



CLAIRE KINGSLEY
MARRYING
Mr. Wrong

A
HOT

Romantic

COMEDY

MARRYING MR. WRONG

CLAIRE KINGSLEY

Always Have LLC

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To my hot messes. Be you. Be messy. Be real.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

I never should have gone commando in that dress.

I'm almost positive the rest of it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been dangling off a hotel balcony with my lady parts in the breeze. And of course the one person to witness my mortification had to be HIM. Camden Cox.

Sure, today he's gorgeous and wealthy, and fine, I can admit he has a great sense of humor. But once upon a time, he was the boy who loved to make my life miserable.

He no longer pulls my pigtails, but I know his type. He wants one thing, and one thing only. A chance to get in my pants.

Nope. Not happening. Not even with that sexy Southern drawl.

But I'm Sophie Abbott, and if there's one thing I'm good at, it's making a mess.

Only this isn't just a mess. It's a disaster. A Sophie disaster.

Because after a wild night in Vegas, I wake up naked in his hotel room.

And I'm pretty sure we got married.

Author's note: An adorkable hot mess who throws a cocky charmer completely off his game. Plus a salty dad playing matchmaker, laugh-out-loud banter, a couch scene that will melt your Kindle, and the swooniest of swoony happy endings.

SOPHIE

I never should have gone commando in this dress.

People wandered by—men in tuxes and women in evening gowns—and I swore I could feel a breeze wafting up my legs and brushing my backside. Was I standing near a vent or something?

The hotel ballroom was beautifully decked out for the gala and auction. It was a great cause, benefiting Big Brothers Big Sisters. Long tables held silent auction items, and the live auction would take place on the temporary stage in front of the panoramic windows. Tables were decorated with fancy linens and two bars provided drinks to the well-dressed guests.

The problem was, I'd totally forgotten about coming to this benefit. My boss, Shepherd Calloway, and his wife Everly—who's one of my best friends—were supposed to attend. I'm Mr. Calloway's executive assistant, so I arrange the details. They attend the events.

But Everly was pregnant, and yesterday her ankles had seemed a bit swollen. She was sure it was nothing to be concerned about—as was her doctor—but Mr. Calloway had developed an impressive level of protective paranoia when it came to his pregnant wife. He'd cleared his schedule for the next few days to make sure he could be there for Everly.

It really was rather cute.

But it left me in the position of filling in for them at this gala.

Which I'd forgotten about until the last minute.

And because I'm Sophie Abbott, expert hot mess, in my haste to get myself presentable enough for a black-tie gala, and be on time, and not break a nail, and find shoes that were formal enough but would allow me to walk,

I'd completely forgotten to put on underwear.

Who forgets to put on underwear?

Me, that's who.

At least I'd remembered a bra. That's important when you have curves—and I have plenty of those.

So here I was, a bra dutifully taming the twins and my dark blond curls behaving nicely, but nothing below the waist except the thin fabric of my red dress.

My rather short, thin red dress.

Was it see-through? Could people see my butt crack?

That was probably my biggest concern at this point. I glanced over my shoulder, wondering if I'd catch someone looking down and pondering the nature of what was beneath my too-light-and-flimsy-to-go-commando dress.

A man in a black tux stood nearby, his eyes locked on my butt.

He could tell.

I sighed and moved farther down the silent auction table. At this point, I had to either cut out early and go home or resign myself to the fact that a handful of people in the room were going to notice and stare.

What would my friends do? My three best friends always seemed to be put together in ways I was not.

Everly would have Mr. Calloway to block her from view. His icy stare would freeze any man who dared to look at his wife. Hazel would never have worn this dress in the first place. She'd be wearing something much more practical. And lined.

But Nora? She'd just own it.

So maybe that was the answer. Channel my inner Nora. After all, tonight couldn't get any worse. I was already dateless at a charity benefit where I didn't know anyone—socially, at least—wearing a dress that made me feel like I was in one of those nightmares where you're naked on stage in front of an audience.

And then, just like that, it got worse.

A man in a dark suit met my eyes from across the room. Gasping, I quickly turned away. Oh no. It was Dr. Handsy Perv.

My elderly father was on a quest to find me a husband and had appointed himself matchmaker. Which meant he tried to set me up with just about every single man he met who appeared to be between the ages of twenty and fifty.

The neighborhood mail carrier. The guy putting stickers on bananas at the

grocery store. The waiter at our favorite restaurant. His ophthalmologist. The guy who did his taxes.

This one, Dr. Shilling, was the surgeon who'd recently performed a minor procedure on his wrist. When Dad had gone in for a follow-up, he'd somehow convinced the doctor to go on a date with his daughter.

I'd gone to appease my dad and very quickly wished I hadn't. Dr. Shilling had spent the entire evening finding excuses to touch me. And not in cute ways that made me want him to touch me more. He'd groped and leered and made me so uncomfortable, I'd faked a sudden bout of food poisoning and left. Later, when I'd dished to my friends about it over martinis, we'd named him Dr. Handsy Perv.

And there he was, just on the other side of the silent auction tables.

I risked a quick peek. He was talking to someone else, but his eyes flicked toward me. This was so awkward. Turning, I almost walked right into a man in a black tux with silver hair and glasses. He deftly shifted his drink out of the way so he wouldn't spill.

"I'm so sorry."

He didn't reply. Just furrowed his brow in annoyance and went around me.

My heart beat faster and I cast another glance at Dr. Handsy Perv. Or where Dr. Handsy Perv had been a few seconds ago. Where had he gone?

"Sophie." His hand slid onto my elbow and I practically jumped out of my heels.

Jerking my arm away, I spun around and took a step back. "Dr. Shilling."

"We're not in my office; there's no need to be formal. You can call me Randall."

"Right, of course. Randall."

He stepped closer and ran his hand up and down my arm. "Glad to see you recovered."

God, why was he so touchy? His hands were cold and clammy. Gross. "Yeah, thanks. I'm feeling a lot better."

His eyes swept up and down in a way that made my stomach turn. It wasn't sexy or provocative. It was creepy. Like he was sizing me up to see if I'd fit in the trunk of his car.

"Excuse me, I have to—"

"Randall!"

Someone called his name and I took advantage of his momentary

distraction to dart away. The live auction hadn't started yet, but I'd just have to miss it. I needed to get out of here before Dr. Handsy Perv could corner me.

I quick-walked toward my table where I'd left my coat, willing myself to not trip in my heels, and adjusted the thin strap of my small black purse. Thankfully, I made it without any mishaps. Congratulating myself on my successful walk across the room—it wasn't much, but I believe in celebrating the little things—I scooped up my coat and turned.

And bumped into someone. Again.

This time it was a woman in a shimmery black evening gown with a plunging neckline.

"I'm sorry." I started to reach for her drink to make sure she didn't spill but pulled back at the last second because I'd probably wind up making it worse.

She recovered quickly, the surprise in her expression melting into a smile. She looked like she was in her mid-thirties, with dark hair in an up-do and deep red lipstick. "No harm done. Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you." My eyes darted to the side. Dr. Handsy Perv was still occupied by the man who'd called his name, but his gaze was on me. I shuddered.

She followed my gaze. "Let me guess. Ex-boyfriend?"

"Oh, no. We only went on one date. Or maybe it was half a date? Either way, it was very uncomfortable."

"I totally understand. We've all been there." She took a casual sip of her drink. "I love your dress. It's very flattering."

I glanced down at myself. "Thanks. Yours is pretty too."

Her lips curled in a smile. "Thank you."

Dr. Handsy Perv broke off from his conversation and started heading in our direction.

"Don't worry." She set down her drink, then shifted so she was beside me and slipped her arm through mine. "Us girls need to stick together. I'll get you out of here."

We started toward the ballroom doors, arm in arm.

"Thank you so much." I glanced over my shoulder. "Oh my god, he's following."

"Persistent, isn't he? I'm Ruby, by the way."

"Sophie."

She gave my arm a reassuring squeeze as we walked through the large double doors. “Some men don’t know how to take a hint. We’ll disappear into the ladies’ room.”

The restrooms were just across the hallway and we ducked inside. I let out a long breath while Ruby checked her hair in the mirror. She got out her phone and started typing.

“Are you here alone?” she asked.

I smoothed down my dress and shifted my coat, which was still hanging over my arm. “Yes, unfortunately. You?”

“My husband is here, but he went back to our room already.”

“Are you from out of town, or just making a night of it?”

“Making a night of it. Hotels have a way of spicing things up.” She tucked her phone into her black clutch. “I’ll make sure the coast is clear.”

“Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure.” She opened the door and peeked out, then let it fall closed again.

“He’s still out there, isn’t he?” I asked.

“He is, and he’s standing in the middle of the hallway so he’s blocking your access to the ballroom and the lobby.”

I shuddered again. So creepy. “I’m genuinely worried he has a syringe in his pocket and he’s going to drug me.”

“He gives off that vibe, doesn’t he? How about we go upstairs to my room? We can have a drink while we wait for him to give up the chase.”

“I don’t want to impose—”

“Nonsense,” she said, slipping her arm through mine again. “We’d love to have you.”

Smiling at my good fortune at having bumped into Ruby, I let her lead me out of the ladies’ room. We took a quick right, toward the elevators, and she pressed the button.

“Sophie,” Dr. Handsy Perv called behind me.

“Pretend you don’t hear him,” Ruby whispered.

Come on, elevator. Come on, open.

“Sophie, where are you—”

The elevator dinged and the doors swished open. Ruby and I darted inside and I jammed my finger on the close button.

Dr. Handsy Perv jogged down the hallway toward us, but the doors closed just in time.

I let out a long breath.

“Wow, he really must like you,” Ruby said.

My tummy felt a little tickle as the elevator rose. “I don’t know if anyone has ever made me more uncomfortable than that guy.”

“Then I’m glad we ran into each other. No one needs that in their life.”

The doors opened to the second floor and I followed her down the hall.

“Thank you again,” I said, my voice emphatic. “You really didn’t have to do all this. You’re missing the auction.”

She waved off my comment. “Believe me, I don’t mind. This is much more fun. Besides, before I got married, I dated a couple of creepers. I know how awful it is.”

She stopped in front of a door and swiped her key card, then pushed it open.

I hesitated behind her. Dr. Handsy Perv had to have given up by now. And I could find a different set of elevators, go back down to the lobby, and be on my way. I probably shouldn’t be going into a stranger’s hotel room, even if she was nice.

“I should actually get going,” I said. “I appreciate your help, but—”

“It’s no trouble at all, I promise.”

A man in a dress shirt with the tie undone appeared in the open door. He was tall, with sleek dark hair and a square jaw.

They made a gorgeous couple.

“There you are,” he said, slipping an arm around her waist. He brushed her lips with a light kiss, then his eyes moved to me. “Did you make a friend again?”

“This is Sophie. Isn’t she sweet? I invited her up for a drink.” She glanced at me. “This is my husband, Marcus.”

“Hi,” I said.

His gaze flicked up and down and he gave me a friendly smile. “Nice to meet you. Come in.”

Ruby hooked my arm and led me inside.

Their suite was beautiful, with a sitting area, a wet bar, and big windows. Through another door, I could see a large bedroom with a king bed. Ruby dropped my arm and I wandered slowly around the room, gazing at the opulent furnishings and beautiful art on the walls.

“Ruby is the social one of the two of us. She makes new friends wherever we go.” Marcus paused next to the bar. “What can I get you, Sophie?”

Before I could answer, Ruby sidled up to him and slipped her hand in his. “Honey, I was thinking. We already had drinks downstairs. Shouldn’t we do something more fun?”

Marcus looked me up and down again, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smile. “You’re right. I think we should.”

Ruby turned back to me and nibbled on her lower lip. “What do you think, Sophie? Are you up for a little fun?”

I froze in place, not sure how to answer that question. The energy in the room buzzed with sudden weirdness. What did she mean by that?

“Um...”

Marcus glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. “You didn’t ask her already?”

“I wanted to introduce you first.”

“You know I trust your judgment.” His eyes flicked to me. “But she’s perfect.”

“Isn’t she?”

“Um, perfect for what?” I asked.

Ruby took a step toward me and grabbed my hand. “Marcus and I like to add a little spice to our relationship by including a friend.”

My eyes widened. Did she mean...

“Oh... I’m not... I don’t...”

She ran her thumb along the backs of my knuckles. “I know you’ve probably never done something like this before. You have a certain innocence about you. It’s why I asked you up here. But I think the three of us could have an amazing time together.”

Marcus tapped something, then held out a silver tray toward Ruby.

My eyes widened more.

There were three lines of white powder on the tray.

Oh holy shit.

My heart slammed a furious beat behind my ribs. Oh my god, she’d brought me up here to do cocaine and have a threesome with her and her husband.

“Would you like some?” Ruby asked, gesturing toward the tray. “It really enhances the experience.”

Sudden panic made my mind go blank. Instead of doing the rational thing and politely declining, then walking out the door, I did the Sophie thing.

I made a mess.

Stepping backward, I jerked my hand out of Ruby's grasp. I teetered on my heels—damn it, I'd been doing so well in them tonight—and flung my arms out for balance. My hand crashed into the tray of drugs—drugs!—and sent it flying through the air, spraying a shower of white powder all over Marcus.

Oh my god, cocaine in the air. Don't breathe, Sophie! Don't get it in your nose!

Ruby shouted something and Marcus staggered backward. I dove into the bedroom and slammed the door shut behind me.

I quickly turned the lock and put my back to the door, my breath coming in gasps. Great, I was like the dumb girl in the horror movie who ran upstairs, trapping herself in the house with the killer.

Frantically, I looked for a way out while Ruby and Marcus called my name through the door. What had I gotten myself into? Dr. Handsy Perv would have been better than this.

Well, maybe.

One of them rattled the doorknob. Maybe they'd have to get housekeeping to unlock it. I could hide in the bathroom until then. No, that wasn't a good plan. Not that locking myself in here was good either, but at this point, I had to work with what I had.

The only other door led to a balcony.

Which gave me an idea.

After all, we were only on the second floor.

With my heart still racing and Ruby and Marcus trying to talk to me through the door, I checked the closet. There were white towels and a few fluffy pillows, but on the top shelf, I found what I was looking for.

Extra bedsheets.

I grabbed the neatly folded stack of soft cotton and madly shook it out while I darted for the balcony.

The cold air hit me and I realized that at some point, I'd dropped my coat. Too late to worry about that now. By some small miracle, my purse still hung off my shoulder, so that was something. I moved the strap over my head to the other shoulder so I wouldn't lose it on the way down.

I glanced over the balcony. It overlooked an inner courtyard with stone-paved paths and lush landscaping. A fountain trickled, glowing with lights.

It was now or never.

I tied the sheets together, then fastened one end to the railing, hoping the

knots would hold. Although I'm not what anyone would call skinny, usually I don't mind my ample curves. But right then, I sort of wished I'd been built a little less shapely.

Oh well, too late to go on a diet now. Here went nothing.

I tossed the loose end of the sheet down and hoisted myself over the side. My shoes slipped off my feet and clattered to the ground below.

The breeze chose that exact moment to pick up, billowing the red fabric of my dress. God, that was cold. It was almost like I wasn't wearing any—

Panties.

Which I wasn't.

Thankfully, no one was down there.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Scratch that. There was someone down there.

I groaned. Of course there was. This was me. If something could go wrong, it would.

"Careful," the man below me said. He had a slight Southern drawl. "You should—whoa."

The wind whipped my dress around again, sending a chill straight up my —

Anyway.

"Stop looking up my dress. I'm trying to get down."

"I wasn't—" He cleared his throat. "Kind of hard to avoid."

My feet were braced against the lower part of the balcony and my arms already burned from the effort of holding the sheet. These probably felt great to sleep on, but for escape purposes, they were really slippery.

"Are you stuck?" he asked.

I hesitated for a second. "Maybe?"

"Okay, here's what you're going to do." His voice was calm and commanding, and if I hadn't been hanging off a balcony about to fall to my death, I probably would have found his accent unbelievably charming. It reminded me of Matthew McConaughey. "You're going to let your feet drop, and you'll slide down. Just make sure you have a good grip on the sheet first. I'll be at the bottom to catch you. And don't look down."

I looked and let out a squeak.

"I said don't look down."

"You can't say *don't look down*. Obviously that's just going to make me look."

“Come on,” he said, his tone strong and soothing. “Slide on down. I’ve got you.”

“Okay.” I took a fortifying breath and released my feet.

I squeaked again as I slid, gritting my teeth against the burn of the fabric in my hands. Too fast. I was going too fast. I was going to—

Strong arms caught me around my waist, bringing me to a sudden stop. The breath rushed from my lungs and I let go of the sheet as he set me gently on the ground.

“Oh good. I didn’t die.”

“Why the hell were you climbing off a balcony with a sheet?”

I brushed my unruly curls out of my face, scooped up my shoes, and started walking away barefoot. “They offered me cocaine and wanted to do a threesome. I panicked. Thank you for helping me down, but I have to go.”

“Wait, what?” He jogged a few steps to catch up with me.

“Never mind. I don’t blame you if you don’t believe me.”

“No, I believe you. Are you all right? Do you need a ride or something?”

I kept walking, although I wasn’t sure if I was heading in the right direction. Away from the scary cocaine couple—and the guy who’d just seen up my dress. “No, after the night I’ve had, the last thing I’m going to do is get in a car with someone I don’t know. I guess I won’t know an Uber driver if I order a ride, but that doesn’t count. But maybe I’ll call one of my friends because clearly, my night is cursed and I’ll probably get picked up by a psychotic ax murderer.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the lobby?”

“That’s not the way to the lobby.”

I stopped and let out a breath. I needed to slow down and think. My eyes lifted, meeting his, and I choked on my own spit.

It was *him*.

I hadn’t seen him in person in at least twenty years—since we were kids—but he was low-key famous now, especially in Seattle. Besides, I’d never forget that face.

Camden Cox.

“It’s you.”

He gave me a smile that made it clear he wasn’t surprised to be recognized—but gave no indication that he knew who I was.

Jerk.

His expression softened and for a second, I wondered if my snap judgment was wrong and he did remember me. He blinked and one corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

A swarm of butterflies took flight in my stomach and that sexy little grin of his sent a pleasant tingle down my spine.

Camden Cox hadn't just grown up sexy. He'd grown up drop-dead gorgeous. Thick, dark hair. Haunting gray eyes. Sharp cheekbones and square jaw. He wore the hell out of his dark suit with a vest and tie.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Like a record scratch, I jolted back to reality, no longer under the hypnotic spell of a gorgeous man—or his slow Southern drawl. He didn't remember me. Yep, jerk.

"Sophia," I said, using my birth name. I didn't know why. No one had ever called me Sophia, not even when I was a baby. But at this point, I didn't *want* him to realize who I was.

"Nice to meet you, Sophia. I'm Camden Cox, but everybody calls me Cox. Are you sure I can't get you a ride, or—"

"No thanks," I said quickly. "I'll get myself home. Thanks for helping me off the balcony."

I glanced around to orient myself and saw a sign pointing to the lobby. Before he could say anything else, I walked away, my heels dangling from my hands, the chill night air still wafting up my dress.

*S*ophia.

She walked away—toward the lobby this time—the sway of her hips positively hypnotic. I stood rooted to the spot, mesmerized. Her scent lingered in my nose and I could still feel the slight tickle of her soft hair against my face.

I'd never been so awestruck by a woman before.

It wasn't because I'd seen up her dress—and seen *everything*. Granted, that had taken me by surprise. Who expects to look up and see a woman climbing off a second story balcony, in a dress with no panties? It was certainly a first for me.

No, there had been something about her. About the sound of her voice and the smell of her hair. The way she'd felt sliding down the front of my body when I'd caught her and set her on her feet.

Sophia.

I hadn't even gotten her last name. For a second, I considered chasing after her. After all, I'm Camden Cox, and when I want something, I get it.

But she'd already disappeared inside. And the fact that such a brief—albeit unusual—encounter had rattled me like this made me hesitate.

Pulling myself together, I adjusted my cuffs. Whoever she was, she was gone now. I doubted I'd ever see her again.

Which was fine. There were plenty of women in the world. I wasn't going to be preoccupied with the identity of that one.



THAT TURNED out to be a lie. Monday afternoon at work, I was still thinking about Sophia. Her soft curly hair. The curves beneath her dress.

Other things beneath her dress.

It was annoying. I shifted in my chair, trying to make room in my pants. She couldn't have been *that* hot. My memory must have exaggerated—fooled me into thinking she was special. Or maybe I'd had more to drink that night than I'd thought.

Didn't matter. I turned my attention back to my computer screen. It wasn't as if I didn't have more than enough to keep me occupied.

My assistant rapped on the door and poked his head inside.

"It's three," he said in his posh British accent.

"Come in."

Oliver Carrington waltzed in, looking impeccable as usual. Tweed vest over a button-down shirt. Fitted slacks. Not a single auburn hair out of place nor the tiniest scuff on his expensive shoes. He'd worked for me for years and was brilliant at his job. Putting up with me wasn't easy, so I paid him well for it.

He set down a silver tray with a teapot, two teacups, and a plate of finger sandwiches. Somehow he'd built afternoon tea into my daily routine. I'd stopped arguing with him about it. Hell, I could even admit that I enjoyed it. I was a Texas boy at heart—as a kid, I'd moved around a lot, including several years in Seattle, but I'd spent more time in Texas than anywhere else. But even this Texas boy could appreciate a hot cup of tea and some finger sandwiches.

Although sometimes I did add whiskey.

He poured, then took a seat on the other side of my desk. "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Bad."

"Good, because I only have bad news. Thiago Santos is out."

"Fuck." I left my tea untouched and sat back in my chair. Thiago was the third investor to drop out of the Skyline project since my now-former business partner, Dominic Coates, had fucked me over with a public sex scandal. He'd resigned, saving me the trouble of getting rid of him, but now I had to clean up the mess—and keep this project afloat.

Oliver adjusted his glasses. "We knew it was coming."

"I know. But this project is on the verge of collapse."

"Well, who do we know who might be interested?"

I'd been thinking about that very thing all day. "Jackson Bennett might be, but he's hard to pin down these days."

"Family man, now. What about Richard Calloway?"

"I'd work with Richard in a heartbeat, but he's become a lot more conservative with his investments." I pressed the tips of my fingers together. "But maybe Shepherd Calloway."

Oliver raised his eyebrows. "Are you making the phone calls, because getting a meeting with Shepherd Calloway isn't easy."

I scowled at him. "He'll see me."

He made a non-committal sound in his throat.

The door flew open. Althea marched into my office and put her hands on her hips. "Thiago Santos?"

"He's out," I said.

She pinched her lips together. My lawyer, Althea McLellan, could have passed for a woman in her thirties, rather than fifty, although Botox probably had a lot to do with that. A blouse and slacks dressed her tall, slender frame and her blond hair was pulled back in a low bun.

"This is a problem," she said.

"I realize that, but—"

"Do you?"

I leveled her with a hard stare. "I'm working on it."

Her expression softened. "I know you are. I'm just panicking because we're in danger of losing this entire deal."

"We won't lose the deal. I'm thinking of bringing in Shepherd Calloway."

She lifted her eyebrows. "Good choice. We know he has the capital. Do you need me to make some calls?"

Oliver set his teacup down with a clink. "I don't think that's necessary. I'll set up a meeting."

"Didn't you just say getting a meeting with him isn't easy?" I asked.

He scowled at me. "I'll get you the meeting."

Althea looked skeptical but didn't argue with him—which was something of a miracle. Oliver and Althea only tolerated each other because they had to.

"Keep me posted." She cast a quick glare at Oliver, then left.

"That's it, Maleficent," Oliver muttered. "Back to your black castle of darkness."

I chuckled, then took a sip of my tea. "Obviously I need a backup plan if

Calloway says no, but for now, we'll take this one step at a time."

He checked his watch. "Speaking of meetings with investors, you have one with Irene Prager at her office in less than half an hour."

Nodding, I took a finger sandwich and popped it in my mouth. Irene Prager was one of the remaining Skyline investors. The fact that she wanted to meet in person was a good sign. It meant I had a shot at convincing her to see the project through.

This was the biggest development deal of my career. I was not going to lose it now.

"Do you need me to join you?" Oliver asked.

"Yeah, you should come. Irene loves you."

He grinned. "It's the accent."

"Drives the ladies wild," I said. "And if it puts Irene in a stick-with-Cox-Development mood, even better."

"I'll do my best to be suitably charming."

Oliver and I finished up with the tea, and he took it away. Irene's office was only two blocks away and it was warm for March, so I decided to walk. I slipped on my suit jacket and waited for Oliver to join me.

We went down the elevator to the lobby and through the glass front doors. Blue sky peeked out between the skyscrapers, and the hum of traffic filled the air. The first job I'd taken here in Seattle had been in this very building, working for a commercial real estate developer. Only three years later, I'd bought him out.

Now I owned the building.

The scent of food wafted from the open door of a restaurant, making me glad I wasn't heading to this meeting on an empty stomach. There was definitely something to Oliver's insistence on afternoon tea.

We crossed the street and Oliver stopped in his tracks. He tilted his head, peering into a shop on the corner.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Shh."

"Did you just shush me?"

He held up a hand and took a tentative step forward, his head still tilted at an odd angle. "Give me one second."

It was a tea shop, aptly named Spot Of Tea. But I had no clue why Oliver was staring through the window like a creeper.

"You like tea a lot more than I realized," I said. "I'm a little worried, to

be honest.”

“It’s not the tea, it’s—” He stopped and let out what could only be described as a sigh. “Her.”

I moved closer so I could see the girl working behind the counter. She had long, light-brown hair and wore a white apron over her blue shirt. “Who is she?”

“I don’t know. They don’t wear name tags. But I think I’m going to marry her.”

I snort-laughed. “Marry her? You might be skipping a few steps if you don’t even know her name.”

He adjusted his glasses. “I know. I’m working on it.”

“Well, either get your ass in there and ask her out or let’s keep walking. We have a meeting to get to and you’re blocking the sidewalk.”

He huffed but tore his gaze away from her. “Fine. But I’m not kidding. I look at her and I have this feeling. She’s destined to be my wife.”

I resumed walking and Oliver fell in step beside me.

“Since when are you so interested in getting married?”

“I’m not interested in marriage for the sake of getting married. Although my mother certainly has opinions about that. You’d think she’s the matriarch of a wealthy family desperate for an heir.”

“You and me both.” My mother had something of an obsession with me getting married. Which was unfortunate for her because I wasn’t the marrying type.

“But wouldn’t it be nice to come home to that special someone every night?” he asked.

“Not really.”

He laughed. “You’d think you’re a confirmed old bachelor, not a very eligible man in his thirties.”

“Maybe I’m ahead of my time. Confirmed old bachelor sounds fine to me.”

Oliver laughed again, but I wasn’t kidding. My parents’ marriage had been a shitshow, and I’d decided years ago that marriage wasn’t for me. I dated women all the time, but never anything serious. And I had a great life. I’d risen from nothing, and now I worked hard, played hard, and enjoyed the many fruits of my labor without having to answer to anyone.

Why the hell would I ever change the way I lived?

We got to Irene Prager’s office and by the time we left, Oliver and I had

charmed her into sticking with the Skyline project. I texted Althea on the way back, letting her know we'd salvaged one of our investors. Thank fuck.

Now I just needed to get that meeting with Shepherd Calloway.

SOPHIE

The spring air was pleasant as I walked from my office to the bistro. I was meeting my friends for lunch and I wasn't running late. Go, me!

I'd recovered from my mishaps at Saturday's gala with wine and a for-the-millionth-time viewing of *Pride and Prejudice*. The good news was Dr. Handsy Perv hadn't tried to contact me since. Apparently running away from him and darting into an elevator with a stranger had gotten the message across. That wasn't a bad silver lining to my Saturday night debacle.

I paused outside the bistro and glanced at my reflection in the window of a parked car. It felt like I might have something in my teeth, so I leaned down and used the window as a mirror.

Just as I was curling my upper lip back so I could see my gumline, the window lowered, revealing a young guy in the driver's seat.

I froze, my face contorted in a strange grimace. "Sorry."

He shook his head slowly and put the window up again.

Lovely.

I straightened, let out a sigh, and turned to go into the restaurant. By some miracle, I didn't trip or bump into anyone when I crossed the sidewalk. That made me smile. One out of two wasn't bad.

The bistro had lively Italian music playing in the background and tables decorated with checkered cloths. Nora, Hazel, and Everly were already there, seated near the back. I carefully picked my way around the other customers, making sure I didn't bump into anyone or smack them with my purse.

I'd met Everly a couple of years ago when she'd hired me to replace her

as Mr. Calloway's assistant so she could start a new job as the executive director of a charitable foundation. She'd invited me to come for a run—and drinks afterward—with her and Nora and Hazel, and because sometimes even I got lucky, I'd fit right in. Now here I was, with three of the best friends a girl could ask for.

"Hey, Soph." Nora wiggled her fingers at me. Her dark hair was down in loose waves and she wore a deep red shirt and jeans.

"Hi, ladies." With a smile, I carefully took off my light jacket and draped it over the back of my chair, then sat.

Everly was next to Nora, wearing a yellow dress, her blond hair pinned up. You could just see her baby bump, which was the cutest thing ever. Hazel sat on her other side, wearing a tan cardigan over a white blouse. Her new wedding ring sparkled on her left hand. She and her husband Corban had opted for a short engagement and small wedding, and had recently returned from their honeymoon.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Everly. "Did the swelling go down?"

"It did. I just need to remember to put my feet up at the end of the day. But otherwise, I feel great."

"You really do make the cutest pregnant woman," Nora said. "It's done wonders for your complexion."

Everly touched her cheeks. "Thanks. Speaking of the baby, I have news. We found out this morning that we're having a girl."

I clutched my hands to my chest and firmly ignored the way my ovaries jumped up and down, trying to get my attention.

When is it our turn, Sophie?

Nora reached over to grab Everly's hands. "Oh honey, I'm so happy for you."

"I imagine Shepherd displayed an uncharacteristic degree of emotion at the news," Hazel said.

"Oh my god, you guys. He cleared his throat," Everly said with a sigh.

That *was* an uncharacteristic display of emotion for Mr. Calloway. He was kind of a hardass, but I didn't mind. He was fair, and that mattered to me more than friendliness. And he loved his wife like crazy, so I knew he had a heart in there somewhere.

"No wonder he was in such a good mood when he came into the office," I said. "He nodded to me when he walked by my desk."

"That was nice of him," Everly said with a smile, then turned to Hazel.

“How’s the new house? Are you getting settled?”

Hazel adjusted her glasses. “It’s quite satisfactory.”

“Have you broken in the dining table yet?” Nora raised her eyebrows.

“We’ve had several meals there, yes.”

The corner of Nora’s mouth lifted. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Nora.” Everly’s cheeks flushed pink.

“What? It’s a fair question. We all know what’s beneath Corban’s nerdy exterior.”

“She has a point,” I said.

“I just want to know if he’s bent her over any tables lately.”

Hazel seemed to be trying to hide her smile. “We’re thoroughly enjoying our new house. Including the dining table.”

Nora smiled. “That’s my girl.”

“Sophie, how was the gala on Saturday?” Everly asked. “Thank you so much for going in our place.”

“It was kind of a disaster, but that’s not your fault.”

“Oh no, what happened?”

I took a deep breath and launched into my story, from realizing I’d forgotten to wear panties, to Dr. Handsy Perv, to Ruby and Marcus and their offer of a cocaine-fueled threesome.

“Oh dear god,” Nora said. “What an absolute nightmare.”

“You actually used bedsheets to climb from a second story balcony?” Hazel asked. “You must have impressive upper body strength.”

I flexed one bicep. “I have been working out. I also had help getting down. Except...”

“Except, what?” Everly asked.

I took another deep breath. “Circle of trust?”

My friends nodded and clasped hands, creating a circle. We all squeezed, then let go. The circle was sacred. What was said in the circle stayed in the circle.

It was one of the many reasons I loved them so much.

“At first I didn’t think there was anyone in the courtyard, but of course there was. And because it’s me, and I have the worst luck in the history of ever, it wasn’t just anyone. It was Camden Cox.”

“I think I’ve heard of him,” Hazel said.

“So have I. He’s a delicious piece of man candy in a suit,” Nora said. “And you weren’t wearing underwear. Please tell me this story ends with a

hot hookup.”

I pulled a face. “No. Oh my god, no. Never. You don’t understand—I know him. Or I used to know him. And it’s not like he remembered me, the big jerk.”

“How do you know him?” Hazel asked.

“He lived on my street for a while when I was a kid and we went to school together. It was around fifth grade, I think. He moved a few years later, but I’ll never forget Camden Cox. He tormented me. I was a chubby little girl with curly blond hair, so of course he called me Miss Piggy. He’d hold his nose up to make a pig snout and oink at me, and he’d come up behind me and pull my pigtails.”

“That little snot,” Nora said.

“Right? And honestly, how does this kind of thing always happen to me? It’s not enough that I forget to wear underwear. I have to wind up hanging off a second-story balcony with my hoo-ha in the breeze while my childhood bully sees everything under my skirt.”

“It was nice of him to help you down, though,” Everly said.

I pressed my lips closed. I didn’t want to admit it, but he had been perfectly nice to me.

“Not nice enough to redeem him from being awful to our Sophie,” Nora said. “Or for looking up her skirt.”

“Thank you,” I said with a nod. “Although the looking up my skirt part wasn’t really his fault.”

“I’m glad you weren’t injured,” Hazel said. “And I commend your decision to decline the drugs and sex with a married couple. That wouldn’t have ended well.”

I shuddered. “Definitely not my thing.”

“And let’s not forget, we have Vegas to look forward to,” Nora said.

We did have Vegas to look forward to. Mr. Calloway had to be in Vegas over the upcoming weekend on business and Everly wanted company, so she’d invited the rest of us to tag along. I’d probably have to work some of the time, but I didn’t mind one bit. It was going to be so much fun.

“I know Vegas with a pregnant lady isn’t exactly the same,” Everly said, resting a hand on her belly.

“We’ll have plenty of fun,” Nora said. “We don’t have to party like a bunch of twenty-one-year-olds to have an amazing Vegas weekend.”

“It’s going to be fabulous,” I said.

We chatted more about our plans for the weekend. Spa treatments, time by the pool, maybe a little gambling, and lots of good food. I couldn't wait.

After lunch, I said goodbye to my friends and walked back to my office. I took off my coat and sat at my desk. Time to catch up on my email.

Steve, one of my coworkers, came back from lunch and set a pet boutique bag on his desk. He sat right across the aisle from me and he was one of my favorite people here. He'd been so helpful in showing me the ropes when I'd first started, and now we chatted all the time. Today he was dressed in a brown button-down shirt with a sweater vest and brown slacks. It was a lot of brown, but that was Steve. What he lacked in fashion sense, he made up for in niceness and an unexpected sense of humor.

"Did you buy a present for Millie?" I asked, gesturing to the bag. Steve was sort of a crazy cat lady, except a guy and he only had one cat. But Millie was very important to him, even though she was basically the meanest cat I'd ever heard of.

"I did. I'm hoping these new toys give her something else to do in the evenings when I'm trying to eat dinner."

"Does she try to steal your food?"

"No, she doesn't like human food. But she jumps on my shoulder and puts her tail in my face."

By tail in his face, I was pretty sure he meant butt in his face. Gross. "Doesn't Millie weigh like twenty pounds?"

He shrugged. "More or less."

"Doesn't it hurt?"

"Her claws are quite sharp, yes." He said that in the same pleasant tone someone might have used to comment on the nice weather we'd been having.

"Well, I hope the new cat toys do the trick."

My desk phone rang, so I picked it up. "Shepherd Calloway's office. This is Sophie."

"Hello Sophie. My name's Oliver Carrington," the voice on the other end said, and I smiled at his charming British accent. "I'm with Camden Cox's office."

My smile disappeared and my stomach did a belly flop. Camden Cox? Why was someone from his office calling here?

"Hi, Oliver. What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping you'd ask that. There's something quite important you can do for me. Mr. Cox would like to set up a meeting with Mr. Calloway as soon

as his schedule allows.”

It was hard not to giggle at his pronunciation of the word *schedule*. So cute. “What is this regarding?”

“A potential investment opportunity.”

Unfortunately, I had bad news for him. Mr. Calloway rarely took a meeting that he didn’t ask for himself, and he’d asked me to keep his calendar more open than usual in case Everly needed him. “I’m sorry Oliver, but Mr. Calloway’s schedule is very tight. I really don’t think I can fit anything in.”

“That’s a terrible disappointment. Are you sure?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Hm. Give me a moment, darling. I’m trying to come up with a suitable bribe.”

I laughed. “Who are you trying to bribe? Me, or Mr. Calloway?”

“You, of course.”

“In that case, I love chocolate-covered strawberries.”

“Consider it done.”

I laughed again. “I wish it were that easy, but there’s not much I can do. He’s totally booked.”

“You’re a tough nut to crack, aren’t you Sophie? I’m mildly daunted by your superb gatekeeping abilities.”

“It’s a big part of my job.”

“I can sympathize. But I won’t give up quite so easily. Enjoy the rest of your afternoon, darling. I’ll be in touch.”

“But, Oliver, I really—”

He hung up.

With a soft laugh, I hung up the phone.



ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, Nina, our receptionist, brought a delivery to my desk. It was a small black box tied with a red ribbon.

“What’s this?” I asked as she set it down.

“I don’t know. Someone dropped it off. There’s an envelope with your name on it.”

“Thanks, Nina.”

She went back to her desk and I pulled the envelope out from under the ribbon. It simply said *Sophie* on the back. Inside, it read,

DEAREST SOPHIE,

I hope this little gift encourages you to find a single hour in your boss's undoubtedly crowded schedule. There's more where this came from.

All my love,

Oliver Carrington.

I OPENED the box to find a decadent array of fresh strawberries dipped in chocolate—white chocolate with a milk chocolate drizzle, milk chocolate, dark chocolate, and a few that had little sprinkles or chopped nuts. They looked delicious.

“Soph, do you have an admirer?” Steve asked, glancing at the open box from across the aisle.

“No, nothing like that. Do you want one?”

He smiled. “If you don’t mind sharing.”

“Not at all.”

He came over to my desk and chose a milk chocolate strawberry dipped in coconut flakes.

After he left, I eyed the rest, trying to decide what to do. On the one hand, I didn’t particularly want to do any favors for Camden Cox. Although he had helped me off that balcony and it was probably silly to be mad about something that had happened twenty years ago when we were kids.

And the fact that Oliver had actually sent chocolate-covered strawberries was... well, it was kind of hilarious and a little bit outrageous, and definitely made my afternoon.

I’d see what I could do. I didn’t think I’d be successful, but at least I could call Oliver back and let him know I’d tried my best.

Mr. Calloway was in his office—the door ajar, not closed—so I got up and poked my head in.

He looked up and raised his eyebrows.

That meant it was fine to come in, so I did.

I have a strange relationship with my boss. Because I’m such good

friends with Everly, I see him socially sometimes. That man is stoic, and although I couldn't call him friendly, he is pleasant enough to be around. But at work, he's all business. He doesn't talk to me very much, just expects me to do my job and do it well. Which I do, so things work out fine.

"Sorry to bother you, but Camden Cox's office called earlier. Mr. Cox would like to set up a meeting."

"Regarding?"

Surprised by his answer, I stumbled over my words a little. I'd expected him to say no without any further questions. "Um... it was... oh, a potential investment opportunity."

With his attention still on his computer screen, he clicked his mouse. "When?"

"He said as soon as your schedule allows." I swiped through his calendar on my phone. "You don't really have any openings in the next several weeks."

"What about in Vegas?"

"Well, there's about a thirty-minute window after your morning meeting on Saturday. Everly will still be at the spa."

"That works."

"Okay, I'll let them know."

I went back to my desk, pleased that I could call Oliver with good news. Or partially good news. I didn't know if a thirty-minute window in Las Vegas on Saturday was quite what Camden Cox was after, but it was better than a hard no.

Now it was time to enjoy my little bribe.

SOPHIE

A kid on a bike rode down the sidewalk as I pulled up outside my dad's house. The grass in front of his two-story Craftsman was getting long. I'd have to see if his neighbors' teenage son would mow it for him again. I wished I could just hire a landscaping service, but I wasn't in a position to afford it.

I should have been in a position to afford it. But that was another story.

I grabbed the groceries I'd picked up after work and went to the front door, then knocked a few times to let him know I was here.

"Hey, Dad," I said, poking my head inside. "You decent?"

His gravelly voice came from the kitchen. "Depends."

I went in and shut the door behind me. "Depends on what?"

"Who's here?"

"It's just me."

"Then yeah, I'm decent enough."

I took the groceries to the kitchen and set them on the counter. Dad sat at the table, his hair damp, dressed in a dark blue robe and plaid slippers. The deep lines around his eyes and across his forehead crinkled as he hunched over a crossword puzzle.

His gaze lifted as I started putting groceries away. "I already ordered groceries this week."

"I know. I just grabbed a few extra things I thought you might like."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "There better not be any kale."

I laughed. "No, you've made your feelings about kale extremely clear."

"It's a fuckin' scam. Goddamn kids trying to say everyone has to eat kale

or they'll die of a fuckin' heart attack. It's not a miracle food. Now bacon, there's a miracle food."

I held up a package of bacon. "And look what I have here."

"That's my girl."

He put his pencil down and slowly stood. Watching him try to get around tugged at my heartstrings. Once upon a time, Melvin Abbott had been a tough-as-nails dockworker and fisherman with a barrel chest, tree-trunk thighs, and hands that were as big as my face. But a lifetime of hard physical work had left its mark. He'd needed three major surgeries in the last ten years, and none of them had been able to fully repair the nerve damage that had left his legs half useless.

But because he was Melvin Abbott, the most stubborn man on the planet, he still walked. Out of necessity, he'd finally given in and gotten a cane. I had a feeling he'd need to graduate to a walker soon. That was a fight I wasn't looking forward to. He'd tried to punch the last doctor who'd told him he was headed for a wheelchair.

"Dad, I've got it. You don't have to get up."

"I need to make my dinner."

"Don't be silly. Let me fix you something while I'm here."

He made a grumbling noise in his throat. "Don't you try to sneak anything green in my food."

I stifled a laugh. Although I denied it, I hid vegetables in his food all the time. "Okay, Dad. Nothing green. Promise."

He grumbled again and I heard the clunk of his cane as he slowly made his way out to the living room. A couple of minutes later, he turned the TV on.

With a glance over my shoulder to make sure he couldn't see me from where he was sitting, I pulled a butternut squash out of one of the bags. He hadn't said anything about not sneaking something *orange* in his food. Besides, he actually loved vegetables. He was just too stubborn to admit it.

Humming to myself, I made dinner for both of us. I ate here with him once or twice a week. My apartment was only a few minutes away so I could come over and check up on him. Although he'd lived alone since I was in college, I worried about him, and not just because he had a hard time getting around. I didn't want him to be lonely. Mom had died when I was little and he'd never remarried. In fact, he still wore his wedding ring.

When I finished cooking, I brought our plates out to the living room. He

sat in his old recliner with his feet propped up. A blanket and pillow were heaped in a pile next to his chair and a little side table was cluttered with prescription bottles, reading glasses, pencils that needed sharpening, folded-up newspapers, and a stack of crossword puzzle books.

My eyes lingered on the blankets and pillow, and there was that tug on my heart again. “Have you been sleeping down here again?”

He waved off my question. “It’s fine. My chair’s more comfortable anyway.”

I handed him his plate. “Dad, you can’t keep sleeping in your recliner.”

The lines in his forehead creased. “Why not?”

“Because it’s not a bed.”

“So?”

Careful not to dump my dinner in my lap, I gently lowered myself onto the couch. “So, if you can’t go up the stairs, we really need to talk about finding you a new place to live.”

“No.”

“Dad—”

“No. My house is fine.”

I let it drop—for the time being. I knew it was more complicated than simply finding him a new house. It had to be something he could afford, and with housing prices being what they were around here, that was a lot easier said than done. But he really needed a place without stairs.

We ate our dinner in silence for a few minutes, the only sound the low hum of the TV. He didn’t mention the presence of the butternut squash in his meal. Either I’d hidden it adequately or he actually liked it.

“You know Mike who lives next door?” he asked, interrupting the quiet.

“I think so.”

“He had someone clean his gutters the other day. Pressure washed the house, too. His card is over there on the mantle.” He gestured with his fork.

I didn’t know if he was telling me this for a reason or just making conversation. “That’s nice. Do you think your house needs to be pressure washed? Because I think it’s probably fine.”

“No. I thought you could go out with him.”

“With who?”

“I told you, his card’s on the mantle.”

I let out a long sigh. “Please tell me you didn’t set me up with the guy who cleaned your neighbor’s gutters.”

“I said you’d call him.”

“Dad, I’m not going to call him.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because. I don’t want to call some random guy who was working on your neighbor’s house.”

“He agrees with me about kale.”

“Oh, then he must be the man of my dreams.”

“He might be. Just take his card.” He took another bite. “Unless you’re dating the doctor. What’s his name?”

“Dr. Handsy—I mean, Dr. Shilling. And no, definitely not.”

Dad shrugged. “He was kind of an ass.”

My mouth dropped open. “Then why did you set me up with him?”

“I’m just throwing fuckin’ spaghetti at the wall, Soph. One of these days, something’s gonna stick.”

“I don’t know if that’s the best approach to dating.”

He shoveled the last of his dinner into his mouth. I got up and took both our plates to the kitchen, only dropping one fork. I cleaned up the dishes and checked to make sure he didn’t need refills on any of his prescriptions.

When I went into the living room again, he was back at it with a crossword puzzle. He’d read once that they could help prevent dementia, so now he worked on them daily.

“I’m going to head home. Oh, and don’t forget, I’m going out of town for a few days. If you need me to pick up anything before I go, let me know.”

“Where are you going?”

“Las Vegas.”

“Why the hell would you go there?”

I laughed. “For work. And my friends are all coming too. We’re making a little trip out of it.”

He held me in a skeptical stare. “Your friends are all going?”

“Yep. Nora is coming, and so are Hazel and Corban. Not for work, of course. They’re just coming for fun.”

“Well, you probably won’t get into too much trouble then.”

“Of course not. What kind of trouble could we get into?”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I know: It’s Vegas. But Everly’s pregnant, so it’s going to be really low-key. We’re going to the spa and maybe to a show or something.”

He grunted and adjusted his reading glasses. “Just be careful.”

“I will. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“The day I stop worrying about you is the day I go into the ground.”

“Thanks, Dad. That’s sweet but very morbid.”

And there really wasn’t anything he needed to worry about. Sure, Mr. Calloway had a meeting with Camden Cox, but I probably wouldn’t have to see him. And even if I did, I could handle it. The man had pulled my pigtails when we were kids, and he’d seen up my dress at the fundraiser, but...

Okay, when I thought about it like that, maybe this Vegas trip wasn’t such a great idea.

But it was too late to back out now. Besides, I only had to work part of the time, and the rest would be all fun with my friends. The worst that could happen is I’d run into Camden Cox. Even with my luck, how bad could it really be?

COX

A last-minute trip to Vegas wasn't ideal, but when Oliver had told me that was the best he could do with Calloway, I'd decided to take it. Besides, I loved Vegas. I'd do some business, then see what kind of trouble I could find in Sin City.

I'd arrived at the conference room a few minutes early. I wasn't nervous in the traditional sense of the word. But I did have a steady pulse of energy moving through me. I needed to make this deal happen.

Shepherd Calloway came in wearing a dark suit and tie. I noted the hard set of his jaw, the focus in his blue eyes, and the wedding ring that glinted on his finger. Although we'd never officially met, we moved in the same circles and his reputation preceded him.

I stood and adjusted the cuffs of my sleeves. We shook hands and made the necessary introductions.

And then *she* rushed in behind him.

Tension crawled up my spine, tightening my back in a wave. A surprising rush of pressure hit my groin so fast, I almost grunted from the force of it.

"Mr. Calloway, I'm sorry, but you left your phone."

Her soft blond curls were pulled up and she wore a dark blue wrap dress that showcased her delicious curves. She held out a phone to Calloway and her eyes darted toward me, then back, like she was trying not to make eye contact.

"Thank you." Calloway took the phone from her.

Why was she here? Did she work for him? I'd never been jealous of another man in my life, but in that moment, I seethed with envy. He got to

spend every day with her? With *my* Sophia?

Only she wasn't mine, in any sense of the word, and the truth of that lit a flare of anger in my gut.

"You're welcome." Her eyes flicked to me again. "Sorry to interrupt. I just thought you'd want it."

He slipped his phone into his pocket and gave her a nod, effectively dismissing her.

"She can stay," I blurted out, then tried not to visibly flinch. Why had I said that?

If Calloway thought my statement was odd, he gave no indication. "If you don't mind, Sophie."

Sophie? Was that a term of endearment? Calloway was married, but what sort of man was he?

And why the fuck did I care?

Her eyes widened and she fidgeted with her handbag. "Oh. Yes, I can. Sure, no problem."

"My assistant, Sophie Abbott," Calloway said by way of introduction, then smoothly took a seat at the table.

Maybe that was simply her name. Had I misheard the other night?

Sophie took a hesitant step, tentatively reaching for a chair, but teetered on her heels like she was about to fall.

I quickly moved in and grabbed her elbow to steady her.

That put me close enough to smell her hair and it took a supreme effort of willpower to keep from visibly sniffing her. God, she smelled good.

It made me wonder what she tasted like.

"Nice to see you again," I said.

A pink flush hit her cheeks and she slowly lifted her eyes, looking at me through thick lashes. "Hi. I mean, you too."

"You know each other?" Calloway asked, a hint of suspicion in his tone.

Sophie pulled her arm away and wobbled on her heels again but managed to get herself into her chair. "Yes. I mean, no. We sort of ran into each other last weekend. It wasn't a big deal."

I loved that I'd flustered her, and I couldn't help but bring to mind the sight of her hanging off that balcony. "I merely helped her out of a precarious situation."

Calloway eyed me as I took my seat but didn't ask any more questions.

Was he protective of her? Why?

And once again, why did I care?

I needed to focus on why I was here. I had far too much riding on this project to let a woman—even one who smelled *that* good—get in my head.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.”

“I assume we’re here to talk about the Skyline project,” he said.

“You did your research.”

He nodded once.

Sophie quietly produced a notebook and pen out of her handbag and sat poised to take notes. Her gaze was on the table, not on me, but I caught her eyes lifting for a quick peek before she looked down again.

Sophie Abbott. Why was that name tickling at my memory?

I cleared my throat and slid a packet with the project specs across the table. “The Skyline project follows the lead of Lincoln Square in Bellevue, only we’re taking it further. Three buildings connected by skybridges, with a mix of condominiums, a high-end hotel, and retail and restaurant space. We’ve already secured the land and permitting is in process.”

Calloway thumbed through the papers. “What’s the timeline?”

“A conservative estimate is two years to opening. But it could be faster. The city is being unusually cooperative because of the potential for tax revenue. This neighborhood is in serious need of revitalization. Skyline would change everything in a five-block radius at least. And phase two would include affordable housing options.”

“The design looks good.” He flipped to another page. “Modern without being garish.”

“Exactly. We’re going for classic and sophisticated. A place people want to frequent.”

I waited, my eyes straying to Sophie, while Calloway looked through the information I’d provided. Her dress crisscrossed her chest, dipping low in the center, revealing smooth skin. What would it feel like to bury my face in those tits? Hike up that dress and grab her ass while she sank down on my cock? A tendril of blond hair brushed the side of her neck. I wanted to curl it around my finger while I licked her neck and bit—

“What’s the story with Dominic Coates?”

Calloway’s voice jolted me back to reality. I liked his directness. He could have asked why I was looking for new investors at this stage, but we both knew. He didn’t need to beat around the bush. “You’ve done your research, so I assume you saw the press coverage.”

“I did, but press coverage is usually bullshit.”

“True, although what they reported was correct. Apparently he had an affinity for snorting drugs off hookers’ asses. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have partnered with him to begin with.”

Calloway met my eyes. “You wouldn’t have?”

That was a surprising question. What the fuck did he care if I did business with a piece of shit who paid for sex? “If you have any concerns about me, I can assure you that’s not how I spend my free time.”

“Who I associate with matters.” His eyes bored into me, sizing me up. “And not just because of the money.”

Interesting. A man of both wealth and principle. “Agreed, which is why I called you.”

“This has potential,” he said, closing the folder. “Revitalization, job creation, not to mention the real estate’s increase in value when the project is complete. I need to do more research, but I’m interested.”

I let a small smile steal across my lips. “Excellent. My office can provide you with anything you need.”

“Good.” He turned toward Sophie. “Put a note in my calendar to follow up on the Skyline project next week.”

“Already done,” she said.

Calloway stood, and I followed. We shook hands across the table.

He’d been straight to the point. No bullshit. I appreciated that. “We’ll be in touch.”

Sophie got up, juggling her belongings for a few seconds before seeming to find her balance. There was something strangely delightful about her. And why did she seem so familiar? It wasn’t because we’d met the other night. There was something else and it was driving me crazy that I couldn’t figure it out.

Calloway started to leave, then paused to wait for Sophie. She tried to deposit her notepad and pen in her handbag but wound up dropping both.

I rushed around the table and crouched to retrieve them for her right as she did the same, and our foreheads collided.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry.” She stood and rubbed her forehead, leaving her things on the ground.

I picked them up and handed them to her, heedless of the slight pain from her head knocking into mine. Her scent wafted over me, leaving me dumbstruck.

What was it about this girl?

“Thanks, Camden. I mean, Mr. Cox.” She tucked her things into her handbag and straightened her shoulders.

“Just Cox.”

“Right. Cox.” With a little nod, she turned and left with Calloway.

I watched her leave, once again mesmerized by the hypnotic sway of her hips and the bounce of her curls. Why was she so entrancing? A simple physical attraction to her didn’t explain it.

Or did it?

I’d been on a dating hiatus for several months. Women always wound up being more trouble than they were worth. But maybe it was time to have a woman in my bed again.

Specifically, that woman. Sophie Abbott.

Wait.

Why did I know that name?

I sat down, my eyes still lingering on the door she’d gone through. Did I know her from somewhere? She certainly wasn’t someone I’d known recently. I’d remember.

She’d recognized me at the hotel after I’d helped her down from the balcony. I hadn’t thought much about that—I was recognized in public occasionally—but was there another reason she knew who I was?

I searched my memory, thinking back further, to girls I’d known in college. Then high school. She couldn’t have been one of the girls I’d dated casually in my teens or twenties.

And then it hit me.

Curly blond pigtails and round cheeks. A girl named Sophie Abbott had lived on my street. We must have been eleven or twelve. Holy shit, was that her?

It had to be, and it explained everything. The first girl who’d ever given me a boner was Sophie Abbott.

And now look at her.

Who knew round-cheeked little girls could grow up to be... all that.

I indulged in a self-satisfied smile. The deal with Shepherd Calloway was as good as done. And Sophie Abbott didn’t know it yet, but she was going to make my earliest fantasy come true.

That fantasy, only dirtier.

SOPHIE

A mazing dress? Check.
Fabulous hair and makeup thanks to Nora? Check.
The bright lights of Vegas? Check.

Panties? Double check.

Not that I was wearing two pairs of panties. Just that I'd checked twice before leaving my room to make sure I was, in fact, wearing them.

I was.

Actually, today had been a surprisingly good luck sort of day. At least it had been since Mr. Calloway's meeting with Camden Cox. That had been less than ideal, although not the total disaster it could have been. All I'd done was almost trip once, and then drop my pen and notepad.

Okay, so I'd basically head-butted him while we were both going for my pen, but it hadn't even left a red spot, much less a bruise. I was totally fine.

I was firmly *not* thinking about the way it had felt to have his strong hand steadying me when I'd wobbled on my heels.

And since then, I'd been completely disaster free.

Now I sat with my friends in a swanky Las Vegas restaurant, feeling like a hottie in this deep purple dress, sipping a delicious martini. We'd been to the spa this afternoon for facials and manicures, then back to my room to change and get ready for dinner. That was where Nora's handiwork had come in. She'd transformed me from cute-but-boring Sophie to Vegas Vixen Sophie.

I liked being Vegas Vixen Sophie. It was fun.

Corban and Mr. Calloway sat at a nearby table, tolerating each other's

company, in a rather adorable attempt to give us girls the illusion that they weren't hovering over their wives. Not that any of us minded. They weren't intrusive, and the way they cast protective—and longing—glances at our table was just too cute. I loved that Hazel and Everly were both so radiantly happy, even if it did remind me of my own failures in love.

Everly yawned and Mr. Calloway scooted to the edge of his seat, as if poised to swoop in and gather up his wife in his arms should she need him.

“Sorry,” Everly said. “I get tired so early these days.”

“That’s a perfectly normal consequence of pregnancy,” Hazel said. “I’m rather surprised you’ve made it this long without needing a nap.”

“Does that mean you won’t be disappointed if I turn in early?”

“Of course we won’t,” Nora said. “Besides, if you don’t go back to your room soon, your husband might give himself an aneurysm.”

Everly laughed. “I know. He’s so intense.”

“And we love him for it.”

Hazel’s eyes darted to Corban. Again.

“Oh my god, will you two stop eye fucking?” Nora said. “Both of you, go.”

“I wasn’t—” Hazel started to say, then stopped herself. “There’s just something about hotel rooms for us.”

I tried not to giggle as I watched Corban chew on his lower lip, his eyes locked on his wife. They were so obvious.

“Go,” Nora said, brushing them away with a flick of her hand. “Go have hot hotel sex. I’m completely happy for you and not the least bit jealous.”

“I’m jealous,” I said.

“I am too, obviously. I’m just trying to be nice.”

Everly stood and a second later, Mr. Calloway was at her side. Hazel got up and shot Corban a look that dripped with suggestion. The corners of his mouth lifted and he stood, shoving his hands in his pants pockets. They both walked away, in different directions, clearly beginning a game that only they understood.

“I guess this is growing up,” Nora said wistfully as we watched our friends go. “Best friends with husbands and babies on the way.”

“Things change,” I said. “And I think it’s normal to be both happy and sad about that.”

“Well said, Soph.” She stood and shouldered her purse. “I think tonight I’m going to embrace that change and turn in early.”

I followed, careful not to knock my chair over. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. To be honest, I didn’t sleep well last night. Pajamas and hotel sheets sound decadent right about now. But I don’t want to ruin your night. Would you rather go out?”

“No, I’m fine. We had fun last night, and it’s been a long day for me too. I like where you’re going with pajamas and hotel sheets.”

She and I walked to the elevators together. Her room was on the thirty-eighth floor, so she got out first. I stayed in, and the elevator rose, opening on the thirty-ninth.

I hesitated, and a moment later the doors closed again with me still inside. Because I didn’t really want to go back to my room.

I was in Vegas, feeling awesome in this dress, and I’d had so much good luck today. My shoes fit right, my hair was behaving itself, and I hadn’t tripped or fallen even once since that meeting earlier. I’d gotten through dinner without spilling a single thing, and that had to be some kind of record.

I didn’t want to waste this good luck. Especially not here.

With a sense of resolve, I pushed the button to go back down.

We were staying at the Four Seasons—so decadent—and since I was alone, I decided to stick close and go to Mandalay Bay.

The noise and lights of the casino greeted me, a cacophony of beeping machines, background music, and conversations. Clutching my purse in my hands, I took slow steps, trying to get my bearings. It was loud and bright and exciting, and I was going to make the most of it.

A slot machine seemed like a good place to start. I chose one of the smaller ones, took the seat in front of it, and fed in some money.

The screen flashed and I hit the button. A little thrill of excitement tingled my stomach as I watched the symbols scroll until—

Wait.

I won.

I didn’t win much, but I’d won a few dollars. Go, me!

Time to play again. I hit the button and the screen flashed.

I won. Again.

How was this possible?

I glanced around, wishing I had someone to celebrate with. I never won anything and I’d just won twice in a row.

Positive that I’d lose this time, I played again.

And I freaking won.

This one was a bigger payout—twenty dollars—and the machine celebrated for me with flashing lights and music. An old lady walking by gave me a big thumbs up. I smiled and waved back at her.

Okay, now I was on a roll. I pressed the button and this time I didn't win. Still, the little tingle of excitement in my stomach grew. This was fun. I touched it again, just to see what would happen.

Winner.

I squealed, bouncing in my seat. This was so cool.

“Way to go, Goldilocks,” someone said behind me.

I twisted in my seat to wave at them when, just like that, my luck ran out.

My smile melted. Why was *he* here?

Well, probably to gamble. We were in Vegas, after all. But the last person I wanted to see tonight was Cox.

His mouth hooked in a smile that made me feel like a little fish who'd just come face to face with a shark. My tummy did a flip because damn it, he was so gorgeous. It was terribly unfair.

And then it hit me. He wasn't looking at *me*. Camden Cox was not going to stare me down with that kind of predatory gleam in his eyes, even if Nora had turned me into Vegas Vixen Sophie. I was still Sophie Abbott, and men like him weren't interested in women like me. There must be a bombshell in a slinky black dress nearby. That's who he was looking at.

I glanced around, curious to see the woman who'd caught his eye. But the only people around me were a gray-haired couple wearing matching pink Hawaiian shirts with little palm trees on them, and a man with a sizable beer gut and gray chest hair poking out his partially open collar.

Cox walked straight toward me, looking stupidly hot in his button-down shirt, vest, and slacks. He'd taken off his tie, cuffed his sleeves, and left the top two shirt buttons undone, and why was that so sexy on a man?

Except he was Camden Cox, childhood tormentor.

“Sophie Abbott,” he said, his hint of a Southern drawl as smooth as melted chocolate. “Are you perhaps the same Sophie Abbott who once lived on Ashford Street?”

Oh my god, did he remember me? “That's me.”

“You recognized me at the hotel last weekend. From back then.”

“You're kind of hard to forget.”

His mouth hooked in a slow grin. “As are you. I seem to recall blond pigtails.”

“I’m not surprised. You used to yank them.”

He lifted his eyebrows and his hand twitched like maybe he was going to pull my hair right now.

And no, I didn’t want him to.

Much.

“Did I?”

“Yes. You were very mean to me.”

He chuckled, and I wasn’t sure if it was because he didn’t believe me that he’d been mean, or that he remembered it and thought it was funny. “I’m sorry; did I interrupt a winning streak?”

I couldn’t help the way the corners of my mouth lifted in a smile. “Yeah, I actually won a few times.”

“Congratulations. I hope that’s a sign of good things to come tonight.”

“I have been unusually lucky today.”

He smiled again, and there was that predatory gleam in his eyes. The nervous fluttering in my stomach made me feel like I could jump right out of my seat.

That wouldn’t be good. Knowing me, I’d land on my ass.

“Then by all means.” He gestured to the slot machine.

I was totally positive that he’d already brought my lucky streak to a grinding halt, just by being here. But when the symbols stopped flashing, I’d won.

I’d actually freaking won.

I bounced in my seat and gave myself a little round of applause.

Cox smiled down at me, his hand still resting on the back of the chair. “That was fun.”

It *was* fun. And maybe I could admit it was a tiny bit *more* fun with someone to celebrate with me, even if that someone was Camden Cox.

“This calls for a drink.” He waved his hand as if he were flagging someone down.

“I think the bar is over—”

Before I could finish, someone from the casino appeared, as if he’d been lingering nearby, waiting to do Cox’s bidding.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Cox?”

“A Glenfiddich for me, and whatever the lady wants.”

“Oh. Um, a martini, I guess? Dirty. Thank you.”

He nodded and left to get our drinks.

I wasn't sure why Cox wanted to stand here and watch me play a slot machine, but that thought soon flitted away on the wings of more wins and the appearance of a martini in my hand. I didn't win every time, but I won more than I lost. It was all I could do to keep from spilling my drink.

After yet another win, Cox gently tugged on my elbow. "Sugar, you're on fire. Come on; let's up the stakes."

I stood, only wobbling a little, and he held my arm to keep me steady. "Up the stakes?"

His hand slid around to my lower back. "Absolutely. We can't waste this kind of luck."

"But I don't—"

"Don't worry," he said, and his voice was so reassuring. "It'll be fun."

More fun? That was why I was here, wasn't it?

With his hand on the small of my back, he led me to one of the craps tables. I had no idea how to play, but I figured how hard could it be? Place some bets, roll some dice.

Craps turned out to be even better than a slot machine. Cox explained the basics, and after the first few rolls, I started to get the hang of it. A well-dressed couple joined us and pretty soon we were the liveliest table in the casino.

The dealer pushed the dice toward me and I picked up two, then clutched them in my fist and blew on them for luck. I tossed them onto the table. They hit the back and bounced, coming to a stop to a chorus of cheers.

I was on fire.

Someone handed me a shot of whiskey. Cox held his up and we clinked our glasses together.

"To a magical night," he said with a wink.

"I'll drink to that."

I swallowed the shot, feeling the bite as it slid down my throat. I wasn't normally a whiskey girl, but whatever that was, it was good. So smooth.

"All right, sugar." Cox took my shot glass. "Let's see some more magic."

I rolled the dice again and everyone at the table won. My arms flew overhead as I cheered. When had I stepped out of my shoes? I glanced down at the floor. They were right there, one tipped over on its side, and that didn't seem to matter very much right now. Who cared if I was barefoot?

Cox swept my hair back over my shoulder, his fingers brushing my neck. The light touch sent a tingle down my spine.

“Not pulling my hair now, are you Cox?” I asked.

The corner of his mouth twitched. “No, indeed.”

“I guess I’m easier to like when I’m your lucky charm.”

“You’re the one doing all the winning, sugar. I’m just along for the ride.”

Giggling, I poked his chest. “That’s what she said.”

The next couple of hours went by in a haze of winning, cheering, and celebrating.

And drinking.

I lost track of how many chips I had. They seemed to be multiplying. Which I suppose they were because I kept winning.

I also lost track of how many shots I took.

Cox’s hand slipped around my waist and I had a feeling that wasn’t something in his pocket when he pressed himself close to celebrate my latest winning throw.

I glanced up at him, meeting his eyes. The room spun, and in the back of my mind, I knew I was trucking right past buzzed and heading straight for drunk. But I didn’t care. I felt wild and uninhibited. Unstoppable. I was the luckiest girl in Vegas, and this was going to be the best night of my life.

COX

The insides of my eyelids felt like sandpaper scraping across my eyeballs. The beginnings of a headache radiated from my temples and my mouth tasted like something had died in there.

Holy shit. What had I done to myself last night? I hadn't partied that hard in years.

Blinking, I glanced around to get my bearings. Where the fuck was I? Sprawled face-down on a king bed in a hotel suite. Naked.

Where were my clothes and why wasn't I wearing them?

The previous night was a haze. I couldn't remember how I'd gotten here, and this wasn't my room. I wasn't even sure if this was my hotel. I shifted enough to reach the nightstand. The notepad next to the lamp had the Bellagio logo.

Definitely not my hotel.

And what had happened to Sophie? Had she come with me? Or had I lost her somewhere last night?

Fuck.

I bolted to my feet, making my head throb.

A low thud followed by a soft "Ouch" came from the other room.

That seemed to answer my question, and the sudden spike of alarm eased. She was here.

I grabbed a towel from the bathroom and held it over my crotch. Then I pushed open the bedroom door.

Sophie knelt on the couch facing away from me, wearing nothing but a white sheet that she'd wrapped around herself. She was bent over with her

head resting on the back of the couch and had one arm draped behind it, like she was trying to retrieve something.

She wasn't wearing clothes. Had I fucked her last night?

For an agonizing moment, I searched my memory, desperate to recall. There had to be something. Anything. Because if I'd fucked Sophie Abbott and been too drunk to remember, that was a goddamn tragedy.

How could I not remember?

Maybe she did. Not that I was going to come out and ask. That would be a blow to my manhood. *Hey, sugar, do you by chance remember if we fucked last night? How was it?*

No.

I'd just play it cool and wait for her to tell me how great it had been. Or maybe ask for more.

I leaned against the doorframe, still holding the towel over my growing erection. I didn't want to alarm her with it. If she wanted some of this, I was certainly in—it didn't do me any good to take a woman to bed and have no memory of it. *If I had actually taken her to bed, and the way my cock ached made me wonder.*

"Morning."

She let out a surprised squeak and straightened. Her hand clutched the sheet at her chest and she very slowly turned her head to look at me.

"Morning?"

That hesitant—almost shocked—expression wasn't what I'd expect from a woman I'd taken to pound town last night. So maybe we hadn't.

Or maybe she didn't remember either.

"Did you lose something behind the couch?"

"My bra. At least, I think it's my bra. There's a bra."

Her blond curls were matted down on one side of her head and she had smears of makeup beneath her eyes. Somehow, that only made my dick harder. I wanted to think I'd messed up her hair, but it still wasn't coming back to me.

"How did your bra get behind the couch?"

"I'm not positive, but it might have had something to do with that." She pointed.

I was clearly not awake yet. How had I missed the portable stripper pole in the center of the room?

"Where did that come from?"

“I’m not sure.” Still clutching the sheet in a tight fist, she climbed off the couch. “Everything after we left Mandalay Bay is pretty hazy.”

I raked a hand through my hair. “Yeah, you’re telling me.”

The room was a mess. Pillows littered the floor and we’d apparently gotten late-night room service. A tray of half-eaten food sat on the floor in front of the fireplace. Our clothes were scattered around the room. I spotted one of her shoes beneath the coffee table, but the other was nowhere in sight. My shirt hung haphazardly from the corner of the wall-mounted TV and her dress was a deep purple puddle next to the pole.

And were those her panties dangling from the top of the curtain?

She turned toward the window and seemed to see the same thing I did. “Oh my god.”

I was about to tell her not to worry about it—I’d get them down—but she dashed over to the window as if she could grab them before I realized what they were. Only, her feet got tangled in the sheet and she face-planted on the floor with a thud.

“I’m okay.” She held up a hand to wave me off.

I crouched next to her. “Are you sure?”

She lifted her head. “Yeah, I—” Her eyes went wide.

Glancing down, I realized I’d dropped the towel and was kneeling in front of her with my morning erection just inches from her face.

I jerked my hips back, trying to get it away from her. It was one thing if a woman wanted your dick in her face. Quite another if she didn’t.

She snort-laughed, which was not the sort of response a guy wanted to a close-up of his manhood.

“Sorry.” She pushed herself up and managed to get to her feet. “I wasn’t laughing at you. That’s nothing to laugh at. In fact it’s very—” She stopped abruptly, pressing her lips closed. “Never mind.”

It’s very what? Hard? Thick when it’s inside you? Satisfying? Tell me, Sophie!

I grabbed the towel, stood, and wrapped it around my waist—trying to ignore the pressure in my groin. Sophie adjusted the sheet without giving me so much as a peek of what was underneath and went to the window to grab her panties. She had to jump, but she hooked them with a finger and got them down.

“Okay, um, I’m just going to get dressed and go.” She shuffled past me to the stripper pole and gathered up her dress. “I’ll just leave the bra behind the

couch. It's fine. Have you seen my other shoe? Maybe it's in the bedroom. That's okay. Do you mind if I use the bathroom? I'll be out of your way in a few minutes."

I watched her, somewhat bewildered, while she grabbed her one shoe and quick-stepped into the bedroom. A second later, the bathroom door closed.

What the fuck had we done last night?

My head hurt and I was dehydrated as hell, so I grabbed a water out of the mini-fridge and took it to the couch. I sat, making sure the towel still covered my dick—since this hard-on wasn't going anywhere, apparently—and chugged the water. There's a reason I didn't party like that anymore. I had a feeling I was going to be paying for it for at least the next twenty-four hours.

The flight home was sure going to be fun.

Sophie came out a few minutes later, her hair a little damp like she'd tried to wet it to get her curls to behave—with only marginal success. She'd found her other shoe, and she wore that curve-hugging purple dress that I'd spent last night fantasizing about taking off her.

Had I?

We'd both woken up naked.

But why couldn't I remember?

"I have to go, but thank you for—" Her foot banged into something and she stumbled but didn't fall this time. "What the..."

She picked up a red sign with a big number two on both sides. An MMA organization's logo was at the bottom.

That's right. We'd gone to a fight last night. And Sophie had—

"Oh my god." She dropped it like it was hot. "I thought that was a dream. Please tell me I wasn't one of the ring girls at an MMA fight."

My lip curled in a smile. It was hazy, but that part started coming back to me. "You did. We were ringside and you said you wanted to go up there with the girls next round."

"So you flagged someone down and they handed me this."

"But you didn't have a bikini, so you went up there in—"

"My underwear."

She was so adorably mortified it was hard not to laugh.

"That was hot. And I seem to remember the crowd loving you."

"Oh my god." She covered her face with her hands. "I have to go."

"Sophie, wait."

She didn't. Just grabbed her purse off the floor and rushed out the door.

I got up, holding the towel, and picked my way across the cluttered floor. I threw open the door but she'd already disappeared around the corner.

I was about to run after her when I realized I didn't have a room key. The last thing I needed right now was to get locked out wearing nothing but a towel. Stepping back, I caught the door with my heel before it clicked shut.

"Fuck," I muttered, looking both ways down the hall.

She was gone.

I waited another second because chances were she was running and she'd trip in her heels. But I didn't hear anything.

Oddly disappointed that she was gone, I went back inside and used the bathroom. My boxer briefs were on the floor in the bedroom, so I tugged them on, then got another bottle of water and took it to the couch.

At least I knew how to get in touch with her. Shepherd Calloway's office. That was something.

I took a long swig of water and looked around again.

Wait a minute.

There were pearly white balloons in one corner and a bouquet of white roses on the table. An open bottle of champagne stood next to a silver bucket.

This was a honeymoon suite.

Oh, fuck.

I got up and tore around the mess, looking for the rest of my clothes. Where were my fucking pants? I finally found them near the front door. Apparently I'd either shucked them as soon as we'd come in, or tossed them in that direction when I'd taken them off. Impossible to tell which.

There was something in the back pocket. Not cash. No chips or gambling winnings. Sophie had done all the winning last night, although I'd been prepared to fund her if she'd hit a losing streak, just because watching her gamble had been so much fun.

But something else tickled my memory. Something slightly less hazy than whatever had happened in this hotel suite last night.

I pulled a folded piece of paper out of the back pocket. It was exactly what I thought. This was an absolute disaster.

Because this time, what happened in Vegas wasn't staying there.

SOPHIE

This wasn't just a walk of shame. This was a Vegas walk of shame. *A dash down a hotel hallway in last night's dress with no bra, tottering on my high heels, hoping and praying I hadn't left anything important behind* walk of shame.

Well, I had left something important behind. My dignity. Or what little of it I had left after last night.

This was such a disaster.

The elevator doors opened and something seemed off, but I couldn't place it. I got in and dug my room key out of my purse. Thankfully everything seemed to be in there—my wallet, phone, room key. Even my lipstick had survived my wild night.

Under normal circumstances, I would have called that a tiny win and internally celebrated—it was expensive lipstick—but these weren't normal circumstances.

I had my pointer finger all ready to press the button for my floor, but I stopped.

Something was wrong.

My room was on the thirty-ninth floor, but this elevator stopped at thirty-six. What was going on?

The elevator started to go down but I hadn't pressed any buttons. Someone on a lower floor must have called it. My brain tried to assault me with fuzzy memories from last night, but I pushed them aside because I had no idea where I was.

Was this even my hotel?

For a second, I thought about going back to Cox's room. But I hadn't looked to see what number it was. And I really didn't want to face him again. Last night had been...

I didn't even know. Vague memories flashed through my mind, but they were foggy and disjointed. I couldn't even be sure they were all real.

My head pounded, throbbing to the beat of my heart, and my stomach was horribly raw. The elevator doors opened to the lobby and a small group of travelers with rolling suitcases stepped aside so I could get out. I kept my eyes on the floor, not daring to meet their gazes. Could they tell what I'd been through? Did they know I'd just woken up naked with a man I barely knew and had only the vaguest, haziest memory of how I'd gotten there?

Could they tell I wasn't wearing a bra?

Probably, but really, that was the least of my problems. One look at the lobby and I knew this was not my hotel.

Somehow I'd ended up at the Bellagio with Camden Cox.

And I'd woken up naked.

That probably meant I'd slept with him.

Although I didn't remember sleeping with him.

But I barely remembered coming to this hotel, so my memory was clearly unreliable.

I'd made messes out of situations before, but this was some next level mess making.

I took a deep breath and walked through the lobby. I was almost too distracted by my predicament to notice the incredible glass ceiling—almost, but not quite. It looked like a glowing, multicolored garden. Or maybe upside-down umbrellas. Either way, it was beautiful.

But I needed to get out of here in case Cox followed me down. I cast a quick look over my shoulder—no sign of him—then made my way outside.

Pausing to get my bearings, I pulled out my phone. I didn't know my way around the Strip very well, but I was pretty sure my hotel was too far to walk. I'd just check the map to be sure, then take a taxi. That seemed easiest.

"Ma'am?"

A limo driver wearing a tie and black jacket stood outside a sleek black limo. His name tag said J.J. Santiago. Was he talking to me?

I glanced around, but he was definitely looking at me.

"Um, yes?"

"Do you need to go somewhere?"

“Oh. Yes, but I’ll just take a taxi.”

His brow furrowed. “Why would you take a taxi?”

“Well, no offense, but I don’t think I need to rent a limo just to go a couple of miles back to my hotel.”

He chuckled softly. “Ma’am, I’m your driver. I can take you anywhere you need to go.”

I gaped at him, fully aware that I must have looked as dumb as I felt. “My driver?”

He opened the rear door. “It was dark last night, but I can assure you it was me. Come on.”

I had a feeling *it was dark last night* was code for *I know you were too drunk to remember*. And when I thought about it, I did have a vague recollection of being in a limo. Cox must have ordered it. Either that, or I’d splurged with my winnings.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling sheepish. I started to get in but changed my mind. “Can I ride up front with you? I just need to get to my hotel and sitting back there with that huge seat all by myself seems excessive.”

“I’m not really supposed to, but I guess it won’t hurt anything.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

His mouth hooked in a grin and his eyes flicked up and down. “Me neither.”

Well thank goodness for that.

He shut the rear door and opened the passenger door for me. I thanked him, idly hoping I’d actually gotten all the smeared mascara off my face. It was so bright out here in the daylight.

I took a deep breath and smoothed out my dress while he got in and started the car.

“Where to?”

“Four Seasons.”

He nodded.

“So... sorry that I have to ask this, but this morning can’t get any more humiliating than it already is, so why not? You were driving us around last night?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Why are you still here? Did you actually wait out there all night?”

He pulled out of the hotel and into traffic. “Yeah, but I don’t mind. Mr. Cox pays *very* well.”

“Oh.” I fiddled with my purse. “That’s good. Do you, um... Can you tell me where we went?”

He had the decency not to laugh at me. “I picked your party up outside Mandalay Bay.”

“That’s familiar.”

“You made a couple of stops on the Strip. Then T-Mobile Arena.”

“Right, the MMA thing.”

“Afterward, I took you to the Regional Justice Center. Then back to the Strip. I’m afraid I can’t tell you everywhere you went. I dropped you off at the Venetian and later picked you up at Circus Circus to take you to the Bellagio.”

Wait, the Regional Justice Center? Why would we have gone there?

Uh-oh.

Back up, Sophie. There was something before that. “You said you took my party. We were with a bunch of people, weren’t we?”

“Yes, you were. Until the end of the evening when I took you to the Bellagio. That was just you and Mr. Cox.”

I nodded, still trying to put the pieces together. I remembered winning at Mandalay Bay. Then Drake Meadows, the lead singer for Monkey Rum, had showed up with his fiancée, an Instagram model named Marika. Drake was a legit rock star, and Cox had known him. They’d said it was their wedding day and invited us to come celebrate with them. That was how we’d wound up with a group of people in a limo, leaving Mandalay Bay.

Maybe that was why we’d gone to the Regional Justice Center. To get their marriage license.

Except—

“Here we are,” he said, and I realized we’d stopped outside the hotel. He got out and came around to open the door for me.

“Thank you so much.” I opened my purse and rooted around for a tip.

“Ma’am, there’s no need,” he said. “That’s been taken care of.”

“Oh.” I met his eyes and smiled, feeling sheepish again. “Thanks for being so nice and not judging me too much.”

He smiled back. “Don’t worry. This is Vegas. Do you need me to wait?”

“No, you should probably go back to the Bellagio for Cox. I mean, Mr. Cox.”

“All right. Enjoy the rest of your visit.”

“Thank you.”

Well, at least the ride of shame hadn't been too terrible.

A very alarming thought tried to push its way to the front of my mind—Regional Justice Center?—but I firmly pushed it back. I was mortified, exhausted, hungover, and hungry. I needed to process last night in bite-sized pieces.

But first, I needed a shower, and I had just enough time before I was supposed to meet the girls for brunch. I'd go back to my room—my actual room in the right hotel—and get cleaned up. Regular clothes would help, too.

And then I'd see if I could figure out how big of a mess I'd made.



THE SHOWER HELPED A LITTLE, as did normal clothes. In my pink top and fitted jeans, I was no longer Vegas Vixen Sophie. Just regular Sophie. My hair was even driving me crazy—like usual—the curls refusing to behave themselves.

It was good to feel like myself again. Although I was still jittery, too many unanswered questions flitting through my mind.

And of course, being me, I was late for brunch.

I hurried to the restaurant and the host led me to the table where Nora, Everly, and Hazel were already sipping drinks. Nora and Hazel had enormous Bloody Marys, and Everly's drink looked like tea. Probably herbal.

"I'm so sorry I'm late." I plopped into my chair.

"No problem," Everly said with a smile. "We've only ordered drinks."

My head spun as I perused the menu. I had so many questions about last night, and although I knew my friends couldn't definitively answer them, I really needed their advice.

The server came and took our orders. I just asked for coffee and whatever Nora was having.

"Are you okay, Soph?" Nora asked after the server left.

"Yes. No. I'm not sure. I have a very important question."

"Okay?"

"How do you know if you've had sex if you can't remember?"

All three of them stared at me for a few seconds.

"Wait, what?" Nora asked. "You're going to need to be more specific."

"Let's say, theoretically, a woman woke up naked with a man, but it's

unclear whether or not they were naked because they'd slept together or because they just took their clothes off and fell asleep that way. I'm asking for a friend."

Nora narrowed her eyes at me.

"Are you inquiring from the perspective of a third party?" Hazel asked. "In the situation you described, did the person attempting to determine whether sexual activity took place walk in and discover the unclothed couple?"

"No, she's part of the unclothed couple."

"But why is it unclear whether they had sex?" Everly asked. "Doesn't she know?"

"No, that's why I'm asking. She doesn't remember."

"Sophie, what happened?" Nora asked. "I thought you went back to your room last night."

"I said I was asking for a friend."

"Like hell you are," Nora said. "Spill it, honey. Tell us everything."

"That's the problem. I can't," I said miserably. "There's so much I don't remember."

"Sophie, did you wake up naked with a man this morning?" Everly asked. I nodded. "At the Bellagio."

They all gasped.

"It was Camden Cox."

They gasped again. Louder.

Nora took my hand, and her voice was uncharacteristically gentle. "Honey, are we talking about a situation where there wasn't consent?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "No, nothing like that. I'm sure if anything did happen, it was consensual."

"I assume your inability to recollect is due to excessive alcohol consumption?" Hazel asked.

I nodded again.

"It's okay, sweetie," Everly said. "Just do your best. Start at the beginning. What happened after dinner?"

I explained how I'd decided to go to the casino by myself after they'd all gone to their rooms. About winning, and then Cox appearing. How I'd kept winning, and we'd kept celebrating. And how by the time we'd left Mandalay Bay with Drake Meadows and Marika, I was already drunk enough that everything from there on out was very hazy.

“So you gambled and partied all night with Camden Cox, the boy who pulled your pigtails when you were kids, and you woke up naked with him in his hotel?” Nora asked.

“That’s basically it. I remember bits and pieces, but—”

“Sophie!” An excited voice cut me off and a woman with platinum blond hair and a clingy red dress rushed over to our table. She had a butterfly tattoo right in the center of her cleavage. “I’m so happy I caught you this morning.”

She looked vaguely familiar, her face featuring in the misty, broken slideshow that made up last night’s memories. But I didn’t know her name or why she was so excited to see me. What was I supposed to say? *Think, Sophie, think.* “Hi. Nice to see you too. These are my friends Nora, Hazel, and Everly.”

“Tanya,” she said with a wave. “Oh my god, Sophie, you were the absolute cutest last night. When I get married, you have to promise me you’ll be my maid of honor.”

“Maid of honor?”

“The pics from Drake’s wedding are all over the internet already and you look amazing in all of them.”

“All over the internet?”

She smacked a piece of gum and nodded. “And the toast you gave? I still get a little choked up when I think about it.”

This time I stopped myself from repeating what she’d said in the form of a question. I’d given a toast? “Wow, I’m um... I’m glad you liked it.”

“So much. You’re a badass bitch. I gotta go; the crew is heading down to the Wynn for the buffet. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye,” I said, not even trying to hide my bewilderment as she walked away. She met up with a tall guy who looked like the drummer from—

No, he was the drummer from Monkey Rum. He was freaking famous. He gave me the rock on symbol with both hands. “See ya, Soph!”

Swallowing hard, I waved back.

“Holy shit,” Nora said, her eyes on her phone. “Sophie, you were in Drake Meadows’ wedding?”

“I guess so?”

“Let me see.” Everly grabbed for Nora’s phone and her eyes widened. “Oh my god, you were.”

“Apparently she gave a toast,” Hazel said.

“Maybe I did.”

“What else did you do last night?” Nora asked.

“Well... I’m pretty sure I was a ring girl at an MMA fight.”

“What’s that?” Everly asked.

“They walk around the ring in a bikini holding up a number to tell the crowd what round it is,” Nora said. “Where did you get a bikini?”

“I think I just took my dress off and did it in my underwear.”

Nora raised her eyebrows. “Hot.”

“No, it’s not hot. It’s crazy,” I said. “Oh my god, that’s probably on the internet too.”

“We’ll find it later, and I’m sure you looked fierce,” Nora said. “You have a banging body.”

That perked me up a little and I cracked a smile. “Thanks.”

“So, what happened with Cox this morning?” Nora asked. “Was he surprised to see you in his room or do you think he remembers more than you do?”

“He was asleep when I woke up. I really wanted to sneak out before he saw me, but my clothes were everywhere. I never did find my bra. Anyway, that’s not important. I have other bras. When he did wake up, he didn’t seem surprised to see me. He just said *morning* in that slight Southern drawl of his. I wonder where it comes from? He had it when we were kids, too.”

“Okay, focus,” Nora said. “He didn’t say anything about last night?”

“Not really. Although I didn’t exactly give him a chance. I fell flat on my face, then grabbed my clothes and got dressed. I bolted out of there as fast as I could.”

“I can’t blame you for that,” Everly said.

“Have you at least gone through the photos on your phone?” Hazel asked. “Those might give you more clues as to what happened last night.”

“That’s an excellent suggestion,” Nora said.

“Not yet,” I said. “I’m afraid to look.”

They all raised their eyebrows at me.

With a resigned breath, I took out my phone and opened the photo gallery.

The first ones weren’t so bad. I’d taken a few selfies with Cox at the craps table and I did look awfully cute. Nora had done a great job with my hair and makeup. There were several more with the other people who’d been playing with us. We sure looked happy.

I kept swiping through the gallery. Shots of people in the limo—there

were Tanya and the drummer, Drake and Marika, and a few others I couldn't remember. More selfies with Cox, holding up champagne flutes. Me hugging J.J. the limo driver.

Well, that was embarrassing. We'd hugged last night and I hadn't recognized him this morning.

There were photos at another casino. Another one of Cox at what must have been the MMA fight. None of me as a ring girl. I wondered if Cox had taken any, and I couldn't decide if I hoped he hadn't or hoped he had.

It seemed like I'd taken a hundred at Drake and Marika's wedding. Someone—maybe Cox?—had snapped a few of me giving a toast. And then more selfies.

But none of this was too bad. Maybe we hadn't actually—

Except... Oh no.

Oh.

No.

“Oh my god, we did.”

Nora's lips curled in a grin. “Did you take sex pics?”

“No, that's not what I mean.” I stared at the photo and I knew. The memory that kept knocking on the back door of my brain suddenly burst in.

My hands trembled as I held up my phone so they could see the truth. The epic disaster that I'd wrought. The horrifying conclusion to my wild night in Vegas.

There hadn't just been one wedding last night. There'd been two.

“I think I married Camden Cox.”

SOPHIE

Silence settled over the table as my three best friends stared at me in horror.

I turned my phone back around so I could look again. There we were, standing in a wedding chapel. I was in my purple dress, holding a bouquet of white flowers, and I had a single white rose tucked behind one ear. Cox had been wearing a button-down shirt, vest, and slacks, and somehow even without a jacket and tie, he looked perfect.

The officiant had been an Elvis impersonator. How terribly cliché.

“Okay, everybody stay calm,” Nora said. “That photo doesn’t mean you actually got married. Even if you went through a ceremony.”

“She’s right.” Hazel adjusted her glasses. “You would have needed a marriage license.”

“I’m pretty sure we got a license.” Slowly lowering my phone, I searched my memory. “We had to rush to the Marriage Bureau because it was almost midnight and that’s when they close. But we made it just in time. I think the clerk was really nice.”

“Oh my god, Sophie, that means today is your wedding day,” Everly said. Nora and Hazel’s gazes swung to her.

“What? If she got married after midnight, that means technically it’s today.”

A tight ball of emotion tried to work its way up my throat, spreading panic as it went. I’d signed it. I’d signed the marriage license. I remembered doing it.

Oh my god, I really had married Cox last night.

Or early this morning.

Whatever.

“This is so bad.” My voice shook. “You guys, I got married and I can’t remember if we had sex, but I don’t even know if that matters, because it isn’t like you have to consummate the marriage to make it legal.”

“Everly, where’s Shepherd?” Hazel asked. “He knows Cox. Maybe he could call him for Sophie and—”

“No!” A bubble of panic burst in my chest. “No, please don’t tell Mr. Calloway. He’ll fire me.”

“He won’t fire you,” Everly said.

“He might. They have a business deal and I married Cox in Vegas and that just seems like some kind of conflict of interest. Please don’t tell him. Not yet.”

Everly chewed her bottom lip for a second. “I’ll give it a day or two, but I can’t keep secrets from him.”

My shoulders slumped in resignation. “No, I won’t ask you to lie to your husband for me. Just... maybe don’t mention anything about it unless you have to.”

Smiling, she nodded. “Okay.”

I rubbed my hands up and down my face. “What am I going to do?”

Nora pushed her mostly-full Bloody Mary toward me. “The first thing you’re going to do is drink this.”

I winced, not sure I was ready to put even a drop of alcohol in my body. “And then what?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” she said. “I’d love to tell you this isn’t a disaster, but it is. I suppose all you can do now is get in touch with Cox and figure out how to get it annulled.”

“You don’t have any reason to believe you’re first cousins, do you?” Hazel asked.

“What? No. Why?”

She shrugged. “It’s one of the conditions under which Nevada grants annulments.”

Maybe I did want that Bloody Mary. I took a sip. “No, we’re not related. And we were drunk, but obviously we convinced the clerk at the Marriage Bureau that we were sober enough.”

Everly reached across the table to squeeze my hand. “I’m sure there will be an easy way to fix this. This kind of thing probably happens in Vegas all

the time. I bet they have a window at the Marriage Bureau just for quickie annulments. And the good news is, our flight isn't until this afternoon, so you have plenty of time to take care of it."

I gave her a weak smile. "That's true."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Hazel asked.

"I don't think so. Like Everly said, there has to be an easy way to fix this. It must happen all the time here."

Our food came and I ate my brunch, trying to keep my spirits up. But Nora was right: This was a disaster. And not just any disaster. A Sophie disaster.

But I'd just do what I always did when things went awry. I'd clean up the mess.



MY HEART FLUTTERED in my chest as I walked through the ornate Bellagio lobby. Again. It was just as pretty now as it had been this morning, but that wasn't why I was here.

Although I'd married Cox, I hadn't gotten his number.

This was such a mess.

I went to the front desk and the attendant greeted me with a warm smile.

"What can I do for you?"

"This is going to sound a little bit silly, but I left without my room key and I can't remember my room number."

"What name is the reservation under?"

"Camden Cox."

She typed something and a second later, her brow furrowed. "It shows he's already checked out. Are you Mrs. Cox?"

My knees buckled, like my legs were about to give out. I grabbed the desk and held on so I wouldn't fall. "Sorry. Um, yes, I... Sort of. I mean, yes, I am. Mrs. Cox."

Her expression shifted from friendly to mildly confused. "Well, it appears he checked out this morning. Would you like me to check with the concierge to see if your bags were left here?"

"No, thank you. I didn't have any... Never mind; it's a long story. Thanks anyway."

I spun around and walked away. This was all so embarrassing.

Plan A was a bust and I didn't have a plan B. I'd been counting on finding Cox here. After some internet research, I'd determined that, unfortunately, Everly was wrong. There wasn't a quick and easy way to get an annulment. Not even in Vegas.

In fact, I wasn't even sure if we'd qualify for one. The list of reasons included things like being underage or being unlawfully coerced. Unfortunately for me, the list didn't include *I was really drunk and didn't mean to*.

So it appeared I'd be taking this predicament home with me. I'd have to call his office tomorrow and go from there. There wasn't anything else I could do.

"Mrs. Cox? Excuse me, Mrs. Cox?"

I stopped in my tracks, my eyes widening. Oh god, Mrs. Cox was me. Afraid to find out why someone was calling for me by that name, I slowly looked over my shoulder.

The woman from the front desk approached with a small gift bag. "Mrs. Cox, this was left at the concierge desk for you."

"Thank you." My hands trembled as I took the bag. There was a little card clipped to it that read *Mrs. Sophie Cox*. Had he written that? Or the concierge?

I reached inside and pulled out my bra. With a gasp, I shoved it back in.

She gave me a bewildered smile and left.

At least I had my bra back?

With a sigh, I went outside to get a taxi back to my hotel. I had a flight to catch.

COX

*B*y the time I got home that afternoon, I still had a fucking headache. I left my sunglasses on and went straight for the kitchen. My personal chef had already meal-prepped, so I grabbed a finished meal and popped it in the microwave.

I headed over to the liquor cabinet and eyed the bottles for about three seconds before deciding more alcohol was not what my body needed right now.

Instead, I grabbed my dinner out of the microwave—something with chicken and vegetables that smelled great—and took it to the dining table.

I'd bought this house on Lake Washington mostly for the view—it was spectacular from almost every window. And the house itself was gorgeous. It had hardwood floors and the original trim and baseboards. I liked a house with character, and this one had plenty.

I ate my dinner and was about to get up to take a shower when the front door opened. I groaned at the sound of high heels clicking on the hardwood floor. She hadn't wasted any time, had she?

Althea swept in, dressed like she was on her way to the office, even though it was a Sunday evening. She had an annoying habit of barging in here unannounced to discuss things that could wait until we were at the office. It had gotten worse since her divorce last year.

“What the hell, Cox?”

“Nice to see you, too. My trip was great, thanks for asking.”

“I realize your trip was great.” She held up her phone.

I took off my sunglasses and peered at her phone. It was a photo on

someone's Instagram of me with Drake Meadows.

And Sophie.

I ignored it. "Calloway is interested. I expect he'll sign by the end of the week."

She opened her mouth like she'd meant to keep ranting at me, but paused. "The meeting went well?"

"Very well. He likes what we're planning. I'll have Oliver send the full prospectus tomorrow."

"Well at least you have *some* good news."

I sat back in my chair and crossed my arms. "I was in Vegas. Things got a little crazy. What are you, the morality police?"

"Hardly. But need I remind you that this project is already on thin ice thanks to Dominic's extracurricular activities?"

"Then you'll be happy to know there weren't any hookers."

She rolled her eyes. "That's something."

"For fuck's sake, Althea. I partied with some rock stars in Vegas. It's not like it's the first time. What's the problem?"

"Your image is the problem. Another scandal right now wouldn't just ruin the project. It could ruin you."

"Stop being dramatic."

"I'm not being dramatic, I'm being practical. One of us has to be."

"On the contrary, I'm immensely practical."

Shaking her head, she walked to the liquor cabinet and helped herself to a glass of whiskey. "You're ridiculous. That's what you are."

I drummed my fingers on the table, my eyes on my empty plate. Should I tell her? She was going to find out sooner or later, and the tongue-lashing would probably be worse if I waited. Might as well rip the bandage off now. Get it the fuck over with.

"There's something else."

She paused with her glass halfway to her lips. "What?"

"I got married."

"That's not funny, Cox."

"It's not a joke."

She laughed and took a long swallow. "Of course it's a joke. Got married to who?"

"Sophie Abbott."

"Who the fuck is Sophie Abbott?"

The way she said Sophie's name with barely disguised venom almost made me fly out of my seat. My jaw hitched and I clenched my hands into fists. "She's the woman I married last night."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

I stood, grabbing my plate, and took it to the kitchen. "I don't know how I can possibly be more clear. I got married. Her name is Sophie. We knew each other as kids."

Althea followed me in. "Jesus fucking Christ, you're serious?"

"Yeah, but I hardly think it calls for that level of alarm."

"Is it legal? God, please tell me it wasn't legal."

"Come on. You know me. I don't do anything halfway. Of course it was legal."

"You're telling me that you married some random girl in Vegas last night?"

"She's not some random girl. I told you, she's Sophie Abbott. I've known her for years." I allowed myself a slight stretch of the truth with that one.

Her eyes flashed with anger. "How could you be so reckless?"

I chuckled as I refilled my water. "Well, to be fair, I was pretty drunk."

She slammed her whiskey down on the counter. "You are un-fucking-believable. You go to Vegas for a goddamn business meeting and instead of blowing some money in a casino and anonymously fucking some girl who's too young for you, you get *married*? Legally married?"

I scowled at her. She was making too big of a deal out of this. "At least I wasn't doing lines of coke off a hooker's ass. Marriage is wholesome, and Sophie is—" I cut myself off because I'd been about to say *perfect*.

"A quickie Vegas marriage followed by a messy divorce is not wholesome. That's a fucking scandal."

"Who said anything about a messy divorce?"

"You're not going to stay married to her."

"Of course not."

"You don't get it, do you? There's no prenup. That one drunken mistake could cost you millions."

I waved that off. "Sophie wouldn't do that."

"Any woman would do that. Why else did she marry you?"

Leaning against the counter, I hesitated for a second. Why had she married me? Because we were drunk? That was true. We had been drunk as fuck, but what had made a drunk Sophie Abbott think that marrying me was a

good idea?

I didn't know the answer to that, nor did I know how I could be so sure Sophie wasn't a gold-digging opportunist. But somehow, I was sure of it. She wasn't.

"Look, Sophie isn't coming after my money. We'll just get a quick annulment and it'll be like it never happened."

"It's not that easy. You can't just get a marriage annulled, even a Vegas marriage."

"You're the lawyer. I'm sure you can handle it."

She practically spit fire at me. "Unless you want to claim that you coerced her—or she coerced you—I don't think even I can spin this to make you qualify for an annulment."

"So we'll get a divorce. What's the big deal? It's just some paperwork."

"A divorce isn't *just some paperwork*. Trust me."

I tipped my head in acknowledgment. She would know.

"And then there's the fact that you don't have a prenup."

"I'm really looking forward to Sophie proving you wrong on this one. She's not after my money. Worst case scenario, I'll offer her a settlement. It'll be fine."

"I don't know how you can be so cavalier about this. The biggest project of your career hangs in the balance and you don't think a very public divorce after a drunken Vegas wedding is a problem."

"No, I don't think *Sophie* is a problem. The fact that we got married is inconvenient, I'll give you that."

"It's a lot more than an inconvenience."

I swallowed the rest of my water, giving myself a chance to think. Because I had an idea.

"If you're so worried about my public image, I'll just stay married to her for a while."

Althea gaped at me. "What?"

This idea was quickly growing on me. "We'll stay married. Once we break ground on Skyline and everyone is in too deep to back out over something as inconsequential as my personal life, we'll file for divorce. Problem solved."

"The longer you stay married to her, the more likely it is she'll get half."

She really needed to stop talking about Sophie like that. "That isn't an issue. I'll make a private arrangement with her and make it worth her while."

“You can’t be serious.”

“Serious as a heart attack.”

“You won’t be able to pull this off. People will find out.”

“The only thing people are going to find out is that Camden Cox married a cute sugar bug of a girl on a whirlwind trip to Vegas.”

The color drained from her face and she looked like she might be sick. “You’ve lost your mind.”

“Now you really are being dramatic.” I slid my phone out of my pocket and started a text to Oliver.

“What are you doing?”

“Texting Oliver to send my wife flowers.”

“She’s not your wife.”

I glanced up at her. “According to the state of Nevada she is.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Fine, have it your way. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“You’re my lawyer and I hear your legal advice loud and clear.”

My phone buzzed with a text from Oliver, but I’d already decided flowers weren’t enough. And I was going to need to see to this personally.

I headed toward my room to shower. “Thanks, Althea. See you tomorrow.”

Indulging in a smug self-congratulatory smile, I left Althea to finish her whiskey and see herself out. I was going to take this little problem I’d created and turn it into something else entirely. So we’d gotten married. It wasn’t the end of the world. Sophie Abbott was sweet as sugar, hot as a sweltering summer day in Texas, and, for the time being, my wife.

Whether or not I’d taken her to bed in Vegas, I was going to. And this time it was going to be a night we’d both remember.

SOPHIE

Monday morning was so busy.

I could barely keep up with everything, let alone spare a single second to call Cox's office. It wasn't that I was avoiding him. Mr. Calloway was very uncompromising, and it wouldn't do for me to get in trouble at work.

Okay, that was a total lie. It was only normal busy, and I kept making up new things to do so I wouldn't have to call.

I knew I had to. I couldn't avoid him forever.

But maybe I could avoid him until the afternoon. Or Tuesday.

Tuesday sounded better. The aftermath of a drunken wedding in Vegas was a lot for a Monday.

But as soon as Nina came to my desk carrying a box tied with a big pink ribbon, I knew my weekend in Vegas had come to find me.

She set it on my desk. "For you."

"Thanks," I said weakly, staring at the box.

Without looking at the note, I knew it was from him. It had to be.

What would a man like Camden Cox send to the woman he'd accidentally married in Vegas over the weekend?

It had to be some kind of breakup gift. A way of apologizing for the mess we'd gotten ourselves into. Because what else could it be?

When I thought about it like that, it was nice of him.

But why did the idea of a breakup gift from Cox make my stomach feel so awful?

Now I was just being silly. It wasn't like we were going to stay married.

Sure, we'd had fun over the weekend, but that was Vegas. It wasn't the real world. And anybody would have fun with that much alcohol. He was Camden Cox, childhood meanie and puller of pigtails.

Staring at the box wasn't doing me any good, so I took a deep breath. The ribbon slid off easily and I removed the lid. Tissue paper crinkled as I unwrapped it.

My eyes widened when I realized what it was. A lacy black bra and panties set.

With a surprised squeak, I smashed down the tissue paper, trying to cover the lace.

I lifted my eyes to see if anyone had noticed and met Steve's gaze from across the aisle. His mouth was open, his eyebrows lifted.

Yep, he'd seen it.

"It's from my friend Nora," I blurted out. "I don't know why she sent it here instead of my apartment."

Steve adjusted his glasses. "Uh-huh."

He totally didn't believe me.

God, why had Cox sent me underwear? That was a weird breakup gift. Was breakup the right word? What did you call it when you had to get yourself unmarried after mistakenly marrying someone you barely knew?

There probably wasn't a word for it because that wasn't really a thing. Most people wouldn't get themselves into a situation like this.

Most people weren't me.

I glanced around again to see if anyone was watching—Steve had gone back to whatever he'd been doing—and peeked beneath the tissue paper again.

There was a little envelope tucked inside. I took out the note and read it.

HEY SUGAR,

These made me think of you. Just promise me one thing. No wearing them in the ring at an MMA fight. These are for my eyes only.

Your husband

HUSBAND? Oh my god.

He was kidding, right? He had to be kidding.

From what I remembered of our wild night in Vegas, I had laughed a lot, leading me to believe Cox was funny. So this must be his idea of a joke.

Fine. I could take a joke.

This also meant I needed to stop procrastinating and call him.

With my heart beating uncomfortably hard, I called his office.

“Camden Cox’s office. This is Oliver.”

“Hi, Oliver. This is Sophie Abbott.”

“Well hello there, darling. I was expecting your call.”

“You were?”

“Certainly. What works better for you, lunch or dinner?”

“Wait, what?”

“I assume you’re calling to set up a... what shall we call it? A date?”

Oh my god, did he know? He probably knew. “Oh, no, not a date. It’s more like... a meeting.”

“Meeting? Sounds boring.”

“It’s more accurate than a date.”

He chuckled. “Try telling him that.”

What was that supposed to mean? “I don’t think I can get away for lunch today. So I guess dinner?”

“You don’t sound convinced. Aren’t you looking forward to seeing your husband?”

“Oliver,” I hissed into the phone. “No. That’s not... We’re not... I mean, we are, but...”

“I’m sorry, darling, I shouldn’t tease you. I’ll be serious now, I promise. But Mr. Cox did tell me to expect your call and to ask whether you’d like to have lunch or dinner with him. So, dinner then?”

“Yeah, that works.”

“Beautiful, I have you down. Can I get your home address?”

“Sure.” I rattled off my address for him.

“Great, I’ll have the driver pick you up around seven if that works.”

“Seven is fine, but I don’t need—”

“Cheers, love.”

And that was that.

With another deep breath, I hung up the phone, then put the lid back on the box and tucked it under my desk. I didn’t want to accidentally knock it over and have the contents spill out. With my luck, it would happen right at

Mr. Calloway's feet and I'd have to explain why Camden Cox was sending me lingerie. Not a conversation you wanted to have with your boss.



JUST LIKE OLIVER SAID, a driver arrived at my apartment to pick me up right at seven. He politely ushered me into the back of the limo, but it was empty. No Cox.

I tried not to fidget on the large seat as we drove. Maybe I should have asked to sit up front like I had with J.J. in Vegas.

We turned down a long drive with an amazing view of the water and parked in front of a large house with a covered entryway and dark wood double doors. The windows glowed with light and I could see it was right on the lake.

Apparently he hadn't just invited me to dinner. He'd invited me to his house for dinner.

The driver opened the door for me and I got out just as Cox appeared in the entry.

"Thanks, Carson," he said.

The driver lifted his hand in greeting, then got back in the limo.

Cox turned his attention back to me and the smile that stole across his face made my tummy flutter.

It's fine, Sophie. He's just your accidental husband. Who lives in a mansion on the lake. No big deal.

"Hi, sugar," he said, and that accent was going to be the death of me. "Thanks for coming."

I approached, trying to act like everything was fine. But it was hitting me hard that I'd married this man and I had no idea what we were going to do about it. "Thanks for inviting me."

He gestured for me to come in, so I followed him inside. He shut the door and led me into the kitchen—the most incredible kitchen I'd ever seen. It was big and open with wood cabinets and granite counters.

"Can I get you a drink?" he asked.

I snort-laughed as I set my coat and purse on a stool. "I think I'll stick with water. Or something non-alcoholic at least."

The corner of his lips twitched. "We do seem to get ourselves into

mischievous when alcohol's involved."

"Mischievous? More like an epic disaster."

"It's not that bad, is it?"

"We got married." I paused for a second. "We did, right? It's legal?"

"Afraid so. Looks like you're stuck with me."

I laughed again, but there wasn't a lot of humor in it. "Until we figure out how to fix it."

He didn't say anything for a moment, just started taking to-go containers out of a brown bag. But the way his eyes flicked to me and back to the food made me wonder what he was thinking.

"I'm not much of a cook," he said finally. "So I had Oliver do the honors and order dinner. I hope you like Thai."

"I love Thai food. Can I help with anything?"

"Sure."

I helped him bring dinner to the dining table and only stopped to gape at the view for a moment or two. This felt so strange—so quiet. When we'd been together in Vegas, it had been all bright lights and noise. This was so serene.

We sat and dished up. Everything smelled amazing.

"So how was your flight home?" he asked when we were both settled with our dinner.

"It wasn't bad. Yours?"

"Flying with a hangover is never pleasant, but at least it wasn't far. Did you get the package I left for you at the Bellagio?"

My cheeks warmed. I couldn't believe I'd dashed out of his room without my bra. "I did. Thanks."

For a second, I thought about asking if he'd written *Mrs. Sophie Cox* on that note, but decided against it.

"I wasn't sure if you'd go back for it."

"Is that why you sent me the, um, gift today?"

"I thought it was fitting," he said with a grin. "How long have you worked for Shepherd Calloway?"

"About two years."

"Do you like your job?"

"I love my job. I'm not really one for being in the spotlight, so I like working behind the scenes, if that makes sense. And Mr. Calloway is a great boss."

“That’s good to hear. What about family?”

I tilted my head. “You’re very inquisitive.”

“I’m just trying to get to know my wife.”

I rolled my eyes at his joke. His wife. Hilarious. “I’m an only child. My mom passed away when I was little, so it was just me and my dad.”

He met my eyes and there was an intensity to them that made my heart flutter again. “I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks. What about you?”

“I’m also an only child of a single parent. Although in my case, it’s my mom.”

That was interesting. I thought I remembered Cox living with both parents when we were kids. But maybe I was mistaken.

“Are you close to her now?”

“Very.”

“That’s nice. Does she live nearby?” I took another bite of my dinner. Delicious.

“She does. I moved her up here from Texas a few years ago.” He wiped his mouth, then set his napkin aside. “I suppose we should talk about our marriage.”

I laughed a little. “I don’t know if we should call it that.”

“We are married.”

“I know, but it’s not like we meant to. We don’t even know each other.”

“We’ve known each other since we were eleven.”

“Not exactly. Until you helped me off that balcony, we probably hadn’t seen each other in twenty years.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Oh yes, the balcony.”

My cheeks warmed. “Stop.”

“You know, in some cultures, arranged marriages are still common. The bride and groom might not even meet until they’re already married.”

“And your point is?”

“Maybe this isn’t such a bad thing.”

My mouth hung open for a second as those words swirled around in my head. Not such a bad thing? “You can’t be suggesting we stay married.”

“No, of course not. At least not long-term.”

“What does that mean?”

He held my eyes and that intensity in his gaze was back, making my tummy whirl with something. Nervousness? Excitement?

Arousal?

No, definitely not arousal.

Okay, maybe a little.

“Hear me out,” he said. “My former business partner... let’s say he got caught in a compromising position that resulted in an unfortunate public scandal—”

“He was doing coke with prostitutes.”

“You heard.”

“Everybody did.”

“Fair enough. Because of that, I lost several investors in a multimillion-dollar project I’m putting together. That’s why I went to your boss. If Calloway invests and my other investors stay on board, which I think they will, the project will be back on track and all will be well with the world.”

“What does that have to do with us? You don’t want me to try to influence my boss, do you?”

“No, of course not. The project speaks for itself. It’s a great opportunity and I’m sure he knows that. The problem is, another public scandal could bring everything grinding to a halt again. Specifically, a public scandal involving a drunken Vegas wedding and a messy divorce.”

“Why would it be messy? It seems pretty straightforward to me.”

He looked at me for a moment, his mouth lifting in a subtle smile, and once again, I wished I knew what he was thinking.

“You’re right. It probably wouldn’t be messy, although my lawyer is all up in arms about it. But I’m just going to level with you. It would be a lot better for me if we stayed married for now. We can take care of the paperwork when the project is underway and a personal matter like a divorce isn’t going to scare away my investors.”

I blinked in confusion. “Wait. You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

“But we can’t... we’re not... that isn’t...”

“It’s just a little delay in the paperwork. No big deal.”

“We’re married. That’s kind of a big deal.”

His eyebrows drew in. “Why?”

“Because it’s *marriage*.”

As soon as I’d said it, I realized there was a fundamental disconnect between us. I did think marriage was a big deal. It was supposed to mean something—maybe everything. It was supposed to mean forever. But Cox

didn't take it seriously. To him, it didn't really mean anything.

Of course, this wasn't a real marriage and never had been. So it didn't matter if he believed in marriage.

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. "I'll make it worth your while."

"How?"

The corner of his mouth twitched in a smile, and Vegas memories flashed through my mind. That slow sexy grin as he handed me a celebratory shot of whiskey. Then a flash of him kneeling next to me in his hotel room the next morning—naked.

Stop, Sophie. Don't be distracted by his huge... gifts.

"That is a good question," he said. "What do you want?"

Uh-oh. I was about to start negotiating with him. Which meant I was kind of, maybe, possibly considering this.

Could I really be considering this?

But as soon as he'd asked *what do you want*, an answer had popped into my mind. A crazy answer—much too big; he'd never agree—but an answer nonetheless. And possibly the one thing that would make his plan worth it.

"I'll do it if you buy my dad a new house."

His eyebrows lifted. "A house?"

"Yes. Not a big one or anything. He doesn't need a lot of space. But he lives in a two-story and the bedrooms are all on the second floor. He has a hard time going up and down stairs, so he sleeps in his recliner in the living room. Because he's disabled, he had to retire early, so his income is limited, and housing is so expensive. I haven't been able to find a place he can afford that's all on one level, and in good shape, and in a good neighborhood. He doesn't get out much, so he has to have a home where he's really happy, otherwise it's just going to be awful for him."

I clapped my hand over my mouth because I had *not* meant to share all that.

"Done," Cox said.

"Wait, what?"

"If you stay married to me, I'll buy your dad a house with no stairs, that's in good shape, in a good neighborhood."

"You can't be serious."

"I said I'd make it worth your while. If this makes it worth your while, I'll do it."

“Just like that? He’ll own it free and clear?”

“Absolutely.”

I searched my mind for a downside. Other than the fact that this was kind of ridiculous and probably crazy.

But was it? Like he said, it was just a delay in the paperwork. It wasn’t like I was dating anyone who’d be mad at me for getting—and staying—married to him. It wouldn’t really change anything.

“How long do we need to stay married?”

“A couple of months. Six, tops.”

I paused to take a deep breath, wondering how this was going to go sideways. Because so many things in my life seem to go sideways.

But maybe it already had, and this was the silver lining to my Vegas marriage cloud. Not just a silver lining, but the sun bursting through the clouds to spread warmth and happiness in the form of a very, very tempting solution for my dad.

He’d done so much for me. I could do this for him.

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

SOPHIE

*M*y first week as a sort-of-married woman went by without any more surprises. Or provocative deliveries from Cox. By the weekend, I'd decided that my decision to stay married was clearly the smart choice. Nothing much had changed. I went to work. Checked on my dad. Went for a run and then out for drinks with my friends. No biggie.

Although, I started to feel guilty for asking for something as extravagant as a house in exchange for basically doing nothing. All I had to do was *not* file for divorce right away. It didn't seem like he was getting nearly as much out of this as I was.

But he'd agreed to it without even a moment's hesitation, so maybe buying my dad a house was nothing to him.

I had no idea what it would be like to have that kind of money.

Although at the moment, I had no idea what it would be like to have enough money that I didn't have to live in a shoebox apartment in a crappy neighborhood either, so I was light years away from buy-someone-a-house money.

Be that as it may, I rounded out my weekend with another visit to Dad, who spent most of the afternoon shouting at the TV about the injustice of his favorite Seattle football player being traded to another team.

And kale. He somehow worked in another rant about kale. It was impressive, really.

By Monday morning, I was convinced I had this thing on lockdown. No problem.

Except...

I hadn't exactly told anyone about agreeing to stay married to Cox.

My friends had asked about it over martinis on Saturday, and I'd hedged, saying we were working on it. It wasn't a lie, exactly. I was just fudging the truth a little bit. Because we *were* working on it. Or we would be in a few months when Cox was sure it wouldn't impact his big development deal.

Obviously I was going to tell them. But since this whole marriage thing was just a legal technicality, I didn't want to make a big fuss about it.

That did leave the matter of my dad. I was going to have to explain things, especially when it came time to drop the bomb that I'd negotiated a new house for him. It was going to take some coaxing to get him on board. And by *some coaxing*, I meant a concerted effort over weeks—possibly months—to soften him up to the idea that I was taking care of his housing situation. My dad did not like accepting charity, especially for something so big, and especially when it was coming from me. Cooking him dinner once in a while was one thing. Getting him a new house was quite another.

This was going to be a tough sell.

The only other crack in my self-assurance that everything would be fine was the fact that Cox kept texting me.

A lot.

Not so much that it was annoying or creepy. But enough that I started to realize he wasn't going to disappear and reappear in a few months when it was time to get divorced.

I had no idea why he was doing it. Maybe he was just making conversation. Maybe he thought it was funny. Maybe he didn't have any hobbies and texting me randomly gave him something to do.

Morning, sugar. Have a good day.

I just had lunch at McCormick and Schmick's. Ever been there?

More permits came through. Might need to pop some champagne to celebrate.

Have you tried on the bra and panties I sent you?

With the exception of that last one, his messages resulted in brief conversations. We'd text back and forth a few times. Then, hours later, or maybe the next day, he'd text something else. I hadn't even had too many text fails. I was convinced my phone was inhabited by an autocorrect demon whose mission was to mess up my texts as embarrassingly as possible. I'd named him Kane. But Kane had been oddly inactive in my conversations

with Cox.

And I hadn't answered his question about the bra and panties.

But yes, I had tried them on.

They were exquisite.

He clearly hadn't picked them up at Target. They felt expensive. Luxurious. Decadent. And the bra was miraculously supportive while still being sexy, which was a rare find. Most bras that fit boobs like mine were beige and boring, not magic gravity-defying lace that let the twins be the best versions of themselves.

So on Monday, I indulged and wore my new silky, sexy underthings to work.

With a dress on over them, obviously.

Although, honestly, they looked *amazing* on me. If ever I was going to show up at work and play out the nightmarish scene of walking down the aisle toward my desk in nothing but my bra and panties, it would be in these.

Apparently my sort-of husband had great taste in underwear.

Not long after lunch, I sat at my desk and cast a quick admiring glance down at my chest—this bra worked so well with this dress—when Mr. Calloway emerged from his office. My heart did a little dance in my chest, but it wasn't his appearance that caused the flutter. It was because I knew where he was going.

He had a meeting with Cox.

I had no idea why that made me feel so jittery, but it only got worse when he stopped at my desk.

"I need you to come with me."

As if I were operating on autopilot, rather than by making conscious choices, I stood and gathered my things. He waited by my desk long enough for me to fall in step behind him and without another word, started walking to the elevator.

Okay. This was fine. I'd been through a meeting with Cox and Mr. Calloway in Vegas and survived. Of course, that had been before we'd gotten married, but that didn't mean anything had to be different now.

I could do this.

We rode the elevator to the parking garage and got in Mr. Calloway's car. Cox's office wasn't far. Probably walkable on a nice day, but the gray drizzle outside made me glad for my hair that we hadn't. In all of two blocks, it would have turned into a frizzy nightmare.

With curls still intact, wrap dress adjusted, and fortifying breaths taken, I followed Mr. Calloway up to Camden Cox's office.

The elevator opened directly into the lobby. A Cox Development logo decorated the wall behind the front desk and there was comfortable-looking furniture for waiting guests. The colors were cool and calming—beachy blues and grays that contrasted with the dark brown leather couch and chairs.

A man wearing a headset that somehow didn't crush his spiky blond hair greeted us with a friendly smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Shepherd Calloway here to see Camden Cox."

"Of course. One moment, please."

The receptionist spoke quietly to someone through his headset, letting them know Mr. Cox's two o'clock had arrived.

The instant Oliver came through the doorway to the right of the front desk, I knew it was him. It had to be him. He was tall and lean with sharp cheekbones, auburn hair, a smooth jaw, and a smart pair of glasses. He wore a tweed vest over a button-down shirt and tie, with slacks and brown shoes.

"Mr. Calloway, right this way," he said, cute British accent and all. His eyes landed on me and his mouth curled in a smile. "Sophie, I presume?"

"Yes, hi. It's nice to meet you in person."

"You as well, darling. I'll take you back."

I let out a relieved breath—thank goodness he hadn't called me Sophie Cox, or worse, Mrs. Cox—and followed him and Mr. Calloway.

As soon as we walked in, Cox stood. He was dressed in a button-down shirt with the collar loose, sleeves cuffed. His eyes slid up and down my body like a soft caress and the corner of his mouth lifted.

Pressing my lips together, I gave my head a little shake. *Don't you dare say anything, Cox. Don't you dare.*

He smoothly turned to Mr. Calloway and held out his hand. "Thanks for coming."

They shook and nodded to each other, then Mr. Calloway and I took a seat.

See? Totally fine. Just business.

Cox's gaze dipped to my chest and there was that almost-smirk again.

I cleared my throat.

Without missing a beat, he slid a folder in front of him and opened it, as if he hadn't just been ogling my boobs.

"Can I get you any refreshments? Coffee? Tea?" Oliver asked.

Mr. Calloway shook his head without looking up. “No.”

“No thank you,” I said.

“Thanks, Oliver,” Cox said. “We’re good.”

Oliver gave me a subtle wink, then left, closing the door behind him.

A second later, the door flew open. A woman with platinum blond hair tied at the nape of her neck walked in, already talking.

“We need to—” She stopped short, her lips parted. “I didn’t realize you were busy.”

A low hum of tension radiated from Cox. His expression barely changed, but I could sense he was annoyed.

How could I tell? I barely knew him.

Maybe it was just logic. Whoever she was, she’d just barged into a meeting.

Mr. Calloway was definitely annoyed. His stiff posture and icy gaze were familiar.

“Althea McLellan,” Cox said, gesturing to her. “This is Shepherd Calloway and his assistant, Sophie.”

A flicker of something—surprise, maybe?—marred her expression. But it was gone as quickly as it had come, and she smiled. “Very nice to meet you. I’ll come back. Sorry for the interruption.”

Her eyes moved from Cox to Mr. Calloway, then to me. They lingered on my face, narrowing slightly, making me wonder if I had something on my nose. I reached up to give it a dainty swipe with one knuckle. She turned and left.

That was odd. Did she know who I was?

“Sorry about that,” Cox said.

Mr. Calloway acknowledged his apology with a tilt of his head. “No problem.”

Seamlessly, as if the brief interruption hadn’t occurred, they launched into a discussion about the project. Updates, timelines, challenges. I dutifully took notes, recorded dates, and jotted down follow-up questions Mr. Calloway might have later.

In short, I did my job.

And did not fail to notice Cox’s wandering gaze.

Somehow he seemed to have mastered the art of looking at me with undisguised heat without Mr. Calloway catching on. He couldn’t have seen the looks Cox was giving me. I knew what he’d do if he caught someone

eyeing his assistant like that. It had happened once at a lunch meeting. There had been several of us at the table and one of the other men had leered at me like I was for sale and he thought he could get me at a discount. Mr. Calloway's voice had been cold enough to freeze a river of lava, and I'd been surprised the guy's heart hadn't stopped right there, encased in ice.

But there was no indication my boss noticed the sweep of Cox's eyes from my face to my chest, the slight hitch in his jaw, or the way his lips twitched.

Why did he keep looking at me like that?

A hazy Vegas memory ran through my mind. Cox giving me that same look, only with more heat and less subtlety. The blaring noise and lights of the casino fading as he locked me in a predatory stare and lured me closer, like the helpless prey that I was.

An involuntary squeak left my throat. I turned away and coughed to cover it, but when I took a new breath in, I accidentally inhaled a droplet of my own saliva. My throat spasmed, closing off as if I were in danger of drowning.

Talk about an overreaction.

With my head still turned, I clapped my hand over my mouth to stifle the coughing. My nostrils flared as the ragged breath I took tried to work its way past my clenched airway and into my lungs.

Another cough, then a real breath finally made it through. I swallowed, wishing I had—

Cox stood next to me, holding out an open bottle of water.

Wow. Wish granted.

I nodded and took the water, not trusting my throat to let me speak without descending into another coughing spasm. The cool liquid soothed as it slid down, easing that tiny spot of irritation that was causing me so much trouble.

Mr. Calloway watched me with his usual stoic expression, only a raised eyebrow betraying his concern.

"Sorry," I said, my voice a little rough, and took another long swallow of water. "My throat got a tickle."

Cox hesitated next to me, an odd expression on his face. It wasn't alarm, exactly, nor was it the look of mild concern my boss was giving me. It was different. Deeper. And for a second, I had the strangest feeling that he wanted to scoop me in his arms and hold me.

Which was obviously ridiculous. He just wondered what the heck was wrong with me that I was coughing up a lung for no reason.

I lifted the now half-empty water bottle, my cheeks warming with embarrassment. “Thank you. Much better.”

“Of course.” He paused, still regarding me with that expression I couldn’t quite read. “Need anything else?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m sorry to interrupt.”

“It’s all right.” He cleared his throat and went back to his seat.

Mr. Calloway’s phone buzzed and he drew it out of his pocket, his brow furrowing. “Excuse me for a moment. I need to take this.”

“There’s an empty conference room to the right,” Cox said.

He nodded and left to take his call.

Cox’s gaze swung to me, his cocky smirk out in full force now that we were alone. “Touchy gag reflex? That’s good to know.”

I scowled at him, but another cough ruined the effect. “I told you, I got a tickle in my throat.”

“I hate it when that happens.”

“It’s the worst.”

“You look beautiful today.” His eyes dipped to my chest again. “That dress is magnificent on you.”

My cheeks warmed again. “Thank you.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “You’re wearing them, aren’t you?”

I knew exactly what he meant—and I *was* wearing them—but his question flustered me. I looked down at myself, as if I were trying to guess what he was talking about.

He chuckled softly. “Of course you are. I love that you wore them for me.”

“I didn’t wear them for you. I didn’t even know I was coming here.”

He just smiled.

“I’m serious. I didn’t know I’d see you today.”

“Speaking of seeing each other, it’s been too long. If we’re going to make this marriage work, we really need to put in more effort. I’ll hold myself responsible for my end, but I need you to meet me in the middle.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Aw, sugar, don’t be like that. Tell you what: You can make it up to me by going out with me tonight.”

“What? No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not going out with you.”

“Being married doesn’t mean I’m going to stop chasing you. We’ve gotta keep the magic alive. Put in the work.” He grinned at me again, his eyes dancing with mischievous fire.

A twinge of pressure between my legs almost made me squirm in my seat. I settled for a quick thigh clench, hoping he wouldn’t notice. I did not want him to think he was getting to me. He was incorrigible enough as it was. He didn’t need more encouragement.

“I can’t tonight.”

“How about this weekend?”

“I don’t think we should go out.”

“Why not?”

“Look at what happened last time. We got married. What are we going to do if we go out again? Make a—”

I stopped and quickly closed my mouth, pressing my lips together.

Don’t say it, Cox. Don’t say make a baby.

The evil grin that stole across his features nearly sucked the air from my lungs and sent a flurry of tingles down my spine.

“Make a what, sugar?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“Tell you what. Go out with me on Saturday and I won’t tell your boss that you’re my wife.”

My eyes widened and I glanced over my shoulder, half expecting to see Mr. Calloway already standing there. I whipped back around and my voice was a low hiss. “You wouldn’t.”

“I’m trying not to be insulted that you seem to want to hide your husband from those closest to you.”

“We both know you’re not really my husband, and you’re not insulted that I didn’t tell my boss. Besides, he’d probably kill you if he knew.”

He chuckled. “I’d like to see him try.”

“Let’s not get into who’s the alpha male right now, please.”

“Then go out with me on Saturday.”

“You’re very accustomed to getting what you want, aren’t you?”

“Sugar, you have no idea.”

“And you’re not going to leave me alone until I agree, are you?”

“Now you’re gettin’ it.”

I let out a sigh. “Okay, Cox. I’ll go out with you. Although I have no idea why you want to go out with me.”

He smirked. Again. The cheeky bastard. “You’re my wife. Do I need a reason?”

I didn’t bother correcting him this time. Just rolled my eyes again. I had a feeling I knew what kind of game he was playing. He was confident to the point of cockiness. Accustomed to getting what he wanted. I’d known men like him in my life—my ex being a prime example. Men who could turn on the charm. Who knew how to use their gifts very, very well.

And for some inexplicable reason, Cox was turning his charm on me.

Of course, he probably just wanted what I’d unintentionally showed him that night when I hung off the balcony in no panties. What he may or may not have had once already in Vegas—because honestly, I still wasn’t sure.

He had his work cut out for him. For once in my life, I wasn’t going to be on the receiving end of that kind of disaster. He was Camden Cox, puller of pigtailed and breaker of hearts.

And I wasn’t going to let him break mine.

COX

I had Sophie right where I wanted her.

Granted, she wasn't naked, pinned beneath me on my bed with my mouth teasing those luscious tits. That was where I really wanted her.

But she would be soon enough.

She'd denied that it had been for me, but she *had* worn the bra and panties I'd sent her. And to my office, no less.

Tonight, I was going to seal the deal—memorably this time. She had no idea what a treat she was in for.

I glanced in the bathroom mirror and started buttoning my shirt, wondering if I should shave or if Sophie preferred my well-trimmed stubble. It was a weekend, but I'd spent most of my day working in my home office and taken a break for a workout this afternoon. That had necessitated another shower before I was fit to be seen. Now my hair was damp and I hadn't yet put on any pants.

Oliver waltzed into my master bathroom like he didn't give two shits that I was only half dressed. For a guy who generally had impeccable manners, he was awfully lax about privacy.

"The dealership is expecting you. Ask for Johnathan. I texted that to you because I know you probably won't remember."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That most of the time, you only half listen to me."

"I listen."

He shrugged. "When it suits you. In any case, Johnathan will be ready to

roll out the red carpet.”

I finished buttoning my shirt. “Good.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to make a dinner reservation somewhere?”

“No, I’ve got it. Going to do something a little different tonight.”

He adjusted his glasses. “Interesting.”

My eyes flicked to him in annoyance as I rubbed a bead of pomade between my fingers. “What’s with the second-guessing? You don’t think I know how to take a woman on a date?”

“On the contrary, you’re quite skilled at it.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

He hesitated. “I wonder if you know what you’re getting into.”

“With what?” I ran my hands through my hair, massaging in the pomade. “Trying to date my wife?”

He chuckled. “You like calling her that.”

I shot him a glare. “I’m just making the best out of the situation.”

“Or taking advantage of it. But a request, if I may. Call her *my wife* as often as possible around Maleficent.”

I ignored his jibe at Althea. “She does have her panties in a bunch over the whole thing, doesn’t she?”

“Quite. Although I daresay bunched panties are a way of life for her.”

He wasn’t wrong, but she was damn good at her job. “Are you going to let me finish getting dressed or would you like to question more of my plans?”

“Just... be nice to her. I like this one.”

One corner of my mouth lifted. “Oh, I’m going to be *very* nice. Don’t you worry about that.”

“And another maiden falls victim to the ravishing rogue.”

“You’re one to talk.”

It was his turn to smile. “Touché.”

“Speaking of, have you asked her out yet or are you still dragging your feet?”

His eyes widened with mock innocence. “Who?”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t try to be coy; it’s not a good look. The tea shop girl.”

Scowling, he crossed his arms and glanced away. “No.”

That was odd. Oliver always killed it with the ladies. They went crazy

over his accent. “Why not?”

“It appears she’s already dating someone. I saw him pick her up from work the other day.”

“So? If you want her, swoop in and steal her away. You’re good at the game. Don’t sit on the sidelines. Get out there and play.” I ducked into the walk-in closet to retrieve my pants.

Oliver followed. “I know; it should be simple. I should have her eating out of my hand by now, but something about her is... different.”

“Different how?”

“I can’t explain it. She makes me inexplicably nervous.”

I tugged my slacks up my legs. “Nervous about what? And when have you had a conversation with her that didn’t involve buying tea? Which, by the way, I saw how much you have stashed in the cupboard in my office. Maybe slow it down a little or I’ll have to open a competing shop and run her out of business.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Hey man, you’re the one buying tea from her every day.”

“I know. It’s like she’s cast a spell on me. I can’t stay away, but none of my usual tactics seem fitting.”

I finished tucking in my shirt and buttoned my pants. “You’re overthinking it. She’s just a girl.”

His eyes flashed with a sudden flare of... was that anger? But it was gone as quickly as it had come. “I daresay she’s not, but I don’t suppose you’ll understand that. In any case, do you need anything else before I retire to my depressingly single life while you enjoy an evening with the lovely Sophie?”

“You bet your ass I’m going to enjoy my evening. And no, take your drama queen attitude home for the night.” I paused to give myself another quick glance in the mirror before walking into my bedroom. “Don’t bug me tomorrow. At least not early.”

He followed me out. “Planning to cook her breakfast?”

I grinned. “I’m a gentleman, aren’t I?”

“That’s debatable.”

“See ya, Oliver,” I said to his back as he walked away.

“Goodnight.”

Chuckling, I cuffed my sleeves. Time to go pick up my wife.



SOPHIE'S APARTMENT BUILDING WAS... well, it was fucking unacceptable is what it was. The red brick façade was cracked and worn, at least two of the windows had broken glass, and there was a car parked out front that had been stripped of just about everything easily removable. She wanted a house for her dad but she lived *here*?

I didn't like it. How the hell did my sweet little sugar bug survive in a neighborhood like this?

Maybe I'd have to buy her a new house too. And talk to Calloway about her salary.

I got out of my car and leaned against the door while I texted her to let her know I was here.

Then I waited.

And waited.

And waited a little more.

It had probably only been a few minutes, but I started to wonder if I had the wrong address. I checked it again. It looked right.

Finally, her answering text buzzed my phone.

Sorry. Be down in a minute.

True to her word, about sixty seconds later, she came out the front door.

All those soft blond curls were up, leaving a few wispy pieces to hang down around her neck. Her light pink shirt nipped her waist and jeans hugged her curves in all the right places. She had a purse slung over her shoulder and a coat draped across one arm.

I'd seen her dressed up and made up. I'd seen her messy in the morning. I'd seen her in work clothes and date attire and goddamn, I liked her every which way. There was something about her. Something... different.

Oliver's words from earlier came to mind—he'd said the same thing about the tea shop girl—but Sophie's bright smile pushed that thought aside.

"Hey there, sugar. You look beautiful."

She gave me the satisfaction of a slight blush. "Thank you. Sorry to make you wait, but I couldn't find my left shoe."

I wanted to kiss her, right here and now. In fact, the urge to step in, grab her by the waist, and kiss the hell out of her was so strong, I almost did it.

But I didn't.

I paused.

Something told me not to come on too strong. Not yet anyway.

My instincts were usually spot on, so I listened. Gave her a smile and

opened the passenger door. “Shall we?”

She smiled again and moved past me to get in my car. I leaned in a little to get a whiff of her hair. God, she smelled good.

I went around and got in, then turned on the car and pulled out onto the street.

“So, what are we doing?” she asked.

“Let’s get a quick bite to eat, but then I thought we’d do something a little different. I’m in the market for a new car. Not an everyday driver, mind you. Something fun. I figure we can take one for a test drive. I’d like to get my wife’s opinion before I buy.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t correct me for calling her my wife. “We’re going to test drive cars?”

“You sound skeptical.”

“It’s just not what I was expecting.”

“I said I wanted to do something a little different. Any guy can take you out for coffee or dinner.”

“Okay,” she said, like she still wasn’t too sure about my plan.

We grabbed an early dinner at a Greek place she suggested. I’d never been here, but the food was outstanding. We chatted while we ate, but she seemed guarded. Like she was keeping an invisible barrier between us, not letting me get too close.

I’d have to work on that.

After dinner, we headed across the I-90 bridge into Bellevue. I pulled into the McLaren dealership and parked.

Sophie stared out the window, wide-eyed. “I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this.”

“Like I said. Fun.”

“Are you sure you’re not just showing off?”

I smirked at her. “Sugar, I don’t need to show off.”

I got out and opened her door. Took her hand while she stood, and a good thing because her foot nearly slipped out from under her. I steadied her with my other hand on her waist, and those soft curls brushed my cheek.

My hand moved to the small of her back and I led her inside. Bright lights shone down on stark white walls and a white tile floor. Several models were parked around the showroom, their shiny paint jobs sparkling.

A man in a sharp suit with slicked back hair was on hand to greet us.

“Johnathan?” I asked.

“Yes, sir.” He gave me a hearty handshake.

“My wife, Sophie.”

She made a little noise in her throat but reached out to shake Johnathan’s hand. “Hi.”

“Nice to meet you. Can I get you any refreshments?”

“Just a set of keys, my friend.”

“Is there a particular model you’re interested in? The 570GT is—”

“How about I save us both a little time and let you skip the sales pitch. I’ve been looking at the 720S coupe and I know all the specs. But my wife needs to get a feel for it before she’ll let me pull the trigger.”

“Fair enough, Mr. Cox. We already have all your information on file. I’ll be right back.” He turned and walked to the back.

“Are you really going to buy one of these?” Sophie asked, her voice almost a whisper.

“If you like it. I’m buying it for you.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right. What are you going to do with it after we get divorced?”

“Why worry about that now? I like to live in the moment.”

“They do say the present is a gift.”

I glanced down at her. Fuck, she was cute. “That it is, sugar.”

Johnathan came back with a key fob and led us out a set of side doors. The car was everything I wanted it to be. Deep blue with a sexy black interior. Sleek, aerodynamic lines. It looked like a million bucks and by some people’s estimation, it was a bargain with a sticker price of less than half that.

Fine, maybe I was showing off a little.

But I really had been looking at this car. And driving it with her in the passenger seat was going to be fun.

Johnathan handed me the key fob and took a few steps back. I ushered Sophie in through the gull wing door—they lifted up, instead of opening out. Such a hot car.

Sophie looked hot in it too.

I went around to the other side and got in, then shifted my weight around on the seat. Felt good.

“This thing is like a race car,” she said as the doors lowered. “I feel like I should be wearing a helmet and one of those jumpsuits.”

“Maybe we should get you one. I bet you’d look sexy as hell dressed up like a race car driver.”

She shook her head and laughed. “Are they really going to let you drive away in this?”

I started the engine and it didn’t just hum. It growled. “They know I’m good for it.”

Ever so gently, I backed us out of the parking spot. A man did not simply *drive* a supercar. A man had to coax it. Caress it. Make love to it from the driver’s seat and be respectful of its power.

I wanted to get out of the congestion of the city, so we headed east. I opened it up a bit on the freeway and damn, all that potential speed was tempting. Sophie’s eyes flicked to me a few times and I swore the look she was giving me said *go faster*.

We cruised down the freeway, getting past most of the suburban sprawl before exiting. I turned north on a two-lane highway that wound through a patchwork of farmland.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“You were right. It’s fun.”

“Told you.”

She smiled, and I sensed a little bit of her guardedness easing away.

That smile of hers tickled at something in my memory. I chased it down, trying to grasp the image before it fled behind a whiskey haze. Sophie in Vegas, wearing her purple dress. Smiling over a dish of—

“Creme brulée,” I said.

“What?”

“You love creme brulée. I just remembered. We had some in Vegas.”

“I do love creme brulée.” She paused. “That’s right. You asked me my favorite dessert and I said creme brulée. Then you had J.J. find a place that served it at whatever time that was.”

“J.J.?”

“He was the limo driver. He took me back to my hotel the morning after... you know.”

“Good man.”

“He said you pay well.”

“Indeed I do. Someone takes care of me, I take care of them right back. Or in this case, takes care of my girl.” I winked at her.

She didn’t argue with me about the *my girl* comment. Just smiled at me.

Progress.

I kept on driving, feeling the curves in the road, hugging the turns. This

car was a dream to drive and I liked that Sophie was enjoying it, too. Obviously I didn't need her opinion—or permission—before I bought it. I just liked teasing her. But there was something pleasurable—not pleasant, *pleasurable*—about gliding down the road in this sexy car with her at my side.

“It's so pretty out here,” she said. “So open compared to the city.”

“It is nice, isn't it?”

“Where did you go when you moved away? When we were kids, I mean.”

Overall, that wasn't a time in my life I particularly wanted to revisit, but there was no harm in answering her question. “Texas. We'd lived there before and my mom still had family there.”

“I wondered where you got your accent.”

“You can take the boy out of Texas, but you can't take Texas out of the boy.”

“How did you wind up back here?”

“I took a job in Seattle not long after college. Been here ever since. What about you? Have you always lived around here?”

She shifted in her seat. “Yeah, born and raised.”

I glanced at her. “You stick close to your dad.”

“I do. We're the only family either of us has.”

“I look forward to meeting him.”

She laughed softly. “Yeah... my dad is... You know how some people are rough around the edges?”

“Sure.”

“It's not just his edges. He's basically sandpaper.”

“I like him already. But how did a rough-as-sandpaper man produce a sweet girl like you?”

She laughed again and the sound seeped into my chest like the burn of whiskey sliding down my throat.

“I don't know. I guess I'm more like my mom.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Yeah. It's not easy to lose a parent, but I feel like Dad and I did okay. Do you miss your dad?”

Involuntarily, my back stiffened and my grip on the steering wheel tightened. “No, I can't say that I do.”

“Sorry. I didn't mean...”

I relaxed on an exhale. “It's all good, sugar. I suppose we should think

about taking the car back.”

“We have been gone a while. Do you think they’re worried?”

“Nah. Like I said, they know I’m good for it.”

“Are you going to buy it?”

“I’d certainly like to own one, but with these, they typically build you one custom. I won’t go through all that work tonight, though. It’ll take too long.”

And I have other plans for you tonight.

I enjoyed the drive back to the dealership. The ride was smooth, the company pleasant. I wanted to touch her, but once again my instincts told me to hold up. I liked being the aggressor with women, but I also didn’t want to make her feel trapped. I was a coaxer, a sweet-talker, an enticer—not an intimidator.

We dropped off the McLaren and as sad as I was to say goodbye to that sweet ride, I was happy to be ushering Sophie back into my Mercedes. A light hand across her back eased some of the craving I had for contact. And the way she met my eyes and smiled felt like a subtle nod of encouragement.

She was definitely warming up to me.

Time to take things up a notch.

“What do you think?” I asked when we were settled and on the road back to Seattle. “Want to come to my place? Maybe have a drink and some dessert? I can rustle us up some creme brulée.”

“Thanks, but I should be getting home.”

Wait, what?

She wanted to go home?

Damn.

“You sure? It’s not very late.”

“I’m sure.”

Her tone was sweet, but decisive. Any attempts to change her mind now would just be arguing. That was not how I wanted things to go.

“All right, sugar. Let’s get you home.”

I drove her home and insisted on getting out and walking her up to the front door of her building. I cast wary glances up and down the sketchy street while she hunted through her purse for her keys. I liked this building even less at night than I had when I’d picked her up earlier.

“Thanks, Cox. It was fun.”

“My pleasure. I’ll call you.”

She met my eyes and I was about to slide in for a goodnight kiss when

she deftly stepped out of my grasp. “Goodnight.”

And just like that, she disappeared inside.

What the fuck? Not even a kiss?

Cox, you're losing your edge.

Straightening, I cleared my throat and went back to my car. Things hadn't ended the way I'd thought—or wanted—but I wasn't a man who gave up easily. Sometimes you had to retreat so you could fight another day.

And when it came to Sophie, I was just getting started.

SOPHIE

Dad poked at his potatoes and eggs, digging around the plate as if looking for a piece of kale hidden in his breakfast. Apparently he didn't trust restaurant cooks any more than he trusted me.

I swallowed a bite of my ham and cheese omelet. "Is your food okay?"

He grunted and grabbed the pepper, then shook some onto his food. "Fine."

The server paused on her way past our table to top off Dad's coffee. He gave her a polite nod and a gravelly thank you. Sandpaper, he might be, but he had decent manners. Most of the time, at least.

I'd brought Dad to one of our favorite restaurants for a late Sunday breakfast. It was busy, all but a table or two taken. The hum of dozens of conversations filled the air, along with the clink of plates, glasses, and silverware. He usually complained it was too expensive, but I always insisted on paying. Swimming in money, I was not, but I budgeted carefully so I could treat him to a nice breakfast once in a while.

"What about him?" Dad asked, using a fork to gesture to his right.

"Who?"

"That one," he said, pointing with his fork again.

I cast a quick glance at a man sitting alone, looking at his phone. His plate was mostly empty and he idly sipped a cup of coffee while his thumb swiped across the screen.

"What about him?"

"Nice looking fellow."

"Dad, no."

“What’s wrong with him?” He shoveled a heaping bite of peppery potatoes into his mouth.

“Nothing. Just don’t try to set me up with anyone right now. Please?”

“Why not?”

Because technically, I’m married.

I wondered what Dad would do if I blurted it out like that. Just came out and said it. I didn’t particularly want to find out in the middle of a busy restaurant.

“Because I’m not going on dates with anyone new right now. I’m taking a little break.”

“Waste of time,” he said around his food. “You’re not getting any younger, Soph.”

“Dad.” I kept eating.

“It’s just the truth. You know I’m no bullshitter. And the truth is, a woman can’t have kids forever. Don’t complain to me about it; I didn’t make the rules. Take that up with the big guy.” He juttied his fork upward, vaguely motioning toward the sky.

“Thanks for pointing out how close my ovaries are to shriveling up.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure your ovaries are just fine. But those eggs do need a man to—”

“Okay, Dad, I get it.”

“I used to worry about some little shit coming along and knocking you up before you were ready. Now I worry all the men your age are too stupid to see a good woman when she’s right in front of ’em.”

“Hopefully I’ll run into one of the smart ones eventually. Oh, I brought you something.”

As I reached for my purse, I bumped my water glass, but Dad steadied it before it could spill. That was close. I pulled out a thin booklet with a blue cover and handed it to him.

“New crossword puzzles.”

He pulled his reading glasses out of his front pocket and put them on, then flipped through the pages. “Thank you, princess.”

“You’re welcome.”

While he continued eating and thumbed through the crossword puzzles, I took out my phone to text Nora. I wanted to confirm what time we were meeting for our run today.

Hey sweetie! What time today?

The reply came almost immediately. *Well hi there, sugar. Any time is good for me, but what are we talking about?*

Dang it, I'd accidentally texted Cox instead of Nora. How had I managed that? I blamed Kane. Stupid phone demon was always messing me up.

Me: *Oops, I meant to send that to my friend Nora.*

Cox: *Damn, you had my hopes up.*

Me: *Sorry. We're just going for a run later.*

Cox: *I don't think I knew you were a runner.*

Me: *Yeah, I usually go with my friends. Then we get drinks afterward at this great place called Brody's Brewhouse.*

Cox: *Been there once or twice. But let's get back to you running. I'm imagining you all sweaty. I like it. Keep going.*

I shouldn't encourage him. Cox was a player with a capital P, and married to him or not, the last thing I needed was to be his next conquest.

But it was just a little texting. It wasn't like he was sitting here in person.

I glanced up at Dad. He'd produced a pencil and was happily working on a crossword puzzle in between bites of breakfast.

Maybe it wouldn't hurt to have a little fun with Cox.

Me: *I do get pretty sweaty. Makes it hard to peel off my clothes.*

Cox: *Peel 'em off, darlin'. One by one.*

Me: *Okay. My shirt comes off easily. It's just damp.*

Cox: *I bet it messes up your hair when you pull it over your head.*

Me: *It does.*

Cox: *I like that. Keep going.*

Me: *My pants stick a little when I slide them over my... wait, maybe I still have shoes on.*

Cox: *Don't worry about it. We're just playin'. Slide those pants down over that sweet ass.*

Me: *Right, sorry.*

Cox: *Tell me you're not wearing panties.*

Me: *Nope. No panties.*

Cox: *I've got this one. You bend over to take your pants off and I'm right there behind you. I crouch down, grab those luscious ass cheeks, and slide my tongue right up your center. You taste salty and sweet.*

That escalated quickly. This was getting intense, especially because I was sitting with my dad. I could feel the blush heating up my face. But he was busy with his breakfast and crossword puzzle, and no one else in the

restaurant was paying attention to me.

Plus, I liked the zing of excitement and little burst of arousal. Being in public kind of made it... better. Naughtier. More fun.

Me: *My knees buckle and I fall forward onto the bed. I guess there's a bed? I'm not very good at this.*

Cox: *You're doing just fine. You're on the bed and I roll you over. I want those tits.*

Me: *Sports bras aren't sexy to get off. Let's pretend it has a zipper.*

Cox: *Good, I like that. I'll lower it with my teeth.*

Me: *What do you do with them once they're free?*

Cox: *Oh, sugar. I treat 'em right. Lick. Suck. Squeeze. That feel good?*

Me: *So good.*

Cox: *I can keep going if you want.*

God, what was I doing? I shouldn't want this fantasy to turn real, but my body wasn't interested in what I should or shouldn't want. My nipples hardened and warm pressure pooled in my core.

It would feel good.

So good.

It had been a long time.

Except maybe Vegas, but I wasn't counting that because I wasn't sure what had actually happened.

I took a deep breath. No, I needed to cool this down.

Me: *You know we're just playing, Cox.*

Cox: *I know, sugar. Have a good run.*

I deposited my phone in my purse and went back to my breakfast. I'd text Nora later. I clearly couldn't be trusted with my phone right now.

Dad finished up and it lightened my heart to see him in such a good mood. I paid the bill and he didn't even complain. He tucked his glasses and pencil in his shirt pocket and got up. Then we made our way outside.

The restaurant was on the outskirts of downtown, not far from Seattle Center. I was following Dad toward my car when a woman across the street caught my eye. She had one hand on her hip, a phone in the other, and everything about her body language shouted *I'm annoyed*.

Why did I recognize her? She was older than me, maybe late forties or so, with platinum blond hair and stylish clothes. Very pretty but also kind of... severe.

I glanced at her again as I held the passenger door for Dad. That's right,

she'd been at Cox's office. The woman who'd burst into the room during his meeting with Mr. Calloway. Althea McLellan.

She hadn't seemed very friendly then, and now she was shedding enough negative vibes into the universe to darken the sky with black rainclouds. So I didn't wave or try to say hello.

I took Dad home, then went back to my apartment to change. Nora texted to make sure I was coming. I donned my running clothes and made sure to wear panties. And my sports bra did not have a zipper. Not that I dug through my drawer to see if I had one that did.

Fine, I did look.

But it was only out of curiosity because a sports bra with a zipper would be easier to get in and out of. It had nothing to do with replaying our brief text game in my mind and wondering what it would be like if it actually came true.



CLOUDS HAD ROLLED in on the tail end of our run, but the rain held off. We slowed to a walk to cool down, although we hadn't been going very fast. Lately we kept our pace to a light jog to accommodate Everly's pregnancy. Her doctor had assured her she could jog as long as she felt up to it, but not to push it too hard.

I didn't mind the slower pace. My friends and I had trained for, and finished, a half-marathon together. It had been a great experience and maybe I'd do another one again someday. But for now, I enjoyed the simplicity of getting some exercise and spending time with my friends.

And the noted absence of the Bedazzled Bitches, a group of mean girls who used to run here too. We hadn't seen them since we'd kicked their asses at the half-marathon.

Thinking about that made me smile.

"Good job, ladies," Everly said, brushing a tendril of blond hair off her forehead. Her cheeks were a healthy shade of pink and her baby bump was the cutest thing ever.

"Agreed." Hazel adjusted her glasses. "That was quite invigorating."

"You know what would be really invigorating?" Nora asked. Her dark hair was in a thick, bouncy ponytail. "A man who can find my clit without

fumbling around for ten minutes.”

I laughed. “Date last night didn’t end as well as you’d hoped?”

“It was such a disappointment. And I thought he had so much potential.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” Everly said.

“At least he learned a little something,” Nora said. “The next girl will thank me.”

We took a few minutes to stretch next to our cars, then walked across the street to Brody’s and picked a table in the bar. It was quiet this time of day—past lunch but too early for the dinner rush. Jake, the cute bartender, recited our usual orders from memory, snapping his fingers when he remembered to change Everly’s drink from a martini to a lemonade.

Our food came out shortly thereafter—sensible salads for our health and dirty martinis because simple pleasures were healthy too. Except for Everly, of course, but she enjoyed her lemonade.

I felt my ponytail drooping, so I tugged on my curls to tighten it, debating whether to tell them about my evening with Cox. Had it been a date? A means of coaxing me into bed? A bit of both? I was flirting with danger, allowing a tiny spark of hope to burn inside me. Hope that maybe I’d judged Cox too harshly. That maybe, just maybe, he actually liked me for more than what I had under my dress.

The front door opened and I froze with my mouth open. My fork fell from now-useless fingers, clattering onto the table.

It was Cox.

What was he doing here?

Eying him as he sauntered toward our table, I stuck my fork back in my salad.

“Everything okay?” Everly asked.

“Oh boy,” Nora said, her lips curling in a smile. She’d spotted him. “This should be fun.”

All eyes swung to Cox.

He wore a dark shirt and jeans, looking just as sexy in casual clothes as he did in a suit. The stubble on his jaw cut through his sharp businessman air and hinted at something rougher.

With an easy smile, he stopped, his eyes sweeping over me and my friends. I could practically feel him sprinkling charm over our table like pixie dust. Even Nora’s eyes brightened a little.

“Afternoon, ladies,” he said in that smooth Southern drawl.

I opened my mouth to say something but couldn't quite get anything to come out. His sudden nearness and unfairly charming smile made my lady parts thrill.

Stay calm down there. He's not getting anywhere near you.

"Hi, I'm Everly." She smoothly filled the awkward silence with her usual friendliness. "This is Hazel, and Nora."

His eyes met mine. "Don't you want to introduce your husband?"

Spell broken. I shook my head a little. "This is Camden Cox and technically he's still my husband."

"Nice to meet all of you." He slid an extra chair over to our table and sat. "I suppose *technically your husband* is accurate, although we sure had a good time last night, didn't we, love bug?"

Three sets of curious eyes fixed on me.

"No, it wasn't... We didn't... It wasn't a date or anything."

"Sure it was." He reached over and lightly fingered a loose curl behind my ear. "Although you did slip away without a goodnight kiss. I'll have to be faster next time."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you. How was your run?"

"It was good."

"You look a little sweaty. Will you need any help peeling off your clothes?"

"Wow," Nora said. "Bold."

Everly raised her eyebrows. Hazel looked at me with clinical interest, like I was a subject in one of her psychology experiments.

"Can I see you outside?" I stood, grabbing his shirtsleeve, and tugged him behind me.

He followed me through the bar and out the front door without protest.

When we got outside, I whirled on him. "What are you doing?"

"Just having a little fun."

"I know things got heated earlier, but that wasn't an invitation to come barge in and say stuff like that in front of my friends."

"Sugar, I'm just playin' with you."

I blinked at him, a sad realization washing over me. He was just playing with me. That was exactly how it felt. Like I was a plaything. An amusement. Temporary.

I didn't want to be someone's toy.

“I need to get back to my friends.”

He leaned away and a flicker of surprise passed across his features. A second later it was gone, hidden by his well-practiced charm.

Holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender, he took a step back. “All right, sugar. I’ll see you later.”

I watched him turn and walk away, feeling slightly sick to my stomach. Was I being too harsh? Unfair? I’d dated the wrong guy before and it had brought me nothing but trouble. Big trouble that I was still digging myself out of. So was I being smart and protecting my heart from inevitable breakage?

I didn’t know.

COX

Sophie had my head spinning in about ten different directions. I was working from my home office today—or I was supposed to be. Mostly I was replaying everything that had happened over the weekend and picking it apart like a man obsessed.

This wasn't like me.

Why was she fucking with my head?

It was one thing to know what I wanted and to pursue it relentlessly. That was what I did. No, it was who I was. I worked hard. Hustled. Made things happen. I knew how to charm, enchant, captivate, and mesmerize to get what I wanted and meet my goals. That was why I'd met with so much success. Why my mama no longer lived in a single-wide trailer and the big logo in my office had my name on it.

But it was quite another to keep knocking on a door after it had been slammed in your face a couple of times. A real man knew that occasionally he had to take no for an answer, whether he wanted to or not.

Which was why I'd walked away from Sophie yesterday.

Despite what she seemed to think, I hadn't gone down to that bar because I thought her texts were an invitation. I knew I'd surprise her. I'd simply seen an opportunity and taken it. And really, how could I have resisted? I did want to peel the clothes off a sweaty Sophie.

But she hadn't taken to that suggestion the way I'd thought she would.

I clicked away from a website that sold zip-front sports bras. I needed to let that go. Sending her one would probably just make her mad.

And why the fuck did I care? Why was I sitting here agonizing over what

to do about her? I was putting a lot of mental energy into a girl I just wanted to fuck a few times.

Except, maybe—

Nope, that wasn't it. Feelings need not apply.

Althea came in, dressed in head-to-toe black, her hair in her usual bun.

“Here you are. Not coming into the office today?”

“Just trying to get caught up on some things.”

She pulled a chair up to my desk and sat. “Sorry to bother you, but you're going to want to hear this.”

“You have my attention.”

“I spoke with Drew Easton from Easton Development this morning. They're very interested in what we have going with Skyline.”

Easton Development wasn't exactly a competitor, but they did operate in the same space, doing large-scale commercial real estate development.

“Interested how?”

“They want to buy it.”

“No shit?”

With a self-satisfied smile, she pushed a piece of paper across my desk. “Yes. It's basically a no-brainer. This isn't official, just the terms we discussed over the phone.”

I scanned the bullet point list she'd drawn up.

“We should take it,” she said. “This is going to make you an obscene amount of money.”

My brow furrowed. It was going to make Althea an obscene amount of money, too. But if Easton bought us out now, our other investors weren't going to see nearly the return than if we completed the project as intended.

“Would this break the existing contracts with our investors?”

“I admit, we'd be walking a line, but not so close that we risk litigation.”

I met her eyes. “So we'd screw them over, but only a little, and not enough that they'll sue.”

She nodded. “Exactly.”

I tapped my fingers on my desk, mulling it over. Cox Development had a majority ownership in the project. It was my call. But this didn't sit right with me. Shepherd Calloway hadn't signed on so I could take his money and hand it back to him a few months later with a little bit on top for his trouble. He'd invested because he wanted to build something that had substance and value. True, if I sold now, I'd walk away with millions, but Calloway and my other

investors wouldn't.

"No." I pushed the paper back to her. "We're not selling."

"What?"

"If it was just us, I'd consider it. But our investors get the short end of the stick on this, and that's not how I want to do business."

"Who gives a shit? We'll make enough money on this deal that we won't need outside investors anymore."

"I happen to give a shit. They'll do better if we see this through to the end. A lot better."

"Does this have anything to do with your..." She trailed off.

"My wife?"

"I was trying to come up with a more accurate term, since your so-called marriage is a joke. But yes. Does this have anything to do with her?"

"Why would it?"

"I don't know. Because she works for Calloway. I'm just shocked you're not even willing to consider their offer."

"This is not about Sophie," I said. "This is our project and I want to see it through."

She paused, her face a stony mask. Was she going to argue with me? It could go either way with her.

As if she'd come to a decision, she picked up the paper and stood. "All right. It's your decision. I'll let Drew know. But for the record, I think this is a mistake."

"Duly noted."

Oliver came in carrying a silver tea tray. He and Althea cast each other quick glares.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said and swept out of my office.

"Pity she's not staying for tea." Oliver set the tray down and poured.

"Yeah, I'm sure you're all broken up about that." I took the teacup from him and grabbed a finger sandwich.

He sat in the chair Althea had vacated and swiped his phone screen. "Will you be in the office tomorrow?"

"I planned on it."

"Good. You have a one o'clock finance meeting and a two o'clock with marketing."

"Got it."

"And don't forget you have that dinner on Friday."

I opened my calendar to see what he was talking about. It was being hosted by Irene Prager and her husband—one of my remaining Skyline investors. Definitely couldn't miss that.

"Right. I'll be there." I sipped my tea.

"Is it on Sophie's calendar, or do you need me to call her?"

"Why would it need to be on Sophie's calendar?"

"Is that a serious question?"

"Sometimes I don't know why I put up with you."

"Because I can put up with *you*," he said. "Everyone else at that dinner will be there with their spouse. If you want to avoid awkward questions, you should bring her."

Leaning back in my chair, I groaned. "She's not exactly happy with me right now."

"Is the honeymoon over already? What'd you do?"

"Why do you assume it's my fault?"

He raised his eyebrows and brought his teacup to his lips.

"Fine. I made an error in judgment. She called me out on it."

"Good for her."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Sophie's, obviously."

"Fuckin' traitor."

"I said you didn't know what you were getting into."

I pressed the tips of my fingers together. "What makes you the expert on my Sophie? For a guy who's hardly spoken to her, you think you know her pretty well."

"I just know she's not like any woman you've dated since I've known you. And I don't think she's fooled by..." He paused and gestured to all of me. "All this."

"I'm not fooling anyone. I am who I am."

"She's not awed by you, then. You're used to women hanging off your arm, totally enamored with you. She's not."

He was right about that. Women usually loved me, and I didn't have to try very hard. Having money helped, but even when I'd been a poor kid driving a beat-up pickup truck, I'd never had trouble with the ladies.

Was that why this was bothering me so much? I didn't like striking out?

But Oliver had a point about this dinner party. I did need to bring Sophie. We were staying married so my investors didn't balk again. If I didn't bring

my wife, they'd wonder why. Best to avoid those questions for now.

"Do you want me to call her?" Oliver asked. "She's not mad at me."

That was a tempting solution. Oliver could probably sweet talk her into it. Take care of the problem for me.

But I didn't want to play it like that. It was up to me to talk to her.

"Nah. She's my wife. I'll call her."

He chuckled. "You like calling her that. Don't even pretend you don't."

I grunted noncommittally. "Get out of here. I don't want an audience if she shoots me down again."

"Fair enough." He put down his teacup and left so I could make the call.

I brought up her office number and hit send.

"Mr. Calloway's office. This is Sophie."

That sweet, cheerful voice washed over me, refreshing as a cool drink on a hot day. "Hey there, sugar."

"Oh. Hi, Cox."

"Listen, I'm sorry about crashing yesterday. It was out of line."

She paused for a second and I heard her intake of breath, like my apology surprised her.

Hell, it surprised me. I hadn't thought about what I'd say. It had just come out.

"Thanks. It's okay."

"All right. Good." A surprising surge of relief poured through me. "I was wondering if you'd come to a dinner party with me on Friday night."

"This Friday?"

"Yeah. One of my investors is hosting and, I'll just be up-front with you, it'll look a bit odd if I show up alone."

"Oh, I see. So you need me to pretend... Right, that makes sense." She paused again and I wondered if she was trying to come up with an excuse to say no. "Sure, I can come with you."

A smile stole over my face. "That's great, sugar. Thank you."

"What should I wear?"

"I suppose it'll be dressy, but not formal. I'll wear a tie, if that helps."

Wait, who the fuck was I? No cheeky remark about her panties, or lack thereof?

"Okay, perfect. What time?"

"I'll pick you up at seven."

"Got it on my calendar. See you then."

“Thanks again, sugar. I’ll see you Friday.”

I ended the call, feeling a hell of a lot better. We were good. And I’d see her Friday.

Although I sure did wish I’d be seeing her sooner.



AN HOUR into Irene’s dinner party, my cute little sugar bug had everyone under her spell.

I’d picked her up at seven o’clock sharp, and damn it was good to see her. Her blond curls were down around her shoulders and the skirt on her dark blue dress had a little swing to it. It kind of reminded me of the dress she’d been wearing when she’d climbed off that balcony and I’d seen...

Well, I’d seen everything.

It had been a little glimpse of heaven. But that wasn’t what tonight was about.

Her friendly smile instantly charmed Irene and her husband Gary. The fact that she almost tripped when we first walked in the door only made her more endearing. Or maybe it was the way she’d straightened and made a light joke out of it, rather than acting flustered or embarrassed. She had grit, my Sophie. I liked that.

Now we sat at the dinner table, chatting and telling stories. I couldn’t stop gazing at her. And it wasn’t because I had my eye on the prize—the prize being gettin’ it on later. I just liked the way she looked. The way she sounded. The way she smelled. The way she smiled.

“I have to admit, Cox, I was surprised when I heard you’d gotten married,” Gary said. “I didn’t think it would ever happen.”

I slung my arm over the back of Sophie’s chair. “Yeah, but can you blame me?”

Sophie laughed softly.

“I think you did it right,” Irene said. “A Vegas wedding would have been marvelous.”

Gary turned to his wife. “I thought you wanted the big wedding?”

“I did, and don’t get me wrong: It was beautiful. But wouldn’t it have been nice to skip all the family drama?”

“That would have been nice,” he said.

“A small wedding seems so pure,” she said. “There’s a simplicity to it. You can focus on what matters.”

“Honestly, it wasn’t what I pictured for my wedding,” Sophie said. “But I guess it was nice not to have to worry about dress fittings or table assignments or whether there would be more people sitting on the groom’s side than the bride’s and the whole thing would look horribly lopsided.”

I twirled one of her curls around my finger. I couldn’t help myself. “I don’t have a big family either, so I bet our sides would have been more or less even.”

“Oh. Well, still. Getting married in Vegas was fun.”

“Now that’s a fact,” I said. “We had a great time.”

Dinner went on, followed by dessert. Conversations wound down and eventually it was time to go. Sophie hugged both Irene and Gary at the door, and although she dropped her phone twice and got tangled in her purse strap, we made it out to my car in one piece.

She was quiet on the drive back to her building. I found a parking spot across the street but hesitated before getting out of the car.

“Thanks for coming tonight,” I said.

“You’re welcome.”

There was something in her voice—a hint of sadness.

“Is something wrong?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I was just thinking about what I said. I sort of lied earlier.”

“About what?”

“When we were talking about our Vegas wedding, I made it sound like I was happy about it.”

My brow furrowed in confusion. “I know you were just making conversation. Making it sound real.”

“Yeah. But it felt wrong to say it. I mean, the simplicity of it would have been a silver lining. Weddings are a lot of work. But I wouldn’t have wanted that for my real wedding. My dad wasn’t there, and neither were my friends. When I was talking, I kept thinking that I’d deal with dress fittings and table assignments and the fact that my side would be almost empty if it meant that they could be there on my special day.”

I stared at her, not quite sure what to say. There was a bit of hurt in her voice that made me want to gather her in my arms and make it all disappear. Hold her until she relaxed against me. Kiss the top of her head and whisper in

her ear that I'd give her the wedding she wanted. I'd do anything to make her happy.

Clearing my throat, I glanced away, reeling from the thoughts that had just blown through my mind.

Give her the wedding she wanted?

Do anything to make her happy?

Who the fuck was I?

I was about to say, *it's a good thing our Vegas wedding wasn't real, then.* But I stopped. Couldn't quite say it, although I wasn't sure why.

"Anyway, I guess it isn't that big of a deal," she said.

I reached out and wrapped one of her curls around my finger. It bounced when I let go. "Sugar, I'm sure that when you do have your special day, everyone you love will be there to celebrate with you."

She smiled. A big, bright, genuine smile that warmed the cold places in my soul.

Good job, Cox. That was the right thing to say.

I got out and opened her door for her, then walked her to the front door of her building.

She paused, pressing her lips together, and I wondered if I had another shot at a goodnight kiss.

"Cox, I need to ask you something."

Yes, I'll come upstairs and fuck you senseless. "Shoot."

"Will you come meet my dad?"

Meet her father? Well, holy shit.

Before I could get caught up in adding that to the list of things that were throwing me for a loop lately, I answered, "I'd be honored."

She nodded, a decisive up and down dip of her chin. "Good. How's tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow works for me. Should I pick you up?"

"Yeah, that would be nice. Around noon?"

"I can do that."

"Okay." She smiled again. "Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, sugar."

She went inside and the door swung shut behind her, once again leaving me standing at her building door, wondering what the hell had just happened.

COX

When I picked up Sophie at noon, she came out wearing a t-shirt and jeans. Her hair was up in a ponytail and I indulged in a brief fantasy of wrapping it around my hand and yanking on it—while I had her on her knees. Naked, of course.

“Hi,” she said, flashing me a cheerful smile. “Ready to meet my dad?”

I blinked away the vision. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

We got in my car and she gave me the address. Her dad lived on a quiet street with well-kept houses and neatly trimmed yards. I parked out front and went around to open the door for Sophie.

“Thank you,” she said as she got out. “We don’t have to pretend we’re really married, by the way. I’m going to tell him the whole story. Except the *you’re buying him a house* part. Don’t mention that yet. I need to work up to it.”

“Wait, he does know we got married, doesn’t he?”

Her eyes darted away. “No. I haven’t told him yet.”

“So I’m about to walk in there to meet your dad for the first time, and oh by the way, funny story, I accidentally married your daughter in Vegas. But don’t worry; we were shit-faced when it happened.”

“It’s not *your* fault. We were both there.”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure your daddy will see it that way.”

“I’ll explain it to him. He’ll understand.”

My eyebrows lifted. “You think so? The man you described as having the personality of *sandpaper* is going to understand?”

“Dad’s been trying to get me married off for ages. I bet he’ll be excited.”

“Is your dad a gun owner, Sophie?”

She just laughed and walked up to the front door.

I jogged a few steps to catch up. “Sugar, you didn’t answer my question.”

“No,” she said over her shoulder, her hand already in the air to knock. “And don’t worry. He’s not very fast. You can easily outrun him.”

“You’re not makin’ me feel better.”

She knocked but didn’t wait for an answer. She unlocked the door, opened it, and stuck her head in. “Dad? It’s me. Are you decent?” She glanced at me again. “One time my friends and I came over and he was in nothing but boxers. So now I like to make sure.”

The voice that answered was deep and rough as gravel. “Yeah. Come on in.”

Sophie led the way, giving me an encouraging nod. With a resigned breath, I followed her inside.

Her father was seated in a worn recliner. He looked up from his newspaper, a set of reading glasses perched on his nose. His deeply lined face gave him a weathered appearance, like he’d spent most of his life working outside. Gray stubble roughed up his skin and he wore a plaid flannel and jeans.

Surprisingly, he didn’t glare at me. In fact, his eyebrows lifted and the corners of his mouth twitched, like he was about to smile.

Interesting.

“Hi, princess.” His eyes flicked between the two of us. “This one looks good. Where’d you find him?”

She laughed. “Dad, this is Camden Cox. My dad, Melvin Abbott.”

“Mr. Abbott.” I reached out and shook his hand.

“Cox, huh?” He eyed me up and down. “What do you do?”

“I’m a developer. Mostly commercial real estate, but I have my hands in a few other ventures as well.”

“A suit,” he said, his jaw working like he was chewing the word and getting ready to spit it out. “You know how to fix a broken toilet?”

That was probably the most unexpected question he could have asked me, but I answered smoothly. “It’s been a while, but I could figure it out.”

“Dad, is your toilet broken?” Sophie asked.

“No.”

“Then why—”

“What about drywall? Can you patch a hole in a wall?”

“Sure.”

Sophie glanced around. “I don’t think you have any holes in your walls.”

“Can you change a tire?” Melvin asked. “Or are you one of those baby-men who’d call a service and wait helplessly on the side of the road?”

I cracked a smile. This guy was great. “I can change a tire. Learned how when I was ten.”

“Can you drive a stick?” He tossed the question at me like he was trying to find my weakness.

“Sir, I spent a lot of my childhood in rural Texas. By the time I was fourteen, I could drive a pickup, a tractor, my mom’s Nova, and my neighbor Mr. Hinkley’s full-size ’72 Ford truck. I can drive a stick.”

He nodded slowly, then took off his reading glasses and set them on the side table next to him. “All right, then.”

“Dad, what are you doing?”

“Just making sure.”

“Making sure of what?”

“That he can take care of you. Never know with these fuckin’ suits.”

Sophie sighed.

“Princess, can you hand me that notepad over there?” he asked.

“This one?” She picked up a yellow pad of paper and handed it to him.

He grabbed one of several pencils off his side table and decisively crossed something out, then set it down. “Won’t be needing that, I guess.”

“Oh, Dad. Please don’t tell me that was a phone number.”

“He works for the electric company. Climbs those poles and fixes shit. He was out here a couple of days ago and knocked on my door to say he had to cut the power for a little while.”

“You didn’t,” she said.

“Nice young man. Straight teeth. But if you’ve got this one—” He gestured toward me.

“I told you, no more,” she said, lowering her voice to almost a whisper.

“You know, you could have told me you were with someone already instead of that bullshit about taking a break. What were you worried about? He’s all right.”

Sophie’s palm hit her forehead, but I just stood by, watching with growing amusement.

“Now, if he can properly sink a fence post, you might as well get on with it and marry him now.”

“We got married already,” she blurted out, talking fast. “When we were in Vegas. Except it’s not what you think. We barely knew each other, and we were both really drunk, and we didn’t mean to. And obviously we can’t stay married, but we can’t get an annulment because it’s not that easy, which you’d think it was, because come on, a lot of people must get drunk-married in Vegas. I can’t be the only one to get myself into a mess like this. But no, we have to file for divorce, except we’re going to wait a little while so Cox doesn’t have to deal with bad PR.”

She stopped abruptly and took a deep breath.

Melvin blinked a few times. “The fuck you talkin’ about, Soph?”

I thought I’d help her out a little. “We got married in Las Vegas. It was surprisingly easy to convince the clerk at the marriage bureau that we were both of sound mind at the time.”

Sophie looked at me, but her eyes were unfocused. “That’s right. You said we’d already had some champagne, but I don’t think you told her about all the whiskey.”

“No, I don’t suppose I did.”

Something about her comment sparked my own recollection. Running down the hallway, hand in hand, yelling for the clerk to stay open for just a few more minutes. Making it just in time. Getting the tired clerk to crack a smile. Sophie hanging on my arm. It had probably looked like she was smitten with me, but I’d been the only thing keeping her on her feet.

“You did what to my daughter?” Melvin asked, all semblance of friendliness gone from his face.

“No, he didn’t *do* anything to me. We had too much to drink and ended up married. Because, you know, Vegas. But you don’t need to be angry with him. I don’t even think we slept together, although to be honest, I’m not totally sure. But even if we did, it’s fine, I know I didn’t get pregnant because I started my period this morning, right on time.”

My throat spasmed. Coughing, I turned to the side. She’d just blurted out a hell of a lot of information, especially in front of her father.

Wait. She didn’t know if we’d slept together? She didn’t remember, either?

Well, shit.

“Why the fuck did you marry my daughter if you didn’t even want to sleep with her?” Melvin asked.

“Dad!”

I almost coughed again but managed to keep my throat from closing. What the hell was I supposed to say to that? *Actually, sir, I'd love to fuck the shit out of your daughter in about a hundred different ways, but so far, she's turned me down.*

No.

"The fact that we got married was largely due to all the whiskey," I said. "But I take full responsibility for everything. And I'll do my best to make sure she gets out of the situation unscathed."

"You don't have to take responsibility," she said.

"No, it's all right. I do."

She sighed. "No, you don't. I think it was my idea first."

I whipped around to look at her. "What's that, now?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm the one who suggested we get married. It was right after Drake and Marika had their wedding. I have a vague memory of saying something like hey, we should get married and I'll be your wifey-poo."

Now that she said it, I did remember. But I had more pressing issues. Like the fact that her father looked like he was contemplating what to do with my body after he murdered me.

"Let me see if I have this fuckin' thing straight," Melvin said. "You two got married but it was just a big, drunken mistake?"

Sophie stood tall, hands clasped, and gave him a decisive nod. "Yes."

His face contorted into a smile and he broke into a fit of laughter, smacking his thigh while his shoulders shook. "Fuckin' hell, Soph. I don't even know why I'm surprised."

She laughed. "I know. Only me, right?"

I figured this meant we were all good, so I started laughing too. Until Melvin's eyes flew to my face, his smile quickly transforming into a dark glare. "You better make this right, Cox."

"Yes sir. I will."

"So the fellow from the electric company?" Melvin asked, picking up his notepad. "That still a no? I think I can make out his—"

"Still a no, Dad. But thanks anyway."

He glared at me again. "You better not keep her too long. I want my girl to have a chance at finding a man who's right for her."

Something about that made my jaw hitch. I wasn't right for her?

Why was I even thinking shit like that? Of course I wasn't right for her. I wasn't the marrying type.

“Understood,” I said with a nod.

Shaking his head, he let out a long sigh. “What am I going to do with you, princess?”

“I’ll be okay, Dad.”

“Yeah. You always are, God bless you.”

Sophie smiled at her dad, then at me. Goddamn, she was adorable.

The more I got to know her, the more I liked her. Hell, I liked her dad, too. She went to the kitchen to fix him a snack and I pulled out my phone to text my real estate agent. I wanted to make sure we found the right house for Mr. Melvin Abbott. He deserved it.

SOPHIE

Cox pulled up in front of a cute little ranch-style house on a quiet street. A *for sale* sign stood at the end of the driveway. The yard was tidy and the paint looked new. All in all, not bad. Could I see Dad living here? Possibly. It definitely had potential.

“No stairs,” Cox said. “Nice neighborhood. We’re two for two so far.”

“It’s definitely nice from the outside.”

“Let’s go have a look.”

Although it would probably be at least a couple more months until we filed for divorce, Cox had suggested we start looking for a house for my dad now. It seemed reasonable to me, so he’d lined up some showings for Saturday afternoon.

Cynthia Drummond, Cox’s real estate agent, had parked in front of us. She got out and we followed her up the short walk to the front door.

“It’s only a two bedroom, but the bathroom is very roomy,” Cynthia said as she unlocked the door and led us inside. “No stairs, of course. Fenced backyard, fresh paint inside and out. Overall, it’s quite charming.”

I took slow steps into the front room, taking in the feel of the place as much as the look. It was a nice day outside, but it seemed dim in here. Still, I wanted to give it a chance.

Cynthia left us to wander through the small house. Cox and I peeked into the bedrooms and the bathroom. The kitchen was small—cramped, even—but the breakfast nook was nice.

“What do you think?” Cox asked.

I hesitated, glancing around. I wasn’t getting a good vibe here. I didn’t

want to sound overly picky but I also didn't want my dad to end up somewhere he wouldn't like.

"The bathroom is nice. And the bedrooms are big enough."

"But?"

"I didn't say but."

"I can tell. There's a but."

"There's not much natural light. And the kitchen is tiny."

He gave me a decisive nod. "We can do better."

"I don't want to be a pain, but—"

"Say no more, sugar. We'll keep looking until we find the right place. Cynthia, let's move on to the next one."

She smiled. "Of course."

The next house didn't have a driveway and all the street parking for two blocks in either direction was taken. Cox nixed it on that alone before we even went inside, saying there had to be a reasonable place for me to park when I came to visit him. House number three was a contender, although I didn't get solid *Dad's future house* vibes. Still, it was nice.

We pulled up to the fourth, and final, house on Cynthia's list for the day. From the outside, it looked charming. It was tan with white trim and had a manageable small yard, plus a driveway that would easily fit two cars.

The inside was nice, with three bedrooms, one and a half baths, and a kitchen that was roomy for a house on the small side. Plenty of light. All in all, not a bad choice.

Cox raised his eyebrows at me.

"I like it."

"But do you love it?"

Putting my hands on my hips, I looked around again. "I don't know if I love it, but it definitely has potential."

Cynthia excused herself and went outside to take a phone call. I decided to wander through the house again. See if I could imagine Dad living here.

There was more space than he had now, considering he couldn't use his second story. And it was a lot bigger than my apartment.

I wondered what it would be like to walk into a house and know you could just buy it. And not even for yourself.

"What's going on in that pretty head of yours?" Cox asked.

"Nothing. I don't want to make it weird."

"Well, now I really need to know," he said with a grin.

“It’s just amazing to me that you can buy someone a house and it doesn’t seem like it’s a big deal. I’ve worked for Mr. Calloway long enough, I should be used to being around someone wealthy. But it’s still so foreign.”

He put his hands in his pockets and took a few steps deeper into the room. “Sometimes it’s still foreign to me, too.”

“Really?”

“I didn’t grow up with money. Most of my life, we were scraping along the bottom end of poor, just shy of destitute.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t have been living on Ashford Street back then if your family had been swimming in money.”

“No, indeed. And that was one of the nicer places we lived.”

I gazed at him. Ashford Street hadn’t been a very nice place. Small, tired houses with saggy porches and weeds in the yards. It had been a low point in my childhood. A time when Dad had been out of work for a while and things had been rough. He’d shielded me from the worst of that, never letting on how hard it was to make ends meet. But it hadn’t been the sort of neighborhood where people lived when they were thriving.

“You’ve come a long way since then.”

“That I have. On the day I turned eighteen, I vowed to my mama that I’d make something of myself so I could take care of her. And that’s exactly what I did.”

There was something in his voice when he talked about his mom. A hint of affection—of real emotion. It felt like getting a peek at the man behind the bravado.

“So it wasn’t all about driving fancy cars?” I teased.

He grinned. “No, the fancy cars are just a bonus.”

“Well, this house is definitely a good option. What’s our next step?”

“I say we keep looking but keep this one in mind.”

“Sounds good.”

We went outside and Cynthia locked up. Cox spoke with her for a few minutes, then she said goodbye and left.

I started toward Cox’s car, but my toe snagged on something—or maybe it was nothing—and I pitched forward. In an attempt to keep myself from falling flat on my face, I grabbed for Cox’s arm, right as he reached out to help steady me. Which meant his arm wasn’t where I’d thought it would be.

I missed, then overcorrected on the way down, smacking him in the face with the back of my hand. My knees hit the ground first, then my left elbow,

scraping across the concrete.

My chin hit last. Scrape.

Normally if I fell, I was quick to reassure any bystanders that I was fine and I'd jump to my feet. This time, I stayed facedown on the pavement, wincing at all the places that stung.

Before I could take another breath, Cox was crouching next to me. "Sugar, are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, although I didn't really mean it. My elbow hurt and I had a feeling I'd scraped my chin, which was going to show. "I'm not injured."

"Like hell you're not." He gently helped me up, then took my hand and led me to his car. "Let me see."

He opened the passenger door and I gingerly lowered myself onto the seat, still facing him. He crouched down again so he was eye level and brushed my hair back, tucking it behind my ear.

"Did I hit you?" I asked.

"You got me on the way down, but I'm fine." He touched my chin and tilted my face. "Oh, honey."

"Is it bleeding?"

"Not here." He checked my right arm—it was okay—then my left. "This elbow's a bit scraped up, but you're not bleeding. Where else does it hurt?"

I glanced down at my legs. There was a rip in my jeans that hadn't been there before. "I think I scraped my knees a little."

He carefully peeked under the torn fabric. "I don't see any blood here, either."

Despite myself, a few tears beaded at the corner of my eyes and broke free to run down my cheeks. I felt so stupid. Who still scraped up their elbows and knees—and freaking chin—when they were in their thirties? Dad had always told me I'd grow out of my clumsiness, but I never had.

Cox swiped the tears away with his thumb. His expression was sympathetic, but not pitying. Almost tender. He took my arm and leaned in to kiss my elbow, just above the scrape. "Better?"

I nodded. He was awfully cute when he did that.

He kissed it again and the feel of his lips on my skin overpowered the sting. His eyes met mine as he turned my arm over and placed a soft kiss on the inside of my elbow. Then another on the inside of my wrist.

The sudden urge to run my fingers through his hair made my fingers twitch.

He leaned closer and touched my jaw again. My breath caught in my throat. He was so close, I could smell his cologne. The scent triggered a memory of his arms wrapped around me, my face buried in his neck. Something from Vegas? Probably, but I couldn't place it in time. It was more of a feeling than a concrete memory.

The feeling of being in his arms.

His lips touched my chin, slightly to the left of where I'd hurt myself. Then he tilted my face and kissed me again on the other side. Gently, ever so gently. Just a soft brush of his lips against my skin.

"Better?" he asked again, his voice quiet, his eyes on mine.

"Yes, thanks. I'm okay. It's mostly my pride."

One corner of his mouth lifted in a grin and he cupped my chin. His lips touched mine in a kiss that was firm but rather chaste. Like he was planning to plant a quick one on me, hardly a kiss at all.

Except once he was there, he didn't pull away. His mouth softened and he tilted his head. I felt his deep intake of breath, like he was filling his lungs with me, and his fingers gently trailed through my hair.

My eyes were shut, although I didn't remember closing them, and the tension melted from my back and shoulders. The sting of my scrapes forgotten, all I could feel were Cox's lips on mine. His mouth moving, caressing. The slow sweep of his tongue. His hand resting on my thigh, his grip tightening.

I parted my lips and his tongue brushed mine. Tingles raced down my spine and my insides turned to liquid. He was dangerously good at this. Warmth bloomed between my legs as he took the kiss deeper, delving his tongue into my mouth.

This wasn't kissing it better. This was just kissing.

Deep, passionate kissing.

And god it felt good.

We slowly separated and my eyes fluttered open. I was dazed—dizzy, even. It was a good thing I wasn't standing because I probably would have fallen on my face again.

Cox licked his lips and something about the way he did that, like he was savoring the taste of me, was the hottest thing I'd ever seen.

"Better?" he asked.

All I could do was nod slowly. I'd been struck stupid by Cox's kiss.

The corner of his mouth lifted again and he regarded me for a few

seconds, like maybe he was trying to decide what to do next. Although he was so hard to read, I couldn't be sure.

"Goddamn, sugar, I wish I could remember more of what happened in Vegas. Because I tell you, I feel like I kissed you and it was something special."

It was my turn to lick my lips. I could still feel his—feel our mouths tangling. Memories from Vegas mixed with his kiss today, but I knew he was right. He had kissed me like that in Vegas, and it had been something special.

Something amazing.

"I think you did. And it was."

"Then I'm glad I got to do it again. Sober, this time."

I couldn't help but smile. "Me too."

He fingered one of my curls. "Do you feel up to getting something to eat?"

"How bad does my chin look?"

He didn't even have to answer. I could tell by the slight wince he tried to hide that it was obvious I'd fallen on my face. Literally. "It's... not too bad."

I twisted in my seat and flipped down the visor to check in the mirror. Yep, there was a distinct red scrape right on the tip of my chin. The kind of thing you'd see on a three-year-old on the playground. I groaned.

"You know what? I have an idea." He shut my door, then went around to the driver's side and got in.

"What's your idea?"

He pulled out his phone and started typing, then glanced at me with a wink. "You'll see."

You'll see? I wasn't sure what Cox had in store, but despite my stinging chin, I was excited to find out.

SOPHIE

Cox finished texting and put down his phone, then started the car and pulled out onto the street. “We’ll take the scenic route to give Oliver a little time.”

“Time for what?”

He didn’t answer. Just grinned at me.

“Wait, it’s a Saturday. You’re making poor Oliver work on a weekend?”

“I take *very* good care of him. He doesn’t mind.”

That seemed to be a theme with Cox. He’d wanted to make something of himself so he could take care of his mother. J.J. the limo driver had said Cox paid so well, he didn’t mind waiting there all night. And it seemed he generously compensated his assistant, too. It was certainly an admirable quality.

Chewing on the inside of my lip, I peeked at him from the corner of my eye. Childhood pigtail pulling aside, I was starting to like him. Really like him.

And that worried me. I didn’t want to get sucked into something I’d regret later.

Although maybe it was already too late.

We drove around for a little while, eventually winding up downtown, at Cox’s building.

“We’re going to your office?” I asked.

“Not exactly. Trust me.”

He parked in the garage and we took the elevator to his floor. Oliver was waiting in the lobby with a big bundle in his arms and two large brown bags

on the floor at his feet.

“Good man,” Cox said as he stepped off the elevator.

I followed him out and smiled. “Hi, Oliver.”

“Pleasure to see you, darling.” He handed Cox the bundle. “I got everything you said you needed. Utensils are at the bottom.”

“Excellent.”

“Can I help with anything?” I asked.

Cox picked up one of the brown bags by the handles. “Why don’t you grab the other one?”

Oliver handed me the bag. Something smelled delicious.

“Need anything else?” Oliver asked.

“No, I think we’re set,” Cox said. “I’ll let you go get ready for your date with the tea shop girl.”

Oliver’s smile melted into a scowl. “You’re a wanker. You know that, right?”

“You still haven’t asked her? I thought she was destined to be your wife.”

“Who’s destined to be your wife?” I asked.

“She’s a girl who works in a tea shop, and I don’t know her name, and Cox needs to shut up about it.”

“He needs to get over himself and ask her out,” Cox said. “But what do I know; I’m just a married man.”

I laughed.

Oliver glared at him. “I’m leaving now.”

“Bye Oliver,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Have a lovely evening, Sophie.”

I followed Cox back into the elevator, grateful Oliver hadn’t mentioned the scrape on my chin. We went up a few more floors, to the top, and the doors opened into a hallway. Where were we going?

“Stairs are over here.” He nodded to the right.

“Stairs?”

“To the roof.”

Oh my god. We were going to have dinner on the roof of his building so I didn’t have to go into a restaurant and feel self-conscious about my chin.

Oh man. This was so adorable, it made my insides all melty again.

I was in so much trouble.

We went up a set of stairs that said *roof access*, then through a thick door, and finally emerged into the evening air.

The lights of the city sparkled in every direction. Skyscrapers, streetlights, construction cranes. The hum of traffic drifted up, sounding faded and far away.

“If I’d had a little more time, I would have gotten us a table and chairs up here,” Cox said. “We’ll have to make do with a picnic.”

“A picnic is great.”

The roof itself was flat with a half-wall around the perimeter that made it feel safe. Vents and mechanical equipment were scattered around. Cox chose an open area not far from the stairwell and set his bundle down.

I helped him spread out a large blanket. Then we set up our dinner picnic.

There was more food than the two of us could possibly eat, but Cox said he had wanted to make sure there would be something I’d like, so he’d had Oliver order a variety. Grilled shrimp with pasta and lemon butter. Baked meatballs with marinara and mozzarella. Chicken with roasted vegetables. And a beef tenderloin with potatoes and asparagus.

Oliver had also packed plates, utensils, napkins, stemless wine glasses, and two bottles of wine—a Pino noir and a chardonnay.

We settled in with our food. I chose the shrimp—it was one of my favorites. Cox opted for the steak.

“How’s your dinner?” he asked.

“It’s amazing. This is really nice. Thank you.”

“No problem, sugar. I figured this way you can just enjoy your meal and not worry about whether anyone notices your chin. Which really doesn’t look that bad, by the way. I can hardly tell.”

“That’s because it’s dark.”

“Maybe. But it’ll heal in no time.”

I touched my chin, but it wasn’t the scrape I was thinking about. It was Cox’s lips on my skin. A little flutter made me shiver.

“Too cold?” he asked, already taking off his jacket.

I started to say I was fine, but he didn’t wait for me to answer. Just draped his jacket around my shoulders.

“There.”

“Thanks.”

He really needed to stop being so sweet. I was in enough trouble as it was.

“Sugar, I think we need to get something out in the open.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Okay?”

“Neither of us remember everything that happened in Vegas, obviously. But there’s one particular thing I keep wrestling with. Did we...”

“Consummate our marriage?”

He grinned, probably at my choice of words. “I gotta be honest with you. It’s killing me that I don’t remember.”

That made two of us. Maybe I was a little old-fashioned, but sex meant something to me. I didn’t like the idea that I might have slept with someone and that experience was just... gone.

“It’s been bugging me too. But I don’t remember most of what happened in your hotel room.”

“It wasn’t my room.”

“Wait, what?”

“Well, it was in the sense that I paid for it. But it wasn’t my original room. I was staying at the Four Seasons.”

My mouth dropped open. “So you woke up in a strange hotel room too?”

“I sure did.”

I laughed. “Oh my god. I assumed that was where you were staying. I wonder what made us decide to get a different hotel room when we both already had one?”

“It probably had something to do with it being a honeymoon suite.”

“Was it?”

He nodded. “You didn’t notice the white balloons?”

“No, I think I was too distracted by the stripper pole. And the fact that I couldn’t find my bra.”

“We were both a bit disoriented.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“I gotta tell you, it took me by surprise when you blurted everything out to your dad the way you did last weekend. And the thing about your um... period.”

I took a sip of my wine. “In case you hadn’t noticed, my dad’s very blunt. As he would say, he doesn’t have any patience for bullshit. He raised me on his own, so he had to take care of all the girly stuff. And he did it without acting embarrassed or anything.”

“He strikes me as a very pragmatic man.”

“Yeah, he is. He was always very open about everything. Puberty, sex, whatever. He’d buy me tampons without blinking an eye, and always bought me chocolate to go with them.”

“You said he has trouble walking. What happened to him?”

“Mostly a lifetime of hard work. He’s the type who would work through anything to get a job done, even if he shouldn’t. So sometimes he worked when he was hurt or went back too soon after an injury. He was just trying to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table. But he’s paying for it now.”

“I have a great deal of respect for a man who sacrifices like that to take care of his family.”

“Me too.”

“What does he do for fun?”

I took another bite of shrimp, pondering his question. “Now? He does crossword puzzles constantly. And he loves to watch sports. It doesn’t matter what it is; if it’s competitive, he’ll watch. But when I was little, I think his favorite thing to do was go fishing.”

“Fishing would have been my first guess. He looks like a fisherman.”

“I don’t think he went very often. He worked too much. But I do remember staying with a neighbor sometimes so Dad could go fishing for the day.”

Cox nodded slowly, like he was taking that in.

“What about your mom?” I asked. “What’s she like?”

“A bit like your dad in some ways. She didn’t have an easy life. Had to work herself to the bone to provide for her son.”

“But now you take care of her?”

“I sure do.”

I smiled. “It’s nice that you can do that for her. What does she like to do for fun?”

“She plays golf.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Every chance she gets. I bought her a house on a golf course and you’d have thought it was a castle in a fairytale, she got so excited. Now she putters around everywhere in her golf cart. She even takes it to the store and her weekly trip to the beauty salon.”

“That’s really cute.”

I thought about asking if I could meet her. But... should I expect to meet his mom? I’d introduced him to my dad, but that was different. Although my dad didn’t know it yet, he had a part to play in this whole Vegas marriage thing. I wanted him to get to know Cox a little bit before I sprang the news on him that Cox was buying him a new house. But there wasn’t a real reason for

me to meet Cox's mother. It wasn't like this marriage was real. In a few months, I'd just be a mistake he'd made after too much whiskey.

That was a depressing thought.

"If you're finished with your dinner, I had Oliver get us something else."

I pushed the icky feeling aside. "Oh yeah?"

He opened the last box, revealing one of my favorite desserts.

I gasped. "Creme brûlée."

Smiling, he handed me a spoon.

We finished our rooftop picnic with the decadent dessert, then packed everything up again and brought it back to his office. We split up the uneaten food so it wouldn't go to waste and left the blanket and dishes there. He said he'd take care of them later. With leftovers in hand, I followed him back to his car.

My heart skipped on the drive to my apartment. I'd had such a nice time with him. And that kiss. And the rooftop picnic. I was feeling very swoony, my resolve to protect my heart crumbling fast.

Maybe I could risk it. Maybe Cox and I could be... more.

What would I do if he asked me to come to his place again? Would I say yes?

A part of me wanted to. Badly. I could still feel the soft pressure of his lips. The decadent glide of his tongue against mine. Had I ever been kissed like that? Not that I could remember.

But a little voice jumped up and down, trying to get my attention.

How could he ever love you, Sophie? You'll just make a mess.

A few more turns and I could tell we were heading for my apartment. And he hadn't asked me to come to his place.

Which was probably for the best. Because, really, how could a man like Cox ever love a hot mess like me? And if he couldn't ever love me, but he still wanted me, it would be exactly what I was trying to avoid. I'd be a brief distraction. A blip in his smooth, sophisticated life.

A plaything. Temporary.

I didn't want to be somebody's tonight. Not even his. I wanted to be someone's tomorrow.

So when he pulled up outside my building, I wasn't too disappointed. Even though I'd embarrassingly scraped my chin, it had been a great day. And it felt like I'd seen a different side of Cox. Maybe a bit more of the real man, the one behind the bravado.

Which, okay, only made me like him more.

“Hang on, I’ll walk you up,” he said.

He got out and I wondered if I should ask him to come inside, although my apartment was tiny and unimpressive. I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to see it.

He opened the door and helped me out, casting wary glances up and down the street. As we walked up to the front, I second-guessed myself. Maybe I’d been reading him all wrong. Maybe when he’d said he was just playing with me, he’d meant he was kidding. That he didn’t really want to peel off my sweaty clothes or do any of the things he’d texted that day. Maybe I’d been misreading him completely.

But that kiss.

Feeling suddenly flustered, I fumbled for my keys and lost my grip on my purse. Cox grabbed it almost before it left my hands.

“Got it?”

“Yeah. I’ve got it. Thanks.” I finally fished out my keys. “I had a nice time today.”

“So did I. I’ll have Cynthia hunt down some more houses for us to check out.”

Right. Houses. Back to business. “That sounds great.”

“All right, sugar. Have a good night.”

My eyes were downcast. I couldn’t make myself look up. I was too afraid of what I’d see. Would it be friendliness? Or heat?

And which did I want it to be?

I didn’t know. Or I did, and I was too chicken to admit it. And the thought of Cox walking into my crappy apartment, when he lived in a lakefront mansion, was suddenly a very overwhelming thought.

So I unlocked the door and went inside.

Damn it.

I went down the hallway and up the stairs to the third floor in a haze of confusion. Why was I so upset? Even if I did want something to happen with Cox, it wasn’t like tonight was my only chance. We’d still see each other, even if it was just to do more house hunting for my dad.

But I was unsettled. Uncertain.

And so distracted, I was in my apartment before it registered that the door had been unlocked.

Uh-oh.

I stopped in my tracks without shutting the door behind me, my heart suddenly pounding. Had I left the door unlocked all day? Although I tended to blunder through life, I was so careful about locking doors. This wasn't exactly the best neighborhood.

And then I heard something in the bedroom. Through the partially open door, a shadow moved.

Someone was in my apartment.

COX

Fuck. I should have kissed her.

Why hadn't I kissed her? I could have. I knew I could have. And regardless of whether it had turned into a *let's go upstairs* kiss or a *goodnight and see you soon* kiss, I should have done it.

Fuck.

I went back to my car and got in. Hit the steering wheel. I was out of my depth here. Flying blind. I hadn't spent the day trying to woo Sophie into bed with me. I hadn't spent the day trying to do anything specific, other than look at houses for her dad. The rest had just... happened. Even the rooftop picnic hadn't been an attempt at getting in her pants, although it had been romantic as fuck. Had to give myself a little credit for that idea.

The lack of a clear objective made it hard to know what to do. I hadn't meant to kiss her outside that house, but I had, and holy fuck it had felt good. Then I hadn't tried to use the kiss as a way to suggest sex. Which was decidedly unlike me. But there was something about Sophie that was messing with my head. Messing with my mojo.

Shit.

Something on the passenger side floor caught my eye. Her leftovers. She'd forgotten to take them with her.

Maybe I had another shot. I could at least give her that goodnight kiss I seemed to want so badly.

Why my blood was running hot over the thought of just kissing a woman, I had no idea, but I wasn't going to waste more time on that line of thinking. I grabbed the bag and went back to her building.

The front door was locked. There was a call button, but before I could press it, someone came out. They paused and held the door for me.

“Thanks,” I said with a tip of my head.

I didn’t see an elevator, but there were stairs at the end of a narrow hallway.

The third floor hall was empty. A slight musty smell hung in the air and the carpet was faded almost beyond recognition.

I heard a muffled crash, followed by the start of a woman’s scream. The sound abruptly cut off, but adrenaline burst through my veins.

Sophie.

Another crash. *Damn it, sugar, you didn’t trip over your own furniture, did you?* I raced to apartment 311, and the door was slightly ajar. I pushed it open. Sophie hadn’t tripped. She stood like she was frozen, her back to the door, her hand covering her mouth.

Oh shit.

“Where are you?” a man’s voice bellowed from her bedroom. “Brenda? Where the fuck are you?”

I dropped the bag of leftovers and rushed to get in front of Sophie. I was about to back her out the door into the hall when the man barreled out of the room.

“Brenda, I know you’re here. Where is he? I’ll kill that motherfucker.”

His beard was streaked with gray and a beer gut strained his shirt. He was stocky and wide and seriously pissed off. Bloodshot eyes locked on me and his hands clenched into fists.

“You!”

Keeping Sophie behind me, I held my hands up. “Whoa, man. You’re in the wrong place.”

“Where is she?” he yelled. “Where’s Brenda? I know she’s here.”

“She’s not here. You have the wrong apartment.”

His head swung around in an exaggerated arc. The guy was drunk off his ass. “Brenda!”

“Buddy, she’s not here,” I said, keeping my voice calm and even.

“Is it you? Are you the one fucking my wife?”

I kept my hands up. “No, my friend. This isn’t my apartment. Look around. A man doesn’t live here.”

He looked around again. Sophie stayed behind me, her hands resting on my back.

“I live here,” she said, peeking around me. “My name’s Sophie and this is my apartment. And I’m definitely not sleeping with your wife.”

For some reason, that seemed to make him angrier. He roared and pushed over a bookshelf, sending the contents toppling to the floor.

Sophie let out a little shriek and ducked behind me again.

Fuck this guy.

My hand already clenching into a fist, I marched right up to him and hit him square in the face. Hard.

Pain exploded across my knuckles, but I didn’t give two shits. His head swiveled wildly and he flailed his arms to keep his balance. I grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him against the wall.

“Maybe your wife ain’t home because you’re a belligerent drunk asshole. Sober the fuck up. And if you get anywhere near my girl again, I’ll beat the living shit out of you. Got it?”

His cloudy eyes seemed to focus for the first time and he blinked at me. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, oh shit. You’re lucky I don’t knock your ass out for fuckin’ up my girl’s apartment.”

He sagged back against the wall, almost going limp. I let go.

A middle-aged man in a sweater and slacks appeared in the doorway with a cop at his side. “Miss Abbott? We heard a disturbance. Is everything—”

He stopped, taking in the scene.

“He broke into my apartment,” Sophie said, pointing at the drunk guy. “I think he’s intoxicated and looking for his wife. Obviously she’s not here.” She gestured toward me. “He’s with me.”

“Let’s go, buddy.” The cop came in and grabbed the drunk guy, then turned to Sophie. “I’ll get him out of here, then I’ll need to come back to get your contact information.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Fucking Brenda,” the guy muttered as the cop led him out.

“Are you okay, Miss Abbott?” the other man asked.

“Yeah, thanks, Mr. Miller. He didn’t hurt me.”

He inspected the cracked wood on the door frame. Looked like the guy had kicked the door in. “I’ll get Ed up here to fix this. Do you want any help with the mess?”

She glanced around and the forlorn look on her face cut through all the adrenaline. Tugged at something in my chest.

“I’ve got her,” I said. “Thanks for your help.”

Mr. Miller—seemed like he was the manager—nodded and left.

The door was still open and a woman peeked out from the apartment across the hall. Something about the guilty look on her face caught my attention. She glanced up and down the hallway, then turned and whispered to someone behind her. I could have sworn she said, *I think he’s gone*.

She stepped into the hall, smoothed down her hair, and straightened her skintight dress. Her eyes darted toward Sophie’s open door, but she looked away quickly, then hurried in the opposite direction.

“I think I just saw Brenda,” I said.

Sophie put her hands on her hips. “Damn it, Brian. That’s the second time an angry husband has come up here looking for his wife. Apparently my jerk neighbor has a thing for married women.”

I wasn’t worried about Brian, or Brenda, or the drunk asshole. I was worried about Sophie. I stepped in close and slid my hands around her waist. “Sugar, are you okay?”

“I think so.” Her gaze darted to the side and her eyes widened. “Oh no.”

“What is it?”

She slipped out of my grasp and crouched next to the overturned shelf. “Oh no, please no.”

“What are you looking for?”

Kneeling on the floor, she picked up something and choked out a little sob. It looked like an old music box. The dark wood was faded and dull, but I had a feeling the lid hadn’t been broken before it had hit the floor. She dug through the mess and pulled out a small metal handle.

“This was my mom’s.”

I crouched next to her and gently rubbed her back. A fury of emotions whipped through me like a tornado, mostly anger at the dumbfuck who’d done this. “Oh, honey.”

She sniffed and swiped beneath her eyes, then stood, still holding the broken music box and handle. I wanted to gather her in my arms and do anything to make her feel better, but the cop came back to get her contact information. He asked her a couple of questions—the whole thing was pretty straightforward—and said he’d be in touch if they needed anything else.

“I don’t even want to look in the bedroom,” she said after the cop left.

“Let’s not,” I said. “Leave it for now and come stay at my place tonight.”

I didn’t phrase it as a question because it wasn’t one. There was no way

she was staying here tonight—or maybe ever, but I’d cross that bridge later. Even if I had to get her a hotel, I was making sure she was safe in a place other than this fucking apartment.

But I really wanted her to come home with me.

I brushed her curls away from her face. “Or if you’d rather, I can get you a hotel room.”

“No. I don’t think I want to be alone tonight.” She clutched the music box to her chest and glanced around again.

“Don’t worry about all this right now.”

“Oh Cox, your hand.” She lifted my right hand and stroked my fingers with her thumb. My knuckles were red and a little swollen. “Is it broken?”

I flexed my fingers and made a fist. It hurt, but not much. “Nah. Just a little bruised. I only wish I’d hit him twice.”

She took my hand again and brought it to her lips, then pressed feather-light kisses along my knuckles. Her eyes lifted to meet mine. “Better?”

My heart did a strange skip, making it hard to take my next breath. “Yeah, sugar. All better.”

Mr. Miller came back with the maintenance guy and said he’d lock up when they finished. Sophie carried the music box with her, and I picked up the bag of leftover food so it wouldn’t be yet another thing to clean up later. Then I led her downstairs to my car.

We were both quiet on the way to my place. I couldn’t stop thinking about what would have happened to her if I hadn’t gone up there. Would that crazy asshole have hurt her? Would that Mr. Miller guy and the cop have gotten there in time to protect her?

Who would she have called first when it was over?

Probably not me. She had her dad, and her friends.

That didn’t sit well with me, and I wasn’t sure why. I was attracted to Sophie—had been since the first time I saw her. From the get-go, I had every intention of coaxing her into bed with me. Giving her a night—or a few—that she’d never forget.

But that was it. That was what I was to women. The only serious relationship I had room for in my life was being a son to my mom. I liked being a bachelor. Liked my freedom. The fact that I’d actually gotten married, even when drunk, was so out of character, it was funny. A joke.

It wasn’t real.

But there was some very real shit happening inside me right now and I

wasn't sure if I was equipped to handle it.

Maybe I was just coming down off the adrenaline.

When we got to my house, I parked in the garage and led Sophie inside. Thankfully no one was here. No Althea waiting to discuss something that could wait until Monday, and Oliver didn't have a reason to come over tonight.

I took the music box and gently placed it on the kitchen counter. "I'm sure we can find someone to fix it."

"I hope so. It means a lot to me."

"Of course it does." I touched her hair again—that beautiful, soft hair. "Can I get you anything? A drink?"

"No, but thank you. I feel..." She trailed off and her shoulders drooped. "Weirdly exhausted."

"Okay. Guest room's this way."

She nodded and followed me to the guest room. It was just down the hall from mine, and I wrestled with whether to invite her to my bed tonight. Hell, even just to sleep next to me so she wouldn't be alone. But she'd just been through a scare. I knew when to press my advantage and when it would be a dick move to do so.

Now would have been a dick move.

"It has its own bathroom through there," I said, gesturing into the room.

Sophie took slow steps in. "This is great. Thank you."

"Let me get you something to sleep in." I left her there and ducked into my room to get a clean t-shirt, then brought it to her.

"This will be perfect," she said, taking it from me. "Thanks again."

"Of course. You need anything, just let me know."

"Okay." She clutched the shirt to her chest. "Goodnight, Cox."

"Night, sugar. Get some rest."

Although every molecule in my body raged in protest, I left and shut the door behind me.

Standing just outside her door, I ran my hands through my hair. There was no way I was going to be able to sleep tonight.

COX

I stared at the ceiling, annoyed. It was fucking late. I just wanted to sleep.

I'd stayed up for a while after Sophie turned in. Nursed a glass of whiskey and tried to make sense of everything. I hadn't come to any conclusions, other than the thought of Sophie sprawled out in bed wearing nothing but my t-shirt was enough to give me a very persistent hard-on.

It was like when we were kids and the sight of those blond curls had revved me up in ways I hadn't been able to understand. Or cope with.

Now I was wide awake in bed with an aching cock and the object of my fantasies—from then and now—was one room away. Sound asleep, no doubt, but still. She was there. And her presence haunted me.

Fuck this.

My hand hurt from punching that guy in the jaw, but not so much that I couldn't take care of business. I ripped the covers off and took a deep breath.

Then I grabbed my very stiff erection and went to work.

I kept my eyes on the ceiling, but that wasn't what I saw. No. Curly blond hair. Luscious curves. Smooth skin. What would I do to that girl if she were here right now?

Anything she wanted.

My hand moved up and down my hard length. This wouldn't take long. Sophie on top of me, straddling my hips. She'd sink down onto my cock and I'd watch while she rode me. While her tits bounced, her hips rolled, and her hair cascaded around her shoulders. I'd caress those curves, thrusting up into her, sliding through her wetness.

Fuck. I stroked faster. God, I wanted her. I wanted her so bad I could already taste her. Swallowing a groan, I licked my lips, imagining her taste. Licking her until she begged me to stop. Then climbing on top of her and—

My door creaked and a small shaft of light broke through the darkness.

Sophie stood in my doorway, dressed in nothing but my t-shirt, her nipples poking against the thin fabric.

And here I was with my dick in my hand, about a minute away from coming.

Well, shit.

She took it all in—every bit of me, from my eyes to my hand wrapped around my erection. It was dark, but not that dark. She could see exactly what I'd been doing.

Your move, sugar.

I figured she'd blurt out an apology and probably trip over her own feet trying to get back to the guest room. But she didn't.

Her eyes lingered on my cock, then moved up to meet mine. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," I said, my voice rough. Not sure where this was going, I kept hold of my cock.

Licking her lips, she looked at it again, then took slow steps into the room. "I can't sleep."

"Me neither."

"I probably shouldn't be in here."

"Yes, you should."

Her eyebrows lifted, her expression hopeful. "Yeah?"

"Sugar, I was about to make myself come just thinkin' about you." Giving myself a slow stroke up and down, I let out a groan. No more holding back now. It was game on. "Now take those fuckin' panties off."

Her lips twitched in a smile. "I'm not wearing any."

"Holy fuck. Get your ass over here." I grabbed her wrist and yanked her closer. She got on the bed and I pulled her on top of me, her legs straddling my midsection. "How about you climb on up here and give me a taste?"

I loved the glint of excitement in her eyes. She wanted this.

"Really?"

"Hell yes."

Bracing herself with her hands on either side of my head, she shifted her legs. I slid my hand between them, indulging in a few soft strokes. Her breath

hitched and she paused while I touched her.

“Goddamn, sugar, I love this pussy already.”

I coated my fingers with her wetness, then reached down to rub it on my erection. She climbed up my body, settling with her knees on either side of my head, her hands on the headboard.

Grabbing two handfuls of her luscious ass, I pulled her down so I could go to work with my tongue.

She was tense at first, her thighs tight, body rigid. Leave that to Cox. A few long, slow licks up her slit and she started to relax.

“I’m worried you won’t be able to breathe,” she said suddenly. “I’m not small.”

Looking up—this view was fucking amazing, by the way—I met her eyes. “Don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll breathe after you come.”

With a shudder, she exhaled. I licked her again, slowly savoring her. She tasted fucking amazing—better than I’d imagined. Better than I *could have* imagined.

Lick by lick, stroke by stroke, she melted for me. Moved her hips while I lavished her clit with attention. Slid my tongue in and out, teasing her. Tasting her. Enjoying her.

She moaned, leaning her head back, her hands gripping the headboard. With one hand, I kept hold of her ass and reached around with the other to grab my hard length.

Rubbing my dick while I licked her pussy was unbelievable. I growled, my tongue relentless, and stroked myself, getting the friction and pressure I needed. I wasn’t going to let myself come—not yet—but damn, this felt fucking good.

Her moans turned into frenzied whimpers and her hips jerked against my mouth. “Oh my god, Cox.”

I didn’t let up, licking and sucking in a rhythm that drove her crazy. Goddamn, I wanted to come. My dick was hard as steel, tension building fast. I stroked harder and licked her faster, reveling in the feeling of her letting go. Losing her inhibitions with me.

With a deliciously satisfying moan, she threw her head back as her pussy convulsed. I squeezed her ass and licked her clit while she came, letting her set the pace. Enjoying the way her taste intensified.

It made me want to fuck her all the more.

“Oh god,” she said, almost breathless. “I’m sorry; can you breathe?”

“Mm, sugar, you taste fucking amazing.”

She moved off me and I rolled her onto her back, pinning her arms above her head.

“How do you feel?”

“So good.”

I helped her pull the t-shirt off, then leaned down and grazed her neck with my lips and teeth. “How do I want to fuck you?”

She giggled softly.

I nuzzled one nipple, giving it a quick lick. “If I keep you like this, I can love on these tits. And they really need some lovin’.” I moved over to the other side and sucked her nipple into my mouth.

She gasped.

“But if I turn you over, I get some of that ass.” I kissed my way up her body, between her full tits, to her neck. “Goddamn, sugar, you have so much to love. I can’t decide.”

“Maybe you should take it all.”

“I could spend all night fucking you every which way. But I think I might lose my mind if I don’t come inside you soon.”

I reached for my nightstand drawer and got out a condom. She waited while I ripped open the package and rolled it on.

“Which way do you want me?” she asked.

I gazed at her, awestruck. At her hair spread out over my pillow. At her full lips and soft skin. Her amazing body with the curves of a goddess, laid out for me, willing and vulnerable.

“Just like this,” I said, my voice slightly breathless. “Fuck, you look good. How did I get this lucky tonight?”

“You did save me from a crazy man in my apartment. And gave me a mind-blowing orgasm just now.”

“There’s plenty more where that came from.” I climbed on top of her and settled between her legs, my cock aching for her. “Are you ready for me?”

“Yes.”

With a low groan, I slid inside her. She was hot and tight around me, slick from coming in my mouth. My self-control almost gone, I pumped my hips, driving in deep while she clung to my back.

Bracing myself above her, I found her nipple with my mouth. I lapped my tongue across her hard peak. Lavished one side with attention—licking and sucking. Then I moved to the other. Fuck, these tits were incredible. Full and

soft, flushed with the heat of her arousal.

She was a goddess.

Her body moved with mine, her hips rolling, tits bouncing. Pressure built as I drove my cock in and out. I'd wanted this since the first moment I saw her. Now that I was getting it, she was amazing. She felt impossibly good. Like I fit inside her perfectly.

Muscles flexing, I fucked her harder. Faster. I couldn't get enough. Couldn't stop. Her breathy moans filled the air, a soft contrast to my rough grunts.

"Fuck, Sophie. I'm going to come so hard."

"Yes. Do it."

Her legs opened wider and I grabbed the headboard for more leverage. I pounded her relentlessly until my breath came fast and the heat and tension in my groin reached a breaking point. A few more thrusts, and I was ready to explode.

With a deep groan, I came fucking unglued.

My hips jerked, driving my throbbing cock deep inside her. Her pussy pulsed around me, squeezing and spasming as she came again. Fuck yes. Her second orgasm spurred mine to new heights, drawing it out until I was nothing but an animal, thrusting and groaning in a frenzy.

Finally, I came down the other side. Breathing hard, I leaned down to place soft kisses on her mouth. Her cheeks. Her neck. She ran her hands over my back and shoulders as I nuzzled her hair, taking in her scent.

Holy shit.

After taking a moment to catch my breath, I kissed her again, then climbed off her to go deal with the condom. She got up to use the bathroom, then came back and slid into bed with me.

Still feeling dazed from the best orgasm of my entire life, I wrapped my arms around her. And I knew two things beyond a shadow of a doubt.

One, I had not fucked Sophie in Vegas. There was absolutely no way I would have forgotten this woman, no matter how much whiskey I'd had. It was impossible.

Two, I was in big fucking trouble. Because I didn't just want to fuck Sophie a few times to get her out of my system. There was no getting Sophie out of my system.

And I had no fucking clue what I was going to do about that.

SOPHIE

I poked around Cox's kitchen, looking for a mug and some tea while his electric tea kettle heated water. It turned out he had quite the collection of both. The pantry had an entire shelf of various teas—loose leaf and bagged. And a cupboard contained both coffee mugs and some of the cutest little teacups with saucers.

Had to be Oliver.

The faint sound of the shower carried from the master bedroom. I'd slept with Cox last night. No, that wasn't the right phrase. Cox had fucked me into oblivion last night. I'd sat on his... and then we'd... My cheeks flushed and a tingling pressure between my legs made me stop and squeeze my thighs together.

I let out a long breath. Last night had been my doing. He'd been a perfect gentleman, from that kiss after I fell, to the rooftop picnic, to the way he'd set me up in his guest room. I'd gone to bed and tried to sleep. I really had.

But he'd been one room away, and I hadn't been able to resist.

I knew one thing for sure. We definitely hadn't slept together in Vegas. I would have felt him in the morning, like I still felt him now. The pleasantly warm ache between my legs was a visceral memory of all things Cox. And I certainly hadn't felt this way when I'd woken up at the Bellagio.

It was a relief to finally be sure.

The shower turned off. I poured hot water over a tea bag, wondering what happened now. I had so many feelings about going back to my apartment. I didn't feel safe there anymore. But would Cox mind if I stayed? And if I did, where would I sleep? Would last night happen again?

This whole temporary marriage thing had gotten complicated.

Cox came out, his hair still damp from the shower, a towel wrapped low around his hips. The little smile on his lips made my heart skip.

“Finding everything you need?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m just making some tea.”

“I’ve got plenty of that. Oliver keeps buying more so he can see his tea shop girl.”

I laughed softly, dunking my tea bag a few times. “That’s so cute.”

“You’re cute, sugar bug.” He moved in closer and fingered one of my curls while his other hand slid around my waist. “I have a standing golf date with my mom today, then I have a flight to catch. I have to be in Houston all week. But first, we should run to your apartment and pick up a few things. As much as I like the way you look in my t-shirt, you probably want some clothes.”

“So you’re not planning to just drop me off at home?” I was half-teasing, but my heart did a hopeful little dance. *Please say you want me to stay.*

“You’re not staying in that apartment if I have anything to say about it.” He let go of one of my curls and it bounced against my neck. “My offer of a hotel room stands if that’s what you want. But I’d rather have you here.”

I smiled. “Then I’d love to stay. But are you sure you don’t mind me being here while you’re gone?”

“Of course not. Make yourself at home. I’ll be back Friday, and if you need anything in the meantime, just give Oliver a call. He’ll fix you right up.”

“Thanks. I’m sure I’ll be fine. I’m having brunch with my friend Nora today, so I’ll probably go straight there from my apartment.”

He leaned in and planted a few kisses around my ear and down my neck. “Sounds good, sugar. I’ll get dressed and we can head over.”

“Thank you. Really. For everything.”

He met my eyes and the corner of his mouth lifted. “It’s my pleasure.”

We both got dressed, then drove over to my apartment. The mess wasn’t as bad as I’d feared. The worst was the overturned bookshelf, and I tried not to think about how antique music box repair wasn’t exactly in my budget right now. A lamp in the bedroom was broken, but it was a cheap one I’d bought at a yard sale—easy enough to replace. Nothing else was damaged, just messy.

Cox helped me pick up and I packed some things to take to his place. I wasn’t sure how long I’d stay, so I stuffed a bit of everything into my bags.

Work outfits, casual clothes, my running shoes. He insisted on taking it with him so he could bring it in the house for me, since he had to leave on a business trip in the afternoon. I gratefully accepted his help.

Since I was meeting Nora soon, I put on clean clothes and left straight from my apartment. I got to the restaurant and found parking not just on time, but early, thank you very much. Pausing, I gave my reflection in the window of the shop next door an air high five. A second too late, I realized there was a woman standing in the shop, just on the other side of the glass. She looked confused but raised her hand in a little wave, like she thought I'd waved at her but wasn't sure why.

With a wince, I wiggled my fingers at her and moved on. Oops. That was awkward.

My phone buzzed with a text, so I got it out to check.

Cox: *I have regrets.*

I drew in a quick breath, my heart suddenly racing. He had regrets? About last night? About me staying with him?

Me: *About what?*

Cox: *Not fucking you again this morning.*

Me: *Damn it Cox, you scared me. I thought you meant what happened last night.*

Cox: *How could I regret fucking my wife?*

I wanted to tell him to stop calling me his wife, except... I kind of didn't. He was so cute when he said it. I just needed to remember that he was only teasing.

So why not tease him back?

Me: *Aren't you glad you married me?*

Cox: *Hell yes, I am.*

Me: *You're only saying that because you got me into bed last night.*

Cox: *If I recall, you came into my room.*

Me: *I just wanted to cuddle.*

Cox: *With no panties?*

Me: *Okay, fine, that wasn't all I wanted.*

Cox: *Did you get everything you needed?*

Me: *Yes. And then some.*

Cox: *I'm happy to hear that. I hope you're ready for more when I get back because I'm not done with you yet.*

Not done with you yet. I tried not to let his choice of words bother me. We

were just flirty-texting. But I couldn't help but wonder what was going to happen when he *was* done with me.

It was too late now. I was a little bit smitten with Camden Cox. And who knew; maybe this wouldn't blow up in my face.

Except this was me. And things always blew up in my face. But I was an unfailing optimist. Maybe I'd get lucky this time.

I glanced up from my phone. A woman in a business suit, her platinum blond hair pulled back in a bun at the nape of her neck, stood outside the restaurant across the street. Her arms were crossed and she tapped a stiletto heel, clearly impatient.

It was Althea McLellan. Again.

That was weird.

And then it got weirder.

A man in a dress shirt and slacks approached. At first I thought he might be her husband, meeting her for brunch—although I didn't know whether or not she was married. And if he was her husband, she wasn't acting very affectionate toward him. In fact, she looked irritated, like he'd kept her waiting.

He started speaking to her and I caught sight of his face. I knew him from somewhere. Why did I recognize him?

Wait, was that...

I Googled and sure enough, it was him. Cox's former business partner, Dominic Coates. The one who'd been caught doing coke off a prostitute's ass.

They went inside the restaurant, leaving me to wonder, why was Althea with him?

"Sophie, I'm so sorry I'm late."

I jumped, clutching my chest, and almost dropped my phone. Nora grabbed my hands, helping me keep hold of it.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I was just..." I glanced across the street again. "Thinking about something."

Nora was dressed in the cutest burgundy cardigan over a t-shirt and distressed jeans. She always looked so fabulous.

"Sweetie, what happened there?" she asked, tapping her chin.

I touched the scrape. It didn't look as bad as I'd thought it would, but it was still noticeable. "I fell yesterday, but it's fine."

“Poor thing. Listen, I’m sorry for being late, and for…” Her eyes flicked behind her.

That was when I saw him approaching. Nora’s half-brother, Jensen Lakes.

Never in my life had I encountered another man like Jensen. I’d met him a few times and always found myself reduced to a blubbing dork-face who couldn’t do anything other than bat her eyelashes and stare. And sometimes drool.

Don’t judge me. He was that spectacular.

Today he wore a leather jacket over a dark button-down shirt and slacks that fit him so perfectly, they had to be custom made. He whipped off a pair of sunglasses and flashed that impossibly sexy grin at me.

“Hello, my sweet Sophie,” he crooned in a smooth British accent.

“Hi, Jensen,” I said, then blinked in surprise. Wait, had I just given him a normal greeting, like he wasn’t the personification of every dark sexual fantasy I’d ever had and would never admit to?

Why yes, yes I had.

He looked as surprised as I felt, but only for a second.

“As usual, Jensen doesn’t understand the concept of invitations and decided to come to brunch,” Nora said, casting a glare at her brother.

“It’s not my fault you had plans when I came over,” he said.

“That’s okay. I don’t mind,” I said.

He smiled again, the corners of his lips turning up in a devilish grin. “Of course you don’t.”

For some reason, the suggestive look in his eyes didn’t leave me a babbling, drooling mess. No dork-face here. Go, me.

We went into the restaurant and the host seated us at a round table next to the window. Jensen slid his chair closer to mine but Nora moved it back with a roll of her eyes.

“Behave yourself,” she said.

“You never let me have any fun.”

I just laughed. They were so funny. They hadn’t grown up together—Jensen had lived with his mother in the UK while Nora had lived with her mom here in the States—but they acted like they’d been bickering since childhood.

We perused the menu for a few minutes before the server came and took our orders. I cast a few glances out the front window, looking across the

street. Something about seeing Althea and Dominic together didn't sit right with me.

Jensen reached over and ran his fingers over the back of my hand. "No ring. Is it true about Vegas?"

Trying not to giggle at his touch, I moved my hand. "That I got married? Yes, it's true."

"God, I bloody love it," he said. "I'm only disappointed it wasn't me. We'd make a gorgeous couple, don't you think?"

I laughed again.

"How's that going?" Nora asked. "Did you run into any issues filing the paperwork?"

I pressed my lips together for a second before answering. "About that. We actually haven't filed for divorce yet."

The server came with our drinks, but Nora's gaze remained locked on me.

"Vegas was a month ago," Nora said, narrowing her eyes. "Why would you wait to file for divorce?"

"Cox was concerned about bad PR if it looked like he was getting a quickie divorce, especially after the whole thing with his old business partner. So I agreed to stay married for a little while."

Nora still stared at me, ignoring her mimosa. "And?"

I took a sip of my drink. Jensen watched us both, an amused smile on his lips.

"And things have happened," I said with a little shrug, trying—and probably failing—to look innocent.

"I like where this is going," Jensen said.

"You're not helping." She smacked his arm.

"We've been spending time together and last night things got... intimate."

She put her hand over mine. "Part of me wants to ask you whether his dick is as big as his ego, because if it is, I'm so happy for you. But before we get to that, I need to know that this is good and you're okay and he's not bullying you into something because you're technically married."

"I love you for being concerned about me, but I walked into his bedroom in the middle of the night with no panties on."

"Ooh," Jensen said. "I'm so jealous."

The corners of Nora's mouth lifted. "Good for you, Soph. Going after what you want. I love it. Okay, so his dick?"

“Fantastic,” I said on a sigh. “I know this could all blow up in my face. And it probably will—this is me we’re talking about. But the truth is, I like him.”

“I had a feeling this would happen,” Nora said. “When he walked into Brody’s that day after our run, he was like a lion stalking a baby gazelle.”

“I was so irritated with him that day,” I said with a little shake of my head. “I’ll be honest. I’m not sure what it all means. I didn’t really think he was serious. Why would a guy like him—”

“Stop.” Nora put up a hand. “Stop right there, Sophie Abbott. Don’t you dare say you don’t know why a guy like him would be interested in a girl like you. I won’t have you talking about my best friend that way.”

I pressed my lips together again. “It’s just unexpected. But he’s unexpected.”

“Uh-oh,” Jensen said.

“What?”

“You’re falling for your Vegas husband.”

I started to argue but stopped myself. There was no sense in lying. I was falling for Cox. A little bit, at least.

“It was kind of hard to avoid. Especially after the rooftop picnic.”

Nora sipped her drink. “That sounds romantic.”

“It was.” I told them about the day before. How I’d fallen and scraped my chin and Cox had treated me to a spontaneous rooftop picnic so I wouldn’t have to be self-conscious in a restaurant full of people. And then what had happened at my apartment, with the scary drunk guy looking for his cheating wife.

“Oh my god, I’m so glad Cox was there,” Nora said. “How bad is your apartment?”

“We went back this morning and it’s not as bad as I’d thought. Mostly it was just messy.”

“Let me know if you need any help with anything,” she said. “And have you considered moving? Your building is pretty sketchy.”

“I’m thinking about it now. That guy got in way too easily. I know I’m a hot mess, but I always lock my door.”

“I agree with my sister,” Jensen said. “Time to start looking for a new place to live. I’d offer up mine, but you’re far too tempting and you’re a married woman now.”

I was about to say, *It’s not like the marriage is real.* But I stopped. I

didn't really want to say it.

"I'll figure something out," I said instead.

Our breakfast arrived and the conversation turned to other things. Nora was having some disagreements with her boss. Jensen had been planning a business trip to London, but it had been canceled. Nora didn't appear to be thrilled that he was staying in town.

I took a bite of my eggs benedict and glanced out the window. Althea and Dominic were outside the restaurant again. They said something, then turned away from each other and left, heading in opposite directions.

"Have you ever had a feeling about something, even though you can't necessarily explain it?" I asked.

"Definitely," Nora said. "Why?"

"There's a woman who works for Cox; her name's Althea McLellan. I saw her go into that restaurant across the street last weekend when I was here with my dad. And I just saw her again, except this time she was with Cox's old business partner, who didn't leave under the best circumstances. It gives me a weird feeling."

"Who's his old business partner?" Jensen asked.

"Dominic Coates."

He scowled, like the name offended him.

"Do you know him?" I asked.

"Only in passing," he said. "He's an insufferable cliché. Man gets wealthy, thinks he can get away with anything. Then he's shocked when he gets caught and actually has to pay the consequences."

"That was a very mature statement, coming from you," Nora said.

"I have my moments," he said. "Apparently, he spent a month in rehab and just hired a PR firm to stage his comeback story."

"Really?" I asked.

"I have a lady friend who works for the firm," he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

I tapped my finger on my fork. "So he gets caught with hookers and blow and loses his job. Goes to rehab, then hires a PR company to fix his reputation. And now he's meeting with Cox's lawyer."

"It's suspicious," Nora said. "Are you going to tell him?"

"I could mention it when he gets back on Friday. Although it kind of feels like it isn't my business."

"You are his wife," Jensen said.

“Stop,” I said, rolling my eyes. “It’s bad enough when he says it.”

He sighed dramatically. “Lucky bastard. I hope he appreciates you.”

“That’s for sure,” Nora said. “And no more pulling your pigtails. Unless you want him to.”

With a soft laugh, I absently fingered my hair. All this talk about Cox was making me miss him, and he hadn’t even left town yet. The thought of not seeing him all week was so disappointing.

I really needed to get my head on straight or my heart was in big trouble.

COX

*A*fter seeing Sophie off from her apartment, I took her things back to my place and unloaded them. I wasn't exactly pleased that I had to go out of town this week, but at least I knew Sophie would be safe and comfortable at my house.

I packed my bag and put it in my car, since I'd leave to catch my flight right after my golf date with Mom. Then I headed to the golf course.

She was at the clubhouse waiting for me, dressed in a polo and Bermuda shorts. Georgia Cox is a pint-sized firecracker with silver hair she keeps short, a sharp wit, and a lifelong obsession with golf. She's very happily single, enjoying an active social life with friends she met golfing, at her favorite beauty salon, and the local senior center.

I got out of the car and shut the door. "Hey, Mom."

"There you are. Hurry on up now; we don't want to miss our tee time."

"I'm here on time." I hoisted my clubs out of the trunk and brought them over to her golf cart.

"Even so."

I gave her a quick kiss on the forehead, then we got in her cart. She drove. I still wasn't allowed behind the wheel of her precious golf cart.

She gave me the rundown on all the gossip in her social circle while we drove out to the first green and started our game. Her neighbors were putting in new landscaping and the HOA was up in arms over the types of trees they'd chosen. Her friend Charlene Lafferty had tried to dye her own hair and it had come out purple. And the men at the senior center had all flocked to the new dance class, on account of the instructor and her skimpy outfits.

By the fourth green, she seemed to have run out of stories.

“You’re awfully quiet,” she said. “What’s on your mind?”

She had no idea how big of a question that was.

“Do you remember when we lived here in Seattle when I was a kid?”

Her eyebrows lifted with curiosity. “I do.”

“There was a girl who lived down the street from us. She was in my class at school and—”

“Sophie Abbott?”

I’d been about to keep describing her, but apparently I didn’t need to. “Yeah, that’s her. You remember Sophie?”

“Of course I do. You wouldn’t leave that poor girl alone. I must have been called in for meetings with the principal half a dozen times.”

I winced. “I was that bad?”

“You were always teasing her and pulling her hair. Some people tried to say *boys will be boys*, but I was having none of it. I would have whooped you for it, but we both know I didn’t do that. I did take away your video games and grounded you from seeing your friends pretty often. But that was also a very rough time.”

“Mom, we don’t have to talk about that.”

“Maybe we should.”

“I ran into Sophie again,” I said quickly, hoping to change the subject.

“Did you, now?”

“She works for an associate of mine.”

“I certainly hope you behaved yourself,” she said. “No pulling her hair this time.”

I choked back a laugh. *Only if she wants me to, Mom.* “I behaved myself. Mostly.”

“What’s she like?”

“Sweet as cherry pie.”

“So all your teasing didn’t do any lasting damage?”

I took a deep breath. “I hope not. Although now I feel like I owe her an apology.”

“I’d say you do. So when are you bringing her by?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

I side-eyed her. “Why would you think I’d bring her by?”

“Why else did you mention her?”

“Mom, it’s not what you think.”

She huffed. “If you keep putting this off, you’ll never make me a grandma.”

“Whoa, slow down. I ask if you remember a girl I knew twenty years ago and you’re jumping to grandkids?”

“No, but I think you’re fixin’ to tell me something important about Miss Sophie Abbott. And I’m just registering my impatience for you to grow the hell up and settle down already.”

“What is it with parents and your obsession with getting your kids married off? Do y’all have meetings where you discuss strategy?”

“As a matter of fact, we do. Last month, the theme was grown-ass men who never date a girl long enough to bring one home to meet their mama. I took a lot of notes.”

I laughed out loud because what else could I do? The truth was so ridiculous, she wasn’t going to believe me. “Mama, I got married.”

“Don’t play with me, Camden. It ain’t nice.”

“I ain’t playin’.” I cleared my throat. I could hear my accent getting thicker. It tended to do that around my mom, or when I was worked up about something. And right then, I was both. “That’s why I brought up Sophie Abbott. We ran into each other in Vegas and wound up getting married at one of those twenty-four-hour chapels.”

She stared at me like I’d just sprouted a second head. “When?”

Well shit, this was going to piss her off. “About a month ago.”

Her eyes widened. “You got married a month ago and I’m just now hearing about it?”

“I told you, it’s not what you think.”

“Well, let’s hope not.”

“It was a mistake and we aren’t staying married. That’s why I didn’t tell you right away.”

She crossed her arms and fixed me in a hard glare. The little boy in me wanted to flinch away, but I held my ground.

“So why are you telling me now?”

I opened my mouth to answer but stopped. Because I wasn’t sure I had an answer to that question.

“I don’t know.”

She nodded slowly. “Well all right, then.”

“You’re not mad?”

“No, I’m furious. When you figure this out, I expect you to have another wedding and do it right this time.”

“There’s nothing to figure out. We got drunk and got married. The only reason we haven’t filed for divorce is so I can avoid bad PR over the ordeal.”

She shot me a look. “Don’t lie to your mother.”

“I ain’t—I’m not lying.”

“The only reason you haven’t filed for divorce? We both know that’s bullshit, so maybe let’s just call a spade a spade and acknowledge that you have feelings for the girl.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You’re trying to hide it, maybe even from yourself. But I can see. You’re smitten. You were then and you are now.”

I wanted to keep arguing with her, but was she right? Was that why I had this weird ache in my chest at the thought of leaving her for a week?

“Besides, you’re old enough to get over your fear of marriage,” she said.

“I’m not afraid of marriage.”

“You are, and I’m partially to blame for that. But only partially. It’s mostly your father’s fault. You never had a good example.”

“None of that is your fault.”

“It isn’t my fault that he was the way he was. But I regret that I stayed with him so long. That didn’t do either of us any good.”

“We both turned out all right,” I said with a grin.

“I’m doing just fine, but the jury’s still out on you.” She winked at me. “And you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Which one?”

“When do I get to meet my daughter-in-law?”

I shook my head. Arguing that Sophie wasn’t really her daughter-in-law—or wouldn’t be for long—would be pointless.

And would it be so bad to introduce them? Sophie was sweet but still tough, the kind of woman my mom would love.

Wait. She *was* the kind of woman my mom would love.

Shit.

“I don’t know, Mom. We’ll see.”

She gave me a look that said she wasn’t pleased but she’d let it go for the time being.

I’d never introduced a woman to my mother. Ever. Why would I? She was right: I didn’t date anyone long enough to get that far. But Sophie was

different, and not just because I'd married her.

I followed Mom back to the cart and got in. Maybe this business trip was exactly what I needed. A week away to get my head on straight. Sure I liked Sophie, and goddamn I loved fucking her. But was this an *introduce her to my mother* situation? That seemed a bit excessive. After all, we weren't going to stay married.

Except—

Nope. I wasn't even going to think it. Sophie and I had a deal. We could enjoy each other in the meantime, but we both knew what this was. And marriage wasn't for me.

SOPHIE

I pressed the garage door opener and waited while it lifted, then drove into Cox's garage. He'd parked one of his cars outside so I could use the space while he was gone. His garage was big, open, and neatly organized. He wouldn't have struck me as a man who owned a lot of tools, but he had a large workbench with tools on a peg board and a red toolbox that was taller than me. It reminded me of our garage when I was growing up, although that had been smaller.

I'd been staying in his house for the last week and it was surprising how comfortable I was here. With him on a business trip in Houston, it could have been so awkward. Once I'd spent two weeks housesitting for one of my dad's neighbors and I'd walked on eggshells the entire time, terrified I'd break or spill something and do irreparable damage. But somehow Cox's big house felt a lot like home.

And I hadn't broken or spilled anything. Yay, me!

He'd been busy on his trip, but we'd been texting in between meetings and in the evenings. Every night, he texted to say goodnight. He was acting very boyfriend-like, which I kind of loved. But it also left me wondering. Had I started dating my accidental husband? Where was this going? My resolve to protect my heart had crumbled and now, here I was, staying in his house, getting all fluttery in the tummy over his sweet texts.

My feet were tired from my heels, so I stepped out of them as soon as I got inside. It had been a long week. Not in a bad way, just an *it's Friday and I'm ready to take off my bra* way. No one was here, so after I set down my purse, I undid the clasp and slid my bra right out of my shirt.

Ah. That was better.

I'd stopped to check the mail at my apartment after work, so I set my bra on the kitchen counter and thumbed through the envelopes. Bill. Bill. Another bill. Rolling my eyes, I sighed. Typical. I never had anything good in the mail. Always more bills. It seemed like they multiplied in my mailbox, those pesky notices getting it on like bunnies and making tons of little bill babies.

Actually, that wasn't why I had so many bills. But it was a cuter reason than the truth.

Someone came out of the walk-in pantry and I shrieked, tossing the stack of envelopes in the air.

"It's all right. It's just me," Oliver said.

I put my hand on my chest and took a deep breath. "You scared me. I didn't realize you were here."

"Sorry about that. I was just dropping off a few things before Cox gets home."

I picked up the envelopes and put them in a haphazard stack. "Is your car out there?"

"I parked on the other side of his, so you probably didn't see it."

Oliver's eyes flicked to the counter and I realized my bra was just sitting there. I snatched it off and put it behind my back, trying to get it out of sight.

Except... oh god, could he see my nipples through my shirt? It was a little chilly in here, and this blouse was form fitting and kind of thin, so they were probably—

I glanced down. Headlights were definitely on.

"You know what, I'm going to go change."

Before he could say anything else, I rushed to the bedroom, my bra dangling from my hand.

I came out a few minutes later wearing a t-shirt and leggings with my weekend bra—which was properly lined. My hair was being particularly unruly today, so I tamed it back as best I could in a thick ponytail.

Oliver was still in the kitchen. "Sorry for the scare, love."

"That's okay. Did you bring over more tea?"

"I think Cox would have my head if I did. I didn't think he knew I'd started stashing it at the office, but clearly I'm not as sly as I thought I was."

"So, you like the girl who works there?"

"She's the most beautiful creature I've ever laid eyes on."

“Have you asked her out yet?”

Shaking his head, he leaned against the counter. “Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“God, I don’t know. I’m usually impossibly charming.” He paused, narrowing his eyes. “Can I be honest?”

“Of course.”

“I think I’m a bit afraid of her.”

“Why?”

“It’s hard to explain. Every time I go into that shop, I have it all worked out what I’m going to say. But then I get up to the counter and wind up asking some inane question about tea flavors and then just buying more, as if that was the only reason I’d stopped in.”

“Maybe you need to stop working out what to say ahead of time. Just say what comes to mind when you’re there.”

“Then I’ll probably wind up saying something idiotic, like *I keep coming in here to buy tea just so I can see you smile.*”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s adorable.”

“It’s ridiculous. Besides, I think she has a boyfriend.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw him pick her up after work one day.”

“Are you sure it was her boyfriend? He could have been her brother or her cousin or just a guy who’s a friend.”

“All right, to be fair, I didn’t see him do anything that proved he was her boyfriend. And it was a while ago.”

“I think you’re just using that as an excuse because she makes you nervous. And now you have this whole thing built up in your mind when really, it’s simple. Just be yourself. Tell her that maybe it sounds silly, but you keep coming in to buy tea just so you can talk to her. Trust me: She’ll think it’s cute. And if she does have a boyfriend, then you can let it go, knowing that at least you tried.”

“That’s... well, that’s very smart advice. Are you always this insightful?”

I smiled. “I have my moments.”

“Cox is awfully lucky to have you.”

“I don’t know about that, but thanks.”

“Well, I do. He needs more good people around him.”

For some reason, that made me think of Althea. I hadn’t told Cox about seeing her with Dominic last weekend. If I was going to bring it up—and I

wasn't totally sure I should—I wanted to do it in person.

“Oliver, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“What do you think of Althea?”

He rolled his eyes dramatically. “You mean Maleficent? She's the incarnation of evil.”

That was unexpected. “Really?”

“I'd say it's because she's a corporate lawyer, but I've met lawyers who are perfectly decent people. Althea masquerades as a good person, but that platinum blond hair of hers is hiding a black soul.”

“Then why does Cox work with her?”

“She's cutthroat and ruthless, but that always works out in his favor, doesn't it? He keeps her around because she's very good at her job.”

“But is she unethical?”

“From what I've seen, she's adept at walking the line. Not quite unethical, but she's happy to bend the rules when it suits her.”

“Do you know if she'd have a reason to meet with Dominic Coates?”

His eyebrows lifted. “Not that I'm aware of. Why?”

“I'm pretty sure I saw them together last weekend. They met at a restaurant and went inside. I was across the street, but I'm almost positive it was them.”

“Does Cox know?”

“No, I haven't seen him since, and it didn't seem like the kind of thing to bring up in a text. Do you think I should mention it?”

“Absolutely. If Althea's up to something, he needs to know about it.”

“Okay, then I'll tell him.”

“Good. Just don't let him walk away when you're talking to him. He does that when someone's telling him something he doesn't want to hear.”

That didn't really surprise me. “Good tip. Thanks.”

“Anytime, darling. His flight landed on time, so he should be home soon. I already ordered dinner. It should be delivered in...” He paused to check his watch. “Ten minutes.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“It's both my job, and my pleasure.” He came over and lifted my hand, then lightly kissed my knuckles. “Say hello to the husband for me. I'll see you later.”

I rolled my eyes at his husband remark. “Bye, Oliver.”

He walked away and left through the front door.

Dinner arrived precisely ten minutes later—he really was good at his job—and I got a text from Cox saying he'd be home soon. I left the food in the kitchen and went to the bathroom to see if I could do something with my hair. Cox seemed to like it when I wore it down, so I took out my ponytail and worked a little product into it to tame the frizz.

My stomach tingled with anticipation. I hadn't seen him all week, and I'd missed him. A lot. In fact, I'd definitely missed him more than I should, but I was having a very hard time convincing my heart—or my body—of that.

Was he going to mind that I'd slept in his bed all week? That I'd used his pillow because it smelled like him? I'd never slept so soundly. Being in his bed was like sinking into a cottony cloud of man heaven.

If he ever got married for real, she was going to be one lucky girl.

I heard him come in and my heart fluttered.

“Honey, I'm home,” he called from the kitchen.

He was so ridiculous.

But it was really good to hear his voice.

“Hi.” I came out, suddenly wishing I'd put on something sexier than this boring t-shirt and black leggings. My bra wasn't even pretty, nor did my panties match.

Way to fail, Soph.

Oh well, too late now.

“Aren't you a sight for sore eyes.” His gaze swept up and down and the corners of his mouth lifted.

“It just occurred to me that I could have put on something sexier since I haven't seen you in a week, but...” I shrugged.

“No need, sugar. You're perfect just like this.” He slipped his hands around my waist and leaned in for a kiss.

As soon as his mouth touched mine, my body lit up. I draped my arms around his shoulders and melted into his kiss. His lips were soft but firm, his tongue velvety against mine. A week apart hadn't changed anything. I was falling hard for this man.

Our lips separated and he pulled back, his brow furrowing.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No,” he said, although he still looked confused. Or maybe bewildered. “No, everything's fine. It's good to be home.”

“It's good to have you back. Oliver sent dinner over. Should we eat?”

He fingered my hair, his eyes tracing over my face. “Sure. Let’s eat. I can have dessert later.”

The look in his eyes left no doubt as to what he wanted for dessert. Me. I had no complaints about that.

We took our dinner to the table. Cox got out plates and silverware and opened a bottle of wine. It was one of my favorites, a Salishan Cellars red blend called Cookie. Delicious.

“How was your trip?” I asked when we’d gotten settled with our food.

“Too long. But otherwise, it was fine. Productive. How were things here?”

“Fine. It was a pretty normal week for me, other than staying here instead of my apartment.”

“How’s your dad?”

“He’s doing okay. Salty as usual.” I paused to take a bite. Now seemed as good a time as any to bring up Althea. “I saw something last weekend and I wasn’t sure if I should bring it up, but it keeps bugging me.”

“What’s that?”

“When I came to your office with Mr. Calloway, I met Althea McLellan. She’s your lawyer?”

“She is.”

“I saw her last Sunday outside a restaurant, but that’s not what was weird. I’m pretty sure she was with your old business partner, Dominic Coates.”

“Couldn’t have been.”

“I really think it was.”

He shook his head and kept eating. “No. Althea can’t stand Dominic. She was more than happy to see him go.”

“Okay, but I’m telling you, I really think it was them. I’ve seen Althea there before and I Googled Dominic to make sure.”

“She doesn’t have any reason to meet with him.”

“Well, that’s kind of my point. Wouldn’t it be odd for your lawyer to be meeting with your former partner? Especially if you didn’t know about it?”

“Sugar, you don’t need to worry about it.”

My back stiffened at his dismissive tone. I leaned back and crossed my arms. “So you just... don’t believe me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You might as well have.”

“All I’m saying is that there’s nothing to worry about. Althea has worked

for me for a long time.”

Maybe I should have dropped the subject. Cox knew her, and I didn't. But I couldn't shake the feeling that something was going on. And I didn't like the way he was trying to blow me off.

“Oliver thinks she's evil incarnate.”

“Oliver and Althea are oil and water. They've never liked each other.”

“But—”

He got up, picking up his plate, and took it to the kitchen.

Don't let him walk away from you while you're talking to him. He does that when someone is telling him something he doesn't want to hear.

I stood, leaving my half-eaten dinner on the table, and followed him. “Cox.”

He stopped and turned to face me. His jaw was tight, his eyes flashing with annoyance. But I was annoyed with him too. “What?”

“Maybe you shouldn't trust her blindly. I know Oliver doesn't like her, but he said she's ruthless and willing to bend the rules when it suits her. And I really think it matters what kind of people you surround yourself with. That's why Mr. Calloway is so careful about who he does business with.”

“Is he, now? Well good for him. I suppose that's a consequence of having a real wife to keep him in line.”

A real wife. My feelings snapped like a dry twig, making tears spring to my eyes. “I was just trying to look out for you. The least you could do is listen.”

Without another word, or waiting to hear what he had to say, I turned and walked away.

COX

Well, shit.
I'd gone and said something remarkably stupid, hadn't I?
Yep. I had.

Fuck.

I went to the liquor cabinet and poured myself two fingers of whiskey. A part of me wanted to follow her. Scoop her in my arms and do whatever it took to make her feel better.

But I'd never been good at apologies.

I took my whiskey to the living room and sat on the couch. This wasn't how I thought tonight would go. Home from a week-long business trip and now I had a girl with hurt feelings in the other room.

Shit.

Sophie's claim of seeing Althea with Dominic had been like a needle, poking an uncomfortable shaft of doubt into my head. I trusted Althea. With as deeply embedded as she was in my business and my personal affairs, I had to trust her.

But if she was meeting with Dominic behind my back...

Couldn't be.

Except why would Sophie lie about that? Althea was prickly about Sophie and this whole marriage situation, but Sophie didn't know that.

And damn it, that *real wife* comment had been a shitty thing to say. I'd known it as soon as I'd said it. I wasn't sure why Sophie bringing up her boss had dug into my pride like that, but it had. It was like she was comparing me to another man and finding me lacking.

Once again, I was faced with an uncomfortable truth about my accidental wife. I cared.

It wasn't that I didn't care about anyone. I did. I cared about my mom, and Oliver, and the people who worked for me.

But I cared about Sophie in a way that was different. Deeper. I cared about her in a way I'd always avoided with women.

I took a healthy swallow of whiskey, enjoying the way it burned as it slid down my throat. It reminded me of Vegas. That crazy night when I'd done the unthinkable and gotten married.

When I'd left town on Sunday, I'd wondered if a week away would change things. If whatever fire she'd lit inside me would go out, and I'd come home feeling like my old self again. A committed bachelor, focused on and fulfilled by my work. No need for a woman in my life except for the occasional pleasant diversion.

And then that woman—Sophie fucking Abbott—had walked out with her soft blond curls falling around her shoulders, looking like the cutest little wife on the planet in her t-shirt and leggings. Looking like she belonged here.

Like it was real.

I was self-aware enough to recognize that my feelings for Sophie had something to do with the way I'd snapped at her. Because the sight of her barefoot in my kitchen, getting plates out of the cupboard so we could have dinner together, had made me feel like something cracked in my chest.

I'd missed her.

No. I hadn't just missed her, I'd ached for her.

Far from giving me some much-needed perspective, my week away had thoroughly fucked with my head.

I finished off my whiskey and got up. Regardless of the long-term ramifications of my feelings for Sophie, it was time to be a man and face the music.

She wasn't in my bedroom, although I could see evidence of her in here. The comforter turned back, like the bed had been slept in, her running shoes set neatly by the door, and a pink sweater on the dresser. I checked the guest room, but she wasn't there either, nor was she in my office or the other spare bedroom. Where the hell was she? I hadn't heard the front door and her car was still in the garage.

Finally, I noticed that the door to the half bath was closed. I knocked. "Sophie?"

The door opened a crack and she peeked out. “What?”

Why was she sitting in the bathroom? “Honey, are you okay in there?”

She hesitated, then opened the door a little more. “I went into the wrong room and then didn’t want to come out.”

This girl was so goddamn cute, she was going to be the death of me. “Would you mind coming out now?”

“Okay.” Her lower lip protruded in the slightest pout. “But I’m still mad.”

“Yeah, I deserve it.”

I took her hand and led her to the living room. We both sat down on the couch. Sophie clasped her hands in her lap and wouldn’t quite look at me.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you like that. It was uncalled for.”

Her face angled toward me.

“As for Althea, I’ll talk to her and find out what’s going on.” I fingered one of her curls. “Thanks for looking out for me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Am I forgiven, or are you still mad?”

She took a deep breath. “I know I’m not really your wife, but—”

I touched her lips with my finger. “In point of fact, you are.”

That made her smile. “You know what I mean.”

“I do. And I’m sorry if I made you feel like you aren’t important.”

“Thank you.”

Sliding my hand into her hair, I leaned in close and inhaled. “I sure missed you.”

“You did?”

I buried my face in her neck and took another deep breath. God, she smelled good. “Mm-hmm.”

“Good. Because I missed you too.” She pressed her lips to my neck and I felt a flick of her tongue across my skin.

That fire she’d lit inside me blazed, hotter than fucking Hades.

I pulled her onto my lap, her legs straddling me. My fingers tangled in her hair and I brought her lips to mine. Delved my tongue into her mouth. Her tits pressed against my chest and she tilted her hips to rub herself against me while I kissed her.

Groaning into her mouth, I thrust my hips up, pressing my hard erection into the soft, warm space between her legs. “You want this, don’t you?”

She nodded, answering between messy kisses. “Yes. Please, yes.”

I grabbed the bottom of her shirt and yanked it up over her head. I wanted

those luscious tits in my face. She ground against me as I unfastened her bra clasp and slid the straps down her arms.

God, she was a fucking goddess.

Her tits were glorious. Full and flushed with delicious pink nipples. She moaned as I cupped them and squeezed, gently kneading her soft flesh.

I lapped my tongue against one nipple, then sucked it into my mouth. Her back arched and she leaned her head back, letting out another moan. I squeezed her tits, sucking and licking. Lavishing her beautiful body with attention while she rubbed up and down my hard length.

Shifting my weight, I twisted her around so she was on her back.

“Clothes off,” she said.

Who was I to argue? “Yes, ma’am.”

I shucked my pants and shirt while she pulled off her leggings and panties and let them drop to the floor. Kneeling on the couch, I pushed her legs open and traced my fingers up her wet slit.

“Yes,” she breathed.

“My sweet sugar needs to come, doesn’t she?”

“So bad.”

I leaned closer and let my heavy erection slide across her wetness. “Condoms are in the bedroom, honey.”

Her eyes fluttered. “I know, but oh my god, do that again.”

Pulling my hips back, I dragged my cock over her slit, then pushed forward. My shaft glistened with her wetness.

“Such a beautiful pussy,” I said, gliding between her legs again. “You’re so wet and pretty.”

She reached down and pressed my dick against her while I pumped my hips. The sight of my swollen cock sliding between her hand and her slick folds was so fucking hot. The tip glistened as it moved smoothly beneath her fingers and she moaned, rubbing me against her clit.

“That’s it, beautiful. Make yourself feel good.”

Her hips rolled and her hand slid along my shaft. I loved watching her take her pleasure from me. The way her lips parted and her breath came in short gasps. The way she held my cock firmly against her, rubbing herself right where she needed it.

I moved faster, giving her more friction. My abs flexed and my fingers dug into her thighs. Pressure built fast. If I wasn’t careful, I was going to come all over her stomach.

And maybe I would. But she was coming first.

She rubbed herself harder. Faster. Whimpering and moaning, her eyes closing. I thrust my hips, letting my cock drag against her, watching it slide in and out of her hand.

So. Fucking. Hot.

“Yes, sugar. Don’t stop. Don’t fucking stop until you come.”

The wet glide of her silky skin was almost too much. Tension grew, but I wanted to watch her come like this.

She cried out, her rhythm suddenly changing. Her pussy pulsed against my shaft and I moved with her as she came. Watched while she came apart beneath me.

Her movements slowed and her eyes opened. “Wow.”

I sure liked hearing that. “Was that good, sugar?”

The corners of her lips turned up in a smile. “Amazing.”

“Good. Fuck, you’re sexy.” I moved through her wetness again, my cock aching for release.

She wrapped her fingers all the way around my shaft and stroked. My hips jerked and I thrust into her hand with a deep groan.

“Bring it up here.” She met my gaze with a wicked gleam in her eyes, then let go of my cock and squeezed her tits together.

“Holy shit,” I said before I could stop myself. Who was this woman?

“Do you want to?” She squeezed them again and slid her fingers over her hard nipples. “Because I think you do.”

“Are you kidding?” I moved up her body, settling with my thighs on either side of her ribcage. We had just enough room. “Baby, I’d love to fuck those tits.”

A hint of shyness crept into her expression and she shifted her grip on herself. “I’ve never done this before, so…”

I let my erection settle in between her tits. “Truth? Neither have I. But I can’t fucking wait.”

“Really? This is a first?”

“Sure is.”

She pushed her tits together, wrapping me in her soft flesh. “I kind of love that.”

“I kind of do too.”

And I really did. If I was going to experience something new with anyone, I wanted it to be Sophie.

“Okay, Cox.” Meeting my eyes, she squeezed harder. “Fuck my tits.”

Just hearing filthy words on my sweet sugar bug’s lips was almost enough to make me come before I’d even started. With a groan, I moved my hips, sliding my hard length between her beautiful breasts.

It wasn’t just the way it felt—and it felt fucking amazing—that made it the single hottest thing I’d ever done. It was the way it looked. Sophie’s hands on her tits and my cock thrusting between them. I watched in awe while she squeezed herself around me. While my cock, coated in her wetness, rubbed against her silky-smooth skin.

My back stiffened and my muscles flexed. The pressure was almost unbearable. Growling like an animal, I drove harder. Moved faster. I reached down and laid my hands over hers, pushing her tits tighter around my cock.

Losing control, I grunted hard. My hips jerked, my thrusts erratic. And I came undone.

I grunted with each pulse, grinding my teeth together, my cock throbbing. Thick ropes of come burst out the tip, splashing across Sophie’s neck and chin. A primal part of me, deep inside, reveled in the sight of my come on her skin, my cock slick and sliding between her tits.

Mine.

Slowing, I loosened my grip on her and paused to catch my breath. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No.” Her eyes flicked to her chest. “That was fun.”

I grinned and climbed off her. “Don’t move.”

I got a washcloth and a clean towel out of a closet and ran the washcloth under warm water. Sophie lay draped across the couch, one arm resting above her head, the other on her stomach. Her hair was wild around her face and her cheeks flushed a sweet shade of pink.

“Let me get that for you.” I crouched next to her and cleaned her up, gently wiping her with the washcloth, then patted her dry with the towel.

“Thank you.”

She sat up and I grabbed a throw blanket, then settled in next to her and draped it around both of us. She relaxed against me, her head resting on my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her.

“Who knew that sweet little thing in pigtails would grow up to be such a dirty girl?”

She laughed. “You must bring it out in me. I’m not usually that dirty.”

“That feels like a damn good accomplishment.” I nuzzled my cheek

against her hair. “We good, sugar?”

“Yeah. We’re good.”

I nodded, enjoying the feel of her warm body next to mine. Getting a little dirty with Sophie was great, but I had a lot more going on inside me than just the satisfaction of an orgasm—even one as mind-blowing as I’d just had. I was both sated and relieved. Something about this moment felt natural. Like coming home to Sophie after a long week away.

On some level, that made me nervous. But on another, I wanted to just roll with it and see where it took us. Even if it was somewhere completely unexpected.

In fact, I had a strange suspicion that it would be.

COX

*M*onday morning rolled around all too quickly. Sophie and I spent the weekend holed up at home, making me feel that we were a hell of a lot like a... well, a married couple. Waking up in bed together and indulging in some delicious morning sex. Sipping coffee in the kitchen. Cooking meals and sitting down to eat together. It was all very domestic and enjoyable in a way that I wouldn't have anticipated.

The truth was, I liked her. A lot. And I liked her for more than her body—sex goddess though she was. I liked her company. Her smile. Her hair, especially the way it looked when it was wild in the morning. The way she knocked things over and tripped over her own feet and yet nothing seemed to get her down.

Some very strange thoughts about Sophie and this whole marriage thing kept trying to push their way to the forefront of my mind. And I kept pushing right back because they were clearly crazy. Sure, I liked her, but that didn't mean...

Anyway.

I got my head on straight for a call with Irene Prager to update her on the status of the project. Then I had another meeting with my engineering team. So far, things were going to plan—more or less. We were roughly on schedule, and if a few more pieces fell into place, we'd be breaking ground right on time.

Walking back to my office from the conference room, I caught sight of Althea. She was at her desk, focused on something on her laptop.

A hit of unease made my shoulders tighten. Had she really met with

Dominic behind my back? I didn't want Sophie to be right, because if Althea set her mind to it, she could do a lot of damage, both to my company and to me personally. But if Sophie was wrong, had she simply been mistaken? Or had she lied to me for some reason?

Not a lot of good options.

I veered into Althea's office and shut the door behind me.

She looked up. "What's up?"

For some reason, Sophie's dad and his interrogation popped into my head. No bullshit.

"Did you meet with Dominic last weekend?"

Her face registered surprise, but only for a split second before her features smoothed over. "As a matter of fact, I did."

Well holy shit, Sophie had been right. I was strangely relieved by that.

"Then the obvious questions are why, and why didn't you bother to mention that to me?"

She met my eyes, nothing but confidence in her expression. "The first thing he did when he got out of rehab was hire a PR firm. I don't give a shit if he tries to spin this into some kind of brave comeback story. I do care if he tries to pull anything with you or this company. I wanted him to know that if he's thinking about any kind of litigation against us for how your partnership ended, he has no ground to stand on, so he shouldn't waste his time. Or money. We'll bury him."

"And you didn't think I needed to know?"

She shrugged. "He agreed and said he has no plans to sue. Since he's not a problem, I didn't think it was worth mentioning. Plus, you were out of town. It was such a non-issue, I almost forgot I'd even seen him."

I nodded slowly. I believed her. Or at least, I believed most of what she'd said. Although if Dominic had rolled over and shown his belly to her that easily, I was surprised she hadn't bragged about how she'd made him squirm. Althea liked to boast about her victories, in and out of the courtroom.

But that was only a small doubt. Maybe it hadn't felt like a satisfying victory, so she'd let it go. And I had been out of town all last week. That probably explained it.

"Okay, then," I said. "If you get wind of anything on his end, let me know."

"I will. And, Cox, I talked to Drew Easton again. They're still interested in buying out Skyline."

“And I’m still not interested in screwing over my investors.”

Her eyes flashed with frustration. “Are you sure your loyalty isn’t misplaced? You’re awfully concerned about Shepherd Calloway.”

“Calloway isn’t the only Skyline investor.”

“No, but he’s the reason you won’t take the deal, isn’t he? Or, more accurately, his assistant is why you won’t take the deal.”

“Believe it or not, this isn’t about my wife.”

“Your wife,” she muttered, rolling her eyes.

I chuckled. “You really ought to stop letting that bother you so much. And we move forward with Skyline as planned. We’re not selling.”

I didn’t wait for her to answer—or argue. Just gave her a nod and went back to my office.

Before I had a chance to sit down, my cell phone rang. It was Shepherd Calloway. That was odd.

“Calloway. What can I do for you?”

“Cox.” His voice was ice cold. Almost flat. “I have some things to go over with you. Can you meet me at the Oak Barrel tonight at six?”

“I think so. Hold on; let me check my calendar.”

I swiped to my calendar. I was free tonight. But why was Calloway calling me personally to set up a meeting? I’d have thought he’d have Sophie call Oliver to set something up. Still, he represented one of the single most important business partnerships I had right now.

“Sure. I’ll see you at six.”

“Good.” He ended the call.

“Nice to chat with you, too, Calloway.” I shook my head and pocketed my phone. I’d see what he wanted tonight.



CALLOWAY WAS ALREADY at the Oak Barrel, an upscale wine bar downtown, when I arrived. He was dressed in a suit and tie and was seated at a table near the back. And he wasn’t alone. A guy in glasses, a sweater vest, and plaid shirt sat with him. Their chairs were angled away from each other, like they’d moved their seats in opposite directions before sitting down.

I straightened my cuffs and went to their table.

“Calloway.” I reached out my hand and we shook. His face was

unreadable, but that was how he always looked. Definitely a man who kept his cards close. Not a guy I'd be in a hurry to invite to poker night.

He gestured to his companion. "This is Corban Nash."

His expression was easier to read, but not easier to understand. He regarded me through narrowed eyes in a way that made me feel a bit like a lab rat running through a maze. He gave me a firm handshake, never breaking eye contact.

I took a seat in the empty chair. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"You know my assistant, Sophie Abbott?" Calloway asked.

Did I ever. I knew every delicious inch of her, but I wasn't about to say that out loud. Especially to these two. "I do."

"Curious choice of words." Nash leaned forward, adjusting his glasses.

"Is it true you married her in Vegas?" Calloway asked.

My eyebrows lifted. "Has she spoken to you about that?"

"Our wives are her best friends," Nash said, as if that explained everything.

"I suppose that means you already know the answer," I said. "Sophie and I have a private agreement as to how we're handling the legalities going forward."

"What does the agreement entail?" Calloway asked.

"As I said, it's private. If she'd like to share the details with you, that's up to her."

"That's actually pretty fair," Nash said.

Calloway shot him a look, then turned back to me. "What's your game, Cox?"

I put my hands up. "No game, unless you count Sophie's winning streak at the craps table. We had a wild night in Vegas with some unintended consequences. And if you're insinuating that I'd use a quickie marriage as a means for some kind of corporate espionage, you're giving me too much credit. I'm not that subtle."

"You mean to tell me this wasn't planned? You just happened to run into her at the casino?"

"Not exactly. I was there looking for her. Sophie's a beautiful woman. I don't think I need to apologize for wanting to pursue her."

Calloway narrowed his eyes. "You do if by pursuing her you mean manipulating her into marrying you."

He was starting to piss me off. Sophie's dad could grill me all he wanted,

but who the fuck was he? “Do we have a problem here, Calloway?”

Nash leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Interesting move.”

Calloway glanced at him. “Are you analyzing him right now?”

“I’m just saying it’s interesting that he chose to up the ante with what could be construed as a threat. Or maybe the precursor to a threat. Male lobsters do a similar kind of posturing when competing for territory.”

“Lobsters?” I asked.

“They’re not the only animals with a hierarchical social structure, of course,” he continued. “But the fact that they’re crustaceans makes them particularly fascinating. We expect to see those kinds of complex social interactions among mammals, but not so much in anything with an exoskeleton.”

I had no idea what to say to that.

Was it weird that I kind of liked this guy?

“Here’s the thing,” Calloway said, apparently ignoring Nash and his biology lesson. “Sophie isn’t just my assistant. She’s my wife’s friend. Which means I have a particular interest in her well-being.”

“Then I’m happy to reassure you that Sophie is just fine.”

“She better be.”

I was about to fire back when Nash spoke up again.

“I think he has intimacy issues.”

“How can you tell?” Calloway asked.

“Subtle nonverbal cues,” Nash said, eyeing me up and down. “And there’s a certain hesitance in the way he says her name.”

Calloway shook his head. “I’m glad you didn’t know me before I met Everly.”

Nash laughed. “Since when are you glad to know me at all?”

“Is there a point to all this?” I asked.

“What Shepherd is trying to say is that you better not screw things up with Sophie,” Nash said. “She might not have any brothers, but she has us, and we make it our business to look out for her. Also, he’ll ruin your life if you hurt her.” He gestured to Calloway.

“Why do I feel like you’re enjoying this?” Calloway asked.

Nash shrugged. “It’s nice to be on the other side of it this time.”

“Look, I didn’t manipulate Sophie into anything, least of all marrying me. That was all the whiskey. And I have no intention of hurting her. I’m a man of my word, and I’ll stick to my side of our agreement.”

Calloway stood and buttoned his jacket. “You better not make me regret doing business with you, Cox.”

I stood and met his eyes, holding my ground. “You don’t need to threaten me to make sure I do right by Sophie.”

“Good. Then prove me wrong.”

“I plan on it.” I reached out to shake his hand, my mouth turning up in a slight smile. I kind of liked him, too.

How could I not? He’d come down here to bust my balls because he cared about Sophie. I had to respect that.

I shook hands with Nash again. “Let me guess. You’re a scientist of some kind.”

“Research psychology and data analytics.” He adjusted his glasses.

My eyebrows lifted. “Intimacy issues?”

“I call it like I see it,” he said with a half grin. “Although relationship dynamics are complicated.”

“That is a fact.”

“I have this questionnaire that—”

“Corban,” Calloway said, interrupting him.

“Yeah, that’s probably not...” Nash trailed off. “Maybe another time.”

Calloway headed for the door, but Nash paused and patted me on the back. “You did great. I’m rooting for you.”

That made me chuckle. “Thanks, man.”

His friendly smile disappeared. “But seriously. Don’t fuck this up.”

I put my hands up again. “I hear you loud and clear.”

“Good.”

He left and I sank back into my chair. That was not the meeting I’d expected. For some reason, my mom popped into my head. And I had a feeling she would have been on their side.

SOPHIE

*M*y shoelace slapped against the pavement as I jogged, and my shoe felt loose. “Uh-oh, I need to tie my shoe.”

Everly, Hazel, and Nora all came to a stop. We hadn’t been running very fast, just a light jog because Everly was with us. Her baby bump was growing and she looked so cute in her yellow shirt. Hazel checked something on her fancy running watch then took her pulse, while Nora adjusted her ponytail.

I crouched to tie my shoe, then tied the other one so they’d match. I hated it when one shoe was tighter than the other. “Sorry about that.”

“No problem,” Everly said with a smile. She ran her hand down her belly. “I feel like I should walk the rest of the way anyway.”

“Is everything okay?” Hazel asked.

“I’m fine. Just a little tightness in my back.”

“Then we should definitely walk,” Nora said. “We have to take care you and that little princess.”

With my shoes snugly tied, I continued down the sidewalk with my friends. It was a Saturday and the weather was gorgeous—sunny but not too warm. Perfect for a run. I was wearing the Dirty Martini Running Club tank top Nora had gotten us for the half-marathon we’d run together. It was my favorite running shirt.

“So Sophie, how’s married life?” Nora asked with a quick wink.

I snort laughed. Although I kept saying we weren’t really married and this was just a temporary situation, it had also been a solid month since I’d spent a night in my own apartment. There was no denying that Cox and I were a

couple.

“Is it weird that I’m dating my Vegas husband?” I asked.

“Stranger things have happened,” Nora said. “Everly married her boss after pretending to date him, and Hazel married her professional nemesis. So why not date your accidental husband?”

“She has a point,” Everly said. “How’s it going with him?”

“Really well, actually. It’s making me nervous.”

“Why?” Everly asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe it seems too good to be true. At first I thought he was just a player who’d love me and leave me. And I didn’t want that. I’ve been screwed over by a guy before.”

“Your ex definitely belongs in the Shitty Ex-boyfriend Hall of Fame,” Nora said.

I sighed. He did, and they didn’t even know the whole story. “He so does. And I don’t want to get hurt again. But underneath all his cocky charm, Cox is a great guy. We have fun together and even when he’s busy with work, he makes time for me. It feels like this is turning into a serious relationship. Maybe I’m just nervous because he’s the last man I expected to fall for.”

“He did pull your hair when you were kids,” Hazel said.

“I bet he still pulls her hair,” Nora said. “Only now she wants him to. Does he live up to his name?”

“What do you mean?”

“Cox,” she said, enunciating the word slowly.

I laughed softly. “It’s spelled with an X, not c-o-c-k-s.”

“I know.”

Hazel’s brow furrowed. “The homophone *cocks* ends with an S, implying cock in the plural. You’re not suggesting he has multiple penises, are you?”

Nora laughed. “I love it when you get literal. No, I was just trying to be clever in asking if Cox has a big dick and knows how to use it.”

My cheeks warmed a little, but I couldn’t help but smile. “He lives up to his name. And then some.”

“Get it, girl.” Nora lifted her hand for a high five.

I tried to slap her hand with mine but missed and almost tripped. She stopped walking and gave me a stationary target. This time, my palm hit hers.

“Oh my god, I almost forgot,” Everly said. “I need your help. We’ve been working with an animal rescue organization and their biggest fundraiser is a doggie fashion show.”

“What’s a doggie fashion show?” Nora asked.

“It sounds adorable,” I said. “Is it like little dogs modeling sweaters and doggie costumes?”

“Not exactly,” Everly said. “They partner with Lulu Shay; she’s a clothing designer and animal lover. Volunteer models wear the clothes and they walk the runway with rescue dogs. I helped out last year and it’s so fun. Anyway, they need a few more volunteers to be models. The clothes won’t fit me with this belly, but I told them I could probably find a few people.”

“That would be an interesting experience,” Hazel said. “And an animal rescue organization is certainly a worthy cause.”

“I’m in, but are you sure the clothes will fit?” Nora grabbed her boobs. “I have bigger ta-tas than your average runway model.”

I glanced down at my own cleavage. “Um, yeah, I’d be happy to, but I won’t fit in model sizes.”

“Oh, no,” Everly said. “Lulu makes clothes for all sizes and the models are all volunteers—just normal people like us, not actual runway models. They plan for that and bring tons of clothes in different sizes so everyone can find something that fits.”

“I’m so into this.” Nora got out her phone and started typing. “I’m texting my boss to see if I can do a write-up on Lulu for my column.”

“I’ll be there,” Hazel said.

Everly’s gaze moved to me. I really wanted to help, but walking a runway? And with dogs underfoot? It sounded like a recipe for a Sophie disaster.

But I knew I’d wind up feeling left out if I didn’t go.

“I can come, too,” I said. “And I’ll try not to trip over my own feet.”

Nora put her hand on my arm. “You’ll do great, Soph.”

“Thanks.”

We got back to the parking lot and stretched. Normally we got drinks after our runs, but today I had a few errands to take care of, so I hugged my friends goodbye.

“Are we still on for tonight?” Nora asked.

“Definitely.”

“Okay, I’ll see you around nine.”

“Perfect. And thanks again. I really appreciate your help.”

She smiled. “It’s absolutely my pleasure. This will be fun.”

Cox had talked to Althea, and she’d given him a reasonable explanation

as to why she'd been with Dominic that day. But I still had a weird feeling about her. I'd seen her a few times when I'd stopped by Cox's office—usually just in passing—and I was always left with a bad taste in my mouth. She never said or did anything overtly suspicious. And maybe it was just her coolness toward me that rubbed me wrong. But I wanted to be sure.

The last few Sundays, Nora and I had staked out the restaurant where I'd seen her with Dominic. But we hadn't seen either of them, so we'd decided we needed to try a different tactic. Nora had asked Jensen if he could talk to his lady friend at the PR firm that Dominic had hired. Maybe she could find something we could use—and she had. She'd told him that Dominic—who was supposed to be sober after his stay in rehab—had been spending his Saturday nights at the Base Lounge, a bar and dance club downtown. So tonight, we were going to be there, too.

We had a plan. And he wasn't going to see Nora Lakes coming.



“WELL, at least he doesn't have terrible taste in bars.” Nora put her hands on her hips and gazed at the neon Base Lounge sign. She gave new meaning to the phrase *dressed to kill* in a silver minidress with a plunging neckline. “I've been here before. It's not bad.”

My outfit wasn't nearly as provocative—just a black dress and red heels. Short heels, because me. Although Cox had certainly liked it. When I'd asked him for help with my zipper, my dress had wound up on the floor—and I'd wound up on the bed. He'd almost made me late.

Not that I was complaining.

“They do make a nice martini here,” Oliver said. He looked dapper as usual in a button-down shirt, herringbone vest, and slacks. When I'd asked him for his help, he'd jumped at the chance to get dirt on Althea and pinkie promised not to tell Cox.

“Are we ready?” I asked. “I'm so nervous.”

“Don't be,” Nora said. “All you have to do is listen.”

Our plan was simple. Nora and I each wore a Bluetooth earpiece, mostly hidden by our hair. We'd keep our phones connected on a call so I could hear while she engaged Dominic in some not-so-innocent conversation. She'd get him talking about his career and see what we could find out.

It wasn't a perfect plan, but I was an executive assistant, not a spy.

I was so glad Nora had volunteered to do this. She was amazing when it came to talking to men, always making it look effortless. Unlike me, who tended to spill things or accidentally hit them—or myself—in the face with something.

She turned to Oliver. “Is there anything else I need to know about this guy before we go in?”

“Cox only took him on as a partner about a year ago, but I do know he's been married, and divorced, twice.”

“That probably had something to do with the hookers,” I said.

Oliver nodded. “Indeed. His father was a hotel mogul, and he should be quite wealthy in his own right, although I have no idea what his financial situation is like now. And he has a shockingly large ego for someone with such a small package.”

“Do you actually know he has a small package or are you just using that as an insult?” I asked.

“Unfortunately for me, he used to change in his office and forget to close the door quite frequently.” He shuddered. “There are some things you can't unsee.”

“Are you sure he won't recognize you?”

“If he does, he probably won't acknowledge me. Assistants are beneath his notice.”

Nora rolled her eyes. “He sounds delightful. But I know his type. This will be easy.”

I adjusted my earpiece. “So are we ready?”

“Let's do this.” Nora called my phone and we tested the sound. It would be harder to hear when we were inside, but we'd tried it at another bar the previous weekend, and it had worked pretty well. Hopefully I'd be able to hear enough.

“I'll go in first so it doesn't look like we're together,” Nora said, then disappeared inside.

Oliver and I waited for a minute, then followed her in.

The lights glowed blue, reflecting off silver-framed mirrors and glass shelves. There was a variety of seating options, including couches, chairs, small tables, and stools at the bar. Dance music reverberated through the ceiling from the dance floor upstairs and people mingled in small groups, taking up most of the seating. A guy in a white shirt tended bar and a few

servers picked their way through the crowd with drinks or empty glasses on large black trays.

“Is he here?” Nora asked in my ear.

We wandered deeper into the club and I looked around. “I’m not sure.”

Oliver stopped and pivoted so he faced me. “He’s here.”

“Where?”

“At the bar. He’s the one in the oddly shiny black shirt.”

There he was, sitting on a stool with his back to the bar. His black shirt was indeed oddly shiny. It looked like the button-down shirt version of a cheap satin prom dress. He rested one elbow on the bar and held a drink while he scanned the crowd. His expression looked bored, like he was too good to be here.

Of course, Jensen’s lady friend had said he’d been coming here every Saturday, so the too-cool-for-school thing was obviously an act.

“Nora, he’s sitting at the bar wearing a weird shiny shirt.”

“Got it. I’m going in.”

Nora made her way to the bar, her swaying hips and very short dress drawing the attention of at least half the men in the club.

Except Dominic. He had to see her. He was facing out and she walked right in front of him. But his gaze didn’t follow her as she passed.

I leaned closer to Oliver. “What if he doesn’t take the bait?”

“He will. Look at her. What man wouldn’t?”

She chose an empty stool near the end of the bar and elegantly crossed her legs. Half a second later, a guy in a short-sleeved shirt and dark pants approached, offering to buy her a drink.

Dominic still didn’t seem to notice her.

I listened in while Nora politely declined.

“We should move,” Oliver said, gesturing to an open table. “I doubt he’ll notice me, but we’re right in his line of sight.”

“Good idea.”

The guy at the bar wandered away from Nora and we snagged a table. It was bar-height with tall stools, so I made sure to focus on what I was doing when I got up into the seat. The last thing I needed was to fall on my face and cause a scene.

“What ever happened with tea shop girl?”

His shoulders slumped. “I missed my chance. She doesn’t work there anymore. I haven’t seen her in weeks.”

“Oh no. That’s so sad. I’m sorry.”

“It’s my own bloody fault. At least now I can stop spending a fortune on tea.”

“Maybe that’s your silver lining.”

He smiled. “Indeed. How about I go get us drinks?”

“Sounds great. I’ll have a martini.”

“One martini, coming right up.”

“Soph, I don’t think this guy likes brunettes,” Nora said through my earpiece. “He’s totally ignoring me.”

She was right. He wasn’t even glancing in her direction.

“That’s so weird. You look amazing.”

“I’ll give him a few minutes to come to me, but if he doesn’t, I’ll have to get more aggressive.”

“Sounds good.”

I waited at our table while Oliver got drinks from the bar. Nora ordered a martini for herself and casually sipped it while Dominic kept not noticing her. I didn’t understand it. Nora was fire in that dress. Another guy approached her and she had to work a little harder to get rid of this one.

Oliver came back with our drinks and set my martini on the table. He was about to take his seat when his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

“What’s wrong?” I glanced over my shoulder but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“It’s her,” he said.

“Who?”

“Tea shop girl.”

I twisted in my seat to look again. “Where?”

“No, stop looking.”

I whipped around. “Sorry.”

Oliver kept staring.

“Which one is she?”

“Long wavy hair. Angelic blue eyes. Black dress that’s tasteful yet sexy.”

I tried for a more casual glance and spotted her. She stood with a drink in her hand, and her dress was tasteful yet sexy. “Go talk to her.”

His wide eyes flicked to me. “Are you crazy?”

“No, but you are if you don’t go talk to her right now. It doesn’t look like she’s with anyone. This is your chance.”

Oliver didn’t move, so I slipped off the stool.

“Fine, I’ll talk to her.”

“Wait, Sophie.”

Too late. I was already picking my way around the small knots of people to her.

I made sure to give her a friendly smile as I approached. “Hi. I’m Sophie. I’m so sorry to bug you, but did you used to work at a little tea shop downtown?”

She looked slightly confused but nodded. “Yeah.”

“I thought so. My friend Oliver used to shop there all the time. He’s right over there.” I gestured to our table. “He thinks you’re really pretty, but he’s being oddly shy.”

She peered at Oliver. “I remember him. He’s the one with the sexy accent.”

“Yes, exactly. He’s totally going to kill me for saying this, but he told me he kept buying tea just so he could have an excuse to see you.”

“Really? That’s so cute.”

“That’s what I said. He’s such a nice guy and—”

Oliver appeared at my side and gave her a sheepish grin. “Evening. I’m Oliver.”

Tea shop girl gazed at him. “Lauren.”

“Lauren.” He said her name with reverence, as if he’d waited his whole life to utter it. “It’s an indescribable pleasure to finally meet you properly.” He took her hand and gently lifted it to his lips.

I took slow steps backward. Clearly they’d both forgotten I was there. The way they looked at each other, I seriously wondered if I’d just witnessed two people falling instantly in love.

It was the cutest thing ever.

“Well that was adorable,” Nora said through the earpiece.

“You heard all that?”

“Yes. But where did... Uh-oh, Soph—”

Before she could finish, I backed right into someone. I spun around. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

I stopped, and now it was my turn to stare wide-eyed.

It was Dominic.

One corner of his mouth lifted. “Are you all right?”

I was too dumbstruck to answer, so I just nodded.

“Good.” He shifted closer, his glassy eyes sweeping up and down. “I’m

Dominic. I don't think I've seen you here before."

"Oh, um..." I cast around for something to say. Had he asked me a question? No, he hadn't. *Think, Sophie.*

"Tell him your name," Nora hissed in my ear.

"I'm Sophia." Sophia? What was with me and blurting out my birth name when I met a man?

"Sophia." He took my hand and lifted it to his lips. "Pleasure."

Wait. What was he doing? Was he hitting on me?

On *me*?

No. This wasn't supposed to happen. He was supposed to hit on super sexy Nora. Not on hot-mess-not-nearly-as-sexy Sophie.

"Soph, go with it," Nora said.

"What?"

"Don't talk to me! Talk to him."

Dominic lifted his eyebrows.

"Sorry." I slipped my hand out of his grasp. "It's a pleasure to meet you too."

"Looks like your friend left you all alone. I hope it wasn't supposed to be a girls' night."

I glanced around, looking for Oliver. He'd taken Lauren to our table.

Except, wait. Girls' night? He must have seen me talking to Lauren and thought I was here with her, not Oliver.

"Girls' night. Right. It was, but I don't mind."

"Her loss is my gain. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Oh, I already—"

"Say yes," Nora said.

"Yes. Okay."

He slid his hand around to the small of my back and led me to an empty table. "What are you drinking tonight?"

"A martini, I guess?"

"Great. I'll be right back."

I watched him walk to the bar and took a seat, then adjusted my earpiece.

"Nora, what's happening?"

"He's into you."

"He can't be. Oh my god, he must know who I am. Should I run?"

"Don't you dare."

"Then what do I do?"

“Get him talking.”

“Me? I can’t.”

“Of course you can.”

“No I can’t. I don’t know what to say.”

“You’ll be fine. I’ll help.”

I took a deep breath. “What if he does know who I am?”

“How would he?”

“There were pictures of me on the internet with Cox in Vegas.”

She paused, like she was thinking about that. “If he were a woman, I’d assume he knows. But guys aren’t usually that observant. I honestly think he spotted you and went in for the kill.”

“Oh my god, he’s coming back.”

“Stay calm. You can do this.”

I swallowed hard and my heart pounded. This was so bad.

Dominic handed me a martini and set his drink on the table.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He sat on the stool across from me. “But I should thank you. Tonight was proving to be disappointing until I saw you.”

“Are you smiling at him?” Nora asked. “Smile, like you’re a little bit shy.”

“Disappointing?” I smiled, but probably too big. That wasn’t a shy smile. I put my hand in front of my mouth to compensate and a finger accidentally brushed the bottom of my nostril, making my nose tickle.

Please don’t sneeze. Please don’t sneeze.

“Can I be honest with you?” he asked.

I took a slow breath through my nose. Thankfully the tickle went away. “Of course.”

“I have a thing for curvy blondes. I saw you and I couldn’t resist.”

“Act flattered,” Nora said.

I lowered my eyes to the table and fingered one of my curls. “Couldn’t resist me?”

“Absolutely. It’s strange; you look a little bit familiar, but I’d never forget a woman like you. Maybe that just means it was fate that we met tonight.”

I laughed awkwardly. He probably had seen the photos of me with Cox. But if he remembered who I was, he wouldn’t have admitted I looked familiar.

“He doesn’t know who you are, Soph,” Nora said. “Keep it up; you’re

doing great.”

Her confirmation gave me a little confidence boost. Maybe I could do this.

I picked up my drink to take a sip. “Maybe it was fate. You seem a little bit familiar too.”

He grinned, as if he liked where this was going. “I’m really looking forward to taking you home with me tonight.”

I almost sprayed martini all over him but managed to swallow it. “Oh, um, that’s...”

“Too forward?”

Yes, and then some. “I was just thinking we could get to know each other first.”

“Fair enough. I’d like to finish my drink anyway.”

“Good save,” Nora said. “Also, this guy’s a douche.”

I paused, thinking he might ask me something, but he didn’t seem to be interested in learning anything about me. He just eyed me like I was on the menu.

“Well, what do you do for a living?” I asked.

“I have my hands in a number of different ventures,” he said.

“That’s code for unemployed,” Nora said.

“Interesting. What sort of ventures?” I asked.

“I used to be in commercial real estate. But now I’m looking for new opportunities.”

“Also code for unemployed,” Nora said.

It was hard not to laugh. But this might be the opening I needed. “Why the change? Commercial real estate wasn’t profitable?”

He turned his glass around. “No, it was. Quite profitable, in fact. I had a falling out with my business partner.”

I tried not to gasp. *Act natural, Sophie. Keep him talking.* “That’s too bad. What happened?”

“It’s a long story.”

He took a sip of his drink, and I thought he might leave it at that. It was tempting to ask another question, but something told me to wait. Maybe if I stayed quiet, he’d continue.

“I admit, I made some mistakes.” He set his glass down. “But who hasn’t? My partner, however, didn’t want to wait for things to blow over. So he forced me out.”

“That’s terrible.”

He shrugged, like it didn’t matter. “Fuck him. He’ll get what’s coming to him.”

Leaning forward, I met his eyes and my lips curled in a wicked smile. I lowered my voice, like we were sharing a secret. “How?”

For a second, I thought I’d overplayed my hand. But Nora didn’t correct me. And the corner of Dominic’s mouth lifted.

“I’ve got him right where I want him. He thinks—”

Smack!

Pain exploded across my face and my eyes watered. Instinctively, my hands flew to my nose. What had just happened?

A server set a tray of overturned drinks on our table. “Oh my god. I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I did that. I tripped. Did I hit your nose?”

Blinking away the tears, I nodded. “I think so.”

“Let me get you some napkins.”

Dominic backhanded one of the glasses off the table. “You fucking spilled all over me. Get this shit out of here.”

“Sir, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, it was just an accident. I’m—” I was about to say fine, but the metallic tang of blood hit my tongue. I looked down at my hands.

Great, I got hit in the face with a serving tray and now I had a bloody nose.

Dominic grimaced. “Jesus. She’s bleeding everywhere.” He stood and brushed off the little bit of liquid that had splashed on his shirt. “Fuck this. I want my drinks comped.”

“Thanks for your help, asshole,” I said as he walked away. “Very heroic of you.”

Another server handed me a clean towel. A second later, Nora and Oliver were both at my side, with Lauren looking on.

I gingerly wiped my nose. “Gross.”

“Sweetie, are you okay?” Nora asked. “Should I get ice?”

“No.” I glanced around, but Dominic had disappeared. “I’m okay. But damn it, he was about to tell me what he was up to.”

“I know.” Nora gently rubbed my back. “But you did so good.”

“Do you want me to call Cox?” Oliver asked.

“No, I just want to get out of here. People are staring.”

Nora cast a death glare at all the onlookers. “She just got hit in the face.

Don't make it worse."

Most of them had the decency to go back to their drinks.

"Come on, love." Oliver helped me off the stool.

The club manager rushed out with more towels, an ice pack, and offers of free drinks. I told him I was fine; I just wanted to go home. Nora wrapped an arm around my shoulders and we went outside.

After making sure I was genuinely all right, Oliver said goodbye. At least one good thing had come out of tonight. He left with Lauren. It looked like his dreams of a date with tea shop girl were finally coming true.

Nora drove me back to Cox's house. My nose still hurt, but the initial blinding pain had dulled considerably. It wasn't broken. And I'd only gotten a little bit of blood on my dress.

I twisted a napkin in my hands, the lights outside blurring as we drove. I'd come so close. Why did things like this always happen to me? Why was I such a disaster all the time? This one hadn't even been my fault. I hadn't tripped or spilled or anything. And I was still a mess.

Story of my life.

But as soon as Nora pulled up in front of Cox's house, my spirits lifted. I wasn't going to tell him about Dominic—not yet—but I could tell him the rest. And I knew he was the one person who could truly make everything better.

COX

The folded piece of fine-grit sandpaper was almost smooth against my fingers. I gently worked it across the wood, moving with the grain. My eyes lifted to the clock. Again. I needed to stop checking the time and focus on what I was doing. Watching the minutes tick by wasn't going to bring Sophie home any faster.

I'd spent the first part of my evening trying to convince myself that I had not turned into the kind of guy who'd spend a Saturday night moping around because his girl went out with her friends.

It was a lie. I was that guy.

So I'd come out to my workshop in the garage. At least I could do something while I moped. I stopped sanding and ran my fingers along the wood. So far, so good.

A car pulled up outside. That was odd. I didn't expect her home so early.

But you wouldn't hear me complain.

I dusted the fine sawdust off my hands, covered my project with a cloth, and went back into the house.

As soon as Sophie came through the front door, I knew something was wrong. Her eyes were red, like she'd been crying. I was ten feet away and it still felt like I couldn't get to her fast enough.

She shut the door behind her and landed in my arms, resting her cheek against my chest.

"What happened, sugar bug?"

"I got hit in the face with a serving tray. It gave me a bloody nose, but I'm okay."

“What?” I gently tipped her chin up. “You were bleeding?”

“You know how it is when something hits your nose. It doesn’t even have to hit very hard and suddenly there’s blood everywhere.”

She looked all right. No sign of bruising. “Sophie, I need you to be honest with me right now. It was really just a serving tray? Because if someone hurt you—”

“No.” She put her hand on the center of my chest. “It was a tray. The server tripped and I just happened to be in the way. Because, you know, of course I was. It’s me.”

“My poor little wifey.” I slid my fingers into her hair. “Do you need me to kiss it better?”

She laughed, and the sound was music to my ears. “Yes, please.”

I gently kissed the tip of her nose. Then her forehead. Her cheeks. Her chin. By the time I reached her lips, we were already heading for the bedroom.

And I was going to kiss her *everywhere*.



SOPHIE SAT in the passenger seat, clutching the fabric of her dress in both hands. It was pink with white polka dots and made her look like a birthday present I couldn’t wait to unwrap. Her hair was loose around her shoulders and she’d worn sexy pink lipstick to match.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about,” I said.

“I’m not nervous. What makes you think I’m nervous?”

“For starters, if you talk any faster, we’re going to have to record you and play it back in slow motion just to understand what you’re saying. And you might want to loosen your grip on your dress.”

She looked down at her lap and tried to smooth out the wrinkled fabric. “Oh no.”

“It’s all right. You look beautiful.”

“Thanks. And of course I’m nervous. I’m about to meet your mother.”

“You have nothing to fear. She’s going to love you.”

“Cox, the last time I was introduced to a boyfriend’s parents, their dog peed on my shoes while I was still wearing them. When I took them off, I realized I’d put on a pair of socks I’d gotten as a gag gift from someone at

work. They had dicks all over them. In rainbow colors.”

I laughed. “I’m sorry honey, but you have to admit that’s funny. Did anyone notice?”

“Oh yes, they noticed. As soon as I walked in, his fourteen-year-old sister blurted out, *Are those penises on your socks?* And then they made me sit down and put my feet up on a chair so they could take a closer look. It was mortifying.”

“Well, are you wearing dick socks today?”

She cracked a smile. “No.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. Besides, my mom doesn’t have a dog.”

“Does she have a cat?”

“No. Why?”

“Because once I was at my friend Hazel’s for movie night and her cat Erwin puked up a hairball in my lap. I’m telling you, I have the worst luck.”

“No dogs to pee on your shoes, no cats to puke in your lap, and you’re not wearing socks, so no dicks. I think you’ll be fine.”

She took a deep breath. “I hope you’re right.”

“The worst thing that’s going to happen is my mom’s going to scold me in front of you like I’m eleven again for not bringing you to meet her sooner.”

“So she knows about us? Like, all about us?”

“She knows about Vegas, yeah.”

“I can’t decide if that helps or not.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m the girl who got so drunk with her son, I convinced him to get married when we barely knew each other.”

“Convinced me?”

“We’ve been over this. It was my idea first.”

“I haven’t conceded that point yet. And who paid for the ceremony?”

She paused, as if searching her memory. “Was it you?”

“I think it was.”

“Still. She’s totally going to judge me, and I don’t even blame her.”

I laughed. “Sugar, you need to stop worrying. I told you, she’s going to love you.” I stopped talking because I’d been about to say *she’s going to love you as much as I do.*

That sure got the adrenaline pumping.

She glanced at me, her face lighting up with a hopeful smile. “Thanks.”
That look did nothing to slow my pounding heart. Because holy shit, did I?

I didn’t have time to keep pondering that thought. I pulled into Mom’s driveway and there she was, standing in the open front door, waiting to greet us.

Here we go.

I parked and went around to open the door for Sophie. I took both her hands in mine to help her out of the car, just to make sure she was steady on her feet.

The house I’d bought for my mom was a beautiful brick two-story with a yard that was as neatly trimmed as the golf course behind it. She stood just outside the front door—painted red, because she’d always wanted a house with a red front door—dressed in her usual polo shirt and Bermuda shorts.

I couldn’t read her expression as we approached. Was she about to smile? Or were her features on the verge of shifting into a glare? It was hard to say.

Sophie slipped her hand in mine and squeezed. I wasn’t sure whether she was offering reassurance or looking for it, but either way, it felt good.

Crossing her arms, Mom met my eyes and gave me the dreaded single eyebrow lift. “Two months, Camden.”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Am I right about that? You got married two months ago?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And I’m just now meeting my daughter-in-law?” She shook her head, registering her disappointment. Then her gaze moved to Sophie and her face lit up with a bright smile. “And now I get to meet my daughter-in-law. Come here, sweetheart.”

Sophie let go of my hand and stepped into Mom’s arms for a hug.

Mom moved back and took Sophie’s hands. “Let me look at you. Sophie Abbott. You sure grew up to be a pretty thing, didn’t you?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Cox.”

“Oh honey, call me Georgia for now. When you’re comfortable, you can call me Mom. Come on in.”

Call her Mom? I was starting to wonder if I should have kept this whole thing quiet.

She ushered us inside and led us to the kitchen. In addition to a red front door, Mom’s dream home list had included a big kitchen with lots of counter

space and an island with stools so her guests could sit and chat with her while she cooked. So that was exactly what I'd given her.

"Your home is so beautiful," Sophie said.

"Thank you," Mom said. "It is a blessing."

She'd already put out a plate of cheese and crackers and she poured us glasses of her famous sweet tea. Sophie took a seat at the island. Mom still wasn't looking at me. I wondered how long she was going to hold onto this grudge.

And how long she was going to insist on calling Sophie her daughter-in-law.

Technically it was true. For now. But did she actually believe I was going to stay married?

Not that there was anything wrong with Sophie. She'd make the sweetest little wife in the world. But marriage wasn't for me. I'd known that since I was a kid. And I wasn't going to start questioning it now, just because I happened to be dating my wife. And enjoying it.

"I think the last time I saw you, you must have been twelve or thirteen?" Mom asked.

Sophie nodded. "I'm surprised you remember me."

"Well, we both know my son wasn't exactly his best self at that age. He was awfully mean to you, wasn't he?"

"He really was."

I leaned against the counter. "Thanks for bringing that up."

"Don't blame me. You're the one who was a snotty little shit to the poor girl. I hope you've properly apologized."

"Mom, I was a kid."

"You certainly were. And a troubled one, at that." She turned to Sophie. "How's your daddy? I apologize, but I don't recall his name."

"Melvin Abbott, but his friends call him Mel," Sophie said. "And that's okay; it was a long time ago. He's fine, all things considered. He has some mobility issues, but he does all right."

"His housing situation is less than ideal," I said. "But I'll be taking care of that soon."

"Will you, now?" Mom asked.

Sophie glanced at me. "It's part of our agreement. You know, the whole *oops we got married* thing. You do know the whole story, right?"

"Oh sure," Mom said. "Vegas. Too much whiskey. Next thing you know,

you've got an Elvis impersonator declaring you man and wife."

"I know it's kind of an unusual situation," Sophie said. "So I just want you to know I appreciate you welcoming me into your home like this."

Mom smiled at her. "Of course, honey. We're family." Her eyes flicked to me, then back to Sophie. "Even if my son still thinks it's just for now."

I swallowed back a groan. She was laying it on thick.

Fortunately, Sophie seemed to be taking my mom's lack of subtlety in stride. She laughed and helped herself to a piece of cheese and a cracker.

I reached to get one for myself, but Mom smacked my hand away.

"What was that for?"

"I'm not ready to forgive you yet."

"For what?"

Her brow furrowed, like I'd just asked a stupid question. "For all of it. Drink your tea and be happy with what you get."

I picked up my glass. There was no arguing with her when she dug in her heels. "Yes, ma'am."

Mom turned her attention back to Sophie, asking her friendly questions about her life. It was a far cry from the grilling Mr. Abbott had given me. I was pretty sure my mom liked Sophie more than she liked me at the moment.

Luckily for me, Mom seemed to come closer to forgiving me the longer we stayed. Sophie and I helped her get lunch on the table, and she even let me eat. I mostly stayed in the background, letting the two of them talk. There was something about seeing Mom and Sophie enjoying themselves—smiling and laughing together—that made my chest feel tight.

Eventually, it was time to say our goodbyes. Mom walked us out and embraced Sophie in a big hug.

"Thank you for everything, Georgia," Sophie said. "It was so good to meet you."

"You too, sweetheart." She turned to me and for the first time today, didn't glare. Instead, she patted my chest. "Love you, son."

"Love you too, Mom."

"Y'all come back soon. And Sophie, whether or not you stay my daughter-in-law, you're welcome anytime."

"Thank you so much." Sophie glanced at me and the look in her eyes was like a knife to my chest. I could almost hear her unspoken question.

Are we really going to get divorced?

Skyline was breaking ground soon. At this point, even if I did take some

flack in the press for marrying Sophie, it wouldn't be enough to hurt the project. And that was why we'd stayed married in the first place. We could file for divorce anytime.

But did I want to? Did she?

The fact that I was questioning this was such a mindfuck.

We said our last goodbyes and I led Sophie to my car. She was quiet on the drive home. Was she thinking the same thing as me? Was she wondering how the fuck this was going to work?

I couldn't deny I had feelings for Sophie—feelings I'd never had for a woman before. She was making me question everything. The way I lived. My staunch commitment to bachelorhood. I'd never considered what I'd do if I found someone I *wanted* to marry. I'd always assumed that would never happen.

And then Sophie had dropped into my life. She'd changed everything. And a single question kept swirling through my head.

Was I going to lose her?

SOPHIE

Meeting Georgia had been so wonderful. She was funny and sweet and she'd been so nice to me. She hadn't made me feel the least bit bad about how Cox and I had wound up married. I felt like I could have stayed for hours, just chatting with her.

But we'd left on a bit of a sad note, and I wasn't sure what to do about it.

Cox drove us home in silence. He didn't seem angry or upset. Just preoccupied. Was he thinking about us? Or had his mind already moved ahead to work? It was Sunday, after all. Maybe he was mentally reviewing all the things he had to do at the office the next day.

I fiddled with my dress, remaining just as quiet as he was. But I wasn't thinking about work.

I was thinking about the big D word.

If we filed for divorce, did it mean we'd break up? Would I go back to my apartment and move on, like none of it had been real?

Because we had to, right? We couldn't stay married.

When I'd agreed to wait to file for divorce, I hadn't counted on falling for the man I'd married.

But I had. I'd fallen for him hard.

We got back to his place and went inside. I half-expected Cox to go straight to his office, but he followed me to the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed while I stepped out of my heels.

"Come here." He patted the spot next to him.

I sat, not quite sure if I could meet his eyes. My feelings were all over the place.

He gently brushed my hair back from my face. “Sophie, I need to apologize.”

“For what?”

“For how I treated you when we were kids. I should have already, but I kept thinking it was so long ago, how could it matter? And maybe it doesn’t. But I’m sorry anyway.”

“Thank you. I forgive you.”

I thought that was it—that he’d said what he needed to say. Because he was right: It had been a long time ago. And we’d been kids. I wasn’t going to hold him responsible for things he’d done when we were children. He certainly wasn’t mean now. And he only pulled my hair when I wanted him to.

But he fingered one of my curls and kept talking. “The time we lived on Ashford Street was something of a low point. It was before my mom finally kicked my dad out.”

“Your dad?”

He nodded slowly. “He drank. A lot. He wasn’t so bad when he was sober, but when he wasn’t, he got violent.”

I touched the side of his face. “Oh, Cox.”

“So I lashed out. I was being hurt at home and I took it out on kids at school. Particularly you. It’s not an excuse, but it’s the truth. And I’m sorry.”

My heart ached for the little boy he’d been. “I’m sorry one of the people who should have loved you the most was hurting you.”

He kept playing with my hair and I had the strangest feeling that it made him feel better. “Do you want to hear something terrible?”

“Okay.”

“I liked you. In fact, I liked you so much, I was mad at you for the way you made me feel. I think that’s why I picked on you so much.”

“You liked me? I wouldn’t have known.”

“No, I was a dumbass. But you made some very confusing things happen in my pants.”

“Do you want to hear something else that’s terrible?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t like you at all.”

We both burst out laughing. It felt good, dispelling some of the yucky feeling in my stomach.

“Sugar, I don’t blame you one bit. I didn’t deserve to be liked by you.”

I traced a fingertip along his lips. “I like you now.”

“That’s good news. Because I still like you.” He took my hand in his and kissed the tips of my fingers.

A part of me wondered if we should have the dreaded divorce conversation. I knew we needed to eventually. But he kissed his way up my arm to my neck and the warmth of his mouth on my skin and the scratch of his stubble made it hard to think about anything else.

“I like you in this dress,” he murmured in my ear. “But I’ll like it even better when it’s on the floor.”

I laughed softly. “Me too.”

Still kissing my neck, he lowered the zipper. The dress slipped off my shoulders.

“Fuck,” he growled, looking down at me. “You’re wearing them.”

I was wearing them. The bra and panties he’d sent to my office right after Vegas.

He slid a thumb over my nipple and I gasped. The lace was rough against my sensitive skin. He traced a slow circle, the friction sending a burst of electricity through my body.

I stood and stepped out of my dress while he took off his clothes. This was what I needed—Cox inside me. I needed him filling me, silencing my worries over what was going to happen between us.

Grabbing my hips to pull me close, he sat on the edge of the bed and nuzzled my chest through the lacy fabric. “You’re so fucking sexy.”

Heat bloomed between my legs. “Cox, I need—”

“I know, sugar.” He dragged his tongue over my nipple, the rough lace and heat of his mouth making me gasp again. “I’ll give you everything you need.”

He took off my bra, then hooked his thumbs in the waistband of my panties to slide them down my legs. I loved the way he looked at me. He’d never once made me feel self-conscious about my curves. In fact, I’d never felt sexier.

His hands roamed over my body while his mouth left a hot trail on my skin. Just when I thought I couldn’t take it anymore—I was going to die right here if he didn’t fuck me now—he got a condom out of the nightstand.

I climbed on the bed and he got on his knees in front of me. His erection jutted out, thick and ready.

“Come here,” he growled.

He stayed on his knees, resting back on his heels, and hauled me onto his lap. I was already so wet, his cock slid in easily, and I wrapped my legs around him. Grabbing my ass, he pulled me closer. His thickness stretched me open, filling me in all the best ways.

Our mouths tangled, velvety soft tongues sliding against each other. He held me close, staying deep inside me, his grip firm. As much as my body cried out for more—for movement and friction—I reveled in his kiss. In my skin against his and the way he held me tight against him.

My heart fluttered as he kept kissing me and a burst of emotion lit me up like a firework in the night sky. Because this wasn't just sex. This moment, this feeling, was so much more. It was intimate and vulnerable. It was connection.

It was love.

Oh my god, it was. I was in love with Cox.

I whimpered against his mouth, feeling like I could cry. Or laugh. Or maybe both.

He kissed his way to my neck again and murmured in my ear. “Fuck, you feel so good. I don't want this to end.”

I held him tighter because I didn't want it to end, either. Any of it.

Groaning, he shifted his hips and moved me up and down his hard length. I rolled my hips, grinding against him as he thrust inside me. He kept hold of me with one strong arm and slid his fingers into my hair. His fist clenched around my curls and he pulled my head back to bare my neck.

I held onto his shoulders, riding him while he lapped his tongue over my skin. Every drag of his cock through me made my inner walls tighten around him.

“I want to devour every inch of you,” he growled.

His grip on my hair loosened and he moved his hand to cup my cheek. My hard nipples rubbed against his chest and he clamped his mouth on my neck, sucking hard.

“Cox,” I breathed.

Driving in deep, he groaned again, his voice reverberating through me. He kept sucking my neck and his finger brushed my lips. I flicked my tongue out, licking it, and he slid it into my mouth.

Our bodies moved in sync—in a slow, erotic dance. Like we'd been made for each other. I sucked his finger while his cock slid in and out, his mouth still clamped on my neck. He filled every bit of me.

He owned me.

Heat and pressure built deep inside. His breath grew ragged and his hips jerked harder. He was close. I could feel it.

Movement suddenly caught my attention and my eyes flicked to the partially open door.

Someone was there.

Oh my god, it was Althea.

My breath caught and I almost stopped. We had to stop. She was standing right there, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

But Cox moved his other hand to my ass and thrust in so deep, my eyes rolled back.

I'd never been excited by the idea of getting caught having sex, but somehow this made me feel wonderfully naughty. She wanted to walk in like she owned the place while we were in Cox's bedroom? Fine. She could get an eyeful.

So I didn't stop him.

With my arms wrapped around his neck, I leaned my head back and rolled my hips against him. His grip on my ass tightened, his fingers digging into me. He thrust harder, faster, grunting like an animal, his cock hard as steel inside me.

My inner muscles clenched, pulsing around him like a warning. He grunted hard and his muscles flexed.

I didn't look to see if Althea was still watching. I didn't care. I chased my climax, moaning with every frenzied thrust. Losing myself in the feel of him deep inside me.

"So fucking good," he growled into my ear. "I'm going to come in you so hard."

"Yes," I breathed. "Come."

Without warning, he tipped me backward onto the bed and drove into me, hard and deep. My eyes rolled back again as he braced himself on top of me and fucked me mercilessly. His hips jerked, every muscle in his body tightening. I hooked my legs around his waist and surrendered.

I'd never been fucked so hard in my life. And oh my god, I loved it.

One more thrust and I burst apart, every nerve ending coming alive at once. My fingernails dug into Cox's back and he groaned, a rough, guttural sound. He plunged in again, and again, and again, his throaty growls filling the air. We came together, riding out our orgasms in simultaneous glory.

Finally, he slowed. Still braced on top of me, he blinked his eyes open and met mine. “Fuck.”

My lips curled in a grin, although I was still dazed from that orgasm. “Yeah.”

He blew out a breath and rolled off me to deal with the condom. No sign of Althea, and part of me wondered if I’d imagined it. Because if she’d really been there, I would have stopped. I didn’t just keep having sex with someone watching.

Did I?

Cox came back and I got up to quickly use the bathroom, then climbed in bed with him.

He gathered me in his arms and kissed my head. “That was amazing.”

I took a long, slow breath, nestling into his warmth. “It was. But...”

“But what?”

“I might be crazy, but I think someone might have just seen us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think Althea was in the doorway.”

He laughed. “Well, shit.”

“She wasn’t, right? I had to have imagined it.”

“She has been known to barge in my house unannounced. So yeah, you might have seen her.”

I winced. “Sorry. I should have stopped. But you felt so good, and... I don’t know.”

He rolled me onto my back and grinned at me. “You wanted to be a bad girl?”

“Maybe?”

“Fuck, you’re amazing.” He kissed me, slow and deep. “And don’t worry about her. If she did see, it’s her own fault.”

“Sorry if I made things weird.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “She should know better. Look at you. Of course I’ll be fucking my wife every chance I get.”

I laughed softly, trying to hide the little bit of hurt I felt every time he called me his wife.

Because it was still a joke to him. A way to tease me.

It had been funny at first. Not so much now.

But he smiled at me and kissed my lips again, and I didn’t want to ruin it. So I just kissed him back. And I didn’t say what was really on my mind.

That, stupid as it was, I was in love with him.

Because I was too afraid he couldn't say it back.

COX

Goddamn, I was in a good mood. Monday morning had started with good news in my inbox—Skyline was well underway—and a productive meeting with my lead architect. I loved seeing the pieces of a project come together, especially one as big—and expensive—as this.

But mostly my state of mind was due to Sophie.

Whether it was introducing her to my mom or the hot afternoon we'd spent in the bedroom—probably both—I felt fucking great.

Even Althea's icy expression when she walked in my office didn't bring me down a single notch.

Although as soon as I caught sight of her face, I knew Sophie had been right. She'd walked in on us yesterday.

Exhibitionism wasn't really my thing, but I didn't really care that she'd seen us. Like I'd told Sophie, it was her own fault. Hopefully she'd just let it go.

"Morning," I said.

Her nostrils flared and she pushed my door closed. "That's it? That's all you have to say to me?"

"What else would you like me to say? Ask you about your weekend?" I crossed my arms. "How was your weekend, Althea?"

"You're sleeping with her."

I narrowed my eyes. "Since when is who I sleep with any of your goddamn business?"

"Since you got married with no prenup."

“This again? For fuck’s sake, Althea. I have this under control. Sophie isn’t going to try to get half my assets. She and I already have an agreement. We’re fine.”

Her eyes widened. “What agreement? Is it in writing? Why didn’t you let me look it over first?”

“It’s not in writing, but if it’ll make you feel better, you can whip something up for me.”

“How much are you giving her?”

“I’m buying a house for her father.”

Her brow furrowed. “What? Why?”

“Because he needs a new place to live and that’s what she asked for. I’m probably making an offer on something this week, but I need to bring Sophie to see it first.”

“She asked you to buy her dad a house? That’s it?”

“It’s almost like she’s not the gold-digging harlot you assumed she’d be.”

She crossed her arms. “I’m just trying to make sure your interests are protected.”

“I know you are. It’s your job. But I need you to trust me when I say Sophie isn’t a problem.”

“I still think sleeping with her is a bad idea.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I fail to see what could possibly be wrong with sleeping with my wife.”

She rolled her eyes. “She’s not your wife.”

I stared at her for a second. I knew what she meant. She was only legally my wife because we’d done something stupid in Vegas.

But had it really been stupid?

“Knock the next time you come over,” I said, my voice cold. “That’ll spare you from seeing anything you don’t want to see.”

She let out a breath. “I’m sorry for intruding on your privacy.”

“Why did you come over yesterday?”

Her mouth opened, but she hesitated before replying. “It was about Sophie, actually. When do you want me to draw up the paperwork?”

My jaw hitched. The divorce paperwork. It was a reasonable question—filing for divorce had always been the plan—but hearing Althea bring it up made me irrationally mad. “We’ll deal with that later.”

“Later? We both know there’s no reason to wait anymore.”

“I said later.” I held her gaze. This wasn’t up for debate. “Was that all?”

“That was all.”

“Good.” I stood and pocketed my phone. “I’m meeting the foreman down at the job site in twenty minutes. I’ll be back this afternoon.”

Without another word, I swept past her and left.



IT HAD BEEN a busy week at work, and normally a charity fashion show featuring rescue dogs wouldn’t have been high on my list of ways to spend a Friday night. But my definition of normal was rapidly changing.

My sweet little sugar bug was volunteering tonight. She’d be walking in the fashion show, so obviously I was going to be front and center.

I made my way toward the long T-shaped stage that had been set up like a runway. Chairs had been set in rows on both sides. I found my seat and nodded to Calloway and Nash before sitting down. “Gentlemen.”

Calloway eyed me with cold skepticism. “Cox.”

“Nice to see you, too. How’s your lovely wife?”

For the first time ever, I saw his expression soften. The corner of his mouth twitched in what could almost be called a smile. “She’s perfect.”

Nash leaned over. “Shep, are you sure you won’t come down to the lab for an interview?”

“No,” Calloway said.

“But you’re like the ultimate case study in avoidant attachment. It would really help me refine my theory.”

“Still no.”

Nash’s eyes moved to me. “What about you? Would you say you have a favorable view of yourself but a generally negative view of other people?”

Calloway glanced at me and shook his head as if to say, *Don’t answer that.*

That seemed like good advice, so I just shook my head.

The emcee, a woman dressed in an elegant black dress, walked out onto the stage and the crowd quieted. She thanked us all for being here and introduced the animal rescue organization, as well as Lulu Shay, the clothing designer. I was happy to support a good cause, but I was really here to see Sophie. A few faces peeked out from behind a curtain at the end of the stage and I craned my neck to see if one of them was her.

“Let’s start the show,” the emcee said, and the crowd applauded.

Music with a rhythmic beat started up and the first model walked out, accompanied by a little Yorkshire terrier on a leash. They were met with oohs and ahs from the audience as they made their way down the runway.

I clapped politely with everyone else as each model came out with her canine companion. Fashion wasn’t really my thing, unless you counted picking out hot lingerie for Sophie. But the outfits were nice—more realistic than high fashion, and some of the dogs wore matching scarves or sweaters. I had to admit, it was pretty damn cute.

“It’s true that dogs can smell fear,” Nash said out of the blue. “Their sense of smell is about one hundred thousand times stronger than a human’s and they can smell changes in body chemistry elicited by alterations in emotional state.”

Before either of us could reply to that, a woman with dark-rimmed glasses wearing a lavender pantsuit came out with a yellow lab. I recognized her as Sophie’s friend Hazel. Corban stood and clapped loudly for his wife. She gave him a quick smile as she walked by.

Next came one of Sophie’s other friends—the dark-haired one, Nora. She strutted in a pair of high stilettos, leading a brown and white dog.

Nora turned at the end of the runway and made her way back to the front. And waiting for her turn at the top of the T-shaped stage was my Sophie.

All those golden curls were pinned up, revealing the slope of her neck, and the red dress she was wearing fit her like a dream. One look and I knew I was buying it for her. It highlighted her delicious curves and made her skin look like it glowed.

She took a deep breath and glanced down at the fluffy white dog on her leash. It had a red scarf around its neck to match her dress. Looking up, she scanned the crowd until her eyes met mine.

I smiled at her. *Knock ‘em dead, sugar.*

With another breath, she started walking down the runway.

Her steps were straight, but hesitant at first. The dog stayed obediently on her left. I watched her pass, smiling up at her like an idiot. But goddamn, she looked beautiful tonight.

She’d been nervous about this—about being up there in front of all these people. I held my breath as she got to the end of the runway and paused, striking a pose with one hand on her hip.

Hell yes. That’s my girl.

She turned, seeming to grow more confident with every step, and the dog followed. Her energy was infectious, her bright smile and cute little hip sway making the crowd clap and cheer. I whistled as she passed on her way back to the front of the stage where the next woman waited, holding the leash of a droopy-eared black dog.

With a glance over her shoulder, Sophie flashed me another wide smile. I clapped louder.

The black dog barked, the low sound carrying over the music, and lunged forward. Sophie's little dog didn't seem to realize it would be nothing more than a snack. It barked back and charged. The leash went taut, jerking Sophie's arm.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. I watched her try to gain control of her dog. It was small but determined, and she hadn't been expecting the yank on the leash. She pitched forward, arms flailing. One foot kicked back and her shoe went flying into the crowd. The bigger dog lunged again, barking at the little white dog, while another volunteer rushed out to help.

Sophie hit the stage, arms stretched out to grasp her dog, and pulled it out of the bigger dog's reach just in time. The crowd let out a collective gasp, then fell silent. I was already on my feet to rush to her when she rolled over, sat up, and pulled the white dog to her chest.

After kicking off her remaining shoe, she tucked the little dog under one arm and stood. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair had come loose, and I had no doubt there'd be a few bruises I'd need to kiss better. But she didn't hide her face or run away, too embarrassed to face the crowd. She held that little dog close while the volunteers got the bigger dog under control behind her. And she curtsied.

The audience went wild.

I stared at her, clapping my ass off, while she waved at the crowd with a sheepish smile, then scratched the little dog's head.

Oh my god. I fucking loved that woman.

The truth hit me like a freight train. I loved her. I loved her so much. Every sweet, smiling, clumsy, hot mess, golden-curved bit of her.

I'd always thought I was immune. Self-sufficient. An island.

Boy, had I been wrong.

Sophie Abbott had stolen my heart when I was a dick-headed eleven-year-old kid. She'd had it ever since. And looking at her now, ruffled but

plucky as ever, I realized that I never wanted it back.

COX

I got off the elevator and nodded to Ty, our receptionist, as I walked by. I'd hit the gym at lunch and my hair was still damp from my shower. It felt good, my muscles warm and tired.

My phone blinked with messages, but none of them were Sophie, so I'd deal with them later. Fortunately, her little mishap at the fashion show the other night hadn't done any damage. No bruises, but I'd spent the night kissing her better anyway.

All right, so even if she had hurt herself, it wouldn't have been where I'd spent most of my time kissing her. But making her come with my tongue was a great way to make it all better.

I set my phone on my desk and took a seat. Althea poked her head in and knocked on my partially open door.

"Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure. Come on in."

Althea always looked serious, but there was an unusual amount of gravity in her expression. She held a folder against her chest.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"I need to talk to you."

I gestured to the chair on the other side of my desk. "Shoot."

She glanced around, then shut my office door before taking a seat.

My brow furrowed. "What's going on?"

She set the folder in her lap and flattened her palm over the top of it. "I'm not exactly sure how to say this."

"That's very ominous."

“I know. But it’s not good news.”

Had something happened with Skyline? She was right; that wouldn’t be good news. “Bad news about Skyline?”

“No. This is personal.” She took a deep breath. “It’s about Sophie.”

Tension rippled across my back. “What about her?”

“I know you told me not to worry about her. But when it comes to your legal interests, it’s my job to worry. And it turns out, we have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Are you aware of her financial situation?”

“I haven’t asked to see her bank statements, no. Why would I?”

“Because you married her. And I knew you wouldn’t, so I took the liberty of doing some research. At the time of your wedding, Sophie was in a considerable amount of debt.”

“So? A lot of people are in debt. Why is that such a problem?”

She opened her folder and took out several pieces of paper. “She had two car loans, plus multiple maxed out credit cards, all in her name.”

I glanced over the documents. “Two car loans? Why would she... Where did you get all this?”

“I have sources. Did part of your agreement with her include paying off all her debt?”

“No. She never even brought it up.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.” She paused and a sense of dread stole over me, like she was about to drop the hammer. “Her debt is gone. She paid it all. Every cent.”

I knew exactly what she was implying, but every cell in my body screamed no. It couldn’t be true. Sophie wouldn’t. She couldn’t have.

“Gone?”

“Every loan, every credit card, all with a zero balance. You’re sure you didn’t do it? Maybe she confided in you late one night and you decided to take care of it for her when you were half asleep? Or drunk again?”

I shook my head slowly. “No.”

“I know that you wanted to believe in her. That you were convinced she didn’t marry you for your money, but—”

“Let’s be clear, right now, before you continue,” I said, cutting her off. “You’re telling me you think Sophie stole money from me.”

“I think it’s quite obvious that she did.”

“How the fuck could she have done that? She doesn’t have access to

anything.”

“The payoff dates on every loan are within a few days of each other. And they’re all when you were in Houston.”

What the fuck? A pit formed in my gut. There had to be another explanation. But if there was, I wasn’t coming up with anything.

“I’m sorry this is hard to hear,” Althea continued. “But she was there, alone in your house that whole week. She could have gotten your account numbers off your computer or your checkbook if you keep one around.”

Althea was right. She could have done either of those things. My passwords were all saved and I had a checkbook I never used in the top drawer of my desk.

I still wasn’t ready to believe it. “If all she wanted was money to pay off her debt, why not tell me up front? I offered her a settlement to wait to file for divorce. She could have just asked me to pay it off for her and called it a day.”

“Think about it. She asked you for something that appeared completely altruistic. Who wouldn’t trust a woman who seems to want nothing but the good of her elderly father? She saw a way to get closer to you and she took it.”

“You’ve got her all wrong. She isn’t like that. Besides, I was in Houston over a month ago. Why is she still here if all she wanted was my money to get rid of her debt?”

“I realize you have so much money, you don’t bother to look at your accounts, but this is why you should. She’s been siphoning money ever since. The withdrawals are irregular, the amounts varied, but we both know you never take cash out of your accounts. So unless you can explain why someone keeps taking out money at ATMs that are all within a half-mile radius of her office, it’s her. I’m sorry, but she played you.”

I stared at my desk, my mind racing, desperate for a different explanation. For an answer that meant Sophie hadn’t done this.

Was there one? Or was Althea right and Sophie had played me from the start?

Suddenly a different version of events ran through my head. One where Sophie hadn’t been nearly as drunk as she’d let on in Vegas. After all, how had she walked in her high heels around that MMA ring? She tripped over her own feet when she was sober. And how had she made that long, heartfelt toast during Drake Meadows’ wedding?

Or hell, maybe the clumsy thing was all part of the act to make her seem innocent and vulnerable.

She'd been on a winning streak when I'd walked into the casino. Had she seen her chance to keep right on winning? And when I'd offered her anything she wanted to delay filing for divorce, she'd certainly taken me up on it. All the while playing cute and hard to get, knowing she was getting under my skin. Knowing she could get close and I'd be none the wiser. She'd bide her time and strike when the next opportunity presented itself.

Was that who she really was? Had I been that fucking blind?

"I'm sorry," Althea said again, her voice soft. "I know this is a lot. Do you want me to have Oliver clear your afternoon?"

"Yeah." I didn't look up.

"I'll take care of it." She stood and took the papers off my desk. "I'll take care of everything."

"Thanks, Althea," I muttered to her back as she left.

I wasn't sure if she heard me. I wasn't sure if the words had actually come out of my mouth. It felt like a hundred-pound weight sat directly on my chest. Like my ribs were cracking and shards of bone penetrated everything.

My heart, especially.

I hadn't told Sophie I loved her this weekend. I'd wanted to, but something had held me back. I'd been almost ready to admit it was fear—fear of being vulnerable. Of opening myself up completely to her.

Fear of what it meant if I loved her, and was married to her, and wanted to stay that way.

But maybe it hadn't been fear. Maybe it had been a premonition.

And maybe Sophie Abbott wasn't the sweet girl I'd believed her to be.

SOPHIE

Steve came back to his desk, whistling a cheery tune. He sat, then adjusted a framed photo of his cat.

“You’re in a good mood,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said. “Was I whistling again?”

I smiled. “You were. What brought this on? Hot date over the weekend?”

His cheeks flushed. Oh my god, was he blushing?

“Actually, yes. I had a wonderful date.”

My eyes widened. “Steve! Are you dating someone? Who is she? How long have you been seeing her? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to say anything too soon. Her name is Flora and we met at a pet store a couple of months ago.”

I clasped my hands to my chest. “That is so cute.”

“We’ve been seeing each other a lot and things are starting to get serious. But there was one big hurdle we had to get over. Specifically, Millie and Clovis.”

“Millie, your cat? Who’s Clovis?”

“Flora’s cat. And unlike my Millie, he’s a bit bad-tempered.”

Unlike his Millie? Steve’s cat was a furry terror. I was fully convinced she spent her days while he was at work plotting his untimely demise. And Clovis was worse? Yikes.

“I suppose that would be a hurdle.”

He nodded in agreement but broke out in a smile. “We introduced them yesterday and Sophie, it couldn’t have gone better.”

“Really? They liked each other?”

“Well, *liked* is probably a strong word for it, but the hissing was minimal. Much better than we expected.”

“Wow. So, does that mean you and Flora can move forward?”

He smiled again and adjusted his glasses. “She’s moving in next month. We want to make a gradual transition so Millie and Clovis have time to get used to each other.”

“Aw, Steve, I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Sophie.”

My desk phone rang and our receptionist Nina’s name flashed on the little screen. “Hi, Nina. What’s up?”

“Mr. Calloway’s three o’clock is here.”

“Oh.” Feeling suddenly flustered, I clicked to his calendar on my laptop. I didn’t remember him having any more meetings today. The three o’clock spot was blocked off as busy, but it didn’t say anything else. And I hadn’t put that there. “Thanks, Nina. Give me one second.”

Hoping I hadn’t forgotten something, I got up and went to his office. “Excuse me, Mr. Calloway?”

He glanced up from his laptop.

“Nina says your three o’clock is here? I’m not sure who it is. It’s not clear on your calendar and I don’t remember setting anything up for today.”

“No, I did.” He stood but gestured to one of the seats on the other side of his desk. “You should be here for this.”

“Of course; no problem. Do you want me to...” I pointed vaguely toward the office lobby.

“I’ll see him in.” He walked past me and out the door.

That was weird.

I darted out to my desk to grab a notepad and pen to take notes, then sat down to wait. A moment later, Mr. Calloway came back in.

“Have a seat,” he said.

And in walked Dominic Coates.

My eyes widened. He was dressed in a suit this time, not a shiny black shirt, but there was no mistaking him. He looked at me—looked right at my face—and my heart skipped at least forty-two times. Did he recognize me? He had to remember me. I was the girl who’d taken a serving tray to the face. You didn’t forget something like that.

But if he knew who I was, he gave no hint of it. His eyes swept over me, lingering on my chest longer than necessary, then he looked away. That was

it.

The jerkface didn't remember me.

Although there was something different about him, and it wasn't just his clothes. His eyes were clear and his movements less exaggerated. And then it occurred to me. He was sober. He must have been on something that night at the club, and he wasn't now.

But he was still a jerkface.

Mr. Calloway sat behind his desk and, for a second, met my eyes. He didn't make eye contact like that very often. Was he trying to tell me something?

"Thanks for coming," Mr. Calloway said, turning his attention to Dominic. "I think we have a lot to discuss."

"I admit, I was surprised when you reached out. But I'm glad you did. Your timing is good."

I was so confused. Mr. Calloway had set up a meeting with Dominic Coates? Why would he do that?

Unless.

Oh my god. He knew something.

Suddenly I understood what that eye contact had meant.

Okay, Mr. Calloway. Let's do this.

"Let's get straight to the point," Mr. Calloway said. "We both know I have a significant investment in the Skyline project. I have some concerns."

"As you should," Dominic said. "Under its current leadership, the Skyline project is being grossly mismanaged."

Mr. Calloway raised his eyebrows. "How so?"

"Details slipping through the cracks; total lack of oversight. I'll be surprised if the whole thing doesn't come to a grinding halt before they've poured concrete for the parking garage."

Mr. Calloway narrowed his eyes but didn't interject.

Dominic kept talking. "Of course you know I used to be a partner in Cox Development. Unfortunately, right when Skyline was about to get off the ground, I was forced out. I fully admit, I made some mistakes in my personal life. But Cox used that as a cover. He got rid of me because I wasn't towing the party line. I kept pointing out problems with the project, but he didn't want to hear it."

I kept as still as I could, but inside, I was seething. He was such a big fat liar.

“And now you believe those problems are enough to threaten Skyline,” Mr. Calloway said.

“Absolutely. Cox Development isn’t capable of pulling off a project of this scale. It’s going to come crashing down, sooner rather than later. But the news isn’t all bad.”

“No?”

“Not at all. Cox has a buyout offer on the table, but he’s letting his arrogance get the better of him, and he won’t take it. I think it’s become personal. I told him this is beyond him and now he wants to prove me wrong. Not a good way to make business decisions with hundreds of millions of dollars at stake.”

“Especially when it’s not all his money,” Mr. Calloway said.

“Exactly. Now, this is a little bit premature, but since we’re here, I can fill you in on the details. Your cooperation is going to be key to getting this thing back under control.”

“What do we need to do?”

“I’m working with legal counsel and several other investors to take back Cox Development. Once we’ve acquired the company, we’ll have decision-making power, and we can do what’s right for the project and everyone involved.”

“Which means taking the buyout offer,” Mr. Calloway said.

“Yes. I’ll be honest, the return on your investment won’t be what Cox led you to believe. But something is better than watching it all go up in flames.”

It was a miracle that I kept myself together. On the outside, I was as cool as my boss. Okay, no one was that smooth—except Cox—but I was the perfect unobtrusive assistant. Dominic had no idea that he was literally sitting next to Cox’s wife. Or girlfriend? Was that more accurate, all things considered? Whatever, I was the woman sleeping with him and Dominic didn’t know.

Mr. Calloway tipped his fingers together, as if he were considering everything Dominic had said. “Normally I wouldn’t get involved in a hostile takeover. But I have a lot at stake.”

“That you do,” Dominic said.

“I need some documentation first. I can’t agree to anything otherwise.”

“Of course.” Dominic opened his briefcase and pulled out a folder. “This should be everything you need.”

Mr. Calloway took the folder and flipped through the pages. Then he held

it out to me. "I need a copy of this."

Meeting his eyes, I took the folder. "Of course. I'll be right back."

I stood, trying to act natural and not let my hands shake. Resisting the urge to run out and immediately call Cox, I walked to the copy room. One foot in front of the other. No hurry at all. My hands started to get sweaty, so I held the folder with just the tips of my fingers.

Leslie, one of my co-workers, came in behind me. "Hi, Sophie. How's it going?"

Oh, you know, fine, just copying evidence that probably points to my husband's betrayal. Why yes, I am married, and gosh no, I didn't tell anyone. Wow, long story. I slipped the papers into the feeder. "I'm good. How are you?"

"Looking forward to the weekend already, you know?"

"Yeah, totally." Instead of hitting the copy button, I changed the quantity from one to two.

Oops, look at that. I made an extra.

Leslie grabbed something off a shelf. "See you later."

"Bye, Leslie. Have a good afternoon."

"You too."

The copy machine spit out two sets. I took one and tapped it into place, then put it neatly with the originals. Then I grabbed a manila envelope off the supply shelf and tucked the second set inside.

On the way back to Mr. Calloway's office, I paused at my desk, and with a smug smile, slipped the manila envelope into a drawer.

Dominic was talking when I went in and handed Mr. Calloway the folder with the copies on top. I could tell by the tightness of his jaw that he was over this guy.

"Mr. Calloway, I hate to interrupt, but you have another meeting."

His eyes softened with a hint of a smile. "Thank you."

Dominic stood and took the folder. "Not a problem. I'll let you get back to your day. Thanks for taking the time."

"You too."

"I'll be in touch." Dominic glanced at my boobs again, then left.

I hesitated next to Mr. Calloway's desk. His eyes flicked to the door, so I shut it.

"You knew, didn't you?" I asked.

"Nora said something to Everly, and Everly told me. I hope that wasn't a

betrayal of your circle of... whatever it is.”

“Circle of trust, and no, it wasn’t.”

“Will you take those copies to Cox, or do you need me to speak to him?”

“No, I’ll take them. Thank you. Whatever Dominic is planning, I hope it doesn’t cost you your investment.”

“If it does, I’ll bury him.”

I laughed, but Mr. Calloway didn’t so much as smile. He wasn’t kidding.

“Well, thank you again. I probably should have come to you in the first place.”

“It’s all right. I’m just glad you didn’t break your nose in your quest for intel.”

Rolling my eyes, I touched my nose. “Oh good, you know about that.”

“I hear about a lot of things. And I respect that your personal life is your own, but I need to ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“Is he good to you?”

“Yes. He’s very good to me, actually.”

He nodded. “Feel free to remind him that if he isn’t, I’ll know.”

I laughed. “Okay. Thanks, Mr. Calloway.”

His phone rang, so he picked it up. “Hi, baby.”

I ducked out of his office so he could talk to Everly. Plus, I wanted to see exactly what was on those documents. I went to my desk and pulled out the envelope.

There was no doubt now that Dominic was coming after Cox’s company. But the question remained. Was Althea involved?

I glanced around, like someone might be close enough to look over my shoulder, and pulled out the copies.

There was her name. Right there. In fact, her name was all over the documents.

I knew it.

My sense of vindication was short-lived. Truthfully, I wished I hadn’t been right. Because this meant nothing but bad things for Cox. His former partner and one of the people he trusted the most were about to attempt a hostile takeover of his company. And he had no idea it was coming.

My desk phone rang. It was Nina again.

“Hey, Nina.”

“Hi, Sophie, there’s someone here to see you.”

“Okay. I’ll be right up.”

That was strange. I wasn’t expecting anyone. I put the papers back in the envelope and went to the front desk. Nina nodded to a man dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans standing in the lobby. I didn’t recognize him.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“Are you Sophie Abbott?”

“Yes.”

He held out a thick envelope and I took it. “You’ve been served.”

“Wait, what is this?”

He shrugged and turned toward the elevator.

Served? What was he talking about? I pulled out a stack of paper and looked at the first page.

Oh my god. Cox had just served me with divorce papers.

COX

I stood in my kitchen, absently turning a glass of whiskey. I'd left the office early, too out of sorts to focus on anything. The conversation with Althea earlier had rocked me to my core.

Had I really let that happen? Let some woman play me?

The worst part was, if Sophie had asked, I would have just paid off her debt, no questions asked.

I'd gone through my bank accounts, and sure enough, there were transfers to a bunch of banks and credit card companies. All when I'd been in Houston and Sophie had been here, staying at my house. Since then, there were random withdrawals of cash that I knew weren't mine, and one of my debit cards was missing.

Everything pointed to Sophie. And I was sick over it.

Had I really been such a fool?

My phone buzzed with a text from Oliver, asking me—again—if everything was okay. I'd left the office abruptly without a word to him, and I'd been ignoring everyone's messages ever since. I sent a quick reply this time, just so he wouldn't decide to come over here and fix me a pot of tea or something.

I heard the faint sound of the garage door opening and took a long swallow of my whiskey. Sophie was home. With a deep breath, I braced myself for her to breeze through the door and step out of her shoes. To set her things down and cheerfully ask about my day.

To run her hands up my chest and pull my mouth to hers for a kiss, whispering that she'd missed me today.

Fuck.

The door flew open and she called my name. “Cox?”

I set my drink down, surprised at the urgency in her voice.

“Cox? Where are you?” Her shoes clicked on the wood floor as she marched into the kitchen.

The fury in her eyes almost made me flinch away. What the fuck was she so angry about?

“What the hell is this?” She held up a thick envelope. “Are you kidding me? I thought we would at least have a conversation, you know, like grown-ups. Grown-ups who have been *sleeping together*.”

“What are you talking about?”

“There are other ways to do this. You didn’t have to serve me at work. I looked it up when we first got back from Vegas. We could have just filed together. You didn’t have to blindside me with it.”

“Sophie, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“The divorce paperwork. I knew we’d have to deal with it soon, so maybe I shouldn’t be so surprised. But I didn’t think it would be like this. It’s so cold and impersonal.” Her lower lip trembled and she swiped a tear from beneath her eye. “I thought we’d at least talk about it first.”

The divorce paperwork? What was she... Oh, shit. Althea. She’d said she’d take care of everything. After what she’d told me about Sophie, she must have assumed I’d want this over with as quickly as possible.

Well, it had been inevitable anyway. Maybe it was best that it was done.

“There’s not much to talk about, is there?”

“So that’s it? Just like that, it’s over?”

I glanced down. It was hard to meet her eyes. I didn’t want to have to say this to her. “Sophie, I know about the money.”

“What money?”

“Let’s not do this, okay? I know.”

“Cox, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I know that you took money to pay off your debts when I was in Houston. And I know you’ve been withdrawing from my account ever since.”

“What?”

“Look, I don’t want to make this worse for you. You shouldn’t have done it, but I won’t turn you in. I’ll let it go. Just get your shit out of my house.”

“But I didn’t. I didn’t take any of your money. I swear.”

“Then how is all your debt magically paid off?”

“It’s not. In fact, I think I’m late on most of my payments because I keep forgetting to get the mail at my apartment.”

Something in her voice made me snap. I fucking loved this girl, and she was going to stand here and keep lying to me? I grabbed my whiskey and smashed the glass on the floor. “Goddammit, Sophie. Why the fuck didn’t you just ask me? I would have given it to you. If you were so far in debt, why didn’t you just tell me?”

She stared at me, her eyes wide, still flashing with anger. “Because I couldn’t. It’s humiliating enough that I can’t afford to help my dad find a better house. You saw my horrible apartment. You saw how I live. You think I want to talk about that? You think I want to tell a man like you, who’s swimming in money, how even though I have a great job, I basically have nothing? How I have to ration every dollar so I can afford to go out with my friends or take my dad out to eat once in a while? How the only reason I could afford that trip to Vegas was because it was for work and the company paid for everything?”

“A lot of people get themselves in trouble. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“No, in my case, I’m absolutely ashamed of it.” Tears overflowed her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. “My ex-boyfriend did this to me, and I was stupid enough to let it happen. He took out loans and opened credit cards in my name. Tons of them. He maxed them out and then stuck me with all of it, and I didn’t know until it was too late. By then, he’d already ghosted me. Not long after he disappeared, bill collectors started calling. Constantly. It’s been a total nightmare for the last three years. And it’s all because I trusted him when I shouldn’t have. So no, I didn’t tell you, for the same reason I’ve never told anyone—not my dad or my friends. Because it’s humiliating.”

Broken glass glinted on the kitchen floor. I had no idea what to say to her.

“I didn’t take your money.” She took a shaky breath. “I don’t know how to prove to you that I didn’t, but I would never, ever do something like that. God, I wouldn’t even know how.”

I wanted to believe her. I wanted it so fucking badly. But why would Althea accuse her if she wasn’t sure?

“The dates your loans were paid off are all when I was out of town. When you were here, with access to my office. And one of my debit cards is missing. The same debit card that someone’s been using to make withdrawals at ATMs near your office.”

She tucked the envelope in her handbag and pulled out her phone. “Here,

I'll show you. This is one of the credit card accounts and the balance is still..." Her brow furrowed. "How is that possible?"

"It's paid off, isn't it? Goddammit, Sophie, just be fucking honest with me."

"How did..." She stared at her phone. "I don't know what's going on, but it wasn't me."

I didn't want Althea to be right. But she'd handed me the evidence. And Sophie didn't have an explanation, other than *I didn't do it*.

She put her phone away and met my gaze, her eyes still shining with tears. "You actually think I'm capable of this."

"No, I don't, but what the fuck am I supposed to think?"

"You're supposed to believe me. I'm your—" She snapped her mouth shut, but her unspoken word sliced through me.

I'm your wife.

"Sophie—"

"No. I'm not and I never was. I should have remembered that." She pulled a large manila envelope out of her handbag and set it on the counter. "I don't even know if I should give this to you. But if I didn't, it would just be to hurt you back, and I don't want to be that girl. Dominic Coates met with Mr. Calloway today. He set up the meeting to find out what Dominic's been doing behind your back. We got these from him. He's working with Althea. They're going to try to take your company so they can sell Skyline. I'm sorry I was right about her. I didn't want to be."

Grinding my teeth together, I stared at the envelope.

Althea was...

That meant...

Oh fuck.

"Oh my god, Sophie."

"I can't really deal with getting all my stuff right now," she choked out through more tears. "And I'll get the divorce paperwork done as soon as I can, but I have to go."

"Sophie, no. Please don't—"

But she whipped around and ran off. The door slammed behind her.

The crushing weight on my chest was back with a vengeance. What the fuck had I done? I crunched through the broken glass to the envelope she'd left and slid the stack of paperwork out.

For a second, I couldn't get a breath in. My throat closed tight and my

lungs seemed to have collapsed. The words on the pages blurred as I flipped through them.

Goddammit, she was right. Althea had betrayed me.

She'd betrayed Sophie too.

Because who else had access to my home, my office, my computers? Who else had the code to my front door? She did.

She'd set Sophie up. And I was such a fucking idiot, I'd fallen for it.

What the hell was I going to do now?

COX

*A*fter Sophie left and I realized I was being fucked over, I did what most any man would do. I got my ass good and drunk.

Oliver found me Tuesday morning passed out on the couch. Drunk or sober, I couldn't set foot in my bedroom. There was too much of her in there. Her clothes, her things in the bathroom, her pink running shoes she loved so much.

Fuck.

He made tea—because of course he did—and breakfast. Then he cleared my schedule for the day. I didn't explain what had happened with Sophie, and he didn't ask. He didn't have to. I was a fucking mess and she wasn't here. He could put the pieces together. And I didn't want to talk about it. He'd confirmed I was alive, so he left me to wallow.

I took a second personal day on Wednesday, but not because I was too hungover to function. I changed the code on my front door so Althea could no longer get in. Changed all my passwords and called the bank to lock down my accounts and get new credit cards. I went through everything I'd given Althea access to over the years and systematically locked her out.

And I put together my counterattack. Made the necessary calls. She and Dominic thought they were going to catch me with my pants down. That wasn't going to happen.

They'd fucked with the wrong guy.

Althea's takeover plan was thorough, I had to give her that. I wouldn't have expected anything less. What I didn't understand was why she'd gone after Sophie. It was clear she'd wanted Sophie out of my life, but why? Why

go to all the trouble to frame her like that? She didn't have to get rid of Sophie to execute a successful hostile takeover. And my reputation certainly didn't matter to her, not if she was about to force me out. Why did she give a shit whether or not I got divorced?

Regardless, now that I knew what Althea was doing, I had the means to stop her.

But when it came to Sophie, I had no idea what I was going to do. I'd tried texting her, but she hadn't answered. Not that I knew what I'd say to her if she did.

She'd left a hollow space in my chest. So I filled it with rage.

Thursday, I was up bright and early. I showered and trimmed my stubble. Put on a suit and went in to work, ready for war.

All eyes were on me when I walked into the office. I didn't know what they'd heard, and I didn't particularly care. An icy calm had settled over me. Anger filled the space Sophie had left, but it wasn't hot-tempered rage. It was glacial, leaving me with nothing but cold, hard edges.

I passed Oliver's desk and nodded for him to follow me. He got up and closed my office door behind us.

"It's good to see you back," he said. "Sober, clean, and dressed, no less. But what's going on? You look like an assassin about to make a kill."

"Is Althea in her office?"

"She was last I saw, yes."

"Good. I'm firing her. I need you to cancel her company credit card, deactivate her building access code, and have IT lock her out of the network. I want her emails, phone records, anything we can get our hands on. She's been working with Dominic to try to get control of Cox Development. It's not going to happen."

Oliver gaped at me. "I thought this was about Sophie. I made a list of ways you could grovel and have deliveries of flowers, chocolate-covered strawberries, and a giant teddy bear all ready to order."

"No. I did fuck things up with Sophie. But it's not something a giant teddy bear can fix."

"That bad?"

"You don't want to know."

"But she was right. About Althea and Dominic."

I rubbed my jaw. "Yeah. She was right."

And I should have trusted her.

“Well, maybe her bloody nose wasn’t for naught after all.”

“Her bloody nose? You mean when she went out with her friends? How do you know about that?”

He opened his mouth, sputtered something incoherent, then closed it again. “I assumed if you knew about Dominic, you knew what happened at the club.”

“No, I don’t know about what happened at the club, but you better keep talking.”

“Sophie had a plan to find out what Dominic was up to. Her friend Nora was supposed to seductively capture his attention and get him talking. But apparently his taste runs more toward Sophie’s type than Nora’s. Sophie was doing remarkably well when that server hit her with the tray.”

“Are you saying Dominic hit on my girl?” I asked, my voice low.

“Somehow I think that’s the least of your worries right now.”

I blew out a breath. The thought of Dominic anywhere near Sophie made me furious. But Oliver was right. “She was trying to catch them this whole time, wasn’t she?”

“Yes, she was. I admit, I probably encouraged her. But a chance to expose Maleficent was hard to resist.”

“Fuck. Why didn’t I listen to her?”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. You’ve spent years working with Althea. She helped you build this business. You should have been able to trust her.”

“I should have listened to you, and I should have listened to my wife. Then none of this would have happened.”

“Is she still your wife?”

“Fuck if I know. Althea set her up. Made it look like she was stealing money from me.”

“Oh, Cox. You didn’t believe her, did you?”

I glared at him.

“You’re right. I’ll cancel the teddy bear. This is going to take a lot more than an adorable stuffed animal.”

“It’s worse than that.”

“Worse than accusing her of being a thief?”

“Althea had her served with divorce papers on Monday.”

Oliver’s mouth dropped open. “No wonder Sophie went dark. I haven’t heard from her all week. How did Althea do that without your signature?”

“Somehow I doubt she’d balk at a little forgery.”

“Good point.”

I straightened my jacket. “Have building security on standby to escort her out.”

“I’ll take care of it. With pleasure. And I’d like the record to show that I’m refraining from any exclamations of a celebratory nature.”

“I appreciate that. You can gloat later.”

“You know I will.”

“Yeah, I know. Time to get this over with.”

I left Oliver to handle the details and went straight to Althea’s office.

Her door was closed, but I didn’t bother knocking. She didn’t deserve a single courtesy after everything she’d done.

She looked up from her laptop, her eyebrows lifting in surprise. “You’re back.”

I shut the door and stared at her for a moment. I was so fucking angry. But it was more than that. It was worse. I wasn’t just mad, I was hurt.

“There are only a few people in this world that I trust. Up until a few days ago, you were one of them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know what you did to Sophie. I know it wasn’t her who took money out of my accounts. It was you.”

“Cox, why would I—”

“Don’t, Althea. Let’s skip the part where you deny everything. It’s insulting to both of us.”

She folded her hands on her desk, the phony shock melting from her expression. “Okay. Fine. But you have to know, I only had your best interests at heart.”

“Really? That is a fascinating bit of bullshit. Do my best interests also include a hostile takeover of my company?”

Her mouth opened and her confident demeanor slipped. “No. You have the wrong idea.”

“And there you go insulting me again. I know that you’ve been working with Dominic behind my back. I know you two plan to force me out and put him in charge so you can sell Skyline. That’s all pretty straightforward. I get it. You stand to make a shit ton of money if we sell, and I wasn’t cooperating. So you decided to go around me.”

She stood. “Not exactly. You don’t understand what I’m trying to do here.”

“No, I certainly fucking don’t.”

“Dominic is just a pawn. We both know he’s useless. A week out of rehab, he was already out partying. But for the time being, he does have good PR. Who doesn’t love a redemption story? So I’m letting Dominic convince your investors that there’s trouble at Cox Development and he’s ready to save the day and do the right thing by selling Skyline and returning their money.”

“And what were you planning to do once you had your pawn sitting at my desk?”

“It won’t ever get that far. Dominic isn’t going to take over. But word of unrest and a project in trouble has elicited a lot of interest in Skyline. Now we not only have one buyout offer, we have three.”

“So you convinced Dominic to screw me over just so you could start a bidding war and drive the price up so I couldn’t refuse. And once I agree to sell, you just screw over Dominic instead.”

She smiled triumphantly. “Precisely.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Cox, this is brilliant. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you, but everything is very delicate. I had to be careful. And you’ve been... preoccupied.”

“I know what you’re getting at, and that’s what I don’t understand. What does any of this have to do with Sophie? Why work so hard to get rid of her?”

Smiling, she stepped closer and put a finger on my chest. “I’ll admit, that part was personal.”

I grabbed her finger. “Excuse me?”

“She’s nothing but a distraction, and a ridiculous one at that. You bang some woman in Vegas and suddenly you have a goddamn conscience? If Shepherd Calloway hadn’t been one of your investors, we both know you would have taken Easton’s offer. But somehow you decided you gave a shit about your fake wife’s boss.” Rolling her eyes, she jerked her finger out of my grasp. “Trust me, I did you a favor.”

“How the fuck was that a favor?”

“She was a mistake from the beginning, but apparently she has a magic pussy and you can’t see it. We’ve worked together for almost a decade, but suddenly some cutesy assistant matters more to you than I do?”

“You’re jealous of her? That’s what this is about?”

“Jealousy is such an ugly word. And really, how could I be jealous of that little twit? I’m a corporate attorney and she’s a glorified secretary.”

I stared at her for a long moment. “You’re absolutely right.”

Her mouth curled in a smile and she touched my chest again. “See? I knew once I got rid of her, you’d start acting like yourself again. Do you want to see the offers?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. You’re right that Sophie changed me. She called me out, and she was right. It matters who I do business with—who I surround myself with. I didn’t think it did. I knew you were fucking ruthless. Dominic dug his own grave, but you were the first to shovel the dirt on top. And how many times before that did I turn a blind eye to what you were doing because it benefited me and my company?”

“Cox, we built this business together. You don’t get to this level without doing a little dirty work.”

“No. That’s not how it’s going to be. I can’t change the road I took to get here, but I can certainly change where I go next. And this underhanded, backstabbing bullshit is not how I do things. I’d rather go back to the rusted-out pickup truck and single-wide trailer.”

“Now you’re just being dramatic.”

“I don’t think you understand what I’m saying to you right now, Althea. You’re fired. As of this moment, you’re out. And I don’t want to see your fucking face ever again.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I assure you, I’m dead serious. And you know, you’re right about something else. You did do me a favor when you set up Sophie. You overplayed your hand. If you hadn’t gone after my wife, I might have made the mistake of forgiving you for this bullshit stunt with Dominic.”

“Cox, listen to me.”

My phone buzzed with a text. Just in case it was Sophie, I pulled it out to check. It wasn’t, but the text from Oliver made me laugh out loud. “Well, holy shit.”

“What?”

“This is poetic. Looks like your comeback kid put a hitch in your grand plan. Dominic was arrested early this morning for soliciting a prostitute and possession of cocaine. He couldn’t keep his shit together quite long enough, could he? But good luck with your hostile takeover. I’m sure it’ll go just fine.”

The color drained from her face. “Cox, wait.”

I turned my back on her and opened the door. Two men with barrel chests

and building security badges waited just outside.

“See her out and don’t let her back in the building.”

“Yes, sir,” one said.

Without so much as a glance over my shoulder at Althea, I went back to my office and shut the door.

But my triumph was short-lived. I sank into my chair, the weight of my mistakes threatening to crush me.

Because regardless of what happened with my company, Sophie was still gone.

SOPHIE

“*H*ere, kitty, kitty,” I said, peering beneath the bed. “Come out. You’re not supposed to be in Nora’s room.”

A pair of glowing eyes shone at me, but the cat didn’t move.

I got up, wondering if I could lure her out with cat treats. Had I gotten cat treats? Probably not. Maybe tuna would work. Cats liked tuna fish, right? Did Nora have any tuna fish in her kitchen?

After I’d left Cox’s house on Monday night, I’d called Nora. She hadn’t been able to understand a word I said because of all the sobbing, so she’d told me to come to her place. Everly and Hazel had arrived soon after, and they’d listened to me tearfully recount the day’s events. They held me while I fell apart and they’d be there to help me pick up the pieces.

I was so lucky to have them.

Later that night, Mr. Calloway had texted to say I had the rest of the week off. And Nora insisted I stay with her instead of going back to my apartment.

So, so lucky.

“Sophie?” Nora called.

Uh-oh. She was home.

I decided to give up on the cat. She had to emerge from hiding eventually. Trying to act natural, I came out into the living room and sat on the couch. “Hey. How was your day?”

“Frustrating, but whatever. Tomorrow’s Friday, so I have that going for me.” She took her coat off and hung it up in the closet, then came over to the couch and sat down. “Look at you, all dressed and everything.”

I glanced down at my t-shirt and jeans. It was a definite step up from the worn-out pajamas I'd been living in. I was even wearing a bra. "Yeah. I had to run some errands."

"I'm impressed. It's only been a few days and you're remarkably functional."

Looking down, I shrugged and picked at a thread on my shirt. "I'm doing okay."

"I know this is hard, but—" Something darted from the hallway into the kitchen and she stopped. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"That little blur that ran into the kitchen."

"Oh, that." I kept picking at my shirt. "That's my cat."

"Since when do you have a cat?"

"Um..." I trailed off. "Since today?"

"That's the errand you had to run? You got a cat?"

"Yes, I adopted a cat." My lower lip trembled. I tried to hold back, really I did. But I burst into tears. "I just want something to love me."

"I thought that's what Mr. Fuzzykins was for." She gestured to the hamster enclosure on her dining table.

"Mr. Fuzzykins bit me." I held up my bandaged finger. "And I changed his name. He's not Mr. Fuzzykins anymore."

"What's his name, then?"

"Camden, because he was mean to me," I said through sobs. "But the cat doesn't love me either. She keeps hiding under your bed."

She put an arm around my shoulder. "Oh, honey."

"Maybe I'm doing this all wrong." I sniffed. "Fuzzy pets seem like a great idea because they're cuddly. But I was reading earlier that bearded dragons are very affectionate."

"What the hell is a bearded dragon?"

"A species of lizard. They're very friendly and—"

"Okay, time to get dressed." She got up and reached for my hands to help me up.

"I am dressed. Do you want to come to the pet store with me?"

"Soph, I'm drawing the line at scales. If you're going to wallow, you're going to do it right, not by adopting more animals."

"I'm not wallowing. I'm trying to find new meaning in my life."

She hauled me to my feet. "You're not going to find meaning at a pet

store.”

“Then where are we going?”

“Out. Go put on something that makes you feel good.”

“Like jammies?”

“No, I mean something that shows off your rack.” She gestured to my boobs. “I’ll help you with the rest.”

I changed into a black shirt and nicer jeans. Nora vetoed my slippers as shoes and talked me into a pair of pink kitten heels. Then she fixed my hair and put a little makeup on me. I had to admit, it made me feel a bit better.

Then we headed out.

Nora swept into Brody’s and waved her fingers at Jake the bartender. I followed her to a table in the bar and sat.

Jake came over and grinned. “Wow, ladies. You look great. I’m so used to seeing you in running clothes. What’s the occasion?”

“It’s a breakup party,” she said.

“Everly and Hazel on their way?” he asked.

“You know us so well,” Nora said. “We’re going to need three martinis and a lemonade, and keep Sophie’s drinks coming. Plus one of everything on the dessert menu. I don’t even care what they are.”

“You got it.” He winked and left.

Hazel and Everly arrived just as Jake brought out our drinks.

“Wow, you look amazing,” Everly said.

“This is Nora’s handiwork,” I said, gesturing to my hair and face.

“She’s adopted two animals in the last three days,” Nora said. “She mentioned a lizard and I had to intervene.”

“I guess consumption of sugar and alcohol is a more normal way to wallow,” I said, lifting my drink and taking a sip.

“I’m sure you’re not the only girl who’s gotten a breakup cat,” Nora said.

“What’s the other animal?” Hazel asked.

“A hamster who hates me.”

“Why do you think he hates you?” Everly asked.

I raised my bandaged finger. “He bit me.”

“That’s typical hamster behavior,” Hazel said.

“I’m a little bit confused,” Everly said. “Why did you get a hamster and a cat?”

I sighed. “This probably sounds silly, but the thought of going back to my apartment and living all alone was too much. I don’t know why. I lived alone

for a long time and I didn't mind."

"Maybe because you didn't think you'd go back to living alone," Everly said.

She was right. But why had I ever let myself believe that?

"Have you talked to him?" Hazel asked.

"No. He texted right after I left, but I didn't reply. And I don't know what there is to say at this point. I do still need to get my stuff out of his house. And figure out how to pay him back because someone paid off all my loans with his money. Plus there's the thing with my dad and the house he's buying for him."

"Wait, what?" Nora asked. "Did we know about that?"

"Probably not. I haven't even told my dad yet. It's what he agreed to in exchange for staying married."

"You asked him to buy a house for your dad?" Nora asked. "Of course you did. Sometimes I don't think the world deserves you. You're too good."

"Good at being a hot mess." I took a big swallow of my martini.

"Sophie, you're an amazing woman," Everly said. "You have so much spirit."

Nora put an arm around my shoulders. "She's right. We're lucky we found you."

"Thanks, girls." I sniffed back the tears. "I love you."

"We love you too," Nora said.

They really did. Maybe I didn't have Cox. And maybe I was about to get divorced—my one and possibly only attempt at marriage starting as a disaster and ending worse. But I did have the best friends in the whole world. And that meant a lot.



BY SATURDAY, I was slightly more put together, even without Nora coaxing me into putting on makeup. And I hadn't tried to get a bearded dragon, or any other pets. The hamster hadn't bit me again, even when I'd opened the enclosure to give him a little pet on the head. And the cat was warming up to me. I'd decided to name her Maddie.

I parked in front of my dad's house and went up to the front door, apprehension making my stomach flutter. I wasn't sure how Dad was going

to react to what I had to tell him.

Here went nothing. I knocked and poked my head inside. “Hey, Dad.”

“Hi, princess,” he called. “Come on in.”

I went in and found him in his recliner.

He took off his reading glasses and set them on the side table. “What’s wrong?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“I don’t need fuckin’ legs that work right to see, do I?”

“No.” I sat on the couch and toed off my shoes, then tucked my legs under me. “I haven’t had the best week.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Well... it’s kind of a long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

Looking down, I fiddled with my shirt. “You know how I sort of got married.”

“To the suit.”

“Yeah. Cox. His first name is Camden, but I think his mom is the only one who calls him that. Anyway, you know it wasn’t a real marriage. It was a big mistake. We would have filed for divorce right away, but he was worried about bad PR and asked me if I’d stay married for a little while.”

“And you were too nice to tell him no.”

“Not exactly. We made a deal. I’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you about it, but it’s really hard.”

His brow furrowed. “The fuck did he talk you into, Soph?”

“No, it’s nothing bad. In fact, it’s something really good. And even though this week has royally sucked, when I think about it, it makes the whole thing worth it.” I took a deep breath. “Dad, he’s buying you a new house.”

He snorted. “Right.”

“I’m serious. He asked me what I wanted and it was the first thing that popped into my head. I thought for sure he’d say no, but he didn’t. We’ve been looking for something that’s perfect for you. I haven’t exactly talked to him since Monday, but I know he’s going to stick to his side of the deal.”

Dad stared at me like he didn’t know who I was. “A house?”

“Yes.”

“For me?”

“Yes.”

“Why... why would you do that?”

“Because you need a house that doesn’t have stairs. I can’t let you keep sleeping in your chair.” I gestured to his recliner.

“No. No, you can’t do that. If he has the kind of money to just buy someone a house, he should buy one for you, not me.”

“Well, that’s not what we agreed to.”

“What if I hate it?”

“You won’t hate it.”

“What if I don’t want to move?”

I crossed my arms. “Then I’ll move you anyway. He’s buying you a new house and you can sleep in a bed again and it’s going to be wonderful and I’m not taking no for an answer, so you better get used to it.”

He looked down and cleared his throat. “Sophie.”

“Dad, you’re all I have. Except for a hamster who’s mean to me and a cat who hides under the bed a lot. And I’m all you have, too. You always took care of me, mostly on your own. And you did such a good job. It’s my turn to take care of you.”

“Princess, you don’t have to take care of me.”

“Too bad. I want to and I already said I’m not taking no for an answer.”

He lifted his gaze and his eyes brimmed with tears. I’d never seen my dad cry. Not even once. “My sweet, sweet girl. The big guy upstairs took your mom too soon, but he sure did leave a piece of her behind in you.”

“Dad, you’re going to make me cry.” It was a silly thing to say because I was already crying.

Coughing a little, he swiped beneath his eyes. “Well, that’s a fuckin’ thing, isn’t it? I guess a new house won’t be too bad.”

“No, it’s going to be great.”

“But things didn’t work out with the suit?”

I shook my head. “No, things didn’t work out. But please don’t tell me you found someone to set me up with. I’m not ready for that.”

“I know, princess,” he said. “But I’m telling you he’s out there. And when he finds you, he’s going to be the luckiest fuckin’ guy in the universe.”

I sniffed back more tears. “Thanks, Daddy. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

And because he was a gruff old man who had a knack for knowing when to talk and when I needed a few minutes to stop crying, he turned on the TV.

I cried a little more. Because for a while, I’d thought Cox might be the

one. The man my dad had been telling me I'd find. The one who loved me for me, hot mess and all.

But that had been too big of a dream to be real.

COX

I set my empty glass down on the bar, contemplating whether to order another. Taking the edge off—more than I already had—was tempting. But I also had to play eighteen holes of golf with my mother, and she was a ruthless competitor. More whiskey was not going to help my game.

I'd come to the country club early, which was why I was the lone guy hunched over a drink at the bar at ten o'clock in the morning. It wasn't even my usual day to golf with Mom. But I'd developed a strong aversion to being at home since Sophie had left.

Since I'd made her leave. It was my fault she was gone. I had to own that.

So when Mom had asked if I was up for a game—her partner for today had canceled—I'd agreed.

Dealing with Althea the other day had brought bittersweet satisfaction. She was no longer a threat to me or my company. But I'd lost one of the people I'd relied on. And what did it say about me that I'd turned a blind eye to her shortcomings? Could I trust my own judgment?

Since coming down off all that anger-fueled adrenaline after firing Althea, I'd sunk deep into the muck of self-loathing. I'd made some big-ass mistakes, and I had no idea if there was anything I could do to make up for them. And when it came to Sophie, I was shit out of luck. There was no way she'd forgive me for how I'd treated her.

Oliver slid onto the stool next to me. "Here you are."

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I think we both know the answer to that. Why haven't you talked to

her?”

I stared at my empty glass. Because it was hopeless. “What the fuck can I say? I screwed up. She left and I deserved it.”

“True, you did deserve it.”

“Thanks, Oliver. I’m glad we could have this little chat. Big help.”

He signaled to someone behind me. “He’s over here.”

I glanced over my shoulder. Great. It was Corban Nash and Shepherd Calloway. This was the last thing I needed right now. It was bad enough that I had to face my mother in less than an hour.

“You brought them here?” I asked. “Why, so they can play their weird version of good cop, bad cop again?”

He shrugged. “I do what I have to do.”

“How do you even know them?”

“Do you really want the details of the chain of events that led us all here?”

“Yes, Oliver. I actually do.”

“Fine. I didn’t want to make Sophie feel worse, given my association with you, so I called her friend Nora to find out how she’s doing. From Nora, I learned that Sophie has yet to hear from you, aside from a poor excuse for a text Monday night. That was almost a week ago, Cox. You dealt with Althea, but since then, you’ve been locked in your office, burying yourself in work. And now you’re day drinking. I had to do something.”

Shepherd nodded to a table, then he and Corban took a seat.

I decided I might as well cooperate, so I got off my stool. “And you called them? They want me dead right now. You realize that, right?”

“Well it’s not like you’re going to listen to me.”

“Wonderful.” I went over to the table and sat across from Corban. “Gentlemen. I’m afraid we’ll have to make this quick. I’m meeting my mother for a round of golf and I won’t hear the end of it if I’m late.”

“Your mother won’t be joining you today,” Shepherd said.

“Excuse me?”

“She’s occupied with a golf lesson.”

“Since when?” I asked.

Shepherd’s expression didn’t change. “Since nine-thirty.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I brought in Leonard Wick.”

My brow furrowed. “Isn’t he the current PGA champion?”

“I believe so.”

I turned to Oliver. “Did you know about this?”

He shrugged. “Would you have preferred we do this while playing a round of golf with Georgia?”

“No,” I said with a scowl and shifted my gaze to Shepherd and Corban. “Fine. Let’s get this over with. Go ahead, do your worst.”

“That’s actually not why we’re here,” Corban said.

Shepherd stared daggers at me. “Yes it is.”

“Well, it’s why he’s here, but he can be pretty single-minded.”

“See?” I said to Oliver. “Good cop, bad cop again. Next he’ll start talking about lobsters.”

“Why haven’t you spoken to Sophie?” Shepherd asked.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” I said. He opened his mouth to reply, but I kept talking. “I know, I know, your wives are her best friends and you’re like the overprotective brothers she never had. I get it. But I don’t need you to threaten me with bodily harm or financial ruin to know that I fucked up. I’m already well aware of that. So I’m sorry you wasted your time and money, but thanks for setting up my mom with a pro golf lesson. I’m sure it’ll be the highlight of her year.”

“So that’s it?” Shepherd asked.

“Cox, I was at the fashion show,” Corban said. “I saw the way you looked at her. That wasn’t the face of a man about to serve divorce papers.”

“In point of fact, I didn’t serve those papers on her. My ex-lawyer did.”

“So why haven’t you explained that to her?” he asked.

“What the fuck do I say? I’m sorry I trusted my backstabbing lawyer instead of you? I’m sorry I believed the awful things she said about you, even for a second?”

“Yeah, that’s a good start,” Corban said.

Shepherd nodded. “Actually, it is.”

“As if it’s that simple,” I said.

“Maybe it is,” Corban said. “Do you love her?”

I looked down at the table, wishing I’d ordered that second drink. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“No, it does matter,” he said. “I’ve made a career out of studying the process of falling in love. Sometimes it’s the only thing that matters. So answer the question. Do you love her?”

I could practically feel all three of them staring at me. “I do. I love her

like fucking crazy.”

“I told you,” Corban said, nudging Shepherd with his elbow. “We don’t have to kill him. We just have to get him to quit wallowing in guilt and self-hatred so he can fix this.”

“I’m not wallowing in guilt and self-hatred.”

Oliver snorted.

“If I am, it’s because everything was perfect and I fucked it up.”

“Yes, you did,” Shepherd said. “So what are you going to do about it?”

There was something about the way he said that, with an edge to his voice that was sharper than a razor blade. It wasn’t just a question. It was a challenge. Almost a dare.

“Wait.” I held up a hand, feeling like I’d just been splashed with cold water. “Am I reading this right? You came here to kill me, unless I admitted I was wrong and wanted to fix things with Sophie?”

Corban shrugged. “Basically, yeah.”

“Which means you two think I have a shot at it.”

“You might,” Shepherd said.

“It’s not a small mountain to climb,” Corban said. “But if you love her, you’re already halfway there.”

“And they have it on good authority that she loves you,” Oliver said. “It would be a shame to walk away from the love of a woman like Sophie, don’t you think?”

“That it would,” I said absently.

She loves you.

Suddenly, the wheels started turning. I was Camden fucking Cox. A go-getter and a hustler. A man who pursued what he wanted relentlessly and never gave up until he got it. That was what had gotten me to where I was today.

That guy didn’t give up. Especially when the stakes were high.

And they’d never been higher.

She loves you.

Did she?

“Holy shit. She does. Fuck, I’m such an idiot.”

“No one’s going to argue that point,” Oliver said.

Ignoring him, I stood so fast, my chair almost fell over. “I have to go save my marriage.”

I was out the door and ready to make the necessary calls in an instant. I

already had the beginnings of a plan. It might not be enough. I believed them when they said Sophie loved me, and me loving her back was not the problem. I loved her so much, I wondered if it would kill me.

The question was, did she love me enough to forgive me?

It wouldn't be enough to tell her how I felt, although I was still kicking myself for not saying it sooner. I was a fucking idiot, but maybe it wasn't too late to come back from this.

I just had to show her what she meant to me. Show her how much I loved her. How she'd stumbled her way into my heart and I never wanted to let her go.

And then maybe we could toss those goddamn divorce papers in a fire. Because Sophie was mine.

SOPHIE

In some ways, it was good to be back at work. Mr. Calloway had been more than generous, giving me last week off. That was certainly a perk to being best friends with your boss's wife. I didn't want to think about what a mess I would have been if I'd had to be in the office.

Then again, I might not have adopted two breakup pets. But even though Mr. Fuzzykins, aka Camden the hamster, had bit me... and even though my cat Maddie was afraid of everything and mostly hid under the bed, I'd already grown so attached to those two fuzzballs. They weren't as good as having Cox in my life—not even close—but when I did move back to my apartment, I would be glad I'd have them to keep me company.

In the meantime, I had to figure out how to get the cat to stop scratching Nora's furniture.

Steve gave me a sympathetic smile from across the aisle. He'd given me the update on the Millie and Clovis situation—they still hissed at each other, but he was convinced they'd learn to love each other as much as he loved Clovis's mommy. It was so adorable.

But I'd also had to rush to the bathroom so I didn't burst into tears in front of him. He was in love and I was happy for him. And I couldn't help but be sad for me.

When I'd come back from my mini-breakdown, he hadn't said a word. Steve was nice like that. But obviously he knew something was wrong.

Nina came to my desk with a large box and set it in front of me. "This just arrived for you."

“Thanks.”

She went back to the front and I eyed the box, wondering what it was. There was no shipping label, which meant it had been hand-delivered. Which could mean...

But what would he have sent me in a box like this?

I didn't want him to send me presents. I didn't know what I wanted from him. Well, I did, but it was clear I wasn't going to get it.

I wanted him to want me.

Nora had talked to Oliver, so I knew Cox had fired Althea. That was good news. But it didn't mean we weren't still getting divorced. Not that I'd done anything with the papers. I hadn't been able to bring myself to sign them yet.

With a sigh, I popped the tape and opened the box.

Inside was packing material and a smaller box. A note on the top read *fragile, open with care*.

It probably was a present. I didn't know why I was so disappointed, but I was. If this was from Cox, it meant he was finally reaching out. But was this what he thought I wanted? Gifts to make up for what had happened?

Still, I was careful. I put the box on my desk and gently opened it.

Whatever it was inside, it was covered in bubble wrap.

I unwound all the packaging and stared through the tears suddenly filling my eyes. Oh my god. It was my mother's music box.

All the damage had been repaired. In fact, you almost couldn't tell where it had been broken. I set it down gently and ran my fingers over the top and sides. It wasn't just repaired. It looked better than it ever had.

Holding my breath, I turned the handle. The notes tinkled, playing the sweet little tune.

A few tears ran down my cheeks, but I couldn't help it. My mom had loved this music box. It was one of the few things I had that was hers—one of the only links I had to the mother I barely remembered.

I opened the lid and a note was tucked inside. It read, *Can I please see you?* He'd written an address underneath, but it was way out in Woodinville. That was odd. It was probably thirty or forty minutes outside the city. Why did he want me to meet him there?

I caught sight of Mr. Calloway leaning against the doorway to his office. He had the hint of a smile on his face.

“I'm sorry,” I said, trying to quickly wipe away the tears.

“Everly is working from home today,” he said. “Her back has been

bothering her, so I think I'll go home for the afternoon. You might as well leave early."

"Are you sure? I missed last week and—"

"Sophie," he said, cutting me off. "Go."

Did he know what was going on? Had he talked to Cox? I had so many questions, but instead of blurting them out, I swiped my fingers beneath my eyes again. "Thank you."

I gently packed up the music box and carried it down to my car. Then I plugged in the address. It seemed like it was in the middle of nowhere.

My heart didn't stop racing the entire drive. Why did he want to see me? What was going on? Had he hired a new lawyer and wanted me to meet him in person to finalize the divorce? That thought made my stomach churn, although logically I knew it didn't make very much sense, not with where I was going.

But I was so afraid to get my hopes up.

The map had me exit the freeway, then took me down a long two-lane road. It reminded me of the drive we'd taken in the McLaren.

Finally, I turned onto a long driveway. At first, I couldn't see anything. Just trees on either side. Then the view opened onto the most beautiful house I'd ever seen. It looked like a country estate. Behind it, the blue water of a small lake sparkled in the sun.

Parked in front of the house was Cox's car.

I got out and looked around. Birds chirped in the surrounding trees, and frogs croaked in the distance. The air was fresh and the sun was warm. It was like something out of a fairy tale.

Cox got out of his car and my heart leapt at the sight of him. A flurry of emotions hit me all at once. I was hurt and angry, but I'd missed him so much.

I wanted to believe he'd missed me too. I wanted it so badly. To be enough. To have this one thing in my life not end in disaster.

Was that too much to hope for?

"Hi," he said, his voice tentative. "Thank you for coming."

"I just realized your note didn't say what time. But you're here."

"I've been here since this morning. Figured I'd wait as long as it took."

He shut his car door, so I did the same.

"Thank you for getting my music box repaired. Whoever you took it to did an incredible job. It's better than new."

“I didn’t take it to anyone. I fixed it.”

“You did? Since when do you know how to fix music boxes?”

He shrugged. “It was mostly the wood that was damaged. I’ve done that sort of thing before. Sometimes working with my hands helps me think.”

“So you really do use that workshop in your garage.”

He nodded. “I was afraid you’d notice it was gone before I got it finished.”

“No, I thought it was still put away.” I glanced around, increasingly confused as to why we were out here in front of this idyllic home. “Where are we, by the way?”

“I have something to show you.” He gestured behind him, toward the lake. “This way.”

I followed him on a path that led around the house. It was so pretty here. Fir trees surrounded us and the lake was a big blue oval in the wide clearing. Behind the house was another, smaller building right on the bank, with a dock stretching out into the water.

Cox led me all the way to the second building—a cute little cottage. He pulled a single key out of his pocket and opened the door.

“Fishing, right?” he asked.

“What?”

“Your dad. He likes fishing?”

“Yes, but why?”

He gestured inside. “No stairs. Lots of light. Two bedrooms and a fully remodeled kitchen. Only one bathroom, but it’s big. And the dock is right through the back door. No stairs there either. You also said nice neighborhood, and I don’t know if this counts, since there’s only one neighbor. But I thought the dock for fishing might make up for it.”

“You found this for my dad?”

“Yeah. Do you want to see inside?”

I nodded and followed him in.

The cottage was so perfect, I couldn’t have dreamed up a better place for my dad. Big windows let in lots of light. The living room had the perfect spot for his recliner. And no stairs. There was a bedroom right off the living area, so he wouldn’t even have to walk very far to go to bed. The style was rustic, like a getaway cabin, but he’d love that. And just a few steps from the back door, he could walk out onto the dock and go fishing any time he wanted.

But as I wandered through the cottage, my heart sank a little. Even though

this would be wonderful for my dad—he'd be so happy here—Cox was just making good on our agreement. That was why he wanted to see me. The music box had been a nice gesture, but I had a feeling this was it. Once he bought my dad a house, our arrangement would be over.

We'd be over.

More tears stung my eyes as I gazed out at the view of the lake through the kitchen window.

“What do you think?” he asked.

I wiped my cheeks, wishing he hadn't seen. “It's amazing.”

“You like it?”

“I don't even think I'll have to talk him into moving here.”

He let out a breath. “Good.”

“Thank you. This is so much more than I could have hoped for.” I sniffed again, because of course I did. I was incapable of being cute when I cried. Like usual, I was a mess. “Who lives in the big house?”

“No one right now. But...”

“But, what?”

“It's all one piece of property.”

“But my dad doesn't need that big house. There must be a million stairs in that thing.”

He nodded. “There are.”

“Then why did you...” I trailed off. He couldn't mean... Except what if... Was this... “Cox, if you tell me you bought that house for me so I wouldn't have to move back into my crappy apartment, I'm warning you, I'm going to collapse on the floor and sob and it won't be pretty. I can't live in a big house like that all by myself. I'll have to get five more cats and maybe that bearded dragon Nora talked me out of and probably a dog or three and I don't have time to take care of all those animals.”

By the time I finished babbling, I was already sobbing.

“Oh, sugar,” he said, his brow furrowing with concern. He stepped closer and fingered one of my curls. “No, I was hoping we could live there.”

“We?”

“Yes. You and me. A man should live with his wife, shouldn't he?”

“Your wife?” I asked through the tears.

Looking deep into my eyes, he touched my face. “Sophie, I'm so sorry for everything. I'm sorry I believed Althea when I should have trusted you. That moment of doubt might have cost me everything. I won't blame you if

you tell me to fuck off and get out of your life. But before you do, I need you to know something. I love you.”

My lower lip trembled and a few more tears trailed down my cheeks.

“I had no idea I could love someone as much as I love you.” He lowered himself down on one knee and took my hands in his. “Sophie Abbott, marrying you wasn’t a mistake. In fact, it was the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I don’t quite remember if I got down on one knee when we were in Vegas.”

I sniffed. “I don’t think you did.”

“Well, I am now. And I’m asking you to be my wife. Sophie, will you stay married to me?”

“Really?” I asked, my voice shaky. “You want to keep me?”

“Sugar, I want to keep you forever. I want to be your husband and live in that house with you. And we’ll fill it with tiny little Sophies who trip over their own feet and run over here to go fishing with their grandpa on sunny afternoons.”

“They should probably have life jackets in case they fall off the dock,” I said, still blubbering through my tears.

He smiled. “Goddamn, I love you. What do you say, sugar? Can we stay married?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding and laughing and crying all at once. “I really, really want to stay married.”

Still smiling, he pulled a box out of his pocket.

Oh my god, a ring. A real wedding ring.

He opened the box and my legs almost buckled. It wasn’t just a wedding ring.

It was my mother’s ring.

Sobbing and overwhelmed, I covered my face. I was so glad Cox hadn’t thought to hire a photographer to capture this moment. It had to be the messiest, sobbiest, teariest proposal ever.

I peeked out from between my fingers. Cox beamed at me, like I was the type of girl who could cry and still look pretty. Not one who had snot on her face.

He stood and pulled a tissue out of a pocket.

“Thank you.”

After a long moment, and more than a few shaky breaths, I pulled myself together. I wiped my face—and my nose—and held out my left hand.

He slid my mother's ring onto my finger. It was small and simple. My parents had never had much, and this ring had been what they could afford. But to me, it was the most beautiful ring in the world. And if Cox had it, it meant he'd gone to my dad. Which made me start crying all over again.

He wrapped me in his arms and held me close, letting me cry against his chest.

"I'm sorry I'm so messy," I said.

"I love you messy." He kissed the top of my head. "I love everything about you. I'm so glad you're mine."

"I love you, too. I love you so much." I looked up at him. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything, sugar. What is it?"

"I know we're already married. But—"

"Oh, we're having a wedding," he said. "I want to see you walk down the aisle on your daddy's arm, wearing a big white dress."

"Really?"

"Are you going to start crying again? I have more tissues."

"Maybe."

He let go of me long enough to pull out another tissue. "Sugar, we're going to have the best wedding you can imagine. You dream it, I'll give it to you."

"Mostly, I just want you."

"I'm yours." He leaned down to press his lips against mine. "And I always will be."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and popped up on my tiptoes to kiss him again.

Cox was right. Getting married in Vegas hadn't been a mistake—even though it had been after too much whiskey and to the man who'd pulled my pigtails as a child. Of course, it figured that things would start out as a big mess. This was me we were talking about.

But I'd always believed in silver linings. And my wild night in Vegas had the biggest silver lining imaginable.

My husband.

He might have seemed like Mr. Wrong, but I'd never regretted marrying him. Not really. And I never would. Because somehow, this hot mess had found her Prince Charming. And we really were going to live happily ever after.

EPILOGUE: SOPHIE

The bride's room at Salishan Cellars winery was kind of a mess. There was tissue paper from the box that held my veil, empty champagne flutes, and metallic chocolate wrappers laying around. The counter had an array of hairstyling supplies and makeup strewn across it, and trays with remnants of our pre-wedding snacks were on the table in the middle of the room.

"Uh-oh," I said. "We've been making a mess."

"Don't worry about that for a second." Nora pinned one of my curls back. "All you need to be concerned about right now is getting married."

"Again," I said with a laugh.

"The first one barely counted," she said. "Although we're sure glad it happened."

"Yes, we are," Everly said.

Hazel put her hands on her hips and looked me up and down. "You look absolutely stunning."

"She really does," Nora said, still fussing with my hair.

My three best friends wore matching red bridesmaid dresses—Nora had chosen them, so of course they were gorgeous. Hazel wore her hair up and had red fingernails to match. Nora's hair was also pinned up and she'd found the most amazing red lipstick.

Everly had been worried about fitting into her dress after having a baby. But she looked amazing. Little Ella Calloway was already ten months old, and the most beautiful baby in the history of ever. She had her dad's ice blue eyes and her mom's pretty blond hair—and sunny disposition. She was the

happiest baby, and all her aunties loved her to pieces.

And she had her daddy wrapped around her finger. It was so cute, I could die.

Nora placed the comb that attached to my veil in my hair and made sure it was secure. “There. Perfect.”

I turned and took a few steps to look in the full-length mirror.

“Oh my god. Is that me?”

The woman looking back at me wore a lace wedding gown that flattered my curves perfectly. The neckline dipped just low enough to make my boobs look amazing—if I did say so myself. The bodice accentuated my waist and the skirt flowed over my hips and down to the floor. Beneath the dress, I wore a pair of white flats—comfortable, and I was much less likely to trip in them than if I wore heels.

Okay, so I still might trip. This was me we were talking about.

My veil was simple, cascading down my back from a pearl-trimmed comb that Nora had tucked into my hair. Because sometimes even a girl like me got lucky, I was having the best hair day of my life. My curls looked fantastic in a loose up-do, with just a few framing my face.

I’d never felt more beautiful.

Tears sprang to my eyes and Nora was quick with a tissue.

“I used the best primer I know of, and waterproof mascara, so your makeup isn’t going anywhere,” she said. “But still.”

I took a deep breath and dabbed the corners of my eyes. “I just can’t believe it’s really happening. I mean, I know I already did this once, but I don’t exactly remember it, so...”

“This is the real thing,” Nora said.

Hazel nodded. “Legalities aside, I agree.”

“If Hazel agrees with me, you know I’m right,” Nora said. “That’s how this works.”

“I know; you’re right,” I said. “And I’m so glad you’re all here with me.”

I opened my arms and they all stepped in for a group hug.

“We love you, Soph,” Nora said, her voice a little shaky.

“Thank you. I love you too.”

Nora stepped back and shooed the other two away. “Careful. Let’s not mess her up.”

“You know, Nora, now all three of us have gotten married at this winery,” Everly said, her lips curling in a smile. “When it’s your turn, are

you going to continue the tradition?”

Nora scoffed. “Everly, sweetie, you’re so cute when you’re being ridiculous.”

“Why is that ridiculous?” Hazel asked. “This is a lovely place for a wedding.”

“She’s right,” I said. “That’s why we chose it.”

“Come on, girls,” Nora said. “We all know I’m never getting married.”

“You say that now,” Everly said. “But you never know. You might meet the right guy, and then...”

“Well, if I do, and let me assure you that I won’t, I’ll continue the tradition. How’s that?”

“I’ll take it,” Everly said.

Jamie, the wedding coordinator here at Salishan Cellars, knocked and poked her head in. “Hi, ladies. Are you about ready?”

“Yes, we are,” I said. “I’m sorry about the mess.”

“Don’t worry about it at all,” Jamie said. “Trust me, this is nothing.”

“All right, Soph,” Everly said. “Are you ready to become Mrs. Sophie Cox?”

I took a deep breath and looked in the mirror one last time. “Yes. I’m ready.”

It had been over a year since our first wedding in Vegas, and we’d stopped the divorce process before it had gotten any farther. So technically we’d been married for a while. But today was the day we were going to celebrate it with our family and friends.

I’d had so much fun planning this wedding. My friends and I had gone dress shopping and done cake tastings and they’d thrown me the best bachelorette party—a weekend at a resort with a luxurious spa. And a lot of champagne.

Now it was time to walk down the aisle in a white dress—the moment I’d been dreaming about for so long.

Jamie led us to the doors that opened to the garden. Music played and guests waited in chairs set up in rows. Neither of us had much family—we had that in common. I had my dad. He had his mom. That was all. The rest of the chairs were filled with friends, many of whom were like family to us.

Oliver had brought Lauren. She’d once been known as the tea shop girl; now she was the future Mrs. Carrington. They’d gotten engaged about a month ago. Steve was here with his new wife, Flora. They’d worked through

the hazards of integrating their cats into the same household and had recently added two kittens to the mix—a brother-sister pair. A bunch of my other co-workers were here too, as were just about everyone from Cox’s office.

Drake and Marika Meadows were here, as were the rest of Monkey Rum. I still wasn’t sure what to think about actual rock stars being at my wedding, but here we were. We’d even invited J.J. the limo driver, and he’d come up from Vegas.

My dad made his way over, walking slowly with his cane. He looked so dapper in his gray suit. As soon as he’d seen the cabin by the lake, he’d been smitten with it. Not a single argument about moving. And the new living arrangements were really good for him. He seemed stronger, able to be on his feet for longer periods of time. He said it was the fresh air and fishing. I tended to think he was right.

Plus, he could come over and have dinner with us whenever he wanted. We’d moved into the other house on the property. I’d never lived anywhere so beautiful in my entire life. Maddie had plenty of room to run around, although she still spent a lot of time hiding under beds. And the hamster was back to being Mr. Fluffykins. He hadn’t bitten me again, so I figured he could keep his original name.

Dad paused and for the second time, I saw his eyes brim with tears. “Oh, princess.”

“Hi, Dad.”

He walked closer, his eyes crinkling at the corners with his teary smile. “You look so much like your mom the day I married her. And that’s a true compliment because she was fuckin’ beautiful.”

I laughed. “Thank you, Dad.”

He held out his arm. “Ready?”

“Yes.” I slipped my hand in the crook of his elbow and Nora handed me my bouquet. “Are you?”

“I’ve been ready for this day for a long damn time, princess.”

A photographer flitted around, taking photos. Everly, Hazel, and Nora lined up and Jamie motioned them through.

I got close enough to see up to the front, where the officiant waited. And there he was.

Cox. My husband.

He always looked handsome. In gym shorts, or a t-shirt and jeans. In a suit and tie, or in nothing at all, he was the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen.

Maybe I was a little bit biased.

Today he was more handsome than ever in a gray suit with a vest and tie.

Georgia sat in the front row, across the aisle from my dad's seat. She twisted around and waved at me, tears already streaming down her face. I waved back, trying so hard not to cry.

Up front with Cox were his three groomsmen, Oliver, Mr. Calloway, and Corban. Mr. Calloway held little Ella in his arms. She must have been fussy and wanted her daddy.

Before I knew it, Jamie was ushering me and Dad to the end of the aisle. Dad straightened, standing tall.

Cox's eyes found me. And he smiled.

I started crying and didn't try to stop. That was just how this was going to go.

Besides, it was my wedding day. If I wanted to cry happy tears of blissful joy through the whole thing, I would.

The guests stood and we started forward, step by step up the aisle. Cox's grin didn't fade even the tiniest bit. He watched me come to meet him as if he were the happiest man on earth.

Me. I made him smile like that.

We got to the front and I turned toward my dad. He leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek.

"I love you, princess," he whispered.

"I love you too, Dad."

Then he turned. Cox reached out to shake his hand, but Dad stepped in closer and wrapped him in a hug.

And then I heard the most amazing thing. Dad held him another second and said, "Son."

Cox pulled away and swiped beneath his eyes. I was crying like a baby, but Cox? I'd never imagined I'd see the day.

Dad took his seat. I handed my bouquet to a teary Nora and moved to stand with Cox.

Looking into my eyes, he took my hands in his and as the officiant began the ceremony, he mouthed the words I'd once longed to hear. *I love you.*

I mouthed them back. And boy, did I mean them.

I loved this man so much, and the best part? He loved me right back.

Our marriage hadn't exactly begun in the usual way. Most people didn't marry someone they barely knew when they were too drunk to remember it

the next day. I still didn't remember much about that Vegas wedding. But we'd framed a collage of photos from that crazy night and put them on our living room wall, a fun memento of the wild night that had brought us together.

Neither of us had a single regret.

And now, here we were, in front of family and friends, saying our vows—vows that truly meant something. Because this time, we were madly in love, devoted to each other, and ready to spend the rest of our lives together as husband and wife.

Maybe it was a good thing I'd gone commando in that dress. Because, who knows, if I'd been wearing panties, maybe none of the rest of it would have happened.

I met Cox's eyes again and smiled. I had a little secret he was going to discover later.

I'd gone commando again today.



NEED a peek into Cox and Sophie's happily ever after? Prepare to swoon with this bonus epilogue.

I NEED MORE SOPHIE AND COX

HAVE you read about the other Dirty Martini girls, Everly and Hazel? Check out Everly and Shepherd's story in **Faking Ms. Right** and Hazel and Corban in **Falling for My Enemy**.

IN THE MOOD for more steamy romcom goodness? Check out **Book Boyfriend!** Turn the page for a preview...

BOOK BOYFRIEND: CHAPTER 1

ALEX

Sometimes in life we all have moments when we realize we screwed up so badly, there's no way out.

I'm having one of those moments.

Mia is staring at me, wide-eyed, like I just told her I murdered her mother. I didn't, for the record. But the book she's holding falls from her limp hand, and her mouth moves like she's trying to find something to say. The depth of the trouble I'm in is starting to hit me.

This is going to be bad.

"Are you serious?" she asks. "You aren't serious. How? No. You can't be."

"I am." Damn it, this is not how I wanted to tell her. "I'm so sorry. I've been planning on telling you. I wanted to tell you. It just never seemed like the right time, and when it did seem right, things kept happening."

She looks at the floor, her head slowly shaking from side to side. I'm panicking, trying to come up with the right thing to say. Is there a right thing to say when you've been lying to the woman you're in love with? If there is, I don't know what it is.

"Oh my god," she says, stepping away from me. "*Oh my god*. I've been... and you were... this whole time... and it was... Lexi was you?"

"Yes, Lexi was me."

"Holy shit." She puts her hand on her stomach, like she might vomit. "I've been telling you things—things about you. And you've been using that, haven't you? You've been manipulating me this whole time."

"No," I say, putting up a hand. "No, Mia, I swear it wasn't like that."

“How can you say that?” she asks. “Oh god, it started in the bookstore. *Can I buy you books?* I told Lexi I wished a guy would do that, and you used it on me. You picked me up with my own line.”

“No. God, Mia, I didn’t know who you were then. I just thought you were cute and it seemed like a good idea.”

“When did you know?” she asks, finally looking me in the eyes.

I stare at her, suddenly unable to speak. All my logic, all the decisions that seemed perfectly reasonable up until this moment come crashing down around me. The proverbial house of cards.

I really fucked this up.

“Alex, when did you find out who I was?”

“After we had dinner at Lift,” I say, reluctantly. “You messaged Lexi and talked about your date. I knew it had to be me.”

She gapes at me, her mouth dropping open, her eyes widening.

Yep. I’m screwed.

“How could you keep this from me?”

“The only person who knows is my sister,” I say. “I kept it a secret from everybody else.”

“Yeah? Well, you aren’t sleeping with everybody else,” she says.

I wince. “Mia, please. I didn’t mean to lie to you.”

“Of course you meant to,” she says. “Lying doesn’t happen by accident.”

“No, but I wanted to tell you,” I say. “I swear, I was going to.”

She meets my eyes and crosses her arms. “But you didn’t. Why?”

OKAY, maybe I should back up and explain why I’m standing in front of the love of my life, trying to make her understand how I’m also a woman named Lexi Logan.

Confused?

Yeah, me too.

It all started a little over a year ago. I know, that’s a big jump, and you want to get to the good stuff. *The boy meets girl, they fall in love, have hot monkey sex, are pulled apart by conflict, and come back together for a brilliant happily-ever-after* stuff. Believe me, I’m all too familiar with that story.

In fact, I write them for a living.

A year ago, that wasn’t me. Five days a week, I was schlepping off to my

job, sitting in a dull gray cubicle, staring at a screen, writing computer code. I had a shitty uncomfortable chair, a boss who needed a throat punch, and a bunch of coworkers who were stuck in just as deep a rut as I was.

But in my spare time, I was writing a science fiction novel. I spent hours doing research, taking notes, drawing sketches. I would work late into the night, plodding away, word after word. The book kept getting longer, but I figured I would deal with that when I started revisions. Or maybe make it a trilogy. I certainly had enough material. More often than not, the sun would be staining the sky with color, and my eyes dry and gritty, before I'd finally fall into bed for a couple hours.

Only to get up and go to my shitty job.

To be fair, the sleep deprivation was probably not helping my attitude toward work.

I'd wanted to be a novelist ever since I was a kid. I almost majored in English, but my dad, ever a practical man, talked me into getting a computer science degree in case the writing thing didn't work out. The problem is, that *practical* degree led to a *practical* career, which led to the soul-sucking existence I was wallowing in.

I didn't see a way out. My job sucked. I was divorced, after a very brief and tumultuous marriage. My relationship status was basically *I love women but I'm not interested in commitment*. All I had was my writing.

But as much as I enjoyed the process, I knew deep down that it was more of a hobby than a career, at least the way I was doing it. Even if the finished product—if I ever finished it—turned out to be the best sci-fi epic ever written, it would take a stroke of luck to get it published and make enough money to quit my job. And considering I'd been working on it for years already, with no end in sight, it didn't seem like I was going to write my way to a better life.

Until my sister, Kendra, said something that altered the course of my life forever.

[KEEP READING Book Boyfriend](#)

AFTERWORD

Dear reader,

I don't know about you, but this was the book I needed.

I wrote this book at the tail end of 2020, and we all know how that year went. Jumping into this sweet, fun, sexy romcom was everything I needed. Writing it was nothing short of delightful.

Behind the scenes confession. If you've read *Faking Ms. Right* (don't worry, no spoilers if you haven't), you might remember Sophie appearing at the end of the book. But she wasn't an original member of the Dirty Martini Running Club. So what happened there?

After I started writing *Faking Ms. Right*, I had this idea for a book with an "oops, we woke up married in Vegas" premise. The concept fit right in with the Dirty Martini world and I really, really wanted to write it. But it wasn't Hazel's story. And it wasn't Nora's.

Which was why I decided to introduce Sophie.

I knew that adding a friend to the group might be a little risky. Would readers look forward to her story? Or would it seem like she came out of nowhere? We do get to know her better in Hazel's book, *Falling for My Enemy*. But would that be enough?

Regardless of how this book is ultimately received, I have zero regrets about bringing Sophie into the mix. This book was 100% worth it. Sophie's hot mess express will always have a special place in my heart. And Cox? Where do I even begin with him?

Finding Cox's voice took me some time. There were other concepts that got bounced around until I finally found him. And it was all in that Southern

drawl. My husband looked at me over breakfast one day and said, “What if he sounds like Matthew McConaughey?” That was all it took. Everything about Cox suddenly clicked.

And I’ll totally admit I was listening to Matthew McConaughey’s book *Greenlights* (highly recommend, by the way) while I was writing this book, so I really had his voice in my head.

But Cox is his own man and I loved being in his head. He’s driven, successful, and cares deeply about the people around him. And when he falls, he falls hard. That’s my catnip, right there. I love it, every single time.

I hope you enjoyed *Marrying Mr. Wrong* and it brought you some happiness, maybe even when you needed it most. And in answer to your next two questions, yes Nora is getting a book, and yes, so is her brother Jensen. I have plans for both of them that you won’t want to miss.

Happy reading,

CK

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Susan, thank you for jumping in and doing an excellent job editing this book, even though it made you hate me. #sorrynotsorry

And Erma, thank you again for helping find those last pesky typos and making sure Sophie didn't go out without her panties again.

Kari, thank you for yet another adorable cover.

Nikki and Alex, thank you for being great brainstorming buddies and helping me work out the kinks. And that one suggestion (you know what I mean) turned out great, don't you think? (*fans self)

To David for being your usual wonderful, supportive self and doing everything you do to take care of us.

And last but not never, ever least, to all my readers for your love and support. I hope this was the romcom you needed right now.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Kingsley is a Top 5 Amazon bestselling author of sexy, heartfelt contemporary romance and romantic comedies. She writes sassy, quirky heroines, swoony heroes who love their women hard, panty-melting sexytimes, romantic happily ever afters, and all the big feels.

She can't imagine life without coffee, her Kindle, and the sexy heroes who inhabit her imagination. She's living out her own happily ever after in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and three kids.

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