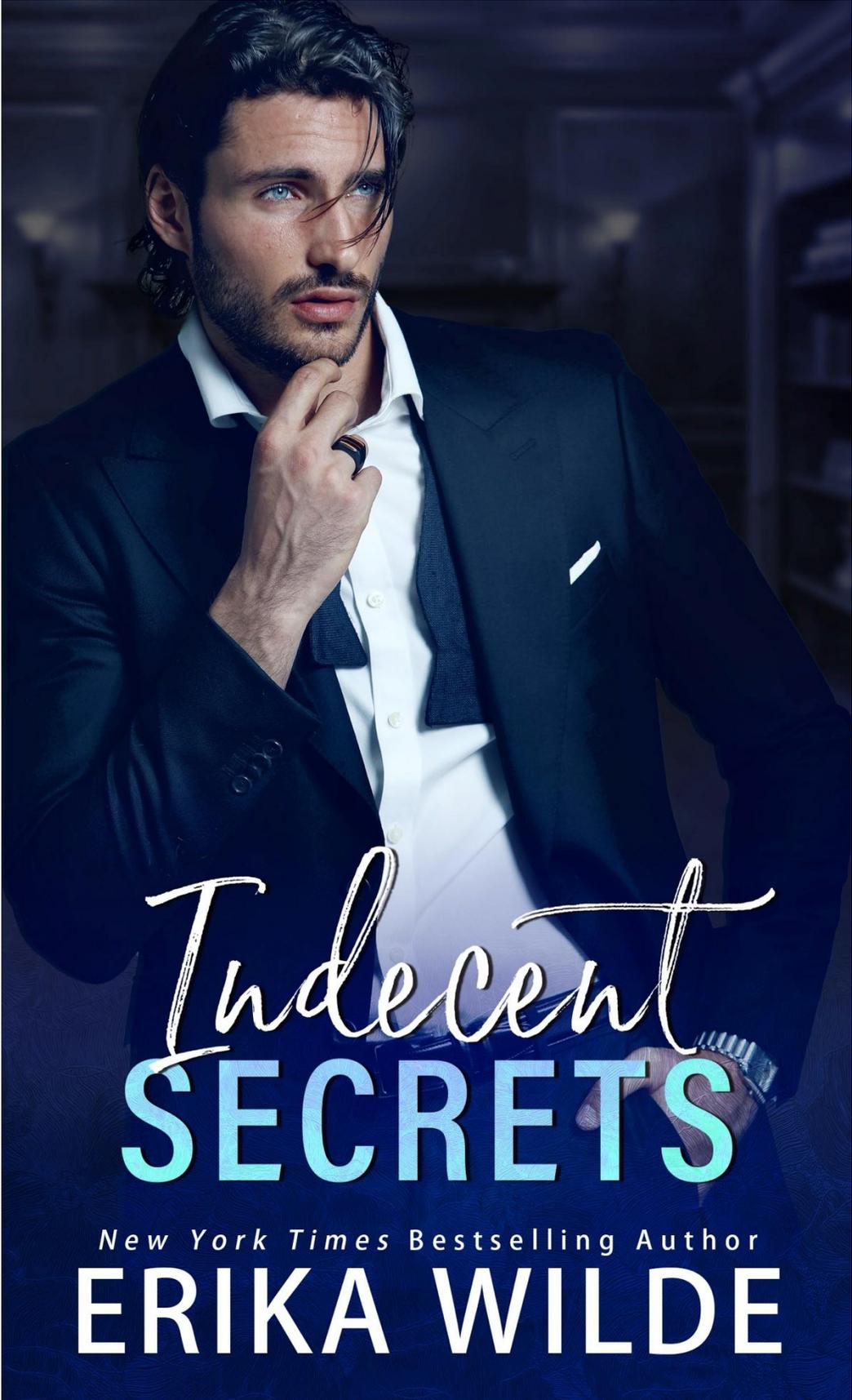




Indecent
SECRETS

New York Times Bestselling Author

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eBook Cover design: Maria at Steamy Designs

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Epilogue](#)

INDECENT SECRETS

Bryce Rivers is gorgeous, arrogant, and nothing like I anticipated. That's okay, because I'm not going to be what he expected, either.

Seducing him should have been a piece of cake, until I discover he's hiding a few indecent secrets of his own.

Secretly infiltrating myself into this land development company wasn't about the money, it was about making a difference. When I heard that the head of the organization had died and his nephew had inherited the entire corporation, I thought I finally stood a chance to persuade him to my way of thinking.

The new guy wasn't at all what I'd expected. For a reported "recluse", he was surprisingly charming, intelligent, and had a rapier wit that matched my own. Our attraction was mutual and scorching hot, which made it incredibly easy to seduce my way into his life and hopefully use that influence to steer him to make changes.

The man knew how to set my sheets on fire, but he wasn't easily swayed. This might have started out as something impersonal between us, but the more I got to know him, the harder I fell for him, which wasn't the plan.

I could only hope that once I made my true motives known that I wouldn't end up destroying something more valuable—us.

And then I discovered that I wasn't the only one hiding secrets . . .

CHAPTER 1



Bryce

This was going to be my most interesting case yet.

Unlike certain anti-social cranky-pusses who were my beloved friends but could still do with a spa day or something more relaxing—naming no names here, *Vaughn*—I liked the cases we received that involved a human touch.

Most of our security stuff at Elite Protection and Consulting—EPC for short—was divided into four categories: the kind where you needed brawn, the kind where you needed a good security system, the kind where you needed someone eliminated, or the kind where you needed a human-to-human investigation.

The last one was the kind of case that I liked to take on. I wasn't much into tech like Seth—our computer guru and partner—although I appreciated it. I could handle myself in a fight as well as any of us, but what I really liked was getting into people's heads. I liked to see how I could manipulate them into giving up the secrets that they held so dearly. It was why I loved to seduce women, to watch them slowly crumble until they were putty in my

hands, and mine to mold as I pleased.

Unfortunately, most of these cases I actually just ended up questioning people and feeling like a bored cop, which was annoying.

This current mission I'd been assigned, however, wasn't going to be boring. In fact, it might end up being a lot of fun, I thought, as I read through the file and gathered all the information I could.

Jack Lawton was a recent multi-millionaire. Not through some startup or through social media popularity, but the old-fashioned, generational wealth way: he had a rich relative who'd died and left everything to him.

The Lawton family had been in the land development business for a couple of generations but the last guy in the business and his sister had some kind of major falling out. So, she'd left the company, married some dentist, and they hadn't spoken much in the years since. Both she and her husband had died in the past few years, one from cancer and one from a stroke.

However, despite the sibling rivalry, her brother—also very recent deceased—hadn't wanted the family business to go purely to the shareholders when he'd passed. He'd never married (although rumors had persisted for years about his young attractive male secretaries) and never had kids, so he'd left his entire fortune and majority stock in the company to Jack, his nephew, the only son of his dearly departed sister.

I was pretty sure this whole newly-rich thing was a bit of a shock to the poor guy. He was a recluse, an academic at some tiny liberal arts college in the middle of bumfuck nowhere, the kind of place where they set books like *The Secret History*.

The guy didn't even have a picture of himself on the college's website. That was the kind of hermit he was.

Jack Lawton liked his privacy and he liked living alone to do his birdwatching and write his papers on philosophy. When I had done some chatting with his colleagues in order to get an idea of the man, I'd been informed that since he'd received tenure he would spend most of his time

sitting in his office staring out the window, making the university board tear their hair out.

Of course, apparently the guy also liked to write a book every five years that blew everyone's balls off with its brilliance so hey, his staring outside the window was earned, I guess.

But this introverted guy was really not suited for a life running a massive company. Or being a society darling, attending the various functions that would now be expected of him. He didn't want to live a public life. And he really, really didn't want to deal with the hangers-on that would now be crowding around him to try and get money out of him.

It was perfectly understandable if you asked me. I had worked with the rich for long enough to know that those businessmen could be more ruthless than any shark in the ocean. They'd sense that Jack was new to this world and they'd bleed him dry if they could.

But until such time as Jack Lawton could figure out how to possibly get the company off his hands and return to his life of solitude and contemplation, he needed to make public appearances. He needed to act the role of the heir and make business decisions.

That was where I came in.

I was used to schmoozing people to give me information. I liked puzzles that involved my brain. So while Jack Lawton was snug in his home in the middle of nowhere, I'd been hired by him to do reconnaissance—pretending to be him and getting the information he needed to figure out who among the board members and others might be suitable to take over the company.

The man was a philosophy professor. He didn't want to hand it over to just anyone. I supposed I was lucky he wasn't also a damn ethics and morality professor or we'd probably spend forever debating who was the least evil of his uncle's cronies. He wanted the person at the helm to be someone who'd handle the company responsibly so that Jack wouldn't feel like shit for destroying his uncle's memory, and I was the perfect man for the

job.

Unlike the real Jack Lawton, I could be charming and sociable. I could slowly pick apart everybody's needs and goals, see if anyone had a skeleton in their closet, and get rid of all the hangers-on and conmen. I'd deal with all of it, let Jack be in peace, and then we could settle who would take over from him based on the information I gleaned.

Easy-peasy.

But *fun*.

I had never impersonated someone before. Yes, nobody knew what Jack Lawton looked like. But I had to know things about my 'uncle' and the family, the fallout, all of that. I had to make sure that I didn't give anyone a reason to suspect I was an imposter, or both Jack and I would be in massive trouble.

There was also the small matter of the senior Lawton's death.

Jack suspected—and I was inclined to agree—that the death of his uncle Byron hadn't been... natural. Nobody had known that he would want to keep things in the family and would pass it all on to his reclusive nephew. Most people, or so the grapevine went, had assumed he'd leave it to his latest secretary or someone on the board of directors.

Now I had to keep a look out for a possible murderer as well, someone who would try to get in good with Jack and then kill him. Jack's uncle Byron might be rumored to enjoy men, but that didn't mean that one of his secretaries or board members or anyone else might not deploy a good-looking woman as an accomplice to help them in taking Jack down. And that was on top of the usual parasites.

This was going to be interesting for sure, and I couldn't wait.

"You're unusually excited about this case," one of my partners, Vaughn, noted as I checked myself out in front of the mirror.

"You only get one chance at a first impression," I noted.

Although how Vaughn managed to snag *his* girl despite one of the worst

possible first impressions ever, I would never know.

Vaughn wrinkled his nose. “You’re wearing baby blue.”

I smirked at him. “Not all of us get by on plaid alone.”

I looked pretty damn good in a baby blue suit, if I did say so myself. I had only one chance to make an impression, it was true—but especially just one to make an impression of *who* Jack Lawton was.

I needed people to think that Jack was high on his newfound wealth and being a bit of what in Victorian times they’d call a ‘dandy’. The kind where you were excited to show off yourself and your wealth, pushing the boundaries of fashion a bit. I needed people to underestimate Jack—and show their hand.

“I do not wear just plaid,” Vaughn pointed out.

“You’re right, that leather jacket of yours gets a lot of use, too.”

Vaughn flipped me off. “I’m going to dinner.”

“With Claire?” I drew out the name because I couldn’t resist teasing him. Claire was the first woman Vaughn had ever wanted to have a proper relationship with. I had to give him shit over it.

“Fuck off,” Vaughn snapped at me, which was a yes.

I let him leave, then double-checked all of my equipment. I had a small recording device in one of the buttons of my jacket to film whoever I spoke to, so that I could replay everything from the evening later in my hotel room and make sure I hadn’t missed anything. I’d rented out this room at one of the fanciest hotels in the city and was planning to drop my need for a swanky penthouse at the party tonight so that I could get recommendations for people’s realtors (everything was done through referrals, through friends of friends, in this world). But the reason I’d done it was so that I could set up a base of operations here that wasn’t suspicious.

I looked good, and there was no reason for me to delay now that Vaughn had dropped off my equipment. It was time to rock n’ roll.

CHAPTER 2



Leigh

*Y*ou knew you were desperate when you were ready to stop holding protests and calling politicians and instead adopt a honeypot scheme. Desperate I might have been, but I wasn't going to let it be the end of me. I knew I could pull this off if I was careful and smart enough.

I'd used sex appeal plenty of times before when persuading people to my side of the cause, whatever it might be, and it had worked like a charm. It was amazing how quickly men fell all over themselves when they saw me in a low-cut top, staring at my breasts as I breathily asked them to *please, please consider supporting...*

My ability to seduce someone to sign whatever petition I wanted or pledge votes or money? That was one thing. But would it be able to stand the test of time to fully seduce someone into persuading them to dismantle their entire company?

I was going to find out.

Lawton Industries had been utterly destroying the natural forests in the area. They tried to claim they brought jobs, but that was a big fat lie. They

did nothing but strip the land and destroy local businesses, only to redevelop the land out of pure greed. My work was with a grassroots organization that helped local businesses thrive in harmony with the environment. But the Lawton company liked to think we were still back in the days when coal companies owned entire towns and there was no such thing as a union.

Now, with old man Lawton out of the way and some greenhorn nephew taking his place, I had my chance to finally make a difference.

I had thrown together a fake backstory and identity using some contacts I had. Nothing crazy, but when you worked in environmentalism helping people go up against massive companies, you tended to make friends with some people on the other side of the law. I was now poised to infiltrate a welcoming party for the nephew inheriting everything his uncle had left behind: Jack Lawton.

Young and absurdly rich, I knew that a lot of women would be making a play for him. But I would stand out. I'd find a way to make him like me best and then I'd influence him to mismanage his own company into destruction. The man was a professor of philosophy, for crying out loud, at some obscure university that nobody had ever heard about. There was no way he knew anything about business.

He'd listen to me while staring at my tits just like every other man, and I'd have him eating out of the palm of my hand. Unconventional warfare? Yes. But as they said—all's fair.

I dressed in my absolute best, then hurried to the party. It was being held at the mansion of one of the shareholders in the company, and they would be checking names at the door. Luckily, I'd gotten in touch with a friend who worked for a public relations company, and they'd added me to the list as one of the 'fillers'.

Fillers were people, usually attractive women, who were paid to go to parties and fill them up. You usually saw them at Silicon Valley parties and other places that were going to have a lot of men but not many women.

You'd be paid for your time, and there would be more of a male/female balance amongst the guests.

There weren't a ton of fillers purchased for this party. There was no need for models or social media influencers here. But a few pretty women to spice up the party were always welcome, and so I'd been scooted onto the list.

The mansion was just that: a mansion. I felt like I couldn't even afford to breathe in this kind of wealthy neighborhood. The driveway was wide and sweeping, big enough for three cars to park side by side, and the gardens that surrounded it—mostly lawn but with some rose beds and a fountain—were bigger than most houses I'd seen.

Light poured out of every one of the large glass windows, three stories high, with a sweeping front set of steps and double set of front doors through which a curling staircase and marble floor making up a foyer could be seen.

This was definitely way above my environmentalist paygrade. And I'd have to act like I actually belonged in this world. Christ.

I made my way up the driveway in my heels. I'd had my rideshare drop me off down the street so that I wouldn't look suspicious—everyone else had either brought their own car or had a driver with a personal vehicle they used regularly. When I arrived at the front steps, a man in a suit holding an iPad checked my name at the door, then let me in.

Time to find this illustrious Jack Lawton. Not a simple task when the man had no social media presence whatsoever, and no photos of himself online to easily identify him.

Through the foyer you could enter into a large room with furniture to make it a living room, but the other room beyond it also looked like a living room. Rich people and their need for excess, I thought, rolling my eyes. But the place was packed to the gills and I made my way through carefully, trying to find the guy I sought.

“Leigh!” A busty brunette grabbed me and I recognized her instantly.

“Hey, Merilee.”

Merilee was often a filler, especially for the more elite parties. She was often dating the latest tech startup golden boy. “Fancy you being here!” Merilee said with a grin. “I’m so excited to see you!”

Merilee wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer, God bless her, but she had a good heart and she was always persuading whoever she was dating to donate large sums of money to ‘save the whales’ campaigns and the like, including my work. We’d met through a mutual friend who’d gotten me onto this list, and I liked her. She was a sweet girl.

“You here networking?” Merilee asked.

This girl was going to blow my cover if I wasn’t careful. “I’m actually here to fill out the party,” I said. “And I thought it might be fun. Everyone’s always telling me I work too much so...”

“Oh, are you finally taking that idea of getting a boyfriend seriously?” Merilee’s eyes practically sparkled. “There are so many nice men here! I’ll have to introduce you to this one—where is he—he’s in the stock market and just bought a new megayacht—Oliver!”

She waved her hand and dragged me over to where some men were talking. The one, Oliver, turned to look towards Merilee and smiled, but the other three remained deep in conversation. Two of them looked like your typical Harvard fare, but the fourth—

My heart thudded in my chest. Oh, wow. I hadn’t seen a man that handsome in ages. Tall, surprisingly built—he looked like he could knock a man out in one punch—with dark hair, a sharp jaw, and bright blue eyes. Unlike all the other men who wore black suits or something else in a dark color, this guy stood out in a light blue, expertly tailored suit that showed off his chest and arms.

A man who was willing to be daring like that, and stand out from a crowd, with good fashion sense? And handsome as sin on top of it?

I swallowed hard. If I was here for pleasure, I would flirt with this man for sure and see where it might lead. Preferably a bedroom.

But I wasn't here for pleasure, I was here for work.

"Gentlemen, this is an acquaintance of mine, Merilee," Oliver said, introducing her. "And her friend..."

"Leigh," I said, smiling. I played with a lock of my hair, my fingertips deliberately trailing along the skin of my throat to draw attention to my neck and breasts.

"Merilee, Leigh, this is Johnathan Horowitz, he's one of the investors in the Lawton company; David Weston, he's a pal of mine from Harvard days, he's a corporate lawyer; and of course our guest of honor, Jack Lawton himself."

My breath lodged in my throat as I met the gaze of the blue-eyed man. *This* was Jack Lawton. The man I'd planned to seduce, and he was handsome as hell.

I supposed that this evening was going to be more fun than I'd thought.

CHAPTER 3



Bryce

I had been at this party for half an hour and I already had everyone swarming around me like locusts. Various women had fawned over me, declaring themselves fascinated with the subject of philosophy, but every single one of them had been easily dismissed the moment I'd brought up how often Plato would lampoon his mentor. Socrates, for being obsessed with sex.

I was currently making some headway with these three men, though. David was one of the lawyers held on retainer for Lawton Industries. Johnathan was an investor, like his father before him. Oliver was a stock broker who handled the interests of the Lawton company on the open market.

Maybe one of them could be chosen as the next CEO?

A vapid brunette was brought up to join us, and I inwardly rolled my eyes as Oliver drooled over her. Christ, could the man go two seconds without thinking with his dick? These were supposed to be the brightest minds in the business, top marks from Ivy Leagues.

But then I got a look at the woman who was with her.

She was a redhead, her hair falling down to the middle of her back, with

big green eyes and a naturally pouting mouth. And fuck, her body... she knew how to show it off, sporting a dark green dress that tightly hugged that pert ass, those hips, and was low cut to show off her generous breasts. She was curvy and with legs for days—my favorite kind of woman.

“I’m Leigh,” she said, smiling and playing with her hair. The movement of her fingers drew attention to her breasts, and the look she shot us was coy.

Hmm. Probably another kind of gold digger.

Oliver introduced us, and I saw surprise flit across Leigh’s face before she settled it back into a mask of coquettishness. “Mr. Lawton. We’ve heard so much about you. Whatever compelled you to pick a post at such an obscure college? I’ve heard you’re very good at what you do, surely someplace more prestigious wanted to snap you up?”

So, she knew who Jack was and a bit about his history. Interesting. Definitely someone who wanted to try and snap him up, then? But for what purpose? Just simple marriage and money, or something more sinister like what might have befallen Byron?

“You’d be surprised at how competitive the world of academics is,” I told her. “It’s increasingly harder for people, especially new people, to get jobs nowadays. But I would’ve refused a post if I was offered it somewhere like Stanford. I’m not interested in teaching to large crowds and I like to be out of the city, near nature.”

“Better for contemplation?” Leigh asked with a wry twist of her lips.

“And birdwatching,” I replied, reciting one of Jack’s favorite pastimes.

Her auburn brows rose. “Birdwatching, now that’s a new one. I would’ve guessed stamp collecting.”

The corner of my mouth lifted in a small, but unmistakable smirk. “But I’m assuming you also would’ve guessed I wear nothing but tweed.”

Leigh opened her mouth—and I couldn’t wait to hear her retort—but Merilee elbowed her in the side in a way that the other girl clearly thought was subtle. “We’re honored to have you here, Mr. Lawton,” she said, smiling

prettily at me. “This all must be so very new for you!”

I sighed inwardly. I liked Leigh’s more adversarial conversation compared to Merilee’s attempts to make nice, but I could play along. “It is, yes. My uncle and I were estranged but it was nothing personal. The issue was between him and my mother. I always just assumed I wouldn’t get much when he died because of that, even if he never disliked me personally. This was all a bit of a shock.”

“I can imagine,” Merilee said, her tone full of sympathy.

I would give her a point in her favor, considering she sounded genuinely sympathetic rather than faking it the way so many other people I’d spoken to had. If I had to guess, I’d say she was a sweet person who just didn’t have the intelligence to match her heart.

Fine by me, but not really someone I wanted to spend a lot of time around. I appreciated compassion but I needed brains to really enjoy a person’s company. I hated being the smartest person in the room. It meant I spent all of my time bored and waiting for everyone else to catch up.

“We’re excited to have him here, though,” Oliver said, clapping me on the shoulder. “No offense to your uncle, may he rest in peace, but we could use some new blood at the company. There’s always room for innovation, but the man was stubborn as hell and set in his ways.”

Interesting. Could that be why someone had wanted him out of the way?

“Well, I don’t know much about business,” I said in a self-deprecating tone. “I’ll have to depend on people like you three to help me out here.”

“Of course we will,” Jonathan said smoothly.

Yeah, fucking vultures, all of them. But they bought my protestation of ignorance hook, line, and sinker. Why wouldn’t they? They had no reason to think that Jack Lawton knew anything about business.

“I believe in you,” Merilee said sweetly, trying to encourage me.

“And you, Leigh?” I asked, unable to resist poking the bear a little. “Do you believe in me?”

“No,” Leigh replied blatantly. “You’ve done nothing to prove to me that you can handle running a business. But I’m interested to see you try and find out how it goes.”

“Are you interested in business, then?”

“Very much so, yes,” she said with a nod. “I’ve studied business for years and work as a consultant. Mostly for smaller businesses—start-ups, that kind of thing, looking to play with the big boys.”

Her voice dropped a little at the last part, getting husky, and she peered up through her lashes. I saw David swallow hard. The idiot was probably already thinking about those plush lips of hers around his dick. Did he not realize she was doing this on purpose?

Leigh might be who she said she was. Most people were. But that didn’t mean that she wasn’t looking to score big by nabbing one of us men as her boyfriend or lover—or even husband. If she helped smaller companies, then it would be a good idea for her to date or marry someone with connections to the higher levels of business so that she could leverage that to get her clients better deals.

She was a bloodsucking leech the same as the rest of them. She was just being smart about it. And sexy. I couldn’t deny she was gorgeous.

Of course, while these men were probably thinking about getting tied up by her and whimpering as mistress played with their dicks, I liked the idea of taking her down a peg. Getting a clever, proud woman to submit to me, to beg for me... to agree to anything so long as I fucked her...

Leigh would look beautiful with a collar around that pretty throat as she begged *master* for an orgasm. My cock twitched in my pants at the thought, but I did my best to ignore it. I wasn’t here for that kind of fun. As much as I would usually enjoy sleeping my way through the women here, I couldn’t do that as Jack Lawton. Not if I didn’t want those same women scampering around gossiping about me.

On the other hand, it might be to my advantage for people to think I could

be led around by my dick...

“I’d love to hear more about it,” Jonathan said to Leigh, bringing me back to the conversation at hand.

The man could’ve been panting and drooling like a damn dog with his tongue out and it would’ve been less obvious how desperate he was to get his dick wet with her.

“Aww, you’re so sweet,” Leigh said with a sultry laugh. “Perhaps after I get myself some canapes? I’m starving and I keep missing the servers with the trays.”

She waved her fingers at us and went off to find the food. I knew I wasn’t the only one staring at her ass as she walked away.

But her dismissal of Jonathan was interesting. She could be playing hard to get, or she could be trying to get him to follow her, away from the others. A woman didn’t want to appear *too* easy after all. Or it could mean that my suspicion was right and she was only interested in me, not any rich guy.

There was only one way to find out.

I waited about five minutes, then excused myself from the others as well and headed for the area near the kitchen. That was where you’d be able to catch a server easily and snag some food.

When I walked over, sure enough, there was Leigh. She was actually eating and nodding along politely to something some much older men were saying to her. I grabbed some food myself and nodded at Leigh, acknowledging her.

“Mr. Lawton.” Leigh smiled and it felt like a challenge. “Do you think there’s any truth to the statement that economics and philosophy are similar?”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” I said, giving her an opening to express her opinions.

She seemed to have already picked up on the fact that I didn’t like breathy, starstruck people like Merilee. But would her intelligence actually be up to the task of staying in step with me?

“I think that it’s true,” Leigh replied, after taking a bite of her smoked salmon canape. “In that both philosophy and economics are fields where the moment a person tries to declare a universal truth, someone else comes up with an equally valid and evidence-backed statement that declares an opposite truth. Both philosophy and economics are attempts to define that which likes to resist being categorized, and ascribe a set of rules to something that defies following any system. Anyone who claims to understand the free market and know what it’s going to do next is wrong, just like anyone who claims to understand the universe and know all of its moving parts is wrong.”

My eyebrows shot up. I wasn’t the real Jack Lawton so I didn’t know exactly how accurate this was, but it was smart enough based on the quick reading of philosophy I’d done to try and study up for the role. Leigh must have done her own studying.

“I’m impressed,” I said. “Did they teach you that in Philosophy 101 at the community college?”

“Actually I prefer to study on my own time, since I couldn’t afford to go to college,” Leigh replied, nonplussed. “Not all of us had rich parents to send us to Columbia.”

So she knew that Jack Lawton had gotten quite the education before taking his post at a nowhere school. “I was fortunate to have opportunities that aren’t afforded to everyone,” I said, playing the part. “But I like to know that you’ve made the most of your own circumstances. Not everyone has that kind of go-getter attitude.”

I didn’t want to be a total asshole, but I had to fit in among these other rich folks too. Maybe something of my dilemma showed in my voice or face, because Leigh’s brow furrowed for a second in confusion.

Unlike most of the other women in the room, Leigh was actually intelligent, which made her even more attractive to me. Maybe it wouldn’t cause too much harm to indulge a little bit with her?

I wasn’t a man used to denying himself, after all, especially when it came

to women. And if she was a danger to Jack Lawton, then it would be good to keep her close to keep an eye on her.

She was smart enough to realize that I didn't want to be pandered to, after all, and that I wanted someone who could match wits with me. That might make her more dangerous than the women who were simpering and complimenting me.

"A go-getter attitude is an interesting thing to value from someone who spent all his career at a college that nobody recognizes the name of," Leigh replied, her smile contradicting the audacious tone of her voice. "But I suppose there's a time for all of us to discover our..." Her gaze trailed over my body. "...virility."

Oh, I saw her ploy now. She'd decided that she needed to stand out from the crowd, and she'd done her homework and assumed a philosophy professor wouldn't want a simpering sycophant. So she'd decided to try a new track.

Well. I could definitely play into that. And if I was going to have my own fun fucking with her while I was at it, well... you know what they said about all work and no play.

And I *was* being Jack right now, after all.

CHAPTER 4



Leigh

Jack Lawton was as smart as I'd assumed, given his reputation in the academic world. He was definitely more outgoing than I'd anticipated and a sharper dresser, but that could've been thanks to help from a private stylist or assistant assigned to him so he didn't embarrass anyone.

No, I was sure he was a fish out of water in this environment. An expert in his own field but lost outside of it.

I'd seen the way those other men had reacted to me on a sexual level. God, these men were so fucking spoiled. Not a single one of them understood what it was to properly dominate a woman. They'd had everything handed to them, and so they actually wanted the woman to do all the work and dominate them instead, like some kind of penance for all the money they sat on.

Jack Lawton was probably desperate for someone to help him feel... like a good boy. And I could do that. I wouldn't have fun with it because, well, I liked to be the good girl. But I would do whatever it took to seduce this guy and get him to do as I told him to when it came to his company.

It was nice, at least, to flex my intelligence. I could feel his sharp gaze assessing me, like he was trying to figure out if I was a threat or not. I didn't want him to think I was some kind of gold digger. My desires were more nuanced than that. I wasn't after his money; I was after the total destruction of his company. It was the principle of the thing.

"Yes," Jack said in response to my latest jab. "This is brand-new territory for me and I'm just glad that everyone's been so kind to offer their help."

"I suppose it would be gauche of me not to do the same, then," I said, infusing my tone with a bit of reluctance so that I didn't end up sounding pathetically eager. "While your company is much bigger than what I usually deal with I'm used to handling brand-new CEOs. I can always offer my consultation services to help you navigate this new area."

"Well, you're the one who said philosophy and economics are so similar. Perhaps I can figure it all out on my own."

I smiled at him. "You can certainly try."

"Ye of little faith."

"I've just met you," I retorted. "I have no reason to have faith in you."

One of the older men in our circle coughed uncomfortably, reminding me that we weren't alone. He had probably never heard someone like me speak to someone like Jack Lawton in this way. But Jack just smirked at me, like he was pleased with me and our playful interaction.

I looked up at him through my lashes. "But I'm sure that you're about to prove to me and all of us that you're more than capable of running this company. I can't wait to see the exciting changes you bring to it."

That, I felt, was enough to hint to him that the company was in need of changing. I hadn't been so blunt as some of the people in our previous conversation. Apparently the former Lawton had been set in his ways. Yeah, set in destroying all remaining natural forest in the goddamn continental United States and kicking people out of their homes to boot.

But Jack Lawton wasn't going to listen to people who were blunt. Few

men did. He was going to listen to someone who would challenge him but not outright state all the things he was doing wrong. Someone who could be playful about it. And I was sure that showing myself off in his dress helped.

I decided to leave him wanting more and left again, looking for Merilee. I could feel Jack watching me as I walked away and I had to hide a smirk. Yeah, I'd got him. I was smarter than any of the other people he was talking to, that was certain. And I'd positioned myself as an expert but an outsider, which would make me interesting.

Now I just had to wait for him to find me.

It took an hour, and I was just about ready to hide out in the bathroom to avoid one more asshole old man trying to set me up as his kept mistress. But just when I was fake laughing at the owner of the house's jokes about golf, I felt a warm hand wrap around my elbow.

"I'm so sorry," Jack said, his voice low and warm as he smiled at my companion. "I'd just like to steal Leigh for a moment, if that's all right?"

He tugged me away before he could even get a proper response out of the other man, guiding me lightly through the room.

"I see you've already got the inability to wait for an answer and just taking what you want thing down pat," I noted. "You'll fit in among all the rest of these rich people just fine."

He arched a brow. "For someone who consults with rich people you don't seem to have a lot of respect for them."

"Everyone needs somebody to pop their bubble a bit. Keep their egos down. I do it while showing off a great rack so I get away with it. It's 'endearing' and 'quirky'," I lied. "I help people to establish their businesses in a cutthroat world and I remind them to stay a little humble while I'm at it. People appreciate that as long as you do it the right way."

He tipped his head inquisitively. "And yet you acknowledge that if you weren't so beautiful you wouldn't be able to get away with it."

"Careful, that sounded like you think I'm beautiful." I ignored the

swirling in my stomach. There was no reason for me to get all fluttery, even if Jack was more handsome than I'd anticipated. "And they really do like me bursting their bubbles. I think it lets them think that they're still the same common man as anyone else. Or..."

I leaned into him as he paused in his walk and made my voice lower, breathier, as I inserted an image in his mind. "Maybe they like a little... humiliation. A pretty woman telling them what to do."

Jack stared at me, and I saw something cross his face—I wasn't sure what, but I just knew it set my blood on fire. Then his eyes went a little wide, like the implications of what I'd said had only just hit him, and he swallowed hard.

Yeah, I got him. If he wanted a Domme, then I was the woman for the job.

Underneath the smart mind and the handsome face and all his bravado, Jack Lawton it seemed was the same as all the other men here. A pity, when it came to my libido. But good news when it came to wrapping him around my little finger and getting what I wanted.

"Leigh..." He started to speak, sounding a bit flustered, but suddenly another woman was there, her hand on his arm.

"Mr. Lawton!" she exclaimed. "There you are, I wondered where you'd disappeared to. I was able to ask and yes, if you want to, the megayacht is available for Sunday."

The woman simpered at him, clearly hoping to get this guy alone on a boat all day. Nothing doing, sister. If anyone was going to honey trap this man it was me.

"I'm so glad to hear it's a megayacht," Jack said dryly. "If it was a superyacht I'd have to pass."

My mouth dropped open and I found myself nearly choking on my own spit as I tried to stifle my wheeze of laughter. Jack glanced at me, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“Oh, of course,” the woman said, not missing a beat. Her eyes looked a little confused, the space between her brows wrinkling slightly as she tried to figure out why he’d say that. “I’m so glad to hear it.”

She was being toyed with, and the poor woman had no idea. I wondered how many other women he’d toyed with in this same way.

I had to admit it was an amusing thought. I’d like to see more of it, if only for my own entertainment.

“We’ll talk to arrange things later,” Jack assured the woman. “I’m just finishing up a talk with my consultant.”

“Consultant?” The woman looked at me—and then glanced down at my tight dress and curves, a sour look appearing on her face.

“Hi.” I smiled sweetly and held out my hand. “I’m Leigh. I help people with their tech startups make it to the big leagues. Mr. Lawton here is a little new to the whole business world so he’s asked me to help give him advice on navigating things so he doesn’t make some kind of misstep. He wants so badly to be a good and confident leader. I find that admirable, don’t you?”

“Of course,” the woman stammered, shaking my hand. “I’m so glad to hear that you’re such a go-getter, Mr. Lawton. It takes a real man to know when to ask for advice, and from a woman, too. You know so many men can’t stand the idea of being under a woman!”

“That’s a real pity for them,” Jack said, still in that deadpan tone. “It’s one of my favorite positions.”

It was a good thing I wasn’t drinking anything or I’d have spewed it everywhere. I couldn’t help but appreciate this man’s dry humor.

“We’ll catch up later,” Jack repeated, patting the woman on the arm. He then steered me away before she could say anything else to prolong the conversation.

“I was hoping you’d like to come back to my place with me,” he said, his voice low and warm in my ear. His hand moved down to my waist and I shivered. “So we can discuss you consulting for me.”

Why, *why* did this man have to be some submissive rich asshole? Why couldn't he be some hot dominating hookup I met at a bar who knew how to tie me up and make me beg for mercy?

“Of course,” I purred out loud. “I'd love to give you some... instructions.”

Well, even if I wasn't really going to get any real pleasure out of this, at least my plan was a success. Now I just had to find a way to keep him wanting more after the first night of sex—and a way to get him to listen to my business ideas and not just my bedroom ones.

CHAPTER 5



Bryce

I had to give it to Leigh, she was working an angle that most of the other women wouldn't have dared to try.

It was a risky one, too. She was gambling on the idea that Jack Lawton would be submissive in bed and in need of guidance in how to carry himself in the boardroom. It was a strategy that was definitely working on the men around her. All of them were drooling over her like they were dogs and she was a juicy steak.

Their behavior irritated me. Not one of those men appreciated her brains. She was the only woman in the damn party who had recognized my dry humor and jabs for what they were and she'd held her own when I'd gotten a bit hostile. She'd never backed down and she hadn't cared that she'd made everyone around us uncomfortable with her conversational faux pas.

None of these men wanted her for her smarts. If they even recognized them, then they hated them. They wanted to take her down a peg.

That was no way to treat a creature like Leigh.

All of the other women I'd dealt with had been easily scared off or

dismissed by me, so I suspected that none of them were involved in anything suspicious. Just the usual gold-digging. Actual con artists or anyone trying to cover up a murder would be more persistent. And clever.

Which just left Leigh.

She was clever, all right, and she knew when to leave a man wanting more. She was also a showstopper in that outfit. She wanted to draw attention to herself.

Was she also looking to score a rich boyfriend? Or something more?

Sleeping with her was probably crossing a line, but I didn't give a damn. This was an interesting case for sure, but that didn't mean I wasn't going to find a way to give myself little perks. My favorite little perk? Sleeping with whatever beautiful woman I came across while in the line of duty, and Leigh definitely fit that bill. She was my type to a 't' and had brains on top of it.

I had to admit that part of the allure for sleeping with her was going to be how it played out. Leigh clearly thought that she was going to be dominating some submissive guy who wanted to be put in his place. That she would be 'Mistress' for the evening.

But I'd felt her shiver when I'd put my hand possessively at her waist. And I had the feeling that what she was planning to do tonight, and what she actually wanted to do in the bedroom, were two different things.

Only one way to find out.

I had the valet—yes, there had been a valet hired for this reception—to fetch my town car, and I held the front passenger door open for Leigh before getting behind the wheel.

“You drive yourself?” Leigh asked, sounding genuinely a bit surprised.

“I'm not used to people doing things for me,” I said, which was true. “I've already attended a barbecue with paper plates that still had waitstaff. They'll take the paper plates out of your hands and throw them away for you, like I can't walk five feet to a trash can on my own.”

Leigh rolled her eyes. “That's got to be frustrating. You're used to

making your own way, right?”

I nodded, remembering Jack Lawton’s family history. “The falling out between my mother and my uncle happened when I was pretty young, so when it came to college and stuff—my dad made a good living as a dentist but I still needed some help from academic scholarships. It’s honestly insane how much people have to pay for college these days, even people you’d generally consider well-off. The cost of living is just absurd.”

“Well, you’re rich now. There’s a lot you can do to change that.” Leigh sounded more earnest than she had the rest of the night.

“That’s very true. I don’t suppose you have some charities you know of that you could bring to my attention?”

Leigh blinked in surprise. “You genuinely want me to do some work for you?”

“If you’re up to the task. I can fire you just as easily as I can hire you.”

“So we’re... not going back to your place for... some playtime?” As she asked this, Leigh leaned over and cupped my cock with her hand, squeezing lightly.

Now was time for me to have some real fun. I feigned a gasp, like I was in shock. “L-Leigh,” I stuttered out, squirming.

She bought the act, massaging my cock. Fuck, I had to admit that felt good. She knew what she was doing.

She leaned closer and lowered her voice to a husky pitch. “I think you want to have some fun with me. I think you want me to take care of you. It’s such a big new world you’re in. I think you want me to take all those worries away for you and let you be a good boy. Don’t you want to be a good boy for me?”

She played the part well, said all the right things in a perfect pouty voice, but I could tell her heart wasn’t in it. It would’ve fooled probably a lot of men, because they’d only be focused on what they wanted and how good it all felt. But I liked being in control in the bedroom. My mind was clear. So I

could tell she was putting on an act in order to seduce me.

I couldn't wait to turn the tables on her.

"Y-yes," I stuttered out, like I was overwhelmed and turned on.

"Then let's get back to your place and we'll see what we can do to take all that stress away," Leigh cooed.

Oh, I was going to get rid of some stress, all right, but not in the way she was expecting.

She teased me the entire drive back to the hotel room I was renting as Jack Lawton, and I made sure to note that for when I got back at her later for her behavior. I was sure any number of the men at that party would be putty in her hands right now, begging her for mercy and for pleasure.

To each their own—I sure didn't judge—but that wasn't the game I played. And it wasn't the game that Leigh really wanted to play, either. I noticed a few times her tone slipped up a bit and boredom crept in. If I'd really been so aroused, I would've missed her lack of enthusiasm.

If I had to guess, I'd say what she really wanted was a man to dominate *her*.

It was in her language, too. It was said that we often gave others what we wanted people to give us—so people who were verbally affectionate wanted to be reassured and told what a good job they were doing. People who gave a lot of hugs wanted to be hugged and held. I suspected that all the things Leigh was saying to me she actually wanted me to say to her.

Well. I would be more than happy to make a 'good girl' out of her.

I parked the car in front of the hotel and made a show of getting my cock under control so I could get out and hand the keys to the valet. Leigh was perfectly behaved as we entered the lobby and made our way up to the floor where my room was located. She didn't even try anything in the elevator.

Once we got to the room, though, she started up again.

I watched that delicious ass of hers sway in her tight dress as she walked over to the bed. "Let's start simple. I'm sure you have a lot of stress you want

to release ... and you did say you liked a woman on top. So lie down on the bed.”

It was a struggle to hold in my smirk as I walked over. She ordered me to strip, one piece of clothing at a time, so I did as I was told, until she was still in her dress and heels and I was naked. Once that was accomplished, with all of her good boys and petting my hair, she had me lie down on the bed on my back.

Oh, we were so close to the juicy part. I honestly was having a little endurance test with myself. How long could I keep pretending to be submissive? When would be the perfect moment to strike and turn the tables on this woman?

“Good boy,” Leigh cooed, climbing on top of me and straddling my hips. “Are you going to be a good boy for your mistress?”

“Yes, mistress,” I replied breathlessly. I had the feeling I knew where this was going, and it was going to provide me with the perfect opportunity.

Leigh slowly peeled the straps of her dress down, letting the fabric fall away from her gorgeous breasts until they were bare and exposed to my gaze. Holy fuck. It took everything in me to stay still and not to flip her over and fuck her right then. I couldn’t wait to tie her up and tease those pretty tits of hers until she was either coming just from that or begging me to let her.

Just a few more minutes. I wanted to wait for the perfect moment.

She really was absolutely gorgeous. Her breasts had my mouth watering, but so did the rest of her curvy body. I moaned, acting like the submissive man she thought I was.

“You want to touch these?” Leigh cupped her breasts, rubbing her nipples with her thumbs.

I nodded eagerly, playing my part.

Leigh smirked. “Well, if you’re good, later on I’ll let you. But first...”

She shoved her dress up and hovered over my hard, straining cock, showing off that she wasn’t wearing any panties. *Fuck*. It took all my control

to hold back and instead I gripped the comforter and squirmed beneath her, acting the part.

Leigh smirked down at me. “You see this wet pussy?”

She slid two fingers along her glistening sex, showing herself off. *Jesus Christ*. I was going to make this woman pay for teasing me like this. She had no idea what she was in for.

“Do you want it?” Leigh taunted me.

She rubbed at her clit and I saw her shudder again. That was her tell—when she was truly aroused.

“Do you want me to ride your cock and let you come inside me?” she asked, tipping her head forward so that her wavy hair fell over her shoulders. “Take the edge off before the real fun begins?”

The real fun was about to begin, all right. I nodded frantically. “Yes, please, mistress!”

Leigh gave me a pleased smile, then slowly lowered herself onto my cock.

I grit my teeth as she enveloped me, inch by inch. Fucking hell. She was tight and perfect. It took everything in me to hold back. All I wanted to do was take over, fuck her hard and deep, and make her scream, but not just yet. *Almost*.

Instead, I held onto my self-control and pretended to be meek and obedient. Leigh damn well knew what she was doing, riding my shaft like a fucking pro. She was hot as hell, her breasts bouncing as she worked my cock like it was a toy, squeezing, twisting her hips. She was trying to make me come, and I had to admit it was taking everything in me to hold on and not do exactly that. In fact, it was my forced submission that helped me keep control. I didn’t enjoy being a bottom, so that helped me to keep the thread of my sanity.

Now, if I’d been *ordering* her to ride my cock...

That could be for another time. And I was already sure I’d want another

time with Leigh, one where she went into it knowing what I liked and what I could give to *her*.

I bit my lip and whimpered like I was close. “I’m gonna—I’m gonna—”

“That’s it, good boy, come for me,” Leigh ordered like a seasoned mistress. “Come for me nice and hard.”

I faked my release, rutting up into her like I was losing control, moaning, letting my face go slack. Leigh praised me through the entire process—and that was what broke me.

I couldn’t help it. I started laughing.

Leigh frowned, freezing in her movements. “What...?”

I grinned up at her, still chuckling. “I’m sorry, but just—the way you were—phew. Sorry, that was just too damn entertaining. I couldn’t keep up the pretense any longer.”

Before she could do anything other than stare at me in shock, I slid my hands under her thighs and picked her up, shifting our weight to get off the bed and sink down on my knees, then pressed her onto the floor, pinning her beneath me. I grabbed her wrists and yanked them up, anchoring them with one hand over her head.

Leigh squeaked in surprise at the role reversal, her eyes going wide, but then I felt it: that shiver up her spine.

“There we go,” I growled, seeing and feeling just how much she enjoyed my power over her. “Now... why don’t I show you how it’s *really* going to go between us?”

CHAPTER 6



Leigh

God, I did not like being in charge in the bedroom.

It wasn't the position itself that bothered me. I liked being on top sometimes. It meant that I could get my partner's cock completely inside of me and feel them really fucking deep and thick. I loved when my partner would dirty-talk me, telling me I was such a good girl, fucking myself on their cock.

This was not that.

I cooed and said all the right things, doing all the work while Jack lost his damn mind underneath me, as if he hadn't had sex in a long time, which both did and didn't surprise me. On the one hand, he was handsome as hell. On the other hand, he was a philosophy professor in the middle of nowhere. The dating pool probably dried up real fast unless he wanted to be unethical and fuck a student.

When he came, I figured I'd let him calm down, then bring in some spanking or something, then during the aftercare give him some praise and gently introduce some ideas for how he could feel more 'confident' by

‘taking the reins’ on his uncle’s company.

And then—then Jack started laughing.

“I’m sorry, but just—the way you were—phew. Sorry, that was just too damn entertaining. I couldn’t keep up the pretense any longer.” He shook his head, grinning.

What. The. Hell. A chill ran down my spine. Something was wrong. The man beneath me right now was *not* the man I’d just been dominating. It was like he’d turned into a completely different person—a snake shedding its skin.

Or rather a wolf taking off its sheep clothing.

I squeaked in surprise as he maneuvered his hands under me and literally pinned me to the floor, grabbing my wrists in his hand. I couldn’t help it—the power, the strength, the dominance—it all had me shivering with want.

This was what I liked in bed. This was the aggression that I craved.

But where had it come from? What was going on?

I was so damn confused.

“There we go,” Jack growled in a commanding tone. “Now... why don’t I show you how it’s *really* going to go between us?”

He sounded so in control and so ominous, I couldn’t stop the whimper of fear and arousal that escaped me. I squirmed, unable to escape the grasp of his hand, and I was still impaled on his thick cock. I was completely trapped. He had all of the power now.

On the one hand, this was so fucking hot I honestly got even wetter.

On the other hand—I felt like I was with a very, very dangerous man that I had stupidly underestimated.

He’d played me. And now I was going to pay the price. What exactly would the price be?

“Fight all you like, sweetheart.” Jack smirked down at me as I tried to test his grip on my wrists. “In fact, I like it when you struggle. You really thought you had it all in hand, huh? You thought you could be a lazy little mistress

and get whatever you wanted from me? You think I wasn't prepared for sharks like you?"

"Let me go!" I pleaded. "Get off me!" What was this man going to do to me now that he'd seen through my ruse?

"No, I don't think I will. And I don't think you want me to. You fooled all the others with your little act. But I'm not like the rest. I can tell when you're faking it..."

Jack leaned in, his lips brushing against my neck, and damn it, I trembled in response. "And you're genuinely so fucking turned on right now, aren't you, pet?"

"No," I lied, my voice breathy and desperate. "N-no, I'm not, let me go!"

I wasn't sure why I was protesting. I really *was* turned on, after all, and his cock was nice and hard inside of me. I could be in for an amazing fuck.

But I could also be in for something worse. I didn't know. So I wasn't going to give in easily.

Jack used his free hand to trail his fingers over my breasts. "God, these are so fucking pretty. You were taunting me with them earlier." He tweaked my nipple and I gasped, pleasure shooting through me straight to my clit. "Poor little pet. You really thought you had me all figured out, didn't you?"

I squirmed instinctively, although I wasn't sure if it was to get closer or move away. I felt absolutely caught in the grip of this man, and there was a part of me that screamed to get away and get my bearings. But there was also another part of me that liked it. That part of me didn't care that I was adrift at sea, lost and confused. That part of me wanted to be caught.

And that part of me was going to win out. I could already feel it.

"What the fuck," I gasped out. I shoved at him with my hips, but that didn't really do anything other than move his cock inside of me like short, shallow thrusts. I bit back a moan. Oh holy mother of...

"Your game was obvious," Jack explained, his voice dark and amused. "You're like all the other gold diggers out there who want me for something.

Except you were a bit interesting. You want me to up your profile in your professional life. That was a nice twist. And you figured out what all the other women at that party didn't—that most of the men there wanted something different. They wanted a dominatrix.”

He bent down to scrape his teeth over the swell of my breast and I cried out. “S-stop...”

“The way your pussy clenches tight around me tells me you want me to do the opposite of stop,” Jack drawled. “But I understand. Your dignity’s just taken a hit.” He sucked on my nipple and I writhed, unable to help my body’s reactions. “If it’s any consolation, your charm would’ve worked on any other man in that room. They were all ready to lick your heels.”

He kissed the shell of my ear. “I’m just not like any other man.”

I whimpered. Fuck, no, he wasn’t.

“You have a little tell that gave you away,” Jack murmured, lifting his head and scorching me with his heated gaze. “One that told me what you really like. You shiver when you’re turned on.”

He slowly dragged his finger down my throat, over my breasts, down my stomach and between my legs.

I shook uncontrollably.

“See?” he said, his tone pleased. “Just like that.”

He rubbed his finger against my clit and I clenched down hard, whimpering.

“You’re a good actress,” Jack continued. “But not when you’re stuck on my cock like this. I can feel how much you’re enjoying it, Leigh. C’mon. Just give in. Admit you want to be dominated.”

I panted, my mind racing. I needed a new plan. Perhaps this could be it? If he wanted me to be a good girl and submit, I would be happy to do that. I’d be a hell of a lot happier with that than with the alternative I’d originally planned.

But I couldn’t lose myself over to good sex. I had to stay focused and find

a way to keep influencing him, and get him to listen to me. What if he just fucked me and then discarded me? What if he wasn't interested in hearing what I had to say about the company?

"I can feel you thinking." Jack chuckled. "Clearly you want me to make a decision for you."

"No—" I protested, or started to, but then his free hand covered my mouth and he thrust hard into me, and my words turned into a garbled scream.

Oh fuck, he knew what he was doing. He was so damn hot, his stomach muscles flexing as he drove into me repeatedly, and I didn't even try to struggle because he felt so good inside me.

My head fell back as he thrust harder and a shudder worked through me. Every noise that I made was muffled by his hand over my mouth, squeezing me just hard enough to make me feel the strength and power in his grip. His hand around my wrists was tight enough that I couldn't get out of his grip even if I really wanted to. I tried to put power into my fight against the restraints, but there was nothing I could do. He had me trapped.

The thought only got me that much hotter, and I instinctively wrapped my legs around his hips, wanting him as deep as he could get.

His grip on my wrists also gave him the leverage to hover over me and really pound into me with his cock, fucking me like the end of the world was coming. I'd been fucked hard before, but there was a way that men did it where it just hurt and was out of control, and not very fun. They were just taking what they wanted without any regard for whether or not it felt good to me.

This was different. This was someone who knew what he was doing, who knew how to actually handle the power and strength that he possessed. It was like watching some idiot rich kid get into a fancy sports car and tear around town with it versus watching a Formula 1 racecar driver handle the very same car.

They were worlds apart.

And oh God, I'd never been fucked like this in my entire life.

My eyes rolled back into my head as I stopped trying to fight and gave over to the pleasure. I felt like a rag doll just being used, by a man who delighted in watching me succumb to his dominance. Jack's gaze was unrelenting, picking me apart as he watched me fall to pieces on his cock.

The realization that this man was more powerful—and smarter—than I'd given him credit for was intoxicating and just as hot as the fact that he was currently fucking me so hard I felt like I was going to fall apart with my orgasm. I shook uncontrollably. I was going to come so hard, I could feel the release building, I was going to—he was going to *make me*—

Oh, oh *fuck*. The world went white and splintered to pieces as I came, shaking around the thick cock ramming inside of me.

Jack growled, sounding triumphant. “That’s it. That’s a good little pet. Fuck yes, you’re so fucking tight as you milk my cock...”

He wasn't stopping. Every other man I'd been with, the moment I orgasmed, so did my partner. But not Jack. He fucked me even harder, faster, like he had been somehow holding back all this time and was now going to really let loose.

I moaned and melted into the floor, all resistance leaving me. It had been way too long since I'd had good sex but especially overstimulation, where I'd already come once and was still being teased and tortured. I moaned against the hand muffling me, my vision blurring as another orgasm crested. He just felt so good, taking from me, dominating me, *using* me—

I just about choked as I felt him coming inside of me, filling me up, hot and sticky and claiming. I spiraled down into another release as Jack lost control and thrust into me wildly, my legs shaking uncontrollably with pleasure.

The second orgasm was always so much more intense than the first, ripping through me like my body wasn't even physical anymore, like I was a

part of the orgasm instead of the orgasm happening to me.

I gasped for breath as Jack slid his hand off my mouth. The change from just breathing through my nose to having my mouth free made me dizzy and sent my orgasm to new heights, and I whimpered helplessly as my body was ravaged.

When we both finally came down from the high of it all, Jack released my wrists, his chest heaving as he got himself back under control. “Well. You certainly enjoyed that.”

His voice was a low purr, completely different from how he’d been at the party. I whimpered helplessly, watching him, knowing that I didn’t have the strength to fight him if he chose to do something more to me.

“Please, sir,” I whispered, trying to get a grip, to get my bearings. “I—I’m sorry—”

“Why are you apologizing?” A frown formed between his brows. “You were a very good pet just now.”

Pet. God, if I hadn’t come twice already I’d be squirming for an orgasm from him calling me that.

“You were trying to further your career and take the next step and I admire your tenacity and ingenuity,” he said, casually dipping his free hand down between my legs and slowly rubbing my clit, reawakening my body again. “Any woman who’s willing to have sex she doesn’t even enjoy deserves some praise, I think. It’s a sacrifice, more than most people realize, having sex that you don’t like.”

He lightly pinched that sensitive flesh between my legs, and I choked out, my whole body jerking. “S-sir—”

“Master,” Jack corrected mildly as he continued toying with me. “That’s what you’ll be calling me in bed. Because we will be having more sex. I do appreciate your consulting skills, don’t get me wrong. But what I also need is someone to help me feel in control. You had it backwards between us, pet.”

He rubbed at my clit faster and I bucked beneath him as a third orgasm

approached.

“Everyone is going to try and take advantage of me and my inexperience. I’m going to have to fight every second to maintain control of what’s rightfully mine. So it’ll be good for me to have something that is already mine. Something I can have complete control over. A way to let out steam.”

Jack’s gaze on me was unrelenting as I shuddered and jerked from his ministrations. My mouth fell open and my eyes rolled back, ecstasy pumping through my veins as another rush of pleasure ripped through me.

“And that thing to have complete control over is you.” He smirked down at me, satisfaction in his eyes as I twitched and gasped beneath him, completely overwhelmed by his natural dominance. “You need a proper master. And I want a nice, obedient pet. This will further your career and help me to maintain the calm I need as I handle my new position. I think this is a win-win for both of us, wouldn’t you say?”

Oh God. I hadn’t been controlled and fucked like this in... ever. My heart hammered wildly in my chest and I felt like I could hardly get my breath even though I knew I could breathe normally now. That was amazing.

There was no way I was giving this up.

It looked like my plans had changed. I was still going to try and influence Jack Lawton to my way of thinking in terms of his company. I was just going to get the most amazing sex of my life while I was doing it. I saw no downside to this proposal.

I would just have to be careful. The man was smarter than he looked, and he already looked pretty damn smart to begin with. He was good at putting on a persona and hiding things from people, and he could figure people and their motivations out quickly. I would have to be on my toes the whole time if I was going to keep him from finding out who I really was and my real motivations for working with him.

“Yes,” I said out loud. “It does sound like a win-win situation.”

“Yes, what?” Jack prompted me.

“Yes, Master,” I said, sealing my fate.

CHAPTER 7



Bryce

Christ. That had been fucking fantastic.

The way Leigh had writhed under me, her eyes wide, muffled cries leaking out from under my hand, her tits bouncing and her whole body shaking as I'd fucked her... I had just about lost my damn mind. She was the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my life and the moment I came inside of her I wanted to get hard and fuck her all over again.

Already, the ideas I had for how to play with her crowded my brain, fogging it up and making me lose track of common sense. What a perfect little pet... just the right amount of feisty and obedient...

I couldn't let this fun take away too much of my attention, though. I had to be smart about this. Having Leigh by my side would be helpful. She'd be loyal to me and me alone and I could use her to help further my spying to figure out what had happened to Jack's uncle and who he might need to be wary of at the company.

Not to mention I had to keep an eye on her, too. She was a sharp and sly one. Was she really just in this to further her career? Or was there another

motive?

I'd have to find out. I was sure I could fuck every single one of her secrets out of her in time, and I'd have fun doing it.

I really had worn her out, though. I stood then helped her to her feet so we could clean up, then I ordered some room service. They had top-notch food here at the hotel, I'd found out. Delicious sandwiches and pancakes and whole bundles you could order.

Leigh stole one of the bathrobes to wear when the food arrived. She seemed surprised that I hadn't just kicked her out immediately afterwards. I wondered what other kind of men she'd been with. So many just used their women and then sent them home or dropped right off to sleep without realizing the importance of making sure your sub was really okay.

"Feel free to use the shower," I told her. "I didn't bruise you anywhere, did I?"

Leigh shook her head. "You're good. I suppose you want to negotiate terms?"

I laughed. "All about business, huh? I actually just wanted to take care of you a little. Eat up, enjoy the food, relax. But if you want to discuss terms now instead of tomorrow, that's fine by me. I appreciate a go-getter."

Leigh still ate the food like it might be poisoned, which amused me. I'd shown her that there was more to me than met the eye, so she was understandably wary. Good. She should be. She had no idea how much I was hiding.

"I have yet to choose a personal secretary," I mused.

Leigh snorted. "I'm not going to be hired as a secretary. I'm over-qualified and it'll raise eyebrows. Hire me as a personal consultant and get someone random to be your secretary. You don't want me chained to a desk anyway—you need me accompanying you to social functions."

I arched a brow. "People might think I just hired you to fuck you."

"That's fine by me." She shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first time people

assumed that. It's their mistake to make."

She was genuinely unconcerned about what other people thought, and I loved her attitude. It was refreshing, and definitely not what I was used to from people in the world of the rich and spoiled. And the confidence in her sex appeal and her attraction was a hell of a turn on.

I watched her carefully as she finished eating. I was wildly attracted to this woman. I could admit that to myself. It had been a long time since I'd wanted someone this badly. Perhaps I never had wanted anyone as badly as I wanted her. But that meant I had to be extra careful. I couldn't let my dick run things or cause me to get distracted and miss something important.

I was hiding layers of secrets. Maybe Leigh was, too.

"So, what exactly do you want from me?" she asked, setting aside her empty plate on the food cart.

"I want you to treat me as a client just like any other. Give me tips and guidance and don't take me for a fool you can manipulate or boss around," I said. "Everyone else will be doing that. I want honesty, whether I'm doing a good job or a bad job, because I know I won't get it from the others. They'll lie to make me feel better about myself, and they'll lie to make me feel insecure. It'll all depend on what they want from me that day."

Leigh nodded, looking serious. "In that case, I hope you're prepared to hear things you don't like. I tell this to all of my clients. I'm not here to give you an ego boost. I'm here to keep you grounded and to stop you from making rookie mistakes. That means you're not going to just get pats on the back from me. You'll hear when I feel you need to go in a different direction."

That sounded professional, and I respected her position. "I understand. As far as the rest of it..."

Leigh blushed and tucked some of her long red hair behind her ear, her gaze falling down to her lap. She didn't look like she was being coquettish on purpose like she had earlier at the party. She looked genuinely submissive,

like she couldn't help it.

It made my blood run deliciously hot.

I took her chin in my fingers and tilted her face up so that she had to look at me. "Have you ever been anyone's pet before, Leigh? Have you ever had a proper master?"

She shook her head. "N-no. I—I've played around with light BDSM before, but only with hookups. I never had a proper . . . relationship. Nothing longstanding."

"Well. We're going to change that." I stroked her soft cheek.

She was going to look so very pretty with a collar around her neck. Not that she'd wear it at the office. The last thing I needed was my investigation jeopardized by people claiming the nephew was just as kinky as the uncle.

"This is how it will go," I said, laying out the terms of our intimate relationship. "You're going to be sexually available to me whenever I need to blow off some steam. The rest of the time, we'll act as normal. But the moment I call you my pet, you'll know that the change has started and you are to be submissive to me completely. I am your master when that happens. Not your client. Not your colleague or even your boss. Your *master*. Understand?"

Leigh shivered, her plush lips slightly parted as she inhaled sharply, her gaze fixed on me. "Y-yes, Master."

Such a good girl already. I was glad that she had some experience. That meant I wouldn't have to train her completely and I could skip to the good parts. I let my hand drop away. "Remember. When I'm your master, I own your body. I get to decide what happens. Including whether you get to come or not and how many times."

Leigh flushed and shivered again. "Yes, master." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Good." Fuck, I had to have her again. "So, for example, I want my good little pet to get on her knees and make me hard again. Use that pretty mouth

of yours on my cock.”

Leigh flushed harder but immediately got down onto her knees between my legs, her hands on my thighs for balance as she leaned in and pushed my robe out of the way. She circled her fingers around my dick and went to work.

The feel of her tongue lapping at my cock was fucking heavenly. I groaned and slid my hand into her hair. “That’s it. Such a good pet for me. So obedient.”

Leigh licked all over, not like she was trying to be disobedient or teasing, but as though she was trying to be thorough and not have it be over too fast. Like she wanted to make sure this was really enjoyable for both of us. Her eyes were closed and her body felt like it was vibrating as she took her time getting my cock nice and wet and hard before she began to take it into her mouth.

Fuck, yes. It had been ages since I’d had the chance to really take my time with someone rather than just having a quick fuck, and Leigh seemed to genuinely enjoy having a cock in her mouth. It felt like she was savoring this just as much as I was.

Her tongue swirled around my shaft as she slowly took more and more of me into that hot wet mouth, and I growled in satisfaction. Yeah, just like that. That was exactly what I wanted. I was in no mood to rush things, and she wasn’t trying to be coy and bratty, so I could just watch her and enjoy the sensations. No rush to orgasm. Just feeling every moment to its fullest.

I tightened my grip on her hair, feeling the silky strands in between my fingers. “Take more of me,” I ordered softly.

Leigh moaned and did as she was told, taking more of my cock into her mouth, bit by bit, until I felt the head of it hit the back of her throat. She choked just a little and I felt my toes curling in pleasure. So damn perfect.

Leigh took my cock in and out of her mouth, bobbing her head, her tongue flicking along the slit and dragging along the underside. I thrust

tentatively into her mouth, testing her limits. You never knew for sure with a new partner—but to my pleasure, Leigh relaxed her jaw and hummed encouragingly. *Fuck* yes.

I thrust shallowly into her mouth, the slick sound filling the room. I was going to come so fucking hard, I could feel it, and I didn't know if I wanted to come down her throat or on her face, dirtying her up.

The choice was taken from me a second later when Leigh pulled off and stroked my slick cock with her hand. She stared up at me with her soft eyes, her lips slightly parted. "I want you to mark me up, master," she whispered. "I want you to come on me and make me yours."

Oh Jesus fucking Christ. She definitely knew what she was doing and how to drive me insane.

There was no way I couldn't come from this. A groan lodged in my throat and I came on her lips and chin, watching myself mess her up. Leigh's mouth dropped open, catching some of my come on her tongue, which made my cock pulse with even more pleasure.

It was all so hot and I couldn't even believe my goddamn luck. I'd found a woman who had no problem getting dirty and kinky, and had the confidence to follow my orders and ask for what she wanted.

I panted, getting my breath back, as Leigh licked the remains off her lips. "Clean yourself up," I ordered.

She did as she was told without hesitation, and brought back a tissue to help wipe me up. Fucking hell. "That's a good girl."

I stroked her hair, and Leigh smiled up at me, looking pleased and almost shy. It settled that thing inside of me that got itchy and anxious if I didn't unleash that dominant side to me in a while. "*Such* a good girl," I murmured.

Oh, yes. This was going to be a lot of fun.

CHAPTER 8



Leigh

*A*s I reported for my first day at work with Jack Lawton, I told myself I wasn't nervous.

That was a lie.

I had mocked up a website that showed all of my 'work' with tech companies and entrepreneurs, filled with blurbs from the various people I'd supposedly helped. Given that we were currently on the East Coast and the work I was pretending to have done was in Silicon Valley, I hoped that would help maintain my illusion.

I had various friends in my environmental work who were willing to pose as people I'd worked with should I need to give out phone numbers. I had the website. I had carefully researched everything and in all my years going up against big businesses that tried to destroy local people's livelihoods, I liked to think I knew how they worked pretty damn well. I would just be speaking the language of the enemy. And hoping I wouldn't get caught.

Lawton Industries was located in a large, depressingly modern building in the financial sector. I had to admit that my stomach twisted a little as I stared

up at the chrome and glass façade.

Jack Lawton wasn't anything like I'd expected and I was about to dive into a pool of bloodthirsty sharks that sat on the board of directors. Could I really make it out of this alive? Could I really succeed in my goals and take this company down?

If you don't try and do it, nobody will, I told myself sternly. I was going to find a way to convince Jack to listen to me and take this company down from the inside, and I wasn't going to let fear—or fantastic sex—stop me.

Entering into the building, I was greeted immediately by security. Of course. “I have an appointment to see Mr. Lawton?” I said as I was led through a metal detector and my purse was put through a TSA level scanner.

I was directed to the front desk where I was asked to give my name and the male secretary looked me up to confirm that I matched my picture and actually had an appointment.

“Here you are.” The secretary gave me a badge that had my picture and a barcode on it. “Mr. Lawton instructed that you were to be given basic clearance so that you can come and go from the building as you need.”

“Thank you.” I put some effort into smiling. “Have you worked here long?”

The secretary—a man who looked slightly younger than me—smiled back. “Oh, yeah, about a year. Honestly I was grateful for it. Lawton's one of the few places they'll hire a guy for an entry level position like this. They usually just want pretty girls in the front desk jobs. Then they hire the guys for the higher-up positions, so the women run into the glass ceiling and if you don't have an ‘in’ because you went to some Ivy League and have connections, you can't get in as a guy.”

“That's really great,” I said, my stomach churning. Yeah, I'd heard the rumors about the now-deceased Lawton. Didn't matter to me what your sexuality was—older rich men were all the same. They'd take advantage of a pretty younger person either way.

But this guy sounded genuinely happy, so maybe he hadn't been aware of any issues—or just hadn't had a chance to run into them before Lawton passed away.

“I'm Leigh, by the way,” I said. It was always good, I'd found, to make friends with the people at the bottom of the ladder in a company.

He had to know my name from my badge, but he understood that I was offering friendship. “I'm Bill.”

“An old-fashioned name, I like it.”

Bill smiled, a little flustered. “Thanks.”

“I'll see you around, Bill,” I said, making sure that I sounded only vaguely flirtatious to give myself plausible deniability.

It was always best not to come on too strong when flirting with men to get something out of them. Despite people almost always being willing to have sex and being open to flattery, if you laid it on too thick and too fast, people would get suspicious.

Why was a gorgeous woman flirting with them? Very few people were delusional enough to not have some kind of insecurity, or be aware that beautiful women didn't usually blatantly flirt with them and offer them a good time.

No, it was better to keep suspicions low and stay more ‘friendly’ than ‘flirty’. I didn't want people to think that I was sleeping around with anyone who'd give me the time of day. And while I was sure people would assume that Jack and I had a sexual relationship, I didn't want them to realize I was the one influencing his disastrous choices.

It was going to be a hell of a tightrope to walk, but I had confidence in my persuasive abilities, if nothing else.

I rode the elevator up to his floor, adjusting my outfit. Unlike the blatantly tight dress I'd worn to the party, I wanted to be professional today. My skirt was a bit tight, but it came down to just over my knees, and I wore a looser blouse that didn't show much of my cleavage. My hair was done up in

a clip, and I had kept the makeup minimal, nothing dramatic.

While I didn't mind being labeled as just a good pair of legs, I didn't want to be so disdained that nobody would give me the time of day. I had to make other allies here to accomplish my goals, not just Jack.

The elevator dinged open and I took a deep breath before exiting. Okay. Showtime.

The floor was mostly open—no cubicles here—with large desks scattered about the floor and then glass-walled offices along the outer edge surrounding the middle space. I could see a hangout area with couches and a kitchenette with a coffee maker and a large fridge, as well as what looked like a conference room off to the side.

It wasn't quite the same as what we saw in Silicon Valley, with its elaborate adult playgrounds for offices (and I meant that literally, not in a sexual way, with slides, ping-pong tables, and other elaborate games and toys for the employees to indulge in). But it was clear that Lawton Industries had decided they would try to mimic that new style with the whole 'open floorplan' thing and the elaborate kitchen setup.

Employees rushed around and spoke in hushed voices together, glancing around, clearly gossiping. I was sure there was a lot to talk about. Your CEO dies and leaves the whole thing to his hermit nephew? Yeah, people had to be worrying about their jobs.

I ignored everyone and made my way through the office, trying to find the one that belonged to Jack. It was pretty easy to find. Not only was it the biggest and along the back wall like you were approaching a throne of some kind, but it was also the one that had a bunch of men in suits crowding around it.

There was one woman, a few years older than I was with streaks of gray in her hair, sitting at a small desk taking notes. The secretary, most likely. But everyone else was a man.

This would be interesting.

I walked over and smiled as I rapped on the door. “Hi!”

Everyone turned to look at me. A lot of eyebrows flew up. But the only person whose reaction I cared about was Jack’s. He was leaning back against his desk and already looked exhausted. He was wearing a simple dark gray suit today, like he was trying to fit in and appear serious, which broke my heart just a little bit in an unexpected way. A man who had the style and flair to show up to a party in a colored pastel suit shouldn’t have to feel like he needed to tone himself down in order to fit in.

Well... hopefully what I was going to do would help him? Jack was nothing like what I’d expected. Maybe he would be happier with his uncle’s company dissolved, and he could go back to being a reclusive professor.

Or at least I could perhaps convince him of that.

Jack smiled when he saw me. “Leigh, so glad you’re here. Gentleman, this is my personal consultant. She’s done a lot of great work with helping entrepreneurs and first-time CEOs take their companies to the next level and I thought it would be wise to have her on my team as I take the reins on the company.”

I saw a few concerned glances exchanged among the assembled men. Did they not want Jack to succeed? And if so, why not?

“Thank you,” I said graciously to Jack. I walked over and stood next to him, then smiled at the assembled men. “And these are...?”

“Oh, of course.” Jack quickly introduced me to all of the executives that were gathered around. Some of them seemed glad that I was there, smiling as they shook my hand. But a couple of them—the head of the investment board, for one—had a sour pinch to their faces.

“Mr. Lawton,” the head of the investment board said. “Are you sure that you want an outside consultant? We’d all be happy to assist you...”

“I think having a lot of different voices is important, including outside voices,” Jack replied. “Getting that outside perspective. My uncle was very set in his ways but I think that injecting some new blood will be important to

the company. We have to innovate or we'll stagnate and fall behind."

"Of course." The man's smile felt like it was being forced out of him by a puppeteer.

"I'm excited to get started," Jack said, with a kind of sincere eagerness that was either woefully, hysterically genuine or hilariously fake. I couldn't tell if he was playing these men or if he was just trying to be straightforward in an attempt to cut through the bullshit. "I'll see you all at the board meeting this afternoon."

It was a clear dismissal. The men all filed out, leaving the gray-streaked woman with her notepad, Jack, and myself.

"Leigh, this is Rebecca. Rebecca, this is Leigh. Rebecca's the woman they kindly assigned to me to serve as my executive assistant. I've been informed this makes her kind of like my TA?"

Jack sent Rebecca a questioning look, as if he was confirming this with her. Rebecca gave an encouraging smile and nodded at him.

"I'm so glad you have people helping you," I told him, making my voice as sincere as possible. "One of the number one things that I tell people is that you're only as good as your team. A CEO is more the face of the company than anything else. The captain might say where the ship is going but it's up to the crew to make that actually happen, so it's important to appreciate the people who are helping you actually make your plans a reality. Nobody can do it alone."

"I definitely can't," Jack said with good-natured self-degradation. "Rebecca here has been at the company for years and I'm shocked it's taken her this long to be snapped up for such a position."

Rebecca's face froze for a second, and then relaxed again. Hmm. Something to do with those rumors about Lawton, I figured. She wasn't young and attractive enough, and probably not male enough, either.

"Well, I'm happy to help the new Mr. Lawton as we move forward with the company," Rebecca said.

“And do you know how you want to move forward?” I asked, meeting Jack’s gaze. “You say we need to innovate. Do you already have a plan?”

Jack’s face fell. “That’s the problem. I’ve done enough studying to understand that our company is... not doing as great as it would like to be. Or as it should be. Financially we’re still in the black for now, but from what I’ve been told, we won’t be for long. My uncle was resistant to change and so he wouldn’t adopt new policies. This whole office reconstruction...” Jack made a gesture to encompass the office I’d just walked through. “...was done against his will and he threw a fit about it, apparently.”

I nodded. “Well, I can’t tell you just yet exactly what will work best for the company. I’ll need to do more research. But I’m sure...” I looked at Rebecca. “If you’ve been at this company for a while, you’ll probably have some ideas, or you’ll know other people who’ll it’ll be good to ask?”

“The board has plenty of ideas,” Rebecca said, but she sounded hesitant, like she was saying it because she felt she had to.

“I’m not going to listen to the board,” Jack snapped. “They’re trying to oust me, for one thing, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they wanted the company to nosedive so they could use that as an excuse. They’ll claim I did a bad job as the leader and that’s why everything’s falling apart when it’ll be on their advice in the first place.”

That was definitely astute. Corporate takeovers were standard in this world as everyone tried to climb their way to the top and amass as much money and power as possible. But a newbie like Jack Lawton wouldn’t ordinarily see it coming. The fact he could already suspect that these men were setting him up to fail reminded me, again, this guy was smarter than I’d initially thought when I met him at the party.

“Why don’t we conduct a private survey?” I suggested. “I’d be happy to handle it. Rebecca, if you have a few people you think it would be wise to talk to, I can interview them and get a possible plan together.”

Then I turned and smiled at Jack. “I’m sure you’ll have your hands full

with learning the day-to-day running and this way we can do it without the board getting suspicious from keeping their eye on you.”

“I think that could work,” Rebecca said. “I’ll get on that. And remember, Mr. Lawton, you have a meeting in an hour for lunch, and then the advertising department has a presentation for you at two.”

Jack nodded, already looking a bit overwhelmed. “Great, thank you Rebecca. I’ll review those files that you put together for me.”

He walked around the desk to sit down at his chair, and I saw there was in fact a thick stack of files sitting there waiting for him to go through. Rebecca nodded, smiled at me, and then left the room, probably to go to wherever her desk was.

I picked up some of the files to flick through them, feigning vague interest but actually hoping I could find something to weaponize in here. “How are you actually feeling?”

“Like I want to fire everyone,” Jack muttered. “It’s pretty damn clear the head of the board thought that he and the others would gain control of the company after my uncle’s death and they’re looking for the first excuse to legally get rid of me.”

“Can you discuss it with legal?” I asked.

He sighed and scrubbed a hand along his jaw. “You remember David Weston, the legal guy from the party?”

“Yeah?”

“He’s one of the advisors for the company. The head of the board is his father.”

Oh, wow. “Didn’t realize that it was so incestuous this high up the corporate ladder.”

“In legacy places like this, apparently it is,” Jack sighed.

The files in my hand detailed everything from the latest ad campaigns to the quarterly earnings to the stock market projections to the security company that took care of the building. This was a hell of a lot to go through.

“This is probably more work than you do for an entire school year.”

Jack grimaced. “The state of academia is... deplorable. They’re constantly asking us to do more with less and we’ve been understaffed for ages. I’m probably the last person they’ll be giving tenure for a long time. But at least I trained for everything I do there. And my colleagues weren’t trying to oust me.”

I smiled reassuringly at him. “Well, I’d suggest maybe retiring if it wasn’t for the fact that it would satisfy the vultures.”

“Trust me, I’d consider it too if I could,” Jack grumbled.

Hmm. This might be easier than I’d thought. If he was already primed to want to retire back to being a professor, all I had to do was show him that it was actually possible. But he didn’t like the idea of these vultures getting one up on him. I’d have to frame the dissolving of the company in a way that would make them all look bad.

The temptation to tell him my idea right this second was a strong one, but I had to stay calm and patient. I couldn’t let my eagerness run away with me. He’d find it suspicious that the person who was supposed to help him thrive in the company was immediately saying, “Well, give it all up and split the company apart then!”

That didn’t fit with the idea of who I was, and it sounded like crazy advice from just about anyone.

“Well, we can’t always choose the cards that life deals us,” I said pragmatically instead. “Have you given any thought to your public image? I know it’s the last thing you want to think about right now but it’s something you need to get control of as soon as possible.”

“How do you know it’s the last thing I want to think about? I think my image is pretty good.” Jack winked at me.

I rolled my eyes. “Ha, ha, ha. Because you’re a recluse up until two weeks ago, that’s how I know that.”

“All right, fair.” Jack shrugged and leaned further back in his chair.

“What would you recommend I do? I want to have something solid to show for it before I walk out there to hold a press conference and start making promises. Nobody is going to take anything I say seriously if I don’t have something to show for it.”

“But if you don’t make some public appearances and talk to reporters now, you’re leaving the door wide open for other people to say whatever they want about you or to draw their own conclusions,” I pointed out. “People aren’t great on their own, Jack. They make their own assumptions and they speculate, and next thing you know you have conspiracy theories on your hands. Just look at any television show fandom during the summer hiatus.”

Jack snorted with amusement. “This isn’t about who’s going to die on *Game of Thrones*.”

“You realize that show ended, right?”

“No, it’s still going.”

“That’s a prequel.”

“Oh my God.” Jack laughed, the low, rumbling sound doing arousing things to my female parts. “You’re a nerd, aren’t you? You’re a total nerd.”

“I’ll have you know that only makes me sexier,” I pointed out. Men loved that I could talk about their video games and fantasy shows with them.

“Never said that it didn’t,” Jack replied.

“Let me guess,” I said, tapping my chin with my finger. “You’re strictly into sports.”

“The philosophy professor who’s into sports?” he asked incredulously. “That’s a new one.”

“It sounds like the start of a joke, honestly. Does he also walk into a bar?”

Jack looked absolutely delighted by me. I found my face heating up. This wasn’t flirting. Not quite. There weren’t any sexual undertones to it. But it was a kind of banter. I liked that we could go back and forth like this. It was fun. Jack was fun.

I took that thought, crushed it in my hand, then dropped it on the floor

and stomped on it. I didn't care if Jack Lawton was fun or not. He was my prey, my mark, not my actual fuck buddy. Or, God forbid, my boyfriend.

"Let's talk to the people in the company on a direction we can go," Jack said. "Once we have that, we can discuss doing some press, how's that sound?"

"All right," I agreed.

He would feel better if he had something to say about where he was taking the company, that was fine. It wasn't like I was actually an expert on public relations anyway. But I did find it refreshing to meet a man who didn't actually care about getting into the spotlight the first opportunity he could.

"I'll see what Rebecca can come up with."

"Perfect." He sat up straight and reached for the paperwork on his desk. "I have to go over these files and then I have those meetings, so feel free to do what you need to during the day. We'll reconvene here after that ad presentation?"

I nodded. A few hours to make friends in the office and start to plant some seeds of destruction. "Sounds perfect."

CHAPTER 9



Bryce

Oh boy, was I going to have my work cut out for me.

My first day in the office was a doozy. I started with a phone call to the real Jack, where I relayed everything and we discussed a plan for moving forward. He was doing what research he could on the company and taking online courses in economics and business. I suggested a few courses in leadership as well, and I felt I was proven right on that when I met everyone from the board that morning.

The head of it, Harry Weston, looked at me like I was a rat that had to be exterminated. Not that he thought I noticed. The only person clearly on my side was Rebecca, and that was because she—like every other woman I'd met as Jack Lawton—saw me as a meal ticket. I couldn't entirely blame her. She'd been passed over for a lot of promotions because she was older than some of the other women, and she hadn't been an attractive man so Lawton Sr. didn't want her. But I'd have to be careful with her. I'd seen the jealous look she'd shot Leigh behind her back. I couldn't have petty infighting on top of all this.

As I read through the files, I tried to look for anything that might tell me who would most likely move against Jack Lawton, and if that same person or persons might have had anything to do with his uncle's death. I was glad that I had Leigh here. I would have to see if I could get her to do some spy work for me—not that she could know what that was. If she could get in good with the employees who were a bit lower down the ladder, she might get some valuable gossip for me about how things went around here.

The files were all neatly organized and full of information. Rebecca had really done her work. Honestly, she should be head of a department or something. I made a mental note to tell this to Jack for when he finally stepped into the role and I could depart. He'd want good people like Rebecca running things, not assholes like Weston and nepotism hires like his son.

Could Weston have bumped off his colleague? He definitely didn't like me—or rather, Jack—and wanted to get rid of him and take things over, but that didn't necessarily make someone a murderer. It was one thing to try and oust someone from a job so you could take over the company. It was another to kill.

The facts of the case made me think that it was more than just the company that led to murder, if it really was murder. Lawton's pills for his heart condition had been put out of reach from his bedside so that when he had an attack he couldn't take one like usual and save himself. That spoke to someone who knew his habits and his household, and I wasn't sure that Weston was that person.

However, Weston could've hired someone. That was the problem with these rich people, they never actually did anything themselves. They were always paying people to do their shit for them like picking up their dry cleaning.

The murder, if it was murder, was elegant and cold in its simplicity. It could've easily been that Lawton hadn't remembered to put those pills by his bed or that a maid had accidentally moved them and he hadn't realized at the

time. It was amazing how even things we usually did mindlessly out of habit we could one day suddenly forget about, or do differently.

There was no proof. No way of knowing it was murder beyond Jack's own hunch, his gut instincts—and mine.

I'd have to do some digging into Weston and the others on the board. I could be wrong, but I suspected if any one of them had actually bothered to bump off Lawton, it wasn't just because they felt he was keeping the company from its full potential. CEOs ran companies into the ground and made poor decisions all the time. There were a lot of options available from filing for chapter eleven to forcing him out through legal means. Resorting to murder was pretty desperate. But if there was a personal reason that one of them hated Lawton enough... now that could be enough.

I scanned all the files Rebecca gave me using an app on my phone, then sent the electronic copies to Jack so that he could read and study them. He trusted me to make sensible or at least not disastrous decisions in these few days while he got his bearings and I kept the sharks at bay. I hoped I was going to be up to the task.

Honestly, thank God for Leigh. She was actually used to this kind of thing. I had operated in the corporate world to a certain extent in my job as a security expert, but that wasn't the same thing as actually making decisions and being in charge. I had to actually *know* things instead of just make nice at parties.

The rest of the day passed by at the pace of molasses going uphill in winter. I felt like I was going crazy. I was a man of action, and a man who loved to go out and charm people, to be where the fast pulse of the situation was, whatever that situation might be. Taking meetings and listening to presentations on buying ad space on YouTube was not exactly my idea of an ideal mission.

Still, I considered it a fruitful day. Jack Lawton had been estranged from his uncle and so while I didn't want to talk badly about him, nobody expected

us to be close. It meant I could openly reassure employees that we were going to take things in a new direction, move things forward, and say things like, “My uncle was a bit stuck in his ways...” and nobody would bat an eye. It got them to open up to me a little.

The head of the marketing department admitted to me after the ad presentation that he wasn’t surprised my uncle had left everything to me. “He was always making promises to people, but he never really kept them.”

“Oh?” I watched as the other employees filed out of the board room, chatting. It was the end of the work day now that the presentation was over, so people were making notes on what to work on for tomorrow and then packing up their things to go home. “I hope nobody expects me to keep any promises, because I don’t know about them.”

“Not unless you’re going to keep promises to spoiled male secretaries,” the head of marketing noted. “Not that I can really blame ‘em. They were all fresh out of college or even a bit younger than that. I think one was only nineteen. When a rich handsome guy buys you fancy watches and says you’re his only confidant and he’ll write you into his will, you believe it at that age, no matter what your gender. It’s not only women who can be gullible when a rich older man makes promises.”

Well, that sounded like a promising angle. “What made you certain that I’d be in the will, then?”

“The executives were all blind about it. I think they were under the impression he changed the damn thing every time he got a new secretary and made them be in favor. They were counting on being able to use that to declare the will unfit—they could show how every will had been altered every few months when he got a new boyfriend, and take over the business instead.”

“But you saw it differently.”

“I really don’t care about who owns what.” The guy shrugged. “I’m just doing my job in my department and making sure it all runs smoothly. I stay

in my lane. I think that allowed me to see things a little more clearly.”

“And you figured he would leave it to me? I mean, he and my mom didn’t speak, y’know? I figured he wouldn’t leave me anything just because it would be awkward and we hadn’t seen each other since I was around eight because of... everything.”

“True, but I knew the guy was old-fashioned. I think gay rights was the only modern thing he really believed in, and that was only because it benefitted himself. No offense, I’m sorry, but your uncle could be a pretty selfish guy.”

“I think a lot of men are, honestly. I don’t take it personally. As I said, I didn’t know him super well.”

“Well, he put a lot of value on the family name and on old-fashioned things. He didn’t maintain a penthouse in the city, for example. He liked his house upstate. He always stayed at the Plaza because of the pedigree. Things like that. So I suspected he’d left everything to you because he was such a ‘keep it in the family guy’. He would praise others for doing similar things. ‘Always good to keep it in the family’, he’d say. I guess the others just ignored it.”

But *had* the others ignored it? Or had someone made the same guess as this man and decided it would be easier to bump off Lawton and then takeover from his inexperienced, reclusive nephew?

Or, on the other hand—had someone thought they were in the will and received a nasty shock?

“Other than the whole company thing, did anyone dislike my uncle?” I asked, making myself sound a bit vulnerable. “I just can’t help but feel that a few people have a grudge going and they’re pushing it onto me now that he’s dead.” I gave a self-deprecating laugh. “Paranoid, I know.”

“Maybe, but it pays to be a little paranoid around here,” I was told. “I’ve found it helps.”

Well, hell. That wasn’t an ominous statement at all.

I went back to my office, pondering what I'd been told. Lawton wouldn't be the first person to make promises that people then killed him over. I sat down at the desk and went into the computer to pull up the employee history of the company. If I could get a list of the secretaries who'd worked for Lawton, I could do research on my own time and see if any of them had access to his home—and if that access continued even after they were fired. Maybe this was a revenge killing, or the latest one thought he was still going to get something.

It was also time I looked into Weston and the others on the board. You didn't kill over a corporate takeover, usually. But could there be an additional reason? Maybe one of them was in dire financial straits and needed a bigger paycheck from Lawton's company to save them. Or there was a personal affront that just couldn't stand.

I got the list and sent it to my work email, then deleted everything. I didn't want to go on my personal laptop on the company's Wi-Fi in case that would give a hacker an opportunity.

Like I'd been told, it often paid to be paranoid.

As I finished up, Leigh entered the office, waving at Rebecca before stepping inside and closing the door. Thank God this was one of the offices that actually had a proper wall facing the interior of the office space. Lawton must've put his foot down on that one, seeing as most of the other offices were pretty much all glass. It muffled sound but did nothing to hide visually whatever you were doing, whether that was falling asleep at your desk or making paper airplanes or arguing with your spouse on the phone.

"How was your day?" she asked, beaming at me with excitement. "Because mine was incredibly productive. You wouldn't believe how many frustrated people Lawton left behind."

"That is my uncle you're talking about."

Leigh rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, don't give me that crap. You haven't seen him since you were how old? You had no relationship with him. And

you're pragmatic enough to accept he had issues, anyway."

I smirked at her. "You really are ruthless."

"I've had to be. And you'll have to be too, Jack Lawton, CEO. You're not in philosophy class anymore where you can debate exactly what it means to have a bleeding heart and if rationalism is ever going to be anything more than a paper shield to try and cope with a reality people don't want to accept."

My eyebrows rose. "You know the school of rationalism."

"I was forced to read Ayn Rand just like everyone else," Leigh said breezily, sitting down across from me in one of the plush chairs meant for clients. I didn't bother to hide my stare as she crossed those long legs of hers. "Rationalism is just a way to avoid personal responsibility. I can appreciate in Rand's case why she retreated into that method of thinking—it was a trauma response. But rationalism is like nihilism, it's an immature way of thinking. And I don't mean that in the way people use immature as an insult. I mean that it's a sign you're choosing not to truly mature yourself. It's thinking at a juvenile stage."

"You would've been a delight to have in my classes," I noted. "You know your work and you have a strong opinion. I'd like to set you on some students of mine."

"Oh, give the students a break." Leigh grinned. "I am older than they are by a good few years."

"So you have the opinion that we have an obligation to help one another, and that by being in the world we are partly responsible for its failures."

"Yes. 'You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it'," Leigh quoted. "From the Talmud."

"Spoken like a true activist."

Leigh shrugged, but I thought I saw a flicker of... something in her eyes. Was it fear?

"You never answered my question," she said, shifting the topic. "How

was your day?”

“Slow,” I said honestly. “And you never told me what you found out.”

“It seems that everyone has an idea that your uncle vetoed.” Leigh held out a notepad for me to take. “I wrote down the gist of a lot of them but I asked them to compile a proper proposal and email it to me so that I could go through it and eliminate the ones that we don’t want to do and prioritize the ones we do.”

I skimmed the list. “This is pretty exhaustive.”

“Like I said, everyone had an idea that your uncle vetoed. Many of them had multiple ideas. There was a culture of frustration here. He seemed to be of the opinion that if something had been working for the company all these years, it would always work for the company.”

“But with how things are advancing in technology and the social sphere...”

“Precisely,” she said with a succinct nod. “I think that things moved slowly enough that if it worked in 1910 it would work for you in 1960. But from 1980 to today? No way. Things have accelerated at an unprecedented speed.”

I scrutinized her face, but Leigh looked completely at ease and eager once again. There was no sign of whatever I’d seen in her eyes that one moment. Had there even been anything there? Or had I imagined it?

There was one surefire way I knew to get a woman off her guard and revealing the things she didn’t really want me to see. I stood up.

“Excellent work,” I told her. “I appreciate you, Leigh, I want you to know that.”

“Why do I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming?”

“Oh, there’s no ‘but’,” I said with a smirk. “I just didn’t want you to think that what I’m about to say is the only reason I keep you around.”

“And what are you about to say?” Leigh’s voice and face turned coy.

“Sit on the desk,” I ordered.

Leigh bit her lip in a vain attempt to hide a smile. She looked absolutely delighted, like she'd been looking forward to something like this all day.

Maybe she had been.

The idea that she'd been hoping for this had my cock swelling. I loved her enthusiasm and shameless desire.

Leigh hopped up onto the desk, her hands wrapped around the edge of it as I approached her. I took my time, sizing her up. She had worn a tempting skirt, one that hugged her ass and legs, but her blouse was looser, more conservative, keeping her professional.

“Spread your legs,” I purred.

In a tight skirt like that, Leigh couldn't really get her legs spread without pushing it all the way up, which was exactly what I wanted. I didn't bother to hide my predatory grin as she hiked her skirt up, revealing inch after inch of delicious bare skin.

When the hem was up around her waist, she spread her legs like I'd told her. Her gaze was on me the entire time, her lips slightly parted, like she was holding her breath.

Mmmm. She wore pale pink lace panties underneath, the kind I could easily rip off. In a longer skirt like this one, nobody would notice. They'd just think they couldn't see her panty line, which was always the goal when wearing tight skirts anyway.

I slid my hands up her legs, massaging her thighs. From this angle, I could stare down right into her face, and I could see the outline of her breasts through her blouse.

Leigh stared at me like she was already desperate for an orgasm, her eyes dark and wide and her bottom lip caught between her teeth. I moved my hands around to her ass and yanked her forward, pressing the outline of my hard cock right up against her lace-covered pussy.

Leigh whimpered, her hands tightening around the edge of the desk. What a good girl. She knew I hadn't said she could touch me. She was waiting for

orders.

It was such a delight to have someone properly trained already. Not that I hadn't had fun with inexperienced women, but there was already so much going on with this mission. To have a woman who knew how to be a good submissive to me, and knew what she wanted... it was hot.

I ground my cock against her and Leigh's mouth fell open, a moan strangled at the back of her throat.

"Yeah, you want this, don't you?" I murmured. It was written all over her face. "You're already trembling. You want me to push you back onto this desk and fuck you?"

I kept my movements up, watching as her face went slack and her eyelashes fluttered. "What if I just slid my cock in right now? Shoved your panties aside and skipped right to fucking you against the desk? You'd love that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, master," Leigh gasped. "Please, can I—please, give me your cock, I'll be so good for you later, I'll be so good and take care of you, you can tie me up and tease me all you want, please fuck me right now—"

"Mmm, I wonder." I gently wrapped my hand around her throat and she made a lovely choking noise. "Would you be able to get off just from grinding on my clothed cock? Are you that desperate?"

And in the span of an instant, the mood was ruined as a knock sounded on the door.

God fucking damn it.

"Mr. Lawton?" It was Rebecca. "I have some papers for you."

I took a deep breath. Leigh looked like she might scream with frustration. "Of course, Rebecca."

I pulled back from Leigh, who quickly shoved her skirt back down and hopped off the desk. Luckily, the interruption definitely killed my boner, and I was able to sit down at my desk with a smile right as Rebecca opened the door.

She headed right for me, ignoring Leigh and smiling as she handed me the papers. “Here you are, I know you need these by the end of the day.”

There was no way she could’ve heard us unless she had her damn ear to the door, and she couldn’t have seen us, so I doubted she was actually trying to sabotage any sex and just wanted to continue to stay in my good graces. Great.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” I smiled at her, then looked over at Leigh. “I just need to sign these and then I’ll be good to head out. Would you like to grab dinner so we can finish discussing things?”

“Sure.” Leigh shrugged casually like it was no skin off her nose. “I’m all wrapped up, although are you sure you don’t want me to have my own office space?”

“I just think that since you’re being employed by me personally and not by the company we don’t want to set a poor precedent. I’m not going to abuse my position or make it seem like I don’t know the proper steps to take.” I flipped through the papers.

Obviously I couldn’t really sign these. I wasn’t actually Jack Lawton and it would be fraud. But I could get him a copy to sign.

Rebecca stood there, listening to us, and seemed unsure whether she should say anything. But when I continued to read through the papers and ignore both her and Leigh, she seemed to realize that there wasn’t anything more she could do.

“Um... should I go, Mr. Lawton?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, please do, enjoy your night Rebecca.” I smiled at her and then went back to the papers.

She nodded and left the room.

Leigh raised an eyebrow once the door was closed behind us again. “She has a crush on you.”

“She doesn’t know me.”

“No, but you’re handsome and you look real good taking charge.”

I put the papers in my briefcase, unsigned. I'd get them to Jack, then return them signed the next day.

As tempted as I was to resume fucking Leigh on the desk... that had been too close a call. Rebecca might not have caught us this time, but I unfortunately suspected that Leigh was right and that she might see me as a meal ticket the way previous secretaries had seen Jack's uncle. I couldn't let Leigh be caught in the middle of that because someone else was jealous, and I could still cause a scandal for Jack if people thought he was the type to have sex on his desk.

"Shall we?" I asked, indicating the door.

Leigh blinked at me, confused. "Shall we what?"

"Go to dinner."

Leigh's jaw ticked. "I thought..."

I jerked my head towards the door. "After what just happened?"

"I'm getting desk sex at some point," Leigh vowed, gathering up her things. "You can't promise a girl a good time like that and then take it away."

"Whatever you say, *pet*," I promised her, grinning as I opened the office door and held it for her.

Tonight, after my time with Leigh was over, I would look at those employee files I'd downloaded. Maybe Jack and I were wrong about our suspicions. Maybe it was just malicious office gossip and speculation because an unpopular man had died. But I was going to make sure I'd thoroughly cleared the nest of vipers before I invited Jack to step inside, one way or another.

CHAPTER 10



Leigh

*G*oddamn Rebecca.

I had been able to feel that hard cock between my legs, rubbing deliciously up against my pussy through my panties. The sensation of lace and cotton dragging against our bodies had been so erotic. I'd been *this* close to getting fucked well and hard on the desk, and then she had to go and ruin it.

I'd been so keyed up all day. While I had interrogated employees, trying to find out information that could help me take this place down, my mind had been invaded continuously by thoughts of Jack and what he could do to me.

Yes, I knew it had been a long time since I'd had decent, let alone good, sex. I'd been wrapped up in work and it was difficult to find a man who could really give me what I wanted. So many of them were either inexperienced, or too harsh, objectifying me in a way that didn't feel sexy but more like I was just a pair of tits and ass to them.

Jack was going to fuck me like I hadn't been fucked in ages, and I couldn't wait.

It lurked in the back of my mind as I scribbled down notes, making me feel hot all over, my clothes too confining. I knew that if he asked me to beg for him, I'd do it instantly. I needed this—far more than I'd realized. One of those things you didn't realize you were missing so badly until you actually had it again.

Of course, sex wasn't the only thing on my mind. It was just a lot more distracting than I'd thought it would be. To be someone's submissive again, and for a man I knew could handle me and liked my mind and my personality, who would dom me the way I wanted and didn't think just some basic dirty talk and rough thrusting did the trick... it drove me to distraction.

But I was here for more than just myself.

The employees I talked to had a lot of good ideas, but not all of them would work for my purpose. It seemed that Jack's uncle really had refused to change things, and usually those things he didn't want to change involved things like promoting women, shifting to more social media based advertising and outreach, and keeping up with the pace of modern society.

None of them seemed to think about the fact that even if all these things changed and the company actually treated its own workers equitably, that wouldn't shift what the company was doing at its very foundations: destroying fragile ecosystems and driving out the small-town populations and businesses that had been in those areas for decades.

One person I spoke to clearly didn't get it. "We need to be more aggressive about recruiting from local people when we move into a new area," he said.

Right. Because people wanted to give up their family businesses they'd cared about for years and then work to destroy their hometown forest. Definitely!

It made my blood boil as these people lamented how unfairly they were treated while completely missing the point of what they were promoting and who they were working for. All that mattered was what affected them, not

others.

I would have to remember that Jack wasn't necessarily any different. As much as I wanted to fuck him, I couldn't let my lust blind me to his flaws. He could've taken one look at his uncle's company and decided to dismantle it himself. The fact that he hadn't said a lot. I shouldn't have to convince him to do it.

But I would. Oh, I definitely would.

If only I could get a damn orgasm and not be interrupted by meddling secretaries.

Rebecca had no idea what she'd done, of course. If she had, she would've made it very clear with something like a triumphant smirk in my direction or a scandalized scowl on her face. I couldn't quite tell if she liked me or not. The way she'd looked at me just now...

But her starry eyes over Jack were obvious. She possibly saw me as a threat. Well, there was no need for her to worry. First of all, I had no interest in actually dating the man. I wanted good sex and I wanted this company destroyed, simple as that. She could be his shoulder to cry on when I'd dismantled Lawton from the inside out.

But second of all it didn't matter, because Jack didn't strike me as the kind of guy who'd sleep with his secretary. Not after his uncle's reputation dragged him down. With me it was a different story. I didn't feel so much like an employee as an equal. Rebecca was directly under him.

Third of all, did she really like him? Or did she like the money and power that he had? He was handsome, sure, but if Rebecca was this starry-eyed already I had to wonder how much of it was an act, and I was sure Jack did too, given how he'd handled me and the other women at the party.

Not that Rebecca would listen to me if I told her all of this. I'd just have to be careful around her. If she saw me as competition, she might try to dig stuff up on me in order to discredit me to Jack, and she'd find out the truth about me. I couldn't let that happen.

My best bet would probably be to act friendly around here, which was annoying given that I currently was irritated. I now had to wait all through dinner to get fucked.

Jack picked a nice place, though. It was a sustainable farm-to-table restaurant. Bougie and wildly expensive, of course, but at least the ethics were there. I didn't begrudge people an expensive night on the town as long as it wasn't done on the backs of underpaid and exploited farm workers.

Maybe this could be an opening for me to discuss the issues with his company.

The hostess took us to a table by the window, which allowed us to watch people go by on the street. I liked it, although I was kind of wishing we'd been put in one of the booths in the back to give us some privacy. The universe really didn't want me to get laid today.

"I love places like these," I said, once our waitress took our order and left us each with a glass of wine. "It's so great to see people working with family-owned businesses that compensate their workers fairly."

Jack leaned back and tipped his head at me. "You're really passionate about this kind of stuff."

"Well, aren't you? You're a philosophy professor."

"I think you're confusing me with an *ethics* professor," he said before taking a drink of his wine. "I ponder the nature of our existence, I don't debate what is and isn't right."

"And yet it's so funny how those two can often be related."

"Well, consider the tech startups you've helped. I looked at your website and testimonials. I wouldn't call all of those people ethical, would you?"

"Not at all. But unfortunately I can't always decide to follow my principles in my business. But I hope that in helping these startups I'm giving smaller, newer businesses a fair shot. A lot of large companies come in and destroy local businesses. We talk a lot about the environment and I'm passionate about it, but I think that can lead to people thinking about the big

picture. They see whole forests destroyed, and it's terrible. But they forget that there's also the little picture—small businesses, local families—they can live in harmony in the local area and work with the environment. These big business don't. And they entirely drive out fair competition and isn't that what our country was built on?"

"You realize what Lawton Industries does for a living, right?" Jack grinned at me. "I wouldn't exactly call us environmentally friendly."

I considered that for a moment. "Mmm, you raise a good point. Perhaps I've finally sold my soul to the devil after all."

"Maybe not, but you might be in danger of becoming a hypocrite." He smirked.

"Perish the thought." I feigned shock and pressed a hand to my chest. "But you do realize that you're the CEO, and you have the power to implement some environmentally-healing changes to the company."

"Were any of those ideas in the proposals that you wrote down?"

"Yes, a couple," I lied. "I'll include them when I send all the rest to you. But only if you want to. It would be a lot to take the company in such a bold direction but... it might also be what you need if you want to distinguish yourself from your uncle."

Our food arrived and we tucked in before I continued to talk. "He was known for really digging his heels in and you want to keep the company from going into the red. Maybe bold is the way to go," I said, planting the suggestion. "But you shouldn't decide anything right now. We can look over the proposals and decide if there's anything in there that really feels right to you."

From there, I moved us on to other topics. At one point I got the server to tell us all about the restaurant and how it worked, and I praised the ethical choices. Just giving Jack some small nudges.

The food really was delicious, though.

We were wrapping up dessert when I felt Jack's knee press against mine

under the table. I nearly dropped my fork and I saw him smirk.

“I want to take you back to my place,” he said quietly, waving down the server for the check. “I have something that I’d like to see you in.”

“You can’t have bought me lingerie that quickly,” I said.

“Oh, how I wish, but no.” Jack grinned. “Same hotel as before. I’m still apartment hunting. I’ll meet you there.”

I nodded, my mouth going dry. I had no idea what he had in store, but I knew it would be good.

We’d arrived at work and the restaurant separately, so I drove myself to his hotel, then headed up to his room. I was glad he had a luxurious suite, for once not annoyed at the waste of money. It meant we could have room and privacy.

I hadn’t paid much attention to it when I first was there, but it was a two-room place with a large bathroom that included a soaking tub. The first room was a large living room area that included a marble fireplace, a sitting area, a desk for work, and a kitchenette with a breakfast table. The second room was the bedroom, with a king-sized bed and a vanity table. That room was where we’d spent our time before.

But now, when I was let into the space, Jack led me instead to the chairs in front of the fireplace.

“You’re my pet, is that right?” he purred in a low, seductive tone.

I nodded, already feeling warm and aroused.

“Pets don’t wear clothes, though,” he said, trailing a finger from my throat to where my buttoned blouse stopped him. “And you seem to be dressed.”

I shivered, and immediately began to unfasten my blouse. Jack smirked approvingly, watching with a hooded gaze as I made my way down the buttons. I pushed the blouse off myself and then starting on my skirt.

I didn’t try to be teasing. I tried just to follow orders and be his good girl. But I could feel myself flushing all over as I laid myself bare to Jack’s

hungry, commanding gaze. For the first time in years, I felt almost shy about getting naked in front of someone. I felt like he could see right through me, to the very heart of me.

“Perfect.” Jack left me standing there completely nude and went into the bedroom, returning with a small black box. “I don’t have a custom one for you, which is a pity, but I think this will do for now.”

He opened the box, and my breath caught in my throat.

It was a black leather collar.

Jack’s gaze on me was devouring. “Be a good pet and kneel for me.”

I went to my knees on the thick plush rug the hotel room designers had placed in front of the fireplace, my hands clasped in front of me. Jack gently pushed my loose hair back out of the way as he wrapped the collar around my throat, then clasped it into place.

When I swallowed, I could feel the pressure of the collar against my throat. Fuck. It was almost like being choked, but not quite as intense. A reminder, and a teasing one at that.

“Very good.” Jack ran his fingers through my hair, his nails scratching lightly at my scalp.

I shivered. Every inhale and exhale, every swallow, reminded me of the collar around my neck. It was ever-present. It kept me grounded so that I couldn’t be distracted by thoughts of anything else.

I could only imagine how I looked right now: naked, except for the strip of black leather around my throat. Like I really was a submissive little pet.

“You were so eager earlier,” Jack mused. “You’re a woman who’s used to getting what she wants, when she wants it. Used to expressing her opinion... used to being bold...”

He walked around behind me, doing something I couldn’t see, and then I felt him kneeling behind me.

“But if you’re going to be my pet, then you’re going to learn to take what I give you, *when* I give it to you. I could slide my cock inside of you right

this moment and you'd come, wouldn't you? You'd be wet enough for me to fuck you as roughly as I wanted."

I swallowed a whimper. "Yes, master." It was true. I could already feel my pussy clenching, feeling empty.

"Well, I've had a long and tiring day. I'm not sure I have time to give you all that attention. I want to relax. So instead... you're going to learn patience."

Jack slid his hand down between my legs, and I realized he was holding something. I gasped as the cool, smooth object was pushed inside of me. It was a vibrator.

I could feel Jack's smirk against the curve of my shoulder as he kissed me there, even though I couldn't see it. It was palpable. I shivered again.

"Now, just to make sure that nothing slips out..." Jack wrapped something around my waist and I realized that the vibrator was the kind that came with straps at the end of it—straps that Jack now used around my waist to secure the vibrator to me and keep it in place.

"There we go." Jack stood up and walked around me, settling himself in the chair right in front of where I was still kneeling so obediently. He pulled a small remote out of his pocket, and then opened his laptop. "I'm going to get some extra work done while you... are going to learn patience."

He pressed a button on the remote, and the vibrator buzzed to life inside of me.

I couldn't hide my moan, my mouth falling open. Ohhh God, it felt so good already—but it was on its lowest setting. A pure tease. Not enough to get me off, just enough to keep me yearning for more.

Jack ignored my distress as he typed away on his laptop. He pulled open the files from the briefcase, the ones from Rebecca that he hadn't signed.

Why hadn't he signed those right away, actually? Was there more he wanted to go over with them?

He didn't sign them now, either. Instead he seemed to be scanning them

with his phone and uploading them onto his laptop. Odd.

My scrutiny of his business practices was only a way for me to distract myself from the torment that was building within my body. Jack knew what he was doing with this, and with me. He'd nailed me—I was impatient and desperate for a good fuck and orgasm. But he wasn't the type of guy to settle for what was easy, oh, no.

He clearly wanted a proper submissive. A good, obedient pet. So he was taking the time to train me.

I almost hated the fact that I was just here to con him into dismantling his uncle's company. This wouldn't be a permanent sexual arrangement. The moment he realized what I'd done and he'd lost everything, he was going to hate me, and I would lose this. I would lose *him*.

But I pushed those thoughts aside. What was the point of getting so attached? This wasn't about me. This was bigger than me (and definitely bigger than my sex drive). Jack might be a good dom but that didn't mean he wasn't going to be the same kind of profit-hoarding scumbag as his uncle and every other member of the board in charge of the company.

As if sensing that my thoughts were wandering, Jack increased the vibrations. I moaned, my legs spreading as I tried to grind down a little—but it wasn't enough. I couldn't get the perfect stimulation I needed. My hips just rocked uselessly into empty air.

Jack smirked from behind his laptop and continued typing away. He looked so composed and utterly gorgeous, still in his suit, not a hair out of place. Meanwhile I was dripping wet, whimpering, naked except for my collar and the vibrator driving me wild.

My hands weren't tied. I could reach down and touch myself. I knew that, and Jack knew it. But I wasn't going to. He'd punish me for it, for one thing, and for another, I didn't want to. There might be times when I would deliberately disobey or be a brat. But this wasn't one of those times. I wanted to be good, and most of all I wanted to come, but I knew it wouldn't be

satisfying if I did it myself by breaking the rules. I wanted it to be Jack giving me that orgasm. I wanted him to fuck me.

But he wouldn't do it if I didn't earn it.

He increased the vibrations again and I dug my nails into my thighs, whimpering. "Master..."

"Shh." Jack continued to type away, his focus on the computer screen. "I'm not finished yet."

Oh God I wanted him so badly. I bit my lip, trying to keep from moving. My hips kept twitching, desperate for something, anything, to give me release.

I had no idea how long I knelt there. I was panting, my lungs on fire, and squirming uncontrollably. Every single movement of my hips just made it worse, but I couldn't stay still, either. I was trapped in between my desire for more and my need to not make it all worse.

After what felt like hours, Jack closed his laptop and put it—and the papers—over on the desk beside the chair. Finally, I could see that he was hard in his slacks, the outline of his cock tempting me and making my mouth water.

Jack spread his legs a little and undid his tie, tossing it to the side before undoing the top couple of buttons on his shirt. "Come here, pet."

I knew what he wanted. I had a collar on and he was calling me his pet. I wasn't supposed to get to my feet. Instead, I crawled to him, going pliantly as I was guided to sit straddling his thigh.

He reached for the remote and lowered the vibrations again, and I moaned desperately. I needed to come so badly... but I held back from begging. I was going to show him I could be good, I could be patient.

Jack tipped my chin up with his fingers. "You're gorgeous. Squirming and soaking wet for me. Look at that hungry little pussy. You want me to fuck you, don't you, sweetheart?"

I nodded. "Yes, master."

He released my chin and slid his hands over my legs, the backs of my thighs, to my ass, squeezing, then lightly, playfully patting it. “Grind down on my thigh, like a good pet.”

He wasn’t doing this for any reason other than to torture me. I knew already that I wasn’t going to come from this. He had more plans in mind.

But I wasn’t going to disobey him. Not when I might get a reward at the end of it. And not when being a good pet would keep me in his good graces and help me to stay by his side to accomplish my goals. I did as I was told, and began to grind down on his thigh.

Oh, God, the effect was instant. Between his solid, muscled leg and the vibrator, I was almost overwhelmed. I ground down hard, frantic, chasing a high that I knew in the back of my mind wasn’t going to come but I had to try anyway, I had to, squirming against that thick muscle... gasping, arching, my toes curling...

The vibrator turned off and Jack grabbed my hips to still my gyrations. “Ah-ah. You were getting close, weren’t you?”

I whimpered in frustration. “Yes, master.”

“Can’t have that,” he drawled in a husky tone. “How are you supposed to learn patience if I let you come right away?”

I swallowed my protest, but I couldn’t keep myself from squirming, just a little.

“I know you want my cock, pet,” he murmured, slowly caressing his hands along the indentation of my waist. “But as tempting as that is... I don’t think I’m going to fuck you tonight.”

I swallowed my protest just in time, but I was sure that my disappointment could be seen on my face.

Jack chuckled wickedly. “Look at these beautiful tits of yours...” He slid his hands up, squeezing my breasts together and tugging on my erect nipples until I gasped. “I’m going to fuck them tonight. And if you’re good, *then* I’ll let you come. And if you’re *very* good, I’ll fuck you in the morning.”

Oh God. He was really going to test me. “Yes, master,” I said obediently.

Jack fondled his cock through his pants, letting me see the outline of it, reminding me of what I wasn’t going to get tonight. “Lie down on the rug, pet.”

I did as I was told, my heart hammering in my chest as Jack undressed until he was gloriously naked. He wrapped his fingers around his stiff cock and stroked it slowly, loosely, his gaze filling with lust as it roamed over my body.

“Spread your legs for me,” he purred.

Obedying the order, I planted my feet on the carpet with my knees up and spreading them so that Jack could see how wet I was, how my pussy clenched around the vibrator. He pressed the remote again, turning it on, and my hips jolted. It was one of the lower settings, but it was still better than nothing, and I clenched rhythmically down around it as it teased my clit from the inside.

“Good girl.” Jack looked like a hungry wolf as he stared between my legs, but then he pushed on my knees to drag my legs back down so he could straddle my hips.

His hands slid up to my breasts, massaging them, and I dug my fingers into the carpet to keep from doing something stupid like clawing at his arms in a desperate bid to give me more. The vibrator quivered inside of me, and his weight on top of my stomach made me feel even more helpless.

I had to admit, I loved this dominant side to him. It set my blood on fire. I just wished I could orgasm. My desperation was reaching a boiling point, and I felt like I might actually cry from being denied.

But there was something so sexy about that, too. About being pushed to my limits, and beyond—and still being a good girl for him.

Jack moved forward, positioning himself higher on my chest. Pushing my full tits together, he slid his cock between my breasts, and I opened my mouth obediently so that the head of his cock dragged against my tongue when he thrust forward.

He groaned, his cock twitching deliciously. “What a good pet you are. You really want to earn that orgasm, don’t you?”

Well, there was no point in lying. Yeah, I wanted an orgasm. But I also wanted to please him. “I like submitting to you, master.”

Jack’s blue eyes darkened, looking as though he might actually forego his plan and fuck me after all. “Such a good girl. You’re so well trained. I’m going to have so much fun with you...”

He thrust between my breasts again, allowing me to lap at the tip of his shaft every time. I could taste the salt of his precome as his cock leaked, and it only made me wetter. I felt used in the most thrilling way, like a toy almost, being tortured and teased while simultaneously used for his pleasure.

It had my blood singing. I almost wished he’d tied me up to put me even more at his mercy, but I understood why he didn’t—he wanted me to consciously obey him and choose not to touch myself, rather than be forced to comply because I was restrained.

But maybe next time...

Jack played with my nipples and squeezed my breasts as he fucked me, teasing me even more. I loved the rough way that he touched me, my body arching under his hands. His cock smeared slick precome all over my chest, my breasts, as he pumped his hips faster, more erratically.

His jaw clenched, and with a low growl Jack erupted all over my chest and into my open mouth, and I shuddered in pure pleasure. I could feel some of the stream hitting my throat, including the collar, and the image in my head of what that must look like had me dizzy.

The vibrator continued to buzz inside of me with no mercy, leaving my toes curling and my legs jerking as I struggled to orgasm against stimulation that wasn’t enough, would never be enough.

“Oh, look at you.” Jack smirked down at me, his fingers sliding along the mess he’d made on my upper chest before painting the sticky fluid across my taut nipples. “You’re such a pretty thing like this. All marked up by me, and

wearing my collar... and so, so desperate to come. You're trembling everywhere. Are you really that needy?"

I nodded, swallowing hard. I could taste his salty come on my tongue. "Yes, master."

"Mmm. You're too used to boys who give you whatever you want the moment you want it. It's about time you had someone that knew how to give you what you actually needed."

Jack stood up, then retrieved the remote. To my dismay, he turned the vibrator off, and I nearly burst into tears.

I thought I'd been good? I'd done everything he asked and I was obedient —

Jack spread my thighs wide open, repositioning himself between them and hooking one leg over his shoulder. I gasped as I realized what he was doing.

He pulled the vibrator out and set it aside, then immediately began to kiss his way up the inside of my thighs. I moaned, trying with all of my might not to beg him to hurry up. He could still change his mind. He could still decide that I hadn't learned my lesson and decide to stop.

I trembled uncontrollably as Jack's warm, wet tongue licked slowly up toward my aching pussy. I hadn't been this desperate for an orgasm in... possibly ever. He knew how to get to me, and the fact that he knew so soon probably spelled my doom, but in that moment I didn't care.

I just wanted him to finally, *finally* let me come.

Jack dragged his tongue up my folds, like he was trying to feel just how needy I was, and I couldn't hold back my loud moan. I gripped my fingers in his hair and arched my back. The collar around my throat felt tighter than before, even though I knew that was impossible. It made me feel like I was somehow bound up, unable to move, tied to the floor.

"That's it," Jack murmured. His fingers dug into my thighs, spreading them wider. "Make as many noises as you want for me, sweetheart, don't

hold back.”

He licked into me, and a few tears slipped free as I felt myself at last climbing towards pure blissful relief. Jack ate me out like he was trying to actually devour me, like he wanted me to come as fast and as hard as possible, and I couldn't even think of holding back. He was so fucking good with his tongue, curling it, dragging it, and I found myself twisting my fingers tighter in his hair, panting, my hips arching restlessly.

I could feel the intensity of my orgasm building inside of me in a relentless surge of pleasure. I twisted my hips as I gave in and let go, coming long and hard, my entire body shuddering uncontrollably. It all felt so incredibly good—not just pleasure but relief. I thrust my hips up into Jack's face, unable to stop, and he rubbed his tongue over my clit, teasing me, prolonging the climax until I began to whimper with oversensitivity.

Jack chuckled and pulled away. His mouth was a mess, shining with the evidence of just how much I had enjoyed his oral skills. “You really needed that, didn't you pet?”

I nodded breathlessly. Yes, yes, I did really need it.

Jack wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand and sat back on his knees. “You looked gorgeous coming like that. You're going to look even prettier coming around my cock in the morning.”

I barely managed a smile. “Does this mean I'm staying the night?” I asked coyly.

Jack pulled me to my feet, his fingers tracing the collar on my throat. There was something contemplative in his gaze that I couldn't quite place, one that confused me. “Oh, yes, I think you are.”

Excellent. I couldn't wait for the morning.

CHAPTER 11



Bryce

I really shouldn't let her stay the night.

Honestly, I shouldn't even have done work in front of her. But she'd been so fucking perfect, writhing on the rug in front of me, trying so damn hard not to beg me to let her orgasm. Leigh was simply too much fun to tease.

It was clear to me that she was desperate for a proper dom, and I didn't tolerate bratty behavior—or at least not a lot of it. I expected to be obeyed and properly submitted to. I figured starting things off with a little test for Leigh would be the best way to go about them, even though I was still fucking annoyed that we'd been interrupted before I could fuck her on the desk.

Leigh was beautiful. Curvy, smart, and sensual. She obviously wasn't afraid to use those attributes to get what she wanted in life. I admired that, but when it came to the bedroom, I wasn't going to let her get away with any misbehavior just because she was gorgeous. She would still submit to me. And she would need to know that I wouldn't give her what she wanted right

away the way that other men had.

But she responded beautifully. It had been hard for her to be patient, I could tell. The way she'd looked at me, pleading in her eyes... but she hadn't given in. She hadn't begged me to hurry up, and she hadn't tried to touch herself. I'd left her hands unbound—although the idea of tying her up was extremely appealing—just to see if she could manage it.

And she did.

It was so fucking hot to be able to use her body like that, to tease her with my cock between those gorgeous breasts of hers. She was sexy as hell and responsive, and I could feel her literally trembling against me with the vibrator still inside her. My cock had been so close, and yet so far, not giving her what she wanted.

I couldn't wait to do it again—and fuck her properly. I had some ideas for things we could do at work, too, as long as we wouldn't get caught...

But she'd been so distracted, I'd figured it was fine for me to do some work on the computer here at the hotel. She couldn't see the screen, anyway. I loved doing other things while my sub was being tormented. Being hard in my pants, wanting her but holding myself back so that I could really drive her to desperation, was always fun.

I'd photocopied and sent scans of the papers to Jack for him to look over. I couldn't sign them so I'd be mailing the hard copies tomorrow morning by express, with instructions that he'd have to sign them and send them right back to me immediately.

I also decided just to be overly cautious and have our I.T. guys back at the security firm run background checks on everyone, just in case. Yes, that included Leigh. I didn't suspect her of being a black widow who married and then murdered rich men but it was better to be safe than sorry with everybody in these things.

Besides, something about her intrigued me. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I'd learned to trust my gut long ago. The way she'd spoken about the

environment and working with small businesses at the restaurant, for example. Sometimes she would say things and it would just sound... not off, that wasn't quite the right word. A step to the left of what I expected from her.

It was in a way that I couldn't quite put my finger on, and it was driving me insane. This background check probably wouldn't yield anything, honestly. I knew that. And when it did yield nothing, I'd get a hell of a ribbing from Vaughn for my paranoia.

But... still.

Anyway, I shouldn't let her stay the night. I knew that. There were just too many opportunities for me to slip up and for her to realize that I wasn't Jack. She was smart and observant, and I wouldn't put it past her to figure it all out.

But I couldn't resist her, either. I wanted to have this for myself. And if I had to put up with all the rest of this ridiculous charade with this mission, then I felt like I deserved a little enjoyment. I would just have to be careful. Besides, Leigh was way too exhausted at the end of the night for her to do anything, anyway.

I pulled on a pair of sweatpants and ran a bath, encouraging Leigh to use it to soak after everything I'd put her through. While she was in the tub, I had a hushed conversation with Jack.

"How are things going?" I asked in a low voice as I reached the kitchenette. "You feeling any more... stable? Confident?"

"Honestly, Bryce, I'm just wishing I didn't have to do any of this," Jack admitted.

I rolled my eyes. "I wish I didn't have to do a lot of things, Jack, but unless you want to give up the company to the board..."

"You know I can't do that. They'll run it into the ground. The ideas you sent me that they had, this is bullshit. They think they're going to actually be improving things and—yeah it's change, but it's not *good* change."

I rubbed my forehead. “Then you have to come up here and assert your place at some point. People are going to get suspicious soon.”

“I know, I know,” he said on a sigh. “I just don’t know what the right thing to do is.”

“Aren’t you lucky then that I got you a consultant who can guide you?” I replied. “She’s great, you’ll like her. She’s also not interested in marrying you for your money like everyone else.”

Jack snorted. “Well that’s good, at least. I could use the help.”

“You need to seriously give me an end date though. We can’t keep shuttling papers back and forth and if I sign anything as you, it’ll be marked as a forgery. I can play your part physically as much as I can but you need to be the one making the actual decisions.”

“I know, I know,” he said again. “I’ll figure something out.”

“If you want to find someone who can be paid to be your imposter for the rest of your life, then you can do that,” I said, grabbing a chilled bottle of water from the mini-fridge. “But I’m not that guy for you. My job is to figure out if there was foul play involved in your uncle’s death and keep the jackals off your heels until we can wrestle this company under control. And until you get a girlfriend to keep the gold diggers at bay. I don’t suppose you could do that, could you?”

“Um. Not really,” he said awkwardly.

Jesus. The guy needed to get out of his small, nowhere town and into the city where he could actually meet people. “Right. Well, think long and hard about your actual plan, because the moment I wrap up my side of things, I’m not going to be sticking around, all right? Whatever you want to do with the company is up to you. That’s none of my business or concern. But you do have to make a decision at some point in the near future.”

“Right. I got it. Thank you, Bryce. I appreciate it.”

I hung up the phone and held in a groan. Philosophers. They thought they could just ponder the pros and cons forever instead of actually acting on

anything. Hell, I didn't give a damn if the guy wanted to break his company up and sell it for spare parts, just as long as he made some kind of decision.

"You seem tense," Leigh noted, emerging from the bedroom in one of the hotel bathrobes. "Do you need me to take care of that?"

"It's nothing." I waved it off and took a long drink of the water, meeting up with her in the sitting area. "I guess when you're in charge of a company there's no such thing as normal office hours."

"Sounds stressful. And probably not what you're used to."

I shook my head. "It's not, no."

Leigh sat down on the small sofa and tucked her legs beneath her. "Do you miss it? Being a professor? Do you ever want to go back?"

I tried to think of what Jack would say. Given our recent conversation, I had a strong feeling I knew what his answer would be. "Yeah. I want to go back to it all the time."

Leigh frowned, looking surprised. "Then why don't you? You don't seem the type of guy to care about what other people think, or do something he doesn't want to."

"I have a responsibility to my uncle."

"A man you barely knew," Leigh pointed out.

"True. But I don't like the plans that the board has for this company. They'll move the company forward and possibly even into profit, but at the expense of the employees. It won't actually improve the company in any way and I'd like to do that. If I had someone else I could trust to run the damn thing... but I don't."

Leigh bit her lip, looking thoughtful. "You could..." She paused, then shook her head. "Never mind. It's late, we should both get some sleep."

Something in my gut twisted. A warning. "No, what is it?"

"Well. You don't have to keep the company going, that's all. You could close it down. Liquefy assets, give the employees severance pay, all that sort of thing. It would take I think about a year to get it all sorted out, but after

that you could go back to your college job. Hell, you might even be able to go back early once you get the lawyers and specialists involved.”

She spoke in a tone of hesitance, like she wasn't sure if she should be saying this to me. But Leigh had already proven to me once that she was a good actress, the kind that most people wouldn't see coming. And my gut right now told me that something was off about this.

I couldn't let her know my suspicions. “It's... something to consider. It feels like a drastic action, though. To dismantle a massive company like this one.”

“Of course.” Leigh shrugged, like she didn't care. “You know that I'm behind whatever you choose. You're the one paying my bills after all. I just want you to be fully informed so you know what path you want to take. I don't want you to make a decision and then realize you might've made a different one if you had all the facts.”

On the surface it all sounded perfectly reasonable. In fact it sounded more honest and fair than anyone else who'd dealt with me as Jack so far. Like Leigh was truly being altruistic and helpful as opposed to just doing what would get her the most money and advance her career.

On the surface.

But my gut was hardly ever wrong. I remembered dinner earlier—that feeling that something was just a step to the left of what it should be. I didn't know exactly what it was, but there was *something*, and I needed to find a way to peel it back until I knew for sure what it was.

I didn't say anything in the moment. Would could I possibly say? I needed to bide my time and figure out the right moment.

“I appreciate it,” I told her out loud. “I need honest people around me. I'll think about it. I just need to get through these next couple of weeks.”

That part at least wasn't a damn lie at all. I just had to get through these next couple of weeks as Jack and then the real guy could take over and make a decision. I hoped, anyway.

“Of course.” Leigh smiled. “Shower’s all yours.”

I showered quickly, and when I came back into the room, Leigh was snuggled in the king-sized bed. Asleep, without any makeup on and her hair done up behind her in a braid, she didn’t look like the confident, witty woman that I knew. She looked a lot more fragile, and almost vulnerable.

Not that I disliked any of Leigh’s personality. I loved her confidence and the fact that she could keep up with me. But as I stared at her I suddenly found myself with a pang in my chest, wishing that I could see this vulnerability when she was awake. Leigh had walls up, and I hadn’t realized it until I saw her with them down, asleep in my bed.

Well. Not *my* bed. The hotel bed. My apartment was only about ten minutes away by car, actually. I wondered what she’d look like in it. What it would do to me to see her like that.

I couldn’t blame Leigh for being ambitious and putting on a bit of a performance. I was lying about who I was, after all. But seeing her like this intrigued me in a way that I hadn’t expected. Like I actually wanted to see more of her personality and all those nuances beneath the confident surface.

That was dangerous. Even more than the possibility that she was hiding something from me. Leigh wasn’t some girl I could actually date. She was going to find out who I really was eventually, and she might even be involved in trying to destroy my client. I couldn’t let her get close to me emotionally. I couldn’t care about her beyond what a dom owed to his submissive.

My heart skipped a beat and my cock twitched as I noticed she’d left her collar on. Or, she’d taken a shower and then put it back on. I had promised her a fuck in the morning and I planned to follow through on that, and now she would already be sporting the collar for it.

Delicious.

I climbed into bed and kept to my side, or tried to. I drifted off to sleep easily. I had quickly trained myself in the Army to fall asleep anytime, anywhere, otherwise I never would’ve been able to get any rest.

It had been a long time since I'd shared a bed with someone, though, and my body gravitated towards her during the night, so that I woke up with Leigh in my arms.

My first thought was: *she fits here.*

If I could have glared at myself, I would have. The last thing I needed was to be having soft, intimate thoughts about this woman. This was just about sex and having a good time, nothing more.

Still... Leigh was asleep, and it had been years since I'd had a woman stay the night with me. I tugged her a little closer, marveling at how the curves of her body fit against mine. Her hair smelled sweet, like kiwi and flowers, and I found myself wishing that I didn't have to get out of bed right away.

And with that thought, I realized . . . I might be in trouble.

CHAPTER 12



Leigh

The moment Jack was in the bathroom to take a shower after our discussion in the sitting area, I dove for his laptop.

Well, I didn't literally dive, that would've been ridiculous. But I snatched it up and opened it to get it unlocked. I'd gotten a thumb drive from a friend that I could insert into the computer to scramble it and unlock it. It didn't do much more than that, unless there were some files I wanted to steal by putting a copy on the thumb drive, but I didn't need anything else anyway.

Jack's computer was now open to me.

The first thing that struck me as odd was that he'd apparently downloaded a copy of the employee records of everyone in the company. Was he running some kind of background check? Why would he do that?

The next thing that I noticed was that he'd taken photocopies of the papers and sent them to someone. The name and address were encrypted and it was way out of my league to try and figure that out... but why would he be sending these papers to someone else? If it was his lawyer that might make sense, but if so why the secrecy?

I noticed that this wasn't the only batch of papers Jack had sent this person. There were a dozen emails sent. And the name of the sender wasn't Jack.

It was Bryce.

Who the hell was Bryce? Why was Jack using a fake name? What was going on?

I wanted to storm into the bathroom and confront this guy, but just in case, I decided it would be best to keep quiet for now and see what I could dig up in the background. If there was stuff on this guy's private laptop, then there was stuff on his work computer. I also might be able to get him to slip up and give me information, or get something out of Rebecca or another employee. Billy—that guy at reception—he was ambitious, he wanted to move up through the company but didn't have the connections or Harvard degree. I could use that to my benefit.

Not wanting to push my luck, I put everything back where I'd found it and crawled into bed, curling up. My heart hammered inexplicably. I told myself it was just that I'd stumbled on far more than I'd planned. I just wanted to know more about Jack and what he was up to so I could plan my attacks accordingly, but now it looked like he was sharing trade information with someone, while using an assumed name. Was Jack trying to get his own company taken down? What were his motives?

Even though I tried to tell myself that it was all my concern over my plan, there was the voice in the back of my head that wouldn't shut up, reminding me that this was going to be the first time I'd shared a bed with someone in years. I didn't usually do that. Frankly, I just hadn't liked any man enough to want to stay the night.

But I did want to stay the night with Jack. I wanted him to fuck me in the morning, as he'd promised. I wanted to see more of what he could come up with.

I left the collar on. I wondered if he would notice.

As I lay in bed, listening to Jack in the bathroom taking his shower, I wondered if there was more going on here than I'd thought. A long-lost heir? One who had no pictures of himself? It was the classic kind of bait and switch that led people to be conned by the likes of Anna Delvey.

And Lawton Sr. had died rather quickly...

Jack was young and handsome. Exactly Lawton Sr.'s type, if the stories were to be believed. He was obviously attracted to me, otherwise he wouldn't have bothered to sleep with me, but he'd shown me that he could pretend to be submissive if he wanted to. Had he been stiffed out of Lawton's will and so he'd cocked up this story of it all being left to his nephew?

My mind raced. It was crazy for me to think this, right? But at the same time it didn't feel that crazy at all. It felt like it made perfect sense to me, in fact. It would be so easy for someone to pretend to be Jack Lawton. The real Jack Lawton probably had no idea that all this was going on. If he even existed which, to be fair, he probably did, given that he'd published books and his name was on the university website. That would be hard to fake.

But if somehow he was intercepted so that he never found out what had happened... then I could see one of the former and spurned lovers of Lawton Sr. deciding to take matters into his own hands.

What that didn't solve was the sending of papers to someone else. Why would he be doing that? Perhaps to get advice on business things so that he could take the company away from the other board members? He didn't seem to like them very much.

The bathroom light turned off and I closed my eyes, breathing deep and even. I heard Jack—I didn't feel comfortable calling him anything else until I was certain—enter the room and walk over.

He stared at me for a moment as I continued to fake sleep. Had he noticed the collar? I'd thought it would be nice to leave it on all night, so that we could get right to the sex in the morning. It was also just... something I enjoyed keeping on. It made me aware of every breath that I took. Made me

feel like I was still bound to him in some way, still submissive.

I liked it.

Jack didn't seem aware that I wasn't asleep, and climbed into bed staying firmly on his side. I was just glad he didn't seem to think anything was up with me. He thought I was who I said I was.

But if he wasn't who he said he was...

Jack had struck me as dangerous, when we'd first had sex and he'd turned the tables on me. I'd liked the danger. I still did. But not if it might actually end up with my life in his hands. If he had bumped off one man already, who was to say he wouldn't deal with me, too? Especially if he found out my real motives?

Despite my concerns, I slipped into sleep, exhausted from the day and the sex.

When I woke up, I was in Jack's arms.

He was apparently asleep, and I didn't want to disturb him, so I kept myself relaxed and breathing deeply, steadily. I was sure his alarm would go off any minute now.

It was actually nice to wake up with someone holding me. I had forgotten that cuddling like this could feel good. His grip was strong but relaxed, and I felt almost... shielded. My body fit so nicely against his.

I was so sure he'd be up any second that I lay there waiting for the alarm to go off until I fell asleep again. This time, when I woke up, it was to the feeling of pleasure.

My body stirred this time before my mind properly did. All I could think of was how good I was feeling. Heat was building between my legs, making me squirm, and my breasts ached in the best way. I moaned instinctively, and it was the sound of that moaning that made me wake up.

There was a hard cock pressed against my ass, and Jack's hand on my breast, kneading it, teasing and pinching my nipple. And between my legs...

Jack's fingers slid in and out of me, his cock grazing over my clit in slow,

teasing circles.

“Oh God,” I blurted out, my voice breathless. “Master...”

“You’re such a responsive pet,” Jack noted, kissing the side of my neck. “I was wondering if I could slide my cock into you before you woke up, if you would really be that into it.”

I would, oh God I would, but I couldn’t even form words. I could only moan brokenly as he continued to tease me, adding a third finger when really all I wanted was his cock, and he knew it, he knew I was ready...

“Beg me,” Jack growled against my ear. “Beg me to fuck you. Beg me to put my cock in you. Beg like a good little pet.”

Still on my side, I moaned and rocked my hips back against his. “Please, please, please master, please put your cock in me, I need it, I need a nice thick cock inside me filling me up—”

Jack swore violently and took his fingers out of me. “Yeah you do. You’re so desperate for a nice thick cock to fill up your needy little hole...”

He pushed one of my legs forward and I felt the blunt head of his cock at last breaching me from behind. I let out a strangled noise of pleasure. Fuck, yes, please, that was what I wanted, that was what I needed, *fuck me hard and rough and without mercy—*

Jack thrust into me completely and I cried out, gasping, feeling like all the air had been taken from my lungs. The collar around my neck was tight—not enough to choke me, but enough to be a reminder. I arched into the hands squeezing my breasts and his cock as he thrust into me, again and again.

Tiny whimpers escaped me. He was relentless, his body pressing me down more and more into the mattress with every thrust until he was on top of me, one leg swung over mine, his weight pinning me. His breaths and growls were hot in my ear, persistent, ever-present, and I could only gasp into the pillow as he used me for his own pleasure.

His cock was as thick as I’d hoped. It made me feel so fucking full, so stretched and used, exactly the way I liked it.

“Is this what you wanted so badly last night?” he purred in my ear.

I whimpered. “Yes...” I could barely get the word out. My mouth was open, my eyes glazed over as my hands gripped the sheets. There was nothing but the sparks of pleasure he fucked into me. Nothing else felt like it mattered.

“Yeah, it is.” I could feel Jack’s smile against my neck. “You needed this so badly, baby. Like all good pets need a nice fucking to keep them happy. I bet you’re used to being a spoiled little pet, getting everything you want instantly. But not with me. You had to earn this. And you did such a good job, you didn’t complain once. You were a good pet and good pets get the reward they need.”

His voice was a low rumble in my ear, curling its way down my spine. It was all I could focus on, all I could think about. I didn’t have room for any thoughts at all, actually. Just his voice and his cock.

I had no idea how long he fucked me, but it felt like forever. Stamina was clearly not a problem for this man. I screamed into the pillow underneath my face, tears leaking free from how relentless he was with my body. Jack’s hands were on me tight enough to bruise, and I loved it. I wanted to be marked up by him, so that even when I took off the collar there was a reminder on my body of who I belonged to.

“You wanna come, baby?” Jack asked, his voice teasing with that edge of condescending that I fucking loved—like he was going to let me come as a favor to me, and not because of any personal interest.

It took me a minute to get enough breath to respond. “Yes,” I gasped out. I felt like the word was literally fucked out of my throat with one good thrust.

Jack’s hand slid between my legs, rubbing at my clit. “Then come for me. Come all over these sheets like the messy little pet you are.”

“Oh *God*,” I choked out, the pleasure spiking, reaching a new height—and I came almost instantly.

He didn’t stop. He didn’t fucking stop, not with his cock or with his

fingers, and I felt my next orgasm building so quickly—too quickly—no, no, oh God it was too much it was too—

There was so much wetness, I was pretty sure I squirted, crying out as I came again, my entire body shuddering. My toes clenched up and I felt like my fingers were vibrating. It was so fucking much, too damn much, holy mother of God...

Jack groaned and came inside of me, messy and hot, smearing me on the inside. I could feel it dripping down the inside of my thighs and I felt another rush of orgasmic bliss at the sensation.

For a moment, I didn't care about my plan, or my concerns about Jack's motives or identity. All I cared about was the phenomenal sex. I'd have done anything for him in that moment.

Jack pulled out of me, and I felt him roll over to grab something—tissues I assumed—and clean us up. When he was done, he pushed my braid to the side and his fingertips traced the collar around my throat.

“You were an extra good girl for putting that on and wearing it.” His voice was a satisfied purr of sound as his lips touched down on my shoulder blade. “I'm so pleased with you. I almost wish I had a plug on me so I could keep that come of mine inside of you all day. While you walked around the office, being so confident and poised... you'd have me inside of you, owning you.”

Oh God. The idea had me shivering.

“Pity.” Jack lightly spanked my ass and finally moved off the bed. “Come join me in the shower. We have time before I have to go into the office.”

His voice was soft but it wasn't a request. I did as I was told, finally taking the collar off, and joined him in the shower. As I suspected, he pampered me in there, washing my hair for me, scattering kisses down my neck as he soaped up my body.

This was something I couldn't remember being so good, either. Most men just said *great, thanks, would love to do that again sometime* after the whole

sex part was over. But Jack took care of me. He made sure that I was grounded and in the right headspace.

Even though I knew it was part of the deal, I couldn't help but appreciate his efforts. "Thanks," I told him, once we were getting dressed.

"For what?" he asked curiously.

"For... all of that, *after*."

Jack shook his head. "No need to thank me. All dirty talk aside, Leigh, that's part of my job as your master. I've seen how a submissive can crash afterwards if they're not given that proper care. Being my pet doesn't just mean that I use you or degrade you. It means pampering you, too."

I could feel a blush crawling up my face and I quickly turned away. It wasn't anything special, honestly. It was a guy actually being decent for once. But the way that Jack said it, his eyes on me and his tone so earnest... it felt like *something*.

And I didn't want to feel anything. Especially for this man I wasn't sure I even knew.

I finished getting dressed while Jack gathered up his laptop and his things. Since we both had our cars, he left for the office earlier than I did, so that he'd be there when I arrived and nobody would suspect anything.

I took the extra few minutes to snoop around the hotel room, but unlike last night, I didn't find anything. Nothing that would indicate who 'Jack' really was or what his motives might be. Seemed he'd taken everything with him to the office. Damn it.

That left me with no choice but to go to the office myself and see what I could do with Rebecca guarding the door.

When I arrived—and got through security with just a slide of my pass card—I waved to Bill. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Leigh."

I stopped to chat with him for a few minutes to get the office gossip. Bill was eager to tell me everything that he knew. Apparently my asking around

for ideas yesterday had sparked a flurry of interest. Some people were excited that there might finally be some meaningful change at the company and some upward mobility for them. Others thought that it was ludicrous to expect changes. A few more thought that if there were changes, Jack would claim credit for them in order to make his mark as CEO.

“Jack’s too humble for that,” I replied. “He admits he doesn’t know what he’s doing. That’s why he hired me.” I lowered my voice. “Just between you and me? He doesn’t even want to run the business. But he refuses to leave it in the hands of the board. He doesn’t think they’d do a good job with it, either.”

“Any idea what his options are, then?” Bill asked.

“I’ve given him a few suggestions but who knows if he’ll take them or not. He wants more time. I had to remind him that while we’d all like time we don’t usually get it. He needs to start making decisions.”

Bill shook his head. “I feel bad for the guy. He’s a fish out of water.”

“I know... at least he’s got Rebecca as his secretary. She’s a lovely person and she seems to really know the business. I want him to have good people around him. That’s how you succeed as a leader.”

“Well, don’t tell anyone I told you this,” Bill replied, lowering his voice as well. “But I think Rebecca wants to be more than just a secretary.”

I faked a gasp of shock. “No, really? I didn’t notice that at all.”

“Mmhmm. She seems to think you’re competition.”

“Me?” I scoffed. “I’m not looking for a ring anytime soon. My career means too much to me. It’s hard to find a man who can accept that.”

Bill, as I’d predicted, jumped onto the bait. “I think that’s amazing that you’ve built your whole company by yourself. I really admire it.”

“Aww, thank you. You’re so sweet. It’s really nice to hear that from a man.”

He smiled at me, and I had to work to hide my smirk. Got ‘em. “Have you considered moving to another department?” I asked him.

“I’d like to, but I’m not sure where I’d go. Reception is good but I think maybe the mailroom might give me the space to make more connections.”

I nodded. “Well, I’ll see if there’s a gap for you somewhere. They’re all getting rearranged up there, it’s like musical chairs.”

He chuckled. “Thanks, Leigh, I appreciate it. I can send you my resume if you want.”

“That’d be great, let me get you my email...”

With Bill’s resume in hand—figuratively speaking—I rode the elevator up and made my way straight to Jack’s office. As I’d suspected, he was already pulled into a meeting somewhere.

I went into his office anyway, forwarding him Bill’s resume and then typing up the ideas that I had to dismantle the company and slipping them into the list of the other ideas I’d been given by the various employees.

My prediction was that it would take Rebecca ten minutes to interrupt me and suggest I shouldn’t be in here. To her credit, it took her twelve. She must be feeling generous.

“Leigh, right?” Rebecca smiled at me. Jealous or not, she didn’t show it. She looked perfectly polite. “I’m not sure you should be in here while Mr. Lawton is out. Perhaps you’d like to use the open common area? Or one of our empty offices? I could set you up...”

“You’re very kind, Rebecca, but I’m fine here.” I smiled at her. “If Jack has a problem with it I’m sure he’ll bring it up with me.”

Rebecca’s lips pursed momentarily. I kept the smile on my face, then adopted a pensive look. “Rebecca, why are you just a secretary here?”

A startled look passed across her features. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I was looking at employee records like Mr. Lawton asked...”

She immediately frowned. “Why is he looking into employee records?”

I winced, like I’d let something slip. “It’s nothing. He just wants to get the lay of the land, so to speak.”

Rebecca’s eyes narrowed. “Is he downsizing?”

“What?” I made my voice go up a few notes to make me sound like I was lying. “Why would you...”

“I know your type. You’re going to tell him to downsize in order to save the company.” Her lips pursed in irritation. “That’s the opposite of what we need right now.”

It was very, very hard to hold in my smirk. “Well, if you have suggestions on what needs to be done, I suggest you tell Jack. I’m sure he’d be happy to hear what you have to say. And it might finally get you out of the secretary job. I think you could serve the company well in a higher-up position. Your employee record shows many years here as a personal assistant to various executives. You should’ve been moved to a management position ages ago.”

Rebecca blinked, apparently stunned by my encouragement. “Well. Thank you. I... well. Mr. Lawton is wonderful. His uncle was... old fashioned.”

“I’ve heard stories,” I said dryly.

“Sometimes,” Rebecca lowered her voice, “I think he dated men simply because he hated women so much.”

I snorted in amusement, then quickly covered my mouth. “Sorry, sorry, it’s not funny.”

“It kind of is, though.”

I laughed. “It is.”

Rebecca smiled at me, then sobered up again. “You’re not going to downsize this company. I’m going to speak to Mr. Lawton about it.”

“Of course. I’m sure he’ll take what you say into consideration. He’s very egalitarian that way.”

Rebecca nodded shortly, then hurried out of the room. I finally allowed myself to grin.

Downsizing would actually be a strong possibility to save the company. It would allow them more freedom to pivot and rearrange things as they pushed forward with a new vision. But Rebecca, and many others, would object to

the loss of jobs. She'd now argue that there should be expansion in the company—that Jack should take on a bunch of new projects while promoting and hiring.

I could practically hear her voice in my head: *It'll really make your mark on the company and show you're a strong leader who's not afraid to make bold choices.*

Once Jack was in over his head with overspending, trying to do too much at once, and the company finances in the red, my suggestions to dismantle the whole thing and go back to his peaceful former life would spring to mind.

And he'd be ready to listen.

CHAPTER 13



Bryce

Any particular reason you just forwarded me someone's resume? I texted Leigh.

I was stuck in this boring meeting with the board again, recording it secretly on my phone so that Jack could listen to all of it later. I'd opened my emails on my phone to check, and saw that Leigh had forwarded me someone's resume.

The person seemed fairly qualified for a position as a personal assistant or minor administrative position. Bill—currently working as our receptionist, according to the resume. But that didn't explain why Leigh would send this to me. She didn't actually think I should promote this guy to an executive position, did she?

I received a reply almost immediately. *You need a new secretary.*

Why do I need a new secretary?

Because Rebecca has a crush on you and that will only lead to trouble. Put her in a junior executive position and have her oversee whichever of the employee projects you want to go with. You want her feelings to ensure

loyalty, not cause awkwardness.

If Leigh had noticed that Rebecca was attracted to me, then I was sure others had as well. There was no way I wanted Jack's reputation damaged because I was too charismatic for my own good. I appreciated Leigh's suggestion.

Although, I couldn't help but wonder...

So you're not jealous and replacing her so she's out of the way, hmm?

I received a reply a minute later: *Why would I bother being jealous?*

She had a point. Leigh was gorgeous, sexy, and confident. Between her and Rebecca—at least in my opinion with my personal tastes—it was no contest. Leigh had no reason whatsoever to be jealous of Rebecca. Besides, I wasn't going to sleep with my secretary.

But weirdly, there was a part of me that wanted her to care enough to be jealous. Because I'd be jealous if—

Okay, no, that was dangerous territory. I definitely didn't care if other men wanted Leigh, or if Leigh wanted other men. She was just another fling at the end of the day. A smoking hot and witty fling who was actually educated, someone I could hold a conversation with, but she wasn't special.

All right, yes, she was special. She could keep up with me. She was funny and educated. She was exactly what I wanted in bed and was submissive, eager, and up for anything. She let me collar her and toy with her.

That didn't mean that I was going to let myself feel anything for her beyond attraction. Especially not any kind of jealousy. Leigh wasn't mine and I shouldn't want her to be. I just had to keep reminding myself of that. I hadn't been tempted by any of the other women I'd had affairs with over the years, why should Leigh be any different?

The meeting wrapped up and I took the opportunity to grab David Weston, the company lawyer. "Hey, David, I was hoping that I could get some advice from you on what to do with my uncle's estate? The personal things, I mean. I don't necessarily want to keep them."

“Sure thing, I can set you up with something,” he said enthusiastically. “Why don’t we grab dinner?”

“Ah, I don’t want to bother you. I heard that you’re having dinner with your old man...”

“No, no, Dad would love for you to join,” he insisted.

I was sure the older Weston would fucking hate me joining, but tough cookies for him. He could use it as an excuse to try and get me to do what he wanted, and I was happy to let him do it while I tried to get information out of him about his movements and knowledge on Lawton’s house and habits.

My research and questioning had shown that out of all the board members, Weston was the most vocal against Lawton’s decisions, but he was also the one who’d known Lawton the longest and was said to spend a ton of time with him. If anyone would have the opportunity to move the guy’s pills out of reach, it would be Weston.

Luckily, his son David seemed to like me and was cheerful enough, so he could be a good buffer at dinner tonight. I was tempted to call Leigh in and have her be my date to provide a distraction if that was needed.

“Well, if you’re sure,” I said, smiling, “then I’d love to join the two of you.”

“Great.” David clapped me on the shoulder. “I’ll text you details.”

My phone chimed, as if on cue, and I pulled it out to see what I had—but it wasn’t another email from Jack or a text from Leigh. It was a report from my tech guys into people’s backgrounds like I had requested.

I headed into an empty office—not mine, since Leigh might be there—and pulled the report up on my phone. It looked like all of the employees were aboveboard, although the executives had various shady business practices relating to the Lawton company tendency to swoop in and destroy local forest as well as local businesses. Christ, what a mess. It was all technically legal, though, so really not my jurisdiction...

But then I got to the bottom and I saw Leigh.

I frowned. The note from our team was pretty straightforward and didn't leave room for error.

When we conducted our background check, we found a lot for her but nothing like what you said she did. She's an activist for the environment who has led multiple walkouts, protests, and grassroots movements. She's the producer behind a YouTube channel that showcases local businesses advocating for better environmental practices and she works with a lot of other people—maybe that's how she slipped under your radar? She doesn't like to be the 'face' of the movement and boosts other people especially local businesses, family-owned places, again see attachment...

The attached photos were pretty damning. They were records of Leigh's involvement with various organizations and businesses. As if that wasn't bad enough, there was a report from my team about how her website that she'd sent to me was actually a fake. None of the people they'd spoken to who were listed as business owners she'd helped as a consultant were actually Silicon Valley executives. By tracing the phone numbers, my team had found that they were actually all activists.

They must have agreed to fake it for Leigh in case anyone followed up. And the worst part was? If I was really Jack Lawton, it would've fucking worked.

I was only able to do this because I was in security and had access to a team that was used to keeping people alive. I had help from people who had worked for the CIA, the NSA, and sometimes the armed forces. We were the best of the best.

But if I was really Jack Lawton, calling some numbers from a professional looking website? Why would I be in any position to doubt this woman? And Leigh was good. She was very good.

But my gut was right.

That was why she'd been coaxing me towards environmental practices. I wasn't sure exactly what her game was, but it was definitely something, and I

had to find out what it was. This report showed that she fucking hated Lawton and everything the company did. She wasn't here to make a quick buck or to get a rich husband. Whatever her goal was, it was going to be a lot more than that.

Maybe I should invite her to dinner tonight. Then take her to the hotel afterwards. I wanted to find out exactly what was going on, and clear out all the lies.

After all, if Leigh had spent all these years trying to take down Lawton and the company... and had put all this effort into hiding her identity and getting close to me with this charade... who was to say she wouldn't stop at murder?

CHAPTER 14



Leigh

I had to find out what Jack was really up to. If he even was Jack. And while I was alone in his office, I had my best chance.

His desk yielded nothing. However, I noticed that he had another laptop on his desk right now, a different one than what I'd broken into last night. I used the USB drive on it to hack it and found it to be startlingly impersonal. There were company records and emails with the other executives, but none of the personal emails or files I'd noticed on the laptop in his hotel room.

Interesting. So he had two laptops, one with the juicy stuff on it and he took with him. That was a level of forethought and frankly paranoia that I hadn't thought Jack would exhibit.

But if he was really someone else...

Frustrated, I decided my only solution was to try and do some more digging on the person who was most definitely Jack Lawton. There wasn't a photo on his department page at the university where he worked, or in any of his philosophy books that he'd published, but he had to exist somewhere.

I pulled up my own laptop and began searching into the university.

The university had its official website, but a website didn't just show the faculty and information about the syllabus. There was also an area where they would post things about the accomplishments of the college, and links to social media pages. I followed those and began to search.

Somewhere in there, there had to be a photo. Something. Anything.

It took me long enough that I was seriously fucking tempted to go for a drive to this damn university myself and just camp out at Jack's office in the department until I could find him (or find that he wasn't there).

But then, finally, I found it: on the college's Facebook page, a picture of all the faculty from a graduation a few years back. Everyone was lined up, and people were all listed by name in order, although not everyone was tagged. I went through all the tagged people, eliminating everyone, and then checked the university website to check the others, too, in case they had a picture of themselves on their page.

Finally, I was down to just five people. Three were women so unless there was something about Jack that none of us knew, I could eliminate those. Of the two men left, one of them had to be Jack.

But neither of them looked like the Jack I knew.

If I had a picture of Jack I could possibly try a reverse image search on Google, but that was out the window. That would make it harder for me to figure out who he really was, but I already had the smoking gun. The two men in the photo were both good looking, but one was blond, and the other was shorter than Jack and had a broader face with a squarer jaw.

Yeah. I wouldn't be drooling all over either of these men, personally, even though they were good looking. They didn't have the charisma, that edge of danger, that I'd sensed in Jack.

But maybe it was that very element of danger that I should've paid attention to. He'd tricked me already once, with how he was in bed. I should've taken that as a warning and instead I'd let myself think with my heart—

Not my heart. That would imply I liked Jack more than as a sex buddy and I didn't, I definitely didn't. It was just—my libido. I was thinking with my libido.

As I stared down at the photo, however, I couldn't help but feel... disappointed. Upset. And to my shame it wasn't about my goal. It was over the fact that I... I liked this guy. This was the best sex I'd had and the first time I'd been with someone who saw me for who I really was.

Jack didn't look at me or talk to me like I was just a pair of great legs. I wasn't just a sex object to him. He liked my intelligence. We sparred and every time I held my own with him, he looked at me like he was proud of me. And I wanted him to be proud of me, I wanted to impress him, because I wanted to stand out from everyone else.

I wanted to be special to him.

Fuck. That was a problem. I shouldn't care what this man thought of me. Especially now that I knew he was probably here to run a con of his own.

That was the question. What was the con?

And who could I trust to help me with information on it? I couldn't investigate all of this without getting information from people but if I ran around asking the wrong questions people were going to be extremely suspicious. Jack would hear about it, and it would get me into trouble. That wasn't going to help me.

However...

Bill liked me. If I could get him situated as Jack's secretary as I'd already planned, then hopefully he could tell me something. Rebecca was going to be miffed at first when she was fired, but then she'd forgive me when she was moved into a junior executive position. I needed her to stay in between hating me and considering me a friend, never sure where we stood. If she was unstable, then she could make rash decisions and steer Jack down the wrong path.

Except that this wasn't Jack! This was an imposter!

Oh, God, what had happened to the real Jack? Did he know about any of this? Did he know that his inheritance was being stolen? Was he dead and nobody realized?

Fuck, was I dealing with a murderer?

I hated that the idea of sleeping with someone so dangerous sent a shiver down my spine. Because I was going to have to keep sleeping with him. I couldn't act like anything was different. Not until I had a way to back him into a corner and get out the truth.

Who knew? Maybe I could get this guy to work with me. If he was here to get money, then dismantling the company would go in his favor. He could liquefy assets and be a rich man, so long as nobody found out his con. And frankly... maybe this said a lot about me and my morality or lack of it but I was willing to help a man con a terrible company out of a few million, or even a few hundred million, so long as that company was destroyed and couldn't keep preying on people and nature anymore.

But until that right moment came... until I had more information... I had to play it safe. I had to act like nothing was wrong.

There was a rap on the doorframe and I nearly jumped right out of the seat, slamming my laptop lid shut. Yeah, great work, Leigh, that's sure playing it cool and calm like nothing's wrong.

Jake stood in the doorway, smiling at me. Fuck, he was handsome and so charming and confident. Why did he have to be a conman-slash-possible-murderer?

"The Westons invited me out for dinner." Jack made it sound like he was possibly being led to the guillotine but he was cheerful about it. "I thought it might be nice if you joined us?"

Before I could reply, he lowered his voice and added, "We could go to my place after."

Ah. Well, it would be convenient as far as sex went. The Westons also afforded me a possible opportunity. The older one, the father, was on the

board of executives at the company while his son David was a company lawyer and one of the men that I'd been introduced to at the party where I'd met Jack.

Both of these men were heavily involved in the company and wanted to see it succeed. Perhaps I could use them to figure out exactly who Jack was and catch him in some kind of lie.

"Sure," I said, smiling. "I'd love to."

My heart hammered in my chest as I contemplated being alone in a room with this man all night again. It thrilled me in a way it probably shouldn't have. "Did you consider my proposal?"

"About Bill? Yes. I think it's a good idea." Jack entered the room fully, closing the door behind him so that Rebecca couldn't eavesdrop. "The last thing I need is someone thinking I'm following my uncle's pattern. Rebecca shouldn't get her hopes up."

"She's long overdue a promotion," I said. "And I think you'll find Bill to be capable in the role."

"Don't know what I'd do without you, Leigh," Jack told me, and my stomach flipped—both at the praise and in fear.

Did he mean that simply as a gesture of respect? Or did he mean that because he wouldn't be able to carry on his charade without my help?

I supposed I'd find out soon enough.

I finished drawing up the various employee proposals including my own and then sent them off for 'Jack' to look over. Or perhaps it was Bryce? That had been the name he'd used on his emails. I liked the name, but it could just be another fake for whoever was getting the files, some criminal accomplice or hired man.

The rest of the day passed terrifying fast and aching slow at the same time. I didn't want the day to end and take me to the conclusion where I'd have to be alone with Jack and figure out what his game was, but I also wanted answers immediately. It made me feel almost sick with nerves.

Rebecca noticed, her usual adversarial guard towards me dropped as she asked me kindly if I needed Ibuprofen or something. When I went to tell Bill about his promotion, he noticed it too, asking me if I was feeling all right.

“Just a bad lunch,” I lied to both of them. “I’m fine.”

When dinner rolled around, I double-checked myself in the bathroom mirror to make sure I was presentable. I would be going straight to the restaurant from work with Jack and I knew I didn’t have time to change, but I could still freshen up.

I hated that I still wanted to impress him, even after what I’d discovered.

Jack met me in the lobby and we headed down the street to the restaurant, which was only a block away.

“When do you think you’ll tell Rebecca?” I asked him.

“Tomorrow at some point. I think it’ll be a good idea to give her the short list of ideas from the employees and let her narrow it down further from there.”

Crap, that wouldn’t serve my purposes at all. “Don’t you think that’ll be delegating a little too much? And to someone you just promoted who was once your secretary? I think you should pick one and tell her to be the head of development.”

Jack nodded, like he was seriously considering it. Or was he? I could no longer tell what he was really thinking. Maybe I never had been able to at all.

That didn’t scare me the way it probably should. In fact it actually upset me. Because I wanted to be able to read him. I wanted to be able to know what he was thinking.

It was just that I was used to being able to convince people and read them, I told myself. It’s not that he’s anything to you, it’s just your pride.

Jack glanced at me. “You okay?”

How could he see through *me* so easily? “I’m fine. Just the usual jitters, wanting this all to succeed. It’s normal. It’s when you’re not nervous that you should really start getting worried.”

He arched a brow. “Oh? That so?”

“Well, yes, because if you’re not nervous then you’re overconfident and you’re going to miss something important. You’re not really in the moment and paying attention.”

Jack nodded. He was looking at me with this assessing gaze that made me feel like he was seeing right through me down to my bones. I hadn’t ever been looked at like that before. People either wanted to fuck me and were only concerned about the surface, or they respected me as a fellow protestor and activist but didn’t really want to see what was past that. We were colleagues, not someone to pick apart.

Jack was the exception in a lot of ways, it seemed.

We arrived at the restaurant, some fancy sushi place, where I normally wouldn’t even be able to afford to breathe inside of it. I smiled as Jack took my jacket for the coat room, and then we were led by the hostess to a fancy table in the back, away from everyone else. Judging by the fact that the hostess mentioned the Westons were “at their usual table,” I assumed they were regulars here and given the best of the best as a result.

Both David and his father were seated at the small round table. David’s smile brightened when he saw me, while his father’s seemed about the same—stiff and false. He was more focused on Jack than he was on me.

So his father fell into the ‘underestimating me’ category while David fell into the ‘wants to fuck me’ category. Good to know.

“David, so good to see you again.” I shook his hand as Jack pulled my chair out for me to sit down in. I noticed he put me in between himself and Weston Sr. so that I was now a buffer for the two of them, and all the way across the table from David.

Not that it meant much with such a small table, but it was the thought that counted. Jack wasn’t just doing this to keep me away from David, I was sure. Weston looked at Jack like he was ready to deliver a lecture and Jack probably wanted some distance.

“When Jack said you were joining us I was delighted,” David told me.

“That’s so sweet of you to say, thank you,” I said.

Jack, the only one who could hear the sarcastic undertone in my voice, pressed his foot firmly on top of mine under the table as a warning. What? I was valid. David just wanted a pretty girl to flirt with.

“Jack,” Weston said, his voice indicating he didn’t plan on letting this just be a dinner of pleasantries and discussing the weather. “I hope that you’ve given some of my suggestions serious thought.”

“I have,” Jack promised, sounding completely sincere. “However, I have some great ideas from some others in the company that I’m considering. I want to possibly pursue other avenues.”

I had no idea what Weston had suggested, but I had no doubt that it would be the opposite of what I wanted to happen.

“I understand that you’re new,” Weston replied, his voice growing clipped as he tried to hold in his frustration. “But I’ve known your uncle since we started the company...”

“I know, I know,” Jack said quickly. “And I really respect that. You weren’t just coworkers, you were friends. You were over at his house all the time...”

“That was more me recently,” David said quickly, as his father’s eyebrow twitched. “I took over the legal department and consulted with your uncle frequently. He often wanted to make changes in his personal life, in the last couple of years, and he respected my judgment. Dad was more concerned with leading the company and keeping an eye on our stock concerns.”

“I’m glad that he felt he could trust you,” Jack said, sounding sincere. “I wasn’t aware that he was making changes in his personal life. Is that why—sorry, this is turning more onto the personal but—why he decided to put me in his will?”

David’s jaw ticked. Odd. Why would that question upset him?

I was sure that Jack had noticed it. While nothing changed in his face, his

foot was still pressing against mine, and I felt his leg tense. Hmm.

“Your uncle was a proud man,” David said, with a touch of admiration in his voice.

His father snorted, as if to comment that too much pride had been the man’s problem. From everything that I’d heard, I had to agree.

“I think that he did want to reconnect with his sister in his last years,” David went on. “But he didn’t know how without eating humble pie and he couldn’t really stand that. I didn’t want to press him to do anything but I did try to give him advice on things. I think this was his way of making amends, as much as he could. Like I said he was a proud man, and very stubborn.”

“Well, I’m really glad that he had you,” Jack said, sounding entirely sincere. “It sometimes—I know this is probably stupid but I feel guilty sometimes that I didn’t choose to reach out when I was an adult. To know he had people like you supporting him means a lot to me. I’m sure he really appreciated it.”

David’s smile was a little strained. “Yes, I did my best to support him.” His gaze darted towards his father. “We all did.”

“He had a funny way of showing appreciation,” his father muttered.

“He did,” David confirmed. His jaw ticked again. “But like I said, he was stubborn. You shouldn’t feel guilty about the things you didn’t do. As someone who worked with him very closely during his last few years I can promise you that he could be a very difficult man. He was charming when he wanted to be, and a gifted intellectual, very educated—similarly to you, I’m sure he would’ve enjoyed academia—but he was proud and he always liked to have the upper hand and be in charge.”

Was it just my imagination or did this feel very personal? I didn’t dare glance at Jack, just in case that would give anything away, but in the moment I didn’t care who he was or wasn’t. Bryce, Jack, whoever, I just wanted to drag him to a private corner and ask if he was getting the same undertone that I was.

“I mean, what can you do with an eccentric man, am I right?” I said, laughing, trying to cut through the tension. “I mean, *I* know what to do with them.” I winked playfully.

David, for some reason, looked like he’d swallowed a lemon. *Oh?*

Weston gave me a look that said he wasn’t impressed. “What were you hired for again?”

I kept my smile fixed on my face. Beside me, I felt Jack get a little tense, but he didn’t say anything and let me speak. I appreciated that. I could handle myself, usually. “I’m a consultant who helps CEOs bring their company to a new level, usually working with startups who want to make a public offering. I’m the one you call when you want to play with the big boys. Jack here is a bit of an unusual case, but since he’s so new to the world of business, he felt I would be helpful to him in navigating his new role.”

“If he keeps the new role,” Weston said.

I laughed. “Well, that’s up to him. I’m happy to consult. Whatever route the client wants to take, I can advise on. So if Jack wants to make a graceful exit and dismantle his whole company, well, I’m here for it.” I winked at Jack like this was a fun little in-joke.

Weston looked alarmed, and I put my hand on his wrist conspiratorially, leaning in a bit. “Of course, personally I want him to see what he can do to innovate the company as it is. I’m sure you have a lot of great ideas for that.”

Weston was now caught—he couldn’t say that he disagreed with me, or he’d look like just as much of a stick in the mud as Jack’s uncle. He also couldn’t say that he agreed with dismantling the company, which I’d made to sound like the opposite of innovating, so he just had to nod his head along.

I couldn’t help but feel a bit smug.

Our food was given to us in a multi-course meal, where we picked the sushi and sashimi off from the tray with our chopsticks or fingers. A peaceful silence finally descended as we ate and enjoyed the meal, only occasionally speaking to comment on the quality and taste.

David insisted on picking up the check, since he had suggested the whole thing. “My treat, my treat.”

I wasn’t going to object since I sure as hell couldn’t afford to eat here, but I thanked him profusely for how generous it was and told him I owed him lunch, just to cover for the fact that I was supposed to be a lot richer than I was with the job I pretended to have.

“Would you like me to walk you to your car?” Jack asked casually as we got up from the table.

I nodded. “That would be nice, thank you.”

We parted ways with David and his father, Jack helped me into my jacket, and we headed back to the office parking structure.

Should I dare to bring it up? But before I could, Jack said, “Did you notice anything about David?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb, Leigh, you’re better when you’re on the attack.” He flashed me a knowing, predatory smile and my stomach flipped.

“All right then.” I took a deep breath. “Something’s going on that he’s keeping from us. About your uncle. I don’t know what it is, but he has this nervous tick in his jaw. You pressing about what your uncle was like upset him. Especially when you noted how supportive David had been.”

Jack nodded. “Would you say David wants to sleep with you?”

From anyone else, I’d be annoyed. But Jack sounded serious, like he was puzzling something out.

“I would say he thinks I’m attractive,” I replied. “I think he was less flirtatious than a lot of others. But you being there could’ve had something to do with that.”

Jack shook his head. “Right, it was a ridiculous question anyway.”

“Because I’m not going to sleep with him?” I hazarded, smirking and making my tone flirtatious.

Jack gave me a slow once over that had me shivering with heat. “Trust

me, I don't worry about that."

Of course he didn't. He knew that he had me—hook line and sinker—in the bedroom. I wasn't going to give him up to be with some boring guy who probably wanted me to be on top so I could do all the work.

We reached the underground garage that went under the office building and each headed for our vehicles. "I can drive you to my hotel," Jack said casually.

That had my heart racing. It meant that he didn't care if we showed up to work together, which meant he didn't care about propriety anymore. Which also meant I was probably about to step in the shit.

"Sure thing."

The drive over was quiet. I wasn't sure what to say. How to investigate without showing my nerves.

What about the Westons, though? Jack had been after something with them. I doubted they noticed, but while Jack was good at controlling his facial expressions (unlike David), his leg against mine had betrayed his nerves.

"So what was dinner really about?" I asked him. He liked when I was bold and challenged him? Fine, then I'd do that. And hopefully I could get him to slip up and provide some real information.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't like it when I play dumb, so give me the same courtesy," I replied. "You were after something with your line of questioning tonight. I think David suspects something. His father doesn't, he was too busy hating you."

Jack chuckled at that last part, then sobered up. "You tell me. What do you think I might be after?"

I considered this. Jack wasn't really the man's name. He was Bryce, or whoever. That meant I couldn't think of his motives as Jack Lawton, inquiring about his uncle.

On the other hand, why would he pretend to be Jack if he didn't want people to talk to him as if he really was the man he pretended to be? Was there something that he could only figure out by posing as Jack? Unless he was really putting in the work to adopt the ruse of the hermit philosophy professor, he didn't seem eager to wrestle full control of the company and be a despot about it. He wasn't spoiling himself, spending money like water, or immediately finding ways to seize power from others and assert himself.

If this man really wanted to use Jack's identity to become wealthy and powerful, then he was either wildly smart enough to play the game slowly and fake it with everyone around him, risking that he might actually be edged out when he acted too humble and too unsure—or he actually didn't care about being CEO and was after something else.

"Weston's been on the board longer than anyone else," I noted. "He practically helped fund the company since he gave it funding that Lawton desperately needed. And David had been over to Lawton's house a lot over the last few years. You... want to see if they know something about your uncle that nobody else knows or will tell you."

He parked us in the hotel parking lot and looked around, then nodded to himself, as if satisfied. "And what about you, Leigh? What are you trying to get out of this?"

I unbuckled my seatbelt and stared at him for a long moment, confused. My heart beat loudly in my chest, echoing in my ears. Did he know? "I'm trying to get paid," I replied blandly.

Jack looked over at me as he released his seatbelt, too, but didn't open his door to get out. His eyes glittered dangerously, and I felt myself getting wet. I was in the presence of a predator, only a few heartbeats away from him, but God if it didn't turn me on.

"Is that really all?" Jack asked, turning fully towards me. His hand landed on my thigh, pushing my skirt up.

We were alone in the parking garage. And unlike the hotel room, with

people above and below us and on either side in their own rooms, if I screamed, it was unlikely anyone would hear me.

This was why he'd wanted us in the same car. To trap me. Had dinner been a trap, too? Had he really not cared about David Weston and his father and only wanted to fool me? I didn't know. All I knew was that I was frozen as his hand slowly crept up my thigh.

"I wondered if you'd like this," Jack murmured.

No, not Jack. That wasn't his name. Bryce?

"Like what," I breathed. His hand pushed between my legs and I whimpered, instinctively parting my thighs for him. "Master?" I hazarded. I didn't know what else to call him, and it might win him over.

His fingers pushed aside my panties so that they could stroke through my slick pussy. "You're so wet." He sounded impressed. "I knew it. I thought you liked a bit of danger. You liked it when I turned the tables on you the other night, didn't you? When you realized just what I was?"

"And what are you," I demanded, even as he leaned closer and slid two fingers deep inside of me. *Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck.* "W-what are you doing..."

"I'm getting answers. At first I thought I'd do it the old-fashioned way but I happen to like you, Leigh. And I happen to like fucking you." Jack curled his fingers, dragging them against a sensitive spot inside me, and I moaned. "So why don't you do yourself a favor and tell me the truth. You're a smart girl. You know that I know something. So why don't you give it up?"

"You—you give yours up," I demanded, even as my body clenched in pleasure. *Oh, God, it felt so good, he felt so good...* "I know you're not who you say you are, Bryce."

CHAPTER 15



Leigh

A look of genuine surprise flitted across Jack—Bryce’s—face, and the next thing I knew his fingers were sliding out of me and he was shoving me into the backseat.

I kicked out and screamed instinctively, but instead of terror I felt arousal.

“Clever, clever woman,” Bryce snarled at me as he maneuvered his body against mine, and then he was kissing me viciously, like he was angry at himself for it.

I grabbed at him, spreading my legs and finding he was hard in his slacks. I unfastened his pants, wild and eager, as he shoved my skirt up and literally ripped off my lace panties. He caught my wrists and pinned them down, then grabbed my throat, keeping me pressed against the backseat as he opened the passenger door behind him to give him more room to operate.

Anyone could come by and see us, but I didn’t care as he drew his cock out and fitted himself between my thighs. “Tell me what you’re doing here,” he demanded, tightening his grip on my throat, and as I choked on a breath, he slammed all the way into me.

My eyes practically rolled into the back of my head. He didn't pause for even a moment, driving into me hard and rough. I clawed at his arms, not to get away, but to try and get more of it. He held my throat just enough so that I could breathe, but just like the collar, I could feel the presence and knew that he could cut off my airway at any moment.

Then, just as I felt myself approaching orgasm—he stopped.

“Tell me what you're doing, Leigh,” Bryce growled, his gaze narrowed on my face. “Because you're not who you claim to be. I know what you really are and what you think about corporations like Jack Lawton's. So what was the plan?”

“Seduce you,” I blurted out. “Please, please fuck me, Bryce...”

“You have no idea how good it is to hear you say my name,” Bryce admitted with an unraveling groan. “Why do you think I wanted you to call me Master? There was no way I was going to make you come while you screamed someone else's name. You're *my* pet. And a clever pet, too. So—what's your game?”

“Convince you—convince Jack—to dismantle the company,” I confessed on a sob. “I thought—I could convince you—to liquidate it. Go back to the teaching post you missed, just be a richer man with it, and get rid of this—this fucking—stupid destructive company—”

Bryce regarded me with hungry eyes. “That's definitely a clever idea. And a bold one. One only you could pull off.” His hand slid down from my throat to my breast, squeezing them through my blouse, toying with me.

I squirmed on his cock. “Bryce... Bryce please, fuck me,” I begged softly, shamelessly.

I had to admit, I liked the name Bryce better than Jack. Somehow, it fit him better, in a way I couldn't quite articulate. Or maybe it was just that now I was saying his real name, I was seeing who he really was, nothing held back or hidden anymore between us.

Bryce pulled his cock almost completely out of me and I whimpered at

the loss. “You know, any other person would’ve screamed and tried to get away from me.”

He slammed back into me and I cried out, shuddering with heat and pleasure. “But not you. You like this. You like the danger. You like me controlling you, dominating you.”

He bent down over me as he fucked me, drawing himself closer so that his lips were at my ear. “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to fuck you just as myself. No pretenses. So that you knew exactly who was in control of you and who was telling you what to do. You’re so used to being the cleverest person in the room. And now look at you. You’re whimpering and begging for my goddamn cock.”

I clawed at his shoulders, wrapping my legs around him, begging him with my body to keep fucking me. I could feel my orgasm building between my legs and I desperately wanted to be allowed to have it. I didn’t want him to tease me, not this time—

Bryce sealed his lips over mine and I moaned into his mouth as he kept ramming into me until the car was rocking. I wondered if anyone could see us, if anyone passing by realized what was happening. I didn’t give a damn. I felt like putty in his hands, his helpless, submissive pet.

In the back of my mind, I knew he might still hurt me. He had his own secrets too. He might even kill me. This might be a goodbye fuck, a final farewell. But this only drove my pleasure higher. I did like the danger. I did want more, and more, and more—

Bryce tightened his hand around my throat. “Come all over my fucking cock, pet,” he demanded in a deep, feral growl.

As if I could avoid obeying him. I gasped and shuddered, my heels digging into his back and my toes curling as I orgasmed, gasping for air that wasn’t coming.

Bryce groaned and fucked me even faster, losing control, and I felt the hot splash of him inside of me a moment later as he followed me over,

marking me as his—and doing it properly this time, as himself, nobody else.

I panted as he released my throat. I stared up at him, having no idea what he was going to do with me next. I was completely at his mercy. I wasn't wearing his collar, but I might as well have been for all the control he had over me.

Bryce smirked down at me, like he wanted nothing more than to see me as a total wreck. His thumb pressed down on my bottom lip, and my tongue darted out to lap at the pad of it automatically.

“What am I going to do with you?” Bryce murmured.

Hopefully fuck me again.

He pulled out of me and grabbed some tissues from the glove compartment of the car, cleaning himself up and then tossing some to me so I could take care of myself.

“How about this,” he suggested. “You want the truth? Then we'll put that clever brain of yours to work and you can earn it. If you figure it out, you get a reward. You get it wrong, you get a punishment.”

“Is the punishment my life?” I asked boldly.

Bryce chuckled and helped me out of the car. “You'd like that, wouldn't you? You like how dangerous I am.”

I shoved the hem of my skirt back down to my knees, sans underwear since he'd ruined them. “And are you dangerous?”

“Oh, very. You have no idea.” His hands slid over my curves to my ass, pulling me to him. His fingers curled under my chin, tilting it up until I was looking into his dark blue eyes. “But I don't think it would be best if you disappeared. I'm much more interested in playing with you, anyway. And playing with that pretty mind of yours specifically.”

I should've known the man liked mind games. He'd played one with me that very first night. “What do I get if I guess correctly?”

“You'll see.”

“And what do I get if I guess wrong?”

“You’ll see.”

I tugged at his shirt and he closed the car door, pressing me back up against it. He wasn’t hard again, not yet, but the hot length of his body was more than enough of a promise for me.

“How long as it been since someone satisfied you?” Bryce mused. “You’re putty in my hands the moment I take control. Has it really been that bad for you?”

I swallowed, suddenly embarrassed by how much control he had over me. How weak he made me feel, in the very best way. “It’s not—it’s not the sex. I mean it is, but.”

I found myself looking away, and in response, I felt Bryce softening, his hold on me gentling.

“You see me,” I admitted. “You see how clever I am. I even like that you saw me as a threat. Nobody else does.”

“Oh, you’re a threat, all right. But luckily I’m good at dealing with those. I wish all of them were as pleasant to handle as you are.”

Bryce sounded incredibly fond, affectionate, even, and I felt my face heating up. I didn’t want his compliments to do things to me.

Sex and games were one thing. Hell, being kinky and turned on by danger was one thing. But to actually feel soft and valued around this man? No, that was dangerous. After all, my goal was still up in smoke.

Bryce coaxed me back to looking at him. He was still smirking, but there was something soft in his eyes now. “That sounds like a loss on their part,” he said. “You’re the only one who can keep up with me. And trust me.” His voice dipped down low and chilling. “I will be finding out how you knew I wasn’t Jack. And I expect honesty.”

“What if I don’t give you honesty?” I whispered.

Bryce’s tone dropped lower and became even more dangerous than before, which I hadn’t thought was possible. “You don’t want to lie to me.”

“Not even if I want to be punished?” I was pushing his buttons, and I

knew it, but I couldn't help it. He liked it when I challenged him, and he was the first guy who liked it when I didn't back down and act flattering and demure.

Bryce's hand came up to my throat and I grabbed his wrists instinctively as he squeezed lightly. "Not. Today. You don't."

I inhaled sharply as he relaxed his grip. He was making it very clear—this wasn't a game. He wanted answers and if I didn't give them to him it wouldn't be some fun BDSM punishment. He would actually be genuinely angry.

Honestly... I appreciated him making it clear (in the sexiest goddamn way possible, by the way) that this was a hard limit for him. This wasn't about fun or about sex. I was going to cross a line, *a real line*, with him if I didn't give him the information he wanted.

"Okay," I found myself whispering in a submissive tone I'd never used before. At least not when I really meant it. "I'll be good."

"You'll be a good..." Bryce prompted me.

"A good pet," I whispered.

He groaned and his hand tightened around my throat again, like he was trying to hold himself back from fucking me right up against the side of the car. Then his hand slid away from my neck, and braced against the side of the vehicle instead. I found I missed the pressure of it.

Bryce stepped back and I shivered with a chill, only now registering how cold it was in the parking garage now that I didn't have the heat of his body against mine. Without a word, he turned and walked away, towards the elevator.

I knew what to do. I followed.

The ride up to his hotel room was silent, the both of us on either side of the elevator. I felt like there was a rubber band stretching between us, and that any moment it would snap.

The problem with snapping rubber bands was that they hurt. A lot. So the

question was—would one or both of us get hurt in this process?

The elevator doors opened silently, as if the technology itself had noticed our bubble and didn't want to burst it.

Watching Bryce as he led me down the hallway, I couldn't help but notice there was a change in him. It was like a veil had fallen away. This was even more of a commanding presence than what he'd shown me before when we'd fucked and he'd been my master. I felt like I wasn't just in the presence of a commanding leader, someone who knew how to dominate. I felt like I was in the presence of someone dangerous. Someone deadly.

It made me shiver.

Bryce entered the room and I followed—only to be grabbed and pinned to the wall, my wrists up over my head. I trembled, out of fear or anticipation, or probably some heady mixture of both.

Bryce's gaze searched my face, as if he was checking for a weapon I had hidden that he hadn't yet discovered.

He kept a hold of my wrists with one hand, then used the other to undo his tie and work it free. He slid the fabric around my wrists with a soft whisper of silk, then tied it quickly into a complicated knot. It wasn't tight enough to make me worry about losing circulation, but there was no way I could get myself out of it. My hands were thoroughly bound.

Bryce hooked his finger through the loop of the knot and used it to lead me across the room to the breakfast area. He put me down on the chair to straddle it, facing the back, and then used one of the loops on the knot he'd tied to secure me to the chair's back, keeping me anchored there.

Bryce left to go into the bedroom area of the suite and I tugged on my restraints. Unless I wanted to try and rip this chair to pieces, I wasn't going to be able to get my hands untied from it. I could feasibly get up and swing my leg around to un-straddle the chair and stand, but then I'd have a damn chair tied to me. It was a possible weapon, I supposed, if nothing else.

I sat there, trembling with anticipation. I was still clothed, I was still able

to move freely except for my hands. I could feasibly try and run away or get myself free and fight back. I was going on pure intuition in trusting this man wouldn't actually hurt me. I had no proof, especially now that I knew he wasn't who he'd claimed to be.

And yet... that was part of what thrilled me. The fact that I could be wrong.

Bryce returned with the supplies and placed them on the table, taking his time opening the case that held all of his sex toys and spreading them out. He didn't put the collar on me, and I shivered at the implications. I wasn't his pet right now. This wasn't my disciplined but benevolent master. It was a whole new game we were playing right now.

"It's such a pity you're the impatient type," Bryce mused. "Well. For you, anyway. It's good news for me."

My blood went cold, and then hot, as he pulled out a knife. I was a sitting duck as he approached me from behind.

"Don't be nervous." I could hear a chuckle in his voice.

His hand wrapped around the back of the chair from behind and yanked it forward, away from the table and putting me more in the center of the room so that I was now vulnerable on all sides. His ease and strength had me shivering again.

"It's a little hard to stay calm when you have a knife," I replied, keeping my tone cool.

The knife in question slid down between my cleavage, the flat of it against my skin, and then it twisted—and faster than I could even inhale in shock—it had sliced through the front of my bra and blouse. He trailed the knife even further down, and I didn't dare move, even to breathe, as he cut through my skirt with another sharp, deft twist.

The knife moved away, but then he could pull away all the excess fabric, too, leaving me exposed and vulnerable. I heard him moving around behind me, grabbing things, doing *something*, but there wasn't enough slack from

the restraints for me to turn and get a good look.

Then Bryce's hands were on my hips. "Lift up."

I did as I was told, and I heard him doing something with the chair...

"And now..." Bryce murmured, taking hold of my hips again and guiding me back down.

I moaned in shock as a thick, blunt object started filling me up as I was forced down onto a dildo. A dildo that felt familiar, actually...

"You can get these modeled after your own dick," Bryce mused, as if reading my mind. "What can I say, I'm a bit of a possessive guy when it comes to my cock."

I panted as gravity forced me to sink further and further down onto the dildo, until it was almost completely inside of me.

Bryce stroked my bare thighs—out of affection or to tease me, I wasn't sure. "Now." His lips brushed my ear as he spoke. "You're going to tell me everything you know and what you're doing here. If you're not honest with me, I will leave this room for an hour. And you won't like what happens while I'm gone."

I jolted and let out an involuntary squeak as the dildo inside of me began to vibrate. *Oh no, oh God no oh fuck oh fuck—*

"You'll be right on the edge. For an hour." Bryce's hands slid up to cup my bare breasts, massaging them not so much for me, but for himself, like he was enjoying feeling them.

That was the difference, I realized with a shudder. Before, he had been doing things for both of us. Now, he was only after his own goal, and toying with my body however he wanted to. It was all about him using me and getting the information he wanted in the process.

A whimper escaped me. I could sense Bryce's smirk.

There was no way I would survive being edged for an hour. It would be pure torture. And there'd be no guarantee of an orgasm at the end of it. Once he came back, he'd start the interrogations all over again. I'd be nothing but a

sobbing, incoherent mess.

Which might only lead to more punishment.

“Did they teach you this strategy at the Pentagon?” I asked, trying to hazard a guess under the guise of sass.

Frankly, I highly doubted the U.S. intelligence agencies used this kind of particular tactic to get information but that didn’t mean he hadn’t learned the basic principles there. I was starting to lean towards some kind of military or intelligence training for Bryce.

I was sure criminals found their own ways to get what they wanted, but immediately having a plan of interrogation ready to go? Criminals didn’t generally interrogate each other, or at least not that I was aware of, unless you were some kind of mob boss who needed to know who the mole was. Bryce wasn’t mafia, though. Mafia men didn’t work alone and nothing he’d done was pushing the company into the hands of organized crime.

No, interrogation techniques instead of just ham-fisted threats and tying me up? His calm manner like he’d done this, or something like it, a hundred times before? That felt like the military to me.

Bryce laughed and pulled away. “You’re a smart one, but I’m asking the questions right now. Let’s save yours until the end of the lesson.”

The vibrator turned up higher and I cried out, squirming. “Bryce...”

He didn’t say anything. I couldn’t see him, couldn’t even hear him breathing. My hips gyrated onto the vibrator instinctively, sinking down further and further onto it. I yanked at the knot around my wrists uselessly.

I was completely trapped.

Moans spilled from my mouth as I was stuck with this unrelenting, thick cock inside of me and the vibrations against my clit and my inner walls. It felt like my entire body was shaking with the force of it. Maybe it was. I was headed for climax, I could feel it, washing over me like the morning sun—

The vibrations stopped. “No!” I tugged at my restraints, my pussy throbbing as my orgasm faded out of reach. “You said you’d ask me

questions, please, please you said—”

“Oh, that’s right, I did say that,” Bryce mused.

The vibrations started up again. They built and built, delicious pressure in my core winding tighter and tighter...

My orgasm was inevitable. I couldn’t stave it off. The vibrations, and the thick cock pressing up everywhere inside of me, was too much. I couldn’t think about anything else, couldn’t distract myself or breathe through it. Every part of me was focused on the pleasure I was experiencing.

Right as it approached—

It all cut off.

I cried out. “Bryce *please*, I’m not going to lie to you I promise. You have to let me come—”

“I don’t have to let you do anything, actually.” Bryce’s voice was dangerously silky as he threaded his fingers through my hair, gripped the strands, and yanked my head back until I was looking up at him. “Now that you’ve got a taste, who are you really?”

“I’m an environment activist,” I blurted out. The vibrations started up again, on a torturously low setting, scrambling my thoughts. “I... fuck, *fuck*... I’ve been working to oppose Lawton Industries and get them out of areas for years... I document the damage they do to the forests and to the local towns... they’re terrible for the environment and they’re terrible for small businesses and families.”

“So why are you here?”

The vibrations kicked up a notch. I found myself rocking my hips, desperately seeking more friction as I tried to get the words out. “To—to try and—s-seduce Jack, the new—owner, he was naïve and new nothing—I created fake credentials—I was going to convince him to break up the company and go back to being a fucking philosophy professor.”

“What a pity you got me instead.” Bryce’s smirk was clear in his voice as he finally released my hair. “I have no doubt that gorgeous body of yours

would've had him doing whatever you wanted after one night together. And that would've bored you to tears, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," I moaned. It would have. I had expected Jack to be the same guy that most were and just submit to me, and even if he didn't submit in bed, he'd be boring about it and then submit to me in every other way that mattered.

It would've been easy. But I got Bryce instead.

Why was it that made me happy? I was no closer to my goal, a very important goal, but I didn't mind that. I was glad that I'd met Bryce and was dealing with him instead.

Bryce's walked around to stand in front of me. "What about Bill and Rebecca?"

"She was too nosy," I confessed, my thighs shaking as the vibrations increased once again. "I needed her away from you and not seeing me as a threat. She thinks I'm going to tell you—bad business ideas—so I encouraged her to give you other ones—ones that will stretch the company too thin and squander resources because she's trying to prove herself to you. Bill—I can control him."

"You and your pretty breasts and pouting mouth and sexy legs," Bryce mused, his heated gaze raking across my bare chest. "Were you going to sleep with him?"

"N-no," I blurted out. "No, never, just flirting with him, keeping him friendly. He's not my type."

The tension in Bryce's body seemed to ease. Normally I would have smirked and fired off a comment about Bryce being jealous, but I couldn't gather enough breath for it. I was being kept right in that in-between spot where I was turned on enough to crave orgasm, but not nearly enough to be approaching it.

"So that's it? You just wanted to fuck Jack into destroying this company?"

“It had to be destroyed from the inside. Nothing else was working. And with his uncle gone—I wouldn’t get another chance. If I waited then he might listen to someone else.”

“And you didn’t make that happen?” Bryce asked, his voice taking on a hardened edge. “You didn’t get the uncle out of the way so the nephew could take over and you could manipulate him?”

“What?” I frowned at Bryce. My head was fuzzy with endorphins and pleasure, but also with confusion. “No, none of us even knew that Jack was the beneficiary, it was a massive surprise—Bryce, please, come on, I’m so damn close, please, I need it—”

“You’ll get an orgasm when I decide. *If* I decide,” Bryce replied.

His tone was so calm and authoritative I wanted to scream—with arousal? With frustration? Both? “I didn’t do anything to Jack’s uncle!” I insisted.

“And were you going to do anything after you convinced Jack to dismantle the company?”

“I was going to disappear,” I replied. “Lay low for a few months. Maybe travel. Then go back to my activism.”

Bryce ran his fingers through my hair again, petting idly as the vibrator buzzed in me and I fucked myself onto it in spite of myself. It just felt so *good*, I couldn’t resist, even if it just continued the torture.

“How’d you figure out I wasn’t who I claimed to be?” Bryce’s voice was sharp.

“I snuck onto your computer,” I confessed. “I—I saw—you had an email account under the name Bryce but I couldn’t see who you were sending it to—another dummy account—I tried looking at your work computer too—and I saw on your laptop you were running checks on employees—ah, ah *ah*—”

“Clever girl.” Bryce said it as if to himself, like he forgot I could hear him. He tugged sharply on my hair. “Anything else you want to tell me?”

“No,” I moaned. Tears of frustration slid freely down my face. “There’s nothing else, please, *please* I swear there’s nothing else Bryce. Please let me

come. I'll be so good . . . just let me come just—let me—”

“All right,” Bryce said, and the vibrations increased.

I cried out as my body was wracked with sensation and I thrust down wildly onto the dildo, fucking myself on it as it buzzed away, filling me with pleasure. I sobbed, tears leaking free from the corners of my eyes as I came.

My body seized up. My mouth fell open, strangled, choked noises escaping me until Bryce finally turned the vibrations off. I slumped down, still impaled on the dildo, my body shaking and clit pulsing with aftershocks. My head fell forward and I rested my forehead onto the back of the chair. I was panting like I'd run a 400-meter dash.

“Very good.” Bryce's hand ran through my hair again, much gentler this time.

“Who are *you*?” I whispered. “You owe me that. You owe me the truth.”

“I suppose you're right.”

But instead of saying anything more, Bryce unhooked my hands from where he'd secured them against the front of the chair. Leaving them still bound, he lifted me off the dildo, and I moaned as that thick cock slid free. Then, he lowered me onto my knees and stood in front of me. The huge bulge of his cock against his slacks was obscene. In spite of everything, I found my mouth watering.

Bryce undid his pants slowly, releasing his erection. “Go on.”

I understood. If I gave him what he wanted and was good and obedient, he'd give me what I wanted.

Leaning forward, I licked the precum off the head of his cock and then stroked my tongue down the shaft. He was already throbbing and fully hard. He'd been turned on that much by what he was doing to me. I couldn't find it in me to feel any anger or regret over what had just happened. I found it all far too sexy. And the fact that he'd actually been affected by it, that it had done something to him to watch me go through that—it filled me with pride and pleasure.

“Good pet.” Bryce’s hands slid into my hair, gently guiding me to take him into my mouth, pushing himself deep enough that I choked on his cock before he gave me just enough room to breathe through my nose. “I’m impressed you guessed the government. But you’re always figuring things out, aren’t you? I should’ve expected you to have a way to hack onto my laptop. I figured the password protection would be enough but you had some sort of override, I’m guessing.”

I moaned around his cock in confirmation as he continued to fuck my mouth.

“And I’m also guessing that you now suspect that the death of Jack’s uncle wasn’t by natural causes. Or we suspect it wasn’t.”

I hummed again as I bobbed my head up and down on his cock, keeping my jaw relaxed.

“Yeah, good girl.” Bryce groaned, his cock pulsing against my tongue. “I’m trying to find that out. Jack hired me to cover for him to keep sharks like you away while he figured out what he wanted to do with the company. Only none of them were supposed to be as smart as you are... mmm...”

He began to thrust shallowly into my mouth. I relaxed my jaw and let him face fuck me, swallowing periodically around his cock, tightening my throat.

“I’m trying to figure out if something happened to him. If it was a murder... fuck it was an elegant one... simple...” Bryce thrust harder, deeper into my mouth. “Fuck, yes, you’re so damn good at this. I wasn’t going to sleep with any of them but *you*... I just couldn’t resist.”

He chuckled darkly and I felt a thrill rush through me. Not just pride that I had been good enough for him, or that I’d impressed him because he’d broken the rules for me, but also because of the tone in his voice. Like he was delighted by me.

“And I was government, for the record. Military, like you said.” Bryce sighed as he slowly dragged his dick along my tongue before thrusting to the back of my throat. “Fuck yeah... gonna come right down that perfect throat

of yours... I work independently now, though, for a security firm. Mmm... and it took me this long to realize there was something going on with you, which isn't usually the case. Congratulations, baby."

I wasn't doing the work now. With his fingers pressed against my scalp, I let him use my mouth, *use me*. Bryce's grip tightened on my hair, and with a low, rumbling growl he spilled down my throat, some of it leaking out of the corners of my mouth. I moaned, swallowing as best I could. The timing of his ejaculation, along with his words, made it sound almost like his orgasm was a sardonic gift.

It made me feel used in that way that I loved.

Bryce pulled his cock out of my mouth but I leaned forward, licking and sucking it clean before settling back. Bryce looked... not proud of me, not like he had after our other sessions. Instead he looked...

He looked relieved, honestly. Like a weight I hadn't even realized he was carrying around was now off his shoulders. I had met him while he was carrying it, and so I'd just thought that was part of how he was. Now I saw a new side to him, a more open and honest side, and one that I liked.

Bryce curled his fingers under my chin to lift my head up and admire the mess that he'd made of my face. I dragged my tongue over my lips, cleaning them off, which made his eyes darken even more.

"Did I pass?" I asked, my voice a bit mocking. I couldn't resist a bit of snark, even after everything.

Bryce smirked. "Do you want a proper fucking, pet?"

I knew that was all the answer I was going to get. "Yes, Master."

I had passed.

I was safe.

CHAPTER 16



Bryce

*I*t was satisfaction like I'd never felt before, to put Leigh through that erotic form of torture, to watch her be pushed to her limit and be so, so good for me.

The right thing to do would've been to actually interrogate her. To intimidate her if I had to, but to stay calm above all else. But with Leigh...

It was personal, in a way. I had underestimated her and let her in, slept with her when I shouldn't have, and I couldn't control myself. I wanted all of her secrets and I wanted her to be punished for lying to me and I wanted her to be mine.

But Leigh had performed beautifully. She hadn't sassed or kept things from me. She'd been a good, obedient girl. Watching her writhe on the dildo had been so fucking hot, and I'd reveled in it.

I wasn't ashamed to admit it. I'd been tougher on her than I would ever be normally. I wouldn't usually punish a submissive like this and make such strong demands. I wasn't in the business of breaking my sex partners. But I couldn't deny it had gotten me so goddamn hard I'd just about lost my mind.

It had taken every piece of self-control in me not to give in and fuck her throat while she was still tied to the chair on the vibrator.

And I'd meant what I'd threatened. I would have left her there, edging her for an hour until she was a sobbing mess. I wouldn't have liked it. But I would have done it. I would've done whatever I had to do to make sure my client was taken care of and protected like I'd promised—to ensure that Leigh had nothing to do with Jack's uncle's death. If I didn't have my honor and my reputation, then I had nothing.

As a reward, I fucked her afterwards on the bed. I kept things slow at first, so that I didn't push her too far, but when I saw that she was okay, that she *wanted* more, I ramped up my efforts, taking her hard and rough, pinning her down like she preferred, and enjoyed every second of her crying out my name—my real name.

It was a good thing I'd always had her call me 'master' before because I wouldn't have been able to handle hearing her beg and cry out for Jack.

There was a relief that I hadn't expected, with her knowing who I really was. I felt freer. Normally I didn't care if the women I slept with knew anything about me, although I could admit that actively pretending to be someone else was a new one for me.

Afterwards, while we were lying in bed, I was able to tell her everything.

"My security company was started by my two other friends and myself," I said, opening up about my part in this case. "When Jack learned about his uncle's death and that the bottle of pills had been moved out of their usual place, he thought it might be malicious. And he didn't trust the sharks who'd be around him. He wanted me to clear the way."

"And I was one of those sharks." Leigh smirked at me, her red hair spilling out behind her onto the pillow, her face propped up on one hand.

She was fucking gorgeous. And she looked so natural in my bed, even if 'my' bed was currently a hotel room.

"You were the Great White," I said with a snort.

“Were you supposed to sleep with me?” Leigh asked, her voice low and husky. “I mean—you didn’t have an assignment, obviously, but it feels like you kind of did the opposite of keeping the shark away with me.”

“You were just too much fun,” I admitted, reaching out and brushing back a stray strand of hair on her cheek. “And I figured that you were dangerous so I thought keeping you close would be a smart idea, so I could keep an eye on you.”

That was true, but there was another part to the equation. I had just wanted her. I’d wanted her so fucking badly and after I’d slept with her that obsession had only gotten worse.

Leigh grinned at me, like she knew what I wasn’t saying. “You can just admit I’m amazing, that’s okay.”

“You’re dangerous, that’s for sure,” I murmured. “I liked watching you manipulate people. I could tell you were up to something and I was curious enough about your motives to keep you in my sights . . . and in my bed.”

Leigh blushed, to my surprise. “I’ve never been called dangerous before.”

“Clearly, most people underestimate you and don’t see how clever you are.”

“Well.” Leigh propped herself up on the pillows, blushing even more deeply, which I found endearing. “What’s the plan now, then? Now that I’ve... complicated things.”

“I should ask you that,” I said directly. “Are you going to just... leave?”

Leigh bit her lip and looked away. “I’m not sure. I... I don’t want to just leave you. I’m curious how this story ends. What you find out about Jack’s uncle. And I guess I don’t like the idea of abandoning my project even if I don’t know what to do with it now.”

I did feel bad. Crazy enough, I agreed with Leigh’s plan. I admired her sense of honor and her commitment to a worthy cause. She was clearly the type who would stop at nothing to achieve her goals. The world needed more people like her. And I had no doubt that she would’ve succeeded in seducing

Jack and convincing him to do what she wanted had he really been here.

“We’ll figure it out,” I reassured her.

Leigh scoffed, amused. “Right, because you’re going to let your client be duped by me so that he can destroy his entire company.”

I didn’t have an answer to that, so I said nothing.

Leigh grew serious, a small frown forming between her brows. “Do you have any idea about... Jack’s uncle?”

I sighed. “Well, he had no shortage of people who would’ve been happy to murder him, at least in theory. But it’s one thing to want someone to die and another thing to actually do it. And the nature of the murder means it was someone who was over at his house frequently and knew his personal life. They knew where the medication was, and they knew what it was for.”

Her expression turned thoughtful. “Sounds like a pretty short list.”

“Well, unless you consider how he couldn’t keep a boyfriend for more than a few months, then it gets long again.”

Leigh groaned. “So, what, we just wait and see if someone tries to seduce and/or try to kill you as Jack so they get the company?”

“Probably,” I admitted. “I’m going to have to get more aggressive, and scare the person into revealing themselves.”

“Sounds risky and dangerous,” Leigh pointed out.

“That’s why I do it.”

She grinned at me, her stare lingering on my face while the room grew quiet.

“What?” I finally asked.

Leigh shrugged. “You’re just sexy, that’s all.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Oh, thank God, with all the sex we were having I was worried for a second that you weren’t attracted to me...”

She hit me with a pillow. I laughed, and ignored the fact that I was trusting her, letting her in, and just hanging out with her, laughing and chatting and sharing intimate, personal things—and that I wanted to keep

doing it.

It didn't mean anything. We were just having fun. I was just relieved that I was now able to be myself around someone for the first time in weeks, that was all.

Or so I kept telling myself.

CHAPTER 17



Leigh

You'd think, with my plan up in smoke, that I would've been upset the next day. Shockingly, I wasn't.

Honestly, I felt lighthearted. Giddy, even, and excited. I wanted to help Bryce figure out what was going on with the company, and I was just... I was glad that Bryce and I knew the truth about each other. And we were still together.

Well, not together, *together*, that would be ridiculous. But we were still fucking, still a team, and a *genuine* team this time.

I didn't know what to do with myself now, but in the meantime, I did want to help Bryce figure out his part of the plan. And maybe—in the process—I could meet the real Jack and persuade him to my original idea somehow. I could pivot. I could figure this out. I had infiltrated this company and everyone except for Bryce still bought my cover. I could find a way to make that work.

And Bryce hadn't said anything about ratting me out to Jack, firing me, or stopping any of the changes I had made at the company. I would just have to

wait for my opportunity. In the meantime, we could work on Bryce's aspect of things. Honestly, I felt it helped me. I couldn't get to Jack until the man decided what he wanted to do with his damn company and showed up, and that wouldn't happen until he felt safe, which meant... well...

Finding a killer, essentially.

Bryce wanted me to look into the various secretaries that had been hired for Byron Lawton to see if any of them were suspicious, while he poked the bear that was the board of trustees. Which included Weston, who if you asked me was the one most likely to off his former friend. But I was happy to eliminate the various boyfriends from the suspect list.

When I arrived at the top floor, Bryce was already off doing his end of things, but I headed straight for his office to start work on the list and plan the interviews. Bill was at his desk, tap-tap-tapping away on the computer with a look of focus on his face.

He looked up as I walked up and waved hello.

I smiled at Bill as I approached. I found that my heart was steady, rather than racing with nerves. Maybe it was that I wasn't in this deception alone anymore. I had a partner, and one who was used to this kind of thing, someone who was an expert on mind games and subterfuge. It wasn't all on me anymore.

"Leigh." Bill smiled and stood up. "How're you doing?"

"Great. How are you liking your new position?" I walked past him into Jack's office as Bill followed.

"Jack's a great boss and I hear he's willing to actually listen to employee ideas," Bill said with enthusiasm. "It could turn this company around if he picks the right ones."

"It sure could. That's our goal." I leaned back against the desk, smiling at him. "I'm sure that he'll listen to you since you'll be at his side all the time."

Nothing wrong with buttering the guy up a bit.

"That's what I'm hoping."

Bill's gaze dropped down my body briefly and oh, I could see where this was going. I had been flirty with him, but I would have to be careful not to lead him on too much. I didn't want to give him hope.

"Well." I straightened up. "I'll let you get back to your work. I just wanted to chat with Jack about something but if he's not available..."

"Oh, well, since I have you here," Bill said quickly, "I wanted to thank you for helping me get this promotion. Are you free for dinner tonight? I'd like to take you out."

It could be, on the surface, just an expression of gratitude. But I knew the undertone he was going for. "That's so sweet of you, but you don't owe me anything."

"Still, I'd like to have some time with you, and thank you," Bill said, tacking the last part on.

Yeah, I was sure he wanted to "thank me". Not that I didn't appreciate such a gesture. Bill was sweet but I wasn't interested in him in general and... unfortunately... I was starting to suspect Bill could be one hundred percent my type and it wouldn't matter to me anyway. Not when I had Bryce fulfilling my every desire and being the kind of man that I'd not even thought would exist for me.

"I appreciate it," I said, still keeping my posture casual and a smile on my face. "But I'm going to just have a quiet night to myself. It's been a lot of work helping Jack out the last week."

There was a temptation for sure to say I was 'busy' or that I 'had plans' already, but I didn't want Bill thinking that he had a chance as long as I was free, or that he just had to fight off some other competition. Bryce could be out of the picture and it wouldn't make a difference.

Bill smiled at me like we shared a secret. "C'mon, Leigh, you and I both know what's going on here. I'm just not interested in waiting around forever. I like to cut to the chase."

"You're now the secretary of my boss," I pointed out. "I've been

contracted by him. That would be a conflict of interest. I love a good flirtation as much as the next person, but I just feel that Jack might not like it if we're involved. It wouldn't be professional."

Bill snorted. "My boss can't say what I do in my personal life."

"Maybe not, but it doesn't stop him or anyone else in this office from having an opinion. And I don't want to ruin my reputation by making people at a very powerful company think I'll promote people out of nepotism. If we get involved, that's what will likely happen. They'll think I helped get you this job because we're sleeping together."

"So you'd be up for it if we weren't working together?" Bill hazarded.

"No," Bryce drawled, leaning against the doorframe. "She wouldn't be up for it."

It felt like the temperature in the room dropped. A shiver ran up my spine as I looked around Bill to take in Bryce standing there. He looked like a wolf who'd just come upon some scavenger eating his kill.

Bryce's gaze pierced me. "You okay?"

"Yes." It took everything in me not to let my legs buckle and to reveal in my voice just how much I wanted to submit to him. I felt like my bones wanted to melt and it took all of my mental focus to keep myself solid, that was how thoroughly he made me want to submit.

It was exhilarating.

Bryce turned his attention to Bill. I had to admit it was really nice to see the flash of jealousy in his eyes. If anyone else had been so possessive I would've been annoyed. But anyone else would've just been jealous because they wanted to fuck me. Bryce knew who I really was. Bryce liked me as a person, even if he probably didn't feel whatever weird attachment I was feeling to him.

He wasn't jealous because I was a good pair of legs. He was jealous because we worked well together. Because he liked me and knew me. And that, to my surprise, had butterflies erupting in my stomach.

Bill looked like he wanted to sink into the floor.

“I’m excited to work with you, Bill,” Bryce said. “I hope you’ll stay focused on that and not let other things divert your attention.”

“Of course not, Mr. Lawton,” Bill said quickly.

“There’s some emails that need answering. Why don’t you get on that?”

Bill nodded, still looking a bit sick, and hurried out of the room. Bryce stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

The moment the door was closed, his demeanor changed. The last bit of lazy confidence fled him and he stalked towards me, grabbing me and hauling me to him, kissing me passionately. I grabbed onto his suit, the fabric crumpling under my fingers, gasping as his tongue slid into my mouth. My knees buckled at last and it was only Bryce’s arm around my waist that saved me from melting to the floor at his feet.

“That man is *lucky*,” Bryce growled, shoving me back onto the desk, “that he still knows me as Jack.”

His mouth was like a brand, kissing down my neck, shoving my blouse out of the way so that he could scrape his teeth over my skin.

“No marks,” I gasped out.

“Trust me, I know.” Bryce’s voice was still low and rumbling, animalistic. “The moment this stupid charade is over, everyone is going to know that you’re *mine*.”

His words sent a thrill through me. I whimpered as I felt him getting hard against my thigh, and automatically spread my legs to make room for him in between. “I want you to.”

On the one hand, I could appreciate that he knew the weird position we were in. We couldn’t make it known that we were sleeping together, or else that would just make me look like I’d gotten the job because of sex. It would definitely give Bill reason to badmouth me out of jealousy, that was sure.

On the other hand, I had wanted Bryce to storm across the room and kiss me in front of Bill and everyone else. I wanted Bill and every other man out

there to know that they weren't good enough for me, and that I already had a man who filled my every desire.

We only had to keep this up for a little longer. Just a little longer, and we could be openly together.

God, that made me sound like Juliet Capulet. This wasn't some crazy star-crossed forbidden romance. I just didn't want to hide how turned on I was for this man—or that I was getting to sleep with the sexiest, most capable guy in town. The fact that I now knew Bryce was keeping himself on a leash in order to play the role of Jack... I couldn't wait to see him unleashed, and to see everyone else see him as his true self.

I hooked my ankles around Bryce's thighs to bring him closer, arching as he continued to kiss along my throat. We were finally getting to do what we had gotten interrupted doing the other day, and I had no intention of someone stopping us now.

"Who do you belong to?" Bryce demanded, his voice rough from forcing himself to stay quiet instead of growling it as loudly as he wanted to.

I shivered, my toes curling in my heels. "Yours."

There was a part of my mind that set off an alarm. *He didn't call you pet, he didn't ask whose pet you are, this isn't a scene, this isn't a game.*

But I was too wrapped up in my arousal to really care in the moment. What did it matter? I liked that I was his. I liked that he was jealous and wished he could openly claim me.

I hadn't realized how alone I was, and how unappreciated I felt, until I had gotten wrapped up in Bryce.

Every stray thought I had was pushed aside as Bryce literally swept aside some of the items on his desk, careful not to knock anything over, but enough to give him the room to push me onto my back and shove my skirt up around my hips. God, I was glad I'd chosen to wear a looser skirt today than last time.

We kept kissing, as if Bryce needed to have his mouth on mine to keep

him from doing something stupid like giving me a hickey I couldn't explain. I whimpered as his tongue stroked against mine, his hands sliding down my body like he was marking his territory.

Over the years, a lot of men had wanted to claim me. None of them had satisfied me. Now that I found one who had, it was all I wanted Bryce to do.

Bryce tore his mouth away from me and moved down to his knees between my legs. I shuddered as he yanked my panties down and off, and as I realized what he was doing, my heart started racing.

He dove straight between my thighs like some kind of animal, licking and sucking at my clit and every other part of me like he was on a timer.

I gripped the edge of the desk until my knuckles were white, shuddering at his expertise. Bryce was a deliberate man, one who had proven to me time and again that he was willing to take things at his own pace. He was the one teaching me patience, after all. But he was completely different now.

My hand nearly flew into his hair before I remembered myself and I gripped the desk harder instead. He hiked my legs over his shoulders as his hands dug into my ass, lifting my hips up so he could eat me out even more thoroughly.

I bit my lip in an attempt to hold back my cry of pleasure. Bryce knew what the fuck he was doing. My vision blurred as lust shot through me again and again, like spurts of flame up my spine. My legs started to shake, my breath stuttering in my chest.

Oh, God, this was too much, I was going to come and so fucking fast—

Bryce scraped his teeth over my clit, giving me that hint of danger and pain, and I found myself shaking apart into an orgasm that felt like it came from the depths of my soul. I inhaled sharply, but it felt like I wasn't getting enough air to breathe.

And still, Bryce didn't stop.

He kept going, like he wanted to eat every bit of me, catch every drop that spilled from my body. His tongue thrust and twisted inside of me and I had to

clap a hand over my mouth to keep myself quiet. I felt like I couldn't catch a full breath.

Bryce's fingers dug into my ass, holding me in place and closer than before so that he could drag his cheek against my hot, slick folds, making me feel the stubble.

My eyes rolled back into my head and I came a second time, biting down on my hand as my entire body shook at the intensity of the pleasure surging through me. Oh, fuck, that felt so good. Not just the orgasm, although that was amazing, but feeling just how desperate he was for me to come, feeling how much he wanted me to orgasm and how much he wanted to devour me.

Bryce continued licking at me as I whimpered and twitched with each pass of his tongue. He had a self-satisfied gleam in his eyes as he looked up at me from between my legs, and I felt like I was prey that had just been felled by a ravenous wolf.

Something on my face must have shown my pure bliss, or perhaps my overwhelm and shock, because Bryce surged forward and kissed me, hot and deep. I could taste myself on his tongue as I licked into his mouth. Bryce's hands seemed glued to my skin, and I was impatient as hell—I wanted him inside of me.

I yanked at his pants, undoing them in record speed and pulling his cock out. He was hot and thick in my hand, already slick from how much he'd been leaking. How we were going to deal with the wet spot on the fabric of his pants was a problem for later as I guided him into me.

The head of his shaft lined up against my entrance, and without any hesitation he grabbed my hips, pulled me to the edge of the desk, and slammed all the way inside. I gasped, my body clenching down instinctively around the cock now filling me up.

“Yes,” I hissed. I dug my heel into Bryce's back, my heel falling off in the process, leaving me barefoot. “Fuck me, Bryce, *fuck me.*”

A ripple of satisfaction ran through his body. He really did like it when I

called him by his real name. Honestly? It turned me on to do it, too.

I clawed at his shoulders as he rutted into me, and thank fuck the desk was sturdy enough that it didn't shake, because Bryce wasn't holding back. If we were in a bed the headboard would be banging against the wall.

Bryce's mouth landed on my throat, planting desperate, sucking kisses onto every bit of my skin he could reach. I could feel the prick of his teeth now and again, and the slight burn of his stubble—never enough to actually leave a mark, but just enough to make me shiver with the danger of it. It was like he was holding himself barely in check from marking me, and that had my pleasure skyrocketing.

Anyone could walk in on us. Bryce hadn't locked the door. In fact I wasn't even sure it had a lock and I sure wasn't going to double-check right now. Bill or anyone else could decide they had a question or were entitled to a moment of Jack Lawton's time.

I wasn't one for exhibitionism. I didn't actually want anyone to watch us. But the idea that we could get caught, the thrill of possibly being in trouble and causing a scandal ... I had to admit it added to the sexiness of it all.

I arched my hips in time with his thrusts, but I was mostly holding on for dear life, caught up in the wild ride. Bryce was almost out of control, and that line between his desire to fuck me good and hard and the thin thread of control he still held onto was the sexiest thing I'd ever experienced.

Bryce kissed me hungrily and my nails scratched down his back and shoulders as he chased his desire. It was so fucking hot. I'd been with men who thought 'dominating' me meant just fucking me like we were in a porn video. That was the only tool in their arsenal, and it was annoying as hell.

This was different. This was after I had seen Bryce's careful restraint and his perfect, controlled dominance. To feel him let loose and chase his high, to own me and use me... it was overwhelming and intoxicating.

"Come in me," I begged, my mouth hot against his ear. I nipped at the curve of it. "Come in me, Bryce, *Bryce*, please..."

Bryce groaned quietly and his body shook as he emptied into me. I felt it happen, hot and claiming, and I came again as if my pleasure was tied to his. I whimpered, biting down hard on my own lip to stifle my noises or keep myself from biting onto his shoulder and marking the fabric.

My body felt like it was in the throes of an earthquake. Holy mother of God. I'd never felt like this when having sex before.

There was a sense of recklessness and connection that I'd just never felt before. Even after we'd come, Bryce sealed his mouth to mine again and kissed me, and we just... kept kissing. Like we just had to keep touching each other. It wasn't one-sided, either. Whatever he was feeling, I felt too. I wanted to keep him close and keep kissing him. To have my hands all over him, to have him inside of me.

I had no idea how long we kissed for, but eventually the franticness faded into something softer, and the kisses became lingering. My hands framed his face, and my legs unwound from around his waist.

After what felt like an age, Bryce pulled back and rested our foreheads together. We breathed together, in a small bubble of peace.

I wanted to do something stupid like smile and giggle like a teenager, my heart feeling oddly light. I didn't know what to do with it.

The *beep, beep, beep* of a phone alarm had us both shooting up and fumbling with our clothes. My heart raced as it took me a second to realize we hadn't actually been caught, and my face felt like it was on fire. It wasn't even so much the sex that had me embarrassed. I felt like I'd been caught naked. Not nude, not sexy, but *naked*—like I had been napping in the bathtub. Vulnerable. Soft.

But nothing had been going on. We'd just been taking a breath after sex. That was normal, that was typical, it wasn't anything special.

So why did it feel like it was?

I grabbed some tissues out of the desk to clean up as Bryce found his phone and silenced the alarm. "I have a meeting." He sounded oddly

breathless, like he'd been knocked off his balance, which wasn't at all like the Bryce I knew.

"Of course," I said, although that didn't make any sense as a response. "Here."

We cleaned up quickly, and made sure we each looked presentable.

"Great, thanks," he finished, and then, before he left—he kissed me on the corner of my mouth, like he'd been unsure if he should kiss me full on the lips or on my cheek so he'd settled for something in between.

I stared after Bryce as he hurried out of the office, leaving the door open behind him. Bill wasn't at the desk, thank God. Probably still hiding from embarrassment until I was gone. But I was glad, because it meant I could just let myself stare for a moment in shock.

What was going on? What had just happened?

And why was my heart still racing?

CHAPTER 18



Bryce

That was an incredibly stupid decision to fuck Leigh on my desk, in my office where anyone could walk in, but I just couldn't help myself.

I hadn't even thought about Bill as a threat when Leigh had suggested him for the position as Jack's secretary. He was younger than me by a few years, hell, younger than Leigh too, a bit wet behind the ears. Leigh certainly wasn't going to be dumping me for him.

Not that we were together as a couple. There was nothing to 'dump'.

So to see Bill trying to ask her out on a date was a surprise. I hadn't thought he'd have the nerve for it, honestly. But then to see him ignoring her polite attempts to explain why it was a bad idea?

That made my blood boil.

I tried not to intervene. I tried to keep my growing agitation to myself and just wait it out. But I couldn't stay silent any longer. I didn't just want to rebuke him. I wanted to grab him by the throat and inform him that Leigh was *my* woman and he'd better fucking respect her. Leigh deserved better than a man refusing to listen to her polite hints, and she deserved to have

someone stepping in to protect her.

But aside from all of my noble intentions to help Leigh and keep Bill respecting her... there was also just that feeling of anger that someone was trying to move in on what was mine.

I couldn't help but feel that if I wasn't still trapped in this stupid role as Jack Lawton, trying to find out information, Bill would never fucking try this. He and everyone else would know that Leigh was mine, and I didn't share. I wouldn't have to hide our relationship, because there wouldn't be anything inappropriate about it. Everyone would know better than to try and make a move on my girl.

The grip of my possessiveness overtook me the moment the door was closed and I let it sweep me away. I couldn't show it to Bill, of course. I couldn't even do *that*. I had to just act like my only concern was for the appropriateness of the workplace and Bill respecting Leigh's wishes, and that drove me even more wild.

I couldn't stop touching her, kissing her, and the next thing I knew I was fucking her like an animal. Leigh encouraged me with whispered pleas and soft moans and whimpers, trying desperately to keep her voice down as I rutted into her.

The temptation to bite her and give her a hickey was so strong that I felt I nearly cracked my teeth clenching my jaw and holding myself back. I wanted to make it so that everyone knew that Leigh belonged to someone, even if I wasn't with her. I wanted people to know she was off-limits and they had no chance with her.

When I came inside of her, it felt like triumph. Leigh clung to me, shaking in her orgasm, like she was overwhelmed. Like she didn't want to let me go.

I realized I didn't want to let her go, either.

There hadn't been anything about the dominant and submissive relationship in what we'd just done. I'd felt jealous and I'd fucked her hard

the second I got the opportunity. Then I kissed her, like it meant something. Because it did mean something.

After the elation and other emotions faded, I realized what I'd just done. How out of control I'd just been. I knew I should pull away, I should maybe even apologize—but Leigh kissed me, and I got lost in it, and her.

That wasn't the same, either. We hadn't just lazily kissed like this before. I noticed the irony of the two of us having deep romantic kisses and intimate comedown from the sex happening in my damn office (or rather, Jack's office that I was stealing) rather than all the times we'd been in my hotel room with a luxurious bed nearby.

I should pull away and put distance between us. This was too much. I wasn't the guy who got emotionally involved. I was the guy who had a fun sexy time and then moved on to the next woman.

I didn't get sucked in, I didn't *do* jealousy.

Yet here I was.

We kissed, and kept kissing, until it all turned lazy and relaxed. That was a problem, too. I knew it was. There was a very active part of me screaming internally that this was all a big fucking mess that I shouldn't get lost in, a massive forest where I might not find my way out—but I still ignored all the warnings.

I was a man who liked a little danger. I wouldn't be in this job otherwise. But this wasn't the kind of danger I should be giving into.

Thank fuck for the damn phone alarm. It shocked me back into my senses.

We cleaned ourselves up, and I made excuses for why I was late to the meeting, and then—I found myself leaning in to kiss Leigh again.

Her mouth would be too intimate. Her cheek would be too domestic. I ended up kissing the corner of her mouth like the idiot I wasn't.

What the actual fuck.

As I hurried to the meeting, my mind was completely elsewhere. I didn't

do this. I didn't get all... cozy and distracted. I was focused on my goal, always.

I needed Jack to hurry the fuck up and get here. I needed to close my case. I needed to get the hell away from all of this and screw my head on straight so that I could get some fucking focus again.

The meeting passed by in a blur while I operated on autopilot. At the end of it, David hung back, looking at me with concern.

“Hey, are you feeling okay?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah, fine.” I smiled politely, casually.

“Okay.” A slight frown marred his brows. “You just seem a million miles away.”

It seemed that while his father wanted to hit me over the head with his disapproval, David was taking more of a buddy-buddy approach with me. Possibly to exert his influence on me, figuring you got more flies with honey.

“Just a bit distracted,” I said to explain away my lack of focus during the meeting. “There's so much to think about, all these projects going on.”

“Yeah.” David shoved his hands into the front pockets of his slacks. “Rebecca, you just promoted her, and she seems fierce about suggesting a lot of ideas.”

Rebecca did seem oddly fierce. But now that I knew what Leigh's real plan was, I could see her machinations in getting Rebecca promoted and Bill as my new secretary, and her motives had nothing to do with simple jealousy. Leigh wanted to see this company fall. Whatever her decision was in getting Rebecca into a junior executive position and assigned as a project manager, it was because she felt that in doing so, Rebecca would damage the company.

I had to admit I hated that I couldn't let Leigh get away with it. It would be so much fun to just sit back and watch my girl work. She was a puppet master, and she was just terribly unlucky that the man she was trying to manipulate happened to be me.

“Ah.” David grinned. “I see.”

“What?” *What had he seen?*

“Look, I’m not going to tell anyone, but as the company’s lawyer I should inform you that it would be best to get her off the payroll before you do anything.”

“...with Rebecca?” I was confused.

David snorted. “I mean—Rebecca’s beautiful, don’t get me wrong, but she isn’t the one you’re bringing to dinners.”

Ah, shit. Something must’ve shown on my face. What kind of fucking amateur was I, giving away that I was thinking about a woman?

“I’m not the type of man who fucks employees,” I cautioned.

“As a habit, no, but we can’t always control who we get involved with,” David replied. “Trust me, I know. Things happen sometimes. Especially when they’re charming. And Leigh’s *very* charming.”

Something about that poked my brain. “Well, I’ll consider what you’ve said.”

“Please do.” David smiled, though the sentiment didn’t reach his eyes. “Hey, at least don’t make her the beneficiary of your will. Speaking of which, as morbid as it sounds, we do need to deal with the question of what will happen if a bus runs you over.”

Yeah, that did have to be dealt with. I’d have to text Jack to see what he wanted to do. “Sure thing.”

“Great.” David clapped me on the shoulder. “I could discuss it with you over dinner, if you’d like, as long as you don’t bring Leigh for that portion of the conversation.”

“Of course not. I’m not going to let her make decisions for me. She’s just a great pair of legs.”

An odd look passed over David’s face. If he could tell I was lying then I was going to fling myself off the roof of the building.

“Sounds good,” was all he said, and then I was alone to have a tiny panic attack.

I didn't fucking panic. I wasn't that guy. But the idea that someone could see how much Leigh meant to me had my chest getting tight.

I had a feeling that the fact that I was panicking meant that Leigh really was something to me. I didn't stress over someone finding out I'd slept with a woman. I did it all the time. It wasn't a crime and it wasn't going to affect any of my actions or decisions. There was no reason for anyone to get in a tizzy about it and if someone else did I set them straight. My sex life didn't mix with my business life.

Until now.

The way I'd felt when I'd seen Bill coming on to Leigh... I had wished so badly in that moment that I could claim her as mine. That I could storm over and inform him that she was taken, and that he'd better stop messing with my girl. But I couldn't. First because it would make Jack look bad, second because that would be against company policy, third because Leigh wasn't my girl.

I found that the first two reasons didn't matter. Only the third.

That had been pure possessiveness when I'd fucked her on the desk. I had been out of control. I shouldn't have done it. We would've gotten in massive trouble. I could've compromised the entire damn mission if we'd been found out. And I'd done it anyway. I had given into temptation in a way I never had before. I hadn't even questioned it or had a second thought. No hesitation. My desire for Leigh had overwhelmed all else.

This was a *big* problem.

I had to do something about it. I had to get Leigh away from me before she became even more of a distraction and we were caught by someone who actually cared.

Leigh had to be fired. Or quit. Or something. I would figure out what to do with her after I spoke with David tonight about the legal issue—and I would be confronting Jack on the phone this afternoon about making his decision. He couldn't hide or use me as a prop forever.

And once you're free of this role, a voice whispered at the back of my mind, you can be with Leigh for real.

I shoved that thought aside. I couldn't think about that right now. Besides, Leigh wasn't going to—she didn't feel anything for me. I wasn't under any illusions, here. I had charmed plenty of women and made them think they were in love with me when they didn't know the real me at all, but Leigh was different. She was a manipulator herself. She wasn't going to make the mistake of falling for a guy she'd originally set out to seduce for her own political goals, even if we'd ended up having a much more torrid affair than either of us had anticipated.

No, I wasn't going to be the sap who stood there with a busted heart while Leigh got to walk away. I would just have to keep my feelings to myself.

She would never know.

CHAPTER 19



Leigh

I went into the break room to get myself some coffee—and ran, almost literally, into Rebecca.

“Leigh.” Rebecca smiled. It was a little less tight than when we’d last spoken but it was clear I still wasn’t her favorite person.

“Rebecca, hi.” I returned her smile with one of my own. “I hear you’re already making waves in your new position, that’s so great. You’ve earned it.”

She blinked, apparently surprised by my kindness. I wondered how many years she’d spent having to compete with everyone around her in one way or another, found lacking, or not good enough for a promotion.

“Well, thank you.” Rebecca went to the coffee maker and started it up.

“You really were wasted as a secretary,” I insisted.

“That’s kind of you to say.” Rebecca continued to stare at the coffee maker. “But I’m a bit grateful for it. Mr. Lawton’s secretaries never stayed long. He gave Mr. Weston huge headaches whenever one was let go, they were always a hair’s breadth away from getting sued over wrongful

termination.”

“Mr. Weston doesn’t seem to like Mr. Lawton at all,” I said, curious to see how much I could glean from Rebecca. “I’m shocked to know they were once good friends.”

“Oh, yes, old Mr. Weston. They were good friends when the company started out, yes. But they have very different ideas of how the company should go and it was bitter by the end. But I meant his son. David Weston.” Rebecca retrieved a mug for herself and graciously got one for me too. “David Weston works in the legal department. He would have had to be the one to deal with a lawsuit if it hit us.”

“Oh, I see.”

“But now I’ve been promoted. So perhaps patience really is a virtue.”

“I hope it is for Mr. Weston, too, seeing as he had to handle Mr. Lawton all these years,” I said with a subtle laugh. “And with the two men feuding... that can’t have been easy.”

Rebecca seemed relieved to have someone she could gossip to. Another woman, for sure. “Well. David’s always going to remain a bit more loyal to his father, but I’m sure he was relieved when Mr. Lawton passed. He was over at the man’s house all the time trying to bring about a reconciliation between the two. I think he feels a bit bad he didn’t manage it before Mr. Lawton’s death. Now Mr. Weston has to live with knowing he and his former friend never made up.”

“Mr. Weston...” Rebecca lowered her voice. “Look, you didn’t hear this from me, because it’s a bit ungenerous.”

“Rebecca, if anyone deserves to be ungenerous about these bigwigs it’s you.” I casually crossed my arms over my chest. “I’ve been trying to tell Jack that we need new blood in here. The men in the boardroom have been doing absolutely nothing, and frankly I think they’ve just been blaming Mr. Lawton for it when they could’ve gotten creative and found ways to make this company work all these years anyway, even if he did throw a fit about it.

They're just lazy."

Rebecca snorted. "Yes, you could say that."

Of course, it was more complicated than that, legally. But Rebecca in this moment didn't care about what was legally possible. She just liked that I was on her side and appreciated her.

"In my opinion," Rebecca continued, "Mr. Weston was glad to see his 'friend' die. He was anxious for it. We all knew that the man's health wasn't great at the end there. He tried to hide it but eventually someone sees you taking pills and then well it's all over. The gossip mill in this place runs at a hundred miles an hour. So it wasn't exactly a shock when he died. But I'm sure Mr. Weston was counting down the damn minutes until it happened. He wants to wrestle the company from Jack, I'm sure of it. Of course I'm glad he promoted me because I can help move this company into the twenty-first century but I'm also worried that now I'm away, and he's got that wet behind the ears kid as his secretary, that he'll have a harder time keeping the wolves at bay."

"I'll do my best to make sure he's aware," I promised her. "But Jack needs to find his own way as a leader. He has to decide to stand up to these men and keep them in line and if they think it's just him listening to other people instead, and that he can't make his own decisions, that'll spell doom for him too."

Rebecca nodded as she finished fixing up her coffee. "Well. I'll see you around, Leigh."

"Of course." I smiled as she left and sipped my own coffee.

Something about what she'd said stirred at the back of my mind.

Everyone knew that Lawton's health was failing. Mr. Weston and Lawton had fought all the time and had opposing ideas on how to run the company. David Weston was over at Lawton's house all the time, trying to mend the bridge. David Weston knew all about Lawton's dating habits. Bryce had asked me if I thought David Weston was really, genuinely, interested in

sleeping with me.

Was it possible? Bryce had explained that if it was murder that had taken out Lawton, it was an elegant one. Simple and subtle. But if it was murder, who could have more to win than David Weston? He knew that none of the boyfriends were actually going to get anything from Lawton. He knew his father would be in the perfect position to take over the company. He would know Lawton's health and habits, where the medicine was... it wouldn't be suspicious for him to be in the house...

Because that was the thing that tripped me up. Any number of people *wanted* to kill Byron Lawton. But who had the opportunity? His house staff. Possibly an old boyfriend—but sneaking into the house with a spare key would be risky.

David Weston, trusted lawyer, always popping over to plead his father's case...?

As if my thoughts had summoned him as I made my way back to the office with my coffee, David appeared at my side.

“Leigh.” He smiled. “Good to see you again. I was hoping you had a minute?”

“Sure thing!” I smiled brightly at him and followed him into another office. “What's up?”

“I was hoping...” David shrugged affably. “You might be free sometime this weekend.”

Oh for fuck's sake. Did I have a sign on my back that said, ‘Date Me’?

“I don't know,” I said honestly. “I haven't given any thought to this weekend. I might just need to stay home and recuperate.”

“It's been quite the week,” David agreed. “But I was hoping I could steal you away from Jack for a short bit. He shouldn't get to monopolize all of your time.”

“That's literally what he pays me to be allowed to do.”

David chuckled. “True. But I'd like to consult with you myself.”

Well, that was interesting. “Oh, so this would be a business meeting over the weekend?” I asked.

Where the hell was Bryce? Surely he was supposed to be back from whatever meeting he’d been in by now. It would give me an excuse to get out of here instead of trying to fucking deal with another man who wanted in my pants.

“I like to combine business and pleasure.” David leaned against the wall, like he was a model for Armani. “Look, we know that the learning curve Jack’s experiencing is insane right now. I just think that the two of us could help each other out and work together.”

This sounded weirdly like a coup. “I’m sure you’ve got a lot of wisdom, but why would we need to talk about it without Jack there?”

“Because I think you won’t even pay attention to me if Jack’s in the room.”

Oh, God. Was I that obvious?

David laughed at whatever he saw on my face. “Look, I get it, he’s a handsome man. But he’s not the only one out there and he’s not the only person with power and good looks at this company. I’d like a chance with you.”

I laughed a little. “Honestly, I feel like you’re under the wrong impression about Jack and me...”

“Oh? Come on, Leigh. I can see it. And it’s all right. Again, he’s shockingly charming for a guy who’s been a shut-in at a no-name university. But he’s not going to reciprocate.”

Okay, ouch. I drew myself up. “Listen, I don’t know where you get the idea that I’ve got some kind of thing for Jack, but I haven’t been as successful as I am by sleeping with my clients. I need to have integrity. Especially as a woman.”

David shook his head. “It’s amazing, how you keep lying. Here’s the thing. You are going to want to help me. Because you might be right about

not sleeping with people to get where you are. But you're definitely not the fancy-pants consultant you claim to be."

My heart climbed up into my throat.

David sighed, like he was disappointed in me. "Look, I was hoping that I could do a little flirting, having a nice dinner with you, but if you want me to bring out the big guns, that's fine. You're not a consultant. Your credentials are a lie. And unless you want me to spill the beans to Jack and get you fired in disgrace—and possible criminal charges pressed against you—then you're going to help me out. Understand?"

I swallowed. Bryce knew the truth about me, but I couldn't let David know that. He'd wonder why 'Jack' was so blasé about the situation.

"Well, at least I can give you credit for hoping to catch me with honey instead of vinegar," I said, keeping my tone light. "But you have to understand a girl's pride. Did you want to try and get a dinner with me because you really think I'm attractive or because you just wanted to butter me up?"

David laughed. "Oh, trust me, I have no problem mixing business with pleasure, as I said. And you are a very beautiful woman."

Great. That wasn't possibly terrifying at all, seeing as he thought he could blackmail me.

I winked at him. "I know." I couldn't act like this was a big deal to me. "What do you want from me, exactly? What's your goal here? Because I thought you accomplished what you wanted when Mr. Lawton passed."

A strange and terrifying look passed through David's eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you now have a CEO who actually wants to move forward into the future and isn't terrified of change," I replied. "And he's not sleeping his way through a new secretary every month."

David's shoulders relaxed a little, but in my mind there was no doubt now. I didn't have proof, but I was certain that David had killed Mr. Lawton,

Jack's uncle.

Now I just had to find a way to tell Bryce without David getting suspicious.

I smiled sweetly. "I mean, surely Jack is the ideal CEO for you?"

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?" David replied, his tone just sardonic enough to be condescending, and I tried not to bristle. "But Jack still wants to do things his way. Stubbornness runs in the family I suppose. I'm not all that fond of another idiot, and this one untrained, driving the company into the ground in a new way. You saw how he promoted Rebecca of all people. I don't know what bee is in her bonnet but she's running around promoting these projects and it'll stretch our company way too thin. We can't go in ten different places at once."

Okay, so he didn't know that I'd been the person to suggest Rebecca's promotion to Jack, or that I'd goaded Rebecca into taking on all these projects in the hopes of pushing the company she cared about into the forefront of the business world. That was good. David had to keep thinking he had the upper hand. He had to keep underestimating me.

"Jack's just new," I pointed out. "He needs guidance, that's all."

"Guidance." David smirked. "Yeah. I'm sure you're happy to give him... guidance. But I tried that once already and do you know what it gets you? Absolutely nothing. So forgive me if I'm not going to waste months trying to train someone who really should just be sent packing back to his university."

"Well, it sounds like you and I are somewhat on the same page," I said, thinking frantically. "I want him to go back to the university, too."

"Oh? You're not in it so he funds your little climate initiatives? Or turns us green?" David flashed a cruel smile at me.

It was in that smile I could feel this was a man who had murdered, and would murder again. There was a certain disconnect in that smile, a callousness to it that chilled me. It was like he was completely detached from me as a person. He wouldn't feel any emotion as he killed me.

“I may owe you my cooperation,” I pointed out, “but I don’t owe you my motivations.”

For a second, I thought he would press, but then he shrugged. “Fair enough.”

It took all my self-control to hold in my sigh of relief.

David started to walk past me, then paused, his finger coming up to press under my chin, lifting it up.

Repressing my shudder was difficult. My stomach churned. This felt nothing like when Bryce would curl his finger under my chin and lift it up. Bryce made me feel hot all over whenever he did that. I loved how submissive I was, and how casually in control he was.

This was different. I felt like I was being demeaned, looked down on like I was some kind of insect.

David’s gaze searched my face. “You may be good at sex. But if you try to fuck *me*, you’ll regret it.”

I nodded, keeping my mouth shut and my eyes wide, like I was intimidated. He had to keep thinking that I was alone and under his thumb until I could get to Bryce.

David stepped away from me. “Good. I’ll see you for dinner tomorrow, then.”

He left the room, and I exhaled slowly. I stayed in there for another minute, making sure that nobody would notice the both of us leaving the same conference room.

Besides. I needed a moment.

I took deep breaths, my hand braced on the wall. I had to act normal. I could act normal, I could do this.

When enough time had passed, I exited the room and headed for Jack’s office. Bill disappeared the moment he saw me coming, apparently still embarrassed. Luckily, Bryce was inside.

“Hi.” I smiled as I entered, closing the door behind me. Once I was safely

inside, my smile fell. “We have a problem.”

Bryce stood up. “What is it?”

“David knows I’m a fake.” I walked over, my knees wobbling a little, as if it was only just now hitting me how much danger I could be in. “He’s blackmailing me, saying that he’ll go to you and tell you the truth if I don’t help him eliminate you from the company.”

“I’m supposed to have dinner with him tonight, without you.” Bryce’s voice and face were grim. “I’ll handle it.”

“How? Without revealing who you really are?”

Bryce cursed under his breath. “I’ll figure it out. This has gone on long enough.”

I frowned at him as he typed away on his phone. “Bryce. Your job is to help out Jack. You don’t need to worry about me. Just let me be a... a double agent for you.”

“You’re giving up your entire plan because you didn’t bet on Jack Lawton doing something insane like hiring an imposter,” Bryce pointed out. “And now you’re telling me that you’ll happily let someone like David Weston pull your strings so that you can help me spy on him? I wasn’t aware you wanted a side gig in corporate espionage.”

I bristled. “I know what I’m doing, all right?”

Bryce shook his head. “This is literally my career, Leigh. I won’t have you in danger.”

That made my breath catch in my throat. “So you think he did it, too.”

Bryce raised his eyebrows. “I think he did what?”

“Don’t you play dumb with me.” I stepped closer. “You think that David murdered Lawton. He had constant access, he undoubtedly learned Lawton’s routine and details about his personal life. He had motive—he thought if Lawton died that his father would be able to take over the company. He knew that Lawton changed his will all the time.”

Bryce smirked. “But why would he think that the will would favor his

father in any way?”

I felt like I was being teased, baited to figure something out. I frowned. “Well, it didn’t favor any of his lovers, did it? He just said that.”

Bryce raised an eyebrow. “Right. But what if he said that to one of his lovers and they believed him?”

“David’s a much more likely candidate than... *oh.*”

The rest of what Rebecca had said came back to me, and the flicker of suspicion that I’d dismissed under the weight of everything else returned.

“To be fair, I wasn’t sure until you came in just now,” Bryce said. “I thought he might have done it—but if he’s desperate enough to blackmail you to get me—Jack—out of the way, then this could mean that he definitely did it. The man’s desperate.”

The pieces clicked into place for me. “David tried to win Lawton over and get in his will, then bumped him off. He didn’t realize it was a lie.”

“Everyone wants to be special,” Bryce pointed out. “And David’s the kind of guy used to feeling special.”

I rolled my eyes in agreement. Yeah, if that wasn’t the truth. Men like David always thought they were an exception.

“If he was just trying to kill off Lawton then it would make no sense. He didn’t know what the will contained. It wouldn’t be in favor towards the board or his father. But it does make sense if he thought that he was the one that Lawton put in his will.”

“As a company lawyer he would know if Lawton really did change his will a lot,” I pointed out. “That part might very well be true, even if he wasn’t changing it in favor of whoever his boyfriend was at the time.”

Bryce nodded as we fit all the pieces together. “I doubt David was his actual lawyer, that’s a different area of law, but he’d know enough.”

I didn’t know the law myself in the sense that I wasn’t a lawyer, but I’d had to deal with them in my activism, and I’d quickly become aware of how specialized the different areas of law were. A corporate lawyer wouldn’t

know how to help in divorce court, and a family lawyer wouldn't be helpful in a dispute between unions and a company. But David would know that *a* change had been made in the will, even if he didn't know what the details of that change were himself because he wouldn't be the one to handle the actual physical copy.

"What do we do?" I asked. This was completely out of my area of expertise. I'd never dealt with a murderer before or anything even close to it.

Bryce shook his head. "We don't do anything. You need to stay away from him."

"Whoa, excuse me?" I stepped up to him. "You don't get to tell me what I can and can't do. I'm in this now, same as you."

"Why?" Bryce arched an eyebrow, and I hated that his attitude was hot to me. "You're an activist who wants to take down the company. That doesn't really sound like someone who's going to help save the company by catching a murderer. Face it, Leigh, you're out of your league here."

"Don't you dare condescend to me," I snapped, barely managing to keep my voice low so that Bill couldn't eavesdrop on us. I poked Bryce in the chest with my finger. "You fucked me over, so I'm going to go along with this and I'm going to see this through, because even if I can't succeed in what I came here to do, I can help take down a murderer and get justice. That's what I *do*, Bryce. I get justice for people. For the local people who can't hire fancy lawyers and spend tons of money in court. I get justice for nature that literally can't even speak for itself. You can't shut me out from this, too, when I've already lost everything else."

Bryce grabbed my wrist, trapping my hand against his chest. "You're not putting yourself in danger. This isn't a discussion."

I lifted my chin stubbornly. "You don't get to decide that."

"I do when it's in the interest of protecting you," he said heatedly. "This man's blackmailed you and he could hurt you. He's already killed one person, and it might have been the guy he was sleeping with. That doesn't

sound to me like the kind of guy who'll hesitate to murder a pesky activist who got in his way."

I glared at him. "So you just get to call the shots now?"

"For your safety? Yes!" Bryce snapped, his voice rising a little. His hand tightened around mine. "This is my job, Leigh. Let me do it. I'm the expert here."

My blood boiled. Typical macho man. "I thought you were different." My voice came out softer, more hurt, than I'd wanted it to. "I thought you actually respected me."

But when the chips were down, he wanted me to just step aside like every other man and dismissed me. Like I hadn't infiltrated this company and kept this ruse up all on my own. Like my work going up against powerful men who would be happy to get rid of an annoying pest like me to continue their planet-destroying, home-bulldozing work didn't matter.

"Let me know how the dinner goes," I muttered. I pulled away from him and headed for the office door.

"Leigh..."

I turned. Bryce looked—dare I say hurt? Conflicted?

But then the look vanished and he shook his head. "I'll keep in touch."

Sure thing, chief, I thought sarcastically. I headed for the door again, and this time, Bryce didn't stop me from leaving.

CHAPTER 20



Bryce

You idiot, something in my mind whispered. Tell her that you care about her. Go after her.

Yeah, right. This wasn't a fucking romcom here. Leigh was in danger. If she was out of the way because she was angry at me, then fine, she was still out of harm's way.

David Weston had murdered someone he'd known pretty much his entire life. I had no doubt he'd try again, if it meant he could keep control of the company his father had spent so many years trying to commandeer. Leigh would be collateral damage if I wasn't careful and I refused to let her be hurt.

The idea of something happening to her... it wasn't just because of my professional pride. When she told me that David was blackmailing her, I felt a rage rise up and choke me like I'd never experienced before.

And now Leigh just thought that I was dismissing her, like every other man who just saw her body and not her sharp mind.

There was a very stupid part of me that wanted to race after her and kiss her until she understood that she was important to me. *Special*. It wasn't that

I didn't respect her. It was that the idea of losing her, or seeing her harmed in any way...

I couldn't forget what I felt when seeing Bill try to come onto her, or hearing what she said about David knowing who she really was. I wouldn't ever let her be hurt because of my mission and the actions of an idiotic, greedy man.

But I was a professional. I didn't do this. I didn't get wrapped up in a woman and lose focus. I swallowed and took a few deep breaths. I was going to be fine. Leigh was going to be fine.

What I had to do was join David for dinner and see if I could maneuver him into a more private meeting where I could extract a confession. This was unfortunately a case where there'd be precious little evidence, if any. Getting David to admit what he'd done was the best bet, and I had an idea of how I could make that work.

But Leigh had to be out of the way, and safe. If that meant she was pissed at me in order for it to be accomplished, then so be it. All that mattered to me was her welfare in this situation.

What all this said about me, I didn't know. I was tempted, honestly, to call up my partner, Vaughn, and ask him if this was how he'd felt about *his* girl. If that angry possessiveness in my chest, the way I felt like I would do anything to make sure Leigh was okay, was anything like what Vaughn felt for Claire while protecting her.

Because I didn't do this, okay? I didn't fall for people. Women fell for *me*, which sounded like a fucking brag and maybe it was, but it wasn't my problem. I was always there for a good time, not a long time and my partners knew the score. I loved the seduction and the chase, I loved dominating them, but it was all just in good fun.

Or at least it always used to be that way.

The idea that I might have been the one to fall this time was... very disconcerting. I sure as hell didn't know what to do about it.

There's nothing to do. I had to just keep moving and focus on my damn job. Not on the woman who was a distraction and a possible liability.

The first thing to tackle was calling Jack. I had avoided that so far, choosing to stick to texts and emails, but this was definitely an emergency. Things were coming to a head and couldn't be avoided any further.

The man was, again, reluctant. "It sounds like the situation is worse than we thought. That's why I've hired you. If you think my life might be in danger..."

"I understand, Mr. Lawton." I kept my voice low so that nobody outside the office could eavesdrop, and I got out my bug sweeper just in case to make sure David hadn't planted any listening devices in the day since I'd last checked for them. "But you need to take the helm, here. For better or for worse, this is your company, and these people are trying to take it from you. How long are you going to let other people act on your behalf? I'm not you. And the only person who can fix this is you. If only for the legal ramifications if I make any major decisions in the company."

Jack was still skeptical. I could sympathize to an extent. Nobody liked being asked to walk into the wolf's den, and that was precisely what I was asking of him. But I knew this was the right thing to do. This charade had gone on long enough. If I was going to make any actual moves—as was my fucking job—then I needed the real Jack Lawton here with me. This wasn't about keeping away the women hungry for marriage with a rich man or the conmen hungry for his credit card. This was about the fate of a company and the catching of a killer.

Luckily, I had a solution. One that I had difficulty pitching to him, but eventually, he saw my side of things.

"I think this will settle your nerves," I told him honestly. "You clearly have a lot of anxiety around this and I think this will be the best solution."

While I believed in what I was telling him, I couldn't deny that I had ulterior motives. But that was between myself and my conscience.

By the time I finished up the call, I had a plan. Jack was headed into the city, and I just had to bide my time until I had my dinner with David.

First, I had to hold a little conversation with Rebecca.

I called her into my office. She looked like she was vibrating with excitement to get a one-on-one meeting with me. I did feel bad. I hadn't ever flirted with her or done anything to encourage a crush, but when she was surrounded by men who were either old enough to be her father or smug assholes (or both), I couldn't blame her for being infatuated with the first good-looking guy to enter the office.

Rebecca smiled and sat down, politely refusing the water or coffee I offered. "What's this about?"

"I'm excited to see the enthusiasm you're putting into your new position," I told her honestly. "You really want this company to succeed."

"It's a position I've wanted for a long time," Rebecca replied. "I want to show off what I can do and how I can bring this company into the twenty-first century."

"Of course. Which is why it pains me to tell you this information. I trust that you'll keep it confidential." I took a deep breath, as if this was hard for me to say. "I'm going to step down as CEO."

"What?" Rebecca's jaw dropped.

"I simply don't like the position. I'm not a businessman, Rebecca. I'm a professor. I'm a studier of philosophy. I don't want to work here any longer. It's not my forte and it brings me no joy."

"But—you can't just turn the company over to the board." Rebecca tried to keep her tone neutral, but I could hear the upset creeping into the edges of it.

I sighed. "No, I don't want to do that. I feel they'd run it into the ground. While I don't want to be in charge of it anymore, I don't like the idea of being responsible for hundreds of layoffs when the company goes belly-up in a year."

Rebecca flinched, like the idea was physically painful to her. “I have so many wonderful ideas...”

“Yes, did you see the eco-friendly ones?”

“Ah.” Rebecca’s face took on a pinched look.

I smiled genially. “Listen. I think these are all fantastic ideas. But there’s too many of them and to do them all at once will stretch us too thin. It’ll destroy the company. I understand this might not be something you’re aware of, given your lack of expertise in a new role. Leigh warned me about it.”

Rebecca’s eyebrows shot up. She couldn’t outright say that Leigh was a liar or that she didn’t believe Leigh. That would mean revealing that she was jealous of Leigh and felt they were in competition. But her displeasure was still visible on her face.

“However, with a younger, hungrier company, where resources could be more focused and angel investors could be pulled in,” I continued. “I think you could start your own company with these ideas, Rebecca. I think it could come to rival Lawton if you put your mind to it.”

Rebecca shook her head. “The Lawton name opens doors. I’m a nobody.”

“Perhaps,” I acknowledged. “But I would be happy to back you, for what my family name would be worth. If you struck out on your own and took these employees with you, I think you’d find a surprising amount of success. They’re eager to be heard and appreciated and a lot of people have noticed the work you’ve put in over the years even if they weren’t the ones with the power to do anything to help you up the ladder.”

“Mr. Lawton.” Rebecca squinted a little at me, like she was trying to read my mind. “If I didn’t know better I would say this sounds a little bit like corporate espionage.”

“I wouldn’t call it that. I think that if you and others in the company decide that you’re tired of waiting for the board to appreciate you, and you go off and form your own company, that’s perfectly understandable.”

Rebecca still looked skeptical. I didn’t blame her. I had plans for her to

change her mind, those would just take a little longer. “I’ll consider it, Mr. Lawton.”

“Please do. I don’t want to hurt my employees by stepping down. It would give me a great deal of peace of mind if I knew that someone capable was taking the people who deserved it under her wing.”

Her mouth twisted up into a wry smile. She was smart, and lovely to look at. Unfortunately for her, I was stuck on Leigh. All I could think about when I looked at Rebecca was that she *wasn’t* Leigh. That in my mind Leigh was smarter, and more beautiful, and funnier.

God, I sounded like a fucking sap. I might as well just start dancing through the office like we were in some kind of Old Hollywood musical.

“You’re really pushing for this,” Rebecca noted. “I’m sorry I can’t seem to change your mind on stepping down.”

“This is what needs to be done,” I said. “I wouldn’t last, and I think in your heart you know it.”

Rebecca bit her lip. “I think that you would, actually,” she said.

I groaned inwardly in frustration. It was the contrast between who I was and who I pretended to be. Could I, Bryce, run a company? Quite possibly. I was curious to see if I was up to the task. I felt I’d done a good job in my days here posing as Jack. I was a lot more determined and willing to be ruthless than the actual Jack Lawton.

But the man I pretended to be, Jack, he couldn’t. He wasn’t a CEO type. As he was my client, it was my turn now to consult him and tell him what best to do. And I was going to make sure that I got everyone exactly what they deserved.

“Rebecca.” I stood up. “Don’t spend so much time trying to see in me what you want to see that you neglect to see that everything you want is already there inside of yourself.”

She knew a dismissal when she heard one, but she took a second to stand, looking a little shocked. “I—uh—thank you? Mr. Lawton?”

“You’re welcome. Go on.”

She left quickly, still looking surprised.

Yeah, I couldn’t help Rebecca with her love life exactly but it was well past time she learned to stop looking for someone else to give her the recognition and promotion she wanted and take the reins herself. If these people hadn’t appreciated her in all this time, they never would.

Now, it was time to deal with the snake in the grass.

CHAPTER 21



Leigh

I was steaming mad when I left Jack's office.

Who the hell did Bryce think he was? I was so frustrated I wanted to cry. I couldn't believe that I'd let myself think that Bryce was different, that he would treat me better than any other man. I wasn't just someone to have fun sex with, I was someone to respect.

Turned out I'd been wrong. He dismissed me the second he thought I couldn't handle things, which was pretty damn fast if you asked me.

Well. If he didn't think that I was capable, fine. I had gotten myself into this mess. I would get myself out of it, without the help of anyone else.

David was just like any other man. I could manipulate him just the same.

David might have been a corporate lawyer, but he didn't work in the actual company building. He worked with his firm in another building, which gave me time to change into something a little more revealing—a tighter skirt and a blouse that had a slit down the middle to show off a tantalizing glimpse of cleavage—before I went over to his office.

Getting up to see him was easy. I just smiled and acted like I was a client

and sauntered in. When I arrived at his office, I could see him through the glass on either side of the door. I took a deep breath.

My stomach twisted uncomfortably. I ignored it. I'd flirted with and done physical things with men I didn't like before. Why should this be any different?

Unbidden, the memory of Bryce's hands on me, that last desperate fuck on the desk, sprung into mind. I shoved it away, trying to convince myself that Bryce wasn't special.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat and walked into the office. It was time to be bold. "Since we're on the subject of blackmail. . ."

David looked up sharply as I closed the door behind me. I smirked at him and leaned back against it.

"What are you talking about?" He sounded annoyed. "And what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to change the terms of our deal, seeing as I'm not the only one with a massive lie hidden under the surface." I walked over and sat in front of him on his desk, crossing my legs to show them off. "I know you killed Mr. Lawton."

David's eyebrows shot up.

I laughed throatily. "Oh, your face. What, you thought that nobody could figure it out? I get it. You did what you had to do. In fact I kind of find it... sexy." I shrugged, as if this was nonchalant to me. "But it does mean that I have something on you just like you have something on me. So I think that changes things a little, wouldn't you say?"

David stood up and planted his hands on either side of my hips on the desk, looming over me. It took everything in me to keep the smile on my face as my stomach unexpectedly churned.

You can do this, I told myself.

Terrifyingly... I wasn't sure that I could.

"That's a dangerous thing to come in and accuse a man of doing," David

said softly.

“Oh, please, as if the old bastard didn’t deserve it.” I took a delicate hold of his tie between my fingers and played with it. “He was holding the company back. Why do you think I showed up the moment he was gone? You were finally vulnerable. It’s just a pity that he didn’t really put you in his will.”

“You’ve been paying close attention to the gossip mill,” David noted.

I shrugged. “I have to admire a man who’s willing to go so far to accomplish his goals. It couldn’t have been easy to pretend to like such an asshole.”

David’s gaze searched mine, a smirk on his lips. “I suppose you would know a lot about that.”

“I do, unfortunately.” I spread my legs a little and tried to fight down the feeling of nausea that hit me when his gaze flicked down. “So why don’t you and I team up together and we can figure something out that works for the both of us.”

David chuckled. “This really gets you that hot and bothered, huh?”

I nodded, biting my lip.

David sighed. “You know, I can’t tell you how tempting it is to fuck you right now.”

Hearing him say it made me want to throw up. I struggled to ignore that swirling sensation in my stomach.

“But... unfortunately for you...” David’s smile grew, and then his hand jerked up and wrapped tight around my throat.

I tried to scream instinctively, but his other hand joined the first as he squeezed, hard, blocking my airway. This was nothing like when Bryce would touch me and play with my throat a little, or when he put the collar on me. This was pain exploding instantly behind the backs of my eyes.

“...I don’t think just fucking you would be enough to get Jack to do what I want.”

David spoke like he wasn't actively strangling me. I clawed at his arms, black spots dancing in my vision. I wasn't in control of my body, panic infusing me as I tried desperately to get away.

"Oh, sure, I think he'd be hurt," David said too casually. "But a man scorned like that is liable to do the opposite of what you want. Tit for tat and all. No..."

David leaned in. It terrified me how cold his eyes were. Like my death, and life, were nothing to him. "But if he finds out you're in danger? That your life is in my hands? Now *that*... that'll get him where I want him."

A tiny, sardonic voice at the back of my mind piped up that he was deeply overestimating how much Bryce cared about me, but even if Bryce condescended to me, he was a good man. He'd literally taken this job to protect Jack and find a killer. He'd probably be worried for me, just as a matter of compassion.

Still... as my vision blurred and black closed in, I couldn't help but hope that maybe I was wrong, and David was right, and I was in some way special to Bryce.

That was the last thought I had before it all went dark.

CHAPTER 22



Bryce

There was immediately something off when I entered the restaurant.

Not the restaurant itself. That was fine. I instinctively checked the exits and the various guests seated at the tables, but everyone looked normal. No, it was when I sat down across from David that the hairs at the back of my neck stood up.

“How was the rest of your day?” I asked.

“Eh, you know how it is, trying to work with a lot of demanding people who often want conflicting things.” David shrugged and raised his hand for the server.

Once we’d ordered, he leaned back in his chair, smiling genially. “So, you going to meet Leigh after this?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t think that my private business is anyone’s concerned, but for the record, I’m not. She has other things to do and we’re not—I told you it’s not like that.”

I sounded like an absolute moron, but I couldn’t let him see the real wolf’s teeth in my mouth without revealing that I was more than I was

pretending to be. Jack Lawton would be a bit nervous and stammer over a glamorous woman. I just had to keep this up for a short while longer.

Although, I hadn't heard anything from Leigh since she'd stormed out on me. I'd sent her a text just to make sure she was doing all right, but hadn't gotten a response. I had assumed she was ignoring me.

But now, my gut twisted. I had a feeling that David wasn't asking merely out of curiosity. In fact, I probably should've been more suspicious of his asking about Leigh at the meeting earlier today. Had he just used that to get the confirmation he wanted?

"Of course it's not," David said smoothly. "So, the company. . ."

He outlined his thoughts on the entire thing while our food arrived and we ate. I kept myself alert, watching the exits and the staff as well as the diners. Nobody around here seemed to be an accomplice. That was a foolish mistake. David probably thought he was being smart, operating alone, and maybe in most circumstances he would be. But I wasn't what you'd call 'most circumstances'.

I watched David as he pulled out his phone over our dessert. "I appreciate your advice," I said to him. "But I know what my course is. I'm going to retire as CEO."

David blinked at me. "Well, that was easier than I expected."

"You think I didn't know you wanted me to step down? I suppose I appreciate that you tried to be my friend about it, unlike your father. I suspect you did the same to my uncle, trying to get him to see your side of things. But I knew you wanted me out of the way. I agree, I'm not fit to continue as the head of the company."

"That's a relief." David smiled. "I suppose I..."

"But," I added quickly, "I won't be giving it over to you."

David frowned. "Jack. Don't be stupid. You're so close to doing the right thing. I would hate to have to give you the consequences of making a bad decision."

“I’m sure that you’re prepared to make my life a living hell,” I said patiently. “But you’re not the only lawyer in this city...”

“You misunderstand.” David waved his free hand in the air dismissively while he unlocked the phone with the other. “I thought you might be stubborn, and I have to admit I’ve developed a fondness for going about things... in a way that’s not exactly legal. It’s just so much fucking *faster*. More efficient.”

He pulled something up on his phone and slid it across to me. “Wouldn’t you say?”

There, staring up at me on the phone, was a photo of Leigh. She was out cold, with finger-shaped bruises on her throat. Duct tape was over her mouth and bound her hands and feet together. She’d been placed in a bathtub, arranged so that her head rested on the bottom of it.

The implication was clear. If I didn’t do as I was told, that bathtub would fill with water, and she’d drown.

My entire body went cold, and then hot with rage. This was nothing like when I’d seen Bill trying to ask her out. That was a candle flame, and this was an inferno. I was going to tear this man limb from fucking limb for this.

My fingers twitched and I almost reached across the table to wrap my hand around a chunk of his hair and bash his head into the—

I took a deep breath.

He couldn’t know who I really was. I had to play the part of Jack Lawton for just a little while longer until Leigh was safe and sound. I wouldn’t be able to manage that if I lost my temper now.

“You son of a bitch,” I said, keeping my voice a low, startled growl.

David pulled his phone back. “You really shouldn’t have let anyone figure out what she meant to you. But that’s all right. You’re new to all of this.”

“I wasn’t aware that kidnapping was a regular part of the corporate world,” I snapped.

“Your uncle wouldn’t see reason, either,” David said, his tone impatient. “I worked on him for years. And finally when I thought he’d put me in the will and trusted me... it turns out he’d chosen you. A nephew he hadn’t seen in, what, twenty years? It was insanity. But that was your uncle for you. The man was an asshole.”

David continued on. “But I’m not going to let stupidity get in my way. My father has worked for this company and kept it going for decades. He deserves it. And I deserve it, too. Either you stand down, and you give the company to me, or I finish off your girl.” The prick smiled. “Let me guess. You bought into her little spiel about the environment and the little guy and all that, didn’t you?”

I looked away, as if it pained me to have him guess correctly. But under the table, I clenched my hand so hard around my knee I felt a knuckle pop.

This man wasn’t going to make it through the night if I had anything to say about it.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked, far more calmly than I felt.

I pulled my phone out, as if waiting for instructions, but instead sent a prepared ABORT text to Jack.

My original plan had been for the real Jack to show up, startling David into a confession. It was the only way to get him arrested. But our plans had changed. I wasn’t going to give him the luxury of a cushy white-collar jail upstate.

Now, Jack would know that the mission was aborted and he was to stay away until I contacted him again with different instructions.

David chuckled. “Put that away. I have everything drawn up for you.”

He pulled out a file from his briefcase and passed it over to me along with a pen. “Just sign on the various dotted lines, they’re all marked out for you. I’ve made it easy.”

I had to hold in a snort. I took the pen with acted reluctance and signed all the various places, knowing *my* signature meant jack shit on the papers. “And

what about Leigh?”

“If you can behave yourself during the entire transaction of the company over to the board, specifically my father, then she’ll be returned to you safe and sound.”

I handed the papers back over, knowing that David had just lied. He had no intention of letting Leigh go free. I wasn’t sure why—unless he was aware that she knew he’d killed once before. Which meant, she knew too much.

In fact, he probably thought I knew too much and he had plans to arrange for something to happen to me, too. Or rather ‘Jack’.

“As long as she’s safe,” I said. “Look, she’s not—it’s not as serious as you think. I don’t know why you think that, but we haven’t known each other that long. But she’s a good person. She doesn’t deserve this. So please, let her go.”

“Don’t worry. It’ll all be taken care of,” David assured me. He waved our server down to get the check.

It fucking boiled my blood to have to pretend to grovel to this man. But I did what had to be done. And soon... soon he would get what he deserved.

When I arrived back to my hotel room, I didn’t waste any time. David was probably smart enough not to keep Leigh at his own place in case I called the police, but he wouldn’t be able to take her to just any hotel.

That left one place he could go.

I strapped up with blades but left the guns in my hotel safe. Ballistics were annoyingly easy to track. Then I slipped on a pair of leather gloves to conceal my fingerprints and headed out.

Breaking into the place was as easy as I’d suspected. Older people like David’s father had a hard time upgrading their security to fit the opulence of their residence and much of what they had was preventative—it was to alert the police or other emergency services rather than protect against, say, actual violence against the property. Once the alarms were disabled, it was easy to slip into his house.

The desire to find Leigh was all-encompassing. I felt like I was fighting through a red haze and had to ignore it to focus on the task at hand.

There were servants in the house, naturally. The older Weston was old-fashioned that way, having live-in staff rather than just a team that came in every week to clean things.

I kept things quiet as I moved through the house to the bedroom, but David wasn't there. I moved back downstairs—and in the library, I found him, sitting at a desk and going over papers, including the ones I'd signed as 'Jack'.

They were quite possibly copies. But even if he'd sent the originals on to someone like his father or his office, it didn't matter. I wasn't Jack Lawton and the signatures would duly prove to be forgeries.

David stood up as I entered. "What..."

"The name's Bryce, by the way," I noted. "Not Jack."

I flung the knife so that it flew across the room and embedded itself in his throat in a direct hit. David collapsed into the chair, eyes glassy, a look of shock still on his face.

It wasn't what I wanted to do to him. I wanted to torture him. I wanted him to feel all the pain and fear that Leigh had undoubtedly felt, times ten. But that wasn't going to work. It had to look like a quick murder and leave the police confused and guessing. If I left his body broken and tortured, there would be a hell of a lot of questions that I couldn't answer. And getting rid of a dead body was always exhausting.

My lip curling in disgust, I pulled the knife out to take that piece of evidence with me, left David's body where it was, and went to search for Leigh.

CHAPTER 23



Leigh

I woke up with a sore throat and my head pounding.

For a second, panic set in as I felt like I couldn't breathe—but then I inhaled through my nose and I realized that it was just my mouth that was covered. By... duct tape?

I tried to sit up, only for me to slide right back down. My hands were tied behind my back with more duct tape, which hurt against my skin, and there was even more duct tape around my ankles, trapping my legs together.

My legs were draped over the edge of a porcelain bathtub, forcing my lower body to lay against the bottom of it. To make it even worse, David had tied a rope from my ankle to the towel rod on the far wall, which made it impossible for me to draw my legs down into the tub and scoot up to a sitting position.

I could try and get leverage to sit up, but it was difficult with my hands behind my back like this. I tried anyway. It felt like doing an intense sit-up, and I fell back onto the bathtub.

Shit.

My throat still felt tender, so that I could really feel every swallow. It was disconcerting, and not in the way I enjoyed with my collar on. Why had I been left like this? Why in a bathtub of all places?

I had no idea how long I lay there for, trying to strategize—and occasionally trying to lift myself up and out of the tub with no success—but eventually the door opened.

My blood went cold.

David stared down at me, as dispassionate as if I was a bug. “Ah, you’re awake. I wondered if you would be. I’m not an expert at this whole thing.”

An expert at murder. I rolled my eyes.

David walked over and knelt by the tub, and for a moment I thought he was going to remove the duct tape to let me talk.

Instead, he leaned over and turned on the water.

A scream wrenched itself out of me as I realized what was about to happen. I thrashed, my ankle throbbing as my movements caused me to tug hard on the rope, but I couldn’t lift my upper body up out of the way of the water.

“I wish this could be as clean and simple as before, but... you’re not an old man with a medical condition. Luckily, there’s plenty of room on the property to bury you.” David stood up. “Goodbye, Leigh.” His hand stroked my leg and I shuddered. “I really wish you hadn’t figured out the murder. We could’ve worked so well together.”

Then he left the room, closing the door.

Fuck. *Fuck*. I screamed, even though I knew nobody would help me and David wasn’t going to have a sudden change of heart. The water was filling up the tub fast. I could already feel it hitting my ass, and soon I would be lying in several inches of it.

I was going to drown if I didn’t find a way out of here.

Okay, Leigh, think. *Think!* I couldn’t lift my upper body up, and I couldn’t bring my legs down because of the rope. There had to be another

way out.

Although, the rope was tied rather crudely. David hadn't been on the sailing team at Harvard, that was for sure. If my hands were in front of me rather than behind my back, I could possibly lift myself up like doing a crunch and untie the rope. But how could I manage that when my hands were behind my back?

If I was some kind of super-flexible acrobat I could get my arms down and hook them under my legs... But I couldn't, my arms just weren't...

Unless...I remembered watching a high school boyfriend showing off how to get his hands out of being tied behind his back, in a very unique way. At the time, I'd been horrified by his performance. Now, I was grateful for the knowledge.

I swallowed, feeling once again the soreness in my neck where David had choked me into unconsciousness. What I was about to do was going to fucking hurt. But it was hurt, or die. And I wasn't fucking dying because of a Harvard legacy prick.

With a muffled scream, I yanked my arms down and arched my back. Pain ripped through me as I popped both shoulders out of their sockets. Tears blurred my vision. I'd never been in so much agony before, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

But now my arms were looser.

I pulled my feet back as far as I could, screaming again with the effort. I had to hope that David couldn't hear me, or that if he did he thought they were screams of fear.

The towel bar came loose from the wall. Just a little.

The water was a couple inches deep now. It covered my throat and lapped at my chin. Another few moments and I would be underwater.

I kept yanking, sobbing with pain and effort, until one of the screws popped free, and the rope came closer, pulling my knees in a bit. Just enough.

I worked my arms down my body, over my feet so that they were now in front, and undid the rope with shaky fingers. The moment it fell away, I was

able to drop my feet down into the tub and scoot up to sitting.

First, I undid my feet with fumbling fingers, then ripped the duct tape off my mouth. It hurt, but I bit my tongue and stayed quiet. David would be able to tell when my screams were no longer muffled by the tape.

Now, my arms.

Whimpering, I stood on shaky legs and faced the wall of the tub. One... two...

With a bitten-off scream of pain, I slammed my shoulder against the wall, shoving it back into its socket. I did the same with the other arm as fast as I could, before the pain could overwhelm the shock.

My hands were still bound by duct tape, but at least I could walk around and talk now. I turned off the water and looked around for a weapon.

There—the toilet lid.

I removed the top piece and took up position behind the door, sure that David would be up to check on me soon to make sure I'd died.

Within a few minutes, I heard footsteps. They were softer than I'd expected, like David was trying not to disturb anyone. Was there perhaps someone else in the house he didn't want knowing about this? His father, maybe? I didn't know where I was, after all. This could be a hotel for all I knew.

The door opened, and I swung with all my might.

It was the mirror that saved him.

The man ducked so that my weapon went sailing over his head, having seen me move in the mirror's reflection. His reflexes were far faster than average, and I realized with a lurch that it couldn't be David. There was no way—

Two strong hands wrapped around me from behind as the momentum of my swing knocked me off-balance. They grabbed onto the toilet lid. "Shh, shh, stop, shh, it's okay, we have to be quiet, *shh*."

A sob wracked my body as I recognized the voice, and all the fight went

out of me.

It was Bryce.

He took the toilet lid from my numb fingers and set it down, then caught me as my knees gave out. I sobbed uncontrollably, shaking, unable to even speak in relief. Bryce held me tightly, and after a moment I realized he was shaking too.

“It’s okay, baby,” he murmured into my ear. “I’ve got you, you’re safe now. You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

I clung to him as he rocked me, his hand stroking through my soaked hair, until eventually my sobs and hiccups calmed down. Bryce kissed my forehead. “That’s it. You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

“David...” I whispered.

“He’s dead.” Bryce’s tone was vicious. “And more mercifully than he deserved.”

I didn’t care as long as he was no longer a threat to me or anyone else.

Bryce picked me up, cradling me in his arms. “Let’s get you out of here, sweetheart.”

He carried me through the house—I assumed it was a house, since it was so large. I barely saw my surroundings. I kept my face buried in his chest. Bryce held me in a way he never had before. It wasn’t like the passion I’d felt from him in Jack’s office on the desk. This was like... like I was precious to him.

Eventually, I heard a car door open and I was placed inside. To my shock, I found my limbs getting heavy and my eyes closing in pure exhaustion.

“The adrenaline’s wearing off,” Bryce murmured, stroking a gentle hand over my cheek. “It’s all right. Sleep. I’m taking you home.”

Home? Where was home? The hotel room? I wanted to ask, but I couldn’t get my mouth to work.

For the second time that day I slipped into unconsciousness, but this time, it was with Bryce carefully buckling me into the car, murmuring assurances

in my ear.

CHAPTER 24



Bryce

If there was a way to bring people back from the dead, I'd bring David back just so I could kill him all over again. Slowly and torturously this time.

Leigh was a fucking fighter. It was the bathroom mirror that saved me. I caught a glimpse of her movement behind the door just in time to duck, otherwise she would've smacked me unconscious—and given me a dangerous concussion while she was at it—with the lid of the toilet.

It gave me a grim pleasure to know that David definitely wouldn't have ducked in time. She would've had him out cold, and possibly brain damaged.

I was shocked she'd managed to get free. I remembered how she'd looked in the damn photo, but additionally—probably in case she'd woken up—after snapping that picture, David had tied a rope to one end of the towel rack and then the other end...

Looking at her ankles confirmed it. He'd tied the rope around them. That would keep her from dragging her feet into the tub and allowing any kind of leeway to get out. Considering the angle she'd been at, she wouldn't have

been able to leverage herself up and haul herself out using her upper body.

She'd been well and truly fucked. And not in a good way.

Looking at the depth of the water in the tub as I held her in the bathroom, I couldn't suppress a shiver of fury and horror. If she hadn't hauled herself out, I would've probably been too late. Maybe I could have revived her. *Maybe.*

But somehow she'd gotten herself out. How?

As she'd collapsed in my arms, I had the answer—I could feel the swollen flesh and muscle around her shoulders.

She'd popped her arms out of their goddamn sockets.

Leigh clung to me and I stroked her hair, holding her tightly. There was nowhere else I'd rather be. I undid the tape around her wrists and then carried her out of the house to my waiting car. She was already passing out—hunger, pain, fear, adrenaline—so I buckled her in and left her there while I went back to clean up the bathroom.

There was no trace of Leigh by the time I was finished.

When that was done, I moved on to David. I took the signed papers with me to shred and dump them somewhere else, but left all the others, then got a knife from the kitchen and stabbed him with it in the exact same place I'd stabbed him with my knife.

Pulling the knife out, I took it back to the kitchen, washed it, and put it back in the knife block. There would still be traces of blood on it when the crime scene team properly searched it, so they'd think they had the murder weapon.

There wouldn't be enough evidence to convict anyone, so the police would either give it up as an inside job without evidence, or given the papers, an assassination hired by someone else on the board, and a fruitless search would commence.

Once everything was taken care of, I went back to the car. Leigh's head turned towards me, her fingers twitching. I took her hand and squeezed it,

then started the car, driving one-handed.

I didn't go back to the hotel. I took her to my place.

If the doorman had questions about why I was carrying an unconscious woman in my arms, he knew better than to ask. The staff in the building were aware of my profession and it wasn't the first time I'd done something weird.

Leigh stirred when I finally got her into my apartment. "Mmm?"

"We're here. I'm going to put you on the bed." Usually I'd want to give her a bath but I had a feeling that wouldn't go over well considering what she'd just been through. Instead I laid her down, then carefully undressed her and went into the bathroom to get a washcloth.

I cleaned her up that way, then applied salve to her various bruises before wrapping her in a spare bathrobe and tucking her into the bed.

There. She was safe now. Safe and able to sleep it all off.

I turned to go sleep on the couch, but Leigh's hand shot out and grabbed my wrist. "Bryce!" Her voice was low and panicked.

I sat back down on the bed. "I'm here, sweetheart, and you're fine."

"Please don't go."

Fuck. How was I supposed to say no to her?

I stripped and put on a pair of sweats, then climbed into bed. Leigh rolled over immediately and curled against my side, clinging to me. I wrapped my arm around her and kissed the top of her head.

She was safe, and always would be. Like hell was I ever going to let her go again.

CHAPTER 25



Leigh

I woke up to some very sore muscles.

I groaned, and immediately the warmth surrounding me moved and sat up. “Leigh?”

“Everything hurts,” I whispered, my voice still raspy from having David’s hands around my throat.

“I’m not surprised. I’ll get you some water.”

Sitting up gingerly, I watched as Bryce—shirtless, because of course he was—went and got me a glass of water.

“Where are we?” I asked when he returned and after I’d had a drink.

“My apartment.”

Home. He’d brought me to *his* home.

I looked around and out the window. His apartment was obviously high up, but it wasn’t all chrome and open floorplans. Instead it was all art deco. That surprised me.

“Why’d you bring me here?” I asked curiously.

He smiled at me. “Where else would I bring you?”

I stared at him. “I don’t know. The hotel?” Somewhere that was less personal and intimate.

Bryce sat down on the edge of the bed. “Leigh. I...” He swallowed and looked away.

I continued drinking my water, surprised that the cat had gotten the tongue of Bryce, of all people.

He finally looked back at me, his eyes pained. “You nearly died.”

I shivered and set the empty glass aside. “I’m aware.”

“The fact that you were able to free yourself...” Bryce shook his head incredulously, a smile turning up the corners of his mouth. “You really are an extraordinary woman.”

“Not so extraordinary that you wanted me to help you,” I pointed out in a low grumble. I was still upset about that, so sue me.

Bryce frowned at me. “That had nothing to do with how capable you are. I was...” He sighed and ran a hand through his already tousled hair. “Leigh, I was terrified of you getting hurt. And of my own possessiveness. I was trying to keep you safe. For my own piece of mind. Christ, I nearly lost my mind when I saw Bill with you, what was I going to do if David got his hooks in you? I couldn’t trust myself. I needed you out of the way so you’d be safe, not because I thought you couldn’t handle yourself.”

He had been right, though. I had been focused on my wounded pride and done something incredibly stupid. I’d played with fire and gotten burned.

“I couldn’t handle myself though,” I said quietly.

Bryce tilted his head. “You dislocated your arms to get out of a death trap and then nearly murdered me. That toilet lid would’ve given David a concussion if not outright murdered him. You could handle yourself fine.”

I found myself blushing. The way he looked at me... it wasn’t with the sexual heat I was used to from him. It was softer than that. It was affectionate. Perhaps even more than that.

Bryce reached out, cupping my cheek gently and stroking my skin with

his thumb. My breath caught in my throat—my very sore throat.

“What now?” I whispered.

Bryce smiled. “Now, I finish doing what I was hired to do. And you rest and get better.”

I nodded. I had so many questions, but honestly, I was so bruised and aching. For the first time, I had a man who wanted to take care of me. Why wouldn't I give into that?

For the next couple of days I rested and worked on repairing my injured body. But on the third day, when I was feeling well enough to do things myself—thank God that Bryce had a big glass-walled standing shower, I wasn't ready to get into a tub again just yet—Bryce asked if I'd be able to accompany him to something.

I didn't know what it was, but I agreed. Bryce ordered me some nice clothes, although how he'd known my exact size...

To my surprise, Bryce took me back to the Lawton Industries company building. What did we have to do here?

We went up through the elevator to the top floor, where in the corporate meeting room the board had been assembled. Mr. Weston was absent, I noted. Whether it was because he had been fired in some way, or he was busy dealing with the death of his son, I didn't know.

How much did he know or suspect about David's actions? It was a mystery that would probably never be solved.

Rebecca was in the room as well, I noticed. That surprised me. She was a junior executive and a new one at that. What would she be doing here at such a high-up meeting?

Bryce and I entered, his hand on the small of my back. He'd never been possessive of me in public before. It gave me a little thrill up my spine. Since he'd spoken to me and admitted that he'd said those things to protect me, because he cared, I'd dared to hope... but I hadn't asked. Not when I was still recovering.

Makeup covered the bruises on my throat, but given that Rebecca's gaze dropped to my neck, I suspected she noticed I'd used concealer. The men in the room wouldn't understand, but as a makeup user herself, Rebecca probably could see what the others would just ignore.

Bryce checked his watch, then looked behind him. "Ah, I was worried you'd be late."

The man I'd seen in the photograph on Facebook as a result of my snooping entered the room. He was a bit older than in the photo, with touches of gray at his temples, and a bit thinner. He looked every inch like the kind of man you'd expect to be a university professor, and nothing at all like the commanding, alpha presence that Bryce exuded.

"Hello." The man smiled. "I suppose I owe all of you an apology. Especially you, Rebecca, I've heard many good things about you as Bryce has served in my place."

Rebecca's jaw dropped.

Bryce gestured with his free hand, keeping the other on the small of my back. "Meet the real Jack Lawton."

Now everyone else's jaws were dropping. Honestly, I kind of wished I had a camera.

"Jack hired me to be his stand in so that he could sort out the business of his uncle's company in peace while I fended off the wolves, so to speak," Bryce explained. "He thought it was best for his social anxiety. I enlisted the help of the lovely Leigh here to do investigating where I couldn't and make suggestions about the company."

Now I was trying to keep *my* jaw from dropping. Bryce had just covered for me and made it look like I was his partner in crime the entire time. He'd just saved my ass.

I saw Rebecca shooting her gaze over to me, a guilty look in her eyes.

"I really appreciate all that Bryce and Leigh have done for me," Jack said, stepping forward. "And I'm now officially moving into my capacity as CEO."

My first and only act is to dismantle the company.”

It took everything in me not to start demanding answers. My eyes felt like they were bugging out of my head. What was happening? What was going on?

“I have no interest in running a company,” Jack continued. “I’d like to return to my teaching post. But I can’t allow it in good conscience to keep running. Bryce was able to deliver me an extensive package on the damages done by Lawton Industries, compiled by Leigh.”

Holy fuck.

“I’ll be liquidating our assets and using the funds to invest in the company that Rebecca here will be starting,” Jack went on. “Provided she maintains a focus on environmentally healing practices.”

Rebecca blushed a little as Jack looked over at her, the full weight of his intense and serious gaze on her. Jack wasn’t my type, but he did seem like the kind of man who got very passionate about a few particular subjects, in his own quiet way. I hoped Rebecca would finally get some kind of happy ending.

Jack continued to explain how the dissolution of the company would work, and how he had consulted with someone on generous severance packages for the employees. I noticed a distinct lack of golden parachutes for the board members, and I had to work hard to hide a smirk.

When it was all over, Jack walked over to us. No, to me.

His gaze was appreciative. “I hear I have to thank you, specifically, for all of your hard work in coming up with a plan. And for helping get justice for my uncle.”

“It was all a part of the job,” I lied, smiling politely.

Jack and Bryce shook hands, exchanged a few words, and then Jack offered to buy Rebecca a coffee. She blushed again and accepted.

I squinted up at Bryce. “Are you playing matchmaker too?”

He widened his eyes in feigned shock. “I would never.”

I laughed under my breath. “You’re a big, fat liar.”

Bryce just smirked and led me out of the room.

When we were alone, I asked, “What happens now?”

Bryce looked into the distance as we walked towards the elevator. “Now, we go home.”

I paused, my heart hammering in my chest at his choice of words, and Bryce stopped as well. “We?”

Bryce cleared his throat. For the first time since I had met him, he looked unsure of himself. “I’m going to be honest with you. I don’t—do this. Relationships.”

“The love ‘em and leave ‘em type?” I asked.

He gently touched my cheek with the tips of his fingers, his eyes going softer than I’d ever seen them. “I wouldn’t use the first word. Not until you.”

My breath caught in my throat. The corner of Bryce’s mouth curled up, but for once it wasn’t a knowing smirk for getting one over on me. It looked . . . bittersweet.

“You really didn’t suspect?” he asked, surprise lacing his voice.

I shook my head.

“Leigh.” Bryce’s free hand slid down, until his arm was around my entire waist and he could pull me in. “Do you think I would’ve taken just anyone to my apartment? To my home? Let you be there alone while I handled business, where you could snoop as you pleased if you wanted?”

I swallowed hard, hopefully, and shook my head again.

“Anyone else I would have driven them to the hospital and checked them in,” Bryce told me. “I would have made sure they were safe, and I would have left. Not you. I didn’t want to let you out of my sight for a second. I wanted you to be where I could protect you.”

I searched his face, but I saw nothing but earnestness there. “You better be serious,” I warned him. “After everything—”

Bryce kissed me. Right in the middle of the office where a bunch of

people who'd thought I was their coworker could see it. Where a bunch of people who'd thought of Bryce as their *boss* could see it.

But it seemed Bryce didn't care. He kissed me until my knees went weak, then pulled back. There was no smirk on his face. Just warmth and the sweetest emotions.

"I'll be honest," he said, his tone a bit gruff. "I don't think I've been so serious about something in my entire life before."

I could feel my face heating up and I was sure I was blushing. "Well. You're lucky you can keep up with me, that's all."

"Uh-huh." Bryce stroked his fingers through my hair, then pulled, ever so slightly. "I can't wait until I can put that collar on you again and show you just how much you belong to me."

I shivered. I couldn't wait for him to do exactly that.

EPILOGUE



Bryce

For some damn reason, I was more nervous about this than Leigh was.

She was going to do fantastic. I knew that. I had talked about how great she would be ad nauseam with my two other partners until they agreed to have her on and see how she did.

Honestly, it was probably because this wasn't just about introducing a new member of the team to the company. This was about introducing my girlfriend to my best friends. Especially after all those years I'd been so non-committal when it came to the women I dated, they all knew how important Leigh was to me and what a huge change this was.

But my worries about that aside—I knew she would be an excellent member of our team. She was smart, she was tenacious, and she had a strong focus on justice. It would give her something to do besides her activism—which nobody in the world would be stupid enough to ask her to give up completely.

Seth was the first one in my office. He was our resident computer guru, hacker, and nerd of the group. He raised a mocking eyebrow at me.

“What?” I asked, glaring at him.

Seth shrugged. “Just curious to see if this woman lives up to everything you’ve told us about her.”

“You think I’m a liar?” I huffed indignantly.

The door opened and Leigh stepped in.

Fuck, she was stunning. She was always gorgeous, but sometimes she took my breath away all over again. Her auburn hair cascaded down her back and she was wearing a sinfully tight pair of jeans and a top with a slit down the middle that showed off her cleavage.

She was doing this just to torture me, I was sure. As if I wasn’t going to make her pay for her misbehavior by bending her over my desk the first chance we had.

Seth’s jaw dropped a little upon seeing her.

I couldn’t help but smirk in satisfaction. “Leigh, meet Seth Maxwell, one of my best friends and a partner here at Elite Protection and Consulting. Seth, this is Leigh Bristow, my girlfriend and our newest member of the company.”

Leigh shook his hand. “It’s great to finally meet Bryce’s friends. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Seth shot me a look. When Vaughn arrived and immediately began chatting with Leigh, Seth sidled up to me. “I guess you actually finally settling down makes sense now.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “It’s not about the boobs.”

He chuckled. “Sure it’s not.”

“She’s the smartest girl I’ve ever met.”

“You’ve met other smart women,” he pointed out.

I looked over at Leigh, who glanced at me and smiled, her cheeks going a little pink. I liked that I was the only man who could make this confident woman blush.

“Some day,” I warned Seth, “you’re going to meet a woman and she’s going to knock your socks off and scramble your brains. And when that day

comes, I'm going to laugh my ass off.”

“Like that'll ever happen.” Then, Seth clapped me on the shoulder. “But hey. Seriously. All jokes aside? You seem really happy.”

I slid my gaze back to Leigh, and thought about how tonight I'd get to have her spread out on my bed, wearing nothing but her pretty collar. And how I would get to hold her all night, and wake up with her in the morning, and banter with her in between.

“Yeah,” I promised him. “I really am.”

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