wants Mettie's, he's

going to have to try really, really hard.

“Of course, I would have to talk to my own accountant first,” I say, “but off the cuff, I think you’re lowballing me. And anyway, if you plan to acquire us, how can you guarantee the safety of my position as CEO, and the jobs of my employees? I thought it was usual for the company being acquired to give up all their assets.”

There are some sputters of disbelief in the room and I grin to myself. If any of them thought I was going to be easy, they’re about to realize how wrong they were.

“I’m happy to negotiate into something more resembling a merger. This is the first conversation of, I hope, many. Of course, our accountants can thrash it all out until we’re happy, but I’m willing to compromise. You would have to give up the company to us, legally, if we bought you outright, but I have no interest in shutting Mettie’s Marketplace down. I would need you to keep it going.”

I want to call him a liar so badly, but I resist. The more I roll it around in my mind, the more sense it makes.

“So, let me get this straight. We agree on how much my company is worth, you give me the money so you can own it, but then you still let me work for it as if it were still my own, presumably after some sort of Fletcher Tech rebranding?”

“Yes,” he says with the utter confidence of someone who always gets what he wants.

But, intriguingly, someone pipes up from the back of the room to say, “Well, actually... don’t... liquid funds available... merger won’t work unless...”

“What was that?” I ask. I’m not letting him fuck me over.

Aiden groans. It’s not unreasonable to assume that someone’s getting fired today. “I have been reliably informed,” he says, taking a deep breath, “that we, in fact, would not be able to buy Mettie’s Marketplace for what it’s worth, so we would have to come to a deal.”

“Oh, so you want me to hand over *years* of my life to you so your goons can

come in and ruin it? You want me to sell for less than I'm worth to make yourself feel good? You really think I'm going to let you ruin my life, again?"

If I wasn't so angry, I'd be reveling in the shocked snippets of conversation I'm picking up. But this is like being back at Aiden's house, eight years ago, all over again.

And he's not getting his own way this time.

"Candice, listen, I promise it's not like that."

I scoff hard, jumping to my feet to yell at him more effectively. "Really? Go on, then. You have thirty seconds to explain to me how this benefits me and how it isn't just your company monopolizing on everything, as usual. Go on!"

There's a sickening silence as he realizes that he has absolutely nothing to give to me.

"Look, it's beneficial because we both need investors," he says, rallying. "We both need to grow. I have the name, you have the innovation. It's a partnership that could really work, if you'd only try it."

"I've heard all this before, Aiden Fletcher. That name is all you are."

It's a cruel thing to say, but the sharp breath of hurt is more vindicating than any hurt I've imagined giving him over the years. And it's true. He'd be nothing without his inheritance.

"Don't call me again unless you have something good to say. Goodbye."

I slam the phone back into its cradle before he can say another word, then slam my fist against the desk. A shockwave of pain travels all the way up my arm, and I yell out in fury and agony and for everything that just happened.

The truth is this: I hate Aiden Fletcher for what he did to me.

The truth is also this: I need the kind of power Fletcher Tech is offering me in order to make it.

As the adrenaline ebbs, I sink down in my chair and put my head on the desk.

I've made it a point not to cry at work, so I don't. But I can't do anything else right now. I stare at the wall, letting each word of the conversation circle my mind, trying to see a way through the tangling paths of the future that are opening up in front of me.

## CHAPTER 15

## AIDEN



“No, Candice, wait—” I stammer, but it’s too late. The drone of a dead line fills the air. Nobody else says a word.

That could have gone better.

“Well done, sir,” mutters Nicholas. I ignore him.

I’m not sure how long I sit there, frozen. Hearing her voice again has brought back a hundred memories that I’ve carefully buried for years. The smell of her perfume mixing with sweat on her neck. The little creases around her eyes when she smiles. Her ever so slightly crooked tooth.

If I were to be honest with myself, I don’t think I’ve ever stopped loving Candice. But I can’t think like that. I need to win her over, and I need it to be clinical and businesslike because she clearly hasn’t forgiven me, and I don’t think she ever will. Maybe I deserve her ire.

But if she’d let me explain all those years ago, I would have told her about how my mother laughed when Dad told me I’d have to work for the job, how Dad told me he didn’t expect I’d get it at all because I’m not good enough. If she’d let me explain now, I’d tell her that I still have the same amount of affection for her as I did back then. And Fletcher Tech falling apart at the seams seems to be proving it.

At last, sensation returns to my fingers and I rise to my feet, slowly, like a troll emerging from a hundred-year slumber. I lock eyes with the young accountant who broke the news about the finances, and, voice shaking with

barely contained anger, I say, “A hint for the rest of your career. When someone is trying to broker a big deal, don’t say something which is going to wreck it if you can be overheard. Okay?”

“Okay,” he squeaks. His eyes are wide and terrified, and he nods hard like I’m about to fire him on the spot. I’m not, but it would be satisfying.

I cast my gaze over the rest of the room, drawing myself up as tall as I can. “Who’s next to tell me what we can’t do?”

The atmosphere in the room grows thick and heavy as everyone tries to avoid my eye.

“Good,” I say, trying to let go of some of the emotion choking me, and failing. “Now, who’s going to get me a solution? No more excuses, no more bullshit. I want someone to offer me a plan that’s going to *work*.”

I wait for everyone to turn back into their teams and for the babble of desperate conversation to consume the room again before I slump down into my chair. I don’t even know how to express the emotions churning inside me. There’s a tightness in my chest and a hollow sickness in my stomach.

Nicholas pulls up a seat beside me. “They’re right, you know. We don’t have the funds for a buyout and frankly, there’s no way she’s going to let her company be absorbed without getting what she’s worth. She’s feisty.”

“Tell me about it,” I sigh.

“This is that same girl from the internship, no?”

I bury my face in his hands. Of course he remembers this. Sometimes, working with people who know you so well can be a curse. “Yes, okay, she is. And maybe I was too hasty because of that. But there’s got to be *something* we can do, right?”

With a deep frown, Nicholas shakes his head. “Unless you can convince her to give her company over to us of her own free will, or you can buy her out, our hands are tied. Your father had some very interesting ideas about how to make a company run, and we’re battling with a lot of strange quirks in our constitution. It’s a shame. She would be a great asset to have.”



“I’m not giving up yet,” I say, raising my head enough to look out at my people working in the room. I’m a ringleader in a circus filled with juggling clowns, except they’re all clowns who were hired by my father, and his shoes are too big for me. Or maybe I’m the one juggling.

I’m definitely the one wearing clown shoes.

Nicholas gives me another look, which cuts right through any of the bullshit I might have been about to give him about how I feel about Candice. “Aiden, listen. It’s noble of you to keep pushing, but personal emotion always gets in the way.”

“Yeah, if I learned nothing else from Dad, that was it,” I say bitterly.

“You know as well as I do that he loved you. Do you really think he would have let you inherit his life’s work if he didn’t believe you could do it?”

I grunt in response, not quite sure what to say to that. I don’t want to think about Dad right now, and much as I don’t want to admit it, Nicholas is right. I have to put the past behind me. We won’t get anywhere if we can’t go forward. Maybe it’s time to let Candice go once and for all.

One of Nicholas’s tiny baby lawyers tiptoes up to us. Every year, he hires a small handful of up-and-coming talent, and every year they seem to get younger.

“Excuse me, sir,” he says, his hands shaking the papers he’s holding. “I think I— we may have a solution.”

“Oh?” I sit up.

He stares down at his feet, shuffling his weight back and forth. “Um... yeah. It’s not— I mean, it would work. It *will* work. It’s just a little... unconventional.”

“Well? Stop wasting my time and tell me, for God’s sake.”

“Marriage,” he says weakly.

“Excuse me?”

He breathes shakily. “There’s a clause that states that, in simple words, if

you're married then you have the right to merge any companies held by both partners and still retain ownership. Mettie Marketplace could still become part of Fletcher Tech, but Ms. Metcalf would have even more autonomy than we first proposed to her."

"Very good," I say, waving my hand to dismiss him. Before he goes, he drops the papers with an outline of the process in front of me. All the words blur and wobble on the page. I should be shocked, or outraged even. But I'm not.

I'm mostly numb.

"He does have a point," says Nicholas, glancing over the dense legalese. "It would be a tidy solution."

"Yeah."

"Aiden, are you all right?" Nicholas asks, and I nod even though he almost definitely knows it's a lie. He stands up and squeezes my shoulder. "It may seem ridiculous, but I suggest you think about it. It could work very well in our favor."

As he walks off, presumably to discuss the legality of the idea further, I shake my hands to try and stop the tingling numbness. Think about it? I'm not going to be able to think of anything else except the image of Candice in a white dress, her pretty blond hair done up to frame her gorgeous face.

They're all going to try and persuade me, but I won't need pushing at all. I let her get away once. I won't be that stupid this time. And I'm going to do everything to prove it to her.

## CHAPTER 16

## CANDICE



I've barely slept in days. Every morning, I come into the office to new voicemails from Aiden, begging me to listen to his proposals, to hear him out. I delete them before I even listen. And every night, I go home and toss and turn and sleep fitfully, drifting in and out of dreams of yelling at him, slamming a door in his face. Being held in his arms.

It's all very disturbing. I don't understand why he won't leave us alone. Isn't it obvious that I'm not interested?

"Rough night?" asks Kelly with a raised eyebrow as I yawn again. We're meeting in my office, an informal kind of catch-up where we can be honest about reality without bringing anyone else down. And reality isn't looking too pretty lately.

I blink and shake my head to try and expel the sleepiness. "Sorry. I'm tired. I am listening, I promise. Spreading the reach of our advertising?"

"Yes," she says, leaning forward in her chair to stare at me, her dark brown eyes boring knowing holes into me. "Maybe we should do this another time, though. What's on your mind?"

Closing my eyes, I sigh hard, frowning with the most contempt I can muster. "Fletcher Tech."

"Still? You told me you turned their offer down."

Kelly isn't exactly happy that I told Aiden no. And she's right, from a purely rational point of view. The boost that being part of Fletcher Tech would bring

would save us. Honestly, neither of us are quite sure how much longer the company can keep hanging on without a radical shift. Yes, we're finding success and growing, but hosting webpages and creating advertising and paying the staff, these things all take a toll on the account.

And the returns we're getting aren't as great as we want or need them to be.

I throw up my hands, exasperated. "I did! But he keeps calling."

"And you keep ignoring him?"

She has a wicked glint in her eye, like she's drawing conclusions about the situation that are way off the mark. Knowing her, she's off in some farfetched romantic delusion, when this is nothing like that at all. Aiden is an annoying toad who can't take rejection.

"Yes. I haven't even listened to his messages. I don't want to know."

"You never know what you might be missing," she says, her double entendre not even remotely subtle.

Before I can completely put any wrong ideas she might have to bed, a sharp rap on the door interrupts us. "Come in," I call, straightening up in my chair to look more presentable.

Danna steps into the room — my secretary. She's a stern woman who wears a style of glasses that ages her twenty years. I'm actually not one hundred percent sure how old she is, but her constantly furrowed brow and sucked-lemon expression put her anywhere between thirty-five and sixty.

Today, however, she's departing from her usual grumpiness and greets us with a weirdly conspiratorial smile. "Sorry to interrupt, Ms. Metcalf, but you didn't plan to meet with anyone today, did you?"

I frown, a sudden panic descending that I've forgotten something important. "I don't think so. Why?"

"There's a young man at the desk for you. Says he won't leave until he's spoken to the CEO."

"Tell him I'll be there in a moment."

Danna nods and shuts the door behind her. I have a nasty sensation that I'm not going to like this. Kelly grins up at me, her eyes gleaming with suspicion.

"Shut up," I huff.

She beams harder. "I said nothing."

I roll my eyes and get to my feet. "I'll be right back."

There are very few things that I want to do less than this today, but I've already committed. I walk down the corridor, my heart in my throat as I prepare for what or who might be waiting for me.

I open the door to the reception and my stomach turns. It's not exactly a surprise to find Aiden waiting for me, but I really hoped it wouldn't be him. Worst of all, Danna's eyes are scorching into me even as she tries to pretend to be busy and not watch.

I have to play this one carefully. Don't want to make a scene in front of the staff. Don't want to entertain Aiden for a second longer than I need to.

"Why don't we go to the meeting room?" I say, smiling as politely as I can manage.

"Wonderful," he says, and his smile is genuine. I make a point not to notice.

The second the door shuts behind us and he sits, I let all professionalism vanish. "What the hell, Aiden? You can't show up here like this! I have a job, you know. I'm busy — not that you'd know what that's like, I'm sure. You're lucky I didn't have you thrown out."

"Fletcher Tech is failing," he says, so candidly that it stops me in my tracks.

"What?"

"Fletcher Tech is failing," he repeats, his forehead creasing with worry and tiredness. "My father left it in a bad way, and I'm trying to pick up the pieces. Frankly, I need your help. We're trying to acquire other, smaller companies with big potential, to give us all a boost. And I knew you would be sitting on something special. You always were."

He looks older now — of course he does — but there's a maturity to him that

he never had at twenty-one. His jawline has widened, his shoulders broadened, his hair still picture-perfect. We're still young, but his life has changed him since we last met. I guess time changes us all.

I narrow my eyes at him. "Why not go and buy up someone else, then? I already told you no."

"We only have the budget for one merger right now, to be honest. And I want it to be with you. There's no way that Mettie's Marketplace won't succeed."

"Are you buttering me up because you're going to offer a deal I won't like?"

He sighs in confirmation. I fold my arms, waiting for the hit that has to be coming. "Perhaps I am. But before I make it, is there anything I could offer you that would make you reconsider the acquisition?"

I shrug. "Yeah. The amount of money I asked for."

Almost with a groan, he rubs his eyes, drawing attention to the dark circles and fresh wrinkles around them. Has he been sleeping at *all*? It's kind of heartening to realize that even the boss of one of the biggest companies in the world gets kept up at night with stress. It's not just me.

"I'm sorry, I can't do that. We don't have it to give."

"Okay," I say, sitting down and staring levelly at him. Whatever he wants to say, I want him to say it looking me straight in the eye. "You have two minutes to explain your new proposal. I'm listening to it as the CEO now. Make it professional."

He nods, pushing his shoulders back as he launches into what sounds like a preprepared speech. "My father has left our accounts and legal constitution in kind of a mess, and all of that means we wouldn't be able to merge with Mettie's Marketplace unless either we were able to buy you out for your full worth, or you gave yourself willingly to us."

I scoff. "No way."

"Exactly," he agrees, trying a smile like he's getting through to me. I haven't decided yet if he is or not. "So we're in a tough position now — we can't buy, and you won't give."

“So...?” I ask. There’s a sting coming and I brace myself for it.

He stiffens in discomfort too. “So, we have found a loophole. In our constitution, there’s a clause which states that if an owner of Fletcher Tech is in a marital union with another person who also owns another company, then both parties can merge while retaining ownership and legal rights over their assets.”

I’m nodding because it all sounds great, but then the words *marital union* finally click in my mind. “*Marriage?*” I say, mouth open in disbelief.

“If you were to marry me, we could merge without issue, yes.”

“Fuck off,” I say, very unprofessionally, then burst out laughing. This is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. “This is some kind of sick joke, right?”

Slowly, he shakes his head, his mouth a firm line of discomfort. “No. The benefits are enormous, if you’d consider it beyond a personal reaction.”

“You want me not to have a personal reaction to you proposing to me?” I slam my palms on the arms of the chair, the harsh sound echoing around the room as I stand. “You’ve had your fun, Aiden. Now get out until you have a real suggestion for me. Or better yet, don’t even bother coming back.”

He rises too, then opens his bag to pull out a crisp, white envelope. “This is real. Here is the proposal.” I scoff as he places it in front of me. “At least read it. Please?”

Once, those gentle puppy-dog eyes might have worked on me, but I’m too astounded to fall for it now. Marriage! I can’t believe the nerve.

“Get out. Now. I won’t ask again.”

He doesn’t protest further. Instead he picks up his bag and walks away, turning back once to look at me before he leaves. His eyes shine with an emotion I can’t place, something between want and sorrow.

As soon as I’m sure he’s gone, I laugh again, a little too hysterically. I ought to throw the envelope away. Burn it, even. But, as if my hands are possessed, I pick it up and tuck it under my arm.

I shouldn’t even be considering this; it’s utterly stupid. So why can’t I bring



myself to toss it away like I know I should?

## CHAPTER 17

## CANDICE



**W**hen I get back to my office, I'm surprised to find Kelly still there, sitting in the corner chair, playing on her phone. "Give me a moment," she says, not looking up. "I've nearly finished this level of Jewel Bash."

Wordlessly, I circle my desk and sit down, letting the noise of her fingers on the screen fill the silence, holding the envelope in my hands, toying with one of the corners of the flap until it starts to peel away.

"What you got there?" Kelly asks when she looks up from her phone.

"It was Aiden," I say, not really answering her question.

"Fletcher?" She raises both eyebrows high and shoves her phone in her pocket. "What did he want?"

I glare at her, throwing the envelope on the desk. "Don't act like you're that surprised; I know you suspected it was him as much as I did."

She shrugs, throwing up her hands in casual surrender. "Okay, so what if I did? I still want to know what he said."

"He really, *really* wants us to merge with Fletcher Tech."

"Awesome. But you said he said they couldn't buy us out?"

I shake my head. "No, and I'm not giving my company away for free."

Kelly hums in righteous agreement. "So, what's in the envelope?"

We both stare at it, gleaming white on the desk, the corner dog-eared from where I was fiddling with it. I don't want to open it. I don't want its contents to make sense.

I don't want to *marry* Aiden Fletcher.

Pretending to be cool and not at all bothered by anything that's happened in the last half hour, I shrug, adopting what I hope is a casual, unaffected expression. "Oh, I don't really know. Some boring legal information about mergers, I expect."

"Because," says Kelly, grinning like I've walked into her trap, "it sounded a lot to me like you were yelling at him about *marriage*."

All the blood drains from my face. "You heard that?"

"Sweetie, I think the whole building did."

Burying my face in my hands, I let out the loudest wail I think I can get away with in public. This is quickly turning into the very worst nightmare I could imagine, or else my own personal hell. But, unlike a dream, this isn't something I can wake up from. I should have moved as far away from Olympus City as I could. I should have blocked Aiden's number and got a restraining order against him and laughed as Fletcher Tech fell apart in his hands.

I should never have gotten involved with him in the first place.

Kelly gets up and lays a cool, calming hand on top of my head.

"He's such an idiot," I mumble into my palms, not wanting to look up at her smug face. To be honest, if I could curl up under the desk and sleep my embarrassment off for the next six years, I would.

"And so you're going to let him win?"

"Huh?" I tentatively peek out through my fingers, my eyebrows knotting together. What the hell is she talking about?

She hops up to sit on top of the desk, letting her feet dangle over the edge, swinging them back and forth like we're not in a professional setting right now. "Look at it this way. You want to prove him wrong by being the best,

yeah? Like a big *go fuck yourself?*”

“Yeah,” I say slowly, slumping back in my chair to stare at her suspiciously.

“But without his help, we’re pretty much failing too, so it’s kind of hypocritical to stick a middle finger up at him.”

“God, we’re so fucked,” I groan as I slam my face back down onto the desk. The chipboard is still hard enough to hurt. I let out another groan, this time at a different kind of pain.

At least Kelly’s fingers massaging my scalp are a reprieve from my stress headache. She’s so reliable like that — she always takes a chunk of the world off my plate. Usually, anyway. Her words today aren’t exactly comforting. “So, what I’m saying is, maybe we should listen to his idea.”

The huff of disbelief I let out sends a warm wave of moisture up my face, making me sit back up again. I’m like one of those stupid, confused birds that go round in circles and looks like they’re about to break their own necks. “You want me to *marry* him? You don’t hear how completely, totally ridiculous that sounds?”

“It’s weird, yeah, but you did say you had a crush on him once.”

“We had a single night together, eight years ago! We don’t even know each other *at all* anymore! Sure, he’s still attractive, but you can’t *marry* someone on some crazy whim because he’s rich and I’m desperate. You do see how insane that is, right?”

Kelly folds her arms. I’m really in for it now. She’s got an idea in her head and once she has that, there’s no stopping her. The last time she was this insistent on anything was three or four years ago when we were faced with half a dozen rich businessmen and a casino. Yet somehow we managed to get out of there with more money than we came in with, a fate they weren’t lucky enough to share. We also got a pretty good deal out of that one.

I adore her, and most days, her being stubborn is useful, but right now it’s going to make me scream.

“Candice, listen to me. I’m not saying you have to marry him tomorrow, or, like, make a big show of it. Negotiate with him, tell him you refuse to have a

wedding. People have arranged marriages all the time.”

“Your line of argument here really is that arranged marriages are a great idea?” I raise the most dubious eyebrow it is possible to raise.

She sighs. “No, I guess not. My argument is, you need him, he’s not bad to look at, and he wants you. You marry him, take his stuff, live your own fabulous life — and *boom!* Problem solved.”

“I’m glad you’re so confident,” I mutter. “I think he probably would want to see his *wife* more than once a year.”

“Look, give him a go, yeah? What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Do you want the complete list or the abridged one?”

We lock eyes, entering into a silent duel, drawing our guns. Whoever flinches first loses and has to ride out of town on a horse of shame. At least, that’s what I’m telling her in my mind. In *her* mind, she’s telling me, “*For God’s sake, stop being so proud and accept some help for a change!*”

It’s kind of more complicated than that, but — even though it is absolutely agonizing to do this — I have to admit that she’s right.

“Okay,” I concede, grabbing the envelope and tearing it open. Whoever put this packet together did a damn good job, considering how fast they must have done it. Everything looks incredibly crisp and clear. “Let’s say I choose to go along with this madness. I still think it’s crazy to marry a man I barely know.”

“So, go out with him,” says Kelly like that was an obvious point I somehow missed.

“I’m not dating Aiden Fletcher. The last thing I want is to get ripped to shreds in the media. Imagine if my face got on TV! I’d never live that down.”

Kelly gives me the deepest frown she’s ever given me, swiveling on the desk to face me, legs crossed. “Candice, I’m not saying you have to actually *date* him. Go somewhere. Do something. Chat. Catch up. Maybe he’s changed.”

“Maybe he hasn’t.”

“And how would you know that?”

We lock eyes again, but I have no more argument left in me. The truth is, seeing Aiden again has created a storm in me and I don't think it's going to quiet down until I put this whole situation to rest one way or another. “Okay, what do you suggest, then? Weekend in Rome? Walking the Great Wall of China? Getting smashed at a luxury hotel?”

She rolls her eyes but can't contain the grin of victory. “Too dramatic. Invite him to Desert Cove.” I give her a blank look until she elaborates. “The oasis? Don't you know it?”

“No, actually,” I say, intrigued.

“Oh, well it's super pretty, not that far away, and really quiet and secluded. Plus there's this spa that does retreats for couples and businesspeople, designed to get you back in touch with your true self and release your inner spirits or whatever.”

One weekend. I can manage that, right? One weekend of vaguely couple-related activities. I can be in his vicinity for two days and not kill him or, worse, let any old feelings get reawakened. I just have to take the personal out of this. It's a business trip meant to secure a business deal. I'm good at business. It's why I'm here in the first place.

“Fine. Can you book it all?”

Kelly grins so hard it looks like she's about to give herself a headache. She jumps to her feet and says, “Awesome. Maybe call him first, though? Let me know what he says, and I'll get right on it.”

“Get out, then,” I say lightly, shooing her with my hands. I might as well get this over with.

Kelly shoots a wink at me as she prances out of the room, clearly walking on the high of winning a battle. As she shuts the door, I sigh and lean forward. Aiden has left his number right on the top of the packet, clearly expecting a call.

I hate how much this feels like giving in.

Still, I pick up my phone and, with a shaking hand, dial the number.



## CHAPTER 18

## AIDEN



**O**f course, the second I get back to HQ, everyone wants me.

About a million minor technicians or programmers or admins or whoever swarm around me, locusts ready to strip the skin from my bones when all I want is to crawl into my office and lie on the floor in the dark. I have literally never been so humiliated.

I've come close — and *that* was Candice's fault too. Maybe chasing her is a huge waste of my time.

I just about manage to brush off the people who want me to sign and approve stuff when the elevator comes into sight. I know for a fact that my inbox is going to be crammed full of the same when I open my emails, but that's a problem for later. For now, I'm going to lock the door and do absolutely nothing until the shame passes.

But, of course, when I step into the empty elevator, I'm joined by the person I want to see least in the world right now.

Nicholas doesn't look at me as he stands next to me in a way that would be shoulder to shoulder if he wasn't a literal giant. "It went well, then?" he says mildly, his mouth only slightly wavering towards a *gotcha* kind of smirk.

I grunt in response. With this streak I'm on, it would be just my luck for the elevator to break down now and trap us here, giving Nicholas enough time to extract the whole play-by-play of what went down at Candice's. His curiosity is clearly bubbling inside him like it's actually giving off heat, but to my

relief he doesn't say anything else.

The elevator door grinds open, and as soon as there's a gap big enough for me to slip through, I make a run for it, Nicholas's judging gaze burning into the back of my head.

The urge to slam my office door like a teenager raging at his parents is overwhelming. But I don't. Instead, I grip the handle so tightly that it feels like I'm going to tear it off. As carefully as I can, I slide the door into position, only letting go when it hits the wood of the frame, leaving me in total silence. I almost turn off the light too, but locking the door and pretending I'm not in would really only serve to make *me* feel better.

You can't exactly hide if you're the guy in charge.

Not that I'm very in control right now.

Once, when I was fifteen or sixteen and Dad was trying to prime me for this position, he made me work as a lower-than-bottom-rung admin and told me that I should never take anything for granted. I was entering endless numbers into a spreadsheet, and it was so boring I would have rather watched grass grow, but it did teach me something. He told me that as far as he was concerned, I was the CEO of that spreadsheet and any mistakes in it would filter out into the rest of the company — and it would all be my fault if the house of cards came tumbling down, because that's what being the boss is like.

After that summer, he bought me a car. Guess I didn't realize then that, whether things are going right or going wrong, you don't get a reward as the CEO. All you get is the reward of dealing with the next problem.

Unfortunately, Candice has been my problem for eight long years. She looks almost exactly the way I remember — her bob still curls into her face, framing it perfectly, her blue eyes are still suspicious and kind at the same time. She holds herself even taller now, though, like the confidence she used to pretend she had has become real. It's not actually any of my business, but I still get a swell of pride to see it.

I wish she'd come to her senses and see what I'm trying to offer her.

The shrill ringer of the phone cuts through my moping, and I'm tempted to

unplug it altogether. If I ran away now to a small, tropical island with a suitcase of cash and a fake passport, what would really be the worst that could happen? Fletcher Tech is circling the drain anyway. I could escape from it all now if I left.

But my dad's legacy rests on this, and the guilt would probably eat me alive, so I answer the phone. "Hello?"

The voice that answers might as well have been that of an angel. She's the last person I was ever expecting to hear. "I hate you. I'm gonna open with that, just so you don't get the wrong idea about any of this."

"Hello, Candice," I say, feeling a warm grin spreading over my face and filling my chest with lightness. "How are you?"

"Don't give me any of that!" she snaps defensively, like she's hiding something or else lying to herself. I can't let myself get carried away. But she is cute, even when she's yelling at me. "This is purely a business call."

I blink in surprise. "Wait, so you've reconsidered?"

She sighs down the phone, and I can almost see her glare of utter contempt manifesting in front of me. "No. But I have read through that information you gave me, and I've called to make a counteroffer."

"Okay, shoot," I say, my heart racing.

A sudden vision flashes before me, of her falling into my arms, looking up at me with those gorgeous, wide eyes, and then I brush her golden hair out of her face and she smiles with those plush, pink lips and whispers to me that she was wrong all along, that she's always loved me and that she always will. She's wearing a white dress — her wedding dress — and I lean down slowly and kiss her...

"Aiden, you're not listening, are you?" she snaps, dragging me out of my fantasy. I absolutely have to stop doing that. If I'm not careful, the teenage crush is going to bloom into something real and uncontrollable.

"Sorry," I say weakly. "What?"

"I said, I don't like it, but the fact is, my company is stalling and yours is

teetering on the edge of collapse. We both need a boost. And unfortunately a merger looks great for both our businesses, on paper. I could really use the marketing power of Fletcher Tech.”

“And we need fresh blood desperately,” I add, trying to figure out where she’s actually going with this.

“Exactly.” She sighs again and pauses, the faint hum and crackle of the phone line the only thing connecting us. “I don’t want to marry a guy I don’t know, let alone a guy who betrayed me and everything I stand for.”

“But...?” I say hopefully, holding my breath for whatever’s coming next.

“*But* my business means everything to me. So, here are my terms. I have full and final authority over Mettie’s Marketplace, no matter what deal we strike. It’s mine and it always will be.”

“Okay, deal,” I say. That’s an easy enough thing to agree to, and I have way too much going on to even *think* about running something new on top of it.

She takes a deep breath. I try to imagine her face — is she angrily steeling herself for what comes next? Or nervous about agreeing to the arrangement? Or bored and irritated by the whole thing? Really, I want to imagine her smiling sweetly, the sun brushing over her face, catching the tip of her small nose.

I’m wandering back into dangerous territory here.

“Good. So my second demand is this: we spend a weekend together, to get to know each other again. I refuse to marry a stranger.”

“You want to go on a weekend date?” My heart leaps at the idea, and I’m sure she can hear the way I’m grinning like an idiot, but I don’t care. This is better than anything I could have expected. I thought that if she agreed to the deal, she’d want to have it on paper but nothing more.

Would it have hurt to be married to a woman like her on paper alone? I can’t see how it wouldn’t. But this makes it sound like marriage means something to her. Like she wouldn’t be content to sign the deed and never see me again.

“No!” she says sharply. “Well. Kind of. I refuse to call it a date.”

“Whatever you want.”

“What I *want* is to go back to the blissful universe where I never had to see your damn face again.”

“I don’t think we live there, honey.”

“Don’t start with that,” she growls. I’m sure if she was in the room right now, she’d pretty much be trying to tear me limb from limb.

“So, any ideas where we’re vacationing? Somewhere tropical and romantic?”

She ignores the comment. “My assistant manager suggested Desert Cove.”

“Oh, the oasis! It’s supposed to be fantastic there.”

She mutters something I can’t make out, then says, “Great. Well, if you’re happy, send through the dates you’re free, and I’ll get Kelly to book it all.”

“Absolutely not,” I say. I’m met by what I can only assume is an astounded silence, so I continue. “You’ve said it yourself; I’m surrounded by all my dad’s money. Let me use some of it on you.”

There’s another long hesitation during which all I can hear is her breathing, before she gives in. “Fine. Whatever. I’ll send you my dates.”

Already, I’m waking my computer up and searching for the Cove. It’s an exclusive spot, but I can use that Fletcher charm to get us in whenever we want. “You’ve got my email?”

“Yes,” she says, her voice clipped. “And... Aiden?”

“Uh-huh?” I hum, typing with one hand on the website.

“Thank you,” she says quietly, and hangs up before I can say anything else.

My heart and stomach are somersaulting and I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing. One thing I do know, though, is that we’re going to have the best weekend ever.

## CHAPTER 19

## CANDICE



**M**aybe this is normal for billionaires, but I've never been in a helicopter before, and even less a private one with my family brand slapped all over it. I didn't exactly need transport out here, but Aiden offered his helicopter, and though I probably should have refused because I'm still making my point about independence and this being a business transaction only, I've always wanted to ride in a helicopter. And the opportunity doesn't come round every day, does it?

I watch the outskirts of Olympus City fade into dirt and get dryer and dryer as we fly out further, to the center of the state. I'm transfixed the whole time, staring down at our shadow as it crosses over a landscape that looks barren and inhospitable, though it clearly is not as I spot a few plants and animals.

The pilot yells into my headset that we're coming in to land soon and points towards a body of water that is startlingly lush and green compared to the arid world around it. I won't admit this to Aiden, but I'm really excited to be here.

Not because of him. Because this place looks awesome. *He's* a necessary evil.

The helicopter starts its descent, and the greenery of trees rushes towards us, growing and growing until the grasses are blowing wildly under the rotors, waving like they're about to get uprooted. The touchdown is a little shaky, but as the engine whirs to a halt, the pilot jumps out and opens the door, offering his hand to help me down.



I take it and thank him, glad that my feet are back on solid ground. Then I look up and see Aiden waiting for me.

He does a little wave, smiling like he's trying to stop himself, and walks towards me. "How was the journey?" he asks, voice raised so he can be heard over the helicopter. He holds out his hand as if to take my bag, but all I brought was a backpack, which I sling over my shoulder.

It's important to play this cool enough that he won't get the wrong idea. "It was fine."

"First time in a chopper?"

"Yeah." I nod.

"Exciting, isn't it? It's so awesome seeing the world so small underneath. Come on, I'll walk you to the hotel."

As we walk away from the landing site, I kick myself internally. I made three promises to myself before I left. One: I would not weaken and start to find Aiden attractive again. Two: I would not let his floppy hair and fake innocence charm me. Three: I would judge him fairly to decide if this could work, but I wouldn't get attached.

I've already broken one and two.

That's okay; plenty of things get off to a bad start. I still have time to recover my senses.

The hotel is only a ten-minute walk away — in fact, the whole settlement isn't that large; and you could walk around the entire lake and still go for a hike. That doesn't stop it being gorgeous. As we get into the village, the paths are lined with rugged trees that sway gently against the calm, bright blue sky.

I could get used to a place like this. It's the definition of tranquil. All I can hear is a few bugs, a few birds, the rustling of leaves. The only traffic noise is one guy zooming past us on his moped. It really makes you remember how big and busy the city is when you come to a place like this where there aren't any advertising billboards or impatient drivers or drunk people screaming outside your window in the early hours of the morning.

If anything, Aiden and I are the anomalies, here to cause a disturbance with our tourism. We are so lucky to be here.

“Thank you,” he says, interrupting the quiet of our walk.

I open my mouth and shut it again, not sure how to articulate that I was thinking of saying the same thing. “What for?”

“Coming.”

“I’d have to be stupid to pass up the opportunity to come to a place like this,” I say, gesturing all around us.

“Yeah,” he says, and if I didn’t know better I’d say the downcast look he gives me is one of disappointment. “Thank you for coming with me.”

I brush off the comment with an awkward smile and grunt of recognition. He sticks out his hand towards me in a way that definitely means *please hold it* but is subtle enough that I can pretend not to notice. So that’s exactly what I do.

Rule four: I won’t feel sorry for him, even if he pouts. We’re here on business.

“Here we are,” he says as the hotel comes into view. The building is incongruously modern and bright and lit up with a neon sign that is nothing short of obnoxious. “After you.”

Clinging to the straps of my backpack, I take the lead and slide through the automatic doors. I’m greeted with a blast of cold air so strong it blows my hair into my face. I didn’t think I’d need a jacket, but it looks like I was wrong.

The atrium of the hotel is as lavish as the outside: polished white floors and gold trim on the walls. Decorative pillars stand guard next to the reception desk, and the woman sitting there is equally as glamorous, her hair coiled on top of her head and hair-sprayed firmly in place, her makeup so pristine it looks like a professional has done it, and her clothes so crisp they might as well have been ironed onto her.

I’m starting to wish I’d brought better shoes than sandals and sneakers.

Aiden overtakes me to check us in, and I follow, happy to let him take the lead on it. I'm still too busy looking around in awe. There's a whole waterfall in one of the walls. Why?

Before I can really start worrying about the water usage, a woman in a long and flowing green dress with long, loosely braided hair drifts up to us. "Hi!" she says in such an overly sweet way I'd think she was joking if her broad smile wasn't completely sincere.

"Hello?" I say, confused as to why she's approached me.

She takes my hand and shakes it generously with both of hers. Looking closer, I notice that her necklaces are made of shells and feathers, as are her dangling earrings. Her lips shine with pink gloss, and a constellation of freckles dust her cheeks. She's a striking woman, gorgeous in that kind of earthy way. I can so imagine her hugging a tree unironically.

"My name is Juniper," she says, beaming. "But you and Mr. Handsome can call me June."

"Mr.— what?" I sputter.

"He's such a cutie!" she says, carrying on like she's oblivious to my horror. She touches me on the shoulder and continues, "You're so lucky."

I blink dumbly at her. Surely she can't think...?

"You think we're together?" I ask, eyes narrowing in suspicion as hers grow wider in realization.

"You're not? Oh, I'm sorry, sweetie. I shouldn't have assumed. Most people who take my weekend program are lovers." She puts such an emphasis on the word *lovers* that I get the impression she knows something I don't. If Aiden has told them something untrue, I swear I'm going to kill him.

Fortunately, he saves me from any more of June's saccharine platitudes by turning round and holding up a room key between his fingers. "For you, madam," he says, offering it to me.

"Thank you," I say, taking it and slipping it into my backpack.

June claps her hands together, flinging her mane of hair over her shoulder.

“Wonderful. I’m sure you’re both ready to get going with everything, so if you leave your bags here, I’ll get Manuel to take them through to your room. He’s *such* a darling.”

We obey, dumping our bags by the desk. As June turns on her heel, beckoning us to follow, I lean in and hiss into Aiden’s ear, “Room — singular?”

He shrugs apologetically. “It was the best I could do on short notice. It’s a king bed, if that helps?”

“It doesn’t.”

He hesitates like he has something to add but isn’t sure if he should say it, but then does anyway, probably more tersely than he means to. “Well, if we’re going to be engaged by the end of the weekend, you should probably be able to stand being in the same bed as me, or room at least.”

I open my mouth to snap a hotheaded reply, but June interrupts before the argument can bloom. “Come on, folks. We’ve got so much to explore!”

Aiden looks at me with pleading eyes, and I glare, straightening up and marching after June. This is all way too much to deal with. But one thing I am absolutely resolute about: I am *not* going to enjoy myself. Not even a tiny, tiny bit.

## CHAPTER 20

## AIDEN



**A**s June leads us through the hotel, it's like we're following a minotaur through a maze. All the corridors look the same except for various different yet generic photos of tropical vistas and fruit on blurred backgrounds. It's nice, but for the price tag I'd expect not to see fraying edges on the carpets.

June is babbling on about the oasis, telling us all about its history, how it used to be a vital stopping point for travelers and fortune seekers and how so many people died out in the plains and blah, blah, blah.

*Is it bad that I really don't care about anything except Candice?*

I should probably pretend to be making an effort, but Candice at least is nodding along and asking the occasional question, which I can kind of make noises to so I sound like I'm paying attention. It's hard when Candice is wearing a dress that shows off her legs and shoulders, and as I walk behind her I can't help looking. It's not my fault she cuts such a perfect silhouette.

We take a sharp left turn and find ourselves in a small, dimly lit conference room. But unlike any other conference room I've ever seen, there are no chairs or tables, just a wide circle of cushions on the floor and some red candles that definitely should not have been left unattended. We're also greeted by the heady smell of incense or perfume, an intense, fake floral scent. It's so strong that it stings my eyes, and I have to resist the urge to cough.

It's obvious which cushion in the circle is June's — it's surrounded by

papers, cards and dice. My heart sinks at the realization that she's probably going to try and tell our fortunes or something.

Candice is not going to enjoy this.

"Welcome to the tranquility zone," says June, flinging her arms into the air and spinning in a circle that makes her dress swing wildly around her knees. "Will you both come and sit with me?"

She floats down to her cushion, her skirt billowing out around her, the draft making the flames of the candles flicker alarmingly. Surely there's a fire-safety-protocol incursion here.

Candice and I both share a look and reluctantly make our way over, each sitting on opposite sides of June. She glances at both of us in turn, her expression mystical. "Let's introduce ourselves again, even if we already know each other intimately. I can already sense a great divide here."

She gestures to me, and I clear my throat awkwardly. "Um..." is all I can manage.

"Let's try our names and one of our deepest hopes or wildest fears, shall we?" smiles June encouragingly. In the dull, wavering light, the shadows dance over her face, almost giving the illusion of her being underwater. "My name is Juniper, and one of my deepest hopes is to help give everyone I love the confidence and peace in their hearts to be truly themselves."

I'm glad that she gestures to Candice next, because I need time to think. Candice hums thoughtfully, her forehead creasing between her eyebrows. "I'm Candice, and my biggest hope is for my business to be successful."

"Wonderful," says June encouragingly. I think I find her genuine sincerity kind of annoying, actually. It makes it hard to be mad with her. "And...?"

"And my name is Aiden. And I guess my biggest fear is... failure."

Both of them give me a look I can only describe as withering. I guess that's a lame answer, but I couldn't think of anything else.

"Thank you for sharing," says June politely. She reaches down to pick up a deck of cards and fans them out in front of her. "Okay! So I'm still getting to

know you folks, so we're going to start with a little round of compatibilities. Take a card."

We both obey. Candice looks at her card straightaway and smiles. What's there to smile about? It's a regular playing card. Mine's the three of clubs.

June's playing some sort of twisted game with us, though. I had thought "couples retreat" would mean something more like sitting by the pool and getting joint massages. Guess I should have read the information better, because this isn't what I expected at all.

"Okay. I'm going to ask three questions. Please answer as honestly as you can. But while being honest, we're going to try and lay some clues so we can guess each other's card. Got it?"

I nod, frowning, mirroring the discontented look Candice gives June, who seems not to notice, or else is so resilient to grumpy people dimming her cheery mood that she doesn't care.

"Okay," says Candice. "What do we win if we get it right?"

"Knowledge that you're meant to be," June grins, and I cringe. There's no way she can believe all this crap. "Question one: what would be your least favorite part of being trapped on a desert island?"

"Oh!" Candice bursts out, then shrinks as if she wasn't supposed to say anything yet.

"Don't hold back. We're in a safe space." Again, June wafts her hands around like she's chasing after incredibly slow-moving flies.

"I'd be the only one. I don't think I'd enjoy the isolation, and I'd miss my friends." She's keeping a straight face but she's trying to give me a clue. The ace?

June nods sagely, her earrings tinkling like wind chimes. They both look at me again, and I let honesty slip out before I can think about it. "I agree. I think I'd like maybe three days on my own, but I like other people, and I like running water."

Candice and I lock eyes, and I barely hear June's next question over my own



thoughts. This game might be stupid, but it's unlocking the final lock on a part of my heart that's been bolted shut for years. I'm not over Candice Metcalf.

I don't think I ever will be if I don't leave here with her as my wife-to-be.

"Imagine," says June, her voice low as she tries to cast a scene, "you're going to the movies together on a date. What's the best snack?"

To my dismay, Candice winces at the word *date*. I'm going to have to try harder to charm her if I want to persuade her that what we felt that night was real. Because it was.

At the same time, Candice and I both say, "Popcorn." The ghost of a smile brushes over her face, making her look beautiful in the candlelight. If only this was a real date, getting to know her better with my own questions, in a restaurant over an expensive meal where I could see the candlelight reflected in her eyes before I leaned in to kiss her.

"The more buttery the better," I say. She nods in firm agreement.

It should annoy me the way June is sitting back, looking perfectly angelic like she's doing something magical, but it doesn't because the more Candice agrees with me, the more I believe this could really be something. Even if this isn't the way I want to do this, seeing her and chatting about anything other than work is lighting me up in ways I haven't felt since I kissed her eight years ago.

"Okay," says June, clapping her hands together and holding them in front of herself like she's praying. "Final question. Remember, honesty is the key here. Is your life everything you thought it would be when you were growing up?"

"Yeah," I say quickly, surprising even myself. "Dad always treated Fletcher Tech like an exclusive little club that I wasn't going to be allowed into, but I always knew he'd leave his legacy to me in the end."

June beams at me and, despite myself, the confession gives me a rush. Maybe this isn't so stupid after all. The restaurant plan is still better, but if June can get us to start being honest with each other, I'm going to owe her big time.

But I have that thought too quickly, because just as I thought that we were getting somewhere, Candice closes back up again, rolling into a prickly, defensive ball. “Yeah, I suppose,” is all she says, and when June smiles gently at her to try and get her to articulate her thoughts, she shrugs. “Anyway, your card is the three of clubs.”

I blink, my mouth dropping open. “How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” she says, pursing her lips like it was nothing. I didn’t exactly give her a whole lot to work with.

“Well, you’ve got the ace... of hearts?” I guess, not confident in my choice at all.

Candice rotates her card slowly to show me the ace of hearts in her hands. June claps in delight. “Oh, brilliant. I love it when people are meant to be!”

“It’s a guessing game,” mutters Candice, her expression darkening as she folds her arms. “It doesn’t prove anything.”

June reaches out and puts her hand on Candice’s knee. “Sometimes the threads of the universe know things that we don’t yet and pull together to surprise us. It’s important to keep an open heart and mind.”

The way Candice recoils from June kind of makes me cringe, so before Candice can make any more snide comments, I say, “Okay, what’s the next activity?”

With a flourish, June grabs another deck of cards and splits it elegantly in half so she can hand a stack to each of us. I take a look at the set I’ve been given and it seems to be a bunch of random questions with no particular theme at all.

“We’re going to play This or That!” announces June with delight.

From the grimaces that Candice and I exchange, I get the feeling this is going to be a long night.

## CHAPTER 21

## CANDICE



I get up early. I'm a morning person anyway, but I like to stay in bed till at least seven a.m. on a Saturday. But it's five thirty and I can't stand the sound of Aiden's breathing anymore and I'm terrified that he's going to reach out in his sleep and grab me like some demon in a horror film.

Would that be so bad?

Right now, yes, it would be. I've barely slept, and I'm so tense from keeping my guard up that my shoulders are creaking like ancient trees. I shouldn't be so unfair on Aiden — from the horror on his face yesterday, he wasn't expecting pseudo-psychoanalysis either.

When I said *retreat*, he was probably expecting something more like an extended lavish spa day. So was I.

The idea of spending another day with June does not fill me with joy.

We played more card games last night in an attempt to further assess our compatibility, but really it was all guessing games and party tricks. It's the kind of thing that's fun with people you like, at an actual party, but in a dark room with a woman who keeps insisting that fate is drawing me and Aiden together, it's utterly unbearable. Eventually I had to pretend to be tired to get out of anything else — which today isn't going to be that much of a lie at all.

Is it so bad that I want to lie by the pool for a while instead?

I stare out of the window for a while, looking at the trees waving over the oasis. It is a beautiful place. I can barely see the water from here, but birds

circle overhead, black shadows against the lightening sky as the sun begins to rise. I wish I'd stopped last night to look at the stars.

Aiden's breathing changes suddenly, like he's about to wake up too, so I shove some shoes on my feet and leave the room as quietly as I can, making sure the door doesn't slam behind me. Of course, I will have to see him again today, but I want to be ready for it.

I wander down towards the restaurant, hoping that breakfast starts at six a.m. It's still early, but if I can at least get a table, it'll give me something to do. I should have brought my book. *Ugh.*

I'm completely alone in the restaurant, but fortunately I am allowed to look at a menu and order. I'm about to tuck into a giant stack of pancakes when, to my despair, a figure with long, strawberry-blond hair and a loose floral dress waltzes in and takes a seat across from me. "Good morning! Did you see the sunrise? Oh, isn't it gorgeous?"

I nod in agreement with all of June's questions. I'm so not in the mood for a conversation at this time of day.

She orders some granola for herself and starts telling me about the dream she had last night about running naked along a beach, the sand under her feet and a storm rolling in from the sea. I wish I'd slept well enough to dream. Or is it when you *don't* sleep well that you dream?

Thinking about that means I miss her question, which I only realize when she stares expectantly at me. I swallow my mouthful too fast and it gets stuck in my throat, so I can only choke out a, "Sorry, what?"

"Are you excited for the day?" she repeats with a smile.

I nod as politely as I can, hoping that my breakfast struggle is covering my total lack of enthusiasm. "What're we doing?"

"I've got a couple of things planned, but today is a little more self-guided than yesterday, you'll be pleased to hear." The glint in her eye suggests she knows exactly how annoying I found yesterday, and I get a tiny twinge of guilt for thinking badly of her.

Breakfast drags on and on, and when Aiden comes down, I stand quickly,

excusing myself so I don't have to watch him eat. I say I want to shower, but the truth is, I plan to sit and stare out the window until we have to meet up again.

"See you later!" June waves after me. I choose to wave back rather than acknowledge Aiden at all.

By the time we all gather back in the conference room, I'm in a thoroughly bad mood and I want nothing more than to lie on the floor cushions and have a mid-morning nap. Maybe we can convince June that that's a good bonding activity.

But before I can even sit down on my lovely, soft pillow, June makes us stand on opposite sides of the room. "I'm sure you'll agree that the most important thing in any relationship of any kind is to be able to trust each other and communicate."

I'm not sure that I agree, but I nod anyway. I don't care enough to argue.

"I get the sense that there's a lot of unspoken history between you two," says June. I frown at her hard. Anyone with eyes would be able to tell that, surely. "So the space here now represents the past that you haven't shared. I'd like you both to say one truth and take a step forward. Who wants to start?"

To my surprise, Aiden speaks right away. "I still regret the way Candice never let me explain myself when she walked out on me. I would have told her that my father was going to disinherit me if I hadn't pretended to be an intern, and that he always played games with me like that. I was never allowed to do anything if I didn't prove myself first."

He takes a step, and I bite my tongue. He makes it sound like his comfortable little life as a billionaire's son has been so hard — but he won't have even needed a student loan. He could have paid any college in the country to take him. I've only just managed to pay mine off.

"Well," I say, folding my arms, "I'm still hurt over the fact that Aiden lied to me at all."

"I've been thinking about Candice for years, and I've always wondered what she's been doing all this time."

“I haven’t used a single piece of Fletcher Tech since I got usurped from the job.”

“I always thought Candice would get the job because she deserved it most of all.”

We’re closer now, and his eyes are begging me to trust him and confess that I’ve loved him all this time too. Clearly that’s what he’s trying to tell me. It’s what this whole stupid weekend is about — trying to trap me into being his wife. So, he wants the truth? He wants to know what I *really* think?

I glance at June, who’s standing in her corner, observing. She doesn’t give any cues at all.

So, I decide to be honest.

“I was so angry when you lied to me, but honestly? It’s the best thing that ever happened to me. If I’d got the job, I never would have started Mettie’s. I wouldn’t have been so driven to succeed all by myself. And you know what? For a long time, I was grateful for it, because I have worked so hard and succeeded so much. But now, seeing you again? I’m *angry*. I’m so angry I could burst because all that time, your father lied to all of us about that job. I tried so hard for it, and it never could have been mine.”

“What, and that’s *my* fault?” Aiden exclaims, confusion and irritation flashing over his face.

“No!” I say with a huff. “Well, yes, kind of! So maybe you didn’t exactly scheme about it together, but face it — there was no way in hell he was ever going to give someone else the job. It was all some sick game to him, and it made everyone else suffer.”

“You weren’t even at the ceremony. How do you know how everyone felt?”

“Ceremony!” I scoff. I’m so not surprised to learn that it was pompous beyond belief. “How could I have gone after you betrayed me?”

“I didn’t— it wasn’t like... I never meant to hurt you,” he stammers, his cheeks starting to pink with an emotion I can’t decode. Shame? Embarrassment?

“But you *did!*” I snap, tears stinging my eyes. I’ve imagined this conversation a hundred times but it never went like this in my head. “And you can’t honestly tell me that the others were happy to roll over and congratulate you for beating them?”

“They were, actually,” he says sharply, showing me an anger I don’t ever think I’ve seen from him. “They had the good grace to congratulate me and let me win with no hard feelings.”

I sputter in disbelief. The arrogance of this guy! “How *dare* you treat me like this is all my fault? All this was your idea to begin with! I never wanted you to buy my company, and I didn’t really even want to come to this stupid place!”

“Then why did you suggest it?” His face is bright red now, his eyes wide and angry, like I’m the one betraying him. “I thought you wanted to give us a go.”

“This was never about us,” I hiss. “This was always for the good of Mettie’s. And you know what? Fuck your money. We can do this without you. I’m done with this.”

As we’ve been arguing, we’ve still been slowly creeping towards each other, like this cosmic magnetism June believes in has actually been drawing us in. We’re close enough that I could reach out and touch him, or hit him, or push him away. Anything.

All I do instead is turn on my heel and march towards the door. If I have to look at his face for much longer, I’m going to do something I’ll regret.

“Candice, where are you going?” he calls after me as I wrench open the door.

“I’m getting the hell out of here, and away from you!” I spit, turning over my shoulder to look at him one last time. Somehow, seeing the hurt of my words sink in isn’t giving me the sense of victory I always thought it would. It’s a hollow kind of win.

I don’t hesitate, though. Even as he yells after me, I don’t stop. I have to get out of here. The swirl of emotions is too much to handle.

I want my life to go back to how it was before he called me and opened up all



my old wounds again. I want it to stop hurting.

## CHAPTER 22

## AIDEN



I burst into our room to find Candice kneeling on the floor, surrounded by clothes that she's cramming back into her backpack. Somehow, she fit about a dozen outfits into a single backpack, and it's all exploded around her in flashes of color. Even like this, when I'm angry and she's furious, I still find her beautiful.

"Candice," I say, breathless. I think I'm still unhappy with her for being so cruel, but mostly I don't want her to leave. If I let her go now, I will never get her back. "Please, wait."

"You need to run more often," she says without looking up.

She's probably right, but the comment stops me in my tracks with how unexpected it is. "What?"

"You barely ran a hundred meters. How unfit *are* you, anyway?"

I shake my head, baffled. This isn't the kind of subject change I know how to deal with when there's so much left to be said. "Look, that's not the point. Why are you leaving?"

That makes her turn at last, a green top clenched firmly in both fists, her eyes blazing. "Why the hell do you think? This is stupid, pointless, and annoying, and I don't want to sit in a room getting patronized by a woman who looks like she owns rabbit bones!"

"Rabbit bones?" My whole face crumples in confusion. Candice has some really weird priorities here, and none of them seem to be the way she's

running away from me. “Whatever. You promised you’d give this a real chance, for me.”

She scoffs bitterly. “I gave this a go and I did it for *my* company, which *you* want.”

Desperately, I fling my hands up. “Okay, stay for the sake of our companies, then. You have no idea how much I need you — and Mettie’s too.”

“What do you know about needing anything?” she snaps, jumping to her feet so she can yell at me from a better angle, tossing her shirt into a crumpled pile along with all the rest of her clothes. “You’ve never struggled a day in your life, have you? Look at you, in your brand clothes, sitting on top of all the billions your daddy gave you when you were three years old!”

“That’s not fair,” I start, but she cuts me off, putting her hands on her hips.

“Isn’t it? What have you ever had to worry about, then? Other than getting Daddy’s approval?”

My mouth wavers as I figure out what to say next. I could snap again, let the indignant fury take over and push her, but that has never been my goal. I’m not my father. I don’t have to be a dictator to get what I want. And she’s right; I *have* had it easy in some ways.

“Look,” I say with a sigh, dropping down onto the bed, clasping my hands together, “I know you think I want to take Mettie’s because it’ll look good for me, and that’s true.”

She huffs victoriously, her hands still firmly on her hips like she’s making a barrier to protect herself. I close my eyes and continue. “But it’s also true that Fletcher Tech is fucked. I told you that we were in a bad way, but the truth is that we’re *way* worse than that. Not only would we not be able to afford to buy you out, but we can barely afford to buy ourselves. We’re in such debt as a company that saving it with my own funds would almost be enough to bankrupt me.”

“Really?” she asks, her eyebrows knotting together as she turns over what I’m saying in her mind.

I nod. There’s a tiny chink in her armor. If I can get in, maybe I can make her

understand. “Cross my heart. Sure, we’re big and we look good on the outside. But stocks are already down and we’re going to plummet badly if it gets out how red our books are. I swear, I need this merger as much as you do.”

She drops her hands and I stand back up, offering mine to her to take. She ignores them. “Think about it,” I continue. “A merger means you get the funds and support you need, and we get the boost on the market as well as an influx of new custom. Not only that... I think you’re brilliant.”

“Shut up,” she says, half-turning away from me like she wants to run again.

I stand my ground. Gently, I continue. “I really mean it, Candice. You’re right to believe that I’d never be able to do what you’ve done. You’ve built yourself up from nothing, and I admire that more than I can say.”

“Now you’re just flattering me.” Tears glisten in her eyes, and I have to clench my fists to stop myself from reaching out to touch her face. All I want to do is cup her cheek and wipe any tears away, to take her pain into my hands and make it all easier. Why won’t she understand that?

“I am,” I admit. “But I mean it. I could use a formidable mind like yours. If we go through with this deal, not only will you still have total control over Mettie’s, but I’ll put you on the Fletcher Tech board. I’ll give you a voice in the company.”

“How can I trust you?” she whispers, and suddenly I see it. Her anger at me all comes from the trust I broke all those years ago. It’s not that she doesn’t like me; it’s that she doesn’t want me to let her down again.

From this moment on, I’m making a vow to never betray her again.

I look around the room, and as my eyes land on a notepad on the desk, inspiration strikes me. I dash over to it and scribble down a note.

*I, Aiden Fletcher, do so promise to instate Candice Fletcher to the board of Fletcher Tech and allow her full and complete control over Mettie’s Marketplace without question.*

Hastily, I sign it, tear the note off and thrust it towards Candice. She stares blankly at it. “What?”

“You have to sign too,” I say, pressing it into her hand. “Or else you can’t hold me to it.”

She reads it, her eyes widening as she realizes what it means, then crosses to the desk and signs her name beneath mine. I smile to see both signatures on the page, sitting together as naturally as a handshake.

“Stay for today. Please,” I say quietly. She frowns at me, and I really think she’s going to say no again. “Let’s run away from the hotel and go exploring. Let’s go to the lake and skim stones and enjoy the sunshine. How often do either of us have a real, work-free holiday? Let’s make the most of it.

“Okay,” she sighs, and I blink. Did I hear that right? “Only if I don’t have to do any more stupid games.”

“Okay,” I say, grinning in relief. “Okay!”

“Don’t get too excited,” she says, bending down to her bag to stash the contract note somewhere safe. Even without the paper, I would stand by it, though. I meant every word. “I still haven’t made any decisions about you.”

“Just you wait.” I raise a cheeky eyebrow at her and she shakes her head, but for the first time in hours, her smile is genuine, even as she tries to hide it. This is the Candice I fell in love with eight years ago — strong and gorgeous and funny. This is the Candice I’ve never *stopped* loving.

She slips her shoes onto her feet and offers me her hand. I stare at it, confused. “Come on, then,” she says, spreading her fingers insistently. “Before June comes to find us. Let’s get out of here.”

I don’t need any more persuasion. I take her hand, and she drags me along the corridor — and to my delight she doesn’t let go.

## CHAPTER 23

## CANDICE



**A**lthough we're technically not doing anything wrong, we still tiptoe as we sneak down the corridor, both of us looking over our shoulders every now and again like we're in a shitty spy movie. I would feel bad for abandoning June if she wasn't so frustrating. She's a nice enough woman, but I do not see the world like she does in the slightest. I guess living in an oasis gives you a unique perspective on life.

I slip my sunglasses on as we walk through the atrium. It's not much of a disguise but it makes me relax more. Neither of us make eye contact with the receptionist as we make a beeline for the door.

The second we slide out into freedom, we're hit with a wave of heat — I'd almost forgotten it was still summer out here. Despite the sunglasses, I still squint in the bright, late morning light. A light breeze blows around us, rustling leaves overhead and taking the searing edge off the heat.

"Where are we going?" I ask, realizing suddenly that we're walking without a goal. This wasn't at all a well-thought-out plan, but it is nice to be free of the hotel. Even if I'm still mad at Aiden, it's getting harder to hold on to that anger. Every time I want to hate him, he does something else to prove that I shouldn't.

Aiden shrugs. "Wherever. So long as we don't have to play any more weird card games or anything."

I let out a snort of amusement. "She means well," I find myself saying, jumping to June's defense. "She's just..."



“Got the wrong end of the stick?” Aiden supplies and I nod with a slight chuckle.

“You could say that. She’s lovely and all, but tell me you believe a single word of the ‘lines of fate and destiny’ stuff she keeps going on about.”

“I mean...” He trails off, unable to think of a good argument. I grin, smug at winning.

“If I’d known that all it takes to find your soulmate is a guessing game and choosing the same answers every time on This or That, then I’d have had way better luck dating.”

He gives me a curious look. It’s cute when he does it, this double blink and almost frown when he’s processing information he wasn’t expecting. “You’ve dated recently, then?” he asks in a way that’s almost casual.

I shrug. “Kind of. I’ve been on dates but I haven’t really dated, if you get me.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I haven’t.”

“Really? I’d have thought you’d have girls hanging off you left, right and center, a handsome guy like you.”

“Yeah, exactly why I haven’t. And hey, you think I’m attractive?” He smirks, and I pretend to go in to hit him on the arm.

“Shut up. I didn’t say that.”

“Actually, you literally did.”

The laugh that escapes me is way bigger than I expected, but it’s natural. It’s good. It’s like we’re releasing some of the demons that have been hanging between us, but in a context we’re ready for. I never thought I’d laugh with him like this again.

It’s reminding me of what I liked about him in the first place. And now I’m torn between trying to beat down those feelings, or deciding if it wouldn’t be so awful to marry him after all.

That’s a decision for later.

Soon, the dusty hotel path turns into the main road that winds down into the oasis village. It's a place that oozes character. All the houses have brightly colored front doors, and the people smile at us as we walk by. To them, we probably do look like a couple. For the first time all weekend, I don't think I hate the idea of that as much as I could.

"Where do you suppose June thinks we are?" I ask as we hit the lakeside strip of shops and restaurants. It's nothing compared to the variety you get in the city, but there's a steady flow of people coming and going and a constant sound of laughter coming from within the lunch bistro. I don't think I could hack this small-scale living, but I bet if it's the kind of lifestyle that suits you, this is an awesome place to live.

"Who cares?" says Aiden, half-shrugging. I roll my eyes at him, that old fondness creeping closer to me with every second.

"Do you think they'll send someone after us?"

"Candice, we're not at school or in prison. We can do what we want."

Not exactly appreciating his tone, I spot a cute-looking gift shop and grab his wrist to drag him over to it without warning. He stumbles on the first step, his legs still expecting to be heading in a straight line as I try to change his trajectory. But he doesn't resist or complain as he wiggles his wrist from my grip to hold my hand properly.

I have to confess, his large, warm hand is comforting. I try to tell myself that this is one of the last things I want, but the fact I don't make the slightest effort to pull away begs to differ.

We wander into the shop, Aiden having to duck under the low doorframe. The shelves are packed with trinkets — everything you could ever think of slapping the words "Desert Cove" on, from mugs to magnets to snow globes that hold a little scene of palm trees next to the lake being rained on by gold confetti.

The bell announces our entrance, and the shopkeeper greets us with a warm smile. "If you need anything, just ask," he says, his rosy cheeks taking up most of the space on his face.

"Thanks," says Aiden before ducking behind a row of festive palm tree

ornaments coated in a fine layer of glitter that has shed into a sparkling layer on the carpet.

As we pretend to examine the glitter-encrusted trees and shells, I whisper, “Why are we hiding?”

“I don’t want things to get awkward if I’m recognized.”

I stand up straight at that, looking down at where he’s crouching, my eyebrow raised. “You are so full of yourself, you know.”

“It’s a real concern!” He tries to defend himself, but his floppy hair in his face makes him look like a child protesting at having a toy taken away.

“There’s no way people actually stop you like you’re a celebrity.” His nose wrinkles as he pulls a dubious frown and I scoff in disbelief. “Tell me you haven’t been stopped for autographs.”

“I thought we weren’t lying to each other anymore,” he says smugly.

“No way.”

“Hey, you’ve got my autograph too.”

I drop back down into a crouch, pushing him gently so he rocks back and forwards again like a spinning top. “That’s different and you know it.”

“It’s forever, though, if you want it to be.”

What do I say to that? My head is spinning way too much to think of something sincere, so I reach behind him to grab one of the ornaments. It’s a mermaid whose bra has been painted slightly off, meaning it barely covers her nipple-less breasts.

“Imagine hanging this up in your house,” I say, looping the string over my finger to let her spin freely, her glitter-encrusted hair and hand-held sign welcoming us to Desert Cove catching the light.

“You don’t think she’s pretty?” he asks, pouting like I’m making a mean comment on a real girl and not an unfortunate mermaid whose molding hasn’t been kind to her.

“I think her plastic surgery went really wrong,” I say, holding her closer to

his face so he can look properly.

Even though he laughs at the comment, he still takes her gently in his hand and cups her there like she's a baby bird. "I feel sorry for her," he says.

"You're buying it?" I say in surprise as he stands back up, still holding her.

"Support the local economy," he shrugs, rolling her over in his palm.

*God, he's sweet. Would marrying him be the worst thing I could do?*

"Come on," I say, not wanting to linger on any growing emotions. "Help me pick out a postcard for my mom."

We head over to the postcard stands — there are three display racks that are as tall as Aiden, holding hundreds of cards featuring different designs jammed into the holders. "Silly or tasteful?" he asks.

I laugh like the answer isn't obvious. "Silly, obviously. Whoever genuinely wants a tasteful postcard?"

"Don't be so sure. One year, I was away in Venice for some conference and I sent my mother this hilarious cartoon gondolier postcard. And she was not impressed."

"Well, my mom has a sense of humor," I say, then quickly add, "Sorry. I didn't mean that to sound like that."

He chuckles, not a trace of hurt on his face. "Ah, no, you're not wrong. That woman hasn't smiled a day in her life."

"You didn't have a lot of luck with parents, huh?"

He shrugs, a sudden cold descending over the conversation. I wish I hadn't brought this up at all. He always looks so sad when he's vulnerable.

"Hey, at least they made me rich," he says, making a weak joke. I smile in response, desperate to return to the lighthearted banter we were enjoying only seconds ago.

The silence between us isn't entirely comfortable, so I search the postcards with increasing urgency. I walk behind one of the stands and rotate it round and round, the shapes blurring into one. Aiden stands on the other side of the

rack, looking as lost as me. Through the mesh, I catch his eye and make a face, and to my relief he smiles in return, sticking his tongue out.

As everything seems to with us, the moment escalates into trying to outdo each other for the dumbest face until our noses brush against the plastic coating of the rack, the postcards rattling in the shelves. I break away in laughter as Aiden crosses his eyes and flares his nostrils in such a ridiculous way that I'm willing to let him win for a change.

He stands up too but knocks a card to the floor. I bend down to pick it up and flip it over — it's a highly edited "wish you were here" collage of uniquely terrible photos of the cove. "This one is perfect," I say, beaming.

"Let me?" he says, holding out his hand.

"I can pay fifty cents for myself," I say, clinging onto my postcard out of pride.

Aiden gives me a look that's somewhere between fond and petulant. "I know you can. You can give me the money later if it really makes you feel better. But if I'm buying her" — he gestures to the mermaid — "then I might as well simplify things and speed the process up."

With the biggest frown I can muster, I hand it over. "Why do you want that thing, anyway?"

"A souvenir," he says, his eyes warm with such affection that I can't look away. "Of the time we spent here. I don't want to forget."

I keep frowning, but I can't deny it to myself any longer.

If he leaned in now to kiss me, not only would I not resist, but I'd welcome it. I've tried so hard to fight it, but the truth is undeniable. From the moment we met, I've felt a connection to Aiden, and seeing him outside the context of work is making my attraction grow and grow beyond my control.

It's not love. But there's a part of me that's saying *not yet*...

## CHAPTER 24

## AIDEN



**W**e wander the streets for a couple hours, and though it's fun going into shops with Candice and laughing as she tries on silly hats and ridiculous sweaters, my stomach starts rumbling so loudly I can't ignore it anymore.

She's sliding some particularly obnoxious joke glasses onto my face as it grumbles again. "Is that you?" she asks, biting her lip to not laugh.

"I haven't eaten since breakfast!"

"Neither have I," she says like that's a good comeback.

"All right. Let's get dinner, then."

Her face crumples, and my stomach twinges in hungry pain at the idea of her saying no to food. "It's early for dinner, isn't it?" she says.

"It's past three," I say, glancing at my watch. "A late lunch, then?"

"I did see a place a little way back that looked like they do great pasta. It smelled good."

"Great," I say, maybe too quickly. I'm too hungry to really care where we go. I need something before I keel over and die. "Let's go?"

I sigh with visible relief when she agrees. "Let me get a photo first, though. You look awesome in those shades."

Pouting, I strike a pose. Undoubtedly, awesome is the last thing I look, but

it's worth it for the joy it's bringing her. She whips out her phone and smashes the shutter a bunch of times. It's like she wants to extend my misery, so I place the shades back on the shelf and make my very saddest face at her so she feels bad for me.

"Okay, let's go," she sighs, either because I succeeded or because she's hungry too. I'm choosing to believe the former.

We make our way out of the store, and I set a fast pace towards the restaurant. I'm pretty sure I know which one she's talking about — it had a delicious garlic smell drifting out of its doors, and I'm pretty sure I got hints of freshly baked bread too. I could really go for a pizza right about now.

It doesn't help that Candice looks sweet enough to eat in that dress too. The blue brings out her eyes.

Fortunately, the restaurant isn't busy, so we get seated right away, a tiny table with a wonky leg, nestled right in a corner and lit by the dubiously yellow fluorescent above. It's not quite the candlelit dinner I'd imagined, but she's here willingly and she's smiling in that way that makes my heart stop. Right now, that's all I can ask for. More than anything, I want her company.

The waitress hands us each a menu, cheap paper laminated badly enough that water has managed to make the ink run, smudging the pictures of pasta into red blobs. If I couldn't smell the food, I'd be seriously tempted to get up and leave. Family dives can be great even if they're a bit rough around the edges, but — and call me snobby for it — I prefer my food delivered on a plate I one hundred percent trust is clean.

My stomach growls painfully again to tell me to stop worrying.

"What you getting?" I ask, hoping Candice will pick something we can share so I don't have to do any thinking.

She hums thoughtfully, chewing on her thumbnail as she considers the options. "How does pizza sound? But I'll only share if you like normal toppings."

"What's a *normal topping*?" I ask, intrigued. As long as she doesn't say something gross like olives or anchovies, I could not care less what gets melted into the cheese. Unless she tries to tell me she doesn't like cheese.



Maybe that's a total dealbreaker, actually.

I'm being ridiculous. Why would she suggest pizza if she didn't like cheese?

She purses her lips, then gives me her list. "Extra cheese. Eggplant and broccoli and mushrooms for vegetarian, or sausage and pepperoni for meaty."

I grin in relief. "Anything but anchovies, right?"

She sticks her tongue out in disgust. "Who in their right mind would put a fish on a pizza?"

"My thoughts exactly. Go with whatever you feel like; I'm easy."

Her eyes sparkling, she flags down the waiter and orders her vegetarian option. Probably a good idea — I don't remember the last time I had anything healthy and my body won't thank me for keeping up that trend.

"So this has been fun," I say. "Today, I mean. This afternoon, you and me."

I'm expecting her to come back with a noncommittal response again, but to my surprise, she doesn't. "Yes. I've enjoyed it, actually."

She's been blowing so hot and cold with me that it's hard to tell what she really thinks, but I've started to realize what honesty looks like on her, and either she's a way better liar than I've been giving her credit for, or she's telling me the hard truth. "Good. This is what I wanted out of this weekend. Just you and me."

"I hated you, you know," she says, giving me whiplash with the change of direction. My mouth drops open, unable to form any words in reply. "For years," she continues, a faraway look entering her eyes like this is a monologue she's had prepared for a long time. "I really, really *hated* you."

"Why?" I manage. It's like the wind's been knocked out of me, like she's hit me and I've landed flat on my back.

Candice presses her lips together like she's considering how to word what she wants to say. "I meant what I said earlier. You've always had it so easy." She holds up a finger to stop me interrupting in protest. "I know your parents weren't great, and that sucks for any kid, but you never had to struggle for every single success, to claw your way to the top and not care how much you

bled to get there. You were always fed and given whatever you wanted. Did you even *work* growing up? For money that you needed?”

I shake my head, too ashamed to say anything. I get it now, her rage. I always thought she envied my life, but it's not that at all. She's angry that I refuse to understand her.

“Exactly. I've always had to work and work, for everything. And I'm not complaining — I wouldn't change anything I've done to get to where I am. I'm proud of it. But it doesn't help to see you parading around like you've got it so hard when the Aiden I knew eight years ago wasn't real and the job I was busting my ass for didn't even exist.”

“I'm sorry,” I breathe. “I'm sorry I never truly realized why you always fought so much.”

She nods, mulling over my apology. What else does she need to hear me say? I want to tell her that she can ask me to say anything, to promise anything and I'd do it. The more time I spend with her, the less I want to let her go. This wasn't meant to be a weekend where we exorcised our demons and went our separate ways, content with the past being laid to rest.

Maybe I'm a romantic, but I wanted this weekend to be about falling in love.

I don't get to say anything else, though, because the waiter returns and lays an enormous pizza between us. My hands are literally shaking with hunger, so I don't wait for permission to drag three of the huge slices onto my plate. I don't comment on the wry smile Candice gives me as she watches.

“This looks great,” I say, then cram as much pizza as is polite into my face. Around my mouthful, I groan in delight and say, “Mmm, it *is* great.”

She takes a massive bite too and nods in agreement. Guess she was hungrier than she made out.

We eat in silence for a bit, then I realize what it is that I actually want to say. “I mean it, Candice. I am sorry. I've always respected you so much more than you know, and I'm sorry I never showed that properly. I'm sorry I made things harder for you than they needed to be.”

Again, she only nods in reply. This is it, then. This is the patching up of the

wounds before we part ways forever. The idea of it makes my eyes prick with tears that I have to fight back because that's the last thing I want to explain right now. That I love her. Completely and honestly, I love her.

And again, she surprises me. "I think I always knew that. I think I forgive you. I'm tired of being angry about it all. I'm tired of hating you and everything you stand for."

"Everything?"

She shrugs, and suddenly the mood is light again, like the clouds have parted without warning. Maybe there is something to be said about a release, after all. "I've been through phases with it."

"So, if I were to drop on one knee right now, you'd say...?"

"Don't push your luck," she scolds, her eyes shining with tears too. That confession can't have been easy for her. It wasn't for me.

"We'll talk about it later. For now, let's enjoy a great meal with great company."

She smiles. "Still pushing your luck, man."

"What's wrong with thinking you're great?" I say, grabbing another slice of pizza. Somehow, it looks like we are going to manage to make it through most of this thing.

All I get in reply is an embarrassed grunt paired with a flush rising in her cheeks. How much of her bravado is masking insecurity and doubt? Even if she doesn't believe me for saying it, surely she has to know how awesome she is.

I decide against telling her that she looks cute with a pink face like this.

"More pizza?" I say, gesturing at the leftovers. We've done good, but four slices still remain. I've eaten enough pizza dough to last me at least three more hours, and from the satisfied expression Candice gives me, it's safe to guess she has too. "But we've still got a whole stack of garlic bread."

"Midnight snack?" she suggests, and I grin maybe a little too hard at the idea of having a moonlit feast with her in our room.

“You’re going to be hungry again by midnight?” I say instead of any of the sappy things I could say about wanting to share every meal with her for the rest of my life, or how great it would be to cuddle up with her in bed and eat pizza and watch movies and fall asleep in each other’s arms.

She shakes her head emphatically. “Right now, I don’t think I’m ever going to be hungry again.”

“Cheers to that,” I say, raising my glass. She clinks it gently with hers, a warm smile spreading over her face. Even in the unkind light, she’s still beautiful. The shadows dance over her skin and make her smile seem deeper than it is, like it’s a smile that could be endless. I want it to be endless.

“Come on,” she says, finishing the last of her drink. “Let’s get the check and a box.”

I pull out my wallet, and she gives me a sharp dagger of a look. “I won’t change my mind,” I say, laying the wallet down on the table. “This is my treat.”

“Hmph,” she responds, then adds, “I don’t need you to treat me.”

Slowly, tentatively, I reach out to take her hands. She tenses as I do, but doesn’t flinch. “I want to. Please let me, Candice. I want to give you anything you want.”

She doesn’t say anything else, just slumps back in her chair, an unreadable pout on her face. “Okay,” she says, finally.

I smile and flag down the waiter to give him my card. He takes it away and leaves us both alone for a perfect moment. I’ve never wanted to freeze time more than this. To capture the pout on her face. The thrill of being us, together.

## CHAPTER 25

## CANDICE



I'm not happy about letting Aiden shoulder the entire bill, but he's a generous tipper and he is a billionaire, so it's not like he can't handle the financial burden. But it is a matter of pride. Next time we go out, I'll make sure I'm the one who picks up the tab.

Next time! It makes me angry that I'm not upset with him anymore and that I'm excited at the idea of a next time, but Aiden's been nothing but a gentleman this afternoon. That was what I always used to like about him — his kindness. He only ever treated me like a person, when none of the other interns did, despite the fact he was richer than any of us and could have acted like a complete snob.

I guess all he wanted was someone to treat *him* like a person too.

It's not at all late by the time we leave and head back to the hotel, the pizza box carefully cradled under Aiden's arm, but I'm exhausted from the emotional rollercoaster of the day and the fact that I've been up for more than twelve hours by this point. I'm glad that he's agreed it's time to go back to the room.

I only hope we can avoid June. I can't take any more of that today.

With a deep breath and a vague sense that I'm going to regret it, I slide closer to Aiden and thread my fingers through his. He freezes for a second before squeezing my hand tight, not saying a word as our hands swing between us. That's another thing I like about him; although he sometimes makes annoying and unnecessary comments, when it matters, he knows how to let

the moment hang.

And the moment holds us all the way back to the hotel, our hands clasped and a bubble of warm affection wrapped around us. I get it now, why people say love makes you feel like you're the only people in the entire world.

It's not love, but it is nice. Nothing could burst our good mood right now.

The atrium of the hotel is abandoned when we get there, but we still scurry through to the maze of corridors in case someone does wander past. Yet again, it feels like being in a cheap spy thriller, but this time with the added excitement of being hand in hand. It makes our connection more dramatic than it really is.

Finally, we hit our room. Aiden fumbles in his pocket for his keycard, but then he's taking too long and all I want to do is lie down, so I grab mine from my pocket and slide it through the lock. This dress is great for its functional pockets. It's made my life easier today, anyway.

We slip inside and immediately I fling myself down on the bed, my aching feet glad of the reprieve from standing. It would be so easy to let my eyes close and have a nap right now. One hour...

Aiden takes off his shoes and comes to sit beside me. "I hate to break it to you, but it's barely five p.m., and if you sleep now, you'll be up all night."

"Go away," I groan, rolling onto my stomach to bury my face in a pillow.

"At least put your pajamas on if you're going to lie on the bed."

I twist my head to glare at him, my eyes bleary with tiredness. "What, are you saying I stink?"

"No," he says, rolling his eyes. "But you should be comfortable."

With a resigned sigh, I force myself up and wiggle off the bed. I'd discarded my pajamas on the floor this morning, left hastily in a pile, so I snatch them up and head for the bathroom to change. Annoying as it is that he's right, it is good to be comfortable.

When I wander back out, he's got into bed himself, the sheets tucked carefully around his waist, the TV remote in hand. He flicks through the

channels, stopping only long enough on each one to let characters say half a sentence.

Normally, I'd be prickly about getting into bed with him, but I'm too tired to put up that front right now. And it is a front. Today has been really nice, actually.

Not at all how I'd expect a day with Aiden Fletcher to go.

He looks at me as I tuck myself in, and for a heartbeat I get the sense that he's about to shuffle over and try and hold me. I honestly don't know how I'd feel about that. This whole weekend has been such a whirlwind of memory and rage that whatever ground I think I'm standing on is crumbling beneath me. The more time I spend with him, the harder it is to keep hating him.

Finally, he stops on a gameshow, some old reruns of *Minute Dollars*, which stopped airing three or four years ago. It was a shame; it was a great concept for a trivia show.

Aiden grins. "Remember that night we stayed in the office till the sun came up, watching this?"

"I remember being the only one trying to get our code done while you and Blair lounged around getting all the questions wrong."

He brings his hand to his heart, gasping in mock offense. "I got most of them right."

"You got *some* of them right." I raise my eyebrow, smirking. I do remember that night very well, between the coding and the caffeine and the feeling of superiority at finishing the project single-handed. And neither of them were that great at getting the answers.

*What's the capital of Albania?* asks the host, a gray-haired man with a sharp sense of humor and dazzling smile.

"Tirana," says Aiden without hesitation.

"How do you know that?" I ask, impressed.

"Got weirdly obsessed with learning flags and capitals when I was twelve." He grins slyly. "See? I know plenty. Bet I could beat you at this."



“Bet you could not.”

“Okay then, you’re on.”

“And what does the winner get?” I demand, and we both pause. My gaze flickers to his lips and I clench my fist against my weakness.

Would it be so bad to kiss him now? After all, we are meant to be engaged after this weekend. I press my hand into my forehead, suddenly dizzy with a hormonal rush that’s trying to tell me I want him. Would it be so bad to give in?

“You okay?” he asks, giving me this look of such genuine concern that I crack and let myself flop against him, my head on his shoulder. His breath quickens under me, his shoulders rising and falling noticeably.

“Let’s play,” I say, avoiding the question.

The longer we watch the show for, the more heated we get. To my surprise, we are pretty evenly matched. I’m better at history and pop culture, but he’s smashing me at geography and music, and neither of us are great at sport.

*“In 1981, which song stopped Foreigner from hitting number one with ‘Waiting for a Girl Like You’?”*

“Oh! ‘Physical,’ Olivia Newton-John!” exclaims Aiden, punching the air in joy at his correct answer. “That puts us on twenty-seven, twenty-five to me I think.”

“Did you look that up?” I screech.

“Would I do such a thing?” he says, his eyes wide with innocence I don’t believe.

I rip the covers away from him, expecting to find him secretly searching on his phone, but his innocence is genuine after all. He gives me a wounded look, and it must be the shard of guilt that cuts through me because, without really thinking, I grab his shirt and kiss him.

His lips are as good as I remember them being. Even when I’ve been at my angriest, I could never quite make myself believe his kisses were terrible. And now his lips are on mine again, and he’s kissing me back and I’m dizzy

with a lust I haven't felt in a long, long time.

I tear myself away and wipe my mouth, breathing hard like I've run up some stairs. "Sorry," I say. "I don't know... I'm..."

"Do that again?" he says, and it must be the spell of those blue eyes, because I do.

He slides his arms around me as we kiss, and I let him pull me closer, his hands strong against my back, holding me up like he's promising he'd never let me fall, and from the way his lips press into mine, I'd believe it. If I can forget the past, it can be perfect.

Just one night of forgetting won't hurt, right?

My fingers find their way to the hem of his pajama shirt and start toying with it, enjoying the way he tenses every time I brush against his skin. His abs are as firm as I remember too, if not firmer.

"Wait," he gasps, pulling back. "Are you sure about this?"

"Don't you want me?" I frown. Why isn't he launching himself at me? Isn't this what he wants?

"God, you have no idea how much. I've wanted you for so long. But you..."

I fix him with my best glare. "Aiden, shut up. I'm horny and I've forgiven you at the moment — and I want you. Right now. Unless you really don't want to go through with it, don't insult me by pretending you know what I want to do."

"Protection?" he asks and I swear under my breath.

"Didn't exactly think I'd need it, did it?" I mutter. "I wouldn't want this to become a scandal."

He takes a breath and gives me a curious look. "What century do you live in? People don't marry because they're pregnant anymore."

"You'd be surprised," I say, my frown deepening. I can see the headlines now, and none of them are flattering for me.

He pauses to look at me, then slides out of bed, letting me see the way his

hardness tents his pajama bottoms. A hot thrill bursts inside me, making me throb with desire. “Good job I always bring spare.”

“Womanizer,” I tease, watching him intently as he dashes to the bathroom to rifle through his toiletry bag.

“I only have eyes for one woman, thank you very much,” he says as he strides back over.

My face grows hot from the compliment. I wish he’d stop doing that. It makes it all too real. So I don’t have to answer, I crawl over the bed and grab him to kiss him again.

He sinks down, pushing me back onto the bed, his body pressing against mine. I fumble with his shirt again, this time managing to drag it up his chest so I can get a look at his well-built torso. Nearly a decade has changed him, but he’s still firm and delightful to look at, and as he wrestles his top off, I let my fingers drift over his muscles, mapping them under my fingerprints.

Clearly his patience is running thin too, because this time when he leans down to kiss me, it’s harder, more urgent, like if our lips don’t meet now, we’re never going to do this again. I can’t think about the future now, though. All I care about is his body and satisfying the heat that’s burning between my legs.

His kisses move from my mouth to my jaw and keep trailing down over my neck. His tongue flicks over my pulse, and I gasp at the sensation, at the electric buzz that shoots through my entire body. He smiles into my skin, then his hands are at my waist, his touch tickling me enough to make me giggle, which makes him giggle too, and we’re both laughing and laughing until he drags my shirt from my body and stares down at my plain black bra like he’s in awe.

“You’re utterly gorgeous,” he whispers.

“I wish I’d worn nicer underwear. If I’d known you’d be looking, I would’ve.”

“You never need to pretend to be anything for me. I like you as you are.”

I don’t have time or words to react because before I can even take another

breath, he's kissing my collarbones, making his way down to free my breasts and trail his tongue over them too. Each movement of his mouth leaves me with goosebumps and shivers, makes me unravel a little more, so by the time he's toying with the waistband of my pants, I'm writhing, a mess waiting to be cleaned up.

"Stop taking your time," I huff.

"But it's been so long! I want to savor the moment."

"I'll savor *you* in a minute," I say, even though that doesn't really make sense. He grins at me. I guess my ability to form lucid thoughts isn't that great right now.

And then, in one smooth motion, he pulls my panties off, leaving me utterly naked before him.

If I'd imagined this before, I wouldn't have imagined it all being so good, so right. It would have been embarrassing, the idea of being completely bare, under the scrutiny of his eyes, watching him look at every new stretch mark and wrinkle, watching him take note of every way eight years has taken a toll on my body. I'm still in great shape, but nothing compares to the perfection of a twenty-one-year-old's unblemished skin.

"You're perfect," he whispers like he can hear my thoughts. In fact, he's so creepily close to the mark that for a second I wonder if I said all that aloud. "You've always been perfect, and you always will be."

I moan, my hips grinding against the air, desperate for a release. "Stop taking your time and make me come already," I whine.

"Your wish is my command," he grins.

It should have been corny, but his tongue is so magical that I'm on the verge of blacking out in pleasure, the intensity of the orgasm he gives me shaking every cell of my body. And when he finally slides himself inside me, time stops altogether, leaving nothing in the world except us, connected in perfect understanding again at last, like fate has always been leading us here.

I'm not even sure I believe in fate, but in this second, underneath him, my fingers digging into his back so hard that I leave crescent marks with my

nails, I do. Everything is right about this. Everything is perfect. It's like this was always meant to be.

We lie staring at the ceiling and breathing hard after, our arms entwined but our eyes not quite able to meet. "That was good," I murmur.

For a second, I think he hasn't heard, because he doesn't reply, then he says, quietly, "It was amazing."

There's not really anything else to say, so we don't. We lie there and let the hormonal glow wash over us. It's a turning point, like there's a decision that needs to be made. And I don't want to make it, not yet. A yes or no to the question that's looming over us will change everything, and I don't want to spoil this. Right now, I agree with him. This is perfect.

Slowly, I roll over, tracing a line down his abs. Into his ear, I whisper, "I still want you."

He turns his head to look at me, smiling as wide as I've ever seen. "Then have me."

As our lips crash together, a vague thought in the back of my mind tells me that I'm going to be sore tomorrow. But as his fingers find my clit again, I decide I really do not care.

CHAPTER 26

## AIDEN



**I**f I could wake up every morning with a beautiful woman in my arms like this, life would be perfect. Well, it would be perfect if that woman was Candice. Her head is tucked against my chest, obscuring her face from me, but the gentle rise and fall of her breast against me sends a calmness through me unlike anything I've felt before. I don't remember the last time I felt so content.

And the worst part is that I know it's going to end the second she opens her eyes.

So, I revel in the moment, tracing gentle spirals over her soft, pale skin, breathing in the smell of her, the musk of sleep and leftover traces of yesterday's perfume.

When she does stir at last, she burrows further into me, hugging me close and smiling until the sleepy haze lifts and she realizes what she's doing and pulls away, leaving an empty void where her body was. I summon all my strength to stop myself shivering.

"Good morning," I whisper.

She grunts in response and pulls the covers over her head.

"Did you sleep well?"

"You snore," she grumbles, her voice muffled. "Plus we went to bed late."

"That wasn't *completely* my fault," I say, poking her leg with my toes. She

kicks back, grumbling again, and before we know it, the retaliations lead us back into each other's arms, giggling.

She sighs as she gives in to my embrace, resting her head on my chest to look at me. "I should shower. And so should you."

"You saying I smell? Thanks," I say sardonically, pretending to be more upset than I am.

She rolls her eyes at me. "We both do. Anyway, I thought you'd leap at the chance to get in a shower with me."

"It was a group invitation?"

"If you want it to be."

I pretend to contemplate the answer as if we don't both know it already. "Okay, I'm persuaded. Shower, breakfast, then we should probably find June."

"Why?" she asks, her lip curling.

"Well..." I stammer, realizing I can't actually think of a reason at all. "We did kind of run away from her."

"So let's do it again today. What's stopping us?"

I don't have an answer to that either, so I say nothing. The idea of spending a day alone with Candice does seem way more fun than June's weird card games — it was yesterday.

We get up and shower, eventually, and the bathroom is so big that we could have fit four more people into the cubicle and still barely all have touched. Watching Candice like this, casually naked and completely at ease with herself, is a sight I can barely look away from. There's a radiance from her confidence that makes me want to drop to one knee here and now.

Not that she'd appreciate that.

Because we don't have anywhere to be, we take our time getting ready. I watch as the hot wind from the hairdryer puffs her hair up, surrounding her head like a fluffy, golden halo. It's a blessing to have her trust again. I'd be



stupid to let that go again.

“Let’s get breakfast out,” she says, pulling on her pants and a light-green shirt that flatters her figure without being too tight. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Okay,” I say, though I don’t need any persuading. The hotel breakfast was mediocre anyway. I swear I’m not getting my money’s worth for this place.

The morning is warm when we step out into it, the sun hazy behind clouds, a faint breeze making the trees sway and shadows swim before us. I brush my hand over Candice’s knuckles as we walk, asking a silent question that she answers by lacing her fingers through mine. We barely speak as we walk into town, letting the morning air envelop us in a comfortable quiet.

It’s almost easy to forget all the headaches of work out here. It’s almost easy to believe I’m here with my fiancée, enjoying a vacation without a care in the world. Is this how normal people feel — like they don’t have the weight of an entire legacy on their shoulders?

Candice leads me towards a pastry store she says she saw yesterday. I kind of stopped paying attention after we’d been in and out of so many gift stores, but her eyes sparkle with the suggestion, and a chocolate croissant does sound pretty good right about now. Or a waffle. Or anything, really. My stomach is starting to get over all the pizza and wants more. It’s never satisfied.

“Thank God it’s open,” says Candice as we wander underneath a faded awning, the red stripes having seen enough weather to make them blend with the white and give the whole thing a muddy-pink quality. “I’m hungry.”

“Me too. We should have had cold breakfast pizza before we came out.”

Candice sticks her tongue out as she makes a face of utter disgust. “Gross. You don’t grill leftover pizza?”

I open my mouth and pretend to be shocked. “Nothing better than cold pizza the next morning when it’s got all super-greasy.”

“And soggy? Blech.” She shakes her head sadly. “Come on, let me treat you to a pastry.”

“But—” I start, but she silences me with a glare before I can protest.

“Absolutely not. You got dinner, so breakfast is on me. Fair’s fair.”

She drags me inside and we’re hit with the warm, buttery smell of baking goods. My stomach grumbles in anticipation, which makes Candice laugh. It’s the most beautiful sound I could hear right now, except maybe for the crunch of fresh crusty bread.

“I’ll get a chocolate croissant, two cinnamon buns, and a loaf of sourdough, thanks,” I say to the guy behind the counter.

Candice raises her eyebrow at me.

“What?” I say.

“You’d think you haven’t eaten in a week,” she chuckles.

“I’m saving some of it for later!”

“So none to share, huh?” She puts her hands on her hips, and I stammer some nonsense syllables before she cracks into a laugh. “I’m kidding — get whatever you want. I’ll have two almond croissants and a lemon slice, please.”

The cashier barely even looks at us as he grabs our goods, carrying that dead-inside look that so many service people share. My father always used to remark loudly in front of that kind of worker, wondering why they didn’t try harder to smile when their jobs were so easy. I never had that kind of job, but I deal with enough people now to know how annoying they are.

I make sure to add to Candice’s tip when we leave, ignoring the way she glares at me. “Let’s go to the lake,” I say, getting ahead of whatever comment she’s going to make. To my relief, she doesn’t protest.

The breeze is stronger when we get to the shoreline, balancing the warm midday sun with endless ripples in the water that crash as tiny waves. As soon as we start walking, I open my bag of pastries and take out a cinnamon bun. My mouth is actually watering at how good it smells.

“You know,” I say around my mouthful, “I have a brother.”

“Really?” Candice says, licking her lips that are covered in flaky crumbs.

“Yeah. Mikey.”

“Michael Fletcher the second,” says Candice with an edge of contempt. No one else has ever understood why Mikey and I don’t really get on, but she might. She’s already closer than anyone else.

“He’s two years older than me. Works overseas now. He was the head of an entire splinter arm of Fletcher Tech, but fortunately he split off from us a while ago to do his own thing.”

“Fortunately?” Candice asks, taking another bite of her croissant.

I shrug. “Mikey was always better than me, and Dad never let us forget it. It was always, ‘Oh, Aiden, why aren’t you running a business empire at school like your brother was at sixteen?’ and whatever. He wouldn’t have let Fletcher Tech get into this mess.” I kick a rock bitterly, watching as it bounces into the lake with a splash.

Candice touches me gently on the arm. “Hey, don’t. You said your dad left it in a bad way, right?” I nod, not trusting myself to say anything else without a barb. “So, how could Mikey have done anything different to you? He might be good but there’s no way he’s a miracle worker.”

“Thanks... I think?” I’m pretty sure that’s a compliment. Candice just smiles gently, casting her eyes down to the ground.

We walk in silence for a while, listening to the water and birds until she asks quietly, “You really think you’re no good?”

I make a strained noise, any words I could say dying in my throat. We pause and stare out over to the houses and trees on the other side of the lake, tiny like a model railway. Other people living their lives. “I’ve always thought you deserved my job more than I do.”

“Really?”

“Cross my heart. You’re right to think I only got here through inheritance. God knows why Mikey didn’t take over — well, I know *exactly* why. He’s hanging out with princes in Dubai sitting on his own little empire; there’s no

way he'd want to come back to Olympus and go down with a sinking ship." I shove my hands in my pockets, the taste of bile in the back of my throat. I shouldn't have said any of that. It makes me look like a whining kid.

Instead of agreeing with me outright, though, Candice loops her arm around mine and steps close. "I wouldn't change a thing. You betraying me meant I got to make Mettie's and some of the best friends I've ever had. In a way, I guess I'm grateful for what you did. It led us here."

"Me neither," I say quietly. "Change it, I mean. I wouldn't. I never stopped thinking about you, all this time. I think I could have loved you then, if you'd let me."

"And now?" she asks, looking past me to stare out into the lake, her arm still around mine.

I take a shallow breath. Suddenly there isn't enough air in the world to breathe. I've never been as anxious in my life as I am around her. She makes my heart burn like it's about to set on fire. "I think I still could."

She smiles again but says nothing. But she also doesn't let go.

We walk in silence for a little longer, then the conversation turns into commenting on a weird duck splashing about like it's about to drown, and we don't revisit any topics any deeper than that. It's good, I suppose — it means I don't have a chance to screw this up.

But it does leave me wondering. If she doesn't have feelings for me, why is she still here?

## CHAPTER 27

## CANDICE



I don't want to, but we have dinner at the hotel that evening. As predictably as clockwork, June appears out of nowhere as the server brings us our starters. "Hi, guys," she says, her singsong tone matched with a playful twinkle in her eyes. "How's it going?"

"Good," mumbles Aiden, covering his mouth as he swallows his bite.

"June wiggles her eyebrows as she looks between us. "Look at my little lovebirds flying the nest," she beams. Aiden makes a choked noise and my face falls into a stony frown. Our reactions don't deter her good mood, though. "What did you get up to yesterday, then? I want to know everything."

My face turns even more sour. I know this is her job and that she has a weird but genuine interest in our relationship, but I really do not want to disclose personal issues to her right now, especially when they've left my head in such a mess.

I have no idea what I'm going to do. If this was as simple as forgiving Aiden and tolerating his presence as a friend again, then that would be easy. That's already done. It's the sex and marriage and mergers that's leaving me spinning. Hell, if it was just sex, that would be simpler too. He's good in bed. I don't think I regret that, even if it wasn't the most thought-through plan.

But marriage?

I keep asking myself if I love my company more than I can't stand the idea of being married to him. The honest answer is, I don't know. I'm being backed

into a corner, and every decision looks like a risk. It's time to do the only thing that makes any sense right now.

I pull out my phone and text Kelly.

*Help! Aiden's going to propose again, and I think it's serious for him, but I don't even know if I've forgiven him and I don't know what to do...*

While I send my SOS, Aiden replies to June with way more grace than I would have. "We went for a walk," he says. "And we went shopping, and we got a pizza downtown."

"Oh, at Oasis Tomatoes? Their stuff is awesome."

"It was pretty good," he agrees.

My text is becoming an essay, and Aiden and June both look at me like it's my turn to say something. "Yeah," I mumble. "Good."

"Sooo," says June, drawing out the syllable like she's about to say something exciting. My stomach drops in anticipation. "How do we feel about coming back to play the cards this evening? It's your last night here and I always like to do a special something for people to show them how much can change in two days."

Somehow, it's almost impossible to say no to her when she smiles like that, so warmly that you might as well be looking into the sun. It's something about the smile and her bright green eyes that makes her trustworthy and likable, even though I'm trying my best not to admit it.

"Okay," says Aiden. I shoot him a look to express my disapproval and he throws one back that seems to be an apology and a plea. I purse my lips tightly, trying to think of something nice to say.

"Fine," I agree begrudgingly.

"You might find it cheers you up," says June, her smile somehow widening even further.

I think that in any other circumstance, she'd be a fantastic friend — kind but truthful. I guess it's why she's so good at her job.

After we finish dinner, we let June shepherd us out of the restaurant, and as we walk, my phone pings. Kelly.

*Stay calm!! Good job not killing him! U gotta think abt priorities — Metties or marriage? Which would be worse, losing Metties or being legally bound to him? Gotta remember it doesn't have to be a WEDDING but if u can tolerate being married on paper and being in the same room, is it worth it?*

I'm still tormented by the weight of decisions as we enter the conference room. It's lighter and less stinky than I remember. The circle of cushions is still on the floor, but it feels less like being brought into a mystic cave to get indoctrinated into a cult than it did on the first day.

"Come, sit," gestures June, drifting over to her pillow and sitting down as elegantly as someone whose necklaces clank together like a faulty engine can. "Join me."

We do, glancing at each other in uncertainty before taking up the same seats as we had the last time. June smiles between both of us. "I'm so glad that I can already feel the positive energy brimming out of the two of you. I have a couple of options for tonight, and I'm going to let you choose. I can read your cards, we can do a quick-fire round of intimacy questions, or we can play This or That again."

There's another moment of hesitation before both of us say, at the same time, "This or That."

June beams and brings forth her deck of cards. "Okay," she says, pulling the first card. "Ready?" We both nod. She clears her throat and reads, "Winter or summer?"

"Winter," we say in sync.

"Morning or evening?"

"Evening."

"Beach or mountains?"

"Beach." This time, when we answer, we lock eyes, and I can't help but



giggle. It's kind of weird the way we're both saying the same thing at the same time, but I guess it's proving June's point.

The game keeps going like this until hundreds of cards and multiple hours have passed, and we've only disagreed on a handful of questions. Annoyingly, one of those was "sleep on the left or right side of the bed?" which is kind of the same thing as agreeing. On the surface, it looks unavoidable that we have a connection.

Why is it so hard to give in to it?

"All right," says June, pulling a card. "Last one and I'll let you go. Think about this one carefully. Head or heart?"

She lets the question hang in the air for a long moment, then holds up her hand to do a silent countdown on her fingers. As she closes her thumb into a fist, we give our answers.

"Head," I say confidently.

"Heart," says Aiden, our words overlapping. I blink at him in surprise and he mirrors me.

June rises to her feet. "Nobody's perfect. We always have differences and things we can't agree on. But that's what compromises were invented for. Sparks can become fires, but fires can be destructive."

We both get up too. My legs are shaky, unstable. June continues her monologue. "You're both incredibly strong people, so sure of who you are. I admire that. It's a good thing to be. But sometimes the cost of *not* acting can be higher than the cost of acting foolishly. Listen with open heads and hearts. That's all I have to say."

"Thank you," says Aiden. "We've had a great weekend."

I raise a dubious eyebrow. June wraps her arms around both our shoulders and pulls us in to whisper conspiratorially, "Let's finish it with a bang, hmm?"

With that, she winks at us and waltzes out of the room, waving before she turns down the corridor. My face flushes as the subtext of her comment.

Maybe we could have been subtler.

We stand, almost facing each other, for a long moment. The air conditioning clicks on and grumbles through a vent in the ceiling. “Come on,” I say, holding out my hand. Aiden stares at it for a heartbeat, then takes it. “Let’s go back to the room.”

“And...?” he says, smirking.

“And,” I say firmly, “we’ll see what happens.”

## CHAPTER 28

## AIDEN



**T**here must be something in the air in this room because the second the door shuts behind us, we're kissing and wrestling with clothes and limbs. I push Candice back against the door, her hands immediately sliding to my waist, one of her legs rising to join them. Every time I've touched her this weekend, I've felt like I'm hurtling towards something that could make or break me.

So much is at stake here, but as long as her hands are on my body, I don't care about anything except her.

I dip my head to kiss her neck, and as she tilts her head away, she moans, her hair falling wildly into her face.

All this time, I've remembered her as beautiful, but I'd forgotten just how much. Everything about her is designed to make me crazy; her stubbornness, her fire, her warm, alluring body. I nip at her skin with my teeth, gently enough that it won't leave marks but enough for her to shiver, her whole body reacting, moving as I slide my hands over her hips, her belly, her breasts. Here, in the nape of her neck, her perfume is overwhelming, but I never want to get the smell of her out of my lungs.

She's burrowed deep inside me and has dug her claws in, and she doesn't even know it.

I pull her shirt out of her pants, fumbling with the fastening. I need to feel her heat. I need her.

Finally, the button gives and I push my fingers into her underwear. She's already so wet, and knowing that sends a rush of hot blood to my head and groin. I dive deeper, brushing my lips over her skin, and she moans. Her fingers tighten on my back as I keep going, her mouth finding mine again, desperately meeting me in a kiss we both need.

She tremors around me, clinging on to me like I'm her only anchor in the world. I don't let go until she tugs my hands away. It takes me a moment to understand, but as she flips us round and slides to her knees, taking my pants to the floor as she goes, I let out a groan of desire. I'm glad I have something to lean on because her mouth is as magical as the rest of her.

We could have everything, if she'd let me drop to my knees and ask her to be my wife. We could fix every single problem we have, personally and professionally, and be the strongest we've ever been. We could have something that would be the envy of everyone — a marriage and an empire. With her, I could be more than the loser who let everything fall apart around him.

I just need her to agree with me.

And right now, from where I'm standing, we've never been more in agreement.

I stop thinking altogether as I climax, the potent combination of emotions and pleasure tearing through me until I think I'm going to fall over. My legs wobble as my brain turns back on, so I slide to the floor to sit with Candice. Her face is pink and her hair a mess, but she's still the most gorgeous person I've ever seen.

"Marry me," I say, breathless. "Please. Marry me."

"Aiden..." she says, her lips wavering as she breathes out. "Let's not do this now."

"Why? Why can't I ask for an answer?"

"Because I don't know what it is yet." She sits up straighter, putting distance between us like she's throwing a bucket of cold water over the warm rush of my orgasm.

I shake my head in confusion. “What do you mean, you don’t know? What part of it doesn’t make sense?”

She looks towards the ceiling like she’s trying to summon strength, then says quietly, “I don’t *know* you, Aiden.” I make a noise of protest, and she cuts me off. “This has been nice, all of it, but I can’t marry you after two days of forgiveness.

“Why?” I say like a toddler having a tantrum. “It *has* been nice. It’s been *great*. Don’t you remember all those nights we used to spend together in the office?”

“That was eight years ago!” She slaps her hands onto her face in despair. I’m starting to wish I’d pulled my pants back up all the way for this conversation. “We were good then because we spent time together. Two days isn’t enough to fall in love with someone.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No!” She takes another hard breath, and when she pulls her hands away, her eyes are shining with tears. “I’m sorry this isn’t the answer you wanted to hear, but we can’t force this to work because it’s *a nice idea*.”

A lump is forming in my throat and I swallow to try and get rid of it. “What about Mettie’s? I want you with me, but I can probably find someone else to save Fletcher Tech. Who else is going to save *you*?”

“You’re not my knight in shining armor!” she snaps, stumbling to her feet, refastening her pants and running a flustered hand through her hair. “I don’t need you to save me. I’ve done all this without you before, and I can save myself again without you.”

“But wouldn’t it be easier?” I press, getting up and pulling up my own pants. “Wouldn’t it be easier to stop fighting and let me help?”

We stare at each other, breathing like we’ve run a marathon. June was right. There is a spark in this room and it’s at risk of becoming a wildfire from the way it’s crackling. Candice is sliding away from me, and holding tighter isn’t working.

“It doesn’t have to be love. But even you have to see that merging will make

it easier.”

She hesitates, considering her options, biting her lip as she wrestles with the choices she’s making. I stand, frozen, my heart pounding so hard it’s like it’s about to break free from my chest. At last, she says, “I have conditions.”

My heart leaps. “Anything.”

“I’m not changing my name. I’m not going to change who I am or how I feel. I’m willing to give us time, but I need time. This is all too much to handle right now, and I can’t pretend I’m okay about it. And I don’t want it to be a big thing. I don’t want some stupid, pompous ceremony so you can look good in the papers. And I want full autonomy over Mettie’s Marketplace.”

“Done,” I say, then my brain catches up with my ears. “Wait, you’re saying yes?”

She sighs. “Yes, okay. I’m saying yes. To a marriage of convenience, that’s all.”

I break out into a grin, the relief overwhelming. “You can have anything you want. I’ll sign for it again. Anything.”

Cautiously, she looks me up and down, then takes a step towards me. “And I’m not saying we can’t have a relationship. I’m just not ready for the commitment of a *marriage*, okay?”

“Okay,” I say, reaching out for her hands. She takes them, and I pull her into my arms. This might not be real for her, but I’m prepared to wait. I’m prepared to do anything to keep her, to prove that I’m right for her. “When we get back, I’ll make the arrangements. We can take it as slow as you want. But...”

“But?”

“Right now, it’s still us in a room alone at a world-class resort. And I’m standing here holding the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“Stop it,” she scoffs, burying her face in my chest.

“What about if I ask for another kiss?” I ask. She must be able to hear the way my heart is racing. She must know that I love her. Haven’t I made that

clear?

She shuffles and blinks up at me, looking up through her eyelashes like she's weighing up some more decisions in her head. Then she slides her hands to my face and pulls me down into a kiss, and I let myself believe I'm kissing my fiancée. Because she is.

And for tonight, as we fall into bed again, I'm going to pretend she loves *me*, too.



## CHAPTER 29

CANDICE

## TWO WEEKS LATER



**N**ot only do I look like a meringue, but the flock of helpers buzzing around me like flies are making me claustrophobic. It's like I have an entire army of people here who have sprung into existence for the sole purpose of making me look like the most ridiculous bride to ever exist.

A girl stabs a pin into my waist, and I cry out in pain, jerking away and almost knocking over at least four other attendants like bowling pins. "Sorry," she mumbles.

"Is this really necessary?" I ask, letting another woman lift my arms to measure something else. They might as well X-ray me at this point.

"Yes," says Katie, the head wedding planner, her platinum-blond bouffant hairdo giving her the look of a woman who thinks she's glamorous but in reality, all it is is a lot of hairspray. "Don't you want to look perfect on your big day?"

I don't reply.

All I can think is how I should have made Aiden sign that stupid paper to make him promise not to do this to me. Though, as much as I want to be mad at him, it's not really his fault. I honestly don't think he would have made us go through with this charade if he didn't have to. His face at the cake-tasting was proof that he was just as sick of all this as I was.

The second we got back to Olympus City, Aiden put the plans for the wedding into motion, but when his mother found out, she basically forbade

the match unless we “did it properly.” Not that she could have stopped us, really, but Aiden didn’t want to make things more difficult than they had to be. And now I’ve met the woman, I understand.

That meeting was one of the worst dinners I’ve ever had.

I want to say no, fuck this, to it all, but now Aiden’s mom is paying for everything, I have a constant guilty nausea for hating it. It doesn’t matter that a few millions are nothing to them; it’s still generous of her to pay, and it’s still awful that I want to run away.

On top of that, Aiden’s board of directors jumped on the idea of a big media wedding, plotting ways to spin our “fairy tale” into good press. We had to physically evict some photojournalists from our offices at Mettie’s. One of them made Kelly cry by trying to get an interview that veered into questions about her family and her career and how she felt being my subordinate. Which is not what she is or ever has been.

And worst of all, I’ve barely seen Aiden in two weeks. Ever since we got back from Desert Cove, he’s been submerged in business contracts and wedding plans and we’ve had no time to talk, so I’ve been sitting here, swinging like a pendulum between wanting to tear him to shreds with my bare hands and wanting him to hold me so tight that we become one. And the few times he has tried to reach out to me, I’ve avoided it because I haven’t known what to say. I hate him and want him all at the same time, and it’s keeping me up at night feeling sick.

The last thing I wanted from this was to get trapped. Now it looks like there’s no escape.

“Now,” says Katie. I imagine she would have been perfect as a horrible kindergarten teacher in another life. She’s got the patronizing sneer down to a tee. “How do we feel about veils?”

“No thanks,” I mutter, knowing full well I’m not going to get a choice in the matter.

“Wrong answer!” she says in the exact same tone I imagine she would have used if I *had* been excited about veils. Her fake sweetness is nauseating. “Now, I have some options here for you.”

She claps her hands and crooks her finger for some more of her lackeys to bring forth reams of silk and lace. Most of the veils are long, puffy things that look like they'd hang all the way down to my ankles. The only advantage would be that they'd cover my face and most of this hideous dress.

I look like one of those bridezillas, with great layers of fabric cascading down from the strapless bodice that barely looks like it can contain the weight of the skirts anchoring me to the spot. Katie claims it's gorgeous, but it's pinching my waist in all the wrong ways and she keeps making awful snide comments about my weight. I'm not dieting for a wedding that I don't want to attend in a dress I don't want to wear.

"How about this one?" she asks, snatching a veil from one of the women. "It's made from the highest-quality silk, and the diamonds in the tiara are a hundred percent genuine and cut by the very finest jewelers."

"It's a little... uh..."

"Perfect?" she flashes her shark teeth at me, and I can't summon the energy to argue with her. I nod without saying a word, grimacing. The word I probably would have picked would be *ostentatious*.

I wince as I'm maneuvered back to the pedestal where attendants start poking and prodding me and pulling at my hair. It's like they're stabbing pins directly into my brain, and every time I flinch I get chided and glared at.

Finally, when I'm allowed to look into the mirror, I have to clench my fists to not physically recoil. When I used to imagine getting married as a kid, on the rare occasion it would cross my mind, I would think about wearing a long, stylish dress with a flowing veil to match. I always wanted to look like a heroine from one of those old novels where they run away from their troubles. I wanted to look like a centerpiece, but not a cake topper.

But this... this could not be *more* cake topper. This stinks of the kind of wedding rich people have to show off about how much money they have. I thought I would have a small wedding with the people I love. Instead, I'm going to be paraded around as Aiden Fletcher's new wife in front of wannabes and journalists and people with more money than sense who thrive off the gossip mill.

I keep telling myself that it's all for Mettie's. It's all a business arrangement. We all have to do things we don't like in order to succeed.

Except I *do* like Aiden — and that's most of the problem. I was telling him the truth at the oasis; I do want a relationship with him.

I just don't want it like *this*.

"Smile!" Katie pushes a camera into my face, and I flinch, wobbling on the heels I have to wear so I can be tall enough for all the skirt. For the first time all day, I'm glad of the attendants because one of them grabs my hip firmly, stopping me from falling. "You're looking great, honey."

"Really?" I say dryly, letting my face fall back into a deep frown.

Katie pouts hard, brushing her thumb over my cheek. "You're worried, hon?"

My anxiety is almost definitely not the kind she thinks it is. "I guess?"

"Aw, sweetie, it's okay. Every girl gets nervous before her wedding. It's part of the process. And it's what we're here for. We'll support you, won't we, ladies?"

There's a murmur of affirmation from Katie's lackeys. How many of them are only agreeing with her so they don't get in trouble? I start imagining her as some kind of medieval monarch with an extreme wig and extreme makeup, bossing about her maids and sending them off to be beheaded if they bring her the wrong type of bread or wrong color corset, laughing maniacally at her own power.

I'm so distracted by my own fantasy that I completely miss what she says to me next. She stares at me expectantly. I blink in confusion. She sighs and repeats herself. "Do you feel like anything needs adjusting here?" She waves her hands at my body like she's going to do any sewing alterations *herself*.

"Yes."

She crooks her finger at a woman with a notepad, ready to write down whatever I need. "Go on?"

"Everything," I frown.

“Candy, Candy, what’s the matter?” Katie asks, her face the picture of sympathy — if that picture had been drawn by a raccoon with its eyes shut. “You can tell me. Girls’ secret, I promise.”

“Do I really have to wear all this?” I throw my hands up and when they land back down on the skirt, they’re absorbed into the layers of chiffon.

Katie touches my face again, her hands ice-cold. “Darling, I promise. You look wonderful. Everyone’s eyes are going to be on you — everyone in the whole city. You don’t want the papers to tear you apart, do you?”

I shake my head, not trusting myself to say anything else. The papers might like this dress, but social media is going to hate it. There’s nothing more cruel than a normal person with too much time on their hands making fun of someone with more wealth and influence than them. It’s not like I’m a household name, but Aiden is.

And soon, after this big, grand wedding, I will be too.

“Look,” says Katie, poking me in the back to make me stand up straight. “You know what I see?” She wraps an arm around my shoulders in a move that’s presumably supposed to be comforting but makes me feel like I’m about to be thrown to the wolves. “I see a beautiful young woman who’s going to make her man’s mouth drop open when he sees her. I see someone who’s pretty and smart and confident. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” I say through gritted teeth. Why were most of the items on her list to do with how I look? She sounds like one of those knock-off influencers whose patronizing bullshit is supposed to be empowering. Whatever she thinks I’m insecure about, she’s wrong.

“Perfect,” she says, flashing her teeth at me again. “All righty, so, if you’re happy with the dress — don’t make that face.”

I force my face back into a neutral expression. I can’t summon a smile.

“So, we’ll break here for lunch. I’ve made reservations at the King’s Hotel. Their restaurant is to die for.”

“Thanks,” I say weakly. The attendants start stripping the dress from me, leaving me staring at myself in nothing but my underwear. Somehow, I’m

more comfortable looking like this than I am in any of those clothes.

“Then,” steamrolls Katie, “We’ll move on to the afternoon itinerary! Yay!” She raises her hands to her face as she squeaks in an attempt to be cutesy. I give her my best smile, which at this point is pretty bad. “We’ve got jewelry fittings and we’re going to pick rings. Oh, I can’t wait! This is going to be the most perfect wedding ever!”

“Yeah,” I say, though I don’t believe it at all. I’ve never felt less perfect about anything.



## CHAPTER 30

## AIDEN



**T**hese shoes don't fit me. They're brand-new and the leather is so stiff it's digging into the backs of my heels, and they don't fit. It's not stopping me pacing, though. It's pacing or throwing up — and I'd rather deal with the blisters.

What do I do if she doesn't come?

Katie told me yesterday that she wouldn't be surprised if Candice left town before the ceremony. She laughed it off as if she was joking, but it's sickeningly plausible. Candice never wanted all this shit. I promised her we wouldn't have to do it like this, but when my mother gets her hands on something, it's her way or nothing.

I wish I could talk to Candice. I want to know if she's okay.

A twinge of guilt hits me in the stomach. I should have talked to her more over the last month. I've barely seen her at all except for business meetings, and she is really good at keeping a professionally straight face in front of other people. I have no idea how she does it. I'm being torn apart. Is it the same for her? Is she tormented by decisions, by wondering what the future will be?

It's not that I haven't tried. I wanted to meet for lunch a bunch of times over the last month but each time I got a weak excuse. The last time I saw her was at the rehearsal last weekend, and by now I know exactly what her forced smile looks like.

Is something that's going to be so great for business really worth breaking her for?

I'm being dramatic. Of course she'll show. She knows what this means for us. It's one day of discomfort for a whole lifetime of success. Mettie's means the world to her, and unless she's come up with another brilliant plan to save herself, I think she'll follow through.

I hit the far wall again and turn, wincing at the sharp pain in my foot. I'm pretty sure I'm drawing blood at this point.

Beyond the doors, there's the burbling of guests. It's mostly my business acquaintances and people who would be offended not to have been invited to this exclusive, big-deal event, but Candice invited her parents and a handful of her friends too. Kelly's her maid of honor, wearing an awful salmon dress. I've never understood why they can't make nice-looking bridesmaids' dresses, and unfortunately ours are no exception.

There's a murmuring of laughter from the crowd. The violinist pauses before launching into another tune that sounds like it's come from the top-ten list of most generic wedding music for solo violin. I'm pretty sure I hear a glass smash. I'm pretty sure no one's meant to be drinking yet.

A door creaks open behind me, and I jump on seeing Nicholas sliding into the room. "How is it out there?" I ask, wincing at my own desperation.

He chuckles, laying a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry, kid, I was nervous before my wedding too."

"I'm not nervous," I say, too fast. Nicholas nods in disagreement. He's not exactly wrong but he's not exactly right either. I don't think it's normal to worry that your bride isn't going to show up because you rushed her into doing something she didn't want to do.

I know I'm not supposed to have, but I sneaked a look at some of her wedding-dress pictures. My mother's laptop is remarkably easy to hack when I know all the passwords. Candice was pulling this face of utter repulsion in all of them, even the ones where she was meant to be smiling, and that made me smile way more than the dress itself. Honestly, I don't think they've *ever* made a nice wedding dress. But Candice is always herself.

It's what I love most about her.

Nicholas withdraws his hand, and his face turns somber. “Look, Aiden, I need a word with you. I have to tell you something.”

Icicles start forming in my gut, stabbing and freezing all at the same time. “What?”

“I need you to be honest with me here. Do you want to marry this girl?”

“Yes!” I say, panic bubbling up inside me. “Fuck. I do, I swear.” My throat closes up around the last word, making me choke, making my head spin so much I feel like I might be about to die. I fling my arms out like I’m falling, like I’m trying to grab on to anything at all to keep me here on the ground.

Finally, I hit something real — Nicholas grabs my arm and leads me to the wall to lean against it. He smiles knowingly, and bile rises in my throat like I’m about to vomit. The whole world falling away from me, I slide down the wall so I can hit some solid ground. “Don’t worry, Aiden. I have good news.”

“What?” I say, desperate, quiet. “She’s coming after all?”

“Me and the boys were up late every night this week, and you’ll be delighted to know that we’ve found a viable way around the marriage. You can still merge, but you’ll never have to see this girl again, and best of all, it’s actually going to be a better deal than marital rights anyway.” He beams like he’s delivered me the best news I could ever want.

Sick and dizzy, I bury my head in my hands. “We’re calling it all off?”

Nicholas shrugs. “You say the word, and this nightmare will be over.”

“Nightmare?” I echo. Nothing makes sense right now, but one fact is becoming startlingly clear in my mind — not one person around me believes that I care enough about Candice to marry her. And I know in my heart that they’re right. If I really cared, I wouldn’t have done all this. I’d have listened to her. I’d have found another way to keep us both afloat and let our relationship flourish in our own time.

I have made a terrible, terrible mistake.

“Aiden, you don’t look at all well. Let me get you a glass of water.”

“No!” I jump to my feet, wobbling precariously. “I mean, have you told her yet? Does she know that the wedding is canceled?”

“The wedding isn’t canceled,” says Nicholas, his face falling into that hard line it always does when he thinks I’m not listening to him. “Not until you give me the word.”

“Does she know?” I press. I must look frantic — I *feel* frantic. Every atom of my body is shaking.

“Know what? About the loophole?” He holds his hands out as if trying to calm a wild horse. I take a breath, making myself stand still, and nod. “Not yet, I think, but I imagine that someone’s going to inform her soon.”

“Where is she?” I demand. Nicholas hesitates, and I grab the top of his arm, frightening us both with my intensity. “Where is she? Please.”

“The guest hotel.”

“Which one?”

“The Oaks. It’s on Jubilee Boulevard. It’s not that far.”

I nod, absorbing the information. Every second counts now. If someone tells her before I can get there to explain, she’ll run for sure. And if she runs now, especially now that she doesn’t have to marry me, I’m never going to see her again. I have to get there. *Now*.

I stumble towards the door, running my hand through my hair.

“Aiden,” says Nicholas in the same way you tell a disobedient puppy to stay. “What are you doing?”

“I have to go,” is the only explanation I offer.

“What about the guests? The wedding? Is it canceled? Is that what you want?” he calls after me, bellowing as I wrench open the door and trip over my own feet escaping.

“Yes!” I yell back. “Cancel it all!”

Nicholas yells something else after me but I don’t hear it over the slamming of the door or the pounding of blood in my head. All I know is I need to get

to Candice. I need to talk to her, now.

I run out into the street, loosening my tie so I can undo the top button that's strangling me. Waving frantically, I try to hail a cab, but there's traffic everywhere and Saturday-afternoon tourists milling around, looking at me like I'm crazy. This is getting me nowhere. I pull out my phone and with shaking hands punch in the address to The Oaks. Fifteen minutes' walk.

If I run, I can probably make it there in five.

Without another thought, I grip my phone tightly in my hand and sprint in the direction of the arrow on the map, praying that I'm not too late.

## CHAPTER 31

## CANDICE



I grunt as I get laced into the dress. I swear, every time I've had this damn thing put on me, it's been tied tighter, like they're trying to shame me for having a human waistline. Nothing in the *world* could have stopped me from comfort-eating this week.

My phone lights up on the table, buzzing faintly. "Please can I have that?" I ask one of the attendants. She hesitates, looking around like she's waiting for permission. "Please," I say again. Fortunately, she doesn't need any other persuading.

I unlock it to see a message from my mother wishing me luck and calling me beautiful, and another from Kelly. *See u soon??? good luck?!* is all it says.

Guess it must be pretty obvious to her that I'm thinking about running.

I'm torn by the idea of it. On the one hand, running is a very attractive option. I could get out of this hideous chiffon-and-satin nightmare. I could go somewhere very far away and start all over again, safe in the knowledge that I'd never have to look at Aiden or his stupid company again. I wouldn't have to face being splashed across the national papers looking like an idiot.

On the other hand, it would kill Mettie's completely. My career has always been everything to me, and running would kill that deader than something that had died three seconds ago.

And I think I love Aiden.



That isn't stopping me being mad at him, though — for this nonsense, for not standing up for us, for not listening. For making me love him and not letting me tell him.

Ugh! I'm making a pros-and-cons list about my wedding on the day of it! This isn't normal behavior. Nothing about this is normal in any way. I shoot Kelly a text back to say yes, but I'm not sure if that's true.

An attendant wanders over with my veil, and I shake my head. "Do we have to do that already?"

"It's nearly time for you to go. You'll want to be ready for the chauffeur."

"Can I have another minute, please? I'm too hot."

"I'll get you some water," she says with a kind smile before dashing off in search of a cup. It's only me, the woman doing up the buttons on the back of the dress, the makeup artist, and one young girl whose role isn't entirely clear to me. Katie isn't here. I could easily overpower every one of these women.

Do I really want to fight them off? Will the nerves pass when I get into the car?

"Can I sit down?" I ask, my legs suddenly weak.

The young woman comes to fuss over me. "Are you okay, miss?"

I wobble precariously. "I need a minute. Please," I mumble, pressing my hand to my forehead. I hear the makeup artist gasp, but I don't care. I'm lightheaded, like all the air is draining from the room.

I'm guided to a chair and handed a polystyrene cup filled with ice-cold water. The cold makes me wince, but it does bring some feeling back to my brain. I close my eyes and breathe. This will be over soon. Everything will be okay.

"If I can say so, you look gorgeous in that dress," says the makeup artist. "Are you nervous, hon?"

I nod. There aren't really words to describe the churning inside me right now, the shaking hands and nausea, the dread, but "nervous" is close enough.

The women all coo around me like doves, making noises that are clearly

intended to soothe me but are actually suffocating. “It’s okay to be nervous; this is the biggest day of your life!”

“Does it have to be?” I mumble.

The cooing turns concerned, like I might actually be about to pack up and leave, but before anyone can start dissuading me, another woman slips into the room, shutting the door quietly behind her. She has a shock of ginger hair that looks like no amount of taming would make a difference, and a constellation of freckles all over her nose. She flushes when she sees me, like she’s nervous too.

“Hello,” she says softly. “My name is Martine.”

“Okay...?” We stare at each other for a while until she clears her throat and fumbles with some papers from her briefcase. Despite the impression of professionalism given off by her business suit, her manner suggests that she is a young person starting out in her career.

Part of me envies her. I miss that naïveté.

“Um, I’m here on behalf of Mr. Fletcher and his senior lawyer, Mr. Richardson, to give you an update on proceedings.”

“Wait, I’m being arrested?” I bite my lip, wincing at hearing such stupid words come out of my mouth.

Martine flushes harder, shaking her head. “No. Oh, I’m sorry, I... Miss Metcalf, I’m sorry to say that Mr. Fletcher is about to rescind his proposal due to some last-minute discoveries by the legal team.”

“We’re not going to merge?” I shout, jumping to my feet. All nervousness flies away, replaced with a searing rage. If he thinks I’m going to marry him and not merge, he’s got another think coming!

I kick off my heels, my feet immediately thanking me, and start clawing at the buttons on the back of the dress. The woman who did them all up gasps in horror, and I feel a tiny bit bad for undoing all her hard work.

“No, no. This is all coming out wrong.” Martine shakes her head again and clears her throat. “You’ll still merge. You just won’t marry.”

“What?” I let my hands drop to my sides, dumbfounded. All I can do is repeat myself. “What?”

And then the door flies open again.

It’s Aiden, his face tomato-red, panting and sweating like he’s run a marathon, half the buttons of his shirt undone and his tie hanging sloppily around his neck. “Candice, thank God you’re still here!”

My mouth drops open and all I can manage to stammer is a nonsensical, “I... am?”

“What have you been told? What do you know?”

“Nothing!” I exclaim, startled by the intensity he’s showing.

“Everyone, get out,” he says, so calmly that the words barely register until he raises his voice to say it again. “Get out!”

Everyone shares a panicked look before they all collectively decide not to argue with the guy who gives them their paychecks. They all file out of the room, and as the last woman goes, she clicks the door quietly shut behind her, leaving me and Aiden alone.

“You look good,” he says, his breath still coming hard.

I scoff. “I look like a fucking idiot.”

“But a very attractive one,” he says, grinning and taking a step towards me.

I’m having a rollercoaster day, again, so I hold out my hand to halt him. “You can’t flirt with me when you’re jilting me.”

“I’m jilt— what?” He screeches to a halt, giving me that confused-cat look again like he’s thrown a toy under the sofa.

“Isn’t that what you’ve come here to say? That this ridiculous marriage is off the cards after all? That we wasted all this time and effort for nothing?” I put my hands on my hips, but the lacy ribbon has such a frustrating texture that I want to rip it all off, so I go back to trying to claw the dress off me.

Aiden shakes his head and surges towards me again. “Candice, please listen to me,” he says, his fingers brushing over my back, our knuckles colliding as

he sets to work on the buttons. I thrash under the touch like I'm being electrocuted. "Please, let me help, and listen."

Much as it pains me to admit it, I do need his help, so I relent, letting him free me. "What's going on, Aiden? Tell me."

"Clearly Martine told you something, but the truth is this: they found a loophole, so we can still merge, but if we don't want to, we don't have to marry. The companies will be okay regardless."

He unhooks the final button and pulls on the string that laces me in, releasing the corset from my waist. I sigh as he helps me step out of it, and I kick it aside for good measure. I should be embarrassed to be stood here in my underwear with a full face of makeup and a hairdo caked in hairspray, but all I feel is the relief of being in my own skin again.

"So, you don't want this stupid wedding after all?" I ask, angry at my own sinking disappointment. *Isn't this what I wanted all along? To be free from him?*

*Why is this like a slap in the face?*

I clench my fists and walk over to the vanity mirror, pulling the clips out of my hair until my bob cascades around my face again. I run my hand through it, trying to get it to look anything like normal again, at the same time looking around to try and find my normal clothes. This is humiliating enough without having to get a taxi while being half naked.

"Guess I'll go, then," I say, marching bitterly towards the wardrobe. Wrenching open the doors, I'm relieved to see my dress hanging there.

Aiden rushes up to me again, grabbing my wrist as I go to take the hanger. "Please, Candice, wait. I know this is never what you wanted." He slides his hand down into mine, freeing the engagement ring from my finger.

I bark a bitter laugh as he takes it back. "Looks like *you* didn't either. Has this all been a game to you?"

"No!" he says, his eyes suddenly glistening as he runs a hand through his disheveled hair. "Not at all. How can you think that?"

“You have thirty seconds to explain what’s going on before I walk out of here,” I say, wrestling my dress on and dragging the zipper up. At least I have a little of my dignity restored now.

He drops to his knees like he’s begging, but then I realize exactly what he’s doing as he shuffles his weight from knee to knee and holds out the ring, and my hands fly to my mouth. “This isn’t what you wanted, and honestly, me neither. When I imagined marrying you, it was on a warm beach, barefoot at sunset, flowers in your hair and free cocktails all night long.

“I’m so sorry I let everyone talk us into this pantomime. And now we don’t have to do it like this. Let’s do it properly, the way we want to. I love you, and I want you to marry me, Candice — not now, not even soon. All I need is for you to promise you will. Let’s focus on the merger and then have the wedding we want to have.”

There’s no point in trying to hold back the tears, so I let them flow freely down my face, exorcising the last of the negativity I’ve been fostering towards him for so long. I’m tired of the rage. I’m tired of pretending his arms don’t bring me more comfort than I can explain. I’m tired of pretending that seeing his face doesn’t make me happy.

“Okay,” I whisper, sinking down to the floor in front of him. “Yes. I promise. A merger and a marriage. Our way.”

He lets out a watery laugh, and I lean in to kiss him, tasting the salt of his sweat on his lips, relaxing into him as he slips the ring onto my finger then holds me, pulling me in closer. “I love you, Aiden,” I murmur into his ear. “I’m sorry I pretended otherwise.”

Holding me tight, he kisses me again. “I’m truly sorry for not listening. Let’s get out of here.”

“What, and leave everyone waiting?”

He shrugs. “It’ll give them a story, and a better one than *woman wears enormous expensive dress.*”

“So you do agree! It’s horrible!” I can’t help but grin, and Aiden grins back, and then we’re both laughing for no reason, tears still clinging to my face, holding on to each other like it’s a promise to never let go.

“Come on,” he says, getting up and helping me to my feet. “Back to my place?”

I nod. In one swift movement, he lifts me up into his arms like the bride I’m not, and kisses me again. “Let’s go and merge,” he says with a suggestive eyebrow raise.

I giggle and hit his chest gently, but don’t resist. At last, I’m where I’m supposed to be.

## EPILOGUE

## ONE YEAR LATER: CANDICE



**T**iny waves lap against the shore of the oasis. There isn't much of a beach here, but that's what the honeymoon is for — lying in the sun and staring out into gorgeous, clear-blue waves.

Right now, we're enjoying a moment of calm before the wedding tomorrow. Not that it's a big thing, but my mother and Aiden's seem to have become best friends overnight because they've spent all day bickering in that way that would seem combative to anyone else but is friendly really. We've left them arguing over flower arranging.

I don't care about the flowers. I don't care about perfection — because it will be perfect no matter what happens. I have Aiden with me, and our companies are stronger than ever. *Our* company. I've been allowed to have so much say in Fletcher Tech that I've started to see it as mine too.

Life is already perfect.

"I wish we never had to leave," sighs Aiden, twining his fingers between mine.

"What, even to go to a private island so we can have full run of the sun and the sand?"

He makes a face like he's weighing up a considerable problem. "That does sound good. But it doesn't have the memories of this place."

"Yes," I say, holding in a laugh. "The memories of June forcing us to predict our own futures."



“Hey, now,” he scolds teasingly. “She’s invited, you know.”

“Only because she’s doing the ceremony!”

If you’d asked me a year ago if I ever thought I’d return to Desert Cove, I would have said no, not in a million years. I could never have imagined coming back here to marry a man I’ve pretended to despise for nearly a decade, or it being sealed by a woman who could see the truth this whole time.

I’ve got a lot to thank her for.

A breeze blows around us, a warm embrace of air that catches my hair and makes me squeeze his hand tighter, draws me in instinctively. He lets go of my hand to wrap his arm around my shoulders, holding me against his body. I loop my hand around his waist with a smile. “I realized I loved you here,” I say quietly. “Last time we walked along this path. It was the first time the thought crossed my mind.”

“I’m glad you did,” he says. “I’ve loved you for a long time.”

We walk a little further, taking in the late-summer afternoon, the warmth of the sun balanced by the perfect temperature in the shade of the trees, the perfume of the last flower blooms, the creaks and cries of the last crickets and frogs. He’s right. It’s beautiful here, and it’s going to be a shame to leave again.

Without warning, he lets me go and grabs my bag, rummaging around in it for something. “Hey!” I exclaim. “What are you doing?”

“I have a present for you,” he says in utter non-explanation.

“In *my* bag?”

“I snuck it in earlier when you weren’t looking.”

With a huff, I fold my arms, staring at him dumbfounded as he pulls out a small box wrapped in gold paper. “Here,” he says, handing it to me.

I take it and blink in confusion. “You know, the guests are meant to give us presents, not us to each other. That’s usually how weddings go.”

“Please, open it. You’ll see.”

He looks at me so expectantly that I steel myself to pretend to like whatever it is so I don’t hurt him. Slowly, I peel back the tape and reveal the box. It’s plain cardboard, like it’s holding a candle or something. Carefully, I pull open the lid and gasp when I see what’s inside.

I hook my finger through the little string loop and pull out a sparkling mermaid whose face has been painted on slightly wrong. “Oh, Aiden, I forgot all about her.”

Her tail catches the light as she spins, and I don’t have to pretend to love her.

“You remember when we bought this?” he asks.

“Yes,” I nod, staring at him as the memory floods back to me, an overwhelming rush of emotion that makes my heart burst.

I pause for a moment, contemplating my own secret. It’s as good a time as any to reveal it, I suppose. “We can give it to our baby when she’s born.”

“Yeah, that’s a sweet ide— wait, what?” He blinks at me, his mouth dropping open. “That’s— are you telling me...?”

With a laugh, I nod. “Yes, I’m pregnant. We’re going to have a baby.”

He whoops in joy and picks me up, spinning me around in his arms before placing me gently back down on the ground, holding me as I regain my footing. He leans in to kiss me, then says, “I love you so much. You’re really pregnant?”

“I’m really pregnant,” I say, grinning hard at his delight.

“She is going to be so loved,” he says, pressing a gentle hand against my belly.

“Yes, she is,” I agree, reaching up to pull him into a kiss. This time, the kiss is long and sensual, a conversation without words, a promise that we’re making to each other and our unborn child. “You’re going to be a great dad,” I whisper, taking hold of both of his hands.

He squeezes back. “We’re both going to be great. She’s going to be spoiled

rotten.”

“She is not!” I scoff without meaning it.

A flash of disbelief crosses his face before settling into a smile again. “Come on,” he says, looking back down the path. “Let’s go and get married.”

I smile in return, holding his hand tight as we turn back towards the hotel and set off into our perfect future.

**The End**



**I hope you’ve enjoyed Candice and Aiden’s story! Sign up to my mailing list to get news, freebies and more!**

**Layla x**

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