



I make
the rules.
She holds
all the
power.

POWER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
J.D. HOLLYFIELD

Power

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Cover Designer: All By Design

Custom Image: Wander Aguiar

Editor: Word Nerd Editing, Novel Mechanic

www.authorjdhollyfield.com

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Epilogue

More by J.D. Hollyfield

About Author

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Dedication:

Support is power. Thank you for being a reader.

Dedication:

Support is power. Thank you for being a reader.

**From USA Today Bestselling author J.D. Hollyfield comes a devil
sexy, office romance about forbidden attraction, temptation and
power to fight for love.**

A controlling boss. A defiant assistant. And a whole lot of what i

I'm at the highest point of my career, and I haven't even broken a
yet.

Wealth, power, and prestige.

It's all at my fingertips.

But in my world, one filled with secrets, power comes at a cost. A l
taints my past. A sacrifice that poisons my future.

Until my newest assistant walks—or should I say *falls* into my of

She's mouthy, horrible at her job, and is making me question every
But I know better. Look but don't touch. The lie rotting inside me for

The problem is, I tried to stay away from her. Deny my darkest de
But I'm a weak man. And one taste of her... There's no going bac

And I *will* have her in my bed.

All she has to do is follow one very strict rule. No one can kno

If only it were that simple.

Her power over me might just cost me everything...

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sweat

lie that

face.

thing.

bids it.

The problem is, I tried to stay away from her. Deny my darkest desires.
But I'm a weak man. And one taste of her... There's no going back.

And I *will* have her in my bed.

All she has to do is follow one very strict rule. No one can know.

If only it were that simple.

Her power over me might just cost me everything...

Power. It's one hell of a drug. Add in control, and you have the cocktail for success. Consume too much, and it'll ruin you, eat away self-control you worked so hard to build and the perfect life you env for yourself. It will destroy your conscience and any sense of true rea potent force steering you. And when you finally wake up from th you've fallen into, it's too late.

I know firsthand what power does to a man. The sacrifices it force make.

In my world, power is a gift and a curse. I'm at the highest point career and haven't even broken a sweat. But wealth and prestige? The at a price—a price I'm still paying after making a deal with the devil h

Power. It's one hell of a drug. Add in control, and you have the perfect cocktail for success. Consume too much, and it'll ruin you, eat away at the self-control you worked so hard to build and the perfect life you envisioned for yourself. It will destroy your conscience and any sense of true reality, its potent force steering you. And when you finally wake up from the haze you've fallen into, it's too late.

I know firsthand what power does to a man. The sacrifices it forces us to make.

In my world, power is a gift and a curse. I'm at the highest point of my career and haven't even broken a sweat. But wealth and prestige? They come at a price—a price I'm still paying after making a deal with the devil himself.

pow·er

/ˈpou(ə)r/

a possession of control, authority, or influence over others.

pow·er

/'pou(ə)r/

a possession of control, authority, or influence over others.

Prologue

Theo

Seven years ago. . .

I pull up to Sullivan's, parking the shiny new Lexus my father had when I returned home. Damn, it's good to be back. Not that I'm here. One summer, then it's Europe for the next two years. Poor me, I Alfred Monroe only wants the best for his son.

Climbing out, I toss my keys to the valet. "Good evening, Mr. Monroe." "Looking good, George," I say over my shoulder before heading Glancing at my phone, I cuss under my breath. I'm already late. I find the table always reserved for him. "Father," I greet, taking in the old and blonde bombshell at his side. I didn't know we would have guests.

"You must be Theo. Charles Hill." The man stands, and I shake his hand. "This is my daughter, Alana."

I gaze over her, offering my signature smile. Damn, I wouldn't be sliding into that after a few cocktails. I bet I could have her sucking me in the bathroom before dessert.

"Son, sit. We have a lot to discuss." I take a seat next to my father.

"I hear congratulations are in order."

“Thanks,” I reply to Charles. Two days ago, I graduated second class. Not that my undergrad degree matters. My future is already paved for me.

“Pretty impressive. Tennis and heavyweight rowing? You sure put your name for yourself up there.”

“Yeah, not too shabby.” I steal a glance at his daughter and wink.

“And now you’re off to France to complete your master’s. What is that about?”

I debate giving him the real answer, but I’m sure my father would disapprove of me telling his friend and his hot daughter what I really do with my time: drink and fuck my way across France before I fall in line waiting at my father’s company. Instead, I reply with a more sophisticated and a little longer. “It’s important to be fluent in all forms of business. Going international will allow me to expand my knowledge and provide more insight into global business deals as MIC expands its investments across the ocean.”

He smiles, and my father nods his approval. “What brings you home tonight?” I ask.

“We have some of the same business interests and ideas and a brighter future. Nothing we need to bore you two with. In fact, when you and Alana go enjoy yourselves? I’m sure you can show her a good evening.”

My night just turned in the right direction. “Of course. I’d love to talk to you around if you’re up for it.”

Her cat-like smile says she’s on the same page. “That sounds like a wonderful idea.”

Hmmm. . . polite and accommodating. Key attributes for being wild. Not a bad start to the summer. She’ll be a nice treat.

in my
ved for



Two years later. . .

made a I tug the strap of my carry-on bag up my shoulder. The flight from
was long, and I'm in dire need of a hot shower. I take my phone off a
mode, and it immediately begins to ding.

brought **Claire: Love you. Text me when you land <3**

A. Monroe: Come straight to the office as soon as you land.

would He can't even give me a second before making demands. So much
plan to long shower and possible nap.

nto line **Me: I will when I land tomorrow.**

answer. **A. Monroe: Now.**

nal will How the hell does he even know I'm home? I told him my flight di
, future in until tomorrow for this reason. I knew he would throw me into the
second I stepped on American soil. I wanted a day to settle into the

two to had set up while I was in France.

Me: Be there in an hour.

bout a I shoot off a text to Claire.

y don't **Me: Love you too, baby. Just landed. Have to stop by the offic**
a nice **you when I get to my condo. Maybe send me some nudes to h**
through my day.

o show I slide my phone into my pocket. My plans of gallivanting across
changed the day I walked into a small café in France. With her
like a accent and kind smile, Claire took my order and stole my heart. She l
a feeling of peace into my life that I hadn't realized I needed. She wa
in bed. and not at all wild, unlike what I was used to, and it only made me l
more.

The last two years went by too fast, the weight of our reality hanging on us. But I plan on fixing that. When she flies over for a couple days, I introduce her to my father and then ask her to marry me. Leaving her in Paris country won't be easy. It's all she's ever known. But I can give her airplane life. Offer her anything she can imagine. With her as part of my future, I want for nothing.

I return some emails during the ride to the office. The internship I did overseas at Monroe Investment Corp last year was intense; my father was sure of it, claiming I needed to know what it took to run a powerful company. That's why I'm thankful for Claire. If it hadn't been for her tampering, I wouldn't have used my time to study and observe. Now, I'm confident I know what it takes to win at this game, make my father proud, and be the husband Claire deserves.

I ride up the elevator. As soon as the doors open, I wave at Trish, the than-dirt receptionist, then head to my father's office. Charles is seated there from my father when I reach his door.

"Gentlemen," I greet them both, ditching my bag. While I've been away, my father and Charles have been plotting. My father built Monroe Investment Corp from the ground up. Typical rags-to-riches story, going from working in his parents' basement to a multi-billion-dollar global real estate investment corporation. Alfred Monroe capitalized on land no one would touch in Europe and turned it into a gold mine.

Charles Hill was nowhere near as successful, but he created something that intrigued my father—a land development company that acquired and controlled the building of commercial and residential structures. But even more than that, his development as a whole, the recent addition of a land survey department

ng overparticular piqued Father's interest. And because my father loved pov
plan to money, there have been talks of a company merger.

r home “What’s so important that I had to come straight from the airport?”

a good “Sit down,” my father snaps.

3, she’ll His cold demeanor catches me off guard. Alfred Monroe is a h

bastard. No one has ever disputed that. But that coldness aimed at
started unusual. “Okay,” I say, sitting next to Charles. “What’s this about?”

r made My father stares at me from behind a desk fit for a king, his eyes da

mpany.fury. I’ve seen him in action; this is a man who destroys people

g me, I boardroom. I’m just unsure why his anger is directed at me. He slides

t I have across his desk, and I throw my hand out to catch it before it falls

usbandground. I open the folder, and it takes a moment for the pictures in

register—to understand why they look so familiar.

e older- “What—where did you get these?”

l across “That’s all you have to say for yourself?”

I flip through each image, shaking my head. “This isn’t me. Well, i

1 away, I don’t remember. . .” I look at my father then at Charles. “Alana and

estment out that night and partied, but I never did this. I don’t touch drugs.”

king in “Those images say otherwise.”

estment “Well, I’m saying this isn’t me. They must have been altered.”

ch and images of me with my nose to a pile of cocaine—a drug I’ve never tou

sit in my grip. “Who gave you these? Alana?”

ing that “You dare blame my daughter?” Charles threatens.

oversaw “Well, who took them then?” Alana and I left the restaurant that ni

han the went to a few parties. We got plastered and ended up at a hotel, fuckin

ment in other’s brains out until dawn, then went our separate ways. We crosse

a few times that summer at charity events our parents set us up at and

ver and occasionally until I got bored and cut it off. She was hot and a minx but she was also clingy and, to be honest, fucking crazy.

“It doesn’t matter. They get worse.”

How much worse can this get? These alone can ruin my name.

I flip through the rest, my fingers clenched around each one. I’m breathing as I scan through three more. My stomach churns. “No. . .” I image. “I wouldn’t have done this.”

I look up at my father. “You know I would never do something like in the would never need to force someone—”

“Again, the image says otherwise—”

“This image tells the wrong story. I was with Alana that night. What the fuck is this?”

“A woman who has come forward, claiming you drugged and raped

I toss the pictures back onto his desk. “No. Fuck that. Someone is trying to blackmail us. Get money.” I shoot up from my chair. I’m going to be satisfied, but “Sit down,” my father growls.

“You can’t honestly believe this.”

“What’s done is done. It doesn’t matter what I believe—”

“Are you kidding me? It does matter!”

Several “Thankfully, Charles and Alana have come up with a solution to match— all go away.”

I look at Charles. My father continues. “Alana has graciously agreed and claim you two were together the whole night.”

“We were. It’s not a lie.”

“Not according to these. Alana confessed that you got very drunk and disappeared, and she left without you.”

“That’s bullshit!” I start to pace the room.

in bed, “You will sit the fuck down and listen, or I will wash my hands leaving you to handle the consequences of your actions on your own. understand the severity should this get out? Or if this woman charges? Your career will be over before it starts. Everything you’ve I stop for will be gone, and I won’t be able to help you.”

Another I stop abruptly. “This is insane. Check the footage at the Conrad I was there with Alana. There’s proof. My credit card—”

e this. I My father cuts me off. “You should be thankful Charles and Al giving you a chance for a future. Everything I’ve worked for to ma who you are, and you disrespect me by doing this—”

Who the “I’m not listening to this any longer. I didn’t do what those photos Do something. We’re Monroes. Certainly, your influence can fix this her.” it go away.”

ying to “It’s already done. We’ve handled it. Now, you will do what you ick. keep this from getting out.”

“And that is?”

He leans back in his chair. “We’ve made this disappear, thanks Hills’ commitment. In return, you will show your gratitude. Charle have a promising business future together—and so will you and Alana ake this

d to lie

nk and

“You will sit the fuck down and listen, or I will wash my hands of you, leaving you to handle the consequences of your actions on your own. Do you understand the severity should this get out? Or if this woman presses charges? Your career will be over before it starts. Everything you’ve worked for will be gone, and I won’t be able to help you.”

I stop abruptly. “This is insane. Check the footage at the Conrad Hotel. I was there with Alana. There’s proof. My credit card—”

My father cuts me off. “You should be thankful Charles and Alana are giving you a chance for a future. Everything I’ve worked for to make you who you are, and you disrespect me by doing this—”

“I’m not listening to this any longer. I didn’t do what those photos claim. Do something. We’re Monroes. Certainly, your influence can fix this. Make it go away.”

“It’s already done. We’ve handled it. Now, you will do what you must to keep this from getting out.”

“And that is?”

He leans back in his chair. “We’ve made this disappear, thanks to the Hills’ commitment. In return, you will show your gratitude. Charles and I have a promising business future together—and so will you and Alana.”

Chapter One

Fay

Present day

Damn, life is good. There's no better feeling than being at the top of the game. The glittering lights of the nightclub sparkle as I sip champagne that I am. The music vibrates in my ears and through my body. A drop of sweat snakes down my chest. The sugary liquid coats my throat as I ride the rhythm. A masculine hand slides around me, and I find myself straddling against a hard frame. I know that hand. I suck in my lower lip as a wave of excitement floods my system. The warmth of his breath skates along my already heated ear, reigniting the spark of arousal and making me even wetter between my thighs.

Thinking about that sends a live wire to my core. I quickly turn, desperate for his mouth on mine. Shifting in his arms, I lift my chin, impatient for his touch. "Take me back to your place and fuck me, Miguel. I'm so messy for you. I need you to ravage my body."

His deep voice tickles my cheek as his lips graze mine. "I love it when you use the word 'moist.' It makes my mouth water." His grip tightens, and

as his hardness presses against my belly. “I’m going to drink you in my mouth with your slick—”

————— “Fay. . .”

“Yes, keep going. Come get all my moistness—”

“Fay. . .”

He starts to pull away. “No, no—where are you going? I’m ready. and ready! Moist. *Super* moist—”

“Fay!”

“What!” I snap out of my dream and turn onto my belly. God! Stu dream ruiner. Just when things were about to get good with my im lover. I groan into my pillow and cover my head with the sheet. “Mo of myso early. Can we talk, like, maybe. . . when the sun comes up?”

ie older “Honey, the sun is up. It spent an entire day in the sky. No oplet of nighttime. Dinner time, to be exact.”

nove to Shit, really? I peel an eye open. “It’s night?” Damn. I feel like I s ruggledfive minutes. And I may still be drunk. “Sorry. Late night at the bar. rush oflove their booze.” Including me. I groan at the unease in my stomach. I ong mybartender has its perks, free shots. It also has its downfalls, too ma n moreshots.

“Fable, you’ve been saying that for six months. I know you’re upse speratewhat happened at the restaurant, but this needs to end.”

for his “Mom, not this again. I told you, I’m not upset.” Hell yeah, I’m oist fordidn’t spend the last four years busting my ass to finally land my dre as a commis chef at the hottest restaurant in the city only to be sabotae n youTristan Hamlin, the worst human being to ever walk this earth.

d I sigh My chest tightens as I swallow down the anger at the reminder of hard work down the drain.

and fill After high school, I got accepted into one of the top culinary schools in the nation. After three years of mastering my art, I graduated top of my class. The program was extensive—difficult for most—but I was in the top 10. I showed skills that took years for some to learn. My exceptional cooking and hard work were praised by all my instructors. And when I left, I left behind a reputation for hot training, technique, and talent for top-notch, gourmet cooking.

I spent the next year working my ass off at an up-and-coming restaurant in New York City until I got a call from my mentor at the culinary institute offering me an opportunity I could not refuse.

Sullivan's was the most elite restaurant in upper Manhattan. You had to know someone, it's someone or know someone to get a reservation. And if you got in within a few months? You were *really* someone. With a stellar referral from Titian's, it happened to be an old flame of Miguel Lorenzo, the owner and head chef. I joined the kitchen in a commis chef position.

Right alongside Tristan fucking Hamlin.

Tristan had been at Sullivan's for four years. He was a hard worker, a bit of an ass-kisser. More importantly, he was an evil, bitter guy. He started at the bottom as a kitchen porter, spending the first year and a half of his career scrubbing dishes and cleaning floors hoping Miguel would notice his dedication and promote him. It took a while, but he was finally bumped up to commis chef, or junior chef, and was next in line for the chef de partie position. Fancy way of saying station chef.

Until I was hired.

Had he been angry? Jealous? Spiteful? It was hard to pinpoint exactly what his problem was, but he only had himself and the stick shoved up his ass. I took all my blame for not advancing. He berated other chefs and tore at their confidence. We were in a cutthroat business, true, but no successful

s in the could be run by one person. His arrogance and inability to be a team
y class held him back—something that landed me the promotion to chef de pa
aven. I I give my mom a theatrical scoff. “Honestly, I couldn’t care less.
ing and even like that job.”

had the Didn’t like it? Psh. I’d been in *love* with it. No longer just assisting
creating. Miguel saw something in me he didn’t see in the rest of his
urant in kitchen is a revolving door of aspiring chefs who, quite literally
nstitute because they can’t take the heat. Not me, though. I loved the adrenali
yelling. The hundred-degree kitchen making me sweat while I sea
ad to be highest quality of meats and fish. I was kicking ass and well on my
thin six making a name for myself when a little accident happened—or sabo
ia, who ruining my entire career. Keyword being sabotage.

chef, I It was no secret Sullivan’s and Miguel’s dishes were well wo
Michelin star the restaurant had obtained. The food was beyond exce
With two stars already under their belt, rumor had it inspectors from
r and a were making their appearances, assessing the resturant for a third star.
arted at Tristan somehow got wind of the final inspector made a reservation
s career was called to the front lines to assist Miguel. I knew it was my sh
ice his time to shine.

ed up to I had just finished plating the most beautiful pasta with black truff
rtie—agras, and marsala. Miguel was at his highest stress point, riding the
kitchen over every little detail. Me? I’d tuned out the mayhem
finished my dish, drizzling truffle oil on top.

ly what I watched as each plate was carted off to the tables, knowing one
s ass to beauties was soon to be consumed, moans following each bite. *Th*
eople’s before I discovered someone had swapped my truffle oil for mushroom
kitchen An ambulance was called for a woman who had been dining alc

player began having trouble breathing. Her face swelled to the size of a balloon. A waiter saved her life when he found her EpiPen and stabbed her in the arm. I didn't seem like I was the only one. Three other people were carted away due to mushroom allergies. When the article about Sullivan's mishandling of dishes and endangering the well-being of their clientele was released, it was clear I had cost them a Michelin star. Due to the severity, a star was even removed. Who knew a Michelin star could be taken away?

Oh, the things I learned when I got super fired. Miguel didn't even bother to explain that I would *never* have made an error like that. The second night I flashed to Tristan's, I knew he had switched the oils. It was no secret to the staff—twit had been gunning for my job, but I underestimated how low he'd get it. Not only was I humiliated and fired, but I was barred from the restaurant within a billion-mile radius. They didn't even allow me to pick up my apron, the worst 'fuck you, you're fired, get out' gesture. Before I could even wrap my brain around what happened, the entire food industry knew. "Seriously. I'm way happier. The bartending gig is really working for me, and I am happy! Life couldn't be better."

Okay. I'm lying.

I tried to find other work and spent months throwing myself at any restaurant that was hiring. I had a natural talent not many had, but when they saw Sullivan's on my resume and put two and two together, the excuses rolled in one after another. *Sorry, we're full. Not what we're looking for. . . .* So many restaurants that would *thrive* with my expertise turned me away. The message was clear: I'd been blacklisted.

I've never been in a serious relationship, but I imagine the end of one would evoke the same feeling—the guy, a.k.a. my former restaurant, me and

on. They heart out and leaving me for dead. That's what it was. Someone hit me in the leg. It was the one thing I loved out of my chest and crushed it.

As. And I did what any normal person would do. I wore the face of someone who could care less. I had zero fucks to give, and I was all good. On the surface, a third though, I was a mess. Everyone around me kept on ticking, being proud of their successful selves. I was jobless, had mastered sulking, and moved back home. I was what you called winning at losing. In short, I was a loser.

Let me fast forward a few months, and I found myself at Bev's, a dive bar at the eyes end of town. I'd gotten suckered into some blind date that never showed up. The little loss, obviously—and ended up sticking around for a pity drink. That's how I met Mindy. She was the bartender that night and has since become my best friend. Her tattoos are statement pieces she wears proudly. Her hair is a vibrant pink, and she's absolutely gorgeous. Her best assets, though, are her abs and I could say boobs, leading to her other job in adult films. She's not the type I would ever associate myself with, but that night, after too many shots, she saved me. "I got you out." my savior.

The next day, I woke up with a hangover from hell and a number written on my arm. Sadly, I had to piece together my night to remember. Mindy's kitchen wasn't from a guy, but in the end, I was thankful. At some point, Mindy saw I had a tattoo and told me about an open bartending position. Highly intoxicated, I applied and got the job. I rolled in behind the bar to make some drinks. Kitchen or bar, it all works the same. Mindy's kitchen could memorize any recipe and create it. Apparently, they hired me as a bartender.

It wasn't any Coyote Ugly, but damn, it was exactly what I'd needed. It was a mind-numbing. When you know a craft, you *know* a craft, and my new bartending mixology skills were right up there with my culinary talent. I could give

had torn a run for his money. Ultimately, it kept me distracted from failures. *Cooking who?* I was happy. Content.

Until my mother decided she had other plans for me, bringing us inside, current debacle.

“It doesn’t matter. Tomorrow, I need you to get up and show up—preferably not smell like booze. I got you a job interview.”

My ears perk, and I sit up, swaying. “You did? Which restaurant?”

“Honey, it’s not a—”

“Just tell me. Is it middle of the road? It’s fine. I’ll take it. I can work when I want—”

“Honey.”

“Tell them I can give a full presentation—”

“Fable—”

“I’ll even start for free—”

“Fable! It’s an executive administrative position.”

My enthusiasm dies, along with my willingness to work for free. “What?”

“Your Aunt Marlena called in a favor for you. A woman from her company said her daughter works for this terrific real estate investment company. The CEO is in dire need of an assistant.”

“Well, I hope he finds one. I’m not—”

“In the position to argue. You need a job, Fay.”

“I have a job.”

“No, you have a distraction. The bar is your way of avoiding life. Your culinary ambitions didn’t work out, and that’s okay! We don’t love you less, but you need to get back out there and get a job.”

“Again, I *have* a job.”

om my “Again, you have a distraction. Listen—your father and I love you
much.”

is to my “But. . .” There’s always a but.

“But you need to pull it together. You’re twenty-three. You need
er. And passed this setback and get back out there.”

“I tried. Look where it got me.”

“We didn’t raise you to be a quitter. It’s time you got a real job and
your way.” She pauses, then says, “Plus, your father and I have plans.
ork my we’ve wanted to do. We thought you would be out on your own by now

One inquisitive brow rises, and I cross my arms over my chest as
back at my mother. “What are you getting at?”

She shifts from foot to foot. “We found you an interview, so it’s
suck it up. . . and, well, consider moving out.”

The. Audacity.

“Wait, Telling me *I* need to suck it up? I have sucked it up. I got back on the
and found a job. It might be at a dive bar working ’til three in the n
churchmost nights serving the thirsty patrons of America, but it’s still a job!
ny, and up, get paid, and have responsibilities!

I also threw up in my parents’ driveway two nights ago. Damn Jäger
The point is, I’m still fragile. Hiding away at night is what’s best for now.
now. Certainly not being an assistant to some old man who probably
like mold in a stuffy office and—never mind. No need to keep drann
e. Your this.

ou any My phone vibrates in my purse, and I grab it, Mindy’s name rolling
my screen. “Hey.”

“You go in yet?”

ou very “About to walk in. Did you know pantyhose comes in seventeen different flesh colors?”

“Ew, no. Why are you in pantyhose? What are you, a grandma?”

l to get “My mom told me I had to wear them. Great. Maybe I should stop in the restroom and take ’em off. They’re really uncomfortable.”

“And stupid. Besides that, are you prepared?”

learned “By prepared, you mean. . .?”

Things “Did you Google who you’re going to work for? Study the company website.” no corporate guru, but I would at least do that.”

I stare “The only thing I Googled was the address.”

“Fay! They’ll probably ask what you know about the company. What time toname?” I spit off the name. “Damn. . . okay. Investment corporation, 1234 500—blah, blah, blah. Buys and sells land.”

I slap myself to wake up. “God, this all sounds so boring. I don’t even hoot about investing or land development. And when I bomb this interview, I’m going to the bakery I spotted coming in and ask if they need anyone to morningsweep their floors. I’ll even clean toilets to get in a kitchen again.”

I show “Toilets? Gross. For real, though, this does sound like a total snooze. . . wait, here we go. Theo Monroe, CEO of Monroe Investment Corp, 1234 567 890. youngest CEO on the Upper East Coast. His father, Alfred Monroe, 1234 567 890 ne rightdown last year and handed his prodigy son the title. Ever since, he’s taken the investment sector by storm. Let me Google him. . . holy shit. Your name is so hot.”

I tug at my blouse, adjusting my new pencil skirt. How the hell do I survive wearing these clothes all day long? The elevator dings, opening on the fifth floor, and I enter the lavish office. While I’m shifting my strapless

ifferentmy resume drops. I bend over to pick it up and feel the pantyhose

“Goddammit,” I hiss, lifting my eyes to a woman standing in front of r

“Miss Evans?”

p at the “Gotta go.” I slide my phone into my purse. “Yep, that’s me.”

pantyhose and all.

“Theresa with Human Resources. Follow me.” The woman doesn’t
for me to gather myself before walking off. Clutching my resume
y? I’mchest, I chase after her and trip over my feet, falling forward. Two
extend in front of me, snagging me upright.

“Holy almost-cleanup-on-aisle-five,” I say, trying to straighten
at’s thewhen my eyes land on the most glorious human I’ve ever seen. “Wow
FortuneGood thing one of us knows how to walk. I’m about to go into an int

Can you imagine. . . carpet burns on my face?” I chuckle awkward
: give agaze shifting to the woman, who looks appalled. I turn back to th
erview, “Hey, if I get the job,” I lean in, “which is unlikely, I owe you a co
yone towink at him and give the angry woman my attention. “I’m sorry, whe
we?”

efest— She opens her mouth, but the gentleman interrupts. “You were a
Forbes’have an interview with me.”

stepped It takes a second for my brain to catch up. I turn to him, my
ken thedropping. “You’re. . . you—oh! Yes. Hello, hi.” I shoot my hand out,
boss issmacking him in the chest, and wince, pulling back. “Sorry. Hi, my r
—”

people “Mr. Monroe, my apologies. I’m not sure how this one got thro
: thirty-screening—”

ess bra, “That will be all, Theresa.”

The woman nods. “Yes, of course. Miss Evans, please follow me

“I expect you here in the morning at seven sharp. No later. Coffee at my desk first thing. We’ll spend the first few hours reviewing my agenda. I’ll nod what’s expected of you.” He abruptly stands, causing me to do the

“I’m a busy man, Miss Evans. Don’t waste my time.”

I find myself nodding vigorously. “Of course. No. I’ll be here.”
He nods. “Is there anything else, Miss Evans?”
I stare back at him, realizing he’s dismissing me. “Oh! No. Not now. I’ll see you in the morning. How do you take your coffee?”
He looks down at me, and his eyes darken. “Black. With a touch of sweetness.”

I’m not sure what the hell just happened, but it seems I have a new job. See, my

st. And

why did

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erience

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orker.”

waiting

or even

“I expect you here in the morning at seven sharp. No later. Coffee on my desk first thing. We’ll spend the first few hours reviewing my agenda and what’s expected of you.” He abruptly stands, causing me to do the same. “I’m a busy man, Miss Evans. Don’t waste my time.”

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I’m not sure what the hell just happened, but it seems I have a new job.

Chapter Two

Theo

“You can’t honestly expect me to agree to this. I’m in love with someone I’m going to ask to marry me.”

“Call it off.”

“Is that a joke? No, I won’t.”

“You will, Theo.”

“You’re asking me to marry someone over a bullshit claim. That shouldn’t have happened. I’m not—”

He slams his fist on his desk. “You will. Or you will have nothing. Success comes sacrifice, but with sacrifice comes power. It’s time you show your loyalty to this family—”

“This is going too far.”

“Don’t stand here and tell me you don’t enjoy everything I have given you. You’ve wanted for nothing. This lavish life you live is because I put you here. This company is my legacy, soon to be yours. You should be more grateful for what I’ve provided for you.” I shake my head. I won’t do this. “No, Theo. Not free. There will always be a price for getting what you want.”

“Not this price.”

“It’s already done. Accept it.” I turn to walk away when his final tear through me. “Whoever the girl is, break it off, or I will.”



I sit at my desk. What I once thought was fit for a king now feels suffocating and cold. It’s not even seven a.m., and I’m ready to pour myself a bourbon to make this burning in my chest stop—drown all the regret and guilt of the things I’ve had to sacrifice. For this business. For him.

My cell phone rings, and my father’s name lights up the screen. I clench my jaw, fisting my hand on the desk. Inhaling a deep breath, I force myself to calm down, my gaze falling to the paper under my hand. Fay Evans. Legs that scream to be wrapped around my neck. A smile that promises something inside me.

Theresa was right. She shouldn’t have made it through the screening process, let alone to my office door. Zero qualification and a waste of my time. And I hired her. *Pretty sure your dick did the hiring.* My dick is the only business making decisions like this, especially when I’m unavailable. The best I can do is fire her the second she walks back through that door.

And if she walks in wearing that pencil skirt and smile? Fuck.

I pick up my phone, dialing Theresa’s extension. She can fire her ass. My phone rings once then goes to her voicemail. I’m about to give her a stern set of instructions when my office door opens.

Alfred Monroe. The fangs behind the bite. The man who still comes in for shots even after stepping down from his throne.

I slam the phone down. “Father. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Good to see you in the office early.”

l words My nails dig into my palms. “I’m always here early. You know that do you want?”

He walks into my office, looking around as if he isn’t already aware of his surroundings. It was his, after all. “Is there something wrong with wanting to see my son?”

arbon to “Get to the point. I have a busy day.”

ver the “I have good news.”

Nothing that comes out of this man’s mouth is good. “Did you want me to beg you to tell me? Jump up and down?”

ychself to “You’ll be happy to know the merger is in place.”

. Petite. His news catches me off guard. My expression slips. “When?”

t woke “It’s set to go through in thirty days.” His victorious smile makes my stomach churn. I wipe my face clear of emotion and reach for the file folder on my desk.

: of my “I’ll believe it when I see it. It’s been in place for five years.” I stare at him as he tosses an envelope onto my desk. “What is this?”

le. The “As you know, Charles will want to move quickly. I expect your cooperation.”

er. The I grab the envelope and open it. My fingers tighten. The contract I signed five years ago. A night I regret with every fiber of my being. My stomach tightens, remembering those images. A lie that portrayed me as a man. Alfred Monroe stood by those photos instead of believing his only son. I sat there in silence while I signed a contract stating I would marry the daughter of Charles Hill by the time the merger between Monroe Investments Corp and the Hill Group was finalized. I could save my name and keep my shiny things. Power, prestige, wealth. If I chose wrong, I would have nothing.

t. What The merger was originally set to go through a year after the contract was signed, but legal issues kept it delayed. Random audits and deals that were supposed to go through. Something was clearly wrong, but it allowed my duty to Alan to stay on the back burner.

And for five long years, I've had to live with this secret. A lie that I told myself. An obligation to a woman I despise. I may have signed that contract, but it didn't stop me from searching for the truth. I spent time and money on me to find video footage that didn't exist, and credit card receipts that showed zero hotel charges. All for a night that never happened but had images that claimed it did. I was wild in college, fucked around and drank, but I would have messed with drugs, let alone taken advantage of a woman. Because there was no evidence to prove otherwise. Only the word of the scientist on my Alana Hill.

And now, after five long years of warding off that lying bitch, the hell she is going through.

I look at my father, and his stare is anything but friendly. "Everyone is expected to be in attendance at Thursday's dinner. Assume it will be a celebration.

Don't be late." He exits my office, and I toss the paper in my drawer. My signed fingers grip the underside of my desk. I want to flip it over and burn it to a crisp. I want to turn it to ashes.

A knock sounds on my door, and my head snaps up. "What?" The door opens. He returns, and Amy, my receptionist, sticks her head in. "Not now."

"I have—"

"Dammit, Amy. Not—"

She pushes the door open, and my cock swells and thickens in my pants. Beside her is the most captivating woman I've ever seen.

"Hi, sorry. I thought you said seven sharp. I can wait in the lobby—"

act was “No. Thank you, Amy.” Amy nods and smiles at my new assistant hat fell closing the door behind her. I adjust my cock to hide my arousal and lana to *Fire her. Fire her. Fire her.* “Have a seat, Miss Evans.” I point to a worktable, loving how her name rolls off my tongue. When she turns her back to me, my eyes land on her perfectly shaped ass. What the hell am I doing? I close my eyes, taking a deep breath to reset. Opening them, I try to get over to the table.

My gaze lingers on her long chestnut hair, itching to run my fingers through the silky strands. I want to reach out and touch it. Bring it to me. I never and inhale her scent. *Jesus, I sound like a creep.* She’s twenty-three. But nearing thirty. I have no business fantasizing about her—or anyone else hemming that matter.

Taking the seat next to her, I pull the agenda Amy prepared and place it on the table. She takes it and offers me a smile. My damn dick jerks again. Fuck, her smile is perfection.

“I’m going to be real honest. I have no idea how to be an assistant dinner professionally trained chef. If this doesn’t—”

“If you’re done, can we start discussing my schedule?” Making clear that the only experience she has, but she isn’t going anywhere. “You’re not here. I expect you to learn my daily agenda and complete tasks before I finish requesting them. Do I make myself clear?” Her smile falls, which I’m thankful for.

“Yep. Got it.”

“You will oversee my meetings and learn who my clients are. The fiscal reports. Are you familiar?” I toss one in front of her, already knowing her answer.

“No—”

before “Demographic reports?” I toss another one.

I stand. “Yeah, nope—”

a round “Miss Evans, are you even aware of what we do here?”

turns her Her smile returns, and I want to kiss it off her. “Sure. Fortunately, I am an investment firm that buys land and sells it for a ton more.”

I walk My frown deepens. “I expect you to do your homework, Miss Evans. When clients come in, I need you to know exactly what we do, and I need to be able to find it on Google version. Now. . .” I stand, needing the space, “I have a meeting in ten minutes. I need to familiarize yourself with these reports by the time I return. I need to see if I’m stuck that needs to be proofed for my afternoon meeting. Oh, and please, for Evans?”

“Yes?” she asks, less pep in her voice. She doesn’t like me. Good. I see it on her face. “Consider this your only warning. My coffee. I expect it first thing in the morning. My eyes narrow on me, and I turn, exiting my office.

Why the hell am I entertaining this? I know better. She’s a bad idea. I’m not having zero room for failure.

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“Demographic reports?” I toss another one.

“Yeah, nope—”

“Miss Evans, are you even aware of what we do here?”

Her smile returns, and I want to kiss it off her. “Sure. Fortune 500 investment firm that buys land and sells it for a ton more.”

My frown deepens. “I expect you to do your homework, Miss Evans. When clients come in, I need you to know exactly what we do, not the Google version. Now. . .” I stand, needing the space, “I have a meeting. You need to familiarize yourself with these reports by the time I return. I have a stack that needs to be proofed for my afternoon meeting. Oh, and Miss Evans?”

“Yes?” she asks, less pep in her voice. She doesn’t like me. Good.

“Consider this your only warning. My coffee. I expect it first thing.” Her eyes narrow on me, and I turn, exiting my office.

Why the hell am I entertaining this? I know better. She’s a bad idea, and I have zero room for failure.

Chapter Three

Fay

“**H**e *what?*”

“He told me to study the reports, then left! Didn’t even
back! Total asshole.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I sat there all day trying to read those reports, and I still don’t know
half of it means. I was too afraid to leave to find the cafeteria, so
smashed granola bar from my purse.”

“Gross!” Mindy laughs over the phone. “Sounds horrible. Just do
back. Tell your mom it didn’t work out. I can ask Harry to give you
hours.”

“I wish. My mom would kill me. Plus, my parents spent the whole
drawing up plans for their new workout room. They’re counting down
days until I’m out of their hair.” I sigh and fall back on my bed, kick
my heels. Talk about cliché. They could at least turn my room into
room. Or a bar. They don’t even work out. My dad has a bad back
heaven’s sake.

“You can always stay with me.”

“I know. I need to tough this out, though. And probably send resumes in hopes someone throws me a bone.”

“Okay, well, the offer’s there. Sucks your boss is a dick. At least he’s got some candy. You can fantasize about riding him while stabbing his eye out.” Mindy chuckles. “Actually, that sounds hot. You know, in a morbid way.”

“Vomit. He may be hot, but no thanks.” I’ll admit, at first, he was a little bit of his way to making a cameo in my next sex dream, but as soon as he saw me, it was a total turn-off. Not to mention, my life is already a shitshow. The last thing I need is to add *lusting for my boss* to my list of problems. The only good thing that came from this job was the hiring bonus—and the landlord’s aunt Rita emailed me for an available apartment lease. “Listen, I’ll see you on Friday, ’kay?”

“Yeah, girl. Good luck. Keep me posted on how it goes with the boss.”

“He’s not that hot.”

“I bet he knows his way around a woman’s body. Can you imagine you look at his hands? You know what they say—”

“Dude, no!” Yes, yes, I did. They’re big. Which tells me other things about him—more hands, big feet, big. . . “I have zero intentions of doing anything except for him. And I don’t know if I can even do that. If today was any indication, he might end up poisoning his coffee and moving into a nice jail cell.”

Mindy bursts out laughing, and I chuckle. “Whatever you say. I’ve got to go. Harry walked in and looks like he’s on a rampage. Love you, girl.”

“Love you.” I hang up and toss my phone onto the bed. Rolling to bed, I smack my face into the pillow, I cock my head and spot a new poster on the wall. “You kidding me?” I gripe at the kitten in a sweatband holding weights onto my back. I seriously need to find a job. A different job. One that

d moreinclude tight skirts or an asshole boss—and has lunch breaks. Speaking of food, I’m starving. I bounce out of bed. “Mom! What’s for dinner?”

ie’s eye



s out.”

ay.” My morning ride to the thirty-fifth floor of the MIC building is painful.

well on could my mother do this to me?

poke to After inhaling a whole cheese pizza last night, I blasted my resume

ow. The every job listing I could find. I pull my phone out of my purse and check

The one personal email for the tenth time this morning. Still nothing. My shoulders

ead my slump. I hate this hollow feeling. I should be behind a flaming hot

see you fulfilling my life’s dream. Instead, I’m walking into a corporate

reporting for assistant duty. *This can’t be my life.* Maybe it hasn’t refrained

delete five spam emails and stare at my phone while it searches for new

hottie *Your email has been updated.* Nothing. *Crap.* Not a single nibble. I realize

has only been, like, six hours, but still. There is *no way* someone

qualified than me applied for a fish cook position in *Alaska.*

ie? Did *Desperation sure does look good on me.* And honestly, so does this

sleeveless, velvet blazer jumpsuit. It would have looked even better with

gs. Big scarf I styled it with if I hadn’t spilled coffee on it while running

ot work subway.

ation, I The doors open, and I step into the main office. The friendly receptionist

re gotta from yesterday, Amy, pops her head up from the desk. “Morning. You’re

it to day two.”

ury my I raise an eyebrow. “Do people normally not?”

ll. “Are She stands and leans over the counter. “He’s kind of. . . tough to work

s. I turn “You don’t say,” I reply, and we both snicker. “Well, off I go.”

doesn’t

king of “Have a good day. Oh, head’s up—he’s on an important conference and gets grumpy when he’s disturbed.”

“Oh, do the fangs come out?”

She grimaces. “Let’s just say you’ll be happy if that’s all that comes of it. How I’m the lucky one who gets to work double duty every time he fires an assistant.”

I open my mouth to ask exactly how many assistants he’s fired, when my phone rings, and she takes the call. I wave and walk off, dropping my folders on my desk. I’m sure he’ll at least want to know I’m here, so I gently knock on his door and walk in.

“Morning,” I say cheerily in a soft voice. He is, indeed, on a call. I am pressed firmly together, and his brow is furrowed. Okay, maybe I have listened to the receptionist when she said not to disturb the boss. “Sorry,” I whisper. “I’ll just be outside—well, at my desk.” His glare deepens. Yep. Fang alert. He stares back at me with a narrowed glare. “Bye.”

I turn around.

“I’ll call you back.” The phone slams on the receiver, causing me to jump. “Miss Evans.” He says my name with such disdain.

I turn around, slapping a forced smile on my face. “Morning, Monroe.”

“Coffee.”

“Hmmm?”

“My coffee. Where is it?”

I continue to stare at him. I can’t tell if he’s joking. His deepening glare says he isn’t. “I just got in. I wanted to say hello first. Let you know I’m here.”

“I don’t employ you to greet me. I employ you to get my coffee.”

ice call I'm taken aback by his blatant disrespect. Emotion swells in my
"You know what. . ." I open my mouth to tell him exactly what
wretched person I think he is, but my mother's face comes to mind.
ies out.to tell her I got fired on my second day for telling the CEO off woul
ires anher heart. Not to mention, it probably wouldn't go over well with n
and her church friends. So, I bite my tongue. "I was. . . just going to a
but heryou take your coffee?" Poison or no poison.
y purse "I already told you. I won't repeat myself. Now, if you'll excus
7 knockDismissing me, he reaches for the phone and hits a few buttons, bring
receiver to his ear. I want to snatch the phone from his hand and b
His lipsover the head.

should "Anything else, Miss Evans?"
e boss. *You suck.* "Not a thing, *Mr. Monroe,*" I emphasize with the same
frownthen turn and walk out.

"Okay, The next time I enter his office, I take Amy's advice and don't distu
Placing the hot mug of black coffee with a pinch of cocoa on his desk,
him a sweet smile and walk out. I check my personal email—still
o jump.replies—then fire up my computer with a sigh and open my work en
he for real?" I mumble, looking at the mile-long to-do list Theo sent m
ig, Mr.does he expect to do all this? Me and my twelve clones? I reply back.

To: T_Monroe@MIC.org

From: Fay_Evans@MIC.org

Subject: This List

g scowl
was—" *Mr. Monroe,*
When do you need all this completed?
Thanks,

7 chest. **Fay Evans**

kind of **Executive Assistant to Theo Monroe**

Having

d break

ny aunt

sk how

se me.”

ging the

eat him

I organize my desk while I wait for him to reply. Certainly, he can't
me to finish all this within the week. My email dings.

To: T_Monroe@MIC.org

From: Fay_Evans@MIC.org

Subject: Your job

By lunch.

Theo Monroe

CEO, Monroe Investment Corp

disdain,

I chuckle. He's kidding, right? He expects all this to be done by
Maybe he just didn't clarify which lunch.

rb him.

, I offer

no job

ail. “Is

ie. Who

To: T_Monroe@MIC.org

From: Fay_Evans@MIC.org

Subject: Please clarify

Mr. Monroe,

*Can you please be more specific? By lunch tomorrow or the fo
day?*

Thanks,

Fay Evans

Executive Assistant to Theo Monroe

While I wait, I check my phone again. Maybe it's not connecting
WiFi. I check my settings when my email dings.

To: T_Monroe@MIC.org

From: Fay_Evans@MIC.org

Subject: Challenge

expect

Is this too much of a challenge for you, Miss Evans?

Theo Monroe

CEO, Monroe Investment Corp

Challenge? *Challenge?* I've been employed here for, like, eleven I barely know anything besides those damn reports he had me go over. I might add, he didn't even come back and quiz me on. I scan over t task on his list. Proof the Teller & Teller fiscal reports. Define proof. A second task? How am I supposed to make a lunch meeting with Greg lunch? at his favorite restaurant when I don't know who *Greg* is or his t restaurant! It's like he wants me to fail and quit. And you know what? fine with me. Screw this. I'm a chef, not an executive assistant. A j come around sooner or later. My mom will totally understand. . .

To: T_Monroe@MIC.org

From: Fay_Evans@MIC.org

llowing

Subject: Challenge this

Mr. Monroe,

I think it would be best if you scheduled the meeting yourself. An you're at it, choke on whatever fancy lunch you order.

Thanks,

Fay Evans

g to the

(Ex) Executive Assistant to Theo Monroe

I go to click send and hover my finger over the button. What am I
This is like the restaurant all over again. Sabotaging and bulldozing are
same. I refuse to let another person force me out of a job. I may not
what the heck I'm doing, but I can learn. I already have the coffee and
he wants a challenge, I'll give him one.

Delete. Delete. Delete.

hours. I **To: T_Monroe@MIC.org**

Which, **From: Fay_Evans@MIC.org**

the first **Subject: Challenge accepted.**

And the *Mr. Monroe,*

g Bauer *Thank you for the opportunity. I look forward to meeting all your
favorite and completing all these tasks promptly.*

' That's **Fay Evans**

ob will **Executive Assistant to Theo Monroe**

I click send, smiling at my reply, then re-read my response. *Meet
your needs?* I squeeze my eyes shut, smacking my forehead. The door
and I twist with a start, finding Theo standing in his doorway.

“Mr. Monroe, is there something I can help you with?” I offer
saccharine smile. Damn. The way his biceps pop when he crosses his
d while over his chest is *not* attractive at all. Neither is his grumpy frown. Ugh
is he so good-looking? It would make this a lot easier if he wasn't. He
like the bluest ocean, stare down at me, looking less than pleased.

“I need the fiscal reports printed and proofed, Miss Evans. Task :
one. Do you need me to hold your hand, or can you figure out how to
staple, and read?”

doing? Okay, I take back the attractive comment. The only thing he i
e all the asshole. Standing, I grab the key card that gives me access to all the m
t know and slide my eyes to Theo. “Of course not. Meet you in your o
own. If twenty?”

His eyes are obsidian. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “
don’t have all day.” He twists in his fancy leather shoes and storms ba
his office.

The door slams shut, and I take my first real breath.



“You stupid pile of—”

r needs “You need help?” My hand flies to my chest, and I turn to find a y
guy standing at the copy room entrance.

“I’m trying to print these reports, but it keeps spitting out the same p

“It’s because you’re using the possessed printer. You need to use the

ting all He puts his hand out for my badge and walks toward a machine hidde
corner. “How many?”

opens, “Uh, there should be twelve in the queue, thanks.”

him a “Got it.” Swiping my badge, he types in the number, and the n
whirs to life, printing flawlessly.

is arms “My hero! I was about to take my heel to that machine.”

h. Why He waves at me. “It wouldn’t be the first time. I’m Kyle.”

is eyes, “Fay. Nice to meet you.”

“Monroe’s new assistant.”

number “How did you—?”

o print, “Lucky guess. Monroe can be a bit much. I’m in the research depart
you need a break. You’re welcome to sneak away and find refuge there

s is an I smile and gather my copies. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind. And
achinesagain for the help. See ya around.” Juggling my stack of reports, I he:
ffice into my desk. Theo’s door is closed, so I clutch the papers to my chest
my free hand to knock.

“Ten. I “Come in.”

ick into I enter, finding Theo sitting at his worktable, his sleeves rolled up.
the reports.” I set them down and sit in the empty chair next to him. “
proficient in investment lingo, so I’m not sure how much help I’ll l
proofing. But I was top of my class in English, so I can spot spel
grammar errors.” I leave out that it was in high school and grab a
opening to the first page.

rounger I look up, catching Theo’s gaze. “Unless you need—”

“That’s fine for now.” For the first time since my interview, the
age.” malice in his tone. It’s almost kind. He reaches for a report and open
is one.” same page. “I’ll walk you through it. This way, you’ll know what to l
n in the eye out for in the future. Common errors.” He reaches over to turn to t
page of my report, then turns his own. “I’ll need you to l
knowledgeable on the key terms. This will allow you to sc
nachine discrepancies.” He turns another page, the side of his finger brushing r
don’t expect you to know everything immediately.” He flips to anothe
his shoulders relaxing. I look up at him, curious about the change
demeanor. Our eyes meet. There’s interest and something I can’t quite
then the darkness from before returns, and he shuts the folder.

“You get the gist. I have a meeting. I’ll leave you to it.” He
ment if abruptly, adjusting his sleeves, and snags his suitcoat from the back
e.” chair. “I expect you to stay here until you’re done.” He doesn’t wa
reply before walking out of his office.

. thanks
ad back
and use

“I have
I’m not
be with
lling or
report,

re’s no
s to the
keep an
he next
become
an for
nine. “I
er page,
e in his
e name,

stands
of the
it for a

Chapter Four

Fay

“**W**hat can I get ya?” I shout over the loud noise of the bar. “Girl! What the fuck!” Mindy runs up to me behind the bar, wraps her arm around my neck, and kisses me square on the lips.

The guy waiting to order cheers, and I roll my eyes. “Seriously? What do you want to get ya?”

“You two, if you’re on the menu.”

Mindy laughs and releases me. “In your dreams, honey. So, how does the second day go?”

“It was fine.”

“Fine? What does that mean?”

I shrug, pouring the guy’s draft beer. “It was fine.”

“Bullshit. The last time I talked to you, you were moaning and groaning. Now it’s fine?”

“Yeah.” I slide the beer across the bar and shove the cash into the register.

“I’m disappointed. I was hoping you’d have more to spill.”

I lean over, calling out to another patron for his order. “Disappointed. How?”

“You work for a hot-as-sin guy. He’s rude and brawny, and to be honest, I bet he wants you. And you come in telling me it’s been *fine*?” She thrusts her hands up.

I turn to her and shrug. “Well, it has been. And why would he *like* walk away, filling more drink orders.

“Because you’re hot. He’s hot. You got a hot office romance thing going on. My favorite trope.”

I roll my eyes and slide three tequila shots across the bar. “I would consider myself hot, but what we look like has nothing to do with it. I’m not an employee. Not going there. Plus, I’m not into arrogant jerks who get off on talking down to people.”

“I don’t know. I find all that aggression sexy. I bet he’s totally dominating in the bedroom.”

“Mindy.”

“You know it’s true. A beast in the workplace, a beast in the bedroom. She laughs, and I whip her shoulder with a bar towel.

“Isn’t it a lady in the streets, freak in the streets—gross, it doesn’t matter. I’d your even wanna think about that.”

“Bullshit. *Oh, Mr. Monroe, I jammed the copier. I think you need to talk to me—*”

“Mindy!”

“Come on, you know it would be super hot.”

“Doubt it.”

“Liar.”

“He’s an egotistical jerk. I bet he goes home and beats off to the rhythm of spreadsheets and financial reports.”

“Maybe you should ask him.”

onest, I I release an unladylike snort. “No!”

ows her “Why not?”

“What, am I just supposed to walk up to him and be like, ‘Hey, be
me?” I curious. Do you enjoy whips and chains and whacking it to the Dow Jo

“No, you prude. Ask him what he’s into. Maybe you two have th
g going common.”

“*That’s* a hard no.”

ouldn’t “You’ll never know if you don’t ask.”

I’m his “And I never will because I don’t care to know!” I take an orde
t off onMindy follows me down the bar.

“Lame. Is he married?”

inant in “I have no idea.”

“Did you see a ring on his finger?”

I stop and turn, bumping into her. “Mindy, I’m not looking at his fi
lroom.” Or his very large hands. “I’m done with this conversation.”

“Just saying, maybe you should ask.”

I don’t “Maybe you should start doing your job. The bar is really full.”

“Hmmm, maybe. Well, is he single then?”

o *spank* “Oh my god! Enough.”

“Fine. You win. Shots?”

“No, I have to work tomorrow.”

“Just one. Please?”

“No.”

“One?”

o stock Ugh! “Fine, *only* one.”



I hate Mindy. I hate Mindy. I hate Mindy.

“Morning! Glad to see you made it to day three,” Amy says as I walk past the office. “You already beat out half the contestants before you—were you okay?”

Ugh. Far from it. One shot, my ass. My stomach is sketchy, and I’m running on four hours of sleep. “Yeah, just tired. Is there a prize at the end of this? Do I get a cookie if I make it to day four?”

Amy chuckles into her coffee. “No. Just a paycheck and bragging rights while you’re here. Have a good day. He just got in. Seems to be in a decent mood.”

“Thanks.” I wave and trek down the hallway to his office, taking a sip of my triple-shot iced coffee I expect to bring me back to life. I should know better. One shot doesn’t mean just one when it comes to Mindy. One shot opens the floodgates to a second and third; the next thing you know, the bar top has become a dance floor. I really need to grow up.

I reach my desk as Theo’s office door opens. Shifting my purse strap over my shoulder, I open my mouth to greet him when I trip. “Morning—” I stumble over my feet, tossing my iced coffee forward. My eyes wide as I track its flight, stopping once it smacks into Theo’s chest, exploding against his fancy suit.

“Oh my God. . .” Holy shit that did *not* just happen. “I’m so sorry.” Theo remains motionless, his arms raised. “I don’t know what just happened while you were walking then—” I shut up because his look of shock and surprise morphs into murder. “Here, let me help. . .” I brush off the ice cubes stuck to his suit. “It’s not that bad.” It’s so bad. Why did he have to wear a white shirt? “Just a little. . .” I wipe my palms up and down his chest like that’s going to make it go away. “Honestly, it doesn’t look that—”

His hands thrust out, latching around my wrists. “Enough,” he snaps

“I’m—okay.” He drops my wrists, and I step back. Spinning on his heel, he storms into his office, throws open another door and enters a row, a bathroom. Without closing it, he tears off his suit coat and unbuttons his

“I can try—”

and I’m “Stop talking,” he bites out.

the end of “Yep.”

He removes his shirt, and I almost choke on my tongue. Jesus almighty, rights. should be illegal to look like that. Tan, muscles for days, and that happy . . . *meow*. I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Maybe your wife can help you sip stain out?” I squeeze my eyes shut, praying that question didn’t really come out of my mouth. I must still be drunk. *Fucking Mindy*. I open them again. He reappears in a new shirt, shoving his coffee-drenched clothes into my closet. I know, “No wife.” He leans in, his breath fanning my cheek, then pulls away, making his way to his desk.

he slaps onto “I didn’t mean to pry. I just wanted to make sure someone—”

—*shit*.” I “Miss Evans, that someone is you. Read the job title.”

He leans as I My brows rise into my hairline. “To be your wife?” Now he’s completely all over me.

His hands wipe down his face. “No. To run my errands. And while you’re here, drop off my dry cleaning, pick up my other suits.” He picks up his phone. I was and dials a number.

He looks into “Well, if it makes you feel any better, I got my shirt dirty too—”

his suit coat. “It doesn’t. If you’re done ruining my day, I’d like my coffee and my agenda—Phil, good morning, Theo Monroe. . .”

He’s going to I turn on my heel, dismissed. “Geez, it was an accident,” I grumble, catching my breath.

He says, “I don’t have time for accidents,” he snaps back.

is heel, Crap, how did he hear me? “Right. No time. Busy, busy.” I twi
privatearound and head out, silently mumbling more choice words.
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Crap, how did he hear me? “Right. No time. Busy, busy.” I twist back around and head out, silently mumbling more choice words.

Chapter Five

Theo

“What the hell did you do?”

*“I did what you couldn’t.” He doesn’t even acknowledge
“She had nothing to do with this. She didn’t deserve this.”*

*“Then you should have done what I told you to do in the beginning.
deserved to know the truth.”*

“The truth?” I scoff. “That I’m living a fucking lie?”

*Father stands and rounds his desk. “Hardly. Alana is very much entangled
by you.”*

“Good for her. I don’t give a fuck about Alana.”

*“You should. Accepting this will make it easier. Alana is very happy about
what’s to come.”*

*“Because she’s part of this sham. Buy his company or merge with us.
don’t give a fuck. Keep me out of it.”*

*I walk out of his study, but his words stop me. “This will happen over and over.
Keep testing me, son.”*

“This is fucked up. You know that.”

“Business is business. One day, you’ll learn the importance of it.”

“I doubt that,” I spit out and walk away.



I stare after her until my office door closes.

“Um, Mr. Monroe, did you mean to call—”

“Wrong extension.” I hang up on Amy.

I drop into my chair, scrubbing my hands down my face. Why the hell am I torturing myself like this? My skin still tingles where her palms touched my chest, and her lavender and vanilla scent lingers in my nose. Christ, I wish I had snuck a peek down her indecent silky blouse that would definitely look good on my bedroom floor. “Fuck.” If I were smart, I’d stop this sudden fixation and have her fired and escorted out of the building. But I won’t be doing anything. She’s quickly become my little obsession—a toy I desperately want to play with.

ng. She I know better, though.

And now, with the merger about to be finalized, she’s the last thing I want to think about.

hralled My door opens, and I sit forward.

“Agenda and a hot cup of coffee as a peace offering?” She walks in, sets the mug on my worktable. I have no idea how she still has a smile on her face after the way I just treated her.

ppy for “I have to say, looking over your agenda, I groaned for you. I don’t know how you do it—meeting after meeting. Conference calls, lunch meetings, dinner meetings. But I guess that’s why the CEO title is on your door.”

ver and She sets my agenda on the table, sits, and opens her laptop. I still can’t move from my chair. I can’t stop staring at her. The way her hair falls over her bare shoulders. The dip at the base of her throat. In another life, I wouldn’t waste a second making her mine.

“Um, is now a bad time? I can come back.”

I shake my head and stand. “No.” I grab my coffee and stop next to the table. “What does my day look like?” As if I don’t already know.

“A ten o’clock with Stephen Bellinger. Lunch at noon with the Hellmann’s Group. Wise and Wise at two. Four o’clock with Steel E in the conference room.”

“The reports I asked you to review yesterday?”

“Done and couriered over.”

“The financial reports?”

She scoots her laptop closer and opens a file. “They should be good.” I step up behind her and lean in, getting a better look at a report I can see perfectly from where I was standing. “Something’s not right.”

“It’s not? I followed all the—”

“I said it’s not right.” I lean in farther, setting my coffee down next to her laptop and caging her in to make quick adjustments. The heat from her radiates up my chest, and the lavender and vanilla from her hair makes me dizzy. I clench my jaw and keep my hands steady, fighting the urge to reach in and pull her head back to feast on her glossy lips. “There. . .” my voice tight but steady. I dip my head lower, my breath washing over her skin. Goosebumps rise on her chest and shoulders. “You missed a decision at the meetings,”

“Mm-hmm,” she hums, the vibration from her chest going straight to my cock. God, I want to kiss her. Taste her. Brand her.

A knock at the door snaps me out of my haze, and I straighten, suddenly aware of my position. “I haven’t finished yet.”

“Good morning, Mr. Monroe.” Julie from HR pauses, realizing I’m alone. “Oh, hello. I apologize. I didn’t know you were with someone. I must be the new assistant. I’m Julie Williams. I work in Human Resources.”

Compensation and benefits manager. But I also head MIC's event p
t to the committee." She reaches out to shake Fay's hand.

"Hi. Fay." She sticks her hand out, knocking over my cup of coffe
th The crud!" She jumps up, trying to salvage the reports. "God, I'm sc
brewing Again." Julie looks mortified while I hold in my smirk. She definitely
have been fired within seconds of walking into my office.

"It's fine."

Fay looks at me like I've grown horns. I pull my attention to Juli
Williams, what can I do for you?"

to go." "Yes. . . well, would it be more convenient if I came back later?"

n damn "Now, Ms. Williams."

' "Of course. We have the employee awards ceremony next wee
reserved the terrace. Staff will be receiving an invitation to join
t to herevening. It should be a wonderful company event."

er back I hold back my groan. It will be anything but wonderful. "Tell m
ake mewhy this has to be an event? Just send them emails and their mid-
wrap it bonuses."

"I say, "It's good to make time for your employees. Plus, they enjoy
ver herevening away from their desks to socialize. It's good for company mor
mal." Or torture. "Fine, whatever. What do you need from me?"

t to my "Oh, if I can go over the menu with you and get it approved. I fee
good about this one." She smiles and looks over at Fay.

tepping "Uh, yes. I should go reprint these reports." She fumbles with the
wet tissues, dropping a few on the floor. When she reaches down
I'm notthem, I glance at her ass, instantly regretting it when my dick springs
ie. YouGreat. Now, I get to hide a semi-boner while listening to finger-food o
sources. "Miss Evans," I call out before she escapes.

lanning She turns to me, her cheeks flushed. “Yeah?”

“We aren’t done here.”

e. “Oh, Fay stares back at me with a questioning look. Good. She’s confused. I’m sorry, caught off-guard. Am I flirting with her? Being the cold prick? I can’t should answer that question. “Oh, and another coffee.”

I focus back on Julie. “Now, show me your ideas.”

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I focus back on Julie. “Now, show me your ideas.”

Chapter Six

Fay

“C hrist on a cracker.” I sigh, throwing myself into the bathroom. What the hell *was* that? I have to still be drunk. There is absolutely *no way* he just . . . I can’t even think it. It’s impossible. But if he wasn’t, why did my body react like that? It was electrifying when his sleeve latched onto my arm, and I swear I felt an actual spark when his skin touched mine.

I slap myself.

“Ow.”

Snap out of it. Sober up. No more drinking on weekdays. And since when did I become so clumsy? The last thing I need to do is think I’m a successful, not-in-the-market-for-a-hot-mess-like-myself boss is into a

I flush the toilet and get out, a round of colorful words leaving my lips. I look in the mirror. Apparently, coffee and satin don’t vibe. “Dammit, I just bought this,” I whine, taking a wet napkin and attempting to soothe my poor, underappreciated blouse. “This is why we can’t have nice things.

Giving up, I prepare another cup of coffee for my boss. When I return, I find myself thankfully on a call. I leave it on his desk and head to mine. Open my email, I see a new one from Theo.

To: *Fay_Evans@MIC.org*

From: *T_Monroe@MIC.org*

Subject: *Accessible*

Miss Evans,

I will need your personal cell number to have access to you at all times.

Theo Monroe

CEO, Monroe Investment Corp

Access to me at all times? What does he think—?

“You look deep in thought.”

I blink and look up at Kyle, the guy from the copy room. “Yeah, absolutely debating how much I really need my job.”

He chuckles. “I don’t envy you, that’s for sure.”

“Seems to be the consensus around here. Did you need Mr. Monroe’s

“Um, no. I know to stay clear of him. A few of us are going to happen and I wanted to invite you.”

Dammit, I love happy hour. I did just swear off drinking during the week, though. Then again. . . it’s karaoke. “You know what, yeah—”

“You’re working late.” Theo appears out of nowhere and dumps his reports on my desk.

I twist in my chair. “On what? I didn’t see anything on your—”

“Are you questioning me, Miss Evans? And you. Do I pay you to fraternize?”

Kyle shifts his eyes back and forth between us and waves—interrupted. My jaw drops. What the hell? Scrunching my nose, I swing my chair back to Theo. “That wasn’t very nice.”

“His feelings are none of my concern.” He dismisses me and heads office.

“Well,” I scoff, “they should be. You could really use a lesson in speak to people.” He stalls in his step and turns back around with a sl that has nerves traveling down my spine. Shit. “I mean. . . just saying.’ nes.

He walks to my desk, stopping when his fancy leather shoes hit my and leans down, his face too close to mine. “Do you have a proble how I speak to *you*, Miss Evans?”

His breath smells like coffee and mint. I hold my breath, un respond. Why does he have to sound so seductive? It’s on the tip tongue to say yes because I don’t deserve to be talked to like that, w gaze drops to his lips. Wetting my bottom lip, I find my voice. “Y speak to me however you please, Mr. Monroe. It doesn’t affect me way. Now, unless you need anything else, I have work to do.”

“The email. Reply to it.” Then he storms back into his office, slamr door behind him.

Jerk.



“Wow, this is record-setting.”

I laugh at Amy as I walk in. “Waiting for my plaque on the wall.”

“Hey, maybe they’ll give you an award at the staff appreciation even you to “Banking on it!” I wave and head down death row to my desk to c day four. I practiced my mantra the whole way to work: *Don’t stab h mission my envelope opener. Don’t stab him with my envelope opener. Don vel my him with my envelope opener.*

into his Last night was a bunch of bull. Working late, my ass. He had to alphabetize his entire filing system—so what if he ordered really how to take out—while he kept his head down, wearing a ridiculously sexy ownness black-rimmed glasses, reviewing reports.

By the time I was done, I could barely hide the venom in my tone. I said good night. Because what I was *really* wishing was that his name consisted of getting a horrible rash all over his balls. Sadly, that only made me think about . . . well, his balls. I may have taken my frustration out on my battery-operated lover, moaning Theo's name as I orgasmed. Whatever I said, desperation looks good on me.

Today is a new day, though, and I refuse to let him affect me. I'm going to do my job and go out for Thirsty Thursday. I'm drinking tonight—no matter what he says!

Theo is at his desk when I pop in with his coffee. "Morning, Mr. Monroe. Here's your coffee. I'll be right back with your agenda." The key is to avoid making eye contact. His eyes are what get me. Alluring, mysterious, and intense all the time.

His deep voice sends a tickle up my back as I walk to the door. "Wow, an important meeting today. I expect you to be in attendance. Stay professional."

I mimic his words under my breath, then slap a smile on and turn to face him. "Of course, Mr. Monroe." I twist back around, rolling my eyes. Here I was, wondering how he's not married or has a girlfriend.

I spend the next hour preparing. I've never hosted a meeting before, but I have no idea what to expect. But I do know that food always makes things better—especially fresh-baked pastries from the bakery I've been going to down the street. Once I put an order in, I head to the copy room.

had me While the reports print, I read the meeting notes Theo sent me. My goodmeeting is with a private investment company that got lucky during a pair of market crash and bought land so undervalued it might as well have been

MIC wants to partner with them, break the land down into four parcels when I sell it off, making both companies almost a billion in revenue. The next night beeps, and I snag the copies and head to the conference room.

My made Amy is walking out as I get to it. "Hey, your bakery order was delivered on my put the pastries on a tray for you."

er. Like "Wow, thank you. Still warm?"

"The delivery guy pinky-promised they came straight from the oven going to "Perfect."

no matter "Oh, and I set out coffee and water."

"You're the best!" A herd of businessmen walks toward me, and I flash a smile. "Good morning, gentlemen. It's a pleasure to see you. Please sit down and enjoy a fresh pastry before we get started."

and angry I greet each big wig as they pass me into the room. At the end of the

Theo, his scowl in place. "Mr. Monroe," I greet him with a friendly smile. "Make sure to grab a pastry." As expected, he walks past me with a simple hello or "go team" smile. Asshole.

I close the door and get to work, walking around the table and laying out the reports in front of the men in attendance. Everyone is enjoying the pastries. And well, except Mr. Crabby Pants, and I use it as an opportunity to make small talk. Unlike the cold-as-ice CEO sitting at the head of the table, his clients are enjoying the personal touch of friendly conversation and sugar.

and things I stop next to Theo. "Would you like me to grab you a pastry?"

eyeing "No."

"Theo, I must say, these are delicious. You'll have to have your a

Today's share her secret with mine." If I weren't so close, I would have missed the faint growl. Since he has zero manners, I reply for him.

en free. "Oh, you bet. But no sharing. We can't have everyone stealing our ideas, and bakery—"

machine "Sit down, Miss Evans."

I look at Theo, narrowing my eyes. "Grouch," I whisper under my breath. I then make my way down the other side of the table, handing out my report before finding my seat. Since it would be a sin not to enjoy a bit of pastry myself, I snag one from the tray, then compliment the man next to me. "Great tie."

He smiles. "Thank you. My wife got it on her last trip to Milan."

"Very flattering on you. She has great taste."

slap on My phone dings on the table, and I peek down.

head in **Unknown Number: Stop flirting with every goddamn client.**

Confused, I glance toward the front of the table, my eyes narrowing. The line is Theo as he schmoozes the man next to him. *Flirting?* I'm doing the right thing he is, my job. The one he's paying me to do. I peer over at the man without thought to me. He turns and smiles, and I return the gesture before typing back.

Me: It's called being friendly. You should try it sometime.

ing the I bring my attention back to my pastry and take a bite, ignoring the mess. "Shoot!" I scoot back, looking down at the glob of cherry filling on my small blouse.

ents are "Oh, here, let me help you." The gentleman grabs a napkin and hands it to me.

"Faulty pastry." My cheeks heat as I accept the napkin and wipe the mess from my filling, smearing the stain in more. I make the mistake of looking down at the assistant table. Blue eyes blaze into mine.

sed his *Well, that's a new level of angry.*

Yep. I should probably just. . .

favorite “Excuse me.” Getting up, I skirt out of the room and shuffle i
bathroom, grabbing a paper towel and wetting it under the sink. “Bad
I loved this shirt,” I mumble, dabbing at the stain even though it’s pc
breath,It’s already ruined.

the last I head back to Theo’s office, remembering his stash of clothes
a warmprivate bathroom. He wouldn’t mind if I borrowed a shirt. Hurr
t to me.unbutton my blouse, toss it in the trash, and open the closet to shuffle t
his spare suit shirts. “Come on. Give me a stylish shirt I can work—”

“What the hell are you doing?”

I nearly jump out of my skin as I whip around. Theo stands
bathroom doorway, the creases in his forehead deep, his arms cross
his chest. His eyes fall to my shirt or lack thereof. “Jesus,” he grunts,
ving onhis back to me.

e same I look down, remembering it’s laundry day. My nipples are on c
an nextpoking through my sexy, sheer lace bra. “Shit. Shoot.” I wrap m
. around my chest. “Sorry, I was just trying to find a spare shirt. I thought
“The drive.”

ing him. “Huh?”

on my “The drive!” Faced away from me, he reaches his hand back and w
“You have the USB drive. I can’t start the meeting without the damn d
ids it to Oh! “Yeah—yes! It’s in my pocket.” I scramble into the back pocke
slacks and press the drive into the palm of his hand. “Here.” His fing
e at thearound mine, and something sparks between us. He whips around, h
own thelanding on mine. Then they lower. His frown deepens. Since my l

outstretched, he gets another shot of my nips. “Sorry, it’s obviously here.” I stretch my free arm over my chest.

“For the love of—put a damn shirt on,” he snaps.

“Well, I *would* if I could find one—”

“Where’s the one you had on?”

“In the trash. It’s ruined—”

“Not ruined enough. Put it back on and get back to that goddamn meeting,” he snaps. He snatches his hand back, taking the drive with him, and storms off.

“Asshole,” I mumble as I dig out my shirt. Holding it up, I inspect it for stains. Gross. “Come on, Fay. Be resourceful.” I look around, wondering whether I could make a shirt out of toilet paper. Instead, I spot a fancy scarf

in Theo’s closet. Sliding my shirt back on, I wrap the scarf around my neck and inspect myself in the mirror. “You’ll have to do.” I praise my turning thinking and head back to the meeting. Theo’s brow creases when I brush him off and retake my seat.

The meeting goes off without another hiccup—I think. I was bored by arms my mind and may have nodded off once or twice. After two hours—everyone’s shaking hands and signing deals.

“Thank you, gentlemen. We’ll be in touch.” I smile as Theo shakes my final hand before turning his attention to me.

“Well, I think that went—”

“In my office. Now.”

“t of my

ers grip

his eyes

hand is

outstretched, he gets another shot of my nips. “Sorry, it’s obviously cold in here.” I stretch my free arm over my chest.

“For the love of—put a damn shirt on,” he snaps.

“Well, I *would* if I could find one—”

“Where’s the one you had on?”

“In the trash. It’s ruined—”

“Not ruined enough. Put it back on and get back to that goddamn meeting.”

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“Thank you, gentlemen. We’ll be in touch.” I smile as Theo shakes the final hand before turning his attention to me.

“Well, I think that went—”

“In my office. Now.”

Chapter Seven

Theo

She doesn't immediately follow. Instead of turning around and scolding her to hurry it up, I continue to walk, needing the extra minute to get my shit together. I have no idea how I landed that deal. My mind was never fully focused on the actual negotiating. I couldn't keep my eyes off Will Henninger and his filthy old man hands. I saw red watching him wipe her the napkin. If he even dared wipe up that shit on her blouse, I would have jumped over the table and broken his hand. The way Steve Wilson dropped to her ass when she walked by. I hated every little smile she gave to the others. Her subtle laughs. I know half the men in that room in their heads were fantasizing about themselves fucking her. Shit, *I* was imagining fucking her. I was so far away from pulling the deal, and the meeting hadn't even started. All I could do was think about how I couldn't stand the way everyone looked at her. As if she was theirs to be taken. Because she was far from available. She was mine.

"Not sure why you're so upset. I think that went well—"

I whip around so fast she almost falls into my chest. Leaning down, my voice low and lethal, I bite out, "How was your *nap*?"

"Darn, he noticed that—I mean, had something in my eye—"

“And explain how exactly that meeting went well. Was it you flirting with each client? Embarrassing yourself with that little pastry display? Or—” you smiled at the piece of shit, chauvinist pig next to you?” Her mouth open, rendering her speechless. “Nothing to say?” The sudden sparkle in her eyes causes my cock to jerk.

“Well?” I taunt, taking a step closer. “You’re not allowed to have meetings with me anymore,” I snap, not realizing what I’ve said. She looks confused and then shocked. “I don’t lock in clients because my assistant always throws herself at them.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Do I look like a man who kids?”

Her hands fist at her sides. “No, you look like a man who—”

“I’m not interrupting, am I?”

My words get jammed in my throat. My body turns rigid, and I step forward, handforce myself to keep my eyes and attention off Fay. “No, but I wasn’t interrupting, I waswe had a meeting scheduled. Fay, you can go.”

Thankfully, she’s mad enough to nod and walk away before my assistant grantedtakes an interest in her. When she shuts the door, he turns his attention directly to me. “You missed dinner last night.”

“I got caught up with work.”

“Nothing is more important than family.”

“And like I said—”

“Nothing will come between or before family.” There he is with his constant threats. It makes the back of my neck heat and takes every breath out of me, myme not to slam him against the wall.

“You’re wasting your time. Why are you here? I have a busy day.”

He adjusts his suit coat. “Charles will be in today. There’s another meeting.”

ng with have him overseeing. I need you to approve a land survey.”

r when “You approve it. I’m busy—”

ith falls “Sign off on it.”

κ in her “I won’t sign off on something I haven’t—”

“Sign off on it.” I don’t get another chance to refuse because he’s
attend walking toward the door. “Oh, and enjoy the opera. I’m sure Alana w
e looks lovely.”

ssistant With that, he walks out of my office, shutting the door behind him.

back. I

t aware

7 father

ttention

with his

hing in

r deal I

have him overseeing. I need you to approve a land survey.”

“You approve it. I’m busy—”

“Sign off on it.”

“I won’t sign off on something I haven’t—”

“Sign off on it.” I don’t get another chance to refuse because he’s already walking toward the door. “Oh, and enjoy the opera. I’m sure Alana will look lovely.”

With that, he walks out of my office, shutting the door behind him.

Chapter Eight

Theo

“**Y**ou’re quiet this evening.” Alana tries to snake her fingers my hand, but I pull away. She knows better than to pry. She get the sweet reaction she’s looking for. She never has. “I heard y Daddy today. You know he would really love for you to take him up golf trip. He says they get to play with celebrities like. . . what’s t golfer’s—?”

“I’m too busy to be playing golf.” I grab my phone from my tux and open my emails. I left work in a hurry. The aftermath of my always fucks with me, and I spent the rest of the day avoiding Fay. Or she’s avoiding me. She refused to pay me attention when I left for 1 o’clock meeting, and she was on a call—which I’m certain was fake—returned. She’s upset. She should be. I acted like a complete asshole. can’t admit to is why. I’m playing with fire here, and I hate that I’m to take her down just for a sliver of her attention. I kept her at work other day because I refused to allow that little twat to get her atte didn’t hire her to spend time with someone other than me. I would ha her there all night if she hadn’t looked so tired. Even I was drained.

I need to get my priorities in check. I didn't spend all this time s
down that part of me for some little minx assistant to revive the on
——I've ignored for years, just weeks before the merger. I've accepted n
Now I have to act like it.

The door to the town car opens, snapping me from my thoughts.
out and lean back in, reaching for Alana's hand to help her out. Ligh
from all directions as Alana grabs my arm as if she belongs there and
knowing her face will be in tomorrow's paper. We always are.

"Theo, you should smile more. It makes for a better picture."

I pull her down the red carpet without much pause, avoiding her lov
aroundspotlight. "I'll smile when I have something to smile about." She kno
e won'tarrangement, and I've never given her reason to expect anything mo
ou sawme. If she thinks that will change after the merger, she can save
on thattrouble, do the right thing, and stop this façade.

hat one I spend the rest of the wretched evening with Alana by my side, m
with clients. Barely paying attention to the performance, my mind
pocketwith a dark memory.

r father *"Theo, honey, have you tried these little tarts? They're delicio
maybetrainger's going to have to overwork me all next week for eating this.
my twoare you even listening to me?" My skin crawls when her fingers to
-when Ishoulder. My hand shoots up and grabs her wrist. "Ouch, you're
What Ime."*

willing *"Good. I prefer to do much worse. Don't fucking touch me." I di
late thehand and walk off toward the terrace, needing a moment to calm down
ntion. Iknew better, she wouldn't follow me. But she has the sense of a fucking*

ve kept *"You know, this doesn't have to be so hard. We can be good togeth
sure didn't say no that summer—"*

shutting I whip around and capture her neck. With each step forward, I force her organ back until she's pressed against the stone wall. Looking down at her only part, I barely control my anger and disgust. "That summer was a fucking rape."

An aberration. Every single thing about you makes me sick. And if you and I climb there will ever be anything between us but a contract and a lie, then your eyes flash further gone than I thought."

she smiles, "It's not a lie. I left—"

My fingers flex and tighten. If I don't calm down, I'm going to do something I'll regret. "You know damn well I never fucking raped the one of the. The only one I fucked that night was you. And from what I do recall, you were always over that hotel room. Or was that just a dream? Because shit is coming back to me bit by bit. You spread your legs like a little whore, begging me to fuck you. You let an almost stranger do filthy things to you. I bet you would love to hear those stories. Was it a dream that you sucked me and I was begging you to come all over your face? How about that ass you let me lick? That a lie too?" Her eyes blaze with heat. Memories from that night started to filter back to me. Proof that whatever they conjured up in our heads was real. My blackmail.

She smiles. "Hello, tell me how much you wanted it, and maybe I'll give it to you again." She licks her lips. Her back arches, and she pushes her breasts at me. "Hurting they're desperate for my touch. "I loved it. I want more."

My hand shakes with rage. My thumb digs into her neck as he presses her hammers against my skin. She moans around my hand. "Theo, yes. I want to hurt her." I want to do more than just hurt her.

When I finally snap back to the present, people are standing around me, applauding.

"Wasn't that wonderful?"

rce her I stand and adjust my suit coat. “Time to go.”

r, I can “Aren’t we going to stay for the post-show cocktails?”

nistake. “I have a busy day tomorrow.” I wave to a few gentlemen while dra
ou think pouting Alana out of the hall. I’m silent as we drive away and finally f
you are I can breathe when we pull up to her brownstone, and she storms ou
town car.

“Home, Mr. Monroe?”

r to do My hand slides over my phone screen. I gaze down at my email v
at girl. number and address I requested from Human Resources this m
ve were Temptation simmers inside my chest—a constant battle between rig
coming wrong. I have no business knowing that information, but I couldr
g me to myself. This lack of control that I’m unfamiliar with rages inside n
Daddy desire to know everything about her.

off and My mind conjures up someone I haven’t thought about in years. T
get at? other woman who’s ever sparked this need inside me. *Claire.* Hurt, ra
ht have regret resurface.

s a lie. “Yes, home. Thank you.”

Instead, I fire off an unnecessary text before putting too much thoug
n.” it.

me like **Me: What’s the status of the Wilson Reports? I need those on n
first thing.**

r pulse I watch as three little dots appear and wait for her to respond. A fe
Harder. pass, and the dots disappear. Then my phone vibrates.

Fay Evans: <insert thumbs up>

ng and Her reply frustrates me.

Me: I need you to come in early to cross-check.

Fay Evans: <insert thumbs up>

I shake my head.

Me: Stop giving me that damn thumbs up.

gging a **Fay Evans: <insert thumbs up>**

feel like **Me: Knock it off.**

t of my She sends it again. Clearly, she's pissed about today. And she should
was a total ass.

Me: I get it. You're pissed. I'm sorry for the way I acted today.

with the **Fay Evans: No, you're not. Also not sure how you got my n
orning, since I didn't give it to you.**

ght and **Me: I have the right to it.**

it's help **Fay Evans: You have the right to me during work hours.
ne. Theyou're texting me after hours to pick up your dry cleaning.**

The audacity of her thinking she can talk to me like this. Yet I'm
he onlyhell at her boldness.

ge, and **Me: It's your job. Unless you would like to find work elsewhere.**

The three dots appear, and I'm desperate for her reply. The
disappear, and panic curdles my stomach. If she even tries to quit, I w
ght intoher ass back—

**Fay Evans: Why would I do such a thing? Who would bring p
y deskto your meetings? Shame you didn't try one. They were deee-lish.**

It's on the tip of my tongue to make my driver turn around so I ca
w beatsup at her door and spank the shit out of her. She won't be serving anyc
those damn pastries if I have anything to say about it.

Taking a deep breath, I do the right thing and shove my phone into
pocket, even though I want her to know she's on the verge of hav
handprint marking her cheeky ass.

If she thinks she'll get away with that sassy talk, she's wrong. But l

decide how to set her straight, I need to get home and take care of this hard-on.

ld be. I

umber

Unless

hard as

in they

ill drag

astries

n show

one else

my suit

ing my

efore I

decide how to set her straight, I need to get home and take care of this raging hard-on.

Chapter Nine

Fay

“That’ll be fourteen even.” I snag the money from the guy at his round of shots toward him as I work my way down the bar. Bev’s is always slammed on Friday nights, and tonight is no exception. I take the order from a group of girls celebrating a birthday and line up a row of shot glasses. My pocket vibrates as I hand them off, and I fish out my phone, reading the message.

“Seriously?” Does he have anything better to do than work? I reply to the message with a thumbs up and take another order. “What can I get ya?”

“Can I get five blow jobs?”

“Yep.” I’m pouring shots when I get another text. Handing the shot to the next customer, I peek at my phone. I shake my head, respond, and shove my phone back in my pocket. Before it’s even in my pocket, it vibrates again.

“That’ll be twenty-five even.” I look at my screen. He’s being all kind and special right now. I fire off a reply, and he shoots one back.

“Who you texting? Booty call?” I roll my eyes at Mindy and put my phone away.

“Far from it. My boss.”

“Your boss? Why is he texting you at ten o’clock at night?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s high or something.”

—— “What? Give me that.”

“Mindy!” I yell when she snatches my phone.

“No way. What’s your passcode?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not!” Ugh, she gives me *the* look. The infamous Mindy look means she’s up to no good. “Fine.” I spit off my passcode, and she unlocks my phone, reading the text.

and push “How cute, he apologized to you.”

packed “I know, but why?”

option. I “Maybe he *is* high.”

the row “Right?”

out my “Though, makes me want to do things with pastries now.”

I roll my eyes. “Gross.”

y to his “Yum. . . *pastries*.”

” “Mindy. . .”

“Okay, fine. I’ll keep it clean. But for an apparent asshole, she comes out, I apologize.”

me back. “Yeah, I don’t know. I feel like I’m going to regret my response.”

“Maybe. Let’s ask our friends.”

sounds of “What—?”

“To all the drunk patrons of Bev’s!” Mindy shouts.

my phone “Mindy, seriously don’t.”

“Survey time!” I shake my head and walk away, pretending this is happening as she hollers the whole text thread to everyone within earshot.

“Why did he apologize?” she asks the entire fucking bar.

“He wants in your pants!”

“Maybe he’s being nice and knows he was wrong for whatever he did.”

“I’mma need a backstory!”

“Totally wants to get laid!”

“What’s the deal with the pastries?”

“Can we see a photo!”

“I’m also into pastries!” Rick, one of our regulars, shouts.

“Okay, that’s enough.” I snatch my phone back. “Really glad you’re getting such a kick out of this.”

I lean over to take another order when my phone vibrates again and I internally groan. What is he texting me now? I slide two drafts over a napkin and walk my back to the bar to look at my phone.

Mindy: What do you think he wants to do with your pastry?

Seriously? I glare at her from the other end of the bar.

Me: Drop it.

Mindy: Think he wants to lick off your frosting? Use his tongue to eat out all the goodness inside? Gobble, gobble! <insert tongue emoji>

I’m going to kill her. I look up, and she’s giggling like a grade school girl.

“Since I employ you two to work, I expect you to do it!” Harry says, thankfully shutting this down. Mindy salutes him with an “Ay, Captain!” and returns to work.

I push any thoughts of his apology and my *pastry* away and get back to tending the bar. This can be Monday’s problem.

is not
hot.



“I honestly want to be you when I grow up.”

I laugh at Amy as I walk into the office. “Thanks. It’s amazing weekend off will do for the soul. How was your weekend?” *My weekend nothing for my soul. All I could think about was that stupid text exchange. And now, walking into work, I’m praying he’s had enough time to think about it completely.*

“Great! I spent the weekend with my boyfriend at the Conrad. He had this fancy spa package.”

“Sounds like the perfect weekend. Have a good day!” I wave and head down the hall to my desk. I drop my things off and head to the breakroom for coffee, and his royal highness’s cup of coffee. When I knock on his door and he turns out to be on a call. No surprise there. This saves me from uncomfortable non-chit-chat about what the hell Friday night was about. And how I may have crossed a line. Jerk or not, he’s still my boss. And my replies were at least professional.

He doesn’t make eye contact, and I am a-okay with it. Leaving his cubicle and make my escape to my desk. Opening my computer, I find an email from a **ojj** that is urgent.

Oh damn

To: Fay_Evans@MIC.org

My yells,

From: T_Monroe@MIC.org

Hey, aye,

Subject: Work hour expectations

Miss Evans,

back to

I expect the following task list to be completed before five p.m. tomorrow. If they are not, I will expect you to stay late.

.docx attachment

Theo Monroe (your boss)

CEO, Monroe Investment Corp

That the
end did
change.
I forget
I got us
I'd walk
I'm for
I walk in,
I'morning
I've have
I'mything
I'moffice, I
I'marked

I knew those replies were going to bite me in the ass. I should have
him on read. A few harmless shots at work—not to mention Mindy snatched
my phone—and my fingers had a mind of their own. If this is how he
to handle it, so be it. I'll take it like an adult. I open the attachment and
“He’s got to be kidding me.” I stare at the first task on the list
records chronologically instead of alphabetically. It took me almost
hours to do it the first time! I read through the rest of the bogus list. I
bourbon, check on dry cleaning. . . it goes on and on. That smug asshole
not going to let him win this one. I’ve dealt with bigger sharks in the kitchen
I stand and adjust my skirt. If he wants to play this game, I’m
Walking back into his office, my biggest smile in place, I mouth, “Just
get started,” and point to his shelves. Hiking my skirt over my knees,
down, pull a row of files from the bottom shelf, and lay them on the
grab another stack, bend back down—
“That’s enough.”
“What’s enough?” I straighten, looking over my shoulder.
“Get out.”
“Why—?”
“Jesus, just. . . get out.” His eyes are dark as night, and his brow is creased
“As you wish, Mr. Monroe.” I walk out, holding in my smirk. A victory
a victory. I get to work, tackling the first half of his silly list. One thing
certain. If I ever need some fast cash, I could steal one of his bottles of
bourbon and sell it on eBay. Man, he has expensive taste. When I know
quarter of my list, I treat myself to a slice of coffee cake from my
favorite bakery. I pop a piece of cake into my mouth and moan at the

vanilla bean and nutmeg. Everything that comes from that ball
orgasmic. It brings back a memory of when I was at Sullivan's. Might
ave left me come in early and do a test run on a new custard tart recipe he l
atching back from his trip to Portugal. We spent hours balancing out the nutme
e wants cinnamon. By the time we'd mastered it, I was high on caramelized
I swear, and flaky crust.

. *Refile* What I wouldn't do to make that pastry again. My office phone
st three bringing me back to my reality. I swallow down my bite and answer.

Restock "Mr. Monroe's office."

ole. I'm "Fable, honey, it's Mom."

itchen. I groan. "Hey, Mom. I'm at work. I can't really talk."

. all in. "Well, you were in such a hurry this morning."

t gonna "Yeah, I have a demanding boss who requires me to be in the office
I bend the chickens rise."

floor. I "Speaking of that, you haven't said a peep about how it's going
Bexley from my church group says he's a very successful man."

Successful. Gorgeous. A total jerk.

"Yeah, he sure is."

"Your father said he saw him in the paper this morning. Some
charity event. He was with a woman."

reased. I sit up straighter. "Oh yeah?"

ctory is "Gerald!"

g is for "No, don't get Dad on the phone. I have to—"

ttles of "Hello?"

ck off a Ugh. "Hey, Dad."

ny new "Hey, kiddo."

hint of "Honey, tell Fable how you saw her boss in *The Reporter*. Ha

kery is blonde on his arm at a charity function.”

uel had “Oh, yes, she was somethin’.”

brought “Maybe it was a client.”

leg and “They sure looked cozy.”

custard My nails dig into the receiver, and I rotate my chair to my computer, slamming on my keyboard. Sure enough, there they are last night at the Builder’s Association charity function. A blonde, perfect, nothing-but-a-bombshell is smiling and clutching his arm. Why did I think he was with me when he had someone like *that*? Pulling that little stunt in his pants this morning. . . he wasn’t mad because he was turned on. He was turned on.

I squeeze my eyes shut, mortified. “Okay, well, I really have to go.”

“You sure you don’t need help moving into your apartment tonight?”
“I’ll be there before you’re really going to miss you around here.”

I’m sure they are. “Nope. I have it covered. Mindy’s using a friend from work, Maryto help bring my stuff over.”

“Speaking of the move,” my mom chimes in. “You know, Mrs. V’s grandson just moved home. He’s a handsome fellow and works at a bank. Make it stop. “That’s great, Mom.”

“You should meet him. He’s got great genes and a great job. I bet you and I would make great babies.”

“Geez, Mom! I’ve never even met the guy, and you’re already talking about what our kids would look like?”

“Well, I’m not getting any younger. And neither are you. Did you look at that dating app I sent you?”

I’m about to stab my eyes out with my letter opener. “Yes, but I do live in the country. And I’m not into farmers.” Not that there’s anything wrong with that. I’d like to see some

with them. I just finished a steamy cowboy romance and would definitely turn down a ride.

“Oh, is that what it was? I just noticed the handsome man in the Thought you two would make a nice fit.”

computer, “Mom, that’s just an ad. He’s not the one I would go out with. I at the have to—”

like-me “Remember our old neighbor Mrs. Davis? Her daughter just got engaged flirting She’s twenty—”

s office And time’s up. I pull the plug when my mother starts bringing up evened off! she knows who’s ever gotten engaged. “Okay. Sorry, guys. This has great, but I gotta go.” I hang up before she can slip in another insult. We’re discard the rest of my tasty treat. My mom should win an award for mood and appetite killer.

’s truck It’s the same thing every time she brings up the subject. When are you going to find a nice man and get married? When are you having kids? Veller’s getting this job and torturing myself to please her isn’t good enough for me. “nk.” They sure weren’t complaining about my cooking skills when I whip up gourmet meals three times a week.

you two And for the record, it’s not that I don’t *want* a boyfriend or to get married and have kids one day. I just haven’t had the opportunity yet.

talking I try to remember the last time I had a boyfriend. *That one guy in middle school?* I’m not even sure I can consider that dating. I mean, would you ever together. A lot. But dating? Shit, when *was* the last time I really had a boyfriend? If I have to go back to the fifth grade when Grayson Power wouldn’t live me out on the monkey bars. . . I shake my head. Maybe dating isn’t for me, wrong Is it me? Am *I* undatable?

Theo’s door opens, and I straighten in my seat as he approaches me.

tely not “Miss Evans.”

“Mr. Monroe.” It’s on the tip of my tongue to apologize for my b
: email. this morning.

“I’ll be in meetings the rest of the day. I expect the filing to be cor
. listen, I by the time I return.”

As soon as his back is to me, I cover my face with my palms and
ngaged. My phone dings, and I see a text from Mindy.

Mindy: S’up, girly girl! We still on for tonight?

everyone **Me: Yep. Bring champagne. Lots of it.**

as been **Mindy: Duh. My specialty. How’s the hot boss workin’ out? H
ult and you doing naughty little assistant things yet? *insert cupcake GIF***

being a Another groan leaves my lips.

Me: Negative. He’s actually with someone so you can knock that

are you **Mindy: Boo-hoo. Maybe there’s a hot single guy in your bu
s? As if Nothing like neighbor sex. Super convenient.**

or them. **Me: Sounds messy. I’ll pass. I’ll be off by five. Meet me at my pa
oped up I don’t have much. Maybe we can be one and done. No time to
when champagne is involved.**

married **Mindy: You got it, buttercup. See ya then. Xoxoxo**



culinary

“Holy cow, remind me to ask what floor you’re on next time I volun
e slept
r had a
s asked
: me.

move you.” We both throw ourselves onto my free couch, courtesy
mom’s church group, and huff out an exhausted breath. “Did you see
in four-A? Not bad.”

I wipe the sweat off my brow. “No, I was too busy fighting for
getting the mattress up the stairs. I’ve always wondered how I would
y desk.

being smashed by a mattress never came to mind.”

behavior Mindy chuckles and slaps her thighs. “Right? Okay, time for the re-

She stands, walks to the boxes, and grabs two coffee mugs. “These w-
npleted to do until the fancy china arrives.”

More like secondhand thrift shop dinnerware and stemware. I get
l groan. help with the champagne. The cork pops and shoots out, slamming
the wall. “Opa!” Mindy hollers and hurries to pour the overflowing
into the mugs. I take a much-needed sip and keep going until it’s

Mindy dumps more into my cup, and I sip slower, taking in my new p-
le have definitely needs a lot of work. Some TLC. A strong deodorizer. But it’s

‘ “Cheers to finally being able to masturbate without worrying your r-
dad will walk in.” She clinks her mug to mine.

t off. I shake my head. “How about, here’s to me getting a call back so I c-
ilding. my job and pursue the career I was meant to have.”

“If you did that, you’d have to quit the bar too, and I would neve-
arents? see you.”

o waste “Wouldn’t my mother love that.” Mindy’s brows raise. “No, I don-
it like that. My mom loves you. What she doesn’t love is her d-
working at a bar. I think it gives her church friends something to v-
about behind her back.”

“Oh, the travesty of selling booze to the dregs of society.”

nter to “Right?” I snort. “She’s convinced I need to settle into a cookie-cu-
of my —get married, give her tons of grandbabies, blah, blah, blah.”

the guy Mindy groans. “That sounds atrocious.”

“Tell me about it. I mean, it’s not like I don’t want to be there so
my life but I don’t see that for me right now. I have this burning desire
die, but something great. But here I am, stuck in a stuffy office with a stuff

living for every ding from my phone and hoping it's a potent
wards."interview."

ill have "Girl, it'll happen, I promise. Maybe you should go to the restaurant
to your old boss? Explain what happened."

up and I walk over and plant myself on my couch. "Trust me, I tried. I c
againsteven get past the snooty hostess."

g liquid Mindy sits next to me. "Want me to come with and distract her wh
s gone.run for the kitchen?"

place. It I snort. "If it were only that easy. The damage is already done. I
s mine.punk's word over mine. And honestly, no matter who's truly at f
nom ordoesn't change the fact that it ruined their chances of another Michelin

"There are other things in life."

can quit "Not for a chef." I down the rest of my champagne, and Mindy f
back up.

r get to "Okay, fine. So, you keep at it. Something's gonna fall into yo
Meanwhile, what are you going to do about your current job?"

't mean The million-dollar question. "Who knows? Keep my head on strai
aughtermouth shut, and be a compliant employee?"

whisper Another groan. "Sounds as ratchet as being married with babies."

"Well, my other option is to stand my ground. I swear, some of the
he says and does. . . it's like he's testing me."

tter life "How so?"

Shrugging, I say, "I don't know. It's how I catch him looking at
sounds silly, and I shouldn't even be saying this. He has a girlfriend.
meday,a complete knockout, by the way."

e to do Mindy nudges me. "Dude, so are you."

y boss, "Thanks, but we don't have to go there on this one. It's. . . I don't

ial jobIt's hard to explain."

"Okay, start with how he looks at you."

t to talk "God. . ." I sigh, imagining those eyes, dark and hungry. "Like he v
eat me alive." I cover my eyes and chug my champagne. "How insai
ouldn'tthat sound?"

Mindy shrugs. "Sounds pretty normal to me."

ile you I scoff. "Not when you're a sexy, high-profile CEO of a company
mention completely unattainable. I'm an idiot and got wrapped up in t
it's thatsigns. It shows how much I know about relationships. I don't even kno
fault, itto flirt, for Christ's sake."

star." She returns my scoff and waves her hand in my face. "Oh, giv
break. I've seen your tips at the end of the night. You know how to flirt
fills me "Schmoozing customers is a little different than schmoozing t
you're interested in—"

our lap. "Oh, so now you're interested?"

"No. There's just something there I don't know how to explain. I
ght, mywish it would go away. He really is a massive jerk."

"Hmmm. . ." Mindy sips her champagne.

"*What?*" It's never a good thing when she starts hmmm-ing.

e things "Nothing. I just think maybe. . ."

She takes too long to reply. "Maybe what? Spit it out."

"That you like him. And maybe he likes you too."

me. It "Yeah, *okay*." I can't help but roll my eyes at that.

Who is Her smile becomes gentle, and she pats my thigh. "Babe, attrac
attraction."

"He is *not* attracted to me. And there's a difference between thinki
t know.hot and liking him. And, again, I need this job. Until I find somethir

the best thing to do is stay out of his way.”

She leans forward to grab the bottle and slouches into the couch.
wants to Evans. Whatever you say.”

ne does “Oh, shut up and go get another bottle.”

“I love when you get bossy with me. Any chance you wanna go see
A wants to join us?”

, not to
he little
ow how

e me a
t.”
he guy

almost

ction is

ng he’s
ig else,

the best thing to do is stay out of his way.”

She leans forward to grab the bottle and slouches into the couch. “Okay, Evans. Whatever you say.”

“Oh, shut up and go get another bottle.”

“I love when you get bossy with me. Any chance you wanna go see if four-A wants to join us?”

Chapter Ten

Fay

The gods are shining on me when I get into the office the next day. This is away at a meeting, and I can drink my coffee in peace and use company resources to research and apply for jobs.

A cook at a diner? Pass. Food truck cook? “Ugh, not that desperate.” I click again, not interested in flipping burgers at the famous arch. I talk about my coffee. “I’d rather stay working for an asshole—”

“Who exactly is the asshole?”

I jerk in my seat, spilling my coffee down my blouse. “Shit—she’s the one.” I hurry and click out of the job site. “I was reading my horoscope.”

Theo looks scrumptious in a fitted black suit. Unlike his usual attire, he isn’t wearing a tie. The top button of his shirt is open, exposing a sliver of chest. He takes a closer step. “And what did it say?”

“What did what say?”

“Your horoscope.”

Oh, yeah. “You know, the typical. Today’s a great day to be a go-getter. Don’t ignore that intuition about a friend. Avoid cheap Chinese food. It costs.” Trust me, that should be in everyone’s daily reading.

“And the asshole part?”

“Oh,” I wave at him, “just calling the reading an asshole. I mean, don’t eat Chinese food from a hole in the wall, is it really Chinese food

And there’s the look I swear I’ve been seeing. The spark I want to die can’t. I cross my legs, and his eyes fall to my lap. I ignore it and straighten up.
“Did you need coffee? Your agenda?”

“I hear you submitted a change of address with HR.”

“What?” I look up at him, bewildered that he already knows my name and address information. Especially since I submitted the request less than an hour ago.

“Wow, your HR is really on top of things. Did they also report that I’m wearing the underwear I’m wearing today?”

He blinks, and his jaw tightens. “My agenda and coffee.” He turns and disappears into his office.

“Pass. Okay then.

ke a sip



Theo

I shut my office door and sit at my desk, tossing the file on top. I grab my phone and press the extension I need. “IT, this is Jason.”

“Jason. Theo Monroe. I need you to put a site block on the computer for Fay Evans.”

“Like stop them from getting on social media?”

“No. Any site related to job search engines. If she tries to use it, I’ll block it.”

“Oh, okay, I can do that. I’ll configure her network to reject any traffic concerning those IP addresses.”

“Good.” I go to hang up but stop. “Actually, is there a way to record, if you search so our company website comes up instead?” I smirk.

“No doubt. On it.”

any but

righten.



Fay

I’m closing my computer for the day when Kyle approaches my desk.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself.”

He stops in front of me. “Looks like you’re done for the day. Any you wanna join—”

“She’s working late,” Theo spits out as he storms past us and disappears into his office.

“Or not.” Kyle shoves his hands in his pocket. “Maybe we should talk over the weekend—”

“Miss Evans, in my office now!”

I roll my eyes at Theo’s booming voice. “I’m sorry. Raincheck?”

“Yeah, sure.”

So much for going home and binge-watching reality TV. I leave my computer and walk into Theo’s office. “There’s no need to yell. I can hear just fine.”

He loosens his tie and takes a seat at his desk. “The Williamsburg report notes had errors and need to be reworked. We’ll be working through it so order some takeout.”

I sigh. It’s pointless to argue. “Where would you like me to order from?”

“Your choice.”

“Any allergies?” I ask.

He lifts his head. “Yeah, to terrible food.”

configure “Got it.” I head out, but he calls me back.

“Order a lot. It’s going to be a long night.”

Great. Just what I need. More time alone with him. “Right.”

When his phone rings, he answers it, and his lips thin. “No. I said—
give a damn.” His brows furrow. “Fine. I know.” He hangs up without
goodbye and stands.

k. “Never mind. You can go home.”

“What—why? I thought we had to work—”

chance “Now we don’t. Have a good evening, Miss Evans.” Grabbing
jacket and laptop bag, he exits his office, dismissing me.

appears “Yeah, okay,” I say to the now-empty room. I cock my head toward
door, making sure the coast is clear, then step toward his desk, curious

ry for a was on the call. Before I get too far, I stop myself. It’s none of my business

I grab my things from my desk, hoping to catch Kyle before he
Screw reality TV night. It’s definitely karaoke night somewhere. And
nothing like a few cocktails to lift the spirits and make you forget
tone-deaf.

I’m heading to the elevator when I look back at Theo’s office.

I’ve seen him upset, but this was different. Before I can talk myself

it, I drop my things back on my desk and tiptoe through his office like

neeting spy, looking around to make sure bad guys aren’t going to jump out at

dinner, me. Not that I’m doing anything wrong. I’m his assistant, and this is

related. I’m allowed to be by his desk.

om?” I move a few pieces of paper around to tidy up, then go in for a

Reaching for the receiver, I pick it up and hit the button for the call log

last number that pops up doesn’t have a name connected to it, but the

code is local. I press the arrow next to it, hoping to get more info, and

redial button. “No, no, no, no.” I panic as the line starts to ring. A voice answers, and I slam the phone down. “Shit.”

You’d think the devil himself shot out of the phone the way I jump -I don’t trings. “Welp, look at the time. Happy hour waits for no one.” I race ou : saying office, pretending my damn curiosity never got the best of me.



Fifty-seven karaoke songs and a shit ton of drinks later. . .

his suit Singing off-tune about loving sex, drugs, and rock and roll, I trip stairs to my apartment and fall into the wall. Thank God for railings
ard the another off-beat lyric and make it to my door. Unlocking it, I stumble t
us who and toss my keys in the general direction of my trusty thrifted table. I
iness. apartment is filled with mismatched furniture, but it has character. M
s gone. isn’t in the best of neighborhoods, but my aunt assured me I was no le
there’s living in the city since crime was everywhere. Thanks for that, Au
you’re Totally reassured. Just little ol’ me living out my best life as a resp
human who takes care of herself—

“Shit,” I huff out, tripping over my kitchen rug.

f out of I wobble to my fridge and grab a water bottle. “Thanks, fridge!”
e some twirl like a ballerina toward the hallway, and stumble to my bedroom
nd bust my water on the bed, unbuckle my pants, and climb out of them. But
s work- have no game, my foot gets stuck, I wobble backward, and my butt m
floor with a drunken grunt.

he kill. “Damn skinny jeans,” I moan, ignoring the pain in my tush as I ri
og. The off. While taking a quick timeout on the floor, I notice Theo’s scarf h
he area under my bed. I snag it, the alcohol telling me to bring it to my no
l hit the sniff. Sighing as I exhale, I toss it on my bed because it’s sleeping v

man's tonight. My blouse comes off next, and once I'm settled in a worn T-shirt, I climb into bed.

when it My mind goes to Theo, and I try to imagine him doing karaoke. I bet he's probably beneath him, and I bet he's never even been to a dive bar. I can feel my stomach sliding my legs over the sheets. The image of him drinking draft beer with his stomach clenching in laughter.

Theo Monroe drinks bourbon and attends fancy soirées. His penthouse is probably all dark and moody like he is. I wonder what he would think of me in his place. Lying next to me, all sexy and muscular, wrapped up in my thigh-high stockings and a comforter. The thought causes my thighs to brush together, and I shudder. I slip a pillow between them. "Oh, Theo, this is so inappropriate. You're my tiny boss," I giggle and pretend it's his thigh pressing against me. My fingers brush up my belly, and I softly squeeze my breast. "Oh, you like these?" I mess with them close, and I visualize him above me. His fingers capture my nipple, and I moan. Rita pinches gently. I breathe deeply and reach into my nightstand drawer. "I don't mind if we kick this party up on a notch, do ya?"

My hands wrap around my trusty vibrator when my phone buzzes. I let it ring, letting it go to voicemail because I'm in a very important fantasy right now. I snort, but then I make the mistake of looking at the phone screen. *Asshole B* is the photo I secretly snapped of his ass light up my screen. *Well, is it perfect timing.* Drunk me agrees. I grab my vibrator and snag my phone. My hand disappears under my sheets as I bring the other to my ear.

"Mr. Monroe," I purr into the phone.

"Miss Evans."

I click the switch to turn on my little friend. Loving how he says my name, I press it against my sex. "What can I do for you, Mr. Monroe?" I exude with me the initial vibration.

-shirt, I “I’m calling to inquire why a phone call was made from my desk left this evening.”

ke. It’s Oh fuck. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.” I add more p huckle, stroking it up and down my slit.

has my “I think you do.”

God, his voice. I don’t even need the vibrator. I imagine his dee ouse ishumming between my thighs. “I sure don’t. Cleaning lady, maybe—ol k of my. . cleaning lady,” I reply, my voice husky. “Is that all you need ift store Monroe?”

relessly “So, you’re saying the cleaning lady was naughty, snooped thro u’re my call log, and pressed redial?”

ers drift “Yep.” Oh god, keep talking.

ly eyes “Do you think she found what she was looking for?”

and he “Oh, yes.” I work myself harder.

r. “You “I don’t like liars, Miss Evans.”

“Mm-hmmm.” My pace increases, his tone lowers, and I slide : debatedeeper inside me.

ht now, “If I find out you’re lying to me, there will be repercussions.”

oss and “I hope so,” I whisper. Shit, I’m about to come.

n’t this “Have you been a bad girl, *Fay*?”

ne, one “Shit.” Oh my god. Fuck! I almost drop my phone. My insides sque toy, and my orgasm tears through me. I exhale, and my hand falls to n Shit, that was hot. Out of breath, I gasp, “No. Not me. All sorts of go here.” Holy smokes, I think I’m sweating. “Is there anything else yo / name, Mr. Monroe?”

chale at “Just wanted to make sure you came.” I almost drop my phon second time.

after I “Wait, what?”
“Good night, Miss Evans.”
pressure, He disconnects the call.



The sound of an alarm jolts me awake, and I shoot out of bed. “I
p voice scream. I look around for flames, only to realize it’s just my alarm.
1, yeah. I grab my chest and look around for my phone. “Where the heck are
ed, Mr. I find it on the floor, partially under my bed. When I turn it face-up
the alarm off, I see that it’s been going off for almost twenty-seven m
igh my “Crap!” I hurl myself out of bed and race to get ready. The last thing I
to be late and deal with Captain Assholio.

As I rush around, I’m proud I only stop twice to gag, cons
everything I drank last night. Even thinking about all the drinks almost
me gag again, but I take a breath and go over last night's events. Ho
even get home? I remember some badass karaoke, dancing, and a lot o
my toy Kyle is definitely not my type—there were zero vibes—but he sure
how to sing. And dance. And, well, take shots with the best of them.
he drove me? Or hopefully not, since he had barely been standing by t
I left.

Oh well. I made it home. Just as I’m about to leave my room, I tr
eze my my pleasure penetrator. My eyebrows go up. “Hmmm. . . I don’t rer
1y side. you making an appearance last night. No wonder I slept like the dead.”
od over I race to work, waving to Amy as I fly down the hall and throw mys
u need, my chair with three minutes to spare. “Suck it, alarm clock.”

“Wow, you’re alive.”
e for a Kyle walks up to my desk with a steaming cup of coffee.

“How much for that coffee? I have about seven dollars, half a pack of gum, and some expired gift cards. Wait, no. Those are actually just coffee my mom gave me for free hugs and kisses. She’s weird and cheap.”

Kyle laughs and does the right thing. Snatching the mug from him, he brings it to my nose, inhaling the goodness. “*Thaaaank* you.”

Fire!” I “You can keep the seven dollars, but I’m taking the certificates because you always use a free kiss and hug.” I look at him with wide eyes. “Kidding you?”

“Oh! Got it. My mom would probably have a lot of questions when I come to shut you out in minutes.” God, this coffee is good. I can feel my body coming to life. “Wow, so fun times last night.”

need is Kyle grins. “For sure. I didn’t realize you loved karaoke so much.”

“I work part-time at a dive bar. It’s ingrained in me to enjoy it. If you’re considering it, beat ’em, join ’em, you know?”

It makes “Where at? I’d love to come hang out while you—”

Why did I My intercom beeps. “Miss Evans, I’ll take my coffee and agenda if you’re finished.” We both jerk at hearing Theo’s phone slam onto the base behind his closed office door.

Maybe “Sorry. I gotta go. Catch up later.”

He time “Yeah, sure thing.” I shoot out of my chair. Shit. I don’t have his coffee. I inwardly groan knowing what I need to do.

Tip over

member

,

Self into

“How much for that coffee? I have about seven dollars, half a pack of stale gum, and some expired gift cards. Wait, no. Those are actually just coupons my mom gave me for free hugs and kisses. She’s weird and cheap.”

Kyle laughs and does the right thing. Snatching the mug from him, I put it to my nose, inhaling the goodness. “*Thaaank* you.”

“You can keep the seven dollars, but I’m taking the certificates. I can always use a free kiss and hug.” I look at him with wide eyes. “Kidding.”

“Oh! Got it. My mom would probably have a lot of questions when you come to collect.” God, this coffee is good. I can feel my body coming back to life. “Wow, so fun times last night.”

Kyle grins. “For sure. I didn’t realize you loved karaoke so much.”

“I work part-time at a dive bar. It’s ingrained in me to enjoy it. If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em, you know?”

“Where at? I’d love to come hang out while you—”

My intercom beeps. “Miss Evans, I’ll take my coffee and agenda if you’re finished.” We both jerk at hearing Theo’s phone slam onto the base from behind his closed office door.

“Sorry. I gotta go. Catch up later.”

“Yeah, sure thing.” I shoot out of my chair. Shit. I don’t have his coffee. I inwardly groan knowing what I need to do.

Chapter Eleven

Theo

“Not now, Theo.”

“I’m telling you, Alana practically admitted she lied.”

“I told you to drop it. Where are we at with the litigation? I asked you to look into the holdup with the shareholders—”

“Fuck the litigation! Are you listening to me? This is all a matter of Blackmail. And Charles and Alana are both in on this. What’s your connection to the Hills?”

“Theo, this will be the last time we speak about this. What’s done is done. Be the man I raised you to be and accept your role. Nothing will change. Once this matter is cleared, the merger will go through. You will stay with Alana, and life will be good. Oh, and before you leave, that woman you were entertaining at the Peninsula? End it. Alana knows about it and is pleased.”

“What? How’d you find out about her? Are you having me followed?”

“I’m protecting my investments. Your carelessness is a liability. You need to be updated on the case. The lawyers will be in shortly.”



I was barely out of my mother's womb before Alfred Monroe was grooming me for my future. *His* future. I couldn't even tell you what the hell I was to be when I grew up because I only knew this.

I played the sports he wanted, made friends with the kids in the family he chose, and went to the Ivy League school he picked. I've been preparing my whole life to become the next CEO of his company. Carry on *his* legacy. I didn't argue. Mainly because you didn't say no to a man like Alfred Monroe. His path offered a life of wealth and power, and no one was foolish enough to turn that down.

He always instilled in me that power requires sacrifice. I just didn't expect it to be this. A contract that will bind me to my future wife.

That night with Alana still haunts me. I was young, horny, arrogant, and I didn't know any better. She was attractive and determined and knew exactly who I'd be to her one day. It wasn't a coincidence we met that night. It was an arrangement cooked up with someone as power-hungry as my father. Charles Hill knew exactly what he was doing when he brought his daughter to that dinner. And my father, whose thoughts were never far from the deal closing, was happily along for the ride. He didn't care that I was being victimized. He was more concerned with the merger happening. Even now, he was using me as his pawn to achieve it.

I should have told him to go to hell when he called last night and demanded my attendance at dinner like I was a child. I knew exactly what he wanted to speak with me. The engagement. The merger deadline was closer, and I had yet to make a move.

The thought of being engaged to Alana boils my blood. My mind screams at Claire. Someone I truly wanted to be engaged to but never had the chance. God, I didn't even get to explain. My father made her disappear before I could. At first, the rage consumed me. It was almost enough to give it all up. I refused to bow down to the insane notion that I was going to marry a woman I could barely stand. My father saw it differently. I should have known better than to think he would let me just walk away.

After removing Claire from my life, any other woman I brought home was gone shortly after. It became clear that my father would not allow my happiness. He was set to sabotage any relationship I attempted to create. He succeeded every single time.

"You will do this, son. This is your legacy. And until you realize you're just wasting your time on these charity cases that do not belong in this world."

His words still ring in my ear. He was right. They didn't belong. Because I wouldn't subject anyone to the misery of my family. Of him. And in the end, I became the exact person he groomed me to be—a cold, heartless bastard.

I needed to be smart and shut down this little game of temptation he was playing with Fay. All it would take is the most innocent of glances but I would be damned if I let us for my father to start asking questions. I refuse to let him near her. His patience is finally near nonexistent, and he won't take no for an answer. Last night, I got his final ultimatum: propose to Alana before my birthday or he will take matters into his own hands.

My birthday is in two weeks.

I fought not to throw myself over the table and wrap my fingers around his neck, squeezing until his last breath left him. This world would be a better place without him in it. But I kept my composure because he gets

shifts topissing me off, took the contract he handed me, and left before t
chance.course arrived. He didn't stop me. He smiled and sipped his cognac, k
efore II wouldn't say no. I wouldn't walk away. He had me cornered. He k
t all up.And I knew it.

narry a My thoughts immediately went to *her*. If I had a different life, I
ld havemake her mine. Bend her to my will and devour her until she knows
but me. Eventually, though, she would become a pawn to my father.
aroundwould ruin her, just as he's ruined everyone else I've selfishly broug
low meh is game.

te. And I consider the comment my father made when I arrived at the res

Thought you were calling back to decline. I knew you knew better. He
ze that,at a loss until he explained the hang-up. Since I was already in r
g in ours someone else made that call. A little someone I left in my office, co
when I left without a word. Seems she went to find her own answe
because I checked my call log. It was bold of her to call the number back,
he end,Either way, it gave me a reason to scold her. Hear her voice.

tard. But when she answered, she was the one to give *me* the earful. Th
n I wasbrat was getting herself off, and I could tell she'd been drinking. But t
etweenshe answered each question. . . Her husky voice and the soft, breathy
ier. Hismorphed into deep pants. I wondered who she was thinking about w
er. Lastfucked herself. My cock hardened with each reply. God, I wanted t
g, or hethat room with her. Watch her touch herself. Smell her arousal. Memo:

face as she came. I was tempted to wrap my fist around my dick and
to the beautiful sound of her masked moans.

und his By the time she orgasmed, I was parked outside her new apartme
a better sure what the hell I was doing there. I knew better. I knew what my
off on

he first was capable of. But she was becoming my weakness. And if I didn't know this obsession with her, I would be her demise.

I knew it. Lost in my thoughts, a noise comes from outside my office door. I raise my head. I hear Fay's voice, which starts to calm me, but then it would be followed by that little shit from Research. I grab my phone and nothing intercom. "Miss Evans, I'll take my coffee and agenda if you're done." And he finished." I slam it back on the receiver.

Right into With a quick knock on my door, Fay walks in, holding my coffee. "Morning. Here's your coffee, nice and hot."

Restaurant. I observe her expression as she walks in and sets the mug on my table. Either she's trying to play coy, or she doesn't remember. Interesting.

My car, "How are you feeling this morning? Refreshed?"

Confused Her brows rise in confusion. "Yeah, um. . . fine. And you?"

ers and I'm going with the latter. I lean back in my chair, loving her discomfited though. I decide to push it a little further. "Who were you thinking about when you came last night?"

at little Her eyes widen, and she sucks her bottom lip into her mouth, running her hands down her skirt. My eyes drop, trailing her movements, imagining her tongue running up her thighs.

When she "I'm. . . uh, not really sure what you're talking about."

to be in "I heard you coming. It's a very distinct sound when a woman organizes her thoughts." Her cheeks blaze crimson, and my cock jerks. I'm taking this too far. I mention mentioning it was a bad move. Now, it's all I can think about. "But I'm curious who you were thinking about."

ent. Not Her mouth parts. Fuck, the things I want to do to those lips. I bet my father knows they would be heavenly.

"Yeah, again, I'm not sure what you're talking—"

at go of “Check your call log, Miss Evans. You may have forgotten, but I did
I’ve stunned the words right out of her. “Shall I take a guess—”
; and I “No! No. It was no one. Look, I was drinking. Anything I said or
men it’s due to alcohol.”

hit the I stay silent, the nervous shifting of her body and the small shake
e quite voice showing how uncomfortable she is. “You must have called a
time.”

coffee. “I think I called at the perfect time.” Her lips part, and I imagine
my cock between them. I lean forward and reach for my coffee. “I’ll take
y desk. a compliment.”

“Wait. I didn’t say it was you—”

“And I’ll take another cup.” She closes and opens her mouth. I manage
broken her. “Is there anything else, Miss Evans?”

comfort. I “No. Nothing else.” I clench my fist around my mug as she walks
men you need to stop this little game with her and stick to my original rule. Let
don’t touch.

ing her

ing my

Fay



Once the door closes behind me, I squeeze my eyes closed and
“Fuck!” in my head. That did not just happen. I *didn’t* do that last
gasms.” Then I remember my vibrator on the floor. . . “Fuck!” I hiss through
r. Even teeth. It all comes rushing back—the tequila, the call, his voice. How
at I am my subconscious allow me to do that? *Because your subconscious was*
—no, I *drunk*. Dammit, I did drink a lot.

I can’t go back in there. I absolutely *cannot* go back in there. I reach
chin to the ceiling and whisper, “Please let a black hole open up and swallow

dn't." me whole." *Dammit, Fay.* I bury my face in my hands. I'm never d
again.

lid was The intercom from my phone buzzes. "My agenda, Miss Evans."

My thighs clench. Oh God, I totally have an asshole fetish. "Comin
e in herShit. "As in. . . about to enter your office." I may hate myself more
t a badhate him. Is hate-fucking a thing? *Definitely* a bucket list item. I g
notebook with his printed agenda. When I return, he's sitting
shovingworktable, a smug smile on his face.

ike it as *Oh, to hell with this.* I twist on my heel to run.

"Sit down, Miss Evans," he demands.

"I forgot my pen." *Please don't notice the one in my hand.*

ay have "There are plenty here. Now, let's get started."

I commend him for being so professional. Well, minus the whole
s out. Ime out for the alleged phone sex. Still not fessing up to that. And not
ook butwere having phone sex. *I* apparently was having solo sex, and he jus
listen. Also, remind me why I *suck so bad!*

"Fay, it will only be uncomfortable if you make it that way."

So wise he is. Inhaling a deep breath, I sit next to him and lay
agenda for the day. "First off, I'm not uncomfortable. Second, this
scream,
speculation. My word against yours."

t night. "That you came or that it was me you were thinking about?"

igh my I choke. "What? Neither. You sure do think highly of yourself. *A*
v could *had* been thinking about you, there's no way I would have enjoyed it
as also you have the Keller meeting at ten, a phone conference with the

Group at eleven, lunch with—"

ise my "Why wouldn't you enjoy it?"

wallow "What?"

drinking “You said you wouldn’t enjoy it. Why?”

I sigh, dropping my pen. “Fine, I would. And the more I remember
enjoy it. A lot. I slept better than I have in weeks. Is that what you
g.” No!hear?”

than I “Yes. Who’s my lunch with?”

grab my “Jim Swanson at Belvidere Steakhouse. Why are you so insis
at theknowing? Did *you* enjoy it?”

“Enjoy what?”

Dammit, I walked right into that one. Oh, hell. “Listening. You didn’t
up. In fact, sounds like you stayed on the line ’til the very end.”

“I was concerned.”

I stifle a laugh. “Concerned?”

calling “Wanted to make sure you didn’t need assistance. Once I heard you
that we done, I hung up.”

t got to God, how are we casually having this *insane* conversation? “W
assistance needed. I happen to be very skilled at bringing myself enjoy
His eyes darken. Maybe that was too far. His gaze drops to my mouth
out his can’t help but lick my bottom lip. There’s a slow shift in the air. His gaze
is stillingers on my lips, and I swear he’s thinking about kissing me. The t
so am I. “If you’re so concerned, maybe next time you can assist—”

“Knock, knock.” I jerk away, falling back. Theo grabs my chair b
and if I topple over. Amy walks in, looking between the two of us. “S
t. Now, interrupt. Mr. Monroe, you have—”

Worley Pushing Amy to the side, a blonde goddess walks into Theo’s office
Hill, the woman from the paper who was attached to Theo’s arm. Theo
and moves away like I burned him. “Alana, I wasn’t aware we
appointment.”

She smiles at him and then looks down at me. “We didn’t. I thought, I *did* would surprise you. How does lunch sound?”

He doesn’t answer her. There’s a shift in the air. The silence becomes uncomfortable, so I shift in my seat, gather my papers, and stand. “I’ll be ahead and reschedule your lunch meeting.” He doesn’t respond but I come home with such distaste it sours my stomach.

I walk out and shut the door behind me. Dropping my things on my desk, I hurry to the bathroom. “What are you doing?” I scold my reflection. I don’t hangfalling into this trap with him, confusing his teasing with a false sense of hope.

I need to stop whatever this is, which is all in my head. Maybe I should listen to my mother, call up Mrs. Weller’s grandson, and swap baby-sitting for you wereand financials over dinner. I groan. That sounds horrible. I take a deep breath and slowly release it. “This is only temporary. The gods will shine down on you, Nell, no you, and you’ll find a kitchen job. Soon, this all will be a distant memory.” I got this. “*I am in charge of my own destiny,*” I repeat. I always get lost in the subway station walls.

I amaze still



Nothing is,

Walking into Bev’s, I throw a lame wave at Harry, toss my purse on the bar, and take a seat. Saying I’m in a shit mood would be an understatement. When I returned to my desk, Theo was gone, and I had to worry to email telling me he wouldn’t be returning and to cancel the rest of the afternoon. Why that bothered me, I have no idea. It shouldn’t have.

Alana

“Hey, girly!” I look over at Mindy coming my way. “Wow, what’s with the frown?”

I had an

“Long day.”

ought I “Boss man isn’t getting any easier?”

I cover my face and groan. “I’m just not sure what I’ve gotten nes too into.”

“I’ll go I drop my hands, and Mindy rubs her palms together. “Oh, I like h
ooks atis starting.”

“It’s not like that.”

desk, I “The look on your face tells me it *is* like that. Spill the tea, girl.” Sh
I keep a beer across the bar to me.

ense of “I hate my boss. There’s nothing else to it.”

“Bullshit.” Her arm shoots out, trying to steal the beer back.

need to I pull it back. “No way. I need this.” I take a hefty sip.

names “Then tell me the truth. You’ve always hated your boss. But now
o breathsulking about hating your boss.” Down goes another big gulp. “Fay—’

own on “I need to find a new job. I’m not meant to be someone’s assista
nt badmeant to be a chef, cooking the most glorious meals tastebuds ha
so readexperienced. And instead, I’m taking orders from an egotistical as

who, have I mentioned, has a girlfriend?” She slides over a shot of
next. “No. I can’t drink anymore during the week.”

“Hmm. . .” she says as I pick it up. She clinks her shot glass to mi
1 top of we both sling it back.

be an “I mean, why he would even be into me is stupid. You should
had an girlfriend. She’s like super pretty. Like super-duper pretty. Like Vi
of his Secret model runway *super-duper* pretty.”

“Yikes, that’s pretty.”

up with “You should have seen the photo of them in the paper.” Anoth
appears in front of me. “And the worst thing is, even when he’s being
asshole, I find myself super attracted to him. It’s like he’s, he’s. . .”

“He’s calling you.”

myself “Huh?”

She points to my phone. “He’s calling you. Answer it.” I look down, sure enough, his name lights up my screen. “Dude, answer it.”

“No.”

“Why not? Answer it.”

She slides “No, he’s probably just going to ask me if I ordered more toilet paper for his fancy bathroom or have his shoes shined or some shit.”

“And then you can tell him to suck it. Answer it!” She grabs my phone and swipes the bar.

“What the hell!” I mutter, and she hands me my phone. I’m going to tell her.

“Mr. Monroe,” I say and shoot Mindy the bird.

“Miss Evans.”

I hate that I love the way he says my name. “Unless this is something urgent, whatever you need will have to wait ’til business hours. I’m closed at the clock.”

Mindy laughs.

“The Callahan report. Was it completed?”

Seriously? “Yes, boss, it was completed and left on your desk. You see, I know if you came back to the office. Must have been some lunch—”

“Fay, hurry back to the table. Your date is waiting!” Mindy yells from the background.

I cover the speaker. “What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Am I interrupting something?” Theo asks.

“No—” Mindy slaps my shoulder. *Ouch*. “Yes. Is that all?”

Seriously, what is Mindy doing? Harry comes over, and she w

something into his ear. He rolls his eyes and leans over the bar. “Hey
You coming back? Just ordered us some shots to loosen you up.”

vn, and Hell.

I’m going to murder them both.

“Where exactly are you, Miss Evans?” His tone drops an octave.

“That’s none of your business. Now, if that’s all you need—”

aper for “God, baby, you look so hot in that mini-skirt. Gonna hike it up at
your—”

one and “Okay, bye.” I quickly hang up. “What in the world?!”

Harry shrugs. “What? She told me to say it.”

g to kill I shoot daggers at Mindy, who has tears running down her face
laughing so hard. “Dude, that was awesome.”

“How exactly was that awesome?”

“Because. Two can play this game. Now he knows you’ve got yo
nethingside piece, and you’re not actually sitting at a bar sulking.”

not on “Yeah, and your sidepiece says to let my bartender get back to

Harry grumbles and walks off.

“Yes, sir!” Mindy salutes him. “Listen, I’m off tomorrow. Let’s go c

“I can’t. Told you. I’m not drinking during the week.”

i would “You’re drinking now.”

“This is an exception. Plus, I have some stupid awards thing after w

s in the “Come out after. We can take Thirsty Thursday to a whole new leve

“I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. I met this guy the other night. He’s a popular ni
promoter. We can meet up with him. I bet he has some connectio
restaurants. Maybe we can see about getting you in with some ma
hispersWhat do you say?”

l, babe. What a low blow. She knows I won't say no to that.

“Fine—”

“Yay! Okay. I'll text you the details. Wear something hot. We're
you a new job tomorrow night.”

A girl can only hope.

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out.”

ork.”

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ghtclub

ns with

inagers.

What a low blow. She knows I won't say no to that.

“Fine—”

“Yay! Okay. I'll text you the details. Wear something hot. We're getting you a new job tomorrow night.”

A girl can only hope.

Chapter Twelve

Fay

“Morning. . . I think. You don’t look so good.”

“How late am I?” I ask Amy, rushing past her desk. Dr. Callahan forgot to plug my phone in before I went to bed. “My phone died. I woke up to my alarm.”

“Thirty-seven minutes.” Great. “And he’s on a rampage.”

Even better. I race down the hallway and throw my stuff on my desk. I waste thirty seconds debating on making my presence known or getting coffee. Coffee wins. When I return, he’s standing in the doorway of his office, arms crossed over his chest.

“You’re late.”

“My phone died.”

“That doesn’t sound like my problem. You’re still late,” he hisses.

“I’m here now,” I snap back. “Your coffee.” He doesn’t move to get it. Instead, he storms into his office. Jerk. I follow, secretly taking a sip from my coffee. I need the caffeine more than he does.

“The Callahan reports are wrong. They need to be redone.”

“What? No, they’re not.”

He whips around. “Are you challenging me?”

Kind of. “They’re not wrong.”

“They are. Redo them.” He picks up the pile of reports and throws them on the worktable. A few slide off onto the floor. It takes everything in my hands to pick one up and whip it at his face.

“Of course, *Mr. Monroe*. Whatever you wish,” I say, my tone dripping with sarcasm. I place his coffee on the table and pick up the reports. I dump them in the trash. I pull out his agenda and take a seat. “Read over your agenda?”

“Yes, forty minutes ago.”

His ticking jaw says he wants to throttle me instead.

“Great.” I ignore his jab. “You have a ten o’clock call with Manufacturing, lunch in the office with Brad Well—”

“Cancel that.”

“Done. One o’clock with the Shilling Group in the conference room desk. I” “Why were you late?”

“I told you. And a four o’clock meeting marked private.” I close my eyes and stand. “If there isn’t anything else, I’ll get started on those reports.” It looks like he has a lot more to say. Or yell, to be exact, because he goes to work and I blaze with fury. “Okay, great.” I leave to escape his wrath.

When I shut his door, I let out a huge breath.

“That’s the face of someone who looks defeated.” I pull my attention away from the annoying voice of Julie.

“Why would you say that?” I push off his door. “Can I help you with something, Julie?”

“Not you.” She walks past me to Theo’s door.

“He’s actually really busy and doesn’t want to be disturbed.”

She waves me off. “I’m sure he’ll make an exception for me.”

“Yeah, probably not. He specifically asked not to be disturbed.”

hem on Her dainty shoulders shrug, and she knocks on his door. “I guess we
e not toout.”

“What?” Theo snaps from inside his office.

ripping She turns to me with a smug smile. “Wish me luck.” Then she op
Then I door and shuts it behind her.

y to go “*Wish me luck,*” I mimic under my breath. God, why does she irk
bad? I need to focus on getting my life back on track. Tonight cou
huge opportunity for me. I miss cooking. I want to rewind life to that c
the things I would have done differently. Maybe I would have seen th
Stevens I shake my head and sit down. Focus on the future. Soon, I’ll be out
and back where I belong.

I pull up the Callahan file on my computer and read the report. Not
—” of place catches my eye. “Seriously, you arrogant ass-wipe?”

r binder
ts.” He
his eyes

To: T_Monroe@MIC.org
From: Fay_Evans@MIC.org
Subject: Callahan report

Mr. Monroe,
As stated, I see ZERO issues with this report.

n to the
Fay Evans

ou with
Executive Assistant to Theo Monroe

I’m starting to think he does this just to be an asshole. My email din

To: Fay_Evans@MIC.org

From: T_Monroe@MIC.org

Subject: Wrong Callahan reports

I'll find *Check it again.*

Theo Monroe

CEO, Monroe Investment Corp

ens the

God! He's such an ass. I may be getting fired today.

me so

To: T_Monroe@MIC.org

ld be a

From: Fay_Evans@MIC.org

lay and

Subject: Right Callahan reports

e signs.

No.

of here

Fay Evans

Executive Assistant to Theo Monroe

ing out

My desk phone rings, Theo's name lighting up on my screen. De getting fired today. "Yes, Mr. Monroe?"

"Is that your final answer, Miss Evans?" His voice is calm yet chall

Tonight is going to work out. I'm going to get a connection and a jo this. "You betcha." And I hang up.

I snicker under my breath as my phone rings again. Yeah, now see a perfect time to print copies. I snag my keycard off the desk and hurr the hall at the sound of Theo's door opening. Another bullet dodged.

Phew.



gs.

I avoid Theo for the rest of the day. He was on a call when I returned desk, and I snuck off to lunch before he got off. The afternoon was th

He was wrapped up in meeting after meeting, and I hid in the bathroom between each one. I know. Cowardly. But it's better this way.

"Hey there."

I jerk, and my knees slam into the bottom of my desk.

"Wow, someone's jumpy."

I look up at Kyle. "Yeah, just. . ." Avoiding my boss, who's on a warpath. "Long day."

"Not looking forward to this award thing. At least we get free margaritas. Curious if they'll have the margarita machine again this year."

"No idea. That's a question for Julie, but you'd have to pull her hair from up his ass to ask her."

Kyle snorts out a chuckle. "Wow."

"Sorry. She rubs me the wrong way."

"She's not a fan favorite, that's for sure. You done for the day? Want to head up to the terrace?"

I check the time. I still have about twenty minutes of work left but something's coming up. That will be the next assistant's job. I have big plans tonight. Big, big plans. I got to go. "You know what? Sure. I have to change really quick. I have a party to go to after this."

I did exactly what Mindy instructed me to do. On my lunch hour, I went to a boutique a few blocks down and bought a sexy white dress.

"Yeah, sure. Meet you by the elevators?"

"Perfect."

I hear Theo finishing his call, so I quickly gather my things and take the elevator. Ten minutes later, I'm walking to the elevators.

"Wow," Kyle says, eyeing me.

"Does it look okay?" I ask, inspecting my dress. "I have an important meeting."

throomtonight. Need to impress.”

Kyle clears his throat. “Yeah, uh. . . I definitely think you’re g
impress.” The elevator dings, and the doors open. “Ready?”

“Yeah, let’s get this over with.” He extends his arm for me to go fi
make small talk on the ride up. The doors open, and the view makes m
on themy breath. “Wow, it’s beautiful up here.” I take in the intimate c
furniture. Greenery covers most of the space, and there’s a long bar tu
booze.the back.

“Right? Surprised Julie was able to reserve this spot. It’s norma
ead outmore prestigious events. Not a first quarter employee award ceremony

“Exactly what are the employee awards anyway?” I ask.

Kyle shrugs. “No idea. A way to get Monroe’s attention? Julie’s p
some pretty dumb shit in the past.” I knew it. Maybe that’s why she b
Wannaso bad. She likes him. Like maybe I like—shut up! “Oh, look. A ba
Let’s go make this thing less painful.”

crew it. Thank God he severs that thought. “You read my mind.” We ma
j plans.way across the terrace, talking with other employees. I wave to There:
to go toHuman Resources, but she doesn’t wave back.

“What’s her problem?” I ask.

is swung “Oh, don’t mind her. She’s had a stick up her ass since I started here
would you like?”

“Wine. Anything red.”

“You’ve got it.” Kyle orders our drinks while I gaze around, admir
ake off.beautiful view. My eyes roam over the manicured planted bushes, hal
the man standing across the way, staring directly at me.

My breath hitches, and my nipples instantly pebble inside my dress.
nt thing “Here you go. Merlot okay?”

“Huh?”

“Merlot. That’s all they have.”

I rip my eyes away from Theo and focus on Kyle. “Oh, yeah. WeThanks.” As long as it has alcohol, it’s my best friend. I take a deep sip. “How long do you think we have to stay at this thing before we can go outside?”

“Who knows. Julie probably hired bodyguards to stand at the door to make sure no one leaves. Can’t miss out on her ‘special event.’ I even heard something about the appetizers in the breakroom.” Even though I’m looking at him, I can still feel Theo’s steely gaze. “Wow, you were this close to getting caught.”

I look at my glass, not realizing I finished the whole thing. “Yeah, I planned was.”

“Here, let me get you another one.” He takes my glass and disappears, leaving me vulnerable. My eyes wander, searching the crowd.

“Looking for someone?”

“Shit!” I whip around. Theo is mere inches from me. “Jesus, you scared the hell out of me.”

His eyes trail down to my dress. “This isn’t what you wore today.”

I straighten, crossing my arms over my chest. “I have somewhere to go. What after this?”

“And that is?”

“None of your business. Yes, that’s my final answer.”

His eyes grow dark. Thankfully, Kyle returns. “Here you go. Mr. N. Thank you for coming to this great event—”

“Go away.”

Shit. “Excuse—”

“I won’t repeat myself.”

“Um, okay. I’ll just be around. . .” Kyle rushes off.

Traitor.

1. Fine. I take a large sip of wine. “If you’ll excuse me.” I walk over to the
ip. “So, slide my glass toward the bartender. “Can I get a new glass? This
1 sneaktaste right.” It tastes just fine. The closeness of him and his gaze break
down do not.

o make The bartender hands me a fresh glass, and I turn back. Theo, again, i
ard hermy space. A burst of heat coils in my core. I hide the flushness of my
'm notwith a large gulp. “Well, I’m going to go mingle—”

rusty.” “Why are you in that dress?” he asks again, more heat in his voi
guess Ieyes have dropped to my chest. My nipples are so hard, they’re about
holes through the thin material.

ppears, “And like I already said—”

“In my office. Now.”

“What? *Now*? It’s past work hours, and I have to—”

. scared “Now, Miss Evans,” he snaps, then storms off through the crowd
elevators.

Is he serious? I look around for back up, but everyone is e
e to bethemselves. You know what? Screw this. I’m in the middle of manife
new job and can feel it about to happen. I don’t need to deal with hi
swings. It’s time we had it out, and I do what I’ve wanted to do
walked through those doors.

Monroe, Quit.

I finish my wine in one impressive gulp and leave the glass on t
Stomping my heels, I walk to the elevator and stand next to him. Not
is spoken the entire way down. When the doors open, he storms out,
me to follow him.

“Shut the door.” He walks over to his mini bar and pours a glass of bourbon. I twist around and slam it closed.

“Let’s get this over with. Like I said, I have somewhere to be.” He faces me, the deep scowl on his face stealing my breath. If looking me kill. His brow furrows, and his jaw is tense. He’s angry. Con-

Smoldering hot. I regret not wearing a bra because it gives away how invaded I am. I swallow down my inappropriate arousal and clear my throat. He takes a slow step toward me. “Who are you wearing that dress for?”

“How many times are we going to do this? It’s none of your business.”

He walks closer, eliminating the remaining space between us, forcing me to raise my chin. I hold his searing gaze. He’s so powerful, taking up space in any room he’s in. I can’t help but inhale his signature cologne. My eyes fall to his tightened jaw, then his glass, which he grips so tight it’s about to shatter the crystal. “I’m going to ask you one more time. Who *the fuck* are you wearing this for? Is it who you were wearing last night?”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

My thighs squeeze together, and I hate it. His eyes fall to my lips, and the earth shifts. “You’re an ass.”

“Watch the way you speak to me.”

Oh! He has some nerve. “The way *I* talk to *you*? How about the other people around here? You haven’t said a nice thing to me since I started here! You’re talking down to me like I’m a child. No wonder no one sticks around. You’re leaving me miserable, arrogant asshole!”

His glass slams against the top of his desk, and I suck in a quick breath.

glass of before he captures the back of my neck, slamming his lips to mine. There's no time for shock to settle in. I find myself pressed up against his chest, his hands demanding access. He tastes like bourbon and sin. I've hated and lust for him since my first day, and now, in his arms, kissing him, feels like a dream or a damned affliction?—or a nightmare.

Without thought, my hands slide up his chest and wrap around his shoulders while his hands lower to my ass, lifting me. I'm sprawled over his large mahogany desk within seconds, knocking off papers and his fancy crystal clock.

His fingers dig into my skin, and I release a soft moan. Tugging me toward him, he hikes up my dress and reclaims my lips. My legs lock around his waist, needing more. Of what, I have no idea. Are we actually doing this? Or is it all the doing this? Five seconds ago, I hated this man. Now, I'm letting him do whatever he wants. His hands up my thighs to a very intimate—

“*Oh my. . .*” a faint gasp falls off my tongue. He captures the thin edge of my thong and tears it completely off me, tossing it to the floor. Spreading my legs, he glides a single knuckle down the inside of my thigh and works his way back up.

The closer his fingers get to my sex, the more lost I am to the world around me. It's happening. My heart bangs against my chest. Inching up even more, his fingertip rubs over my folds and slides between them. He gathers my juices, his slickness, working it around until one thick, glorious finger breaches my entrance. My mouth falls open. He draws back, then thrusts inside. He goes deeper, his tongue delves into my mouth, swallowing another moan. My body quivers around him. Again, he pulls out and eases back in with more thrusts. You're granting me a second finger. He increases his pace, stroking me over and over. My heart thrashes. It's too much. Not enough. I raise my hips, trying to catch just

There's get closer, meeting each thrust, but his grip only tightens to the point
st as he he'll leave bruises. He holds me still, forcing me to take what he's givi
ed after Pleasure ripples down my spine, and my toes curl. With every s
i dreamhurl closer and closer to the edge. He thrusts hard, pressing deep into
and I crumble around him. My nails dig into the back of his neck as m
is neckspasms. "Theo," I moan his name, and his intercom beeps.

hogany "Mr. Monroe, are you in there?" We freeze at the sound of Julie's
"Mr. Monroe? Everyone is waiting to start the ceremony."

closer, Theo stiffens above me. I search his eyes, lust blazing in their de
s waist, man crazed. I wait for him to tell Julie to beat it because we are c
? Am I nowhere near done getting whatever this is out of our systems. "Mr. M
run his are you in—"

He reaches over and slams on the intercom button. "I heard you, c
strap of I'll be right out." His fingers are gone, along with the heat of his bc
ling my stands and straightens, walking over to the mini bar and using a na
orks his wipe his hand.

Unsure what to do, I sit up, pulling down my dress. "Theo, I—"
what's "Don't." He turns his back to me and goes to pour another drink. I
nore, he wasn't a dick before, but I'm confused why he's still being one aft
ers my just happened. Did I read this wrong? I slide off the desk and adjust m
hes my He doesn't acknowledge me or what happened, which pisses me off.

I gasp, "I don't know what your problem is, but I don't deserve to be trea
7 thighsthis. Not that you know how to treat people."

e force, He keeps his back to me, sipping his stupid drink.

ver and "Screw this. I'm done dealing with your mood swings. You c
ying to someone else to put up with yo—"

"You're fired."

I know My eyes widen. “You’re *firing* me?”

ng. “I know you’re not deaf. Get out. Tell Julie to deal with the awards.”

stroke, I Heat blasts across my face, a nice mix of humiliation and fury. “
my sex, there was a reason I hated you. You’re a miserable person. Enjoy
my body lonely asshole because you can’t, for one fucking second, show a s
humanity.”

s voice. I rush to the door, throwing it open. He calls my name, and
automatically. “Don’t forget to grab your quarterly bonus on the way c
pths. A I bite my tongue, holding back all the things that want to come ou
ertainly mouth, give him the finger, and walk out.

Monroe,

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My eyes widen. “You’re *firing* me?”

“I know you’re not deaf. Get out. Tell Julie to deal with the awards.”

Heat blasts across my face, a nice mix of humiliation and fury. “I knew there was a reason I hated you. You’re a miserable person. Enjoy being a lonely asshole because you can’t, for one fucking second, show a sliver of humanity.”

I rush to the door, throwing it open. He calls my name, and I turn automatically. “Don’t forget to grab your quarterly bonus on the way out.”

I bite my tongue, holding back all the things that want to come out of my mouth, give him the finger, and walk out.

Chapter Thirteen

Theo

“Hey, babe. Where you at? I left a few messages. I thought we hit it off. If you’re up for it, we can meet at the Four Seasons. Order your favorites and anything you want for dessert—even though it’ll be mine. Call me.” I stand and grab my coat and laptop bag. My head is off limits, but my cock still has needs. And nothing numbs the memory of what I lost like Breanne and her very talented mouth.

A knock on my office door sounds, and the receptionist sticks her head in. “Sorry to bother you. A courier delivered this.” She enters my office and hands me an envelope.

“Thanks. Have a good night.” When she’s gone, I rip open the top of the envelope and pull out the papers inside. Images. Over twenty of me and a woman I’ve never been seeing. I thought I was more careful this time with the hotel camera. How the fuck did he find out? These images could only come from someone with access to the penthouse. “That son of a bitch!” I drop my bag and dial his number. As soon as he picks up, I start in. “You’re having me followed?”

“Hello to you too, son. I take it you got my gift.”

The sun has barely made an appearance when I enter the office. If unethical, I'd demand all my employees start at this time. One employee in particular. I gaze up at the grandfather clock in the corner of my office. She should be showing up shortly. If she knows what's good for her.

My palms drag over the scruff on my typically smooth-shaved jaw. Frustration stirs in my stomach, and I drop my leather work tote and throw myself into my chair. Taking a deep breath, I stare across the room, try to focus on the one thing I refuse to think about. Images of her spreading her legs on my desk, her bare thighs showcasing her porcelain skin. She felt like she really was under my palm and was just as perfect as I imagined. The fantasies I had started the moment she clumsily fell into my arms were nothing compared to the real thing. Last night, I finally snapped and gave in to my obsession. I know I may regret it, but I'm a glutton for punishment when it comes to her. She was right.

She was a heartless asshole. Maybe in a different life, I could be who she deserves. I grab the portfolio on my desk and move to the worktable, burying myself in reports. I need to focus on today's meeting with Venture Quest.

Minutes later, my head pops up to check the time. Where the hell is she? More images of her in that damn dress, her lips parted, and the sweet sounds of her arousal play like a movie reel in my head. I lean back in my chair, my hands grabbing the back of my neck.

After she stormed out of my office, I drank myself into a bourbon and whiskey. And as much as I fought it, I brought my fingers to my nose, smelling the sweetness of her orgasm. The way she tightened around me. . . fucking getting hard again just thinking about it.

I never should have laid a finger on her. But a man can only take so

The moment I slid through the slickness of her pussy, it was over. With subtle moans and the way her tight little cunt hugged my fingers, they were in no stopping all the nasty things I wanted to do to her.

My frustration builds, and I look at the clock again. Walking over to her desk, I reach for my phone and hit the button for her desk, disconnecting the line when it continues to ring. “Where the hell is she?” I slam the phone down, throw my foot bouncing, and hit Amy’s extension.

She picks up on the first ring—like Fay should have.

“Yes, Mr. Monroe?”

“Where the hell is Miss Evans? She’s late.”

She stalls before saying, “Um. . . rumor has it you fired her.”

“What? I didn’t fire her.” Maybe I did. But it was out of frustration that I hang up on her and tell her to get her ass to work immediately.” I hang up.

Who the hell does she think she is? I try to concentrate on the report I am in front of me, but it’s useless. I toss the file down and lean back, snatching up the phone when it rings. “What?”

“Mr. Monroe, Miss Evans said she’s no longer employed here.”

Thirty That little brat. “Call her back.”

“I would, but she advised me to tell you to. . . well. . .”

“Spit it out, Amy.”

“To go fuck yourself.” I’m stunned speechless. I can’t say anyone else had the balls to tell me to fuck off. Let alone twice within a short period of time. “Please don’t fire me. I’m just the messenger. I really need this job.”

“Jesus, I’m not going to fire you.” I hang up and grab my cell, hitting the contact button. It rings three times and goes to voicemail. I hang up and dial the number again.

Voicemail. “This is childish.”

So much. **Me: Answer your damn phone.**

With her **Fay Evans: I don't work for you anymore.**

ere was **Me: Answer it or I'll show up at your apartment.**

Fay Evans: You wouldn't. You have an important meeting tod
r to my**can't miss.**

necting **Me: I'll reschedule it.**

down, **Fay Evans: *laughing emoji* No you won't.**

Me: This is ridiculous. Answer.

I dial her again, my grip tightening with each ring. I pull the phon
from my ear, ready to chuck it across the room when she finally picks

“What do you want?”

“You—in my office—with my coffee.”

1. “Call “You fired me.”

“No, I didn't. Get in the office.”

port in “Are you kidding me? Maybe *you're* the one who's deaf? I. Don't.
hing upFor—”

“I'll double your salary. You have one hour.” I disconnect the call.



One hour and seven minutes later. . .

“Why can no one make a goddamn cup of coffee—”

's ever “I've got this. Amy, you can go.” My head whips toward the door
t span. walks in.

ing her “Thank you,” Amy whispers to my very tardy assistant as she rushe
my office.

l again. “You're late,” I snap as she struts forward, holding the cup. I react
take it from her, but she pulls back.

“My salary is going to double?”

“What?” I make another attempt, and she steps back farther.

“You’re going to double my salary, or I’m leaving—*with* the coffee.”

“Give me the coffee, Fay.”

“Not until you confirm the only reason I’m back here after how you treated me.”

White dress. The sound of her moans. Her flushed cheeks as she caught my hand. . . I would pay her triple. “Double. I’m a man of my word. Give me the damn coffee.”

She smiles and hands me the mug, and I take a deep sip. Before I could ask for more demands, she turns to leave. “Where do you think you’re going?” She doesn’t answer and walks out. I take a menacing step after her when she returns.

“Your agenda and the reports for today’s meeting. Did you want to work them?” She leans forward, offering me a direct view down her blouse. My jaw tightens as she places the portfolios on my worktable, and more fantasies about her flash through my mind. Spread out across the table. Bitin’ my perky tits. Digging my fingers into her curves. Fuck, maybe I should have fired her to keep her away. “Hello? Did you want to go over—”

“This isn’t working out.” Now that I’ve had a little taste, there’s no way I can keep my hands to myself. I want her. I *crave* her.

“Are you kidding me? You made me come all this—”

“I need the reports redone. I found a spelling error in the summary report.”
“I found no such thing. I just need her out of my sight so I can get the reports together.”

“Oh, we’re doing this again? I thoroughly checked them.”

“You didn’t.” God, she looks beautiful today.

“Fine, whatever. I’ll redo them.” She picks up the reports, grants

another eyeful. I clench my jaw to keep from snagging her into my arms.
burying my face in those fucking tits. “I’ll be right back.”

I nod, sipping my coffee, ignoring how her chest lifts as she holds herself
treated against her body. I exhale when my door closes, letting out what feels like
my first real breath. There’s no doubt I’m playing with fire. I’ve spent
the last two weeks fighting my urges, and now, it will be impossible to be
in control. Now, and not want to pull her slacks down and bend her over my desk. The
way she breathlessly moaned my name is burned into my memory. I need
to get my mind off it over and over. I’m so fucked.

going?” I’ve crossed the line with her. The question is, what am I going to do
when she hits?

I grab my phone and hit her extension.

go over “Yes?”

use. My “Get in here.”

fantasies “I’m working on the—”

g those “Now.” I hang up.

ld have She enters my office, a frown on her pretty lips. “Shut the door
pushes it closed and walks over to my desk. “Sit.”

o way I “Do you know how to say please?” Her jaw clenches, and I fight to
my smirk.

“Please,” I say with less of a bite. Her eyes blossom in shock. She
report.” she’s told and takes a seat across from me. “We need to discuss—”

my shit “No, we don’t.”

“But we do.”

“Honestly, there’s no need.”

I don’t know whether her refusal to acknowledge last night is
being meaggravating. “We need to discuss what happens next.”

ms and “Nothing happens next.” She crosses her legs, and I hate that she
away my view of her exposed thigh.

he files “You’re right. I crossed the line. I shouldn’t have done what I did. I
els like happen again.”

the last Her shoulders drop, and her lips turn down slightly. “Good. Are w
ear her here? I have reports to review.”

he way It takes everything in me not to pull her into my lap and lick off her
to hear lip gloss while I tell her what’s going on inside my head. Her hand

against my chest, feeling the way my heart pounds at the possibility
o about ramming my cock deep inside her until her snarky words turn into

moans. I want to bask in the beauty of her eyes and gentle smile. I

something else comes out of my mouth. “I have the Winchester

dinner tonight. I need you to attend as my guest.” Her brows pin up i

hairline. She’s shocked at my statement. I’m just as stunned, but I can

better. What the hell am I doing telling my assistant she’s attending a

with me when Alana’s name is already marked as my plus one?

r.” She “Wait—what? Don’t you already have a guest?”

Not anymore. A fire I’ll have to put out later. “Yes, you.”

hold in “Me?”

“You.”

does as She uncrosses her legs and clenches her fingers together in her lap.

. . . um. . .” Her shoulders lift, and she deflates. “I hate to break it to yo

don’t own anything that says ‘wear me to a fancy benefit dinner.’

you’re looking for the whole Cinderella without the fairy godmother

why don’t you ask your girl—”

cute or “I’ll have a dress delivered to your apartment. Now, I need to prep
morning call. I’ll take another cup of coffee as well.” She doesn’t

she takes a deep breath. "Fuck, she's cute. "We're done here."

"Of course we are." She rolls her eyes and stands. I let her get away because I won't because I'm fighting a damn boner as I watch her walk out of my

Once the door is closed, I pick up my phone and dial Human Resource. "We're done." "Yes, Mr. Monroe?"

"Theresa, I need to know Miss Evan's salary."

"Her original salary or after your adjustment this morning?"

"Both." She puts me on a short hold before relaying two pitiful nurses to me. "I'll give her strict instructions and hang up, then dial the number for Valentine's. You need to call Madison."

Instead, "Valentine's, how may I assist you?"

"Benefit." "Fredrick Christoph."

"Please hold."

"Yes? Fredrick speaking."

"Fredrick, it's Theo Monroe."

"Mr. Monroe, lovely to hear from you. How are those Armani suits treating you?"

"Fine. I need a dress for the Winchester Benefit dinner from your collection." I relay Fay's size and make sure it will be hand-delivered to me.

I end the call and sit back, gripping my neck. What am I doing? Did I become her fairy godmother?

I told her nothing more would happen between us, yet here I am, dressed in a designer gown and taking her to a benefit dinner.

I'm losing my mind. What will this accomplish? Why am I trying to make her even more desirable only to deny myself? I want to tell her what

belongs to. Claim her so I can finally have her in my bed. But, fuck, I can't move. Let her leave. My cock starts to swell again, thinking of her naked

sheets, her silky brown hair spread over my pillows, my mouth covered with its sweet cunt—I grab my phone and press her extension.

office. “Yes, Mr.—”

s. “Get in here.”

She walks in, looking annoyed. “Yes?”

“I—I—” *What the fuck is wrong with me?* “I—”

“Oh, shit. Are you having a stroke?”

numbers. I “A *what?*”

entire’s “You’re stuttering. Isn’t that the first sign of a stroke? Should I call one-one-one?”

“What? No! I’m not having a goddamn stroke. I called to tell you reports for the West Side project need to be finalized. You’ll need to get through lunch.”

“I thought those weren’t due for another few weeks.”

“Are you questioning me, Miss Evans?” *She should be. I’m losing it*
in suits Her lips press together, and I bet she’s calling me a colorful array of
in her head. “Absolutely not, Mr. Monroe. Is there anything else?”

private “Where the hell is my coffee?”

by five. “Coming right up, *sir.*” She salutes and walks out. Fuuuck. Now I
did I just start working on the damn West Side project so I have a reason to keep
my office over lunch.

pressing

to make

who she

did never

on my

sheets, her silky brown hair spread over my pillows, my mouth covering her sweet cunt—I grab my phone and press her extension.

“Yes, Mr.—”

“Get in here.”

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“Oh, shit. Are you having a stroke?”

“A *what?*”

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“Where the hell is my coffee?”

“Coming right up, *sir.*” She salutes and walks out. Fuuuck. Now I need to start working on the damn West Side project so I have a reason to keep her in my office over lunch.

Chapter Fourteen

Fay

What the hell am I doing here? *Money. He's paying you a lot of* Which I also need since Mindy's contact last night didn't pan least Theo cleared the air about what happened last night. *Hot, steamy sex.* And about what's *not* going to happen again. *More hot, steamy sex.* Which is a-okay with me. I'm not into jerks. Even if he's sexy, but a Greek god, and from what I felt, fully packing. A small delirious escapes my lips as I press the K-cup into the machine and start it.

"What are you so smiley about?" I lift my head as Julie walks in. "Could have anything to do with being fired and then rehired with a hefty increase?"

I open my mouth to reply, but my answer gets lodged in my throat. Mentioning that I got an inappropriate yet super-hot orgasm from my boss is probably not what I wanted traveling around the office. "I'm, um, sorry about what I do? And technically, I quit. He *begged* me to come back. Hence I'm here." Julie's lips thin as she walks past me. My coffee finishes brewing. "Well, see ya around!"

I walk out, annoyed by her comment. The workplace rumor mill is v

God knows what people are saying about why I'm back *and* got a raise probably think I'm sleeping with the boss. I *wish* I was sleeping with t
but still. . .

"Hey, Fay?" I turn to see Amy flagging me down.

"Hey, Amy. What's up?"

"Sorry to bother you, but I have a Fredrick Christoph on line two v
to talk to you? It's about the clothing Mr. Monroe personally orde
you."

Amy's timing couldn't be any worse. Tricia from Marketing an
walk by, and Tricia's brows rise to the ceiling before she and Kyle
money.knowing look.

out. At "Oh, you must have heard him wrong. They're for him. I'll just c
y finger—"

y finger "Except he said it's specifically for you. From a *private* colle
uilt likeGoddammit, Amy! "Did you want me to—"

giggle "Just send him through. I'll take it. Thanks." I hurry off, ignor
whispering employees. Without knocking, I burst into Theo's office
Could itthis coffee in front of him, and stare him down.

y salary "I'll need to call you back." He hangs up. "Is there something wrong

"The whole office knows I got a raise. Wanna know why they thir
throat.it?"

boss is "You earned it?"

good at "Yeah! By sleeping with *or* blackmailing you. But I'm gonna assu
ce whysleeping with rumor is winning because Amy just stopped me to tell m
rewing.Fredrick guy has dresses for me to try on?"

"Give me the names."

vicious. "What?"

e. They “Give me the employees’ names so I can reprimand them.”

he boss “I’m not a snitch.”

“Give me the names, and I’ll make sure no one mentions another to you.”

“No, because then they’re definitely going to think we’re sleeping together.”

red for He leans back in his chair wearing a damn smirk. “Exactly how so?”

“Because they’ll know that I came in here tattling, and if we were sleeping together, *which we’re not*, you would do anything for me which would share a fire with them. Therefore, you *can’t* do it because then people will *definitely* know we’re sleeping together.”

all him “But we’re not sleeping together.”

“They don’t know that.”

action.” “Miss Evans.”

“I bet it was Theresa—or Julie. I bet she has some cameras in here, watching them—”

place “Miss Evans—”

“If she did, she’d know we only got as far as second—”

?” “Fay!”

lk I got “What?”

“Nobody knows but you and me. As long as we keep it that way, you’re fine.”

ime the I exhale a deep sigh. “Fine, but you better be right.”

ie some “I am. Now, if you’re done here, I need to call that client back.”

“Yeah. Done.” He barely dismisses me, picking up his phone again to leave when he calls me back. “Yes?”

“Anyone crosses the line, I expect you to inform me.” I can’t tell

being sincere or if it's his lack of patience for office bullshit. I nod and
his office.

hing to



leeping The rest of the afternoon continues on painlessly. Theo is consumed with
after call. Around lunchtime, I bring him his lunch order, and he barrels
, my way. When I sit back at my desk, I get an email notifying me that
leeping working lunch is canceled. I avoid the breakroom in case of Julie sitting
and eat my lunch at my desk. A call comes in, and I finish chewing
ld be to answer. "Mr. Monroe's office."

ly think

"Fable, honey, it's Mom."

"Mom, you know I can't talk at work."

"Well, I wouldn't call you there if you returned my calls on your
phone." Yeah, it's the freedom to be an adult and choose whether to call
parents back.

spying

"I've been super busy."

"You should never be too busy to call your parents."

"Got it! So, what's up?"

"Well, my book club has to bake cookies for a library fundraiser."

"Wow, sounds super exciting." *Not.*

ou'll be

"Yes, well. I mentioned how you were a chef—"

"*Am* a chef."

"There's going to be a judge. The winner receives a gift card to the
Garden in Times Square."

l. I turn

"And you thought to call and bother me at work to tell me this?"

if he's

"Oh, Fable, I was hoping you would join us tomorrow morning. Could
ladies a tutorial. Maybe bake a few batches."

id leave Leave it to my mother to bash my career path in cooking and then to cook. “I don’t know, Mom. I have this fancy benefit dinner tonig my boss. It will probably be a late—”

with call “As in the man you work for?” Yep, that’s him. “Is that in your job honey? You should really go ask somebody.”

y looks I’m not sure a lot of the things I do are in my job title. Mainly, hat our finger banged by the boss. “It’s not a big deal.”

ghtings “It is if he’s taking advantage of you.”

ng and “It’s fine.”

“I think you should talk to your father.”

“Why would I need to talk to Dad—”

“Gerald!”

our cell “Mom, no! Don’t get Dad—”

all your “Hello?”

Why do they do this? “Hi, Dad.”

“Hey, it's my favorite daughter.”

"I'm your only daughter." I roll my eyes.

“Fay has some fancy dinner she has to go to tonight with her boss, says.

“Your boss? Why?”

“Why what?”

e Olive “Why is he taking you? What happened to that blonde?”

“What kind of dinner is this?”

I inwardly groan. “It’s like a charity event at a hotel. You dress fancy food, and dance. . .”

ive the “Honey, you don’t even know how to dance,” Mom interjects.

I roll my eyes. Not the point. “Fine, I’ll bake cookies. Anything else

ask me “Wonderful. There’s a train that will get you here at nine in the mor
ht with “Great, see you soon!” I hang up, falling back in my chair, wonderi
*I’m going to this “work function.” Why is he taking me over his girlfri
ob title, Maybe she’s busy at a modeling event. Or winning an award for b
perfect. Or maybe she’s—*

getting “Am I interrupting something?” I snap out of my daze and look up
Theresa standing on the other side of my desk.

“Nope. What’s up?”

“I need you to sign these.” She tosses a packet of papers on my desk

“What’s this for?” I ask.

“Your raise. Congrats, by the way. You must be doing a *stellar* job.’

How wrong would it be to slap the head of HR? “Yep, I sure as
really can’t get employees like me nowadays. The big fella in there
realizes my worth.”

Theresa’s fake smile falls.

“You know what? You can leave these here, and I’ll bring them
Want to make sure everything is correct. No spelling errors and wha
” Momcan practically hear her teeth grinding.

“They need to be submitted by the end of the day.”

“Sure thing!” Without another word, she whips around and dis
back to her office. “Bitch,” I mumble under my breath. Seriously,
everyone’s problem? *Well, they all think you’re sleeping with the bo*
Sighing, I wake up my computer and read over the mile-long to-do li
up, eatemailed me earlier.

When I finally look up, it’s just past five o’clock. Theo is stuck or
so I wave goodbye, reminding myself everything between us is all
?”

ning.” head. The possessive and lust-filled looks he gives me are a figment
ng whyimagination.

end? I need to nip this toxic attraction in the bud. Take a nice set of clipp
eing sochop it off at the root. I definitely don’t need to go to this dinner. It’s

Whatever the reason, he shouldn’t take me. The smart thing would be
o to seehim and say I’m not feeling well and can’t make it. I climb up th
flights to my apartment, slowing my steps when I see a man standing
my door, holding a large box.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

“Miss Evans?”

” “Maybe. Who wants to know?”

n. You The man laughs, extending his arm. “Fredrick, honey. Mr. Monr
finallyme. I have a special delivery.”

“What’s in the box?”

“The most beautiful dress we carry. Do you need help getting r
to you.brought my styler kit. You could probably use some help with that hai
tnot.” I I scrunch my nose. “Messy buns are in right now.”

“Baby girl, that’s a nest. Come on. Let’s get you inside. Mr. Monr
be eating out of the palm of your hand when I’m done with you.”

appears Yeah. . . that’s the opposite of what I need. Can we replace han
what’spuss—ugh, what’s wrong with me? I’m clearly sexually deprived.

ss. Pfft.only explanation. I’m strung out on this whole boss fantasy.

st Theo I shake off my insanity. “Yep. Sure. Any chance you can make m
hot blonde?” He looks at me like I’m crazy. “It was worth a shot.” I

o a call,my door and wave him in. “Let’s see what’s in that box.”

. in my



t of my “Jesus.”

“Right? Girl, even I have a hard-on. Wow.”

ers and Wow isn’t the word. I think I might cry.

wrong. “Fay, honey, what’s wrong?” Fredrick panics.

to text “Nothing. It’s just. . . I don’t think I’ve ever looked this pretty.”

ie three “Girl, pretty doesn’t cut it. You look stunning.”

outside I stand in front of my full-length mirror, staring at the most beautiful I’ve ever seen. The dark, emerald-green silk falls to the floor, the neckline wrapping around my neck, exposing my entire back. My brushes my shoulders in thick, beautiful waves, and my makeup is per-

“You must be something special to him. He’s going to have a heart attack when he sees you.”

I slap him on the chest. “Nice try. I know you’re fishing, but for real, just his assistant, remember? And he’s not that old, but I look good, ready? I bite my lower lip, but a giggle slips out. “Sorry, that’s being—”

r.” “Girl, you need to own this. You look hot. *I’d* almost do you.”

“Why, thank you,” I smirk, shimmying my shoulders. The buzzer sounds, indicating Theo’s downstairs.

“Your prince has arrived. Here.” He hands me a tube of lipstick. “Thanks with gift from me. Enjoy your evening. I’m going to sneak out.” He kisses my cheek, gathers his stuff, and shows himself out.

I take one last look in the mirror, but I feel like I’m looking at a stranger. She is hot, though. I stifle another laugh and grab my small clutch. Carefully, unlocking walking out of my room so I don’t topple over in these heels, I answer the door. Theo is standing on the other side, his hands in his pockets, looking good for my sanity. His gaze travels over my body like a caress. W-

eyes lock with mine, I notice his lips are firmly pressed together, his brow is furrowed.

“You look mad. Do you not like it?”

He inhales a slow breath. “It’s exactly what I described.”

Heat rushes along my cheeks. “Well, you hit the mark with the whole godmother thing. Dressing me up in fancy silk. I definitely feel like a dressprincess. I even shaved.” And why did I admit that? “Just my legs—I mean, well, I actually shaved everywhere.” *Shut up, Fay.* “Nice tux. Armani hair.” He nods, his lips curling into a smirk. “You look stunning. Shall we go to the reception. you have everything you need?”

I wave my little purse. “Yep.”

We make our way down the stairs, and I’m extra careful not to trip. I’m in my dress and tumble down. When we exit my building, a shiny black limo is waiting. “Get in, Icar awaits. A driver walks around the vehicle to open the door.

“James,” Theo says, and James nods and steps aside. The length of the dress is challenging, so I pull it higher than I probably need to climb in. “Jesus,” Theo mumbles behind me.

“I know, sorry, but it’s so constricting. I can’t get in any other way.” I lift my dress higher up my thighs and plop down on the seat. “There you are, my good.” Theo waits until I’m seated, shakes his head, and slides into his seat.

James closes the door. “You made that look easy.”

James, the stranger. He turns to me. “You made it hard.” His eyes skim down my dress carefully, realizing my legs are exposed. The temperature in the car feels like it went up a hundred degrees. For someone who made it clear nothing was going to happen between us, he sure looks like he’s fighting the urge to take his clothes off and eat me alive. His phone rings, and he pulls his eyes away to take the call. I release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

and his “Re-evaluate everything. I don’t care. Then rerun it. Keep this betw
—and email me the files when it’s done.” He hangs up, his eyes strai
the window.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

le fairy “Just business.”

like a He stays lost in his thoughts for the remainder of the drive. I pull my
mean. .out and shoot Mindy a text.

i?” **Me: You’re never going to guess the day I’ve had. Or whe
we? Doheaded.**

I really could use some Mindy advice right now. She doesn’t rep
spend the remainder of the drive swiping through social media.

ip over When we arrive, I stuff my phone back into my purse. James opens
k towndoor, and he climbs out, turning back to offer me his hand. This tir
more ladylike and scoot to the edge, modestly lifting my dress to av
. of mymuch of a peep show. Without releasing my hand, he escorts us do
t. carpet, nodding and offering simple hellos. My nerves kick in. My smi
strained as the first flash blinds me. I work to soften it and pretenc
y. . .” I know what the heck I’m doing.

e. . . all When we enter the hotel, a server greets us with champagne. “So,
seat as the plan for the evening? Do I hang on your shoulder and look pretty,
get to talk shop with the big dawgs?”

s, and I Theo takes a sip of his champagne. “You get to keep me compa
s like it hope we don’t die of boredom.”

; would “Wait, there’s a chance we’re gonna die tonight? I didn’t sign up for
ear my Theo’s lips form into the most beautiful smile, and he laughs. “I
rway to joke. You can relax.”

A single brow raises at the unfamiliar action. It’s not a full-blown l.

veen us may have just been a cough. Or my imagination. I stop walking to fa
ned out “Wait a minute. You just made a joke?”

“That I did.”

“And you’re doing something strange. What is that?” I wave my fi
his curled lips.

phone “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“There, you just did it again. Theo Monroe, are you. . . smiling?”

re I’m He tucks a hand in his pocket and wiggles his brows. “I’m not sure,
“I’m not sure either. I’ve never seen you do it. And I swear you
ly, so I laughed.”

“Now, *that* didn’t happen.” Amusement shimmers in his eyes. He
Theo’s laughed. “If you’re done making up things, let’s head into the ballroo
ne, I’m doesn’t wait for my reply and cups my elbow to guide me. Together, v
oid too inside the ginormous ballroom. My mouth drops at how stunning it
own the entire room is decorated in white and silver with accents of pale bl
le feels array of crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, reflecting tiny s
d like I throughout the room.

“Everything okay?”

what’s I look over at Theo. “I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s. . . breath
or do I He stares down at me. This connection cackles between us, and w
seem to look away. “It sure is.” His eyes drop to my lips and—

ny and “Theo! Fantastic of you to come.”

Our moment is cut short when a plump, aged man interrupts us.

that.” “Vincent. Wouldn’t miss it.” He reaches out, and they shake hands.

t was a “How’s your father? I haven’t seen him since the golf outing last ye
keeping himself busy since handing the reins over?”

ugh. It “You know him, once a workhorse, always a workhorse. Just doesn’t

ce him.how to step away.”

“Tell him hello.” The man refocuses his attention on me. “And who have here? I expected to see you and—”

inger at “This is Fay Evans,” he replies before the man finishes. “She’s my weapon for the evening.” He angles his head down at me and smiles.

“Is that so? Well then, am I able to claim the seat next to you? much lovelier chatting with you than listening to the horrendous s jam I?” we’ll have to sit through over dinner,” Vincent says.

just. . . I smile, accepting the compliment. “Well, thank you, Vincent. A p to meet you.” I extend my arm, and he holds my hand to his lips, kiss totallytop. “The pleasure is all mine.”

m.” He Theo wraps his arms around my waist, and an electric buzz runs dc ve walkback. “We should find our table. Enjoy the evening. Call the office and is. Thelunch.” Vincent nods, and Theo escorts me away.

lue. An We walk for a beat until I break the silence. “Who was he expecting parklesyou with tonight?”

“No one.”

“Is *no one* the woman you were photographed with at that charity ev aking.” Theo stops and stares down at me. “Stop digging for silly informat e can’tcome out and ask me. You want to know why I brought you.” I slow

“Because I make the rules. And since I have no obligations to anyone, you with me. Does that answer your question?”

I’m not sure it’s the answer I’m looking for, but the way his pen gaze steals my breath, I accept it. I feel stupid now for bringing : ar. Stillswallow and reach for anything to redirect the topic. “So, secret v huh?”

’t know “Like I said, these things tend to be terrible. When I look bored ou

mind, it's your job to save me."

"Oh, so you're using me."

His lips curl into the sexiest smile. "That wouldn't be the first thing I've done. It's a secret that comes to mind when I think about using you."

He holds my gaze, and butterflies erupt, creating a warm flutter inside my chest. It'll be belly. There's no more denying the attraction between us, and I don't know how much longer I can lie to myself. My body aches to be touched again. And deep down, I think he feels the same. "Theo, I—"

Another client interrupts. I stand there quietly, my body screaming for pleasure. I take a sip of my champagne to help calm myself, but it's useless. The silk fabric suddenly feels heavy against my skin.

"I'm sorry. Excuse me. Theo, I'm just going to go find the bar." I set up hand wraps around my arm before I can make my escape.

"Pleasure catching up. If you'll excuse us." The man nods as Theo and I head toward the bar. "What's wrong? You look flushed."

He has no idea. "Nothing. Just thirsty. And I wanted to practice my weaponry. How'd I do?"

"Another small chuckle falls off his tongue, and I swear, it's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. "Horrible. You're supposed to save me, not ditch me." It's then he notices my full glass of champagne. "I don't know, I have something wrong with the champagne? Did you want something different?"

"Nope." I tip my head, shooting back the entire flute. "That was great. Take another." This whole one-eighty from him is confusing me. He's not taking it up. I. nice. Gentle. He orders another and hands it to me, and I inhale that cocktail. "Okay. All good." I place the glass on the bar top.

His smile is semi-devious as he takes my hand and guides me around the edge of my ballroom. Conversation after conversation, he introduces me to clients.

business associates. I enjoy the ambiance and expensive champagne
works the room and talks business. When we're finally seated for din-
ing that speeches are just as Vincent described—painful. The dance floor imme-
fills when the tables are cleared from dinner.

side my “Dance with me.”

't know I look up to find who could have asked me that. There's no wa-
by him Monroe dances. Or me. My mom wasn't lying. “You dance?”

“I've been known to a time or two. Up we go.” He stands, offers
ing with hand, and escorts me to the floor. I'm a little wobbly from the heels
ss. The champagne. Tingles run up my spine when the palm of his hand rests
lower back and he brings me closer.

Theo's “I don't know how to dance,” I admit looking up at him from un-
lashes.

directs He tugs me closer. “I'll go slow. Follow my lead.” The symphony I
I stare down at his feet.

ice my “Look at me.”

“I can't. I need to follow your—”

ie most “Look up at me.” And I do. His steely voice has become my weak-
me, not eyes are fire, heating me through to my core. “Dancing is a partnersh-
s there follow better if you look at your partner. You can read my patterns an-
ent?” rhythmically. See, there you go.”

od. I'll My eyes stay locked on his, and song after song, we dance. When
being. .sure my feet can take another song in these heels, Theo escorts us away
me too. “That was amazing. I never knew how. . .”

“Beautiful it can be.”

und the He surprises me with his interpretation. “How do you know how to
nts and like this?”

e as he “Forced lessons growing up. But I really began to love it in France
ner, the was with. . .” He stalls for a moment as if he were about to reveal some
mediately personal. “A friend. . . who taught me. Ready for another drink?” The
slight shift in his manner, and we hold our gaze until I nod, and we
dance floor.

y Theo The remainder of the evening is spent making small talk, listening to
boring business chatter, and drinking copious amounts of champagne. I
me his excuse myself, finding a nook outside on the terrace to gather my thoughts
and they feel like I’m out with two different men. The asshole and the gentleman
on my There’s no way they can be the same person. Theo is ruthless and, well,
But this man tonight. . . Imposter Theo is kind and stirs up emotions I
der my sure I want to think about. It has to be the champagne. I’m going to be
strictly on the champagne.

lays as “Here you are.” Theo’s voice has me turning away from the balcony
the champagne I’ve consumed makes me lose my balance at the
movement. He’s there, wrapping his arm around my waist and saving me
again. “Are you alright?” There’s worry in his tone.

ess. His “Yeah, sorry. Just tired and maybe overdid the bubbly.”

ip. You “You were supposed to save me there.”

d move I can’t help but bask in the warmth of his hold. “The conversation
to be getting intense. I thought I would give you two your privacy.”

I’m not “Ah, says the nosy little assistant who went through my call log.”

y. Ugh. I thought we were past that little slip-up. “I’m not sure what
—”

“I told you. I don’t like liars, Fay.”

o dance I pull away. “Okay, fine. I snooped. I wanted to know what made
upset and shut down. Who was it?”

when I “I also prefer my privacy. Now, it seems like the night is dwindling, nothing has always been one of their top donors, so they comp me the perimeter’s suite for the evening. You should take it.”

exit the “Oh, no. I can go home.”

“I insist.” His hand presses against my lower back, and he escapes through the luxury hotel lobby. We’re quiet while we take the elevator to the private floor. A million opportunities arise for me to stop and insist on going home. It would give us extra time together so I can ask the gentleman questions that have been simmering in my mind all night. Why did he kiss me instead of her? Does he feel this constant buzz between us? And I’m not what the hell do we do about it?

blame it We stop at the suite’s double doors, and he swipes a card. I step inside, turn around, but he doesn’t move.

my. All “I don’t need to stay here. You can take me home.”

sudden “No. Enjoy the room. You deserve it.” His words say one thing, but his eyes tell another tale.

A tremor of desire flows through me. I tuck my clutch under my arm and slightly pop my hip. “Want to at least come in for a nightcap? I’m sure the mini bar is filled with those really expensive bottles.”

seemed His eyes gleam with humor, but he holds back. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.” The last thing either of us wants is a nightcap. The booze I’ve consumed gives me the boldness I need to ask for what I really want. You’re that’s him. The way he’s looking at me right now, he may be saying everything else about him wants to say yes.

I lift my hand and tug the tie at the back of my neck free. My dress flows to my feet, leaving me bare except for my black lace thong. I look at him steadily and reply, “I think it would be a very good idea.”

g. MIC His hands fist at his sides, and a muscle in his tightened jaw pulses. Although he's angry at my blatant attempt.

“This can't happen,” he says through gritted teeth.

His continued denial hurts, spiking my own frustration. “Right or wrong, I have obligations...” I bend to grab my dress when a hand shoots out, taking me by the throat. He guides me back up, and his lips crash against mine. His hand slips behind my nape and grabs a fistful of my hair while his other hand wraps around my waist to lift me off my feet.

The door to the suite closes behind him as he storms over to the bed and pulls me into his arms. “This goes nowhere. Do you understand me? No, you don't know.”

“Your secret's safe with me, boss.”

“Watch it.” He smacks me hard on my butt cheek as he sets me down. He deepens our kiss. Switching our positions, he sits on the bed, pulling me onto his lap. I immediately grind against the hardness already evident through his pants. “You're a naughty little thing. And this is a very bad idea.”

“If it's such a bad idea, why'd you kiss me and get me off in your office?” His fingers dig into my ass. “Because I couldn't stay away.” The heat of his hand on my hair tightens, and he tugs my head back, exposing my neck. His mouth moves to my chin, and he spreads a kiss after heated kiss down my neck. I squeal when he stands and twists, tossing me onto the bed.

My skin prickles with anticipation and hope that this goes further than it did in his office, and he doesn't back down. But as soon as we lock eyes, I know there's no way he's walking away this time. “You looked stunning in that dress.”

“Thanks. Do you want me to put it back on?”

“Not a fucking chance.” He loosens and removes his tie, slinging it over his shoulder.

I worry before his jacket and dress shirt follow. My breath catches with his bare chest on full display. Just like I'd remembered. Pure muscle. His fingers grip my ankles, and he tugs me toward the bottom of the bed. Dropping to his hands and knees, he slowly slides my thong down my legs, and I gasp when he covers my pussy with his mouth. My hips shoot off the bed, but I don't get too far before he pulls me back. His hands dig into my skin, holding me in place. Lap after glorious lap, he thrusts himself in, teasing me. My thighs shake around him, needing more. His fingers thrust through my slickness, and my head falls back.

He looks at me with a satisfied expression. "I knew you would taste this sweet." His finger brushes between my breasts before sliding back up and disappearing inside me. "Never expect me to be so greedy." In and out, he fucks me at an almost torturous pace. I attempt to move my hips and bring him closer, but his hand holds me down and more firmly in place. "Tell me what you want, Fay. Your body is so beautiful, and I want you to confess everything you're craving." My sex throbs in response to his tongue while he grants me two fingers, stretching me. "You know you like to wait. Tell me or—"

"I want you to fuck me. We've been here before. I want more." He releases his grip on my breasts. In an instant, his fingers are gone, and the lust-induced fog clears from my mind. I watch as he unbuckles his belt and removes it one-handed, then tosses it aside. My breath catches when he drops his pants and boxers all in one go. Good god almighty, he is a beast in every way.

Once the rest of his clothes are discarded, he climbs onto the bed. Closing his eyes, I lie with his warm body, he prods my thighs apart. He gazes down at me, searching for any sign of backing out, and his intense gaze alone makes me undone.

"What are you waiting for?" I ask.

A low chuckle falls from his lips. "I don't wait for anyone." He

re chestslides past my slick folds, creating a low moan in the back of my thr
grip myenters me slowly, but once he's fully engulfed inside, I can barely reg
; knees, and down. And then he begins to move.

my sex It's like Christmas and the Fourth of July all rolled into one. Pure. F
fore hisMagic. His fingers slide back into my hair, and he holds tight as he p
e sucksand powers back in. With each thrust, my vision blurs. Moans continu
tongueoff my tongue, and when he silences me with his mouth, I lose it altc

He's a force, and I'm no match.

my butt "Theo," I rush out. His tongue delves back into my mouth to swall
xpectedcries. His free hand cups my ass and raises my hips, granting himself
ly slowaccess. Every nerve in my body goes haywire, and I work my hips, r
olds mehim thrust for thrust. Each little growl or grunt gives me more power,
needy, hands snake up his chest and around his neck, pulling him closer. I k
aroundwith hungered passion, and he returns it like he's starved only for n
I don'tbodies slap against one another, the desperate sound of sex filling the

been so long since my body has been taken to such heights by somec
that I know I'm going to fall apart too quickly. "Fuck, Theo. I—I—"

rom my I can't even finish my plea. Nor does he take mercy on me. He rele
beforegrip on my hair and digs both hands into my hips, driving into me wi
r briefsmore force. The moment my orgasm ignites, I swear I begin to bla

Bright lights blast behind my lids, and my body trembles aroun
overingWithout letting up, he continues to take my body hard and deep. He r
at me, my mouth and drops his lips to my breast, sucking in my nipple and bi
kes me I cry out, the pain morphing into more pleasure. My legs become
and I have no choice but to wave the white flag. He continues to pump
out, and I fight to keep my hold around his waist.

is cock "Fuck, Fay," he growls deeply, and I feel him expand and jerk,

He tosses the towel and shoves his hands through his wild hair. “For what you’ve done with me.” He walks over to the window. His shoulders sag, sex. fall. There it is. Regret.

I grab the sheet and cover myself. Hurt and humiliation simmer in my chest. I look around for my dress, needing to get out of here. What was I thinking?

regrets, “Where are you going?” Theo stops at the end of the bed.

dropped “Obviously you think this was a mistake. I’m going to go—”

I sense He climbs onto the bed and covers my body with his. “You’re right. I’ve crossed the line. I’ve tugged the sheet out of my grip and lowered his mouth to my exposed breast. I’ve fucked up. I broke the rules.” He sucks my nipple into his mouth, and my head falls against the pillow. When he’s satisfied, he lets go with a pop. “I’ve clearly proven I have a weakness.” He wets his lips and drags his tongue between my breasts and up my neck until his lips hover over mine. “I’m not leaving you.”

His confession is unexpected. My lips part in a subtle gasp. “How did you know I was first breaking the rules?” I whisper.

sture. “For one, I don’t sleep with people I employ.”

ension. His reply is a buzzkill, but he’s right. I *am* his assistant. “Maybe I should fire me again.”

with my He drops his mouth to kiss me. He doesn’t let up until I barely remember what we’re discussing. “For two, I have my reasons.”

y knew Hence the whole, this-never-happened speech beforehand. “I get it. I’m not leaving you. . .”

He grabs my chin, holding my gaze. “I crossed the line with you. My thumb grazes over my bottom lip. “But it seems I can’t stay away, and I’m not going to make it for nothing.”

ick. . . I My voice wavers. “I don’t follow.”

ise and He releases me as he slides his fingers down my neck. His eyes fo
he moves lower, stopping between my breasts. “It means the dan
in myalready done, so I might as well make it worth my while.” His mouth
the hellaround my nipple, and his teeth clamp down, causing my hips to bi
means you’re my weakness, Fay. The drug I’ve been denying myself
don’t think I’ll ever be able to get enough.”

His lips move back to mine, and I melt against him. His tongue j
ht.” Heinto my mouth and swallows my moan as he slides back inside me, tak
east. “Ibody to a new level of ecstasy. We fuck. Slow, hard, fast. On the bed,
and mythe window. In the shower, on the sink. I’m flipped and pulled and be
p. “Butmany ways I could add contortionist to my resume. When my battery
tongueruns out and I fall asleep, one question lingers. Where do we go from h
And it’s

are you

be you

nember

Tell no

u.” His

nd I’m

My voice wavers. “I don’t follow.”

He releases me as he slides his fingers down my neck. His eyes follow as he moves lower, stopping between my breasts. “It means the damage is already done, so I might as well make it worth my while.” His mouth closes around my nipple, and his teeth clamp down, causing my hips to buck. “It means you’re my weakness, Fay. The drug I’ve been denying myself. And I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get enough.”

His lips move back to mine, and I melt against him. His tongue plunges into my mouth and swallows my moan as he slides back inside me, taking my body to a new level of ecstasy. We fuck. Slow, hard, fast. On the bed, against the window. In the shower, on the sink. I’m flipped and pulled and bent in so many ways I could add contortionist to my resume. When my battery finally runs out and I fall asleep, one question lingers. Where do we go from here?

Chapter Fifteen

Fay

I groan, stirring awake. My body feels like I fell out of a third building. I lift my head from the pillow and pat the other side of the bed. Empty. I squint at the red lights blaring from the clock on the side of the nightstand. “Oh shit,” I shoot up, searching the room. How the hell is it ten o’clock on a morning?

“Theo?” I call for him, but I already know he’s long gone.

Great.

I sit up and glance around, spotting a piece of paper on the nightstand. I reach out and grab it.

Enjoy the room as long as you decide to stay. James is downstairs waiting. He’ll take you home when you’re ready. -TM

I fall back against the plush pillows. I’m not sure, but this all screams *Pretty Woman*-ish. The fancy hotel. Free amenities. My phone dings.

Mom: Honey, when are you getting here? You were supposed here at 9:30 to help me bake cookies.

“Goddammit.” She’s going to be *sooo* mad. I shoot off the bed and run around for my clothes, groaning at the silk hanging over the chair. I’m too mature and ladylike to do the walk of shame out of here.

Five minutes later. . .

“Morning, Miss Evans.” James smiles. “After you.”

“Yep. Thanks.”

The ride to my apartment is quiet, minus the screaming voices in the background all yelling *what the actual fuck!* How do I walk into work on Monday morning like that? Do I pretend it’s just a normal workday? *Hey Mr. Monroe, sorry I’m so tardy getting your coffee. Who would have thought riding the bed all night would make muscles I never knew existed so sore?* Also, I’m finally starting to work out.

I open my photos app and swipe through the images I secretly snapped last night. The beauty of the ballroom. A selfie with my fancy champagne. Stolen shots of Theo while he spoke to a client. He truly is a sight. His profile has my cheeks warming. I hug my phone to my chest as I have a growing smile. What have I started, and where do we go from here?



Theo

Monday morning...

“Morning, Mr. Monroe!”

I don’t bother to respond to Amy. My morning has been anything but pleasant. I haven’t slept, and I’m on edge. I storm past her, continuing

I go to my office, and stop at Fay's empty chair. The sole reason my world has suddenly turned upside down. Speaking of, where the fuck is she? Doesn't she have to be here and look what seven sharp means? I look at the clock. It's only six-thirty. My head is way tightens. Seven feels like forever from now. It's been too long since I've seen her. Forty-nine hours too long.

I throw myself into my chair and reach for my desk phone to call her and demand she get into the office immediately. But my hand hovers over the receiver. What am I doing? I need to stay in control. And right now my head is acting irrationally.

After a while I sit back, gripping the back of my neck. After Friday night, this is a whole different *Monroe*. I can't explain it, but there's a whole new determination driving through me. A driving force that I haven't felt in almost five years. I can't need to go through with merger charade anymore. I won't. There has to be a loophole to stop the merger from going through. Something I missed last time I scoured through the contracts, hoping to find an out. I need to kill the deal. A few weeks and break this hold the Hills and my father have over me. It shouldn't have even been approved by MIC's shareholders. The Hill Group does not hide my promising on paper. Their financials alone would have dissuaded anyone if Charles' company adds no value, why is my father so insistent on absorbing it?

The Hill Group has done mediocre land development, dabbling in surveying up until six years ago when the company made a huge profit allowing their surveying department to grow to more than fifty percent of their business. Right around the time my father and Charles proposed the merger.

The one thing all these contracts and deals have in common? They're all in the Hill Group. With so many red flags from their land survey department, so

uddenly doesn't add up. He's spent millions clearing the way for the sale. Why do we know goddamn special about this company? And why haven't I looked in my chest earlier? Maybe I could have found a way out of this a lot sooner.

I've seen My mind drifts to Fay. The benefit dinner. I fucked up. I never should have stepped foot into that hotel room. What did I think was going to happen and it's not an if but a when that my father will catch wind of our night over the playing with fire with her, and there's no doubt we're both going down, I'm burned. But now that I've fully had her, I don't know how I'll deny it again.

Things are She drives me mad. I could have walked away. Saved us both from the flowing claws of my father. And I would have, but she's my weakness. The moment I can't go that dress fell to her feet, I knew I would have her in every way I've ever needed. Craved. God, I fought the urge to bite and mark every piece of her while creamy flesh.

merger When she finally passed out, I had to force myself to leave. She would have been beyond exhausted. But damn, did she look like an angel sleeping. I didn't look nothing more than to stay in bed and hold her. Get high off her sugary perfume. But But I needed space to think clearly. After our night, I can't fathom not having had full access to every inch of her. I know damn well I'm no good for her.

I'm a selfish man. And I plan on fighting to make her mine.

in land A soft knock on the door grabs my attention. I check the time and see the shift forward as Fay walks into my office with a steaming cup of coffee.

percent of "Morning. Here's your coffee. And I saw your morning list. I'll get it done for you—"

"Shut my door," I say, unable to keep the bite out of my tone. Her lips are taken back at my sharp demand, but the time away from her has me doing nothing.

What is soHow the hell have I gone so long without touching her? It's all I can think about.

"Yep, sure." She sets my coffee on the worktable, turns, and should have door.

What? And "Lock it."

Right. I'm Yeah, I'm crossing that line again. I'm out of my chair and stalking her to gether before I realize what's happening. She twists the lock and faces me myself we having a super secretive meet. . . oh!" A soft gasp leaves her lips

crowd her personal space. She smells like lavender and perfection from the don't stop until my Italian leather shoes touch her heels. When her moment gaze meets mine, I get lost in her hazel depths for a moment. I can't find what I wanted. urge and don't even try. My eyes drop to her lips. I want nothing more of her to kiss away her cherry lip gloss. And since all rules have already been thrown out the window, I do.

What looked A mix between a raspy moan and a gasp falls from her lips as I wanted head to kiss her. I swallow her sweet sounds and snake my hand around her waist, bringing her snug against me. She's absolute perfection in my arms. I want to have kiss her until some of the crazed need dissipates. But I know the only way to get her. But fully feel at ease is to push her up against my desk and fuck the tension.

When she melts even more in my arms, I slowly pull back.

and sit "Now that that's out of the way. . ." I step back before I follow through and tear her skirt off. "I need your help scanning five years' land surveys."

Get right "Five years."

"That's right. We're looking for discrepancies. Anything that seems off. Possible code violations. Any structure findings that seem wrong."

on edge. "Theo, I haven't worked here long enough to know what I'm—"

"I don't expect you to. Just be another set of eyes for me, okay? A"

n think that looks off. I know you've only been here a short time, but you've
on quick. I'm impressed. I have no doubt you can do this." My praise
uts the her off guard. "So, unless you want to discuss how much you enjoy
benefit dinner, I'll need you to print out those reports." God, she's cut
she's flustered.

over to "Yep. Reports. I'll get right on that." She spins around, almost los
e. "Are balance. She grabs the door handle, tugging it open, forgetting it's
lips as I "Duh. I locked it." She finally gets it open and stumbles out. It's
, and I reaction for me, one I seem to be doing more of late, but a smile
startled across my face.

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n away.

igh and

ms off.

nything

We've been staring at reports for over an hour. I had Legal pull eve
survey MIC was affiliated with over the last five years. I slam the
report down in frustration. "I thought something would—"

"Here."

"Did you find something?"

"Maybe. I don't know. The Geller and Geller project—don't you
meeting with them this afternoon?"

It's the latest land survey my father insisted I sign off on without qu

"Yeah, let me see."

She hands me the report, pointing out a highlighted section in th
survey. "Now, this may be nothing, but the two maps don't match u
original filed and the final one. Look here. . ." She rips two pages fr
report and walks over to the window. "See?"

I follow and stare as she places the two sheets of paper, one over th
onto the window. "I'm not sure what I'm looking at."

caught “It’s super subtle. But here.” She points to a line hidden deep beneath scribble and parcel dimensions. “Do you see it?”

“I do. . .” Fuck. The original property survey Bill Geller submitted when the one the Hill Group filed. It’s covered in red markings and lines weren’t there before. All indicators that would show up on a report if the land was deemed uninhabitable. “How did you catch that?”

“Chef. Attention to detail is my specialty.”

“I need to look into this.” I grab the papers and jump into my chair to make a call. “Lance, Theo Monroe. I need a second opinion on a land survey. I need this to be discreet and fast. I’ll pay whatever price to have it expedited. Great. Lunchtime is perfect. Thanks.”

“So, what does this mean?”

“I’m not sure, but I need you to continue scanning those documents. I want to pull her into my arms and kiss the shit out of her. She managed to single-handedly save my future. Possibly ours. “I need to focus.”

She nods. “Yeah, sure. I’ll take these to my desk and give you privacy if you need anything, just ring me.”

“Will do. And Fay?” She stops and looks over her shoulder. “Thank you.”

I get to work, tearing apart every detail of the Geller report. Reading the meeting notes, I learn Bill Geller came to my father three months ago in a desperate need of help. His development company purchased a large tract of rural land to build commercial and housing projects. But once the land was ready to break ground, the land survey came back stating the land was contaminated and a danger to any proposed building plan. The problem was he put all his eggs in this very small basket in hopes that the development would take his company to a new level of revenue. Instead, it was about to bankrupt him.

th other And when I get off the phone with Lance, my anger spirals. He came to the same conclusion: the land should have never been deemed uninhabitable. I read through Bill's personal file. We always run background checks on all clients with the potential for a large payout. Bill Geller is a family man with a wife and three children, the youngest who's battling a rare disease. Before this deal, his company was growing at a rate that had the potential to make a lot of money. Now, he can barely pay our retainer, let alone hire me to make as his consultant.

urvey. I The problem is, what do I do with this information? Doubt over the legitimacy of the Geller and Geller project and any other business deal in conjunction with the Hill Group sets in. All those contracts my clients demanded I sign off on. *No need to review. Just sign it.* Does that mean anything to do with the upcoming merger? Or all the legal issues surrounding the sale?

It all starts to make sense. But until I figure out what to do, I need to talk to Fay. If it's right with Bill.

There's a soft knock on my door.

"You." "Mr. Monroe, Mr. Geller has arrived."

I nod to Fay and stand, walking over to Bill. I reach out and shake his hand. "Bill, we have a lot of ground to cover. I suggest we order in some Thai. How does Thai sound?"

Bill smiles. "Theo. Sounds great." He turns to Fay. "If you can order those yummy little wontons, you will forever be in my debt."

"I think I can manage that."

I direct Bill to sit at the table and get right to it. "Bill, we need to talk about the land survey."

Bill's shoulders slump. "I'm done. I know this. I'm just thankful

e to the still willing to purchase the land.”

le. “The original survey that was issued to you concluded your land
is uncontaminated, and any attempt to build risked the chances of said
land by manufacturing whatever you develop.”

cancer. He shakes his head. “I’ve put everything I have into this project.
I’m supposed to change my family’s life. And now I don’t have any money
to pay MIC—”

“The survey was wrong,” I cut him off.

His chin raises, and he stares back at me. “What? What do you mean
the results for the soil came back positive for contamination.”

“I’m telling you, the report was wrong. The land is fine. There was a
mistake in the plat survey, where the water lines run through the land. I re-
visited and got a second opinion. Lucky for you, we were in the wrong.”

His mouth opens, but he’s struggling to speak. Bill’s shoulders tremble
as his eyes fill with tears. “So. . . the land is. . .”

“Will pass inspection. To make sure this doesn’t happen again, I’ll
give you a name of a land survey company unaffiliated with MIC.
They should be able to run the survey and give you the green light to
make his construction. I can’t tell you how sorry I am for this grievous error.
I hope this allows you to follow through with your vision. It’s a great
land.”

“But... what about the contract? I already signed—”

“I’ll have Legal void it.”

“Theo. . . I. . . I don’t even know what to say.”

The knock on my door interrupts us. Fay pops her head in. “L
here.” I wave her in, and she walks in carrying two large bags of food.
You’re help but stare. It’s impossible not to. She looks absolutely breathtaking

there's a new glow to her. Like she had the best sex of her life and was strangely, I find myself smiling, thinking the same thing.

ground “Enjoy, gentlemen. Let me know if there's anything else you need. Smiles and looks my way, and damn, that smile is going to be the deal. It was me.

ly left to Amy appears in the doorway and sticks her head in. “I'm so sorry to interrupt. Fay, can I speak to you real quick?”

“Amy, we're in the middle—”

in? The “I know, I'm so sorry, but it's important. Your—”

“And I said we're in the middle—”

an error “Your mom is trying to reach you. She called the main line. Your computer threw it a heart attack.”

My eyes snap to Fay. She looks back at Amy, her smile in place and unable to hear her wrong. When the words start to register, it falls, along with the empty bags in her hand. “He. . . what?”

on going “Your mom's on the phone. She's at Bennett General Hospital.”

]. They She shakes her head and steps into gear. “Oh, um. . . sorry. Excuse me, I need to start. She rushes out.

1. But I “Bill, we'll need to reschedule.”

plot of “Of course, I know the importance of family.”

I storm out and find Fay at the receptionist's desk, tears streaming down her face.

“What's going on?” I demand. Amy shrugs while Fay nods and excuses me.

unch is “I'm sorry. I need to go.”

. I can't “I'll take you.” I ignore Amy's shocked expression. “Cancel my appointment. And afternoon.” Fay is too distraught to notice and nods, allowing me to go.

e. And to the elevators. I shoot off a text to James to meet us out front. When
up to the emergency entrance at the hospital, she barely allows the ve
d.” She stops before she rushes out.

leath of “Stay close,” I tell James, following Fay inside.

“Hi—my dad was brought in. He had a heart attack.”

orry to “Last name?”

“It’s—he’s—”

“Evans.” I step in, grabbing her hand.

“Thank you.” Her voice trembles, and I hate it.

The nurse gives us his room number, and I guide her down the hall
dad had we make it to her father’s room, she stalls. I dip my head. “It’s goin
okay.”

s if she She takes in a shaky breath and nods.

with the We walk into the room. Her mother is sitting in a chair next to the b
her father is alert, slapping away his wife’s hand as she fusses w
blanket.

se me.” “Dad?”

Her mother twists in her chair at her daughter’s voice. “Oh, Fabl
stands, pulling her into her arms. My brows perk at the name, and Fa
back at me with a *don’t you dare* stare.

g down She pulls away from her mother. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“Oh, hell. I’m fine,” her father says and tries to sit up.

nds the “Gerald, the doctor said you need your rest.”

“Woman, he said *you* need to relax. I’m fine.”

“Dad, you had a heart attack.”

ael my “Mild.”

uide her “Still a heart attack. You need to listen—”

we pull “Who the hell are you?”

hicle to “What?” Fay turns to where her father is glaring. Right at me. “Oh, . . . uh. . . Theo. My boss.”

His eyes widen and then narrow.

Her mother releases Fay. “Well, *you’re* much more handsome in per-

“Seriously, Mom?”

“Boss, huh—”

“Dad! Can you two just not?” She looks over her shoulder at i
cheeks red with embarrassment. “Ignore them. Side effects of a heart a
. When I nod and reach out. “Mrs. Evans, Theo Monroe. A pleasure to meet
g to be Her mother blushes and shakes my hand. Fay doesn’t hide her th
eye roll.

“Mr. Evans,” I address her father, who’s sporting a scowl.

ed, and “Dad!” Fay turns to me. “Sorry. Loss of manners must be a side eff
with hisHey, do you mind giving me a moment with my parents?”

“Of course not. Glad to see you’re doing well.” I nod to her moti
excuse myself to find an open seat in the waiting room.

e.” She I spend the next hour searching for any deal in the last five years t
y looksGroup was attached to. My stomach turns at the long list. How man
has my father pushed through behind my back? How many are the ca
fraudulent land report?

“Fuck,” I hiss under my breath. “What have you done, you bastar
this time, the position I worked so hard to obtain. And for what?
railroaded by my father.

I shoot off an email to my father, demanding a face-to-face meeti
phone rings with the name of a man I haven’t spoken to in five years.

“Theo, I was surprised to see your message. It’s been a while.”

“I know. But I have new evidence.”

this is. “About the girl?”

“Against my father. It seems our focus was on the wrong person. I have new information and want the case reopened. I’m not giving up the case until I’ve put a stop to this.”

“Okay. Well, shoot me over the new details. I’ll review it and get you as soon as I have more intel.”

Fay emerges through the doors, and I stand. “I’ll call you back.” I hear a faint creak. “How is he?”

“It was minor, thank God. But hopefully this is a wake-up call for you.” “It really scared my mom.”

I can’t help it. I reach out and cup her cheek. “How are *you* doing?”

Her shoulders lift. She suddenly looks tired. “Fine. You didn’t expect too. I know you have meetings—”

“Fuck my meetings. What do you need?” She looks up at me. Her hand grabs at my heart. She nestles into my palm, and my chest tightens. I scoop her into my arms and guard her against the world and anything the Hill brings her sadness.

“Honestly, I’m fine. But if you don’t mind, I’m going to stay with my mom for a couple of days. In case she needs me or anything.”

“Take as much time as you need.”

There’s a beat of silence before she speaks again. “Are you sure? To be sure—”

I don’t know what comes over me, but I slide my hand to the back of her neck and kiss her. My lips are gentle as they press to hers. Her soft, plump lips remind me of our first stolen kiss in my office. The benefit dinner I’ve opened myself up to this new world with her, and there’s no way

ever walking away. I won't go back to the life I was living before collection of lies and deceit.

I have Having her in my arms and just getting a small taste of her isn't en is timewasn't strong enough five years ago with Claire, but I won't make th mistakes again. My father may have the power to destroy me, but w back tonew information, I realize he doesn't hold all the cards. And the on hold give me the power to fight back.

ang up. I pull away to her dazed eyes. "Just don't take too long. You're tl one who knows how to make my coffee how I like it." I want to te him. Itcan't fathom being away from her. Be selfish and force her back w right now. But I hold my tongue.

"I won't." Her somber tone is my demise. I drop my hand and ste have tobefore I decide to never let her go.

"If you need anything, call me." She nods, and I walk away, kno er gazeneed to keep my head on right. I grab my phone and call my contac want to "That meeting needs to happen today. Be at my office within the hour. ng that I know there's no more trying to deny her. Now, I need to figure c to fully have her without ruining her.

with my

I know

κ of her

pillowy

r. Fuck,

ay I'm

ever walking away. I won't go back to the life I was living before her. A collection of lies and deceit.

Having her in my arms and just getting a small taste of her isn't enough. I wasn't strong enough five years ago with Claire, but I won't make the same mistakes again. My father may have the power to destroy me, but with this new information, I realize he doesn't hold all the cards. And the ones I do hold give me the power to fight back.

I pull away to her dazed eyes. "Just don't take too long. You're the only one who knows how to make my coffee how I like it." I want to tell her I can't fathom being away from her. Be selfish and force her back with me right now. But I hold my tongue.

"I won't." Her somber tone is my demise. I drop my hand and step back before I decide to never let her go.

"If you need anything, call me." She nods, and I walk away, knowing I need to keep my head on right. I grab my phone and call my contact back. "That meeting needs to happen today. Be at my office within the hour."

I know there's no more trying to deny her. Now, I need to figure out how to fully have her without ruining her.

Chapter Sixteen

Theo

“I don’t care. Make it go away.”

“Alfred, it’s not that simple. There’s a paper trail. Document things that will eventually lead to us—”

“Then get rid of it—”

“Get rid of what?” I enter my father’s study, interrupting a conversation between him and Charles.

“This is none of your concern, Theo,” Father snaps at me. “Where’s the Williams contract?”

“Waiting on signatures. Couriered the contract this afternoon. And I want the right to know if something is happening with the company. Is this related to the audits?”

My father slams his fists against his desk. “Are you deaf? This is not your concern. Focus on the tasks you were given.”

“It does concern me if it’s about MIC. That’s my future. If there’s anything I should know about it.”

“And if you want any of that future to be possible, you will mind your goddamn business.”



“Evening, Jeffries. Is my father in?” I pass Clifford Jefferies, the family lawyer, as I walk through the foyer of my father’s estate.

“He is. I just left him in the study.”

“Thanks.” I’m curious why he’s meeting with my father this late, I guess I’m about to find out. When I enter his study, he’s on a call; finally looks of it, it’s not a good one.

“Just push it through.” He hangs up. “What’s this nonsense I hear about you voiding the Geller and Geller deal?”

“It’s exactly how it sounds.”

uments. “Do you know what a headache you’ve caused me today? I’ve spent the last hour on the phone with lawyers holding Bill Geller to his contract.

“Well, then retract it. It’s done.” I toss the land report on his desk.

heated “What the hell is this?”

e is the “I’m sure you know. It’s the bogus land survey. Geller’s land is uninhabitable. It never was.” He barely acknowledges the report or said. “You hired the Hill Group to do a land survey, and they came back with a falsified report. That land is and never was contaminated.” He waves and stands, walking over to his mini bar. “How many more of these are there?”

doesn’t “Are you of what? Theo, it happens. Not all reports are accurate.”

n issue, “This doesn’t just happen. Jesus, how many more fake land reports are there like this? All those projects you’ve insisted we use the Hill Group for.”

“Son, I don’t know what you’re getting at, and I don’t like it.”

our own “How many?” My voice rises. “The audits. The cover-ups. Is this how you can’t get the goddamn merger to go through because you can’t find the right lawyer?”

your fucking scandals deep enough?"

"That's enough."

Monroe

"I want the truth. I won't be a part of this."

He turns to me, his expression cold and emotionless. "You already know that. You think you get to just walk away from this? You always seem to forget what power Charles Hill holds over you."

"He holds a lie over me."

"He's the reason you are where you are and not in jail for *rape*. Remember that night? You need to be more appreciative. Especially Alana. Speaking of Alana, how was the charity event?" He stares at me with those beady eyes, waiting for a reaction. "I must say, you never do things the right direction well. Always wanting to flout the rules laid before you. I know you would have gotten the point after Claire. Or Breanne. Every pathetic lie you've tried to have behind my back. But now your *assistant*?"

His words hit their mark. A chill radiates down my spine. "Leave me alone. I don't want any part of this."

"You should have. Taking her to an event like that. What were you thinking?"

"That I want to be free of you and all your evil scheming. These are your interests. They are convenient."

"Was it now?"

"It was a one-time thing. You're looking into things that aren't there for you."

"Then forget this nonsense." He picks up the report and tosses it in the trash. "Dinner is set for the day before your birthday. You *will* propose to me then we'll go public with news of the merger." His words turn my stomach sour. "Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?"

Too much is swirling inside my head. Fury and resentment boil inside me.

and I can't trust myself to speak. I turn on my heel and leave.

One thing's for certain; I'm done playing his game. I've finally found a reason to fight. Now I have to figure out a way to stay on top.

They are,
away from
you."

Shall I
initially to
come with
I did take
thought
a little

her out

are you

'It was

."

it in the
case, and
tomach

hide me,

and I can't trust myself to speak. I turn on my heel and leave.

One thing's for certain; I'm done playing his game. I've finally found a reason to fight. Now I have to figure out a way to stay on top.

Chapter Seventeen

Fay

“Oh, thank God you’re back.” Amy throws her hands around me before I’m through the doors. “These have been the longest days of my life.”

I laugh and pull away. “Uh oh. That bad?”

“Almost unbearable. You’d think someone took his favorite toy away.”

A rush of warmth spreads across my cheeks, and I hope Amy notices. “Oh boy. Maybe I should have waited another day or two to return.”

“No way. Please never take off again.” A delivery comes in and interrupts us. “Catch up later?”

“For sure!” I head down the hallway, trying to hide my anxiousness.

Amy’s right. These have been the longest two days in history. Leaving my mom to care for my dad, I decided it’s time to return to work. The constant back-and-forth bickering about things like sodium intake was making me insane. My mom has a lot of work to convince him to change his behavior because I swear he would put salt in his cereal if he could.

That last kiss from Theo has been on repeat since he walked away from me in the ER waiting room. What did it mean? It was nothing like the other

we kissed—not a hot, desperate ‘need to rip each other’s clothes off’ kiss like in his office or the night of the benefit dinner. Instead, it was ———. meaningful. And it confused the hell out of me. That wasn’t how you do it with someone you’re just having fun with. And is that what we’re doing?

I fought the urge to call and ask that very question. Because what’s wrong? He’s every woman’s fantasy, minus the asshole part. But he can have anyone he wants. I have a hard time convincing myself that person would choose me. I know; the smallest violin is playing as we speak. I am nowhere near bombshell status. More like runner-up.

Speaking of a bombshell, am I doing something I shouldn’t be? I don’t want to be a playboy neckmorals. Maybe not after a ton of champagne, but I refuse to be the best two women. I already feel guilty about what happened, uncertain if I should even indeed have a girlfriend. It’s one thing I need to clear up before we go any further. Do I even want this to go further?

“I’ll admit it. A guy has never made me feel this way physically. Sex doesn’t always been just sex for me—fun and unremarkable. Is it pathetic to say I’ve never been in love?” twenty-three, I have never been in love? Or at least I don’t think I have. I’ve been attracted after men. Had the whole butterflies-in-my-belly kind of feeling, but never earth-shattering, axis-tilting, life-changing love. Until. . . now.

Gah! There’s no way I feel *that* way.

Do I?

Crud. . .

I’m not blind to how different we are. Let’s be honest; the whole opposite-sex-attract thing is a total myth, right? There’s no chance he—we—us. . .

enough spiraling.” I need to flat out ask him. We’re mature adults. I can’t come out with it. *Do you have a girlfriend and what the ever-loving fuck are we doing?* Yep, sounds perfect.

kind of Since I know better than to bother him before his coffee, I complete my task, then knock on his door, and walk in. “Morning.” He’s on a call. You kiss interrupting, I set his cup down and leave.

“I’ll call you back. Fay?”

I turn back. “Yeah?”

“Shut the door and sit down.” Okay then. Maybe things haven’t changed between us. I guess it’s business as usual. I take the seat across from her near “How’s your father?”

“He’s fine. I spent the last two days making healthy meals for him. I haven’t sacrificed too much taste. The benefits of having a chef as a daughter other “We need to discuss us.”

His tone is so serious.

“Okay.” I cross my legs, my breath catching in my throat. He takes a long time to speak, and I twist my fingers.

“I want you in my bed.”

Okay. Wow. That was *not* what I was expecting him to say. “Where do you need me to explain?”

Kind of. “Well, that can mean a lot of things.” I love the way his lips tremble at the edges. The way his hands clench and unclench. And I find it extremely attractive that my response is causing him slight discomfort.

“It means I want you naked and under me. Or on top of me, if you prefer. But in my bed. As in, all mine, as often as we can. Is that something you both want, Fay?”

“Okay, now, it’s me who’s squirming. I press my thighs together and I can just bottom lip, trying to buy myself some time. Inhaling slowly, I reply, “Fuck, you’re intriguing, but I need more details.” Oh Lord, the way his gaze drops

ete thatmouth. It's as if he's undressing me with his eyes. There's a good
Withoutwhen I leave this chair, there will be a wet spot in my place.

“Is that so. . .?” He stands and rounds his desk. “You want to know
how I plan to have you bare for me? Your legs spread just for me. My
licking your sweet cunt until you're shaking around me.” He lean
hangedagainst his desk, and my knees brush against his thighs. “Do you wan
is desk.go on, or do you have an idea of what I mean?”

I clear my throat. “Maybe go on. Still unclear.” I know I'm ask
im thattrouble, but I need him to admit what he wants.

ter.” He leans forward. His hands run up my thighs, stopping just short
panty line. My body shivers at his touch. It's impossible to hide I
affects me.

kes too “I want to fuck you until you can't speak. Taste every single inch c
Moving closer, he cups my chin and brushes his thumb across my lov
“I want to explore this mouth with my cock because I bet these lips
now?” feel amazing wrapped around me.”

He presses on my lip, and my mouth slowly opens. “Have yo
ips curlthought about that, Fay? Because I have. More times than I can cou
tremelynow that I know what a naughty little assistant you are, I think it's only
show you what a bad boss I can be. The question is, do you want that?

. prefer. I don't know how to answer. Mainly because he's rendered me spe
ng youMy entire body buzzes with need, and I want everything he's offered
single naughty thing. “I do,” I reply more breathlessly than intended.

ick my He pulls away and moves back in his chair. “Then there are some
Soundswe need to clear up.” And back to business. “This has to stay between
s to myone can know.”

“Ah, you want me to be your dirty little secret.”

chance Anger blazes across his face. “That’s not what I fucking said.”

“Isn’t it, though? *No one can know.*” His disrespect has me st
exactly “Yeah, no thanks.”

tongue “Fay, wait. You don’t understand.”

is back “No, Theo, I do. That’s the problem.”

it me to “My life is very complicated right now. If anyone knew—”

“You mean if your *girlfriend* knew.”

ing for His fingers clench around his desk. “I am *not* dating anyone. And th

I can say about that. Listen, I’m laying it on the table. I want you. Bad
t of mythink you want me too. Yes, this can’t be a publicly known thi
how hestarters, you’re my assistant. It’s quite frowned upon. I’m asking you

me. So, you’re correct. You would be a secret. But it’s the only way t
of you.”work out if you’re interested. If not, I’ll never mention it again.” I c
wer lip.anything but stare at him. “Are you denying the attraction between us?”

; would Dammit, I can’t. He’s right. I want him. I’m just hoping it doesn’t c
a cost I can’t pay. “Fine. You win.”

ou ever “I win?”

nt. And “Yep. You win me. And, of course, my silence.”

y fair to He assesses my response, waiting for me to take it back. When I do
” nods. “Good. If you have plans tonight, cancel them. You’ll be with m

eachless. “Oh, are we working late?”

. Every “No, you’ll be in my bed. If there’s nothing else, my home address
in your inbox. I’ll take the notes from yesterday’s meeting. Amy shou
e thingsthem. And another cup of coffee.”

us. No Dismissed, I roll my eyes and walk away.

“Oh, and Fay?” I turn to him. “You look absolutely breathtaki
morning. If I make it through the day without dragging you into my ba

and fucking you over the counter, it will be a miracle.”

anding. My mouth drops.

“Don’t forget the coffee.”

Asshole. Hot, *hot* asshole. “Sure thing, Mr. Monroe.” I fight the s
his compliment and put an extra sway into my hips as I walk out of his



at’s all Theo has me cancel all his meetings and stays locked in his office on
l. And I calls. I spend most of the day proofing land surveys from five years
ing. For the most recent, the Geller project. I’ve found seven more altered rep
to trust with the same discrepancy. I’m not sure what it means, but I assume
his can good.

an’t do When it finally hits five o’clock, I shut down my computer and gat
„ things. Theo walks out, wearing his suit coat and carrying his wo

come at “Have a nice evening, Miss Evans,” he teases and continues toward the

“That’s to be determined,” I say to his back.

I scramble to catch the next elevator and race home. I go through my
in a panic. What the heck does someone wear when they’re about to b
alive by their sexy beast of a boss? Casual but comfortable it is.

on’t, he *Have a nice evening, Miss Evans.* I can’t stop hearing his voice. Th
e.” both a challenge and a promise in that sentence. He’s going to ruin m
will be most glorious way. And if tonight is anything like our hotel stay, I’m
ld have trouble.

I shouldn’t be this nervous. It’s not our first time, but it’s differe
stakes feel higher, too. He’s inviting me into his home. It’s more. . . pe

ng this And I’m not sure how to wrap my head around that.

throom

“Take it moment by moment,” I coach myself. But the last thing I do is get *lost* in the moment or want more than he’s willing to offer. The more our connection develops, the more I start to feel. Imagine. Is it possible to smile about the question to see us as more than secret lovers? Jesus, that’s office-like something from one of my mom’s romance books. Secret fuck buddies. That sounds more current day.

The Uber ride is long and stressful. I think of all those inappropriate things he wants to do to me, and by the time I’m about to knock on his door, I’m already going to an entire scene playing out in my head where he drags me into some dormitory playroom and chains me to a bed to test out all these—

“Are you planning on standing outside my door all evening?”

His voice snaps me out of my possibly real-life *Fifty Shades* fantasy. I look at him. He’s dressed casually in jeans and a fitted gray shirt, even more attractive if possible. “What? No. I was making sure this was the right door.”

Theo leans out and looks down the hall. “The last time I checked, there was only one door on the penthouse floor.”

“Oh, shut up. “Are you going to invite me in?”

His lips curl into a smug smile. “Of course.” He steps to the right and I walk inside, getting my first glance at his place. It’s a lot cozier than I imagined. Bright abstract portraits cover his walls, and his furniture is modern yet homely. And his kitchen—

“Holy mother of kitchens.” I walk over to his ginormous island. “I just orgasmed looking at your appliances.” My mouth hangs open as I survey his immaculate chef’s kitchen. “I didn’t know you liked to cook,” I say, shocked. Floor-to-ceiling shelves are loaded with stainless steel appliances that put half of the cooking shows I watch to shame.

want to “I don’t cook.”

But the “*What? Are you kidding me? Then, why do you have all this. . . s* entirely wave to all the beautiful, top-notch equipment, not to mention the soundswood fire pizza oven and wine dispenser.

buddies. “Francene Barro lived here before me.”

I sway on my feet, and Theo reaches out to steady me. “You’re e things Like *the* Francene Barro from *Kitchen Wars*?” It’s like being on the se , I have cooking show. I look back at him. “Okay, *now* I’m officially jealous.”

ungeon “Would you like some wine?” he offers.

“Sure.” He walks into the kitchen and grabs a glass from the c

“Please tell me you at least have your personal chef make you pizzas y, and I oven.”

looking “No to the pizza and no to the personal chef.”

was the My eyes widen. “Serious?”

“Very serious.”

l, there I drool at the Venus Century Espresso machine, recognizing it fr *Appetit* a few months ago. “How often do you make espressos?”

“Never.”

t, and I “Why not?” I practically shriek.

han I’d “It was a gift.”

iture is I stare at the insanely expensive coffee maker. “This is wrong for s reasons. These poor appliances. They’re meant to be used and enjoyed

think I I point to the corner of his counter. “What about the juicer?” The while I way that thing is less than ten thousand dollars.

ook,” I “I use the juicer.”

ss-steel I sigh. “Phew. I was going to call the kitchen police for neglect.” He and hands me my wine. “Thanks,” I say.

“You’re welcome. Does this mean you’ll be disappointed that I had
tuff?” I catered?”

built-in I look at him, then scan his super cool pizza oven before bring
attention back to him. “No, it’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

joking. “Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

t of her “Fay, would you like to test out that pizza oven?”

“No, it’s fine. I mean, unless *you* want to. Don’t change your plans
of me.”

cabinet. He eyes me for a beat, then reaches for my hand. “Come, sit.” I sit
in that island, and he pulls up the stool next to me. “Tell me something about

I chuckle into my glass and take a sip. “I hate to break it to you, but
not very interesting.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

I watch him sip his bourbon while I think of a response. “Well, I’m
from *Bon* originally from Ohio. My parents moved us to New Jersey about four
ago. My mom wanted to be closer to her sister, and I enrolled in
culinary school.”

“Did you always want to be a chef?”

“Ever since I was a little kid, I’ve been obsessed with creating things.
So many why I fell in love with cooking. Taking a bunch of things from scratch
.” creating a beautiful piece of art. God, I made some messes. My mom
re’s not hiding food so I wouldn’t get to it.” I laugh. “She hid all the bowls
thinking it would deter me from mixing my newest creation, so I
inventive and used the toilet bowl.”

I laughs “Please don’t tell me—”

“It took my dad a long time after that to taste test anything I

l dinner Anyway. Fast forward, and I went to culinary school to become a
loved it. I knew it was my calling. Well, *I* knew when I was four and
ing my made Eggs Benedict from my plastic food set—sorry, I’m babbling.”

“No, I want to hear this.”

“Okay, blink twice if you’re about to fall asleep. When I graduate
lucky and landed a gig as a station chef in one of the hottest restau-
which is almost unheard of that soon out of school. It was thrilling.
because The best feeling in the world. I was working with ingredients I
dreamed of cooking with. State-of-the-art cutlery. Man, a nice sharp
it at the against a fresh cut of tuna . . .”

you.” “So, why are you working for me? Not that I’m complaining.” He v
but I’m me. I smile back, but it feels strained. I fight to hide my true emotion:
guilt. Regret. Anger that some fuckboy stole my job. I take a sip of my
allowing myself a quick moment to gather my emotions.

ell, I’m “It’s a very cutthroat industry. I let my guard down and made
ir years mistake. Somehow my truffle oil was swapped for mushroom oil. An
in their inspector dining at the restaurant was coincidentally allergic to. It c
restaurant their chance at a Michelin star because the final inspecto
rushed to the hospital from an anaphylactic reaction. Not only was I fi
ings. It’s word spread of my incompetency, and I was blacklisted from any
tch and within a billion-mile radius.”

started Theo reaches over and grabs my wine, setting it on the island. “I’
s once, to hear that.”

o I got All the hurt and betrayal start resurfacing, but I push it down. “Don
worked out. I snagged a job at this really fun bar and met one of r
friends. My parents weren’t the biggest fan of my new career choice.
made. mom butted in and had my aunt call in a favor. Apparently, she has fri

chef. High places and who knew a big wig CEO who was in desperate need said Assistant.” I shrug. “Before I knew it, I was tripping into you and expect to be turned away as soon as you saw me.”

He doesn't say anything. His steely gaze has me shifting in my chair. Did I just confess all that? I'm clearly not the average woman he brings to restaurants, and now my sad, pathetic story probably has him rethinking this whole thing. Scary. He takes his phone out and dials a number. Great, he's calling me a cab. I'd only hope he should. Who wants to get in the sack with such an underachiever? I hope I haven't lied and told him I was an aspiring actress or something.

“Grant, I need you to cancel the catering and send up every ingredient I need to make homemade pizzas. Yes. Thank you.” He hangs up.

“Wait—what are you doing?”

“Making pizzas.”

“Why? I thought you ordered—”

“That was before you told me about your true passion. So, we're making pizzas.”

“You can do that? Just cancel a catering order and demand for ingredients?”

“I can.”

“Ahhh, to be important.” I laugh and pick up my wine glass and take a sip of the insanely delicious wine.

“I'm not important. I'm rich.”

I eye him over my glass. “To be that too.”

His lips press together, and something unfamiliar flashes in his eyes. “You can't be. It's not all it's cracked up to be. So be careful what you wish for.” His expression is gone as fast as it came.

“Okay, fine. Tell me something about you. Where did you grow up?”

d of an He takes another sip of his bourbon. "I've lived in New York C
cting to whole life. Went to Harvard for business. Spent two years in France l
about investment banking and foreign markets. When I came hor
ir. Why father brought me on as a senior consultant at MIC. Two years a
s home, stepped down and named me CEO. The end."

e thing. "Okay, thanks for the resume. I asked you to tell me something abo
ab. And What do you like to do?"

should He scowls but eases up. "I used to enjoy playing tennis. Used
heavyweight rowing, but I don't get to do either much anymore. I love
redient flicks, but watching movies doesn't fit in my busy schedule. I read. I
fascinating the way others view the world. There's so much we don't
I've always wanted to do something insane like climb Mount Evere
read over a handful of books about it. Not that I ever will. But hearin
other journeys is captivating. People are doing things with their lives
making of arguing about money and investments. Makes my accomplishmen
mundane." He stops and takes a breath, staring off. I don't think he m
l pizzashare as much as he did. "I'm sorry, I must have—"

"Nothing to be sorry for. I like seeing this side of you. Sometimes
work and no play' persona gets old."

ke a sip He nudges my thigh. "Are you saying I'm no fun, Miss Evans?"

"I'm saying you are definitely uptight and can use a little relaxati
squeal, almost spilling my wine when he grabs me and pulls me fr
stool onto his lap.

es. "It's "Maybe this is my relaxation."

s sullen "Are you saying this is your playtime?"

"You're my playtime." He slowly leans in, pressing his lips to mi
" like the kiss at the hospital, this kiss is slow and deliberate. He tak

lity myexploring my mouth. Grabbing my wine glass out of my hands, he p
earningon the counter and lifts me so I'm straddling him. I love the way our
ne, myfeel pressed together. This may be a secret fling, but it's starting to f
ago, hesomething more.

“So,” I murmur against his mouth, “do you like the works on your p
out *you*.are you a boring plain cheese kinda guy?” I stifle a moan when his hai
my butt, and he grinds into me.

l to do “I like the sweet kind.”

e horror “Pizza isn't meant to be sweet. Unless you're a pineapple weirdo-
[find itHe's hard, rubbing against me in the perfect rhythm. It's a shame he
t know.me with the pizza oven. There's no way we're making it to pizza.

st. I've A knock on his front door kills the deal. He slows and pulls his
g aboutaway. “We're going to have to table this until dessert.”

outside “Oh yeah? What's for dessert?”

ts seem “You.”

ieant to



the ‘all It's official. I'm in pizza-making heaven. Every topping imaginat
delivered, along with fresh spices, an array of tomatoes to make hon
sauce, and ingredients for the dough. “Don't think you're just goin

on—” I there,” I say to Theo, watching me across the island.

om my “Why not? You look too excited. I don't want to get in your way.”
fresh mushroom at him. “For tonight, this is your kitchen. Fable's
Pizzeria.” I fling another mushroom at him.

ne. Just “Watch it. Only my mother gets to call me that. And if you tell
that's my full name, there'll be repercussions.”

es time “Oh, do tell.”

places it “Nice try. My kitchen, my rules. Get up. I’m putting you to work.”
bodies doesn’t move, so I aim another mushroom at him.

feel like “All right. You win. I’m at your service. What can I help with?” I
and walking behind me, snaking his arms around my waist. He mo
izza, or thin lining of my shirt, and his warm lips press against my bare sh
hands cup “Moral support? Because you’re doing an excellent job.” He sucks r
into his mouth.

“No, I need you to help knead this dough.” I focus on the ingred
—shit.” need to add.

teased His hands cup my butt cheeks, and he digs into my flesh. “How
want me to knead it?” He massages my ass, slowly grinding into me.

mouth I press into the counter, and my hands dig into the ball of dough. “S
I say, basking in the feel of his hands. I forget about the dough and
his arms. He lifts me onto the counter, pushing the ingredients aside. I
lands in the pile of flour as he takes my mouth.

“Have to admit. I’m suddenly a big fan of making dough.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, our kiss turning heated. “It’s my
le was recipe. You can only get it here.”

nemade “You sure are something special,” he hums, pulling up my sh
g to sit cupping my breast.

My head falls back at his touch. “Maybe pizza was a bad idea.”

I toss a “Pizza was a great fucking idea.” He pinches my nipple through t
Tuscan lace, earning a breathless moan. I press my hips forward, needin
friction, and he grinds into me. My butt slides and knocks over the oil.

anyone “Shit,” Theo cusses as it drips down his cabinet. “Okay, maybe
right. We’re going to have to reschedule pizza night.” I burst out into
laughter. He inspects the mess. “Your jeans are ruined.”

ck.” He I wiggle my brows and say, “Looks like I’m going to have to take
off.” He backs up as I slide off the counter. I unsnap my top butt
He’s upslowly shimmy out of my pants. His eyes darken at the sight of my
ves theYep. Worth the money spent. “Now. Where were we? Oh yeah, the do
oulder. “Fuck the pizza.” I’m in his arms in a blink. He storms down
ny skinhallway to a massive bedroom. I don’t have time to admire it before he
me onto his bed.

lients I “Isn’t it bad to have dessert before dinner?” I tease, loving the way he
roam my body.

do you “I think I’m going to make an exception tonight. Because there’s no
can do anything but feast on you right now.” He rips his shirt off and t
lowly,”to the floor. My heartbeat quickens when his jeans and boxers are ne
twist in panties are gone in a poof, and I bite down on my bottom lip when he
My butto onto the bed, blanketing me with his glorious body. “I’ve never had a
so sweet.” His lips fall to mine, then trail down my chin while he wo
my shirt. “So divine.” He pulls the thin lace of my bra aside, expos
specialbreast. “So fucking perfect.” He sucks me into his mouth, causing my
lift off the bed. I love the way his mouth feels on me. His hands touch
irt andmy body cocooned by his.

I thread my fingers through his hair and tug, letting him know I n
mouth. I need him. He obeys, taking my lips and kissing me. But it’s
the thin enough. I open my legs for him, his cock already hard and ready. He r
g morehips back and thrusts deep inside me.

A low growl reverberates up his throat. The feel of him filling m
you’re my breath. My nails claw his back. He pulls out and drives with mor
a fit of and I cry out. He flips us, my legs now straddling his hips, and I slid

re them on him. He pistons his hips up, causing a deeper penetration, and I moan and his name.

panties. “Fuck, you’re beautiful like this.” He raises my hips and slides through—”over him. “Perfect little cunt, made just for me.” His filthy words only make me long for more, and goosebumps prick down my spine. I take control and ride him, grinding on his cock. His mouth captures my breast, and he sucks to the point of pain.

his eyes “Theo. . .” I work him faster. I’m close to the edge, but I don’t want to end. His teeth clamp down on my nipple, and another hoarse moan leaves my mouth. “Theo, please. . .” I’m losing the battle. My walls clamp around his cock, his head falls back, and my lips part as my orgasm tears through me.

Next. My His fingers dig into my hips, branding my skin as he takes over. He climbs into me, each thrust drawing out more cries of pleasure. “Fuck,” he moans, and holds himself inside as he reaches his release.

He works off My head drops to his shoulder as I fight to catch my breath. This close, my heart connected, I feel his heart hammering beneath mine. When I finally find my voice, I lift my head and look down at him. “You still owe me pizza.”

He says to me, The most beautiful sound expels from his lips as he laughs. “I sure could



He says to me, “You know, instead of coffee, I’m going to insist that you bring me pizza in the morning.” Theo takes another bite, and I laugh. “Seriously, how do you learn to make this? It tastes exactly like pizza I had in Italy.”

He says to me, “I’m a chef, remember? Well. . . was. It’s on my bucket list to go to Italy. I’ve studied a ton of Italian cuisine.” I wiggle my brows. “I want to learn how to do a little bit of everything. If it’s a dish that makes someone happy, I want to learn how to create it. Does that sound silly?”

can out “No. It sounds like you have a passion. I envy you for that.”

“What are you talking about? You’re an investment tycoon. You’re the youngest CEO to make the Fortune 500.”

He finishes his wine and puts his glass down. Picking up our plates and walks over to the sink. “On paper, I’m many things.”

He sounds. . . sad. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re right. I turn unused land into million-dollar ventures. But this to you say it like it’s a bad thing.”

He wipes his hands on a towel and turns, resting against the sink. “I like that because it’s not my passion. It’s just a job for me. I was forced to become the person I am.”

He walks back to his seat and refills both glasses. “I envy you is a growth hope I get to experience a lot more of your talents.” He taps his glass. “And not just in the kitchen.”

And just like that, the mood shifts. The corner of his lips forms a smirk. “What do you say we move on with our night?”

“Sure, if I get to pick what we do next.”

A mixture of lust and curiosity light up his eyes. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Come on.” I grab his hand, drag him onto the oversized couch, and push him down. Grabbing the remote, I sit next to him and turn on the TV.

“What are we doing?”

“Watching porn.” A single brow raises. “Kidding. You let me do my favorite things. Now, you get to do one of yours. Pick a movie. The scariest movie you can find.”

His other brow joins the first. “You want to watch a horror movie?”

“Yep. And if you’re lucky, I’ll make popcorn, assuming you have some.” He’s speechless. And super cute this way, too. “Okay, so no popcorn.”

“I’ll have someone bring it up.” He takes me in a beat longer, then catches my neck and pulls me into him. “You are quite the surprise, Fay Evans.”

I climb onto his lap. “Is that a good or bad thing, Theo Monroe?”

He brings his mouth back over mine, deepening our kiss. His hands slide up my thighs and stop to caress my butt. “Oh, it’s a good thing,” he murmurs against my lips. Our tongues dance together, and we bask in the feeling. I say it each other. When air becomes vital, we slowly break apart. “How do you get used to this with scary movies?”

I gaze down at him, my tone serious. “Horribly.”

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“Yep. And if you’re lucky, I’ll make popcorn, assuming you have some.”

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I gaze down at him, my tone serious. “Horribly.”

Chapter Eighteen

Theo

I pace my office, the sun barely peeking over the horizon. My intuition has been right. The Geller sale wasn't the first. Christ, it wasn't even the second or third. There are dozens of executed land surveys stating acres of property were uninhabitable.

What the fuck was my father doing? It may not be mine, but this commission is his legacy. How have I gone this long without catching wind of any backdoor dealing? I inhale a ragged breath. The real question is, how do I come out ahead of this when my hands are just as dirty? What will the market do for her? If I don't play my cards right, this will blow up in my face and ruin Fay. The pit in my stomach tells me it's not a matter of if but when.

My shoulders relax when I finally hear Fay's purse being placed in the bottom drawer.

She opens the door and walks in, her pale teal blouse and gray pants hugging her body as she sways toward me. "Morning—"

"Shut the door," I growl. So much for being relaxed.

"Did you want me to grab your coffee?"

Fuck it. I can't even wait that long. I storm up to her, backing

against the door and closing it. “I’m going to require you to get t earlier.”

——— “And why’s that?” she asks breathlessly.

“Because I’ve had to wait way too long to do this.” My lips slam ov but not even this kiss alleviates my need for her. I grab the hem of h pushing it up her thighs. My thumb grazes her lace thong. “No more j They get in my fucking way.” I push them to the side and slip a through her slick cunt. I’m hard as steel at how wet she already is. “T me?” I tease, pushing deeper.

“Maybe. . .” she purrs as I pull out and push back in with two ion hadShe’s so damn wet. My needy girl loves this. With no shame, I drop ven theknees, push her skirt over her hips, and take what I want. I grab at her res andand hold her in place. Each subtle moan gets me off, and I almost com first taste. The problem is, it still doesn’t ease any of my frustration; ompanyintensifies it. My tongue eases inside her, stroking. I slide a finger al r of thisslit and use my soaked finger to tease her back entrance. Her legs quiv w do II dig my nails into her thigh to hold her in place. “So fucking sweet,” is do tosucking her into my mouth.

destroy Her fingers lock into my hair and grip a chunk as I feast on her. He body convulses around me and she comes on my tongue.

l in her She quickly becomes lax in my arms. When I feel she can stand own, I shoot up and work off my belt.

cil skirt A knock on the door stops me.

I back away from Fay, and she tugs her skirt down. Her cheeks are f and she looks cute as hell.

“What do we do?” she whispers.

her up “We do nothing. They’ll leave.”

o work More knocking. “Theo, are you in there?” The doorknob starts to r
“Fuck. Go hide in my bathroom. I’ll take care of this.” Fay hur
disappearing into the bathroom as the door opens.

er hers, “Oh, there you are. I was wondering if you’d finally taken a day off.
er skirt, I walk over to the table and aimlessly grab a report. “I don’t take d
panties. What can I do for you, Ms. Williams?”

i finger She waves her hand at me. “Please, I keep telling you. Call me Jul
This for Williams reminds me of my mother.”

Anything to get her out of my office and back to my little minx.
fingers. Julie, what can I help you with? I’m very busy.”

o to my “Your birthday is next week. I was hoping we could go over the bu
r thighsthe employee celebration.”

e at my “That’s not necessary.”

it only “Your employees love you. It’s important to give them the opportu
ong hershow how much they appreciate you.”

er, and Half my fucking staff wants me to get hit by a truck. “I’m sure the
I hum, don’t care. Do what you think works. I have things I need to—”

“I’d love to show you the ideas I drafted. If you’re busy, we can s
r entire lunch. Everyone has to eat.”

The fact that she is still in my office is making me angry. “I have
on her lunch. Just sign off on whatever it is—”

“Maybe dinner—”

“For Christ’s sake, Julie. I am *extremely* busy right now.”

ushed, I shock her with my blatant rudeness. She holds her tight smile an
“Of course. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thank you. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Yes. Enjoy your day.” She walks out, and I shut the door behind h

tate. time locking it. I storm across the room and into the bathroom. Fay sits
ies off, counter, swinging her legs back and forth.

“That wasn’t very nice, Mr. Monroe.”

.” “I don’t give a fuck. She was seconds away from getting fired.” I sn
ays off. arm around her, pulling her to me to claim her mouth. “Now, why do
be a good little assistant and take off this skirt?”

lie. Ms.



.” “Fine. Fuck, I can’t catch my breath. “You okay?” The cutest giggle falls
swollen lips.

lget for “Yeah, but I don’t think your towel rack is.”

A rumble travels up my throat. “All worth it. I’ll have maintenanc
fix it.” I love how flushed her cheeks are. I got a little carried away, a
had to hold on to the towel rack so I didn’t ram her into the mirror
unity to she’s perfect. And mine. She’s going to be mine. “Think anyone would
ay do. I if I carried you out of here and back to my place? Spent the day in my

Her soft giggle tickles against my lips. “Not a single soul. We sh
it.” I spank her ass. “Just kidding. Theresa would probably have my p
set up a waiting for me before we made it to the exit.”

“No one gets to fire my hard-working assistant but me. And I h
a work plans on doing that anytime soon.” I kiss her hard. When I pull aw
eyes are half closed.

“Speaking of, how did your morning meeting go? And why was it l
d nods. out in your agenda as private? Is it anything to do with those land surv

“Because it was meant for only me. Let me help you.” I kneel
ground and slide her skirt up her thighs. Never one to miss a chance
er, this her, I run my tongue up her bare thigh.

Once it's secured, I stand. "There. Now, if you wouldn't mind, we get back to work."

She smacks my chest. "Bossy. You know, you make a better lover than my boss."

"A lover, huh?"

Her cheeks instantly flush. "I mean, whatever you are, we are, this— I tug her against my chest, loving the quick breath she expels. "Well, I assume you're *my* lover, as you call us?"

She scrunches her nose. "God, that sounded so lame. What are you starstruck lovers out of a romance book?" Her sudden shyness has me all over again.

"Well, *lover*, I want you in my bed again tonight. So, if you have any plans, cancel them."

She pretends to think about it. "I'll have to reschedule some things. I notice you have other lovers."

I growl and bend down, taking her bottom lip between my teeth. "You'd better not be anyone else."

"There's not," she whispers, easing my sudden jealousy. "But fair warning: Since there isn't anyone on *my* end, can I assume there's no one on your end?" Her eyes shine up at me, waiting for an answer.

I suck her lip into my mouth. "The word you're looking for is 'excuse me.' And yes." I release her and give her a quick kiss. If she stays in my arms much longer, I'm going to undress her and fuck her all over again.

"With that being said, off to work I go. My boss is kind of a taskmaster."

I let her go and step back. That sexy as fuck smirk is going to be the last I see of her. I need to move up my plan because I won't go back to work without her in it.

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Chapter Nineteen

Fay

Theo Monroe is a force of nature. He's demanding and hot-headed dominance is lethal, and he will stop at nothing until he gets what he wants. I can't stop smiling, and I'm not sure if it's because of the near-explosive orgasms he's giving me or getting to cook again. Being in his state-of-the-art kitchen reminds me of how much I miss cooking. The thrill of creating delicious art. The fullness my heart felt at being in my true element.

It also reminds me that this assistant job isn't my true passion. As much as I love the thrill of all things Theo Monroe, I need to get back on track and fighting for what I want. I have a gift. I know I'm good; I just need someone to believe in me and let me back in the game.

Maybe I need to expand my online search. Change up my keywords on a job search site I've used before, but the link goes to the MIC career page. I re-enter the website. "What the heck?" I hate technology. I try another site, but the same thing happens. "Come on, you stupid internet." Even when I type in defaults back to MIC's website. "Screw it." I give up and sit in my chair.

Looking at the time, I realize that Theo should be back soon. /

private meeting. Quite a few have been added. Is it pathetic to say that I've only been gone a few hours and I miss him? I chuckle under my breath. I never imagined missing my grumpy, asshole, attentive boss. My cheeks burn with embarrassment from earlier. *Lovers? Really, Fay?* Could I have anything cornier? *No.* Shut up, self.

Somebody clears their throat, and I look up to see Theresa standing at the end of my desk. Great.

“Theresa, what brings you over to these parts?”

“To chase after you, which I knew I’d have to do.”

“Me? How nice of you, but I’m not much of a runner, so it looks like I’ve been left behind. His joke’s on you.” She stares back, confused and obviously missing the point. “So, how can I help you?”

She crosses her arms over her chest and taps her heel. “The paper you’ve been asked to sign?”

Oh shit, yeah. The paperwork that’s still sitting in my drawer, unopened. “Oh yeah. Sorry it took me some time to read through it all. No real mistakes, just a few typos.”

“There were no typos.”

“Hmmm. Either way, I’ll just sign off on them.” I pull the papers out of my drawer and flip to the back page where my signature is needed.

“What is it about you, anyway?”

“Excuse me?” I ask, handing her the forms.

“He’s yelling at you more than he’s not. And yet, he rewards you for everything by tripling your salary. I want to know what it is you’re doing. All of this inattention really only leads me to one conclusion.”

I’m taken aback by her blatant accusation. It’s one thing to whisper something behind my back. But to insinuate this to my face? I inhale slowly, trying to keep my composure.

hat he's composure.

reath. I “Welp, I don’t know what to tell you, Theresa. Maybe you should c
s blaze learning how to read since he only doubled—”

ve said Her cynical laugh cuts me off. “So much for your proof checking.
definitely want to know what makes you worth such a salary increase.’

in front “What are you talking about?”

“Please. Don’t act so naive.”

“Give me that.” I snatch the papers out of her hands and scan them
find—

like the “Ladies. Miss Evans.” Theo walks past us and disappears into his of
ie joke. “I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that fraternizing in the work
against company policy. But you should already know that.” She snatc
rwork I forms out of my hand and walks off.

I storm into Theo’s office. “Did you triple my salary?”

signed. “Hello to you too. God, you look sexier than you did this morning—

I *major* “Answer my question.”

“I did. Now, shut the door.”

“No!”

it of my “Why not?”

“No wonder everyone thinks we’re sleeping together!”

“We are sleeping together—”

“Theo! People are talking. Now they have proof.”

you by “How so?”

sudden “You tripled my salary!”

“Well deserved.”

behind I’m going to smack him. “Theo, I deserve to get paid a salary that
eep myscream I’m sleeping with the boss.”

“But you are sleeping—”

onsider “Theo.”

“Fay.”

Now I “Theo!”

’ “It’s a fair price for putting up with me.” He’s right there. “And else knows how to make coffee like you.” Okay, that’s also true. Even it’s just me popping in a K-cup and hitting a button. “If you’d shut n 1 until Iso I can have my way with you, I would quadruple your salary. It’s long morning.”

ifice. “Fine.”

place is “Fine, what?”

ches the “I’ll accept the salary.”

“Anything else?”

I shrug. “No.”

_-” “Good. Shut the door. I need that sweet cunt in my mouth.”



“Hey, Fay.”

I pull my eyes away from the land survey I’m reviewing. “Hey What’s up?”

“These were couriered over for Mr. Monroe. Thought I would drop off.” I take the package.

“Any chance you’re free to come to happy hour? A few of us are headed to Sylvie’s Tap.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say yes, but I remember I have doesn’t “Shoot, no. I can’t. Mr. Monroe is making me work late tonight.”

“Yeah, figured. The evil boss strikes again.”

“Ugh, I know, right?” Strikes deep inside me. “Next time?”

“You bet. Well, for what it’s worth, I’m happy everything’s working. Having him off my back has made my job so much easier. Plus, I like it. Too bad it never works out to hang, though.”

no one “I know. I’m sorry. Maybe this weekend? I have to work my other job, but we can do a girls’ day. Shopping and liquid lunches?”

my door “You bet. Good luck with that.” She nods to the reports on my desk and walks off. I grab the package, knock on Theo’s door, and walk in. He’s leaning back in his chair, throwing out numbers and business jargon. His eyes lock on mine, and I swear the earth shifts slightly. Pointing at the package, I mouth, “I’ll leave this on your table.”

He sits forward and grabs his cell phone. A few seconds later it vibrates in my pocket.

Theo Monroe: Put the package on my desk, shut my door, and lock it. My eyes lift to his. His expression doesn’t budge.

Theo Monroe: Now, Fay.

I shake my head, put the package on his worktable, and go lock his door.

Me: Is there something I can do you for, Mr. Monroe?

; Amy. “I don’t give a fuck. Tell them the acres don’t match the cost.”

Theo Monroe: Lift up your skirt and show me your pretty panties. Holding back my smile, and slowly shimmy up my skirt.

Me: Anything else?

reading “I thought we set up the markers. No investor will risk a half-billion dollars on a residential price tag if it’s deemed only residential.”

plans. **Theo Monroe: Turn around and touch your toes.**

I bite my bottom lip and spin on my heel, bending over and wiggling my ass for good measure. When I straighten and turn back, his eyes are

night.

ing out. **Theo Monroe: You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.**

ke you. **Me: You're not so bad yourself.**

Theo Monroe: I'm going to show you how beautiful you are.

job, but **Me: Sounds intriguing. Should I add it to your calendar?**

Theo Monroe: Make it a reoccurring thing.

ask and "No, I don't agree with that. John, you'll lose half your investment
e lookssell to Weinstein."

on. His His eyes narrow, and he turns in his chair to face the window, t
to thestealing his attention. I push my skirt back in place and leave, un
conceal the smile on my lips.

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Theo Monroe: You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Me: You're not so bad yourself.

Theo Monroe: I'm going to show you how beautiful you are.

Me: Sounds intriguing. Should I add it to your calendar?

Theo Monroe: Make it a reoccurring thing.

“No, I don't agree with that. John, you'll lose half your investment if you sell to Weinstein.”

His eyes narrow, and he turns in his chair to face the window, the call stealing his attention. I push my skirt back in place and leave, unable to conceal the smile on my lips.

Chapter Twenty

Theo

“**A**nd the flowers?”
“On the island as requested, sir.”

“Great. Have a good night, Grant.” I head up to my penthouse with five minutes to shower and prepare before Fay arrives. I want tonight perfect. This thing between us is too intense, and I can’t risk anything in the way of what we’re becoming. I’m going to tell her the truth. everything.

I can’t keep up this lie. Every time I bask in the beauty of her smile triggers a tightness inside my chest. A need to own. To consume. The way she bites on her bottom lip when she’s turned on or her cheeks blossom with color when she’s embarrassed or shy. I ache to peel back her layers and see all her fears, secrets, and desires. To make her mine. I want to sip the shine that she radiates. The light that she brought into my dark world when she walked into my office.

And until I lay everything on the line, all of that is at risk.

I shower away the stress of the day. I should tell her the truth the moment she gets here, but I plan on feeding her first. Or having her feed me.

overboard, getting every ingredient I could for her to make whatever her heart desires. My phone dings to notify me that the doorman let a guest in while I'm pouring a bourbon.

I open my door, and my smile drops. "What the fuck are you doing here?"
"Well, that's no way to greet your future wife."

My skin crawls at her words. "That's me being nice."

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"No."

"Invite me in, Theo. There are some things we need to discuss." I'm unsure of what to do. Fay is going to be here any minute. Fuck.

"Make this quick." I step aside, grabbing my phone.

Me: Something important for work came up. I'll come to you in about forty-five minutes-when I'm done.

I don't see the three dots and start to panic. I can't have her show up getting right now. This won't look good.

About "Hmmm, if I didn't know any better, I'd say I was interested in something."

I look at what caught her attention. The three large vases of flowers in the hallway. "Now, what is it you need to discuss?"

She turns to face me. "How was the charity event?"

"Lovely. Is that all?"

"You canceled the fundraiser dinner."

"I sent a check. Now, unless you're my keeper, you can leave."

My phone vibrates in my hand.

Fay Evans: Got it. *insert smiley face*

I shove my phone into my back pocket, feeling somewhat at ease.

"You're seeing someone. I can tell. Daddy's going to find out,

ver herwon't be happy."

uest up I turn my back on her and head to the kitchen, searching for my

"Goodnight, Alana."

here?" "You can't just ignore me."

"Watch me."

"You know what? You cannot talk to me like this. I deserve to be with some respect."

I slam my glass down on the island. "You want to be treated with re
freeze,She puffs out her chest and nods. "Then get the hell out of my life. Go
man willing to put up with your lies and deceit. Because that man is
anymore. So, yeah. If you want to keep up with this bullshit, then this
r placeyou'll get. Do you really think if we get married, you'll get your hap
after?"

ving up The fucked-up part is that the way she looks back at me tells
exactly what she thinks. I walk until I'm mere inches away from her
ruptingme and know this. You will never get a sliver of affection from me
barely stand being in your presence. If this blackmail plan goes ti
s. "Yes,which I'm fighting to make sure doesn't, I will ship you off to the ot
of the world so I never have to see you again."

"What do you mean you're trying to fight it? You. . . you can't do th

"Watch me." My anger clouds my senses, and I realize I've said too

She flings her hair over her shoulder. "I don't know what's come o
lately, but this isn't you."

I've had enough of everybody thinking they know what's best for m
I should be doing, and what I must sacrifice for my *family*. I eat
remaining space between us, and she steps back. Smart girl. "I'r
and he

playing your little games. Your father's. Mine. You've strung me al
7 drink.this long, but I'm done with your games."

I need to shut up. Revealing my cards too early will only hurt m
can't. "Get the fuck out of my penthouse. If I'm lucky, I'll never hav
your face again." I've backed her up far enough that all I have to do
treatedmy door and push her out. The second I slam the door, I feel so exhil
almost shout out in celebration.

spect?" Then reality sets in. What have I done? I've been here with Alana b
o find aher jealous rants and backlash. It's only a matter of time before my
not megets wind of this. Any sliver of relief disappears. "Fuck." I grab m
is what "Fuck!"

py ever I reach for my phone and hit redial on my last contact. "It's me. I
move things up. I don't have much time. It's now, or I lose everythin
me it'stells me he'll have what I need in the next few days, which seems
. "Hearlifetime. I don't think I'll have that long if Alana is on the rampage.

e. I can



hrough,
her end **Fay**

The faint knock stirs me awake. I sit up and look around. Shoot,
have fallen asleep on the couch. Another knock. My door. I get up ar
iat." over to look through my peephole. Then I check the time.

much.
ver you What the heck? I twist the lock and open the door. "It's late—"

"I know. I'm sorry. Can I come in?"

e, what
up the "Sure." I open the door and move aside. He walks in, scanni
apartment and taking in my place. "Sorry, it's not the penthouse suite."

n done His jaw tightens, and he snakes his arm around my waist. "I don't
fuck where you live." He walks me backward, and I can smell the bc

ong forhim this close.

“Well, you should. It’s not fancy like your place.”

e, but I “Fay.”

e to see “My coffee maker is from historical times. It only has one v
is opensetting.”

arated I “Knock it off.”

“Don’t even bother asking for squeezed juice. I’d have to old
efore—squeeze it. I’d also have to have fruit—”

7 father “Just kiss me.” He pulls me into his chest, and his head bends dov
y hair.eyes close when his lips brush mine. “All I want is you. These lips

snarky little thing that comes out of them.” His tongue glides along m
need tolip, which he sucks into his mouth. “I just want you.” His hands cup

ig.” Heand he lifts me. He kisses me with a message I’m trying to decipher.

s like amy arms around his neck and deepen our connection. “I hate that my li
confusing. But I’m going to make it right.”

I don’t know where all this is coming from or what’s brought it on,
not complaining. He lays me on the bed and moves next to me, not ir
anything more.

I must “Hey,” I say, threading my fingers through his hair. “Everything oka
id walk that I mind this sweetness.”

He doesn’t answer at first, so I cup his cheek and guide his eyes t
mine. “I know you’re the big bad wolf, and no one can touch you, l
can talk to me. If something was wrong.”

ing my He lifts his hand and grazes his fingers along my chin. “I’m just
, have been for a very long time. And I don’t want to be anymore.”

t give a “You could have called. I would have understood. You didn’t l
oze on come all the—”

“This is the only place I want to be. You. . .” He breathes in a
slowly. “You’re the only way I can fall asleep. You make it all go aw
doesn’t say more because, with his next breath, that’s exactly what he
working

-school

vn. My

. Every

y lower

my ass,

I wrap

ife is so

but I’m

itiating

ay? Not

to meet

out you

tired. I

have to

“This is the only place I want to be. You. . .” He breathes in and out slowly. “You’re the only way I can fall asleep. You make it all go away.” He doesn’t say more because, with his next breath, that’s exactly what he does.

Chapter Twenty-One

Fay

I sigh into my steaming mug, taking a long, much-needed sip of coffee. Not even this second cup has revived me from the poor night's sleep I got. The machine beeps, and I shove another stack of papers into the shredder.

When I finish, I head back to my desk just as Theo returns from a private meeting. He's missing his tie and looks tired.

"Hey." I smile and stand as he walks into his office. "Everything good?" "Yeah, just a long meeting," he says as I follow him into his office. As much as I wanted to shake him awake and ask him what he meant last night, I let him sleep. I took off his shoes, maneuvered him under my desk, and listened to his deep breathing while my mind ran through several scenarios. What did he mean when he said his life was confusing? Why was he tired and needed me to make it all go away?

He woke up this morning as if last night never happened, kissing me and telling me he would be late to the office because of a meeting. One thing is still none of my business.

"Yeah, just a long meeting," he says as I follow him into his office. He's been consumed with these private meetings. Not to mention he shut

every time I bring them up. “These private meetings sure seem to work out.”

—— “As I said, they’re long,” he snaps. He scrubs his palms down his face. “Sorry. I have a lot on my plate.”

“Then let me help—”

He throws a hand out, silently telling me to stop. “Let it go, okay? I know you’re busy. He comes up to me and cups my face. “You’re doing more than you should. You, here in front of me? That’s what I need.” He brushes his lips over mine. “That’s not doing much, though.”

“It’s doing way more than I know how to show you. I’m sorry I was a little out of coffee just now. Let me make it up to you tonight.”

“I can’t. I have to work.”

“Come over before. I promise to make it worth your while.”

I pretend like I have to think about it. “Fine. I can probably squeeze in another one.”

He gives me a quick kiss and steps back as Julie knocks on his door. “Okay?” “What can I do for you?”

Julie blushes, and I roll my eyes. *Give me a break.*

“Theo, we have your birthday event to discuss. I wanted to go over the final budget. It’s on your calendar.” Julie looks at me, her smile tight.

“Oh, was that today? It may have accidentally been canceled for the meeting.” Or I deleted it because I’m immature. And since when is she on a first-name basis with him?

Theo looks at the time. “It’s fine. I have a few minutes.” Julie snarls at me, her upper lip shifting into a snarl as Theo turns away.

“Great. Oh, and Fay, if you don’t mind, this is a private meeting with a downskanky little witch.”

ear you Slapping on an even bigger smile, I stand straighter. “Of course.” I
Theo. “T, we’ll finish later.” Julie’s brows raise as Theo gives me an
is face.look. Yeah, I made up a nickname to one-up Julie. Grow up, Fay.



Listen.” We’re laying in Theo’s bed, coming down from the most exhilarat
I know. high. My head rests on his chest while his fingers comb through my
r mine. hate that I have to leave soon for work, but I’d be screwing Mindy be
bar if I called out.

s a dick “Theo?” I graze my nails up and down his chest. “What does a m
has it all want for his birthday?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, come on, you have to want something.”

ize you “You. In my bed.”

I sit up and straddle him. “You already have that. Maybe I can take
dinner?”

“Julie, His hands brush up my thighs. “Why would I want to do that and
share you with others?”

ver the Maybe because all this hiding around is weighing on me, and I’m
to want more than to be his little secret. “You know, I was also think
another maybe. . . searching for another job.”

he on a I feel him tense up. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

irks at “Well. . . because that way, we wouldn’t have to sneak around. If th
problem, I could probably get a glowing referral from my curren
What? What’s with the scowl?”

.” That “Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Your mood just totally changed. You’re mad.”

turn to “I didn’t get mad.” He maneuvers me off him and climbs out of bed
amused “So, you just decided to get all pissy and get up?”

“I’m not pissy.”

“You are. I get it. No one can know. You’ve made that clear. But
because of work, we can change that. I’ll quit—”

ing sex “No.”

r hair. I “No?” My stomach tightens as the realization starts to settle in. “E
mind the you don’t want it to go past this.” Even saying it out loud hurts.

an who “Fay, it’s not about that.”

“Then what is it about? I like you. *Really* like you. We’re—this, it’s
He shoves his arms into a shirt. “It just is. Can we not get into th
now?”

“When is there ever a time to be honest about what this really is.”
out of bed and search for my clothes. “Is it me? Are you. . . embarrass
: you to me?”

have to “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Then what is it—”

He slams his fist against his dresser. “I said drop it. You knew w
starting situation was going to be from the start. I never led you to believe a
king. . . different. Wait, Fay. That’s not—”

“No, you’re right. You were *very* upfront. That’s on me.”

at’s the “Fay—”

it boss. “I have to get to work anyhow.”

“I pay you enough. You need to quit that bar.”

“You don’t have a say in my life.” I storm out of his bedroom, se
for my shoes.

“If you were smart, you would quit. It’s not safe for you.”

I let out a sarcastic laugh. Finding my shoes by the couch, I slide them on. “How would you know? Oh, wait, you don’t since you wouldn’t be dead in a dirt hole of a place like that.” I find my purse and grab my phone. “Fay, you’re being childish.”

“Well, good thing we’re only a bedroom and office fling, and you’ll have to step out in public with a *child*.”

“Jesus, give me a break.”

“Enjoy your weekend.” I open his door and take off.

“Fay, come back here. Fay!” I don’t stop until I’m in the safety of the elevator. My heart hammers against my chest, and I struggle to catch my breath while I fight back the tears.

I knew what I was getting myself into. But as time has gone on, I realize I climb something would change. And that’s where I went wrong. He never passed by on anything changing. What started as a secret fling has turned into something more. I know he can feel it. It’s impossible not to. The connection between us is so strong it’s scary.

It’s my fault. I let my emotions get involved and allowed myself to fall for a man who wasn’t available, emotionally or physically. And he never could be anything to be. But why? The only conclusion I can come to is I’m not worth it.

I wipe away a tear and exit his building. I walk a few blocks to calm myself before getting an Uber to work. The problem is, even the cold walk and the distraction of work to process don’t help, and when I open the door to the bar, I break down. The second I see Mindy.

“Damn girl, who stole your sunshine?” She gathers me into her arms. Arching like the child I apparently am, I ball my eyes out. “Hey, it’s okay. Did someone die? Your parents okay?”

“Yeah. It’s not that.”

them on. “Uh oh. Is it a guy? Only other reason a woman ugly cries is because caught guy.” I pull away, feeling embarrassed about my outburst.

none. “So, *that* was pathetic.” I wipe my nose.

“Nah. We all have those kinds of cries. Do I need to put someone on the never-hit list?”

I stifle out a sad laugh, shaking my head. “No.”

“You sure? To be honest, I didn’t even know you were seeing anyone.”

I wipe under my eyes to prevent my mascara from smearing any more. “I’m not. That’s the thing. My boss—”

“Wait, your *asshole* boss made you this upset? He’s going on my mind.” I sure. I thought this was a lover’s spat—wait. . . No, Fay—”

“It’s not like that—”

“Holy shit, you didn’t flat-out deny that—Fay! You’re sleeping with your asshole boss!” She cocks her head to Leroy, the barback, and yells. “Leroy, pull cover the bar! We need a minute.” Then she drags me to the back.

“Girl, I want all the details.”

I huff and fall into the chair. “It’s complicated.”

“Oh, I bet it is. Hurry up, though. You know Leroy sucks at drinks.”

I sigh and spill the beans, starting with our first office escapade. “When I finish, Mindy is putting out her second cigarette. “Well? Are you going to say something?”

“Honestly, that was the hottest story I’ve ever heard.”

“Mindy—”

“What? Seriously, I work in porn and can’t fake that much heat. You know. Wow.”

“It doesn’t matter how wow we are. He doesn’t want more than just a story.”

ise of awow.”

“It doesn’t sound like he said he didn’t.”

“But he didn’t say he did. It’s enough for me to connect the dots.”
on mylooks at me with her sad, puppy dog eyes. “It’s fine. I’m fine. I’m p
just getting my period or something. Since when do I get attac
something?”

ie.” “The stray cat out back.”

further. “Yeah, and he ran away. See! Getting attached is bad. Seriously I’n
feel way better letting it all out.”

list for “You sure? I can cover for you—”

“No way. This place is exactly what I need right now.” She goes i
hug, and I accept the comfort.

th your The bar gets slammed, which I’m thankful for. The next few hour
“Leroy,in a flash. I’m finishing an order for Cat, one of the waitresses, wl
k room.open stool in front of me becomes occupied.

“What can I get ya?”

“Well, I’ve never been in a place like this, so I don’t know what’s g
makinglook up to Theo sitting across from me in jeans and a fitted shirt.

“What do you want?”

By the “To say I’m sorry.”

u going “Great. Better hurry back to your fancy car before someone steals
not safe around here,” I spit out and walk off to help another custome
still there when I make my way back down the bar. “Did you want sor
else? We don’t carry fancy bourbon.”

ou two. “I want to talk.”

“Can’t. Working.” I walk off again.

just the Mindy comes up while I’m pouring a draft. “Hmm. . . I’m going to

the hot guy at the other end is your boss since he looks like the
Googled, and if so, just looking at him makes me want a smoke.”

Mindy “You can have him. Beware, though, he has commitment issues.”
robably Mindy laughs. “So do I. He’d be perfect for me. But I’m not the
shed towards.” I pull my eyes away from the tap. I hate the way my stomach t
at the sight of him. The way he looks at me. Like I’m the only one l
“Man, he reminds me of a sad boy who lost his favorite toy. May
1 fine. I should just go talk to him.”

“And say what?” I hand the beers off and shove the cash in the regis
“Hear him out. Clearly, he has something to say if he came all t
in for a here.”

He’s yet to release his hold on me. Finally, I sigh. “Fine. Cover for r
s go by “You bet! You know where I keep my smokes if you need one after
hen the I slap her shoulder and walk down to the other side of the bar. “Yo
five minutes,” I say and walk past him, lifting the end of the bar. He
and follows me. I find an empty table in the corner and sit. “Whatever
good.” I could have waited until Monday.”

“No, it couldn’t.” Frown lines form between his brows. “You didn’t
explain.”

“No need. I’m pretty sure I understood exactly what you were ge
; it. It’s—”

er. He’s “No, you jumped to your own conclusions.” Screw him. I stand up,
nothing grabs my arm. “Let me finish, please.” I want to tell him to go to hell,
way he’s looking at me has me sitting back down. “I told you
beginning that we had to keep our relationship private. I have my r
and those still stand.”

assume “Why? What are you hiding?”

hottie I “I can’t get into that—”

“Why? Then it’s true. You have a girlfriend—”

“Dammit, no.”

one he “Then what? Because all I can come up with is that this is just fun f
ightensBut it’s turning into something more than a fling for me.” I hate t
ie sees.emotions are so exposed. But I need to let him know where I stand. E
be youin the end, it will be me who gets hurt. And I should know better than
any deeper into whatever this is. God help me if it’s love. And becau
ster. taking so long to answer a simple question, I’m pretty sure I have my
he wayI pull my arm out of his grip and stand. “We’re done—”

“Fay, I’m in love with you.”

ne?” My world spins. “Wh—what?”

ward.” He tugs me forward into his lap. “I have my reasons for keeping us
ou havewish you would trust me. But for right now, that’s how it has to be. A
gets upit’s unfair to you. But it’s this or nothing.” He presses his forehead t
: it is, it“Please. Just trust me right now.”

“I don’t want to be this secret person in your life. I deserve—”

t let me “You deserve everything. Please. Just give me time.” My heart
beat, and something settles in me at his declaration.

ting at “How much time?”

“I wish I could give you that answer. But not too much longer. Pleas

, but he I take in the strain around his eyes. “Okay.”

but the He cups the back of my head and kisses me. “Thank you.”

in the “Sure, but can we go back to the other part where you said—”

asons, “I love you. Fuck, I love you.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and return his kiss. “I love you, too
it is love. “Gah! This is kind of crazy. I used to totally hate you, you ki

“You never hated me. I saw the way you would eye fuck me during the day.”

I laugh and slap him on the shoulder. “Yeah, more like murder you. I’d like to see you for you. “Well, ever since you started, I wondered how your mouth would feel around my cock. How slick your cunt would feel when I slid inside you. Because sweet these lips would taste.”

“That’s a little aggressive, don’t you think, Mr. Monroe?”

“Not when it comes to you, Miss Evans. You have the power to bring a man to his knees. And let me tell you, it’s not a bad place to be.”

That may have been the sweetest and hottest thing someone has ever confessed to me. “Okay, fine. You win.”

He takes my lips quick and hard, but we’re interrupted by Harry yelling. “Quiet. I’m here.”

“Coming! Sorry, work calls. If you hurry, you can leave before the roughnecks show up.”

He squeezes my ass. “Not a chance. I think I’m going to toughen up tonight. See what this whole cheap draft beer thing is all about.”

I smile, loving this laid-back side of him. “Okay. Your funeral.” I climb into his lap and get back to work, and he parks himself on the bar stool in front of me. I get the attention of the crowd and point to Theo. Then I yell, “See you later, the house! This guy’s buyin’!”

“God,

now.”

“You never hated me. I saw the way you would eye fuck me during the day.”

I laugh and slap him on the shoulder. “Yeah, more like murder you.”

“Well, ever since you started, I wondered how your mouth would feel around my cock. How slick your cunt would feel when I slid inside you. How sweet these lips would taste.”

“That’s a little aggressive, don’t you think, Mr. Monroe?”

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He takes my lips quick and hard, but we’re interrupted by Harry yelling for me.

“Coming! Sorry, work calls. If you hurry, you can leave before all the roughnecks show up.”

He squeezes my ass. “Not a chance. I think I’m going to tough it out tonight. See what this whole cheap draft beer thing is all about.”

I smile, loving this laid-back side of him. “Okay. Your funeral.” I climb off his lap and get back to work, and he parks himself on the bar stool in front of me. I get the attention of the crowd and point to Theo. Then I yell, “Shots on the house! This guy’s buyin’!”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Fay

“**Y**ou have got to be kidding me.”
“No way. This is it.”

Mindy and I stand in the middle of a sex shop, staring at an outfit can't even be considered an outfit.

“It's a string.”

“Technically, it's a ribbon. Sexy if you ask me.”

I lean in and check the price tag. “*Are you kidding me?* A hundred a dollars for a ribbon?”

Mindy shrugs at the display mannequin wrapped up in a thick re “Hey, you asked, I answered. Who wouldn't want to come home to tl girlfriend—*ouch*.”

“We're not dating.”

“Oh, sorry. We only tell *friends* we love each other, okay. As I was who wouldn't want to come home to their hot *friend* tied up in a pr bow for them to unwrap.”

“Ugh,” I groan. Maybe I shouldn't have asked Mindy to help me t perfect birthday gift for a guy who has everything. “I wouldn't ever

how to put that thing on.”

“I can help you.”

———— “No!”

“Why not? I can be in and out. Come on, it’s not like I haven’t
naked woman before.”

I put my hand up. I don’t need to hear anymore. “If I even consid
I’ll do it myself.”

“Whatever, your call. I did see an extra-large synthetic penis. May
two can—”

“I’ll take the ribbon!”

“Sweet.” Mindy walks off to wave down an employee while I star
poor mannequin. “You look uncomfortable,” I tell her. She doesn’t tal
—no, itProbably cause she’s too uncomfortable. And not real. My shoulders r
fall with a deep sigh. What people do for love.

God! I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to saying that. Love. “Ha!”
love. “Strange times. . .” I shake my head and purchase the most exp
nd fiftyribbon I’ve ever owned.



d bow.

heir hot I can do this. Totally got this. *I am woman, hear me*— “Ugh,” I ben
holding my stomach. My nerves are going bonkers. What was I thin
wasn’t. Mindy was thinking for me. Who let the part-time porn star p
my outfit? *You did. You can only blame yourself.*

saying,

etty red Okay, maybe I don’t got this.

My phone dings. I snag it out of my pocket as I walk into Theo’s bu

find the **Mindy: Last chance. Let me know if you need help. Tell him
n know this terrible rash and need you to investigate.**

Ew.

Me: I'll pass. But I expect you to sue that place if I end up putting on wrong and choking myself to death. Make sure to tell them I've seen a into asphyxiation before this.

Mindy: I'll delete your browser history too. I got you xoxox
ler this, "Evening, Miss Evans."

"Hey, Grant." I greet Theo's doorman. "Theo is expecting me."
'be you "I'm aware. Enjoy your evening."

I wave and head up the elevator. Nothing says happy birthday like card and a homemade cake with fresh buttercream frosting. But *nooo* e at the to go and get creative, and now there's a chance I might suffocate k back.before I even give him his gift. There's no way I'm getting it on by rise andMy hand starts to shake, and I reach for my phone to text Mind because I think I need her but miss my chance because Theo's door ' I'm in "Hi!" I jump into his arms and hug him. Dammit, I'm so nervous.

pensive "Miss me that much, huh?"

"Yep!" And I'm about to make a fool out of myself. I pull away and my top.

"Everything okay?"
id over, "Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

king? I "You seem. . . never mind. Come in. All the ingredients you as
ick out were delivered."

After I give him the show of a lifetime, or he cries over my suf corpse, I plan on cooking him the most delicious birthday meal. "Aw ilding. And again, I could have paid for everything. Seems silly paying for yc **I have** birthday meal."

"Stop. And I plan on having you pay me back in other ways."

I smile, but I think it comes out slightly crazy looking. Jesus, calm
ing thisFay. “I mean. . . I know I’m a treat, but wait till you taste my hon
vas notfrosting.”

He reaches out and tugs me into him. His lips graze mine until he
me the sweetest kiss. “Doubt that.” I don’t know. My buttercream is
badass.

“Hey, do you mind if I change real quick?”

“Not at all. Get settled. I’ll pour us some wine.” He grants me anothe
e a niceand I head down his hallway, trying not to pass out. I can do this. I
). I hadthought about what to get him, nothing of substance came to mind. H
myselffall. But from our past conversations, it seems like he may be lackin
myself.happiness. I might be jumping the gun on this one, but what better
y backmake your man smile than to dress up in ribbons and offer yourself t
opens.Let’s hope I don’t mess it up.

It doesn’t take me as long as I thought, undressing and wrapping m
the ribbon lingerie. Maybe it was the extensive tutorial videos I w
I adjustOnce I feel settled, I text Theo.

Me: Come to your bedroom.

I throw my phone, accidentally hitting the light on his nigh
“Breathe, Fay.” Inhaling a slow, deep breath, I settle into a kneeling p
ked forat the end of his bed. It feels like an eternity, but a minute later, th
opens, and Theo walks in. His eyes scan the room until he spots me
focatedbed.

esome. “What is this?” His voice is husky, and his eyes roam every inch
our ownbody.

“Your birthday present.”

“But my birthday isn’t until next week.”

down, My eyes stay on his. My breathing is steady even though my chest is pounding out of my chest. “You’ve been a good boy. I thought I would give it to you early.”

He offers He walks in and stops at the end of the bed. “Are you gifting yourself to me, Fay?”

“I am.”

He raises his arm and extends his hand, a finger grazing the ribcage. “I thought I already had you?”

When I “Not all of me.” His gaze darkens. I fight against my nerves as excitement and fear race through my body. I’m going to mess this all up. The lingering doubt in my mind that Theo has been holding back with me. A man with stature and power, I know he craves more. The intensity between us is on a level I’ve never experienced before, but I’ve always sensed a fire inside that he’s yet to show me. A beast that wants to take me and destroy myself in the most delicious way.

He watches. I part my lips. His eyes fall to my mouth as I wet my bottom lip. “It’s yours to do with as you please. You call the shots. Make me beg a little while you take everything you want.”

He stands. His fingers work up my breastbone and clamp around my neck. His grip tightens, his thumb pressing against my vein. “Are you sure about that? He’s asking because he can feel my pulse racing.

He looks on his I slide off the bed and kneel at his feet. He stares down at me. Slowly, he undoes his pants, and his cock springs free from his slacks. “Don’t be afraid of me with me,” I murmur.

He steps forward, pressing the crown of his cock against my lips. I open wide for him. “Oh, I don’t plan to be.” I stick my tongue out a

heart is the tip of him. Without warning, he pushes forward, and I take him full into my mouth. I relax my throat and breathe out of my nose so I don't gag.

He reaches out and caresses my throat. "You look beautiful like this with my cock in your mouth. I wonder what you'll look like after I fuck it, with cum streaming down your chin."

He slides into my mouth. I suck on him while my tongue glides down along his shaft. His words turn me on, and I can feel myself soaking through the ribbon covering my sex.

"Am I too much for you, naughty girl?" he hums, pulling out and thrusting back. I take him deeper, his subtle grunts telling me I'm doing good. He works him faster. "So hungry," he grunts, thrusting forward. His grip on my throat tightens. "Is this what you want? Me to feed you, naughty girl?" He picks up speed, grabbing my hair to keep me from moving. As he enters, it would happen. "Open up wider, baby." He holds my throat as his cock enters, and the warmth of his orgasm shoots down my throat.

I do my best to swallow all of him, but some slips past and drips down my chin. He pulls out, gazing at me. "Look at the beautiful mess I've made of you." He presses a finger into the mixture, coating his finger and drawing it up. His grip between my breasts. "You look like an angel like this." He steps back. "He's slowly begins to undress. My sex is swollen with need. He's still hard. I need him inside me. When he's completely naked, I stare up at him and beg for his next demand. He takes his time, teasing me. "I like you like this. I'll do anything I want to you. And you would let me, wouldn't you?"

I'm not sure I can talk. My emotions are running wild. But he's teasing me, and I would let him do anything. Ungodly things just to get him inside me. A wicked smile spreads across his face.

"I know, naughty girl. You want to play too. Not yet. Up on the bed"

lly into for me, angel.” I get to my feet and crawl onto the bed, positioning myself as requested. My eyes follow him as he walks to his nightstand. He returns with a small box. My something, and my curiosity spikes. I stare at the objects in his hands. My cumhe’s in front of me. “Do you know what these are?”

I nod. “I’ve seen them but never used them before.”

up and His smile turns even more wicked. He pushes aside the ribbon covering my bud, then clamps the toy over my nipple. I wince at the sudden pain. “This is going to pinch at first.” He sucks me into his mouth, then moves to my other nipple. His fingers drag down my belly, pulling at the ribbon around focus pauses at the wet strip between my thighs. “Is this my pretty girl?” yours?” he asks, slipping a finger between my soaked cunt.

if that “Yours,” I say breathlessly, struggling to respond.

k jerks, “And what exactly is in it for you?” He torments me, pushing his fingers deep as it will go. “To please you. Give you what you want.”

own my “I already have what I want. You, at my disposal. Is there anything else.” He wouldn’t let me do, angel?” He slides two fingers in, hook them just right a line hitting that elusive spot. A desperate moan slips from my lips. I suck and clenches, and I fear I’m going to come just from his words and touch.

d, and I “Take what you want,” I rush out, then hold my breath.

nd wait His fingers suddenly disappear. “Turn around,” he demands harshly. I can hand presses against my back, pushing me onto the bed. “Slide your ass

On your knees.”

right. I I slide my arms above my head, and two hands grip my hips, tugging me. Aup. My knees dig into the mattress, while my ass is on full display. My nerves heighten in anticipation. I’ve never done this before. The fear is palpable. Kneelsends a faint tremor through my body.

myself as “Relax, Fay.” He spreads my cheeks, his thumb grazing my p
etrieves opening. “I’m not fucking you here tonight.” As much as I want to gi
s when all of me, relief washes through me.

Theo tugs at the ribbon and slides it back and forth against n
“You’ve soaked my ribbon.” I gasp when his mouth presses against i
ing my “So fucking wet. I want to devour you all night long.” And he do
wetting tongue slips through my heat, fucking me as he sucks me into his mout
n. “But I can’t hold it in any longer. My breath comes out in short pants
ie same working my hips, pushing my ass against his mouth, needing more.
on. His the verge of exploding when he pulls away.

sent or “Stay face down. This cunt is all mine.” I feel the bed dip as he cli

His hands are back to gripping my hips again. His hard cock fir
swollen cunt, and he drives inside me. With just one thrust, I start to
nger as He takes no mercy on me and powers into me, taking what belongs

He fucks me fast and hard. His nails dig into my flesh as his balls slap
ing you my clit. My face slides up and down the mattress, and my nipples t
ght and they rub against the silk sheets. I’m powerless against him as m
My sex submits to him.

“Naughty. . . fucking. . . girl.” He grunts out the last part. Then he p
up to my elbows, leans over me, and pulls off the clamps. I cry out
ily. His ecstasy as my body spasms with another orgasm. The intensity becom
rms up much. My vision fogs over, and I swear I almost pass out. Theo gro
cock jerks, and he comes deep inside me.

ing me



ay. My

of pain “Have you ever thought about what you would do if you weren’t a
CEO?”

lickered He tugs me back against his chest, splashing water in his huge bathtub. He slides a loofah down my belly. “No.”

“Pretend you’re a kid again. Theo Monroe, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

He doesn’t answer at first, just takes his time soaping up my skin. “Honest, I’m not sure. This has always been my life. I never sat down and thought about what my else life could be.”

Such a sad answer. But he admitted he didn’t choose this path. I roll onto my side and straddle him. “Well, think about it now. No more badass investor. He’s gone. Today, you get to start over. What would you do?”

He stares at me, his look of regret tugging at my heartstrings. It’s gone in a second, and he brings me closer, sucking a nipple into his mouth. “Serious.”

“What, is my birthday party over?”

I laugh and slide my arms around his neck. “Not even close. I’m curious. I want to know more about you. Your passions. Dreams. What do you see yourself in five years?”

His chest rumbles against mine. “This is sounding more like an interview question.” “Answer the question, Mr. Monroe.” His teeth capture my nipple. “In pure—”

“You first. Where would you be if you weren’t here with me?”

“Not as satisfied, that’s for sure.” His laughter vibrates against my back. “Well, we don’t want that.”

“But the real answer? In some kind of chef position, working my way up to executive chef or something. And maybe one day own my own restaurant. I know that’s a pipe dream and not something that happens overnight in a lifetime for some. But I want to be somewhere I can use my

ub, and Cooking is my happy place. I'm not good at most things, but I'm good at that. You can crunch numbers and take on scary business tycoons. I just want to cook a mean truffle risotto."

"Then why aren't you?"

"To be honest, I told you. Because I tried to kill people with mushroom oil, I lost my restaurant a Michelin star, and got myself blacklisted from the restaurant world."

"So, fight back."

"Yeah, okay. I'm pretty sure my picture is in all kitchens with a 'no hire' warning."

"I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit. You have this kind of power that not many people have. It's one of the things I admire about you. I've dealt with ruthless businessmen over the years. Some would cut the legs of their own flesh and blood to get ahead."

"Geez, that's not morbid or anything."

"I'm just saying that they fight dirty. You should, too. Don't let anyone stop you from what you want. No one is holding you back but yourself."

"So, what you're saying is quit working for you and—"

"Theo," he says, "Okay, forget anything I said. You're never quitting." He leans in, kisses me on the cheek, and I feel his lips on my mouth. His lips are magical, and I hate when I need air and have to breathe. I gaze into his eyes, and my heart does this little flip that it hasn't done in a long time. He's doing a lot lately.

"I love you." The words fall off my tongue. We said them the other day up to the bar, but that's all. The feelings that race through me are unfamiliar. Beautiful. Scary as hell. Theo has woken a part of me I never knew existed. To love someone like this. . . it almost hurts. And not knowing what we're capable of together is unsettling.

good at I won't be his little secret forever. I refuse to be. But he makes me
st wantthat somewhere at the end of all this, there is an us. He asked me to tru
and I'm trying. I just worry. I'm offering him my heart on a silver plat
he has the power to destroy it.

cost a His silence creates a pit in my stomach. I'm falling too fast. What i
staurantall a dream?

“Let's get out. I have something for you.”

He doesn't say the words back, creating a bigger hole of doubt. W
'do notout of the tub, and he wraps me in one of his soft towels. I follow him
bedroom and sit on the bed while he disappears into his closet. My
fight in racing. I wish I didn't push it. Telling him that ruined the moment. W
ou. And returns, my right leg is bouncing with nervous energy. “Hey, I didn't r
off the spoil the moment by saying that. I just felt—”

He places his finger over my lips. “Shh. . .” He kneels in front of
places a box on my lap.

anyone “What's this?”

.” “Open it and find out.”

I look at him, then work off the bow. Opening the box, my breath c
, takingand I inhale sharply. In the box is a necklace, a large flawless d
to pullhanging from the clasp. “Theo. . .”

's been He takes the necklace from the box, unclasps it, and reaches for
place it around my neck. “Do you like it?”

er night My fingers brush over the jewelry. “I. . . I love it. But isn't it your b
amiliar.party?”

existed. He chuckles. “It is. And trust me, I'm not done with my prese
e are toadmires the necklace on me. “It doesn't compare to your beauty
wanted to give you something because I don't show you enough how

believe love you.” His words catch me off guard. Never did I expect him to affect me the way he does. “You’ve changed my life. In more ways than you could ever imagine, and I know I’m a bastard, but fuck, I want to be around to watch your dreams happen.”

“This is Theo.”

“I don’t deserve you. And there’s a good chance I’m going to fuck up.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Just don’t give up on me, okay?”

I wrap my arms around him. “Why would I do that?”

He looks at me, and I can almost see the fear in his eyes. “Hey.” I lean into his cheeks. “I’m not going anywhere. Well, unless your pizza oven breaks probably—ouch! Okay. I can live without it.” He holds my gaze, and there’s more worry in his eyes. “Mr. Monroe, you’re not getting sappy are you?”

“I wouldn’t dare, Miss Evans.” I squeal when he grabs me, tosses me onto the bed, and rips off my towel. “Now, do I need to remind you that it’s my birthday celebration? Spread nice and wide for me. It’s time for my diamond birthday dessert.”

ward to

irthday

nt.” He

. But I

much I

love you.” His words catch me off guard. Never did I expect him to affect me the way he does. “You’ve changed my life. In more ways than you know. I know I’m a bastard, but fuck, I want to be around to watch you make your dreams happen.”

“Theo.”

“I don’t deserve you. And there’s a good chance I’m going to fuck this up.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Just don’t give up on me, okay?”

I wrap my arms around him. “Why would I do that?”

He looks at me, and I can almost see the fear in his eyes. “Hey.” I cup his cheeks. “I’m not going anywhere. Well, unless your pizza oven breaks, then probably—ouch! Okay. I can live without it.” He holds my gaze, and I swear there’s more worry in his eyes. “Mr. Monroe, you’re not getting sappy on me, are you?”

“I wouldn’t dare, Miss Evans.” I squeal when he grabs me, tosses me onto the bed, and rips off my towel. “Now, do I need to remind you that it’s still my birthday celebration? Spread nice and wide for me. It’s time for my birthday dessert.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Fay

I look down at my phone as I race to work. There's no way I'm going on time. The Monday morning commute is the worst. Theo can't help himself if he's upset. He's the one who wouldn't let me out of bed when my alarm went off, knowing I had to run home for a fresh set of clothes.

Boohoo for me, I snicker to myself. I'm not going to lie; it wasn't the best place to be. Especially since I barely left his bed all weekend. My room is swarming with butterflies, and another giggle falls from my lips. Who would have thought Theo Monroe could be so attentive? He was controlling and selfish when it came to what he wanted, but since that was me, I allow myself to feel my cheeks flush at the way he made me submit. In the end, I'm crying from the most glorious orgasms I could ever fathom. I have everything I ever imagined I would want in a man when I fell in love.

God, I'm in love! I want to scream it to the universe. This feeling of being so consumed by a person, an emotion, is scary, sure. But it's also beautiful.

I open the doors of Monroe Investment Corp and wave to Amy. "Morning, Amy! Great top." I hurry down, drop my jacket, and grab the late

Appetit magazine I snagged from my mailbox.

Going into Theo's office, I wave the magazine around. "Morning."

He's on a call and puts his finger up, pausing me. "Then get it done by lunch." He ends his call. "Morning to you, too." He glances at his watch. "You're late."

"Oh, bologna. That's on you. But I know how to make it up to you." He opens his door and opens the magazine.

"You're going to seduce me with a magazine?" he asks, standing up and walking over to me.

"Kind of. It's what's inside the magazine that's going to seduce you. The August edition is about all things Italian. This chef, who's like the most famous in the world, shared one of his super exclusive dishes. And I'm going to make it for you."

"Are you now?" He pulls me into him.

"The door isn't locked."

"Makes this even more exciting." He captures my giggle with his mouth.

"Well, if you're lucky, I'll cook it for you in nothing but an apron."

"After the birthday present you already gave me, that feels like too good to be true." He covers my mouth with his hand. "I vote for one of my silk ties."

God, I love him. "Hmmm. Maybe. What's in it for me if I do?"

"I'll let you choke on my cock, as it seems you very much enjoy it."

He raises his hand and glides his thumb along my bottom lip. Heat spreads across my cheek. My little act on Saturday turned out to be a huge success. Not only did Theo love it, but surprisingly, so did I.

A giggle escapes my lips. I reach down, brushing his growing erection. "Mmm. . . tell me more."

"Or I can show you. Lock the door." His eyes darken while mine light up.

offer him a sweet smile. “As you wish, Mr. Monroe.”

He tries to grab for me, but I shuffle away, avoiding his hands, and open the door. By my way to the door. As soon as I reach for the knob, it turns on its watch. opens to the man I saw the other day entering Theo’s office.

I look from the man to Theo. His face is suddenly blank. “What is he doing here?”

“I came to see my son, of course. See how things are running around here. His son? This is Theo’s father? I smile and extend my hand. “Hello, Mr. Monroe. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Fay, Theo’s executive—”

“I know who you are.” His tone is clipped. He doesn’t acknowledge my gesture, his stare cold. I slowly lower my hand. “What kind of meeting are you two having? I’d love to sit in on it.” I don’t know what it is, but the way he stares at me makes me uncomfortable.

“We were done. Fay, you can leave.”

“Sure, did you want me to bring you two anything?”

“I said get out. Don’t you listen? I don’t pay you to question me.”

I flinch at his sharp tone. “I wasn’t. I was just—never mind.” I turn and hurry out of his office, not missing the smug look on his father’s face.



Theo

“Well, what a way to speak to your staff.” My father laughs.

I storm to my desk and sit, digging my heels into the ground. The way she looked at me after I spoke to her like that. . . She doesn’t understand. If my father saw any hint of affection, he’d jump on it. I need to deter him from any suspicions.

“When I pay them to do a job, I expect them to do it.”

“Fire her. Easy fix.”

“It’s fine. What brings you in?”

“No. Fire her. Or I will.” He turns toward the door.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Father? I assume it wasn’t to question how I treat my assistant.” I’m fucking praying it has nothing to do with

He slowly turns, and I release a tight breath. “I haven’t heard from you here.” since our dinner. I want to know where you stand.”

“With what? The fraudulent land surveys?”

“The proposal. I thought we had an understanding.” Every bone in my body fights not to throw myself over my desk and wrap my hands around my neck. “Alana and her family will be dining at the Silverstone tonight. They will be there. It’s time.”

“I can’t.”

“You can and you will.” He takes a step toward my desk. “You forget who is in charge here—”

My fists slam against my desk. “No, I don’t. Because you refuse to listen to me.”

“Then it’s time you fall into line. You have a duty to this family. I have been more than patient. You *will* make this official. Or else.”

Holding my breath is the only way to keep my fury at bay.

“I’ll let them know you’ll be joining us. See you tonight.” He turns to leave but stops. “And, enough with the assistant. It won’t end well for a girl who already has nothing and lives a measly life, spending her free time at a dirty bar? She’s not like us. Let her be.” Then he opens my door and it’s gone.

The second my door closes, I swipe everything off the top of my desk. “Fuck!” I yell, needing to break something. I can’t do this anymore.

let him control me like this. If he wants to take everything from me, s
I'm fucking done.

But I know it wouldn't end there. It's not just me who will lose ever
questionHe won't stop until he ruins her too. Just to get at me and make me
1 Fay. line. And I can't do that to her.

om you He's right. He's always fucking right.

The soft knock echoes in my office, and I know it's her. She does
for me to acknowledge her and opens the door.

in my "Hey, you okay?" she asks, her tone gentle and filled with concern.
und histo bury myself deep inside her and tell her I'm not, knowing she woul
ht. Youit better. But I don't. I need to do exactly what my father wants. It's t
way to save her from him. From myself. Until I'm free of him, I hav
her go.

get, son, "I was fine until you walked in uninvited."

Her eyebrows scrunch up in confusion. "Sorry, I heard yelling and—
e to let "Your job is not to tend to my feelings, Miss Evans."

"I'm not. I just—"

ana has "You can go now. I won't be needing you this evening eitl
tomorrow. You're free to do as you wish."

I hate myself. The way she looks at me. Shock. Hurt. Anger. But thi
urns toonly way she walks away from this unscathed.

her. A "Yeah, sure. Got it." Whipping around, she storms out of my of
time intakes everything in me not to call after her, make her come back, and f
and isapology into her. She doesn't understand the position I'm in. She woul

Instead, I let her go and hide in my office until I know she's gone
y desk.day. When I'm sure she's not still sitting at her desk, I grab my suit c
I won'topen my door to a note stuck on it.

so be it.

anything.

fall in

Alana Hill called to confirm your dinner reservation for tonight. She told me to let you know she's looking forward to it.

can't wait

I want

and make

he only

to let

—”

ner. Or

is is the

office. It

uck my

dn't.

for the

oat and

Fuck.

That call has my father written all over it. I rip the paper from my hand, crumple it in my fist, and toss it into Fay's trashcan. This is just the beginning. I've been here before. I need to do what's best for Fay right now and cut ties. Stay the hell away from her until I'm out from under his control. The ride to the restaurant is torture. The closer I get, the more I fight the urge to demand that James turn around and just tell my father to go to hell. From the beginning, it was a struggle to give it all up. I was selfish and greedy. My father did that to me. I craved the shiny little things he dangled in front of me. There was no other reason I agreed to these lies.

But now, those things seem worthless. I'd give it all up to have Fay back in my arms. Build a family with her. I clench and unclench my fists and check my phone for the millionth time. She hasn't called or texted. I select her name, but I don't thread to message her and stop. I know what's at stake if I reveal my secret. I need her to hate me and show my father she means nothing to me.

Pulling up to the restaurant, I instruct James to stay close and hand me my coat. Everyone is already seated.

"Theo, wonderful to see you." Katrina Hill stands, offering me her coat. I can't greet her and nod around the table. My skin crawls when I reach Alana. She sits next to my father. "Alana."

“Hello, handsome. We just ordered drinks. I got your favorite.” She brushes her lashes.

“Theo, sit down,” my father orders. I do, thankful for the drink in my hand.

“Rough day at the office?” Charles inquires.

“Demanding—the way my father likes it,” I say, throwing a jab his way. I finish my bourbon in one swig and raise my glass, signaling for another.

“It’s so lovely to have us all together. Theo, we missed you at last night’s dinner. Right, Alana, honey?” Katrina says.

“Of course. It’s never complete without you, Theo.” Alana smiles at me.

Charles never had that blowout at my place and reaches over and pats the top of my head. I cringe and pull away, meeting my father’s hard stare. It’s a warning.

“In the power of my name, I command you to listen to Katrina. She’s right. The opera house at the country club said the opera house is hosting private events now.”

There Katrina claps her hands together. “How wonderful. That would be a perfect venue, don’t you think, Charles?”

He nods, taking a sip of his old fashioned. “As soon as Theo does his homework, we can look into booking it.”

“Really, Daddy?”

“Anything for you, darling,” he coos.

I breathe in through my nose and slowly exhale, keeping my calm. I know the drill. *Don’t let them see the truth.* Or the fact that I’m aching with

That my heart has never felt so full. That I’m so madly in love with her. I can’t fathom another second away from her.

I shoot out of my chair, startling everyone.

“Sit down, Theo,” my father demands.

“No.” I shake my head. “I can’t do this anymore.” I storm out,

he bats James to be out front. My phone rings, my father's name appearing
dashboard screen. I click decline. The text comes through next.

front of **A. Monroe: Get back here. NOW.**

A. Monroe: You know how this will end.

A. Monroe: Don't force my hand.

is way. I I slam my fist against the seat. I'm going crazy because I can't h
er. one thing that would make this right. When the rage finally dissip
week's realize I've told James to take me to her. I need to go in there and c
Warn her. Beg for forgiveness.

as if we Instead, I have James take me home.

o of my Until I put a stop to my father, there can be no us.

arning.



A friend

, ***The next morning. . .***

superb She's late.

I gaze at the clock. Only minutes have passed since the last time I cl
I haven't slept, and my patience is at its thinnest. She's angry with r
his part, I'll take it, but she doesn't understand. I need to make her understand.
is why I'm coming clean and telling her everything when she gets
said she trusted me. Right now, this is where she needs to fucking show

Stay on I hear shuffling outside my door. I wait to hear a knock or for it t
out her. but nothing happens. No morning smile. No gorgeous vision carrying

h her, I I snap and open my door when I can't wait a second longer. "Get
now."

"No."

"Yes."

texting She shoots from her chair and faces me. "I'd rather not."

on the “And I’m not giving you a choice.” She doesn’t budge. I shove my hand through my hair, about to lose my shit. “Fay, goddamn it—”

“Theo?”

My head whips over Fay’s shoulder to see Alana walking toward me. I freeze. Fay turns her attention to Alana. “Already starting the day with a headache, I see.” What the fuck is she doing here?

Fay slowly turns and stares at me, the shock and betrayal in her eyes explaining the sharp knife gutting me. “*She’s your private morning meeting?*”

What the hell is she talking about? I step toward Fay but stop myself. I need to get Alana away. “In my office, Ms. Hill.”

“Of course.” Alana smiles and stops in front of Fay, not bothering to listen. “We’ll need our privacy. Please don’t bother to put anything through.” Alana hits her mark and turns to my office. Fay stands there, her face blank, which scares me more than if she said something snarky.

“That’ll be all, Miss Evans.” I speak harshly to her, hoping she’ll understand the truth and desperation in my eyes. *I’m sorry. This isn’t what you think of you. Don’t forget that.* But none of the important stuff leaves my lips.

Which She nods, the coldness in her stare gut-wrenching. “Of course. I’ll give you two your privacy.” She grabs her planner, and I storm into my office, slamming the door behind me.

“What are you doing here?”

“You left dinner in such a rush.”

“I shouldn’t have even shown up.”

“Theo, this would be much easier if you just gave it a chance.” She steps toward me, crowding my personal space. Her perfume burns my nostrils, and my throat constricts.

“Unless you’re here to admit you lied, there’s nothing we have to discuss.”

my hand “Theo.”

“I assume that’s a no, so get the fuck out.”

She flinches at my tone. “You have to be kidd—”

and me. I “Out! Get the fuck out. And do not come back.” Without another word, she turns on a dime, whips around and storms out of my office.

I hold my breath until I know she’s gone, then scrub my hands down the sink like a face before heading to face Fay. I exit my office, my stomach dropping.

I see her empty chair. Grabbing her phone, I hit the button to call receptionist.

“Good morning—”

receptionist “Amy, where’s Fay?”

receptionist “She left. Said she wasn’t feeling good. But she gave me your agency card, her should be—”

I slam the phone down and walk toward the elevators. “Mr. McCallister, I love you.” I see the Amy tries to flag me down as I press the down button and the door closes. “Your morning meeting just arrived—”

“Cancel my entire day. I won’t be back in.”

I give you

office,

Fay



I can’t breathe. I knew something was off with those meetings. Why didn’t I listen to my gut? He’s been lying to me and being with her. I’m his secret because he’s involved with *her*.

He walks I choke as I try to swallow my sob. What am I doing? I’m nothing but a puzzle piece in a fucking game he’s playing with me.

My scuss.” I make it to my building, relief coursing through me. I need to be alone in a room with closed doors so I can scream. Break things. My heart is already cracked.

a million pieces.

“Miss Evans.” I stop when I hear my name and watch a man exit car. “Do you have a moment?”

ord, she “Not particularly.”

“I’ll be quick.” Theo’s father steps onto the sidewalk. “I understand your own myson has taken a liking to you.”

g when “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

for the “There’s no need to keep up the charade. I’m well aware of the relationship you two have.”

“Well, if you know so much, then you know there’s nothing to tell. done here?”

la. You “Not yet. I thought it’d be best if you were better informed.”

“Of what?” Seeing him today does nothing to change the sleazy vibration from him yesterday. His smug stare followed me as I walked out of the store and gave me the creeps. Now, sirens are blaring.

“Theo may be enjoying his time with you, but there are things he’s hiding from you. Things you deserve to know.”

Trust me. Right now, we have to be a secret.

My stomach twists. “And what might that be?” I ask, knowing I don’t have the answer before the question leaves my lips.

y didn’t “Theo is engaged.”

is little I sway, and Mr. Monroe reaches out to steady me, but I step back.

g but a “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you. Theo isn’t very forthcoming at this time. But it’s best you know before things go any further and you get hurt.”

behind “He’s. . . engaged.” The words feel sour in my mouth.

ing into “As of last night. He proposed at dinner. It was a beautiful evening.”

I suck in a tight breath, fighting back the tears just waiting in the void.

refuse to give this man the reaction he's looking for. "I'm sure it was."
a town "So, you see, it's best you forget whatever this was between you
aren't the first girl he's toyed around with, but you will be the last."

"Oh, wow. A modern-day hero. Thanks for the info. I'll make
and mycongratulate the happy couple next time I see them." My nails dig i
palms, and I'm holding onto my last thread of sanity. "If there's nothin
.."

ionship "Of course. Enjoy your day, Miss Evans."

I walk away without another glance and run up to my apartme
Are wemoment my door closes, I slide down to the floor, tears streaming dc
cheeks. I bury my head in my knees and scream until my throat burns.

How *could* he? I hug my legs and rock back and forth. My fists clen
es I gotI bang them against the floor. How could he fucking do this? I'm spir
e officefast that I don't hear when someone enters my apartment. Two hands g
to my feet, and I snap out of my hysteria.

keeping "Jesus, Fay, what's wrong?" I look up at Theo, his face contc
concern. Hiccupping a staggered breath, I push his hands off me.
happened? Are you okay?"

i't want "Am—am *I* okay?" My world is spinning. I stumble back, trying t
away. He grabs for me, and I yank myself out of his reach. "Don't y
touch me."

He pulls back, and I suck in a breath, choking on my emotions
all thebarely look at him without wanting to fall apart. I shake my head an
urt." my eyes. When I open them, I force myself to look at him. "Wann
something crazy?" I wipe at my cheeks and shake my head again, swai
' back the emotion in my throat. "You're the first person I've ever told
vings. Ithem." I laugh, but it comes out painfully sad. "Twenty-three years c

“I’ve never loved someone. Until you.” I gaze at him through my tears.
“You messed up, right?”

“Fay.”

“I honestly don’t know what about you changed that. I have a weakness for you. I let myself fall for you.”

“Fay. . .”

He reaches for me, but I back away. “And the most pathetic thing I’ve ever done was believe you when you said it back.” Another strangled hiccup takes my breath. “I was okay being your little secret. I hated it, but I was okay with it because it was the only way I got you. But somewhere during this fucked up situation I fell in love with you. I thought. . . I actually thought you felt the same.”

My anger spikes. “There was always this pit in my stomach, though I tried to ignore it. I fooled myself into pretending I didn’t have this feeling because it was too good to be true. I was just waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

And even then I knew. I *knew* this was too good to be true. But you started to trust me.”

“What do you want me to do?” “And I’m still asking you to—”

I throw my hands out and shove him. “Fuck. You! I *never* should have trusted you. That was my first mistake. I never should have let myself get so close to you. I can barely see through my tears. I go to shove him away but he grabs my wrists.”

“I never promised you more than what I was able to give.”

I pull out of his grip. “You’re right. You didn’t. And shame on me for hoping. To be naïve enough to think you actually *meant* the things you were saying. That you loved me back.”

“Jesus, I do love—”

“Stop! Just stop with the lies, the hiding. Stop making me look like a fool.”

“Pretty My chest heaves. I cover my face, shaking my head and inhaling breath. “All those private meetings. . . God, it was right under my nose

“Those meetings—”

ness for “Are none of my business. You were certainly clear about that. know why.”

“What are you talking about?”

hing? I I wipe under my nose. “Your father came to see me.”

kes my “What?”

if that “To tell me what *you* wouldn’t.”

ation, I He stares back at me, his silence confirming the truth. “So, it’s true” doesn’t even have the decency to admit it. “Is it true?”

. I tried “Yes, but it’s not what you—”

telling “Oh god.” My knees buckle. I reach for the back of my couch and to drop my stomach. He tries to help me, but I slap his hand away. “Stay away told meme!”

“Fay, you need to hear me out.”

“Fuck you. Nothing you say will fix what you’ve done. God, I would have to give up so much of myself. But I won’t be just your conquest who guard get *married!*”

again, “He didn’t tell you everything—”

“He told me enough.”

“Yeah? And what’s that? My father is a manipulative bastard. He told me for what he knew would get you to walk away.”

ou said. My laugh is cynical and harsh. “He told me the truth—something wouldn’t.”

“Then you *are* the naïve girl you claim to be—”

a fool.” I throw my fists into his chest. “God! How *dare* you? I’m done with

a sharpbullshit. You told me once that you don't deserve me. And you're
!" Because I deserve better than you!"

I back away, unable to catch my breath. "I hate you." My lip quiver:
Now I hate myself for ever letting myself love you." I can't look at him ar
"Get out."

"No."

"Get out! God, you're so full of yourself. You can't even see when
not wanted. I never want to see you again."

His jaw tightens, and his eyes blaze with fury. Fear. But I don't care
ie?" He doesn't leave soon, I'm going to break completely.

"You're not the one who makes the rules. I say when we're done."

I stare back at him in shock. "You just can't fathom not being in
I clutch can you? You may think you can have whatever you want, but never
ay from you don't own me."

"I do when you work for me."

I laugh. "Then consider this my resignation."

willing He steps toward me and stops, his hands balled into fists at his side
ile you let you quit, but you need to give me two weeks."

"Are you insane?" I'm about to crack into a million pieces of deva

"Get out."

"You'll work your two weeks, or I'll have you blacklisted. Every
old you Not a single company will consider hiring you."

"You wouldn't."

ng you "I would. And you surely know I have the power to do so."

My lips quiver. "I hate you."

"You should."

th your I feel like you could hear my heart shatter. I shake my head and lo

e right chin. “Just leave.” I refuse to let him see any more of the pain he’s cau

He doesn’t immediately move. Finally, I hear his footsteps pass me
s. “And door open. “I expect you at work tomorrow.” I can’t even reply. Tell
ymore the things I want to say. The second the door shuts, I turn and
necklace from my neck, throwing it against the door.

Then I unravel entirely.

you’re



e. If he “You should eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.” I adjust my head in Mindy’s lap as she runs her
through my hair. We’ve been like this for hours. She came to my res
held me while I cried. And still, the tears won’t stop. I hate him. The
control, he has over me. How he could stand there and see the damage he cau
vsflash, didn’t fight for us. He didn’t even show remorse. He simply told me
work.

“You know, if you sold that necklace, I’m sure it could pay for
months’ rent. Worst case, you can get a job with me.” I close my eyes
es. “I’ll tear drips down my nose. “Hey, I was kidding. You’d make a horrib
star. There’s always the hiring a hitman route.”
station.

I shake my head and wipe my cheek. “I want to rewind time and ha
never happen. I wish I never crossed the line with him.”
ywhere.

“Sorry, girl. You have a better chance of the hitman solving your p
Hey, I’ve heard of people getting hypnotized to quit smoking. May
can hypnotize you to not remember this.”

I bark out a laugh and sit up. “God, what do I do? After everyth
only concern was me showing up to work. How could I have been so l
hate him. I just want to stop crying.”
wer my

sed. “You have to be close to dehydration, so let’s hope it’s soon.”

and the “Mindy. . .”

him all “Sorry, I know I’m trying to make light of this. And it’s fucked up. rip thewe go find his fiancée and tell her her scumbag, soon-to-be-husba cheater and douche.” Her comment only has my mind going to her Hill. A woman who’s everything I’m not. “Shit, sorry, I didn’t mean to trigger—”

“No, it’s fine.” But it’s not. How could he do this to me? “Why w stupid? I should have fucking known—” I cover my face.

fingers “Oh, Fay. This isn’t your fault. You let him in because you saw sor cue and in him. You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever met. You’re kind. control as hell. Who wouldn’t want a piece of that magic? Yeah, he did you di sed. He don’t let that discredit who you are. You’re the one who wins. Withc to be at he loses.”

“Then why do I feel like this? Why does this hurt so bad?”

r a few “Because you have a big heart.”

s, and a “Look what good that did me.” She pulls me into her arms, ar ple porn willingly, needing her comfort. “I hate him,” I cry, soaking her shirt.

ave this “I hate him too. Wanna go get tattoos and drink ourselves into a stu I laugh into her chest. “I would, but it seems I have to work tomorro

roblem.

be they

ing, his

blind? I

“You have to be close to dehydration, so let’s hope it’s soon.”

“Mindy. . .”

“Sorry, I know I’m trying to make light of this. And it’s fucked up. Maybe we go find his fiancée and tell her her scumbag, soon-to-be-husband is a cheater and douche.” Her comment only has my mind going to her. Alana Hill. A woman who’s everything I’m not. “Shit, sorry, I didn’t mean for that to trigger—”

“No, it’s fine.” But it’s not. How could he do this to me? “Why was I so stupid? I should have fucking known—” I cover my face.

“Oh, Fay. This isn’t your fault. You let him in because you saw something in him. You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever met. You’re kind. Funny as hell. Who wouldn’t want a piece of that magic? Yeah, he did you dirty, but don’t let that discredit who you are. You’re the one who wins. Without you, he loses.”

“Then why do I feel like this? Why does this hurt so bad?”

“Because you have a big heart.”

“Look what good that did me.” She pulls me into her arms, and I go willingly, needing her comfort. “I hate him,” I cry, soaking her shirt.

“I hate him too. Wanna go get tattoos and drink ourselves into a stupor?”

I laugh into her chest. “I would, but it seems I have to work tomorrow.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Fay

My heart is in my stomach as I walk into the office. I'll give him two weeks. But I won't make it easy. Hopefully he'll be thrown out before the week is over.

I wipe my sweaty palms down my pencil skirt and offer Amy a wave. "Just warning you, he's in a mood," she says. "He's been out here a few times looking for you."

"Thanks, Amy."

"Good luck."

I head toward his office, mentally preparing myself. Stay strong, don't argue, but don't take any more shit from him. Do as little work as possible. He doesn't deserve my full effort anymore.

I drop my things off at my desk. With a deep breath, I straighten my shoulders, exhale, and walk into his office without knocking. "Mr. M... He's sitting at his desk, hair disheveled and tie undone. I keep my face neutral and go straight into my spiel. "Your agenda has been emailed to you. You have an eight o'clock call with Trey Williams and the Weller group at 10:00 in the conference room."

“Where’s my coffee?”

“The machine is broken,” I lie.

———— “That’s not what I asked.”

I fight to tell him it’s up his ass, but I bite my tongue, refusing to see how he affects me. “I’ll have to head down to the café—”

“Send someone else. I need you to help with the reports for 10 o’clock.”

My smile is tight. “Sure thing, Mr. Monroe.” I spin on my heel and walk out of his office. “Fucking asshole,” I mutter, shutting the door behind me.

The intercom on my desk beeps. “And when you’re done cursing at him, bring me the blueprints for the Weller meeting.”

“Sure thing, you prick.” This time I say it loud and clear. I walk down

the hall to make *myself* a cup of coffee. Seeing him hurts, but I refuse to let him to tear me down. Mindy’s right. I’m awesome. I’m worth it.

I deserve better. I lean against the counter while the coffee brews and close my eyes. “I deserve better,” I chant.

“Better coffee? I agree. This stuff is horrible.” I open my eyes to

“Wow, you okay? You look sick.”

Nope, just heartbroken and angry. “Gee, thanks.”

“Shit, sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. You still look great. Just tire mentioned you went home sick yesterday.”

I wonder what else Amy mentioned. “Yeah. Just a bug. I’ll be fine.”

“That sucks. I actually wanted to ask you. You’d want to go?”

“I can’t say I’ve heard of them.”

“What? No way! They’re a local band. Here. You have to listen.” F

out one of his AirPods and hands it to me. I smile and place it in my ear as he plays the song. Music blasts as he watches me listen. “Whaddya think? Cool, right?”

let him “Yeah. They’re not—”

“What the hell are you doing?” Theo’s voice snaps through the break in my train and Kyle jumps. “I thought the coffee machine was broken.”

“I guess it’s fixed.”

and walk “Then where’s my coffee?” he barks, taking in how close I’m standing to him. Kyle.

me out, “In the coffee machine,” I bite out.

“Then get it! And, you—get to fucking work.” He jabs his finger at Kyle, then storms off.

to allow “Man, how do you work for that guy?”

, and I I hand him back his AirPods. “I imagine poisoning him daily, which would give me immense pleasure.” Kyle laughs. “Thanks for the invite. Some other time though.”

to Kyle. “Yeah, sure. See ya.” I wave him off as I trek back to Theo’s office to get his coffee and debate spitting in it. When I return, he’s sitting at the worktable. It takes everything in me not to accidentally dump it on his head. Amyhead.

“Your coffee.”

He doesn’t say thank you, and I regret not adding my own special touch. . . “Sit down. I need you to read over the report.” I huff, take the empty chair next to him, and flip through the pages.

“You’re not even reading it.”

“Yes, I am.”

He pulls “You’re not. Start over.”

er while “Asshole,” I mumble, moving my eyes back to the first page. This
i think?count to fifteen between every page flip. My phone buzzes, and I pu
of my skirt pocket.

Mindy: How’s it going? Kick him in the dick yet?

lkroom, I stifle a laugh and reply.

Me: No but I think I’m going to spit in his next cup of coffee.

Mindy: Girl, piss in it.

iding to I laugh again.

“What the hell is so funny?”

“None of your business.” I put my phone face-down on the table.

toward “I pay you to work, not fuck around—”

“No, you’re *forcing* me to work. I don’t want to be here. *You* threat
take away any chance of getting another job if I didn’t.” He reaches
h giveshand, and I pull away. “You don’t get to do that either. If you cross the
er time,any way, I *will* go to HR. I’ll tell everyone how you came on to me, a
it was not mutual.” His hand freezes. His desk phone rings. “You
ce witho’clock call is early.” I stand and grab my phone.

at his “Fay—”

ver his “If you don’t like it, fire me.” I leave his office, feeling like maybe
little, but my chest quickly deflates. This isn’t how I wanted it to be.
to the bathroom and shut myself in a stall, willing my heartbeat to sl
l touch.fighting not to cry. I want to go back in there and yell at him. Make l
oty seatme why. I do breathing exercises and counting techniques Mindy tau
from a stupid Google search and pull myself together. When I get back
desk, my email notification dings.

To: *Fay_Evans@MIC.org*

time, I **From: T_Monroe@MIC.org**

ll it out **Subject: 10 am meeting**

You will be attending this meeting. I expect you to study the report and take notes.

Theo Monroe

CEO, Monroe Investment Corp

From: Fay_Evans@MIC.org

To: T_Monroe@MIC.org

Subject: 10 am meeting

<insert thumbs up GIF>

Fay Evans

Executive Assistant to Theo Monroe

ened to

for my

line in

and that

ir eight

God, I hate him. He doesn't reply, and I'm glad. His call runs late, still preoccupied when his ten o'clock clients arrive. I greet them and direct them into the conference room. I may hate Theo, but his clients do nothing wrong, so I have a box of pastries on the table again.

"Please, enjoy a pastry while you wait."

I won a

I hurry

ow and

him tell

ight me

k to my

They take a seat and dive into the goodies. I smile at the groans. I rush to miss that local bakery. I walk around the table, handing each gentleman a report and making small talk. There's a younger guy at the end, and when I give him the report, he stalls, looking up at me.

"Hey, not to overstep, but I swear I've seen you before."

"Hmmm. . . not sure. I haven't been with Mr. Monroe very long. He finally makes his entrance.

The guy smiles at me. “Well, I’m new too. Interning. And I can’t p where, but I swear we’ve met—wait! I know. Bev’s. You bartenc *ort andright?*”

I return his smile, fighting a blush. “Yeah. On the weekends mainly.

“I knew it. I have to say, you’re a great bartender. We’re always t Fridays. Any chance you’re working this weekend?”

“I am.” Knowing Theo is in earshot, I reply. “You should come b drink’s on me.”

“For sure. Maybe after the meeting, I can get your number?”

“Miss Evans, do you mind if we start the meeting now?” Theo grow

“Actually, why don’t I give it to you now—”

“Miss Evans,” Theo barks, but I ignore him. He can’t have his cake it too. I bend down, leaning into the guy to write my number on his rep

so he’s “Fay. Great name.”

id walk “Thanks. I kinda like the way you say it too.”

dn’t do “Miss Evans!” Theo raises his voice, causing attention to himself.

I straighten and move on, handing out the rest of the reports. When Theo, I drop his in front of him and make my way to an open chai n going stares me down. I can feel the fury even though I’m not looking at eman a takes everything in me not to give him a fuck off smirk. Thank god h when I the meeting. My phone buzzes with a text message.

Unknown: Hey. My name’s Ben BTW and wow, someone n relax. He always talk to you like that?

” Theo I look up and see the cute guy down the table smiling at me. I smi and type a reply.

Me: Only when he hasn’t taken his meds. I won’t be here much so it’s okay. #grumpyoldman

inpoint **Unknown:** You should quit and come work at my office.
l there, **younger, more lively. And maybe I'd get to see you again. *wink e**

Me: I'd love that. How about—

” “Miss Evans.” I stop mid-text, meeting Theo's glare across the long
here on “Yes, Mr. Monroe?” I smile, shifting my eyes to Ben, and wink.

His palms slam against the table. “In my office. NOW!” Theo is u
y. Firsthis chair, startling everyone.

This time, I don't fight it. I have some words for him too. We botl
out of the conference room and enter his office.

ls. “What the fuck was that about?” he asks, slamming the door behind

I whip around so fast that I almost lose my balance. “Not to soun
and eatbroken record, but none of your business.”

ort. “It is my business when you're blatantly flirting with someone in t
me.”

“Then stop paying attention.”

“Give me your phone.”

I get to “No.”

r. Theo “Give me your fucking phone!”

him. It “No!”

ie starts He's too quick, snatching it from my hand.

“Give me that back. Theo!”

eds to He shoves my phone in my face, unlocking it. “Hey! You can't do
assume he's scrolling through my text messages. “This is an inva
le backprivacy.”

“Grumpy old man? Didn't seem to have a problem with my age bef
longer “Well, I do now.” He starts pressing buttons. “Wait, don't. What
doing?” He's most likely deleting Ben's contact. “You can't do that.”

We're "Fucking watch me."
noji* Once the number is erased, he tosses my phone onto the table.
"You're an asshole."
table. "Tell me something I don't know."
"I fucking hate you—" He grabs the back of my neck and pulls me up fromslamming his lips over mine. This kiss is brutal. Angry. I struggle him, and he bites my bottom lip. It causes my mouth to open, and his h stormlashes against mine. God, I want this. Miss this. But what I truly wan a mirage. I work my hands up to his chest and shove him away. "Yo him. get to do that anymore."
d like a His chest is heaving, and his brows furrow with anger. "You're mi his. Not *anyone*'s. Mine!"
front of I hate the wetness I feel on my cheeks. "I will never be yours agai disgust me." He stares at me for a beat, then turns and walks over window. "Is there anything else you need, Mr. Monroe?"
"Get the hell out of my office."
"With pleasure."

that!" I
sion of
ore."
are you

“Fucking watch me.”

Once the number is erased, he tosses my phone onto the table.

“You’re an asshole.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I fucking hate you—” He grabs the back of my neck and pulls me to him, slamming his lips over mine. This kiss is brutal. Angry. I struggle against him, and he bites my bottom lip. It causes my mouth to open, and his tongue lashes against mine. God, I want this. Miss this. But what I truly want is just a mirage. I work my hands up to his chest and shove him away. “You don’t get to do that anymore.”

His chest is heaving, and his brows furrow with anger. “You’re mine. Not his. Not *anyone*’s. Mine!”

I hate the wetness I feel on my cheeks. “I will never be yours again. You disgust me.” He stares at me for a beat, then turns and walks over to the window. “Is there anything else you need, Mr. Monroe?”

“Get the hell out of my office.”

“With pleasure.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Fay

Two days later...

I didn't see him again the rest of that day. The hours drag, every little sound making me jump in my chair. I wondered if he would come into his office and finally fight for us. I didn't mean what I said. I wasn't going to allow him to walk all over me. He didn't choose me, so he doesn't get to have me. What hurts the most is that he never plans on keeping me. I was just a toy to pass the time with until he got married.

Two days have gone by.

Just like yesterday, his entire calendar is blocked out with meetings. The happy couple is probably at cake tastings and picking out fancy silverware. I feel mentally and physically worn down, and I'm constantly fighting back tears. I can't stop thinking about what the meetings on his calendar meant. There were so many. Was he with her when he was then running off with her?

I'm on autopilot, knocking off the tedious lists he emails me. Some items are there just out of spite. He's trying to make a point. Until I realize he does own me. I raise my head to see Julie walk past, tugging a hair

balloons toward the elevators. Today is Theo's birthday, and the last
want to do is celebrate him. I hate that my brain takes me back to the
wrapped myself up as his present.

"You're going to get icing on the bed."

"I don't care. God, you're a vision."

"Because I'm covered in icing?" I giggle.

"Because you are absolutely flawless. And I am one lucky man."

"You okay?" I break from my thoughts and look up to Kyle.

"Hey. Yeah, just tired. I can't wait for this day to be over. Se
considering playing hooky tomorrow."

"You and me both. Everyone's heading up to the terrace for the b
ged by,celebration. You're coming, right?"

uld call "No, I'm actually—"

l. But I "Please? Don't make me do this alone."

3, so he The last thing I want is to go up there, but his pleading eyes win n
ned on "Fine. I guess I can stick around for one glass of champagne and gross

"You're the best." Kyle waits as I shut my computer down. W
together and take the elevators to the terrace. "Jesus, how does Ju
privateapproval for this shit?" We both stare at the gaudy decorations.

ing out Because he was too busy railing me in his private bathroom to
nd I'mcheck what he was approving. "Who knows. Oh, look, bubbly." We

privatethe bar, and I grab a pre-poured glass. Kyle taps his fingers on the bar,
me anddeciding on his own drink. I look around the area. Theresa gives me

look, and, because I have nothing left to lose, I smile and flick her off.

2 of the "Did. . . you just give HR the bird?"

n done, "Sure did."

idful of Kyle laughs and taps his glass against mine. "Savage. I like it."

thing I I drink my champagne faster than I should, discard the empty gla
night I grab a fresh one. I should leave before he gets here. I don't want to see
don't know if my heart can take it.

"Ah, the man of the hour has arrived," Kyle says. I turn around, a
heart drops to my stomach. Theo walks in looking more gorgeous than
and he takes my breath away.

I empty my glass a second time and grab a new one.

Employees surround him, wishing him a happy birthday. He shakes
seriously his eyes searching the terrace. I scoot to use Kyle as a barrier, but
need to worry about Theo seeing me because he's turning to someone
birthday him who grabs his attention.

His father.

And Alana Hill.

"Damn, who's the blonde?"

ie over. My hands begin to shake. How is my glass still empty?
cake." champagne."

ie walk "Who?"

lie get "No—more champagne." My chest burns. Kyle grabs me another
guzzle it down.

double- "How are you doing that? Don't the bubbles—"

head to "Shut up." Fuck. My glass is shaking. My entire body is. Alana sash
finally to him and leans forward, placing a kiss on his cheek.

a nasty "Should we go say—"

"No. Please don't leave me."

"Are you okay?"

No. I'm far from okay. Alana looks like a goddess. She threads l
through his. They are the true power couple. "You don't look good. A

iss, and still sick? Probably should slow down on those.”

he him. I “I think I need a refill.” I turn and grab another glass, this one going just as fast as the others. The problem is they’re not numbing the pain and my stopping the hurt fast enough. I make the mistake of looking their way. In an ever, eyes collide, and as much as I need to, I can’t look away. I hate him and him at the same time.

Alana presses her hand on his shoulder and whispers something in my ear. I hate that she’s here. That he so easily flaunts her in front of me.

I don’t I turn to Kyle. “I need a favor.”

behind “Sure.”

“Kiss me.” Without giving him a chance to reply, I grab his tie and press his lips to mine. I hold my breath until I can’t bear it and pull away.

“Geez, I didn’t know you—”

“Wanna get outta here?” I’m trembling.

“More “Yeah, sure.”

“Cool, let’s go.” I grab his hand and pull him toward the exit. Theo looks in my direction, but his father blocks him, allowing us to make a clear path. We exit the building, and I burst into tears.

“Hey, whoa. You okay?” Kyle asks. And why wouldn’t he wonder about me acting completely insane.

lays up “Yes. Totally. Why wouldn’t I be?” I can’t even say it without hiccuping.

“I mean, it’s kind of obvious.”

“Yeah, don’t know what you’re—”

“It’s okay. I’m not going to say anything. It’s just. . . I caught you that week.”

her arm “Wait—what?”

Are you “Yeah. Wrong place, wrong time. Monroe had me stay late to work

Sutherland proposal. I think he forgot. When I came by to have him sign down on it, he was. . . busy.”

pain or I cover my face with my hands. “Oh, my god. Everyone knows I was sleeping with my boss?”

and love “No. Well, I mean, everyone suspects. Most are for it. Monroe has been somewhat tolerable as of late.”

his ear. “Oh great,” I groan. “And the others?” I dare ask.

“The others are jealous you’re banging the ‘hot boss.’ Their wives are on mine.”

I wipe my hands down my face, my eyes meeting Kyle’s. “Well, I’ll just bringbreak it to everyone, but we’re done.”

He offers me a sincere smile. “I’m sorry to hear—”

“Don’t be. He’s a jerk and a liar.”

“I could have told you that and saved you the tears. If you want, we’ll go out. Have a drink.”

steps in The last thing I need is alcohol. “Thanks, but I’m going to head out for a break. There’s also a good chance I won’t be returning to work—for real this time.”

Kyle nods. “Well, here’s my number. If you ever want to get a drink, I’ll be here.” He takes my phone and enters his contact info.

“Thanks, I will.” I hug him, and we go our separate ways. When I get to my apartment, I do what I should have done three days ago—type up a resignation letter, effective immediately, and email it to Theresa. I know she’ll be more than happy to push it through. I can’t be here, so I pack up my two last overnight bag and leave. By the time I knock on the door, I’m emotionally broken.

The door opens, and the dam finally bursts.

“Mom. . .”

sign off “Oh, honey, come here.” Cradling me to her chest, she brings me
“Gerald! I think you need to get your gun!”

ws I’m

as been

nds, not

hate to

can go

l home.

time.”

nk, call

I get to

up my

m sure

ack an

tionally

“Oh, honey, come here.” Cradling me to her chest, she brings me inside.
“Gerald! I think you need to get your gun!”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Theo

I pace my office, looking at the clock every two seconds. Where the hell is she?

There's a knock, and I whip around. "You're late—"

"Oh, I didn't know you were waiting for—"

"Get the fuck out of my office!" The kid turns around and almost falls himself out on the door before catching himself and exiting.

She's late. Again. She's doing this to get back at me. If I'd known my father had planned to show up at that disaster of a birthday celebration with Alana on his arm, I would've left early. It smelled like a setup. A man. And he sure fucking sent it.

I wipe my hand down my face, guilt tearing at me. The way she looks at me. At Alana. If she only knew. *You could have told her. She would have understood.* She would have left me sooner. I wanted to pull her in my arms and kiss away that sadness I know I caused, and I fucking hate myself. But that bullshit she pulled. . . the kiss. . . I'll murder that little punk.

I glance at the clock and snatch up my phone, hitting the extension for the receptionist.

“Morning, Mr.—”

“Where the fuck is Miss Evans?”

—— “Oh god, not this again,” she mutters.

“Not what again?” I snap.

“She. . . um. . . she quit.”

“She didn’t quit.” She knows better.

“Yeah. She did.”

She wouldn’t dare. She’s mine for the next eight days—enough time to figure out how to make her mine permanently. “Well, she’s not actually quit. Call and tell her she better get her ass in here.” I hang up, bash my head into the receiver onto the base.

She’s not fucking quitting. I need her here. Now. My hands shake. I take a deep breath and hold it, trying to compose myself.

One. Two. Th—

knocks “Fuck this.” Grabbing my cell, I hit her contact. It goes straight to voicemail.

When my “This little stunt is going to cost you. You’re mine for eight more good days. Get to the fucking office!” I hang up.

Message. Five minutes pass, and I redial. Voicemail again. “This is childish. Come to work, or I’ll follow through with my threats.” I hang up.

Looked at I don’t even wait long before I call her back. “This is ridiculous. I would have answered my damn call.” Every second that passes, I lose more patience. Finally, I snap, storming out of my office and past reception.

myself. “I’m sorry, Mr. Monroe. I can’t seem to get in touch—”

“Cancel all my meetings. I won’t be returning.”

for the “But—”

Twenty minutes later, I’m outside Fay’s apartment, my fist to her

“Fay! Open the damn door! I’m not leaving until you—”

“She’s not home, so you can stop disrupting the entire building.”

I turn as a guy walks up the stairs. “How the hell do you know?”

“I passed her last night when I was coming in. She was leaving an pretty big bag. I’m guessing she’s not planning on coming back for a v

“Did she say where she was going?”

“Nope.” The guy disappears down the hall to his apartment, and I t
time tomy phone and dial her number one more time. “Call me. . . please.” Th
owed toI can’t keep the tremble from my voice, my frustration turning into wo
ing the

I take a

ight to

oddamn

Get into

At least

atience.

r door.

“Fay! Open the damn door! I’m not leaving until you—”

“She’s not home, so you can stop disrupting the entire building.”

I turn as a guy walks up the stairs. “How the hell do you know?”

“I passed her last night when I was coming in. She was leaving and had a pretty big bag. I’m guessing she’s not planning on coming back for a while.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

“Nope.” The guy disappears down the hall to his apartment, and I take out my phone and dial her number one more time. “Call me. . . please.” This time I can’t keep the tremble from my voice, my frustration turning into worry.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Fay

T *hree smelly, pathetic days later. . .*

A loud clanking stirs me awake. I drag my arms up, my slapping over my ears.

“You’re doing so great, honey.”

“I think I see a muscle forming.”

My hands do nothing to block out the noise. *Jesus, not this again.* I blanket and peel an eye open. “Any chance you two can tone it notch?” My mother looks down at me, her hands on her hips. Am wearing that ridiculous workout jumpsuit again.

“Well, look who’s finally awake. Thinking about getting out today?”

“Beds are meant to be stayed in. Why would I ever leave?”

“Because you haven’t left it in almost three days. It’s starting to s here.”

I twist my head and stick my nose into my armpit. Ew! “I smell fi probably you two. Sweating and stuff.” Shit, I smell awful.

“Your father and I are also wondering how much longer you p

staying.”

I lift my head. “What do you mean? I’ve missed you both so much. —me moving back in is for the best.”

My mom sighs. “Honey, we love you. But for the love of God, get in bed, shower, and suck it the hell up.”

I sit up, only to lose my balance and sink sideways. Stupid air mattress. Hurt at how my mother, who’s supposed to comfort me through all my pain, is talking to me, I say, “Mom, I’m going through a difficult time. I need you to stay close to those who love me. It’s part of my healing—”

“It’s getting pathetic. We didn’t raise you to let anyone walk over you. Stand up for yourself. Hiding away in your parents’ house is not going to fix your problem. You’re really interrupting our workout routine. I know you’ve been here before. Fight. Where is that spitfire daughter of mine?”

My shoulders slump. “She got her heart broken by a man who died. I don’t lift my any worth in her.”
down a “Then show him what he’s missing. Rise above this. An Evangelist and she accepts defeat.”

I lay back down. Defeat is putting it lightly. Three days have passed and the pain has only gotten worse. I can’t stop thinking about him. He’s in my head, in my dreams. . . Thoughts of him consume me, along with what-ifs and ways this could have gone. She’s right. This isn’t who I am. I don’t know that I would know since I’ve never been in love. And now that I know it’s like, I can go another fifty to seventy years without it.

It’s I wipe my nose on the sleeve of my shirt. “You’re right. I need to get on my big girl pants on and move on.”

plan on “Good. There’s a car outside for you.”

I sit up. “What do you mean?” Geez, I thought maybe I could s
I think another two weeks and then make my reentrance into the world.

“A very nice man named James is waiting for you.”

t out of James? As in *Theo*’s James? I shoot out of bed but get sucked back
sinking mattress and roll off the side. “Jesus,” I huff and trip over my
mattress.pants, faceplanting into the floor.

My pain, My mom squeals. “Oh, goodness, are you okay?”

should “Yep. Good. Where is he?” I run across the hall to the bathroom and
my head through the blinds. An SUV is parked in the driveway, and J
you like standing with his hands clasped together in front of his waist. “How l
ourself.he been here?”

s. Plus, “Hmmm. . .”

urt, but “Mom! How long?”

“Three days.”

ln’t see “*Three days!* Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I tried, honey, but with all your crying, you wouldn’t hear me.”

s never I stare down at James. *Theo*’s James. And then I come to my sense
him to leave.”

ed, and “Why?” My mom chases after me.

s in my “I’m not going back.”

all the “Fable—”

um. Not “No! He—I—No.” I flop back onto the mattress. A loud pop
w what around the room, and I sink into the floor. “*Seriously!* You couldn’t
have left my bed in here?”

put my “Fable, get the hell up.”

I lift my head. “Mom.”

“I know, but you’re being a bit dramatic.”

sulk for I wrestle myself into a sitting position on the flat mattress. “How
have no idea what he did to me. How bad he hurt me. *Lied* to me.”

“He also told you to trust him. . .”

into the My eyes narrow while hers widen. “*Excuse* me?”

pajama “I’m just saying. . .”

“How did you know he told me that?”

“Oh, heavens, he was here—”

nd stick “He was here?!”

ames is “Yes! He came looking for you. We stuck our ground. But he
ong hashandsome. Convincing even. Your father invited him on his next
trip.”

My jaw drops, dragging on the floor. I shake my head. “I’m sor
gonna need you to repeat all this because what the hell, Mom!”

“I think you need to hear him out.”

“I will do no such thing.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Then you can stay here and always wonder.”

s. “Tell “What would I wonder? I know everything I need to know.”

“The truth, honey.” Then she turns and walks away.

The truth? What the hell does that mean? “What does that mean?”
to no one. I know the truth. Does she want me to hear it again? Not a c

I walk across the hall and take another peek out the window. Thre
echoesPoor James. Caught in the crossfire. I take a few deep breaths to
at leastmyself. The least I can do is go home. Relieve James of this silly assign
He’s probably hungry and misses his family.

I knock on the window, getting his attention. When he peers up a
hold up my hand, motioning I’ll be right out. My mom is right. I’m an
I got this.

v? You **

On the ride home, I make a mental note of everything I need to mother refused to let me out of the house before I showered, so that Food is next. Now that I have some of my fire back, I'm starving. Time to conquer the world. Find a job. Maybe reach out to my old ins and beg for referrals. Worst case, I can move to Antarctica, where knows me, and get a job as a cook. Maybe find a nice fisherman and my days smelling like fish and happiness.

's very Okay. Scratch all that. Let's just start with the basics. If memory s hunting nice packet of beef ramen is waiting for me at my apartment. . .

"Um, James." I look out the window. "This isn't the way ry. I'm apartment."

"I'm sorry, Miss Evans. I have strict orders to deliver you straight Monroe if and when you leave your parents'."

That conniving. . . "James. Stop the car."

"I was instructed not to, Miss Evans."

"Fine, I'll jump out."

My heart rate quickens, and my breathing comes out in chopped I shout can't do this. I'm not ready to hear his excuses. I'm not strong enough hance. him no. Because I miss him so much. And I refuse to give in to ten e days. pleasure only for the long-term pain that *will* follow.

center "James, I'm serious. Pull over and open this damn door!" He final gnment. as I say. The door to the car opens, and I hurry out, straight in front of building.

it me, I Theo stands there barefoot in a pair of fitted sweatpants and a T-sh Evans. hands are hidden in his pockets. He looks at me, his face blank.

"More tricks from you? Nice. Tell James to take me home."

“Not before we talk.”

do. My “I have nothing to say to you. *We* have nothing to talk about.”

s done. “We do.”

hen it’s I throw my hands up. “I beg to differ.” I walk in the opposite direction. She stops me.

no one “Five minutes. That’s all I ask. If you still want to leave after that, live out your life, and you’ll never hear from me again.”

I stall. He doesn’t deserve a minute of my time, let alone five minutes, *agoddamn it*, curiosity gets the better of me. “Five minutes.”

He nods and opens the door to his building. I follow, but not before I turn my head around and giving James a nasty look. We ride the elevator in silence. I should have made him talk in the lobby. Going into his penthouse is a mistake. I’m asking for trouble. He opens his door, and I walk in, hating how I missed the unique smell of his place. The TV is on, playing a movie I hate that I want to know what he’s watching.

“Would you like some wine?”

“No—yes. Yes, I’ll take some.” Combining booze with my uncontrolled emotions and an empty stomach is a bad mix, but I need the distraction. He hands me a glass, and I accept it, sitting at the island. Theo stands temporarily from me and pours a bourbon. “Your clock is ticking. Why am I here?”

He picks up a large envelope from the island and slides it to me.

ly does “What is this?”

Theo’s “Open it.”

His face is blank. Cautiously, I open the folder and pull out the contents. Photos. Images of— “What the hell is this?” My stomach clenches and a wave of nausea travels up my throat. “Jesus.” My hands shake

single tear flows down my cheek. I drop them onto the counter. “Why are you showing me—”

“Seven years ago, my father introduced me to a man named Charles Hill, but I don’t care. I can’t—”

“I have four more minutes,” he states. “Charles Hill runs a very successful development company. I’d just finished my undergrad, and my father invited me to dinner. Charles was there, and they shared their vision of a merger with me. Monroe Investment Corp and the Hill Group would be coming together. The same night I met Charles Hill, I met his daughter. A chance meeting turning down my spine. “I was asked to take Alana out. Show her a good time. I understand, I was fresh out of college. I was wild and had a chip on my shoulder. So I took her out. We got wasted, went to a hotel, and had sex. I quickly stand, photos falling to the ground. “I don’t want to know what happened, and I—”

“Three minutes,” he says. “My memories of that night are foggy. I know I woke up alone. Alana and I saw each other a few more times throughout the summer, but it was casual. When the fall semester started, she left for Europe to complete my master’s. I never spoke to her again.”

“Am I supposed to feel sad for you? Did you . . .?” I look down at the photos. “Are those photos—”

“I need you to hear me out. Please sit down.” I don’t want to, but my hands are shaking so badly I do. “Two years later, I returned home from London. My father called me into his office as soon as I landed, only to ambush me with those photos.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. How could he do something so horrible? “Are you telling me this?”

“Because they’re a lie.”

Why are “Pictures don’t lie, Theo. She doesn’t look very willing—”

His glass bangs onto the counter. “I’m not a fucking rapist. Those Hill.” are fake. I have no idea who that girl is. And I have never touched

My brows crease as I look at the images. “I don’t know how those small, created or altered, but that shit never happened. I went to a hotel with and my and woke up there. Without her or anyone else. The problem is, Alana ision of otherwise.”

d grow “I don’t understand.”

Will runs “It was her word against mine. She told her father I was messed d time. ditched her at the party. That she was never at a hotel with me.”

on my “What? Why would she do that?”

x—” “Because I think that was their plan all along.” He’s losing me again or hear father showed me those images with Charles Hill sitting there. I argue innocence. Told them to check the hotel cameras, my credit card. But /, but I all wiped away. There was no evidence I was ever at the hotel that night e times “How?”

Started, I “Because they had a plan. They told me they paid off the g supposedly raped, and Alana lied and said she was with me that e 1 at the Those images would disappear, my name wouldn’t be ruined, and I stay out of jail. . . with conditions. If I accepted their terms, I would ny legs play my part and marry Alana when the time came. ”

Europe. I don’t know how to digest this. It’s crazy. How can someone create ush me disgusting scenario and cover it up? How can someone force. . . I sh head. “I don’t. . . this is—”

? “Why “Crazy? Fucked up? I know. I’ve been living this nightmare for t five years.”

He takes a step toward me, and I tense, stopping him. My denia

touch hurts, but he doesn't advance. "I was born and raised to be exact images you pinned me as, an egotistical asshole. I would run my father's cocaine drugs." when he stepped down and take my place in a role already mapped out for me. When the time came, I would become CEO of Monroe Investments and Alan marry Alana, and together, we'd continue to build an empire."

I claim. Hearing him say that out loud churns my stomach. Another tear falls. Ashamed, I turn my cheek and wipe my face. "I don't want to hear anything of this."

up and "I need you to. It was either marry Alana or lose everything. I never wanted this. Or her. I can barely stand looking at Alana."

"Theo, this isn't the medieval times. Your father can't force you to marry in. "My someone. It's called saying no. If you're innocent like you claim—"

I lied my "I *am* innocent." He runs his hands through his unruly hair. "It's not that it was simple."

ht." "How is it not?"

"Because it isn't!" he snaps but regains his composure before speaking to the girl. "I'd again. He turns back to me. "There was a point in my life where I only cared about power. Wealth. Money was my drug, an addiction I never would give up. My father made me that way. He created a version of himself that I would have to know that's what it took to stay on top. At first, I didn't believe him until he presented me with these insane terms. You're right; no one should be forced such as to force someone into marriage. I would come to find out that it is possible to make my wanted the whole mess to disappear and thought it would with time."

he conceded. I shut that part of my life off, signed my life away, and threw myself in work. I knew, once that merger was ready to go through, if not, I would marry Alana."

I of his "And now it seems you're engaged. Why did you bring me here?"

tly who “I never proposed. That was my father’s doing. I want nothing to do with your company Alana.”

out for “Oh, give me a break. The perfect couple? *Please*. Are you seriously going to tell me you’re not into her? That this is just a scam?”

“Yes. Because it’s the truth. I told you. We had that night in the hotel a few other times that summer, but it was all meaningless.”

“What’s your point?”

“I haven’t touched her since.”

I shoot up from my chair. “I’m not here to be played. If you think you’re going to believe you, you have—”

“I’m not done. Sit down,” he barks out but quickly catches himself and sighs. “Please. . .” I slowly retake my seat. “As I said, the agreement would go into effect when the merger was ready. And now it is. My father gave me a deadline to propose by my birthday.”

“Well, you’re right on schedule then. Congrats, by the way—”

“I’m not marrying her!” He grabs the back of his neck. “My father is a powerful man. He doesn’t take no for an answer and always gets what he wants.” He starts to pace the kitchen. “He’s ruined everything I’ve ever wanted and destroyed any woman I’ve felt anything for. Innocent women who wanted to make this contract go through.” He storms over and stops in front of me. “He’s made me into this cold, heartless person. Because if I were a sensible person, he would destroy it.” He stares down at me, needing me to understand.

So, I “I gave in to his demands. This lie. He won.” He pauses, holding me back. “But then, you walked into my office with your clumsiness and horrible manners.”

“You didn’t know shit about being an assistant, but damn it, you made my heart beat again.” He cups my cheeks and rests his forehead against mine.

“You made me want something I couldn’t have.”

do with “What?”

“You.” I feel it then—the slightest warmth in my heart. Like one of my broken pieces has settled back into place. “I’ve seen what my father is capable of. I refused to put you in his crosshairs.”

His palm slides down and grips the nape of my neck. “I fought away from you because I knew the repercussions. I thought I was strong enough to do my duty, marry Alana, and fall deeper into my work. I accepted that—”

“And then the awards ceremony happened.”

He nods. “I fucked up. I was weak. You, in that dress, broke me. I crossed the line. Risked everything. I told myself if I kept it to one kiss, maybe I’d be satisfied knowing what your lips tasted like. Felt like. But god, my father couldn’t stop. And fuck, I didn’t want to.”

“Why couldn’t you just be honest with me?”

“The things he’s done to people who became important to me. . . I can never let that happen to you.”

“So, you broke my heart instead?”

He laces his hands into my hair and presses his lips to my temple. “I’m selfish. You’re all I thought about. Saw. Smelled. Fuck, I couldn’t function without you.”

I push him away. “And, in the end, you left me in pieces. So, again, am I here?” I stand, needing my space.

“My private meetings.”

I raise my hand, stopping him. “I don’t want to hear about those. You made that’s going to fix this?”

“Yes. Because you were wrong.”

“Oh, you two having private hookups isn’t what it looks like?”

“I told you, I haven’t touched her in seven years. It took me some
of the piece it together. The day Alana showed up, I had a meeting that was
rather private. You assumed it was with her.”

“Yeah, no shit. Now that we got that out of the—”

to stay “I was meeting with Craig Stone.”

strong I pause. “Who?”

ork. I’d “A lawyer helping me find a way out of this.”

“How?”

“My father told me if I didn’t follow through with the deal, not only
crossed he take everything from me—the company, everything I’ve worked to
e I’d be he wouldn’t hesitate to let those photos resurface.”

then I “He wouldn’t do that.”

“He can, and he will. Money goes a long way. But I didn’t care
going to risk it all.”

ouldn’t “But. . .”

“Then he caught wind of you, and I knew you were in danger.”

“How?”

“I was “I don’t know. Fay, I need you to know I wasn’t hiding us becaus
unction embarrassed. It was to keep you safe until I could figure a way out o
told you to trust me.”

in, why “You also *lied* to me.”

“I did what was safest for you.”

“You’re engaged!”

ou think “Damn it, haven’t you been listening? I never proposed. Never b
ring. This was an agreement made between two power-hungry fathers
don’t care about the money anymore. I’d rather be fucking poor th
under my father’s control any longer. But I couldn’t do that to *you*.”

time to “I can take care of myself.”

marked “He would have taken everything from you.”

“What exactly do I have for him to take?” It takes me a moment to f
out. “You.”

He takes in a deep breath. “I did what I had to do.”

“So, you *had* to break my heart and shatter me? You’re right. You
should have touched me.”

“I did what I had to do because I love you.” I shake my head, refu
r wouldallow his words to affect me. “Fay, I love you.”

ward— “Stop.”

“No. I need you to understand I did what I thought was best for you.

“You didn’t love me enough to be honest with me. You wanted me
. I wasyou but couldn’t trust me with the truth.”

“I did it to protect you—”

“No, you did it to control me!” His lips slam down on mine, bru
demanding.

I pull back. “I can’t.”

e I was “Because you think I’m playing you.”

f this. I “Because I think you’re a liar.”

He disappears down the hall, returning with a pile of papers and di
them on the counter in front of me. “See for yourself.”

“If these are more pictures—”

“Read it.”

ought a I look down, pushing around the papers. One catches my eye, and I
. Fay, Iup. “I don’t understand. What is this?”

an stay “My way out.”

I read through the pages. Land surveys, contracts. . . Pages and p

financial reports. The last page is a statement from Theo detailing his involvement. I look up at him. “You’re going to expose yourself as a figurehead for fraudulent mishandling of properties?”

“I’m stating that, for the record, I had no prior knowledge of this. It wasn’t until you caught the error in the plat survey for Bill Geller that I started putting things together. While you were with your family after your heart attack, I started digging. I’ve never been in direct contact with Hill or the part his company plays in these deals. My job, as you know, is to close. My father would just demand I sign off on deals involving the Hill Group. I never thought twice about it until something strange appeared in the Geller deal. I’m not sure if you remember, but Bill Geller doesn’t usually come across as a businessman who would have lied about something like this. So, I reached out to Lance to do another, more discreet, land survey.”

“And? What did it say?”

“The exact opposite of what the Hill Group reported. Geller’s land was perfectly fine for construction. But, per our company, it wasn’t suitable for such. We were going to swoop in and save the day, offering him a share of the land to save him from a total loss, and in return, claim to clear the land and resell it for triple what we paid.”

“Jesus, how could they do that?”

“Again, money. Geller and Geller wasn’t the first client we did this with. If you found, there were dozens more.”

“Theo—”

“I confronted my father about it, but he blew it off.”

“So, he’s scamming people into selling their land? That’s all so illegal. He can’t get away with this.”

“And I don’t plan on letting him.”

his non- There's a moment of silence until the realization of his words si
and the "Wait, but your name—"

"If he doesn't allow me to walk away, I will expose him."

wasn't I shake my head. "But that can blow up in your face. Theo, you j
started me how much money and power he has. What makes you think he w
father's something crazy, like turn the blame on you?"

Charles "That's where Craig comes in. To make sure it doesn't."

ow, was My stomach aches at the next question. "And the confession?"

the Hill He cups his hands over his mouth, exhaling a breath. "Worst ca
d in the prepared to fight."

exactly "Theo." I stand, too many thoughts and worries clouding my bra
ng like shuffle through the papers. "Some of these dates are within the last five
ey." That makes you just as guilty. If you expose this, you're exposing you

"I know." The seriousness and finality with which he says it tells r
nd was already accepted this possibility.

eled as "That's not fair. If they're lying, and you knew nothing about th
uit price can't—"

an it up "I only care about you. Nothing else matters."

"If you cared about me, you wouldn't give up!" I raise my voice.

"I'm not."

s to. As I pause to take all this in. "So, what are you going to do? Go
police?"

"I'll negotiate. If he dissolves that contract and allows me to walk
I'll keep the documents to myself. If he disagrees, I'll go public.
sorts of police. The media. I have a whole contact list of people at *The Ne
Times* who would die for this story."

"And if he thinks you're bluffing? Theo, the law is not always on o

inks in. Innocent people go to jail every day.”

He cups my cheek. “I refuse to be under his hold any longer.”

A tear cascades down my cheek, and he brushes it away. “And what must I do with these photos? What happens if he does what he’s threatened? I believe in you, but they look bad.”

“I have to trust the legal system to prove my innocence.”

A sudden rush of panic steals my breath. “There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t.” His knuckles brush along my cheek. “I need you to choose, I’m sorry. The day you came into my life, you changed things for me. You made me choose to fight for what I wanted. Which was love. A life of happiness and the biggest regret is I didn’t make a move sooner. I should have made you choose years ago. “You should have been honest with me.”

“I should have. And that’s something I have to live with. But I’m sorry you now. I’m laying it all out. And even after sharing this, I know you’ll still be done with us. I’ll have to accept that. If you choose to stay, I need to know that things will get ugly. I know what my father’s capable of. I’ll go after you first.”

“I told you I can take care of—”

“I know you can. But I can’t and won’t allow you to be his target. I’m not going to take this lightly. He’ll pull out all the stops to ruin us both.”

to the “Then go to the police. The press! Expose him.”

“If it comes to that, I will. But there’s also a chance I’ll go down with you. As you pointed out, I look just as guilty because of those land deals. My loyalty is not with me. It’s with his name and fortune. He won’t hesitate to destroy me. Things will get worse before they get better. I don’t expect you to stay with me. You have your whole life ahead of you, and I can’t put my side in jeopardy.”

“Oh, shut up.” I rise onto my toes and press my lips to his.

“Is...” He stalls, basking in our connection. “Is this you telling me about forgive—”

“It’s me telling you that what’s the point of love if it’s not a little bit of pain?”
Now shut up and kiss me.” He scoops me in his arms and lifts me onto the counter.

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Probably not.”

He squeezes my butt and yanks me forward. “But this time, I’m not letting you walk away.” He deepens our kiss, and I melt around him. His fingers tug at his sweatpants while he slides off my shirt. His hands are on my hips, and I secure my legs around his waist as he walks us to the couch.

My jeans are gone the second my back hits the cushions, and I feel his hands on my ass. He grabs my ass, positions us, and drives inside me. “Fuck, you’re mine,” he hisses. “You belong to me. Only I can work myself in and out, his hand snaking into my hair and gripping my neck.”
“Look at me, Fay.” My eyes flutter open to meet his. “You’re mine. Do you hear me?” The seriousness in his voice sends a shiver down my spine.

“Does that go for you as well? Are you all mine?”

His jaw tightens. “If you doubt that I want anyone but you, then I’ll show you a shitty job showing you how much you mean to me.” He works me harder. His next thrust more forceful. My legs are around his waist, my heels digging into his ass as he pulls out and powers back through my throbbing heat. “Do you and me. No one else. Do you understand me?” In and out. My hands clutch his shoulders, and I hold on while he fucks the promise into me.

“Theo,” I cry out as my thighs clamp down. He releases his hold

hair and grips my hips, pistoning into me like a man on a mission. Being me youme. Owning me. I can't hold on any longer and free fall over the edge is right behind me, finding his own release.

is risky? "Fuck," he pants, holding me in place until his cock stops spasming into the brushes the hair out of my eyes and holds my face between his palms. "You love me so damn much." He kisses me quickly, his hands threading through my hair.

His grip tightens, and suddenly, he pulls back, forcing my eyes open. "There's one thing I need to know. And I need the truth." His expression is unreadable. My unexpected shift, and his gaze becomes hard, sending a shiver down my spine. "What?" I ask, my voice unnerved.

"Did you fuck that kid?"

"What?"

"That twat from the office. You kissed him in front of me. Did you see him?"

His tone is harsh. Completely gone is the gentle Theo, and in its place is a beast, ready to tear at the throats of his enemies. "Why are you not answering me?"

"I didn't."

"Swear to me."

"I swear. I saw you with Alana, and it hurt me. I wanted to hurt you harder, but we went our separate ways once he asked him to leave with me, but we went our separate ways once at. "It's outside."

He leans his forehead against mine, exhaling a deep breath. "I thought you would let him. . . have you. It killed me."

"Like I said, I only kissed him to get back at you."

randing “And I hated every second of it. God, I wanted to rip his tongue o
e. The thought of him and you. I couldn’t take it. It drove me mad. And th
wouldn’t answer your phone. . .”

ing. He I quickly pull away from him. “What do you mean you couldn’t
“I love What did you do?” He doesn’t answer me. “Theo—”

ugh my “Nothing. But I wanted to demote him, then give him a salary cut—
“Theo!”

to his. “What did you expect? He crossed the line. He never should have
; moodyou.”

own my “I made him kiss me.”

He grabs my ass and digs his nails into my skin. “I will always fi
what’s mine.”

“Theo, you can’t just mess with someone’s job like that! He di
anything wrong.”

ou *fuck* He drags his nose up my neck until the warmth of his breath hits

“Then you have no idea what lengths I’d go to to have you, keep you,
ace is ayou and only you.” He grips my earlobe between his teeth. “I can’t
sweringmyself when it comes to you.” My hips jerk, and I moan when he
forward into me. “And that’s never going to change.”

He secures me in his arms and stands, walking us down the hall. He
us into his bedroom and lays me on his soft sheets. “If that’s too m
back. Iyou, you need to let me know now. Because I’ll always be crazy in lo
we gotyou.” He pulls back and enters me with force. “Protective.” Again
unbearably possessive. That’s what you do to me.” His hand scoop
ght youmy butt to fuck me deeper.

“Theo. . .” I moan his name, pleading, and arch my back off the bed

“Tell me that’s what you want.”

out. The My heart beats violently against his. These confessions and promises
when you feel so vulnerable. “I love you, too,” I hum against his lips. “I want all
The good, the bad. I even want your unbearable asshole side. God, I
take it? crazy. I love you—” He cuts my words short, stealing my breath in the
beautiful kiss.

” We come together, moaning each other’s name.



! kissed
It’s well into the night before we wave the white flag. I rest my head
chest and wrap my leg over his. Our bodies are spent. We’re both exhausted
ight for but the weight of the future keeps us awake. “Theo?” I know he’s nearly
near sleep. His arm wraps around my waist, and he pulls me into him.

dn’t do “Yeah?”

“So, what happens now?”

my ear. “What do you mean?”

cherish I lift my head. “What do we do? About us? And your father.”

control He grazes his fingers through my hair. “I’ll set up a meeting with my
thrusts and Charles in the morning to present my findings. Give them
ultimatums.”

e walks He makes it sound so simple. “And if it doesn’t go well?”

uch for He leans up and presses his lips to mine, kissing me briefly. “Try
ve with fight back. I don’t plan on backing down.” He takes control, flipping
l. “And thick legs hold me in place as his lips drag up my chin to take my mouth
s under fervent kiss. When he lets us up for air, his hand drags up my neck and
into my hair. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I’ll kill him with my
hands before he has a chance to harm you—”

“Theo—”

es. . . I “I’m promising you. You’re mine. And no one fucks with what’s mine
of you. My chest tightens. This promise is romantic yet scary. We’re not in a
must be a fairytale. This is real life. “Theo, I don’t want you to do anything you
can’t come back from. If things go bad, don’t risk your life for—”

“I’ll risk everything.”

“Theo—” He cuts me off with his mouth. “Please. . .” His lips suck at my
bottom lip. “This will be for nothing if you’re taken away from me
forever.”

l on his “It won’t end like that.”

hausted, “How do you know?”

owhere “Because when you love someone, you’ll do anything to stay with them.”

I wrap my arms around him and pull him closer. My heart thumps against
my ribcage. The more this settles in, the more worried I become. I’ve
seen Theo rattled. Ever. Until now. And even though he thinks he’s hiding
I see it. He’s not sure this will work out in his favor, and he’s
putting everything on the line. When he pulls away, there’s no hiding the way
y father his eyes.

n their “Everything’s going to be fine. Let’s get some rest.” I nod, and he leans
to me, tucking me into his side. But all I can think about is what he’s
for me. Would a man who has it all be willing to give up everything
hen we someone who has nothing? My mind flashes back to picturing him in
us. His in all its thrifed glory. There’s a slight tug at my gut at the thought
uth in a won’t be enough for him.

d locks

ny bare

“I’m promising you. You’re mine. And no one fucks with what’s mine.”

My chest tightens. This promise is romantic yet scary. We’re not in some fairytale. This is real life. “Theo, I don’t want you to do anything you can’t come back from. If things go bad, don’t risk your life for—”

“I’ll risk everything.”

“Theo—” He cuts me off with his mouth. “Please. . .” His lips suck in my bottom lip. “This will be for nothing if you’re taken away from me in the end.”

“It won’t end like that.”

“How do you know?”

“Because when you love someone, you’ll do anything to stay with them.”

I wrap my arms around him and pull him closer. My heart thumps against my ribcage. The more this settles in, the more worried I become. I’ve never seen Theo rattled. Ever. Until now. And even though he thinks he’s hiding it, I see it. He’s not sure this will work out in his favor, and he’s putting everything on the line. When he pulls away, there’s no hiding the worry in his eyes.

“Everything’s going to be fine. Let’s get some rest.” I nod, and he lies next to me, tucking me into his side. But all I can think about is what he’s risking for me. Would a man who has it all be willing to give up everything for someone who has nothing? My mind flashes back to picturing him in my bed in all its thrifted glory. There’s a slight tug at my gut at the thought that it won’t be enough for him.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Theo

I don't know how long I've been standing here, but I can't seem to j eyes away. Fay is fast asleep, wrapped in *my* sheets, on *my* bed looks so peaceful and at home. This is where she belongs. Once this she's moving in with me. She's not going back to that shithole apart it were up to me, I'd have all her shit packed up and moved into my p the end of the day.

If something goes wrong, at least she'll be safe here. I pull out my and send a message to Grant confirming Fay has full access wit building.

"Morning."

Her groggy voice pulls me from my phone. "Morning. How'd you s

"Like the dead. What time is it?" She sits up.

"Almost seven."

"Seven! Why didn't you wake me up?"

"You need your sleep."

"Yeah, I can sleep later." She throws her legs off the bed, but they l tangled in the sheet. I throw my arm out and catch her before she tun

the floor. “Geez, what the hell did I ever do to your sheets?” I mask my
while she adjusts herself. “Give me ten minutes, I’ll be—”

—— “Fay.”

“What?”

“You’re not going with me.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you anywhere near my father. I want you
here, where I know you’re safe.” Her lips form into a cute-as-fuck p
need to stay focused. You being here allows me to do that.”

“But what happens—”

pull my “Whatever happens, you’re still better off here. I can handle my fath
ed. She prepared.”

is over, “But how will I know what’s going on? What if I don’t hear bac
nent. If you?”

lace by I cup her cheeks. “You will. Stay here. Order as many groceries
want. Bake. Cook. Drink. Shit, I don’t care. Just stay here. Give m
/ phone peace of mind today. Can you do that?”

hin the She takes too long to reply, and I know she’s going to be difficult. ‘
groceries?”

“Ship in fresh cheeses from France. I don’t give a fuck. Just please g
leep?” this.”

Her shoulders slump. “Fine. But it’s Greek goat cheese or nothing.’
a kiss but don’t linger. A second longer, I’d have her naked and bent o

“Thank you. I’ll call you when I can.”

I leave her and head to the office. As soon as my eyes open
become morning, I set the wheels into motion. I emailed Craig to meet me fir
ibles to and be ready for a fight. We went through the same hellish process five

my smirk ago when I sought him out to help me, but we weren't looking for the things back then. I was so consumed with finding the girl in the picture I never thought to suspect the Hill Group or MIC of the underlying reason that was set in motion in the first place. Now, we do. And after who knows how much money and fervent determination, our evidence is solid. After that, there's no way my father will hold all the cards. Which should let me stay feeling a lot more confident. Certainly not jittery like I currently am. I nod. "A small kernel of doubt forming in my stomach. *I hold all the cards*, I say to myself. But Alfred Monroe is unpredictable.

I text my father on the way in, letting him know it's time to discuss the matter. It matters. It's quiet when I get off the elevator, but I head to my office and wake up my computer. There's a knock on my door, and I lift my head to peek from the door. "Morning."

"Craig." I nod, and he enters my office and sits across from me. "You've got everything? We have to be prepared." We've gone over this so many times that I know the answer. "Theo, it's solid. Evidence doesn't lie. We have signatures and proof of mishandling and cover-ups. If that doesn't get his attention, we have the *All the* allegations to throw at him. And I can't imagine Alfred spending a minute behind bars."

He offers me some relief.

My phone buzzes. "Mr. Monroe. Your father has entered the building." I press the intercom. "Thank you. When he comes in, direct him to the conference room. I'll be in shortly."

Leaning back, I brush my hands down my tie. "Let's get this over with." Craig stands with me, and we make our way to the conference room. The first thing we enter, I see that Charles is with my father. My annoyance spikes. It's been seven years.

the rightsight of Alana. “Father. Charles.” I don’t bother to address Alana. “I know she was on the attendee list.”

son this “I think it’s important she be here considering the topic of conversation how Father says, eyeing Craig. “Who is this?”

today, “Father, meet Craig Stone. My lawyer.” I sit at the head of the table and Craig takes the chair next to me.

There’s His brows raise at the title. “Lawyer? Where is Jeffries? You know I repeatedly use the family lawyer.” He flicks his fingers in the air. “Dismissed.”

family “Craig is staying right where he is.” I nod to Craig, who pulls out a chair. Standing, he puts one set of documents in front of my father and another in front of Charles.

“Theo, what’s this about?” Charles asks, reaching for the documents on the table. “It’s about taking back control.”

My father stares down at the papers on the table. “Whatever you think you have is nothing.” He pushes them away without looking at the content. The other hand, Charles has gone quiet and pale as he realizes what Monroe is looking at.

“Well, that depends on whether you care how I handle this information.”

“Excuse me?” Father hisses.

“You know damn well I had nothing to do with those allegations.” I turn to Alana, who’s squirming in her chair. “The agreement you two have made is null and void.”

Consider this not only my resignation but a warning. Let me walk away with you, and I will expose every fraudulent deal you two have pushed through the last five years.”

Father shoots from his chair. “You’re *blackmailing* me?”

“Sit down,” I growl.

I didn't "I will do no such thing. These land deals are nothing but—"

"Forged surveys. Land you claimed to be uninhabitable to make money."

Charles stands, putting his hands out to me. "Theo, son. There's time while for this. Let's talk—"

"There's nothing to discuss. My terms are simple. I want out. You now have your company. Your deceit. I don't need a single cent from you. You're to be rid of it all."

"And what exactly do you think you're going to do with this? Expel the file. My father grabs his stomach and laughs. "Son, I thought you were better than this."

"I want out."

"Not a chance."

"Then I go public—"

"Theo, you can't be serious," Alana chimes in, but I ignore her.

"I want it in writing. Dissolve the contract. Go through with the man what he's you want; I don't give a fuck. But I want nothing to do with any of it."

down and walk away, and you won't come after me or anyone—"

"You ungrateful little shit—"

"Alfred, please, let's calm—"

"If you don't agree with my terms, this information goes public. You choose to live the rest of your lives with the success you've earned, or I can have nothing." I meet my father's eyes, my expression impassive as five faces turn red, and Charles looks like he's about to pass out.

My father drops his snarl, and an eerie calmness washes over him. "what you think will happen?"

"I don't think. I know," I state.

“Then you didn’t do your homework. You forget I’ve been planning more you to take over Monroe Investment Corp since you were still in your mother’s stomach. Your name is on every document I’ve ever signed including all those land deals.” His smug smile eats away at my confidence. I want to look at Craig for confirmation, but it will show my cards. “You can’t right, son. If I go down, so do you.”

I want “These go back way before I even stepped foot in this office.”

“You’ve always been my prodigy, son. There was never not a time I didn’t use us?” include you in my legacy.”

I stand. “I may go down with you, but I’d rather go down in flames than agree to the hell you’ve planned for me.”

Alana gasps. Her father reaches for her hand while glaring at me with contempt.

“I’m walking away, and you’re going to let me. You have forty-eight hours.”

Charles quickly stands. “Theo, you need to consider Alana. You’re leaving her too. She’s innocent in all this.”

“Then you’ll make the right decision and think about her future.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” My father straightens his shirt and adjusts his tie. “I would hate to see you fail. Or see anyone else fail who you can—”

I shoot up from my chair. “I swear to God, if you fucking dare—”

“Theo.” Craig sticks his hand out, stopping me. I hold my tongue while my father storms out of the room. Charles follows with his stone cold bit of a smile. “Is that your daughter. I look to Craig. “I need to know how far back my name has been signed on any MIC documents. Can this come back to hurt me?”

“As far as I could tell, your name was on final sales, but I don’t know for sure.”

ing for concerning the land survey. But that wasn't our initial focus."

r whore "Then make it our focus now. I need to know."

signed, "If it happened without your knowledge, the court could consider involuntary liability. We would just argue you were unaware of what "That's much fraudulent activity was occurring."

"Just find out." My father could be bluffing. But he also could Craig leaves, and I pull out my phone and hit Fay's number, my I didn't warning blaring in my mind. After the fourth ring, she answers.

"Hey."

ies than "Jesus, what the fuck took you so long to answer?"

"I didn't hear my phone. I was trying to make this—oh, shit!" A ne with echoes through the phone, followed by a screeching sound.

"What the fuck was that?"

ty-eight "Shit. This—the stupid carrot got jammed! How does a carrot get j in a billion-dollar juicer?"

will be "I don't know. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I mean. . . I'm doing better than the juicer. I think it's, w dead. The carrot killed it. It looks like a crime scene in your kitchen oulders laughs, bordering on hysterical. "It's on the wall!" My shoulders ea get hurt my god! I'm sitting here babbling. How'd it go? Have you had your r yet? Do you need a pep talk?"

I shake my head, wiping my palm down my face. "Everything hile my Going in now," I say, not wanting to worry her or spoil her mood.

ch of a "Oh, okay! Give them that same snarl you give me all the time as been buckle at the—shit!" There's a pop followed by another squeal. "Oh r your machine is possessed!"

nothing "I have to go. Stay put. Don't open the door for anyone. And be

when I get home.”

“Will do. Any chance you can point me to your cleaning products? I’ll find them. Good luck. Love you.”

“I love you.” I hang up, feeling barely comforted. His warning was that puts her in harm’s way. I promised to protect her, and I’m going not be just that.

I head back to my office and get to work. My stomach churns number of documents with my signature that Craig has unearthed. He bluffing. He signed my name to deals before I was even on the payroll.

By the time I lift my head, it’s late afternoon. Fuck. I reach for my squeal. No calls. I press Fay’s saved contact. My fingers tap against my desk rings. And rings. When her voicemail picks up, I hang up and dial “What the fuck is she doing?”

Two more attempts. Two more times sent to voicemail. I hang up at the front desk of my building.

“Thank you for calling—”

“Grant, it’s Theo Monroe. Has Fay Evans left, or has anyone entered her residence?”

“Oh Mr. Monroe. Let me check.” He places me on a quick hold, and meeting on my coat. “It looks like there have been no visitors, and no one has building.”

“Thank you.” I hang up and rush out of my office.

“Mr. Monroe, I was just about to bring you your afternoon agenda—”

“Amy, cancel my day.”

“Again? You—”

I push the down button and take the elevators down, leaving her to find naked out. I call James to meet me out front immediately. As demanded, he

my condo. When he pulls up, I jump out and hurry inside. In the elevator, my anxiety rises with each floor. As soon as the doors open, I storm to the penthouse and rush into my penthouse. “Fay?” I call out. She doesn’t answer. Still nothing. Fuck, what did I do? I should have come home right after my damn meeting. I knew. I knew he wouldn’t leave her—

“Hey.” She appears from the bedroom, wrapped in a towel. I stalk her. “How’d it—”
“It wasn’t.” I cut her off, taking her mouth. My tongue slides past her lips, and I kiss her hard.

She pulls back a little. “Hey, what happened? Did it not go—”
“It didn’t.” I don’t let her go, pulling her back and kissing her again with an intensity she doesn’t recognize. When I feel a sliver of relief, I pull back, my eyes searching her beautiful face. “It went as expected.”

Her palms skate up my chest, and I bask in her touch, not realizing how much I needed her to calm me. “What does that mean?”

I slowly step back. “I laid out the facts. He didn’t take it well at all. Now, we wait for his next move.” She stares up at me, worry in her eyes. I brush a strand of hair from her face and lean down again, pressing my lips to hers in a quick peck. “It’s going to be fine.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I have you by my side.”

She lets out the cutest laugh. “Theo.”

“I know I have the upper hand. I don’t know if he’ll manage to pull that off.” I feel like shit lying to her. She wraps her arms around me, and I pull her closer, feeding her more lies. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about you. I know you’ve worked hard to be where you are. It’s wrong to let him take that away from

tor, my You've earned your place." I kiss her head, then pull away to see her e
ny door "Don't worry about that."

"Fay!" "It's just not fair."

fter the "None of this has been fair. But I am, as you've called me many t
cold, ruthless asshole. I plan on fighting just as dirty."

toward "So, what happens now?"

I wait for Craig to tell me if my father has the upper hand. "He ha
d I kisseight hours. Business as usual until then."

She links her hands behind my neck. "Maybe you should take the n
days off. We can stay in bed. Have dessert for breakfast. All you can
ensity Ilove the sparkle in her eyes. My little minx has become a little sex
archingbend down for her mouth, sucking her bottom lip into mine.

"You drive a hard bargain."

ng how "But. . ."

"But now is not the time to let my guard down. And if I stayed in b
nd left.you, I would never come up for air."

eyes. I She sighs. "All work and no play."

7 lips to She starts to pull away, but I tuck her into my arms. "But I have the
the day and night, and I'm famished." I pick her up, loving her little
and carry her to my bedroom.

change

d I pull

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m you.

You've earned your place." I kiss her head, then pull away to see her eyes.

"Don't worry about that."

"It's just not fair."

"None of this has been fair. But I am, as you've called me many times, a cold, ruthless asshole. I plan on fighting just as dirty."

"So, what happens now?"

I wait for Craig to tell me if my father has the upper hand. "He has forty-eight hours. Business as usual until then."

She links her hands behind my neck. "Maybe you should take the next two days off. We can stay in bed. Have dessert for breakfast. All you can eat." I love the sparkle in her eyes. My little minx has become a little sex fiend. I bend down for her mouth, sucking her bottom lip into mine.

"You drive a hard bargain."

"But. . ."

"But now is not the time to let my guard down. And if I stayed in bed with you, I would never come up for air."

She sighs. "All work and no play."

She starts to pull away, but I tuck her into my arms. "But I have the rest of the day and night, and I'm famished." I pick her up, loving her little giggle, and carry her to my bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Fay

I roll over, and my hand hits the empty spot on the mattress. I'm standing by his dresser, staring into space. "Everything okay?"

He turns and gazes down at me. "Sure, why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you found out your dad set you up cheating half his clients, and your career is now on the line. Or maybe because you distracted me and made me burn dinner last night and probably starving."

He walks over and leans down, kissing my lips quickly. "I'm fine. I'm just waiting for a call from Craig. Thought I would have heard from him now."

"Did something happen you're not telling me?"

"No, nothing's happened. I'm just ready for this to be over."

I lift up on my knees and wrap my arms around his neck. "You're worried. Talk to me."

His eyes tell me one thing, but his words say another. "I just hate you. I'm not used to not having you at my side all day."

"I told you to stay home. I can put some spice into your agenda. I

worth your while.”

He offers me a quick kiss. “I changed my mind. Come to work with me. That will solve my problem. We can order lunch, and I can fuck you in my office.”

I put a finger to my lips, pretending to think about it. “Yeah, that’s no. Only wearing a big ol’ neon sign that says ‘Boss’s Mistress’ would make it more obvious that we’re sleeping together.”

He tugs me closer. “You’re not my mistress.” He leans down and sucks my bottom lip. “You’re far more.”

I roll my eyes. “As romantic as that is, I’m fine not going public right now. Theo’s And I know I made a fuss about being your little secret, but it’s just I prefer not to give everyone the satisfaction of the whole ‘I told you something.’”

He grabs my waist, pulling me against him. “I don’t give a fuck what people think. It’s my company. I’ll flaunt you around wherever you’re whenever.”

I smile. “Does that mean we can make out in front of Julie? No, Theo. Just let’s have sex on her desk!” I finally get a smile out of him. “Please? I can do it on the copy machine and send her copies of my ass. Man, she’ll go ape shit.”

He brushes his lips against mine. “As fun as that sounds, I don’t want a lawsuit on my hands right now.”

I fake pout. “Boo. You’re no fun. If you change your mind, you can come where I’ll be. Frolicking naked around your fancy place, thinking about leaving the things I want you to do to me.”

His grip on my waist tightens, and I feel his cock harden through my slacks. His palm skates up my side, and he pulls my head back. “W

Fable. You should know by now it's wrong to taunt a man like me. With me. Be gentle when I finally get to have you." A shiver of desire shoots down all over my spine, tickling my toes. God, the things I'd do just to get him to stay. "What rendered my little minx silent?"

"I'm a hard worker. I sigh. "Nah, just thinking about what to cook today. I normally don't make a mess. I may just skip getting dressed so I can save my clothes."

He bites down on my bottom lip. "I expect frequent updates. Bonus: I'll send you photos."

"So bossy."

Right now. "You have no idea." He spanks my ass and releases me. "Behave. I'll be back as soon as I can." He walks out of the room, and my kind of fake pout morphs into a genuine sulk. I fall back on the bed, exhaling a disappointing breath. Cocking my head to the left, I shamelessly snuggle into the pillow. My heart does a little flip, and I snuggle into Theo's bedsheet. In a million years did I think when I agreed to a fling with my boss that I would end up here.

There she is! "This is crazy," I sing and fall onto my back. There's so much to think about. Or we. How does this change us? Our lives? We come from two different worlds, but in a way, we balance each other out. The question is, where do we go from here? My smile slips at what he'll be forced to do if his father won't concede. How could he have carried the weight of his father's demands so long? On the outside, Theo came across like a confident powerhouse. I know nothing fazed him or got in his way. Little did I know he was harboring a secret that was dragging him down.

If I had the means, I would take his father down myself. Maybe kick him in the shin or something because I am only five and a half feet tall and can't reach it, a buck-twenty. How awful can a parent be? And to his only son. My

I won't have always been a shade closer to crazy, but they've always shown me my own. I've never felt anything less. Alfred Monroe is a cruel man, and I hope he gets what's coming to him. I just pray Theo walks away unscathed.

All these thoughts about Theo and business remind me that I can't get so have no job. Something that's needed in the world today. Yes, my boss is rich beyond belief, but I need to support myself. I don't want Theo to see if you're relying completely on him. I want to show him I'm an independent woman. Established and confident. Also jobless. But then again, he needs me. Or wait. . . I quit. Either way, I need to find a job. Maybe that's what I should do today. Job search. The question is, where do I start?

and my The thought of getting another assistant job makes my skin itch. The reason I stuck it out at MIC was because of the eye candy. I wish I could be thrown back into a kitchen and create beautiful dishes of perfection.

. Never With nothing else to do, I get up and seize the day. I jump out of bed and search of my phone. I should probably call my mom and let her know I'm back on track with Theo.

take in. I hear the sound of the front door opening from the bedroom, and my heart widens. I *knew* he couldn't stay away. I forgo pants and skip down the stairs, ready to seduce him. I turn the corner, and my feet stutter to a stop.

doesn't "How did you get in here?"

s for so Alana Hill is standing in Theo's foyer. She eyes my choice of clothing, lack thereof, then responds. "My key. How else?"

oring a A woman Theo claims to have zero relationship with has a key? "You're not wanted here, so you can leave that key and get the hell out." I don't kick him tough, but inside I'm shaking like a leaf.

I weigh "Wow, you have quite the mouth on you." She looks around as if waiting for Theo to walk out. "Is Theo here? I can't fathom him leaving you

ie love alone. To steal something, I'm sure."

hope he I take a step toward her. "Excuse me?"

She waves her dainty hand. "So feisty. It's cute that you act like you currently belong here."

My friend "You mean how you think you belong here?"

to think She adjusts the designer purse on her wrist. "Please. I know bottom-dwelling people like you. You attach yourself to a wealthy man and offer your services. He'll give you the world. Hate to break it to you, darling, but that I'll won't."

"You know nothing about Theo and me. You're just bitter because he only never chose you."

ould get Her sinister laugh echoes through the penthouse. "Is that what you

Honey, he will always choose me. You're not the first toy he's brought home and you won't be the last. A man like Theo Monroe doesn't settle down. He uses women until he's bored. He may be fascinated by whatever he has you now, but it will end. Maybe it's the impoverished girl with nothing but a smile that entices him. Theo has always had strange tastes."

he hall, I bite the inside of my cheek, refusing to let her see that her words

me, and she takes a step toward me. "I'm only saying this to protect

Theo can be quite captivating. It's why it hurts so bad when he walks away. And he will."

I scoff and roll my eyes, crossing my arms over my chest in disbelief. "You're just saying this to bait me. Nice try."

I sound Another step closer. "Fable—that is your name, isn't it? What's happened between our families is bigger than you. Hear me when I say you're just another pawn in Theo's game."

ou here I stand straighter, even though my heart is hammering in my chest. "

the one who doesn't realize. You two were a contract—a business deal. You need to wake up and realize he doesn't want you. He never has. And you're the only one playing them. So, if you're done—”

“Oh, is that what he's led you to believe? Such a naive little girl attempts to touch my cheek, but I swat her hand away. “Yes, we started a business together. But you can't deny attraction. And that's what ultimately led us to this deal. We all agreed to this deal, Theo included. I wouldn't be pregnant with his child if he hadn't.”

My vision blurs, and the world tilts, but I shake it off, standing my ground. “If you think I'm going to fall for that lie—”

“I don't need you to. The proof will come to light soon enough. Don't think of yourself a favor and walk away. You'll thank me in the end.”

“I think I'll take my chances, being *naive* and all.”

“But aren't you?”

“What?”

“Well, you're here. . . in his place, doing what he says. . .”

“I'm here because I choose to be.”

She rubs her hands over her belly. “I'm sure you do.” Her vile smile affects me, chilling down my spine. She turns and makes her way back to the door. “I'll reschedule our visit.” She opens the door and goes out.

My heart threatens to beat out of my chest as I take deep gulps of air, trying to calm myself. But would she go so far as to lie about a baby? My stomach begins to open up, and I grab at my torso. “Stop,” I hiss. This is what she wants. I just trust Theo. I spin around, racing back to the bedroom for my phone.

On the nightstand, I shake as I unlock my screen and dial his number. “You're . . .” The phone rings and rings. “Come on.”

al. You “You’ve reached—”

d these I hang up and call back, only to get his voicemail again. “Oh, sci

Seems like I’ll be making an appearance at work after all. I throw on a
l.” She jeans and a sweatshirt as I rush out of his penthouse. The chill in the a
d off as me in the face as I exit the building. I pull out my phone and try for a
o wherebut the screen doesn’t load.

regnant “Oh, come on, technology. Don’t let me down now.” I turn wher
someone call my name. Before I can figure out where it came fro
ground.palms slam into my chest, and I’m shoved into the street.

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“You’ve reached—”

I hang up and call back, only to get his voicemail again. “Oh, screw it.” Seems like I’ll be making an appearance at work after all. I throw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt as I rush out of his penthouse. The chill in the air slaps me in the face as I exit the building. I pull out my phone and try for an Uber, but the screen doesn’t load.

“Oh, come on, technology. Don’t let me down now.” I turn when I hear someone call my name. Before I can figure out where it came from, two palms slam into my chest, and I’m shoved into the street.

Chapter Thirty

Theo

“**F**uck!” I yell, swiping the papers off my table.
“This doesn’t mean you’re guilty.”

“That’s exactly what it means,” I snap.

“This is just a setback. We knew this could happen. Should we go to court or not? We still have proof that could be admissible.”

I lean back in my chair, rubbing my palms down my face. “What do you want to do now?”

“We wait to see what they decide. In the meantime, we need to get your name cleared quickly to clear your name.”

“If it’s not quick enough?”

“It won’t come to that. But I have to warn you, this will open up a full investigation and lead to more questions. About any other deals you’ve done under the table. Or how many you have been a part of. . . You need to prepare for some tough conversations with your clients.”

“Which means that no matter what, taking down my father takes me down too.”

“Let’s hope he and Mr. Hill make the right decision.”

He won't. He's calling my bluff.

There's a knock on my door. "Mr. Mon—"

———— "Not now," I snap.

Amy sticks her head in. "I'm sorry to bother you—"

"Then don't! Get out!"

"But it's very—"

"If you don't get out, I will fire you—"

"Then fire me, but stop *yelling* at me! There's been an accident. F
hit by a car this morning."

The air rushes out of my lungs. "What?"

"Her mom called. I guess someone pushed her—"

"What the fuck do you mean someone pushed her?" I stand, stuff
phone in my pocket and rushing out of my office. "When did this hap
o court, bark out.

Amy hurries behind me, trying to keep up. "I'm not sure. Her mo
o we do pretty upset and hard to understand."

I slam the down button and dial James. "I need you out front now
o work elevator ride down is a blur. I can't stop replaying the news in my he
by a car. Someone pushed her. I call the hospital twice to get an up
her status. Is she conscious? How bad is she hurt? Who the fuck wo
up an this. . .? But I already know the answer to that. This has my father wri
r father over it.

ou need When James pulls up to the ER, I jump out of the car and race insid
Evans. She was brought in a couple hours ago."

e down "How do you spell—"

"Fay! F-A-Y. She was. . ." I can't say the words out loud. I look c
my hands. They're shaking.

“Here we go. She’s in room—”

She spits out the room number, but I’m already hurrying down the hall. My feet pound on the floor. Every step closer, my chest tightens in fear. When I stop in front of her door, I realize I’m holding my breath. Afraid of what I’ll see. What I’ve caused. A police officer is standing in front of her, blocking my view, and her mother is next to the bed. She turns at my presence.

“Oh, thank God you’re here.” She walks my way as the officer moves away, allowing me a clear view of Fay. “We’ve been trying to reach you.”

“I know. . . I didn’t have. . .” My throat locks up.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Fay says, lying in bed, her face covered in bruises and her leg in a cast.

“I’m making my way over to her, needing to touch her and physically open up.” Ishe’s okay. “Fuck. . . Fay. I’m so sorry.”

“Why are *you* sorry? Did you push me?”

If I weren’t surrounded by people, I’d spank the shit out of her. “I’m going to find out who did this.” I lean over and gently kiss her, trying to avoid the scrape on her chin. “What happened? Did you see the person who pushed you?”

“No. I was trying to get service on my phone for an Uber, and someone called my name. I barely raised my head to see who it was before I was thrown into traffic.”

Her words create a visual that plays over and over in my head. The image of those hands thrusting her into the street. Her fear. Rage builds inside me. A wave of anger I’ve never experienced before fuels an urge to go down the fucker who dared touch her, let alone cause her pain, and do it to all of them. End their existence.

I breathe slowly to remain calm. “Jesus, Fay.” This was intended.

Someone was there waiting for her. “Why were you even outside?
all. Myyou to stay put.”

When I “And I planned on it. Until I had a visit from Alana.”

What I’ll My shoulders tense. “What?”

locking “Yeah. Guess she still has the key to your place.”

My eyes blaze into hers, searching for the punchline. “She doesn’t
: shifts, key.”

“Apparently, she does. Walked right in like she owned the place a
me how much I didn’t belong there.”

ered in Alana’s name has just been added to my list of people I’m destr
clench my fists and stoke the flame of my hatred as I picture how fa
see that will fall. And if either of our fathers played a part in this? Nothing w
me from ending them. “What else did she say?”

“Let’s see. That I was only temporary to you. That I wasn’t the f
I swear, you brought around and wouldn’t be the last. She warned me to ru
ying to before you hurt me. Oh, and she called me naïve, a bottom feeder.”

on who “You’re looking better.”

I turn at the sound of another voice. The doctor. I straighten and re
omeone to shake his hand. “Theo Monroe, Fay’s boyfriend. I want to
e I was everything.”

“Nice to meet you, boyfriend Theo. Fay was very lucky. X-rays sh
images fracture in the tibia. We have her in a cast, and she’ll need to m
side my appointment with an orthopedic surgeon for a follow-up. Everything
to hunt superficial. She’s going to be pretty sore, so I’ve ordered a script for th
ecimate We’ll send her home with some ointment for the deeper scrapes.”

“Great. When can I take her home?”

ntional. “Let me start the paperwork, and we can have her discharged shortly

I asked I thank the doctor and focus my attention back on Fay. “You okay? need anything?” God, I hate seeing her like this.

“Well, you can call yourself my boyfriend again.”

Fuck, she’s cute. I lean over and kiss her. “I like calling you mine b whisper against her lips, then force myself to pull away, remember have a have an audience. The officer finishes his notes, closes his pad, then lo

“I think I have everything I need, Miss Evans. If there’s anything e nd told remember, give me a call.” He reaches out, and I take his busines

“Luckily, it’s a nice area, so I’m sure one of the cameras on the surro ying. I buildings caught something. We’ll be in touch.”

r Alana Fay’s mother walks up to the bed. “Are you sure you’re okay, honey ill stop “I’m fine. Again, it could have been way worse.”

I don’t even want to think how else this could have turned out.

irst toy “Okay, well, I’m going to go call and update your father. Then we n away you home.”

“I’ll be taking her home with me,” I state.

Her eyebrows raise. “To your home? I’m sure you’re a busy man ach out need someone to take—”

know “I plan on taking time off. My sole focus is on her and her recover woman blushes like a schoolgirl. When I glance over at Fay, she’s roll owed a eyes.

ake an “Well, all right. Fable, I assume you’re okay with this?”

else is I peer over at Fay, and she frowns back at me. “What’s wrong? Do e pain.—”

“That’s how it’s going to be?”

“What?”

.” “I have to get hit by a car for you to take off work? Offering sexual

Do you was a no-no—”

“*Fable.*”

“But getting taken out by a rusty Honda Civic does the trick?”

etter,” I “Fable!”

ing we “I was going to do some pretty filthy, downright nasty things to y
oks up.*nooo.*”

lse you Her mother covers her ears as I fight not to smile.

ss card. “I’ll just leave you two alone. I’m going to call your father.” A
oundingwalks out of the room.

I grab Fay’s hand. “I never should have gone to work today. You’re
?” should have stayed home and played with my toy.” Her frown
transforms into a smirk.

“You should have. It was all wound up and ready to go.”

can get “If you’ll let me, I’d like a redo.”

She pretends to think about it, but I know from the instant flush
cheeks that she’d let me have my way with her right now, cast and l
. She’llstaff be damned. “Fine. I guess.” I kiss her quick, sealing the deal bef
changes her mind.

y.” The The drive home is quiet. The pain meds made her drowsy, and sl
ling hermost of the ride. When we get to my condo, I thank James and carry
the penthouse. She finally stirs when I lay her on my bed.

“Hey,” I say when she opens her eyes.

you not “Did I fall asleep?”

“Yeah.” I sit down on the bed next to her. “I’m so sorry for all thi
words are thick in my throat. “If I just left you be, this would have
happened.”

I favors “Theo, this isn’t your fault. There are crazy people out there. I was

the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“But you weren’t.”

Her eyes open wider. “What do you mean? It was a fluke—”

“I think my father had something to do with this. Alana showed you, but drawing you out of my place. Someone pushing you into traffic. I don’t think this was a random accident.”

“Your father would really try and have me—”

and she “He would.” I don’t allow her to finish that sentence because I can’t bear to hear it come out of her mouth. I grab her hand and bring it to my lips. “I’m going to fix this.”

slowly “How? Just go to the police. They’ll arrest him. Then he won’t be—”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It is that easy. Pick up the phone and—”

of her “It’s not. Listen to me. I’m putting a stop to this tonight.” I hate the way she’s shining in her eyes. “I promise you.”

before she “Theo, please. If he’s dangerous, you shouldn’t confront him.”

I hate doing this, but I kiss her hand and release her. “I need to see you tonight. I won’t be gone long.”

for her to “Theo, no.”

“I have to. He’s not getting away with this. Not anymore.” I lean over and press my forehead to hers. “Rest. I’ll be back before you know. Straighten up and walk away. I hate to leave her, but I need to do this. This is.” My tonight.

and I never I stop at the concierge desk and threaten Grant’s job if anyone resembling Alana Hill ever enters this building again. I know exactly how to do this; just in

got that key, which infuriates me. He crossed the line today. A line I've overstepped many times, but this time I'm done.

I storm into his house, startling the staff, and shove open the mahogany doors to his study.

"You son of a bitch."

Like I expected, my father is in here, sipping cognac. As if he's expecting me. "Now, now. That's no way to speak to your father—"

"I'm done with you," I spit out.

"Says the coward standing in my office. You don't have the balls to go public with this."

"Watch me."

"Oh, I will. What do you think happens to you when that information leaked? Are you that delusional that you think you get to run off with the money and live happily ever after? Or are you willing to give it all up for a mediocre pussy—"

I grab his shirt and slam him against his bookshelf. "You're fucking old man. Done controlling me. Done puppeteering everyone in your name. Mother did the right thing, dying on that table. Living under your delusion would have been worse than the fate she was granted."

"And you should have died with her, you pitiful—"

I pull him back, only to slam him harder into the shelves. "I would have done it. I'll just put a stop to you. Whatever my future is, it'll be worth what it costs you to fall." I release my death grip and step away. "I'm going to the police."

"You wouldn't."

"I would. And I am. This is the end of the road for you. I'll account for the consequences of your wrongdoings, even if it's in a cold jail cell. I'll be like a baby knowing I'm finally done with you."

ne he's I turn and walk out. I'm on autopilot during the drive home, but
washes over me. Soon, he'll have no more control over me. I refuse to
doubleabout the blowback, but I'm ready to accept it.

I find Fay hobbling around on crutches in the kitchen. "Jesus, what
doing up?"

he was "You ditched me, and I needed water."

"Here, let me help you." I scoop her in my arms and carry her back
the hall.

s to go "The water."

"I'll get it." I put her back on my bed.

"So, are you going to tell me what happened?"

on gets I sit down next to her, inhaling a slow breath. "There's something
the girltell you." Her face pales, and I fucking hate it.

r some "Please don't tell me she's really pregnant."

"Pregnant? Who?"

g done, "Alana. She told me she was pregnant with your child."

ur life. That sleazy bitch. "Fuck no. I told you, I haven't touched her si
emandswere kids. She just wanted to rile you up."

"Well, it kind of worked."

I cup her cheek. "She's a conniving, heartless bitch. She wants this
I risk itbecause it puts her on a higher pedestal. If I have my way, I'm g
atchingknock her off and enjoy watching her fall."

ice." Fay shrugs, adding a simple nod. "I'd make the popcorn to see that."

I kiss her quickly but pull back. "I wasn't fully honest about h
cept themeeting with my father went the other day. We presented the infor
ll sleepand I made my case. Then he threw us his own wild card."

"What?"

it relief “He’s been putting my signature and name on company documents for years. Way before I was even on the payroll at MIC. My name is on 100% of every single bad land deal.”

are you “Wait, he can’t do that—”

“He did.”

“So what does that mean?”

k down “It means if I go to the police, there’s a good chance I go down with Craig. He is confident the court will throw it out since it’s not my signature on the documents. Plus, I was overseas for a lot of the deals. But as you point out, a handful have occurred since I’ve been CEO. It will be for the court to decide.”

I didn’t “Then don’t go to the police.” She sits up, holding my hands against her face. “You’ll find another way.”

“This is the only way.”

“Theo, no,” she pleads, tears welling in her eyes. “Please don’t do this.” I press my lips to hers. “I have to.” I kiss away a fallen tear. I wish I could kiss away all the pain and sorrow she’s feeling.

“I love you,” I murmur against her lips. “I’m going to fight this. I won’t leave you willingly.”

merger “If you do this, you will. You said so yourself.” I climb onto the bed, forcing her to lay under me. I’m gentle with her, cautious of her vulnerability.

“You don’t deserve this,” she says, and I capture her cries with my mouth.

’ “I have to do this,” I repeat, needing to hear the words and let them sink in. “I don’t change my mind. I kiss her until the guilt and regret dissipation, won’t leave you.”

She pulls away from me, hurt in her eyes. “You can’t promise me anything. And saying things like that only makes it harder for us both. “W

ents for “In the morning.”

the sale “Does your father know?”

“Yes.” If she only knew how I was barely surviving before his loneliness. What it’s felt like to be under his control.

Having power and wealth means nothing if it’s at the hands of happiness. I may have gotten lost in all that for some time, but Fay has taught him. I realize there’s more to life. And I deserve that more. “You should get some rest. I have some things to prepare for.”

Her eyelids are already drooping. She wants to fight it, but the muscles are tiring. “I’ll be right here when you wake up. I’m not going anywhere.” She nods and closes her eyes. Her lips part as if to say more, but she’s overcome by sleep almost instantly. I close the blinds, shut the door, and go to my office. Sitting down, I reach for my phone and make a call.

“Craig. Start the process.”

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pate. “I

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When?”

“In the morning.”

“Does your father know?”

“Yes.” If she only knew how I was barely surviving before her. The loneliness. What it’s felt like to be under his control.

Having power and wealth means nothing if it’s at the hands of your happiness. I may have gotten lost in all that for some time, but Fay has made me realize there’s more to life. And I deserve that more. “You should get some rest. I have some things to prepare for.”

Her eyelids are already drooping. She wants to fight it, but the meds are winning. “I’ll be right here when you wake up. I’m not going anywhere.” She nods and closes her eyes. Her lips part as if to say more, but she’s lost to sleep almost instantly. I close the blinds, shut the door, and go to my home office. Sitting down, I reach for my phone and make a call.

“Craig. Start the process.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Fay

I stir in my sleep, groaning at how sore my body is.

“Morning.”

I open my groggy eyes to Theo standing over me. “Hey, what time is it?”

“About seven-thirty.”

“In the evening?”

“Morning.”

“Morning! Why did you let me sleep so long?” I sit up too fast and feel dizzy.

“Easy there. Clearly, you needed your rest.”

“Not when you’re about to confess to something you had nothing to do with and possibly go to jail!” Frustrated, I struggle to swing my cast bed, wincing at the pain. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I told you—”

“That’s not a reason. That’s time you took away from me. Did you do it? Is this you saying goodbye?”

He takes a seat next to me. “This is just me saying good morning. I haven’t done anything yet. I’m waiting for Craig to get here. We’re going

station together.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” A tear cascades down my cheek.

“Come here.” He scoops me in his arms and lays me on the bed. His head falls to my stomach, and he presses tender kisses up my belly.

“You’re not answering my question,” I say, my eyes closing to combat tears.

“I don’t plan to either.” Two hands smooth up my sides, and he rubs the oversized shirt he put on me at some point yesterday. His hand curls around my breasts in his palm. “I love the way you fit perfectly in my hands. Squeezes, wrapping his mouth around my nipple.

“You’re trying to distract me,” I hum. “It’s not going to work.” He scrapes along the tip, and I expel a breath.

“I wouldn’t expect it to.” His free hand works off my panties, being careful not to bump against my cast. I want to tell him no, that I refuse to be distracted into not addressing the issue with sex, but my body is buzzing, and I ache for his touch. He slips a finger past my heat, and I sigh deeply. “And I bet my wet and getwet cunt isn’t a way to distract me?”

“Nope.” He slides another finger inside me. “We’re actually going to have sex after this—yes. . . more of that,” I moan, raising my hips. The pressure of his cock against my breast tightens, and his strokes become more aggressive. “Theo, please, I need more. I need you.” His hand disappears as he strips out of his pants. He pushes my legs wider, and thrusts inside me.

“Always so perfect.” He fucks me slowly, whispering dirty and sensual words in my ear. I hold on to him, never wanting him to leave. I haven’t cried when they appear, but tears stream down my cheeks. His mouth covers mine, and he works me into a glorious sexual frenzy. “Don’t cry.”

“I can’t help it. I don’t want this for you.”

“It’s going to be okay.” He pulls out and drives back in, his head throbbing. “I love you.” He ravishes my mouth with such passion it almost mouthbreaks me. I cry out as my orgasm washes through me, and he grunts, planting himself deep inside me as his cock spasms.

We stay quiet for some time, catching our breaths and trying to find the right thing to say. Reality is a bitch, and I don’t want to face what’s to come. “You don’t deserve this,” I whisper under my shaky breath.

“I know.”

The sound of his doorbell echoes through the penthouse. Theo looks at me. “It’s Craig. He’s early.”

“Tell him to wait outside.”

He plants a sweet kiss on my lips and gets up, helps me get dressed, and gently finds my crutches. Together, we make our way down the hallway. He tricks my hand and opens the door.

“Jefferies? What are you doing here?”

I don’t know the man standing at his door, but it’s not Craig.

“Theo, can I come in?”

“If this is about my father, you tell him I’ve already said everything I can say—”

“Theo, your father had a heart attack last night.”

“What?” My lips part, as do Theo’s. “Is he all right?”

The man’s expression falls. “I’m sorry, Theo. He passed away.”

Theo’s head jerks back like he’s been slapped. “What? I don’t understand that.”

“He suffered a massive heart attack. His staff found him this morning as he was in the bathroom.”

Theo is silent for a beat, allowing the news to settle in. His face is blank with emotion. Finally, he nods. “Thank you for coming to tell me. Let me know what’s needed of me.”

s cock “Nothing right now. Take some time to grieve, and we can discuss almost a funeral later. I’m so sorry for your loss, Theo.”

holding Theo nods. “Thank you.” He sees the gentleman out.

“Are you okay?” I ask, unsure how he’s taking this news. Hatred and they’re still his father. He turns, his expression grim. “Theo, I’m so sorry to come. Can I do?”

There’s another knock on the door. This time, it’s Theo’s lawyer. “I just heard—”

s down “I need to know what this means,” he spits out to Craig.

“Theo, we don’t need to do this—”

“What does this mean?” He inhales a staggered breath, brushing his head, and down his face.

He takes “That’s what I need to tell you.” He retrieves an envelope from his briefcase.

“What is this?”

“It’s not good. I need to prepare you.”

Theo rips the envelope open and unfolds the documents. “What the

; I have “What is it?” I ask, but Theo ignores me.

“How did you get this?”

“It was faxed to my office early this morning.”

He flips through the pages, his jaw clenched. “That son of a bitch.”

“What’s going on?” I ask for a second time. I lean over, trying to get a view of the documents.

g.” “Charles expedited the merger. The date was marked as yesterday, blank of says.

e know “But doesn’t it have to have your father’s signature on it?”

“It does,” Theo snaps.

his will “We’ll fight that,” Craig adds. “All final signatures and date stamped yesterday. Due to Alfred’s sudden death, there’ll be a few questions surrounding it.”

or not, That gets both of our attention. “As in, Charles knew about my father’s death, then submitted it after the fact?”

Craig shrugs. “Could be. I had a guy keeping track of them both. I’m sure of the specific time of death, but Charles Hill did visit your father that night.”

Theo’s face pales. “So did I.” Theo looks back at me.

“No one’s saying he was murdered. We just need to stick to the facts. Did your father sign the papers before he died? Was it out of duress? Was he alone when Charles left?”

side his “Why would Charles kill him?”

“Money. Power. It does crazy things to people. He could have been spooked.”

Theo shakes his head. “He wanted his daughter married off that bad, but he didn’t need my stature or money. They were—”

“Bankrupt.” He hands Theo another folder. “The proof is in the documents. When your father and Charles met, Charles’ business was struggling. Your father offered to save his company and merge the two once the new side of the business was created.”

o get a “But why?”

“I assume for the same reason—money and power. It gave Alfred the means to acquire land on false pretenses. Monroe Investment Corp got a few millions that year. It wasn’t because of a lucky market or talent. It was because he had Charles producing fraudulent reports, just as you suspected.”

“I know all this, but why bring me into this?”

s were “For one, you’re his son. If he couldn’t pull your strings and trust a lot of fall in line, then who could he?”

“And Alana? Why would my father agree to Charles’ terms? Go father’s with their accusations?”

Craig purses his lips.

I’m not Geez, how many folders does he have? Craig hands him another paper last papers. “It came in late last night. I was waiting to show you this m

but my investigator finally found the girl.” Theo’s head whips up to

“This is good for us. But Theo, it’s going to be hard to digest.”

cts. Did Theo scans the first page.

ne alive The paper trembles in his grip. He’s shaking. “Theo, what is it?”

“I’m sorry,” Craig says.

He continues to read, his fingers gripping the document.

gotten “What? Will someone please fill me in—”

“It’s a confession. It wasn’t Charles behind this. It was my father.”

ad? She My head snaps to Theo. He’s still staring at the paper, not even reading words anymore.

1 these Theo doesn’t go on, so Craig says what he’s struggling to. “It appears failing girl Theo allegedly raped—”

he land “There was no fucking rape.”

“I know. Theo, I’m on your side.” He addresses us both. “Her name is Stacey Gilmore. She was a waitress at one of the social clubs you

red the frequented. Shortly before you came home from college, Alfred approached her with an opportunity he knew she wouldn’t refuse.” He stalls, as

It was Theo before going on. “He offered her five hundred thousand dollars and specific photos with you.”

“I never touched her.”

you to “She knows. She admitted to knowing you were drugged. She did nothing with you, only posed for pictures she was assured would not be seen in the public eye.” Theo covers his mouth, scrubbing his hand down his chin. I reach out and snuggle into his side for support. “She was let into the room by a young blonde. You were already naked and passed out, and she maneuvered you into compromising positions to implicate you for premeditated rape. She admits you never touched her.”

Craig. The papers fall from Theo’s grip. He has yet to say anything or show his reaction to this news. “Theo, are you okay?”

“He set this up.”

“I’m sorry, Theo. I know you. . . we assumed it was Charles.”

“And this. . . this girl. She let this happen and allowed people to think she was a victim.”

“Alfred did his homework. She had a baby at the time and was struggling. Hence why she was working at the club. She regrets it, of course, but she thought what she thought was right for her child.”

ling the “And now?”

“With that money, she took her daughter out of a bad situation. We got her into school. Bought a house. She’s made a safe life for herself and her child. It doesn’t fix what she’s done, but she didn’t do it for nothing.”

I try and comfort him, but he steps away from my touch. “I don’t care if she’s a fuck about her life. I give a fuck about what her lies did to mine.”

Craig gives him a moment. Theo walks off, threading his fingers through his hair, and stops at the glass doors of his terrace. “And the coke?”

“She had nothing to do with that.”

When he turns back to us, his eyes glint with wetness. “Why would she do this to me?”

Tightness spreads across my chest, and tears fill my eyes.

dn't do "I don't know, Theo. His way of making sure Charles wouldn't ba
ever beGuaranteeing his daughter was taken care of secured that."

own his I hate what this is doing to him. I hate Alfred Monroe for all the
into thecaused his son. I hate Alana Hill. And I hate myself for ever call
nd theymodel material. Theo shakes his head, dismissing the hurt and b
otentialturning back into the cutthroat businessman his father raised him to be

"Over my dead body will that merger go through. Craig, I want a c
ow anymy father's will. Assuming he hadn't made any changes, everything
mine. It'll need my final signature to pass."

He storms over and picks up the papers he dropped. "Everything i
documents, I want them filed and on the record. The false land de
lk I—" blackmail, everything. Then I want the deed of ownership for MIC."

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she didyou in the dark again. Go get dressed. We're paying a visit to Charl

This ends today."

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child. It

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through

d he do

“I don’t know, Theo. His way of making sure Charles wouldn’t back out? Guaranteeing his daughter was taken care of secured that.”

I hate what this is doing to him. I hate Alfred Monroe for all the pain he caused his son. I hate Alana Hill. And I hate myself for ever calling her model material. Theo shakes his head, dismissing the hurt and betrayal, turning back into the cutthroat businessman his father raised him to be.

“Over my dead body will that merger go through. Craig, I want a copy of my father’s will. Assuming he hadn’t made any changes, everything is now mine. It’ll need my final signature to pass.”

He storms over and picks up the papers he dropped. “Everything in these documents, I want them filed and on the record. The false land deals, the blackmail, everything. Then I want the deed of ownership for MIC.”

He turns to me. “You trust me, right?” I nod. “I told you, I’m never leaving you in the dark again. Go get dressed. We’re paying a visit to Charles Hill. This ends today.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Fay

Two weeks later. . .

I stand next to Theo in a simple Chanel dress, complimenting Fredrick, while Theo greets people and shakes hands. The line is still a hundred deep—which doesn't include the other hundred who have already offered their condolences.

Theo reaches out, shaking another hand. “Theo, son, your father was a great man.”

“Thank you, Steve.”

With all the praises for how honorable Alfred Monroe was, one would not believe he actually was a good man. I know better. In the past two weeks, Theo opened up about his childhood. Growing up under his father's shadow and who his father really was. His stories made me angry. Made me realize that no one should be treated so poorly by a parent. I also learned his mother's story at his childbirth.

He talked about the pressures of college. Europe. And Claire. It's the first time he's been able to open up to someone, and the moment he began

he didn't stop. From the outside looking in, Alfred Monroe was destroying his son.

Power was mistaken for privilege. He wasn't granting Theo power or wealth. He was chaining him to a life he never truly wanted.

I steal a look at Theo, but his face is blank of any emotion. Instead, he wears the business scowl I've grown to love. I squeeze his forearm. "You doing alright?"

"I just want this to be over with."

I secure my crutches and lean forward, looking down the line. "Well, the line is out the door and backed up into the next county, it looks like I only have four, maybe five hours to go."

Theo grabs my hand and squeezes. "They have forty-five minutes left over for you and I are leaving."

"You can't leave your father's wake."

"Watch me." He tugs me closer. "Then I'm going to call Fredrick. No matter what was at stake, it was whether to knock him out or thank him for his dress choice." His eyes drop down to the dip between my breasts.

"You can't leave early. People will talk."

When the news about MIC goes public, they will anyway.

In three days, the news of Theo Monroe stepping down as CEO of a company with a thumband walking away from a two-billion-dollar company will spread through the country and world. I've never seen him so at peace.

Dealing once and for all with Charles Hill was his first step in moving forward.

Seven years ago, he made a deal with a man out of desperation. He had sacrificed his values as a businessman for the promise of power, wealth, and the safety of his only daughter. He would alter his ethics to salvage a failing company and save his marriage to a woman ready to leave him because

set on financial mistakes. He would secure a future for his daughter and bring
guilt that instantly began to fester at his choices.

When Theo stormed into Charles' home to destroy every ounce
being, the defeated man broke down and confessed his guilt. He ex-
fact, he how he was forced into this web of deceit by a man who convinced
. "Hey, was his only option.

Theo had no pity. Everyone has a choice. Charles Hill chose to st-
lie. Cheat honest businessmen out of millions to get ahead. His hand
l, since just as dirty, conjuring up a lie so awful it made Theo carry this horrib-
like you on his shoulders. Deep down, Theo knew he would never do such l-
things, but as the years went on, his mind started to second guess h-
as, then Did he do it? Was that night with Alana all in his head?

Charles confessed to everything, placing heavy blame on Alfr-
Charles told him his father was behind the rape allegation, Theo sho-
Not sure emotion. Alfred supplied the drugs. The forged images. Over the
is graze Charles tried to put a stop to it, but there was no going against a m-
craved such power. The deceit they created within their companies
ticket to success.

Theo made some heavy threats. Charles Hill was destined to a
of MIC deserved. Charles was to shut down his business completely, and if T-
oughout wind of a single sale, deal, or business meeting, he would expose l-
fraudulent activity and being an accessory in the rape setup. He was
ring on man walking, but it was up to him if he went down quietly. And that v-
: would Theo's threats for Charles. When he moved on to his loathsome da-
lth, and even I trembled slightly from his fury.

a dying Charles cried and begged for forgiveness for his daughter. He pro-
e of his Alana's innocence in all of it, but it was seven years too late. There

ury the way Theo was letting her walk away unscathed.

“Theo, please. I beg of you, leave her be. She’s innocent in this.”

of his *Theo wraps his fist around Charles’ neck and thrusts him up against the wall. I try to pull him back, but Craig puts his hand out to stop me. ‘I’ll tell him it’s delusional if you think I don’t have the same threats and blackmail power for her as I do for you.’*

real and *“She doesn’t deserve—”*

his were *“She deserves whatever she gets and then some.” His grip tightens on my arm. I feel the guilt plan on destroying everything. Her livelihood. Her cushy little life. What heinous done with her, she’ll barely have the clothes on her body. I will do it myself. everything from her right after I’m done taking everything from you.”*

He releases him, and Charles slumps against the wall, his face so red. As with tears. Theo turns his back on him and places his hand on my lower back. “We’re done here. Let’s go.” We make our way out of the Hill estate, pass an older woman, her face contorted with fear and despair, and who disregards her, and we walk out. James is there with the car door open. I was his someone catches my eye. I twist to the right as a man steps out from the garage. It takes a moment to register him, but he’s familiar. But why? I—

heo got *My body stiffens. Theo puts his hand on my lower back to help me up. I try to run for the car, but my feet are frozen. “Fay. . .” Theo says my name, but my attention is deadlocked on the man lighting a cigarette.*

was just *“Who. . . who is that?”*

laughter, *“Who?” Theo follows my line of vision until he stops at the man leaning against a car. “Him? That’s Alana’s driver. Why?”*

claimed *“That’s him.”*

was no *“Who?”*

“The man who pushed me.”

My mind hadn't allowed me to remember anything from that day. *inst theit* was busy trying to heal from being hit by a car. But the second I saw *'You're* though, I knew. I remembered the hardness of the man's face—his *planned* nose and blond hair.

Thank god Craig was with us because if it were only me holding back, he would have killed someone that day. His rage scared me. *ens.* “Reeling from the betrayal of those who should have cared for him. He *hen I'm* Craig to drag him back to the car and do the right thing by giving *ill take* information to the police.

Rick Saunders.

ddened Coerced by his lover to wait for me outside Theo's building and *er back*. death look like an accident. Alana Hill tried to have me killed to *ate and* future. She'd been secretly sleeping with Rick for years.

o. Theo There was one thing Alana was truthful about. She was, indeed, *n when* But it wasn't Theo's. Alana offered Rick the promise of a life he *om there* refuse. She would marry Theo, and in time, Theo would have the same *o? How* me. It could take years, but they would eventually be together.

Alana was arrested alongside Rick. Her story was completely *into the* than Rick's, claiming everything under the sun—rape, duress, *ntion is* Everyone knew the truth, but it was for a judge to decide. Charles *hefty* bail so she could remain on house arrest until the trial.

There's no doubt Alana was obsessed with Theo. She envied him *n, now* everything he was. Without him, she had nothing. Alana may have *innocent* initially, but greed led her down the same path as her father Alfred. In the end, it ruined them all.

My thoughts are brought back to the present when Theo lifts my

placing a tender kiss on the inside of my wrist. “Let them talk,” he says. I guess “You think Charles will show up?” I ask when there’s a pause in the row him, “If he’s a smart man, he wouldn’t.”

ominent Another hour goes by. My leg is killing me, and my crutches are clung into my armpits. I lean into Theo and whisper, “I’m going to sneak off to the Theoladies’ room.”

He was “Hurry back.”

allowed “I’m sure you’ll survive not looking down my dress for a few minutes during the He turns, his eyes falling to that spot before meeting mine. “Fredrick’s a dead man.” He leans in, his voice low. “But I do prefer enjoying myself when I shove my cock between those tits and fuck. I’ll make my painting your pretty little face with my cum.”

real her Of all places, I’m turned on in a funeral home. Heat spreads across my face, and I shiver. “Well then.” I lick my lower lip, sucking it between my pregnant teeth. “How is a girl supposed to make it through the whole day knowing she wouldn’t treat she has in store for her?” Theo’s lips curl into a playful smile. “I’d like to see your fate ashave to alleviate some of this ache in the bathroom.”

“I dare you. Touch what’s mine, and you’ll regret it.”

ifferent “Oh, I always did like a good challenge.” He reaches for me, but I backmail.back, smiling, and hobble away, knowing it will cost me later.

said her Theo’s been very possessive lately. As in, he needs to control every inch of my body. Not that I’m complaining. He’s shown me how desirable I am and he is to making me feel wanted, cherished, and loved. And let me tell you, I’ve never been feel on top of the world. There’s only been one minor disagreement. (I told her and was a total blowout because he took it upon himself to have my apartment packed up and moved into his place.

My hand, “You can’t just make those decisions for me!”

ing in. I “You’ll do no such thing.”

“What kind of streaming services do you have? I’ll cover Netflix, Hi

gers go “Knock it off, Fay.”

“WiFi?”

“Fay. . .”

“If you can print me off the utility bill—”

I’m up and over his shoulders before I can finish my sentence.

He slaps my ass. “How about my cock between these sweet ass cheeks squeal when he spansks me again.

“Hmmm. . . sounds like we’re going to be working up an appetite. go halvesies on take-out—shit!” That one stung.

on my “Shut up, Fay.”

lled my “Where’s my please?”

“The only one who’s going to say please is you, you naughty little m

oodbye “Fine, but one question. Did you pack my vibrator? We’ve been there a lot together. I’d hate to see him go.”

e some I chuckle at the memory. As mad as I was, he made it up to me with a vibrator. With orgasms and a storage unit where he put the couch.

I struggle to open the bathroom door. I find a stall and rest my c

“Well, against the wall, sighing as I take the pressure off my leg.

nothing. My mind goes back to my crazy, unexpected morning. Theo Mon has been all about surprises. I shake my head, my lips spreading into a smile as I replay the memory.

“Open it.”

“What is this?”

“Just open it.”

“Is this finally the bill for all your streaming services—”

“Open it, or I’m going to spank the shit out of you. Again.”

ulu—” I wiggle my brows. “Geez, don’t tempt me with a good time.”

“Jesus, open it.”

“Fine.” I take the thick envelope. I’m going to owe a lot of IOUs i really his Netflix. Tearing at the seal, I slide out the stack of docur take a quick peek at him, curious about what he has up his sleeve, th the first page. Legal terms and phrases I don’t understand are jumb l eks?” I phrases I am familiar with. Confusion sets in, trying to understand w reading. Ownership, purchase agreement, restaurant license. . . I fina Wannaup at Theo. “What is this?”

“It’s the purchase of a building space.”

I look back down, reading more. Restaurant assets, partnership agr . . “And what is it for?”

inx.” “You,” he says. “But only if you want it.” He gives me a mor ough aprocess what he’s telling me, then continues. “I don’t want to contr life or your dreams. What I want, more than anything, is to watch you i lots ofin your passion. You’ve made me realize I have a dream of my own. I goals and aspirations. You allowed me to break free from the life rutchesbarely surviving. And I don’t know how I will ever repay you. But, I th is a good start.”

roe has “You bought me a restaurant?” The words sound unreal coming ou ile as Imouth.

“I bought a space that used to be a restaurant. It failed, so they s left all the equipment behind. I know you don’t need my help. I have fc can do this on your own and in your own time. I’m here for you whene decide to get back on that horse, but I don’t want you to wait too loi have too much talent not to pursue it.”

“You bought me a restaurant,” I repeat.

“I’m giving you a chance to be who you’re meant to be. What you want is on you. You cook like shit, on you. You decide to turn it into a meal for this reason you.” I snap out of my shock long enough to smack him in the cheeks. In point is, I love seeing you in your element. I want you to be happy.”

“You. . .” I still don’t know what to say. Tears rush down my cheeks. “You bought me a restaurant?”

“Again, only if you want it. Are those happy tears or mad tears? I really look sure how you’re taking this. Shit, you’re mad. Fay, this isn’t me convincing you. It’s me offering you a stepping stone—”

“Shut up.” Shit. My emotions are running rampant. I close my eyes, my heart slamming against my chest. I hiccup a sob and throw myself jumping into his arms. He stumbles backward, almost falling over. I want to tell you, Theo Monroe. For being so brave and strong. Gentle and caring. I want to tell you how I feel about you seeing me for me.” I press my lips to his and kiss him until I make my head thrivedizzy. “Thank you for believing in me. My cooking. That I could even run my own up a potential meth lab.” We both chuckle, and I brush my lips back over his. I was “I don’t know how to react to this. It’s crazy and scary and exciting and I don’t know if I fail?”

“I believe in you.”

“Even if it’s a meth lab?”

“Even if it’s a meth lab.” He pulls me closer, tightening his grip on my waist. “It’s all yours, but I will tell you there’s one stipulation.”

“What’s that?”

“You bring up the goddamn bills one more time, and this all goes away. You know I, Fay Evans, have my own restaurant. Or bakery. Or meth lab!”

“Gah!” My giggly voice echoes in the stall. I hear the door open and

my mouth. Flushing, I head to the sink to wash my hands, smiling *do with* thinking about my future. *Our* future—

eth lab, “That’s the smile of someone who thinks they’ve won.” My head *st*. “Myup, and I see Alana Hill in the mirror’s reflection. I spin around, grunting my casted leg is slow to follow.

s. “You “What, are you here to take me outside and throw me in traffic? Finish the job?” How the hell is she here? And I’m no medical professional. I’m *not* but she doesn’t look well. The word *unhinged* comes to mind. My gaze *trolling* to the ankle bracelet that’s beeping and flashing red.

“You’re a little bottom-feeder whore who thinks this will end well for *yes, my* You don’t get to just show up and mess with my entire life. My plan *at him*, takes a step toward me. “I’ve worked too hard to have someone like you *I love* everything away from me.”

ig. *And* “Like what? A man you tried to trap? Wow, congrats on everything *myself* worked so hard for. If anyone’s the whore—”

conjure She lunges at me.

ver his. I have enough time to shield my face before she tackles me to the *id what* and grabs my hair. “You bitch.” She yanks my head, banging it on the ground, and white spots flash in my vision. “I’m going to tear your eyes out,” she yells, slamming my head again. I claw at her face, and she screams in pain. I try to flip us, but the restriction of my cast makes it difficult. *on my* thrust my knee upward, hitting her in the gut. She grunts, momentarily losing *up* on her grip, and I thrust my head up and headbutt her. I knock her off *balance*, but the problem is, I do the same to myself. I scramble back *way*.” get out from underneath her, but she grabs at my dress. I elbow her in the chin to release me and scurry to my feet.

d cover “You’re dead, whore. If you think—” She reaches for her purse. I c

ng and it at the same time, but she's quicker and pulls out a gun, aiming it at my face. "I told you to go away. I warned you this wasn't your place. I told you to whipshad to stick around. Theo is mine."

ting as "Theo was never yours. He was a prisoner in your little game."

Her laugh is cynical and manic. "And what are you? His savior?"
again? "I'm the one he loves. The one he's going to marry. The one who will be his children." Maybe baiting her while she's pointing a gun at my face is the best idea, but it's the only option I have to stall her. Theo is impatient and come looking for me. Someone will have to pee. Someone will hear the yelling and call for help.

s." She "That's where you're wrong," she says, her voice suddenly calm. She takes the gun backfired on me. Her finger caresses the trigger.

"Alana, please. You don't have to do this. Think about your baby. You're going to be a mother."

Her hands shake. "A baby with no father because he's in *jail!*" She says in her voice. "You took everything from me, and now. . . now it's my turn to pay the favor." Her arm straightens, and I duck, barreling into her. The gun goes off as we fall to the ground. Alana slams her head back against the floor as I land on top of her. Just then, the bathroom door is thrown open with such force that it hangs crooked on the hinges. Two hands grab my armpits, and I'm pulled into Theo's arms.

Everything that happens next is a blur. There's yelling and commotion. I hear the faint sound of Alana's screaming voice as Theo hauls me away.

"Are you okay?" he asks, rushed. He lays me on the floor. "Are you hurt?" I start to shake my head, but the quick motion makes my stomach roil. I raise my hand to the back of my head. When I pull back, my fingertips are red.

t at my “Fuck,” Theo turns and yells. “Help! Someone call for an ambulance!”
But you picks me up and races to the front doors of the funeral home.

“I’m fine,” I say, feeling drunk and possibly slurring my words.
bump.”

“You’re not fine. You’re bleeding, damn it. Are you hurt anywhere?”
I have heard a gunshot.” His words come out frantic, and I have
no idea what he’s saying. “Fay? Help!”

The pain in my head gets worse. “Theo, my head hurts.”

“Fay, stay with me, baby—thank God. Over here!”

A nice man in a medic uniform takes me from Theo’s arms, and I’m
put on a gurney while someone inspects my head. “I could really use some
painkillers for this headache,” I mumble, closing my eyes.

“Hey, keep your eyes open. Can you tell me your name?” the medic
flashes a bright light in my eyes.

“They are open.”

“Fay, please. Stay awake.” Theo’s voice sounds so sad and sudden
as he moves away.

“I’m fine. Really.” I force my eyes open and try to sit up, pointing
my finger. “That bitch ruined my dress. Fredrick’s gonna be mad.” I fall
back under down on the gurney, and everything goes black.

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“Fuck,” Theo turns and yells. “Help! Someone call for an ambulance!” He picks me up and races to the front doors of the funeral home.

“I’m fine,” I say, feeling drunk and possibly slurring my words. “Just a bump.”

“You’re not fine. You’re bleeding, damn it. Are you hurt anywhere else? I heard a gunshot.” His words come out frantic, and I have trouble understanding him. “Fay? Help!”

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A nice man in a medic uniform takes me from Theo’s arms, and I’m placed on a gurney while someone inspects my head. “I could really use something for this headache,” I mumble, closing my eyes.

“Hey, keep your eyes open. Can you tell me your name?” the medic asks, flashing a bright light in my eyes.

“They are open.”

“Fay, please. Stay awake.” Theo’s voice sounds so sad and suddenly far away.

“I’m fine. Really.” I force my eyes open and try to sit up, pointing to my dress. “That bitch ruined my dress. Fredrick’s gonna be mad.” I fall back down on the gurney, and everything goes black.

Epilogue

Theo

Eight months later. . .

I tug at my tie as the elevator dings for the penthouse floor. The door opens, and I walk down the hall, the sound of music blaring from our apartment break into a smile for the first time today since I left her. She's cooking, and she blasts the same girly shit when she's in her element.

The last eight months have been absolute mayhem.

Eight months ago, I sat in a hospital room after my father's wake, waiting for the woman I planned on spending the rest of my life with to wake up. Alana's attack gave Fay three stitches to the head and a concussion. A woman who had been confined to her home by the law was able to walk out of her home and cause harm to my woman. I harbored guilt for what happened. When she didn't immediately return, I became worried. I listened to my intuition instead of shaking hands with strangers, I could have done something sooner. Saved her from the psychotic hands of Alana.

Alana was arrested and, this time, denied bail. No matter how much my legal team tried, she was destined for a life behind bars. I hope she breathes free air again. And Charles Hill was in the wind, not even because

to stick around to help his daughter. Once his wife heard the news at transgressions, she left him. She knew exactly what was happening closed doors, but greed makes people turn a blind eye.

While waiting for Fay to recover, I made some big moves. Investment Corp was dissolved. My father and Charles' greed tain good work being done there, and I could no longer confidently walk office knowing what they did. I stepped down immediately, and I've felt freer.

My father always taught me to be ahead of the game. With success sacrifice, and with sacrifice comes power. What he didn't teach me w power can destroy a man. And it almost destroyed me. But then I m e doors Fay became my lifeline. She saved me in more ways than I can expres door. I plan on spending the rest of our lives making sure she knows how lo ng. She is.

Because she's become my reason. My purpose.

I bought the restaurant because I knew she was worthy of another waiting to shine. She was amazing inside and out. From her simple pizza re cake up. her seared scallops with spiced pomegranate glaze. God, my dic sion. A thinking about her food because damn, can she cook. And since my talk out resilient in every way possible, she was writing down ideas, mock or what and restaurant names before she was released from the hospital.

As promised, I brought in a team to assist her. As soon as she got ld have ahead from her doctor, she hit the ground running. So much so that I Hill. she was overworking herself. She was still easily tired because uch her concussion, and I sometimes regretted not encouraging more ti e never recovery. She wouldn't rest. At one point, I threatened to shut eve othering

out his down if she didn't take a break or slow down. I remember our
behind threatening to do just that.

"Dammit, Fay. You have to slow down."

Monroe *"I'm fine. If I don't take care of this, it won't be ready in time."*

ted the *"That's why you have an entire army behind you. Let them do the
into the You need a break."*

e never *"No, I need to make sure this is all perfect."*

*"Fay, for Christ's sake. You're running yourself ragged. You
is comessleeping. Are you even eating?"*

as how *"What? I ate this morning. You saw me."*

let Fay. *"Eating the foam off your cappuccino isn't a meal. The doctor said
s, and I take time to heal from your accident and concussion. And you're not
ved she yourself that. I'm worried."*

*Her hands flail over her head. "Worried? You offer me this
opportunity, and now you want to take it away?" She pouts, tears form
chance her eyes. I hate that she's starting to cry, but I know it's from exhaus
tipes to Nightmares have been keeping her awake, so she's trying not to sleep
k jerks "I just want you to slow down."*

7 girl is *"No, you want to control me and tell me what I can and can't do
menus, crosses her arms over her chest. If it keeps her safe, healthy, and hap
sure as fuck control her."*

the go- *"You're right. And I've stated my case." I reach into my suit jac
worried hand her a paper.*

of her *"What's this?"*

me for *"Your ultimatum."*

rything *She unfolds the paper, and I watch her eyes widen. She looks at th
and then at me. "You. . . you're. . . why are you giving me the Netflix*

r fight, hate the tears that drop down her face, but I need her to know how serious I am.

“Because I care more about you than that restaurant. I care about your health and well-being more than anything. If anything starts to jeopardize your jobs, that, I will step in and put a stop to it.”

“Yeah, but you’re handing me the Netflix bill. The Netflix bill. I don’t want to pay the Netflix bill.”

“You’re not pulling her to me, I rip the damn bill out of her hand and toss it away while she sobs on my shoulder. “So, maybe I am a little tired. And I’m a little stressed out. And possibly really stressed out. I just want it all to be perfect. I know I’ll prove it will prove—”

“You don’t owe anyone anything. You certainly don’t need to give anything to that fuck head Hamlin or Miguel Lorenzo. You are Fay’s great Evans. You shine so brightly that there is no competition. You’re young and in that’s enough.” I pull her from my chest and kiss the tip of her nose. “Beautiful.”

“Being beautiful has nothing to do with cooking.”

“It has everything to do with it. When you have a beautiful soul, your beauty shines in your food. And that’s why no one will ever be able to compete with you.” She stares up at me, her eyes touching my soul. “I’m here for you every step of the way. I just ask that you slow down. This is me asking. Even saying please.” She chuckles and wipes her cheeks.

Sighing, she replies. “You probably could have just said please in the first place. You didn’t have to go all beast mode and bring out the Netflix bill which is kind of high, and pretty low, by the way.”

“I needed your attention.”

serious I “Well, now you have it.”

I kiss her lips. “Good.” The doorbell rings, and she glances out your shoulder.

pardize “Are you expecting someone?” she asks as I release her and walk door.

it’s want “Yes,” I say, opening the door to her spunky girlfriend.

“Am I early?” She glances at both of us. “Late?”

it aside “What are you—?” Fay starts, but I cut her off.

hungry. “She was my reinforcement if the streaming account bill didn’t work want to Her mouth drops, and I want to toss her friend back out and kiss the off her face.

› prove “You called Mindy?”

fucking “Oh, girl. No. He didn’t just call me. He risked his life and showed u—and Bev’s. Begged me to help drink some sense into you.”

r nose. “I didn’t say drink.”

Her friend turns to me. “Talking sense into this one requires discipline. Might wanna take notes.” Then she glances back at our girl. “If he’s useful, that make it out of the scary bar, I vowed to take care of you and make sure you’re able to live the rest of your life happy and drunk.”

“I love “Didn’t say any of that—”

› down. “Thank god he made it back to you alive.”

at her Surprisingly, while I’m getting annoyed, Fay starts to chuckle.

“He is a sissy sometimes, isn’t he?”

the first What the hell? “I’m not a sissy.”

x bill— “Right? Surprised he didn’t ask for a straw to drink his draft beer.” How the hell is this turning into a bash on me? “Jesus, you know what Mindy slaps my chest and walks up to Fay, wrapping her in the

hug. “Just kidding. Your boy toy is a great guy. I’m jealous you never mysomeone so perfect. But I agree. You need a time-out. So tonight, no meal planning or whatever the fuck you do. Tonight, we’re watching k to theand eating whatever Hot Stuff over there orders us.”

As Mindy pulls her into the living room, Fay turns and mouths, you.”

The loud music pulls me out of my memory, and I unlock the doo penthouse. My dick jerks in my slacks at the aroma. Whatever the he k.” cooking smells amazing. I find Fay in the kitchen, surrounded by a at lookplated dishes. From the looks of it, she started the second I left.

“Hey,” I call out, but she can’t hear me over the loud music. She h in her hair and a smear of something green across her cheek. “Hey!” d up at She jumps, turning my way. “Hey! Oh my god, you’ll never guess I’ve had.”

“Looking at the kitchen, I’d say an eventful one.” rinking. “Well, yes. That too. But guess what!” She doesn’t give me a ch e didn’tanswer. “I finally figured out the sauce for the duck!” She dips a spo ure youher saucepan and walks over to me. “Try this.”

She lifts it to my mouth, and my tastebuds practically orgasm at t taste. “Damn, that’s good.”

“Right? I was trying to stick to the norm. But then I started thinking just changed a few things, swapped out the truffle oil for Alba white oil, it would pair better with the saffron and bring out the tartness cherry wine. It’s perfect.”

“I think Amy’s going to love it.” The restaurant isn’t set to o j at—” another six months. She and Fay have become inseparable. Amy’s bo biggestproposed a few months ago, and Fay offered to throw her an enga

foundparty at the restaurant. She said it would be a good test run before she
morethe doors to the public.

movies “I still can’t believe she said yes to letting me do this.”

I kiss her forehead. “She’d be crazy not to.”

“I love Amy became a constant in our life when my father died. After I
down from MIC, I started an LLC, working with investors who wanted
r to the land. Instead of buying it, I was helping companies, investors, and real
ll she’s moguls search out the best deals to make them a long-term flow of
pile of When I walked away from MIC, with Fay’s wise advice, I took An
me. I hate to admit it, but I took her twat friend, Kyle, too. He’s bec
as flour asset to my company, but I keep that to myself.

Within the first three months, I had a full clientele and waitlist. An
the day Fay calms down, I’m going to share that my small group of trust
shareholders has agreed to expand, opening two additional offices.

“God, I hope she loves the dishes I chose. I mean—if she doesn’t, h
ance to the general public? What if—”

on into “Stop. Self-doubt doesn’t look good on you. You’re amazing, a
know it.”

he first My girl shrugs, trying her damndest to hold back her smirk. “
right. I am. I want it all to be perfect. It’s not every day someone says
, . . . if I catering their engagement dinner. I don’t think she actually said yes
truffle like I told her. Shit, what if she really doesn’t want this?”

of the I cup her cheek. “She wants this. She won’t shut the hell up at wor
how excited she is. I’m about to give her a pay cut if she doesn’t—”

pen for I chuckle when she whips me in the gut with a dish towel. “You’ll
yfriendsuch thing. It’s just. . . I’m hosting seventy-five people!” There’s f
gement

opened excitement mixed in her voice. “What if the liquor license isn’t approved yet?”

I pull the envelope out of my suit coat. “Good thing it got approved then.”

stepped “Gah!” She squeals and jumps into my arms. “Holy shit! Why didn’t you tell me?”

estate I kiss her chin and her cheek and bring her lips to mine. “It was done right before I left.”

ly with She returns the gesture, kissing me back. “Amy’s going to be so nervous. Can you imagine seventy-five people, not to mention mixed family members, trying to make conversation *sober*?”

d when “The travesty.” I take my thumb and rub it down her cheek. “You’ve got a little green sauce on your face.”

She looks up at me, and the glimmer in her eyes makes my heart swell. “I probably look a mess.”

I inhale and exhale slowly, keeping my emotions at bay. I raise my hand and brush her wild hair behind her ear. “You look like someone who deserves. But my selfish self says you look like my forever.” My words catch in my throat as I reach for the box that’s been burning a hole in my pocket for days, waiting for the right moment. I allow her to slide down. Morebody until her feet are secure. “Fable Evans.” I drop to one knee and her mouth drops open. I ignore it, making myself continue. “I’m not going to talk about you. You probably secretly hate me. . .” I take a breath. “But as you know, I take what I want. I have control issues, but nothing compares to the control you have over my heart.”

ear and I reach up, catching a falling tear. “I fell in love with you the moment you tripped into my arms. I felt your heartbeat against mine, and it changed

oved in life.”

She chuckles as she wipes at her cheek. “If you could see yourself today, my eyes, you’d know you’re a blessing, a miracle, this beautiful enigma, and you wouldn’t question anything. I’m not worthy of you, but I’ll cherish you as the gift I was given until you decide you’re done with me.”

I open the box, my fingers shaking, and reach for the diamond ring I’d deliberated on for endless hours choosing. Not to mention the additional time I’d spent listening to Mindy try to convince me her girl wanted a pink diamond. “Evans, will you marry me?”

Tears cascade down her beautiful cheeks. She wraps her arms around me, hugging me tightly, my eyes filling with the same emotion. When she says you have back, I smile, dying to hear her say—

“No.”

I’m still smiling when her reply settles in. “No?”

“No. I can’t have a man who threatens me with a Netflix bill when my handtimes get tough—which I still think is high. I need a man willing to take care of me in the bedroom and take care of me.”

Little brat. “If that’s the case, I’ll cancel the service altogether.”

Her eyes widen. “Well, don’t do that. The new season of *Top Chef* starts next week.”

“I’ll call the company and threaten their lives if they don’t love me with monthly payment.”

She thinks about it and nods, easing my worrying heart. “Okay. We’ll do a power deal.”

“A deal?” I look up at her.

“Yes. I’ll commit to being your wife, the other half of your heart. Everything that’s what you are to me.”

Fuck. I grab her and pull her down, choking back my tears as I s
throughring on her finger. When she pushes me backward and topples us over
gma. . .it. I take the musical giggles and bask in the happiness that washes o
cherishThis love. . . it's intense and scary, but it's real. It has power. And dam
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The End

**Want more of Fay and Theo? Sign up for my newsletter and ge
exclusive bonus scene! Download here!**

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Fuck. I grab her and pull her down, choking back my tears as I slide the ring on her finger. When she pushes me backward and topples us over, I take it. I take the musical giggles and bask in the happiness that washes over me. This love. . . it's intense and scary, but it's real. It has power. And damn, does it feel good.

The End

Want more of Fay and Theo? Sign up for my newsletter and get an exclusive bonus scene! [Download here!](#)

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Pride

Text 2 Lovers

Hate 2 Lovers

Thieves 2 Lovers

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Blackstone

Four Sons Series

Hayden

Elite Seven Series

Pride

About Author

USA Today Best-selling author, J.D. Hollyfield is a creative designer and superhero by night. When she's not cooking, event planning, or spending time with her family, she's relaxing with her nose stuck in a book. With a love for romance, and her head full of book boyfriends, she was inspired to test her creative abilities and bring her own stories to life. Living in the Midwest, she's currently at work on blowing the minds of readers, with the additions of her new books and series, along with her charm, humor, and HEA's.

J.D. Hollyfield dabbles in all genres, from romantic comedy, contemporary romance, historical romance, paranormal romance, fantasy and erotica. To know more! Follow her on all platforms!

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awesome people who got my back. Thank you to Jenny Hanson, J Kreinbring, Molly Wittman, Cindy Camp, Ashley Cestra, Kristi Webs anyone who I may have forgotten! I appreciate you all!

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A warm thank you to Molly at Novel Mechanic for having superb input.

Thank you to Wander Aguiar for his amazing talent and the custom artwork for this cover. This image is the first representation of a story, and he brought it to life.

Thank you to my awesome reader group, Club JD. All your comments and all the support for what I do warms my heart. I appreciate all the time you spend on my art out, helping my stories come to life within this community.

And most importantly every single reader and blogger! THANK YOU for the job is and all that you do. For supporting me, reading my stories, spreading the word.

It's because of you that I get to continue in this business. And for that I will be forever grateful.

Thank you. Cheers. This big glass of wine is for you.

Thank you for some

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Thank you for the

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j.d.
HOLLYFIELD

READER. WRITER. WINE ABUSER.

