

**RUDE
BOSS'**

SECRET

BABY

J. P. COMEAU

RUDE BOSS' SECRET BABY


A Single Mom Romance

J.P. COMEAU

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PROLOGUE

Trey

Six Months Ago

Have you ever had one of those days that seems to have no end in sight? You know the ones. The ones where every time you get up, someone emails you? The ones where you can't even take a bathroom break because of the emergencies flooding your desk? The ones where it seems as if the children won't stop screaming, the cauldron won't stop bubbling over, and every corner you turn has a nice, sharp Lego for your bare-ass feet?

Yeah, today sucked.

While I loved my secretary with all of my heart—mostly because she reminded me of my grandmother—only having her part-time was killing me. On the days she wasn't at her desk, I could barely get *my* shit done because I had to field *her* stuff. And the times she took vacation? Like right now? The entire week could kick rocks, as far as I was concerned.

“Another one?” the bartender asked.

I held up my empty glass before sliding it his way. “One more, but that's it.”

He snatched up my glass. “You driving?”

I shook my head slowly. “Nah, but I still can't wake up with a hangover. Too much at stake tomorrow.”

He chuckled. “Sounds like it's pretty important.”

You have no idea.

I picked at my nail beds and sat there, waiting for my third scotch. I never drank scotch, usually. It burned too much and singed my nose hairs if I swallowed it the wrong way. But, today had sucked, and it brought me to a terrible conclusion I didn't want to face yet.

I might have to fire my work mee-maw.

“What would ya like, sweetie?” the bartender asked.

I raised my eyes at the sound of the man's voice, and I found a beautiful woman sitting at the other end of the bar. Wait, no-no. Not beautiful. The damned woman was drop-dead gorgeous.

“I'll have a Jack and Coke, please,” she said.

Only strong women drink those kinds of drinks.

“Coming right up.” The bar tender handed me my glass.

I nodded mindlessly. “Thanks.”

Before I started staring at the unassuming woman who was playing around on her phone, I dropped my eyes back to my scotch. But, I was no longer interested in throwing it back and getting the hell out of Dodge. I suddenly had the urge to stay out a bit later, to nurse my drink a little slower than I had originally intended.

And as I kept stealing glances at this breathtaking woman, I drank in her features.

She had pin-straight brown hair that looked to be on her head in droves. The woman had the thickest hair I'd ever seen, and my fingertips ached to sink deep into the sea of softness. Even with the truncated view of her torso, I could tell she was a thicker woman, with curves like the waves of the sea and valleys like the craters of the earth. And her eyes... holy fuck. Her eyes were the bluest I'd ever seen. In the right glint of light, they almost looked photoshopped onto her face.

Dammit, I loved a thick-bodied woman.

“Sir?” the bartender asked.

His voice ripped me from my trance. “Yep?”

He handed me a shot. “Courtesy of the woman at the end of the bar.”

And when I looked back over toward her, I found her staring at me with a smile on her face before she waved her hand in my direction. Her curves were ready to lick, and she knew what she wanted in her life. I couldn’t let the opportunity pass me by.

So, I threw back the shot and scooped up my drink before making my way toward her end of the bar.

“Evening,” I said as I slid into the seat next to her.

She peeked over at me. “Hello there.”

I grinned. “Out of all the things I thought you were wearing beneath the bar, a pencil skirt wasn’t what came to mind. Long day at work?”

She snickered. “You could say that, yeah.”

I leaned against the small back of the barstool and held out my hand. “I’m Trey.”

She shook my hand softly but with confidence. “Leslie.”

“It’s very nice to meet such a lovely woman after the day I’ve had.”

She snickered. “Rough day for you, too?”

I winked at her. “You could say that, yeah.”

She blushed, and I wanted to know what that color looked like over the rest of her body.

“So, are we going to mutually talk about our terrible days? Or, are we going to act like they didn’t exist and talk about anything else?”

She licked her lips. “You know, I’m kind of a fan of the third option.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “And which option is that?”

She leaned in close, and I smelled her candy-laced body spray as it wafted up my nose. “The option where neither of us

speaks at all.”

“I like the sound of that.”

She turned back to her drink and sipped on it, but I saw her stealing little glances at me. I kept myself turned toward her as I chugged back my drink, waiting patiently as her own dash of liquid courage seeped slowly into her stomach. I couldn't wait to sink my teeth into her excess. I couldn't wait to coat my dick between her luscious thighs.

Then, after she finished her drink, she swiveled herself toward me. “So, Trey. Tell me the worst highlight of your day.”

I chuckled. “I thought we weren't going to talk about our days?”

“That's when I wasn't buzzed. Now, I have my God-given right to bitch if I so choose.”

I smirked. “Very well. Care to do the bitching in my car? My place is only fifteen minutes from here.”

She winked at me. “Ever heard of taking your time?”

“Foreplay. I like it. All right, I'll bite. The worst highlight from my entire day was having to fire two of my interns because I caught them getting it on while clocked in.”

She giggled. “I suppose that isn't that bad.”

“This wasn't the first time they'd been caught.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay, I can see how that—”

I cleared my throat. “They were in my office when I came back from lunch.”

She almost choked on a piece of ice she was chewing. “Holy shit.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, you're telling me. I had my entire damn place cleaned down, which put me working in the conference room of all places. That then spiraled into people believing I was free to talk since I wasn't in my office, so from the time I caught two of my interns hooking up against my desk until the time I finally clocked out, I got only half the work done that I

needed to because ‘office with the door closed’ means ‘no,’ and apparently ‘conference room with the door closed’ means ‘open the floodgates.’”

She threw her head back in laughter, and the sound washed over me like warm syrup over a stack of pancakes. With her neck exposed, I could almost taste the sweetness of her skin against my teeth, if that were even a thing. This woman had a pull on me that I couldn’t resist a second longer. I needed to get her back to my place. I needed to hear her choking when she got off as she tried to remember my name.

“So,” I said as I scooted a little closer to her, “what do you say you give me the worst highlight of your day while we swing by a drive-thru and get some french fries? We can share a large or something on the way back to my place. Then, maybe I could have my chef cook us up a midnight snack. You know, after we’ve made room for it.”

Her eyes swept down my body before her gaze came crawling back up to mine, and I knew I had her. That line always worked, especially when I dropped the fact that I had an in-house chef. I had a lot of things at my disposal that most people didn’t: a chef, a butler, a doctor I could call at a moment’s notice, groundskeepers who kept my estate painstakingly tailored from front to back, a maid staff that came and went as they pleased twenty-four-seven. I knew something was bound to catch her eye.

“Actually, I think I have to be getting home.”

I blinked. “What was that?”

She gathered her purse from the seat beside her and slid to her feet. “I have to be getting home. It’s later than I figured it was, and I have some things I need to tend to.”

I looked down at my watch. “It’s only ten o’clock.”

She cursed beneath her breath. “Yeah, I needed to be home half an hour ago.”

“Well, let me at least walk you out to your—”

She cut me off. “Bartender? Just charge my card you have on file, please?”

I waved my hand in the air. “Put her drinks on my tab. Are you sure you don’t want me to at least give you a ride?”

She shook her head and started for the exit door. “Really, I’m good. But thank you. It was nice talking with you tonight.”

I started scrambling for last-minute tactics. “Can I at least get your number?”

“Have a good evening!” she called out from the door.

And just as quickly as she had fluttered into my life on the wings of an angel, she wafted away. Soaring into the distance through the exit doors and dumping out onto a bustling sidewalk as people flooded the bar.

I sat there, dumbfounded at what just happened.

Had I seriously been turned down?

Women never turn me down.

As the bar flooded with a bunch of stupid college kids, I eased myself off the barstool. I felt stunned to my core as I mindlessly paid for both of our tabs and made my way back out into the parking lot. Was it something I had said? Surely, it wasn’t because of what I looked like. I kept myself up well, my grooming tactics always kept up with modern standards, and I never cheaped out on a fucking suit. I paid well for the clothes I wore and the cologne I spritzed onto my skin every morning.

But, as I nonchalantly dropped the bartender a Benjamin for his troubles, I found myself leaving the bar.

Alone.

After being bought a drink by the most gorgeous woman I’d ever set my sights on.

Leslie

I opened my townhouse door and heard Suri yelling for me. “It’s about damn time you got home!”

I almost couldn’t think straight; I was so riled up. I closed the door behind me and locked it as my best friend of all time

came waltzing around the corner. She had her disapproving glare on with her hands cocked against both of her hips, and I knew I owed her a serious apology.

Mostly, because I was supposed to be home an hour ago. “Thank you so much for watching Aurora,” I said with a sigh.

Suri narrowed her eyes. “You met someone tonight, didn’t you?”

I scoffed. “Yeah, a little too late as well, I might add.”

She threw her hands into the air. “Then, why didn’t you text me? I would’ve stayed here and hung out. Probably crashed in your guest bedroom down here or something.”

I walked toward her and enveloped her in a big hug. “I didn’t want to leave you here longer than I needed to, especially since I can’t pay you for the overtime.”

She wrapped me up tightly. “There’s no overtime when I’m watching my goddaughter. Got it?”

I closed my eyes. “I love you so much.”

“That hot, huh?”

I groaned. “You have no idea.”

I sniffed the air and smelled the remnants of pizza, so I started my hunt. Suri slid my purse off my shoulder and hung it up as I made my way into the kitchen. I sighed with relief when I saw the unopened pizza just for me.

“Pepperoni and mushroom with pineapple?” I asked.

Suri giggled as she came to meet up with me. “Just the way you like it.”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho. Do we have Ranch? Please, tell me we have Ranch.”

My best friend wiggled her eyebrows. “I had to buy some from the pizza place, but there are three small containers of it in the fridge.”

“You’re my soulmate, you know that?”

“And as your soulmate, I’m telling you that the next time you meet a hot guy after I shove you out the door to go have some ‘you time,’ the thing you *should* do is text me to tell me you’ll be late.”

I picked up a slice of lukewarm pizza and took a bite. “Noted.”

As much as I wanted to cry, stuffing my face with pizza was the next best thing. So, I walked Suri to the door before I stacked a plate full of the cheesy, meaty, pineapple-y goodness. I grabbed my ranch and plucked a Dr. Pepper from the door of the fridge before I made my way upstairs, stopping just shy of my daughter’s bedroom.

I heard her soft snores leaking through the small crack the door, and the sound settled my restless soul. “We’ll find a way to make it, I promise,” I whispered.

I made my way into my bedroom and headed straight into my en-suite bathroom. It was kind of small, and sometimes I had trouble navigating my way through it. But, I put up with it because the shower-tub combination was large enough for me to take a legitimate bath in it. I set my food down and stripped myself of my work clothes. I tossed them into the hamper just outside of my bathroom door, then readied myself for a nice bath. I poured rose-scented bubbles into the hot bath water and rummaged around for Old Faithful—my vibrator that did wonderful, ethereal things to my body.

“Come to Mama,” I murmured.

With my child-sized TV tray pulled up to the edge of the bathtub that my daughter didn’t use any longer, I set my pizza and drink beside me. Then, after turning off the bathwater, I tossed my leg over the frothy edge. I dipped my vibrator beneath the bubble-coated waters and parted my pussy lips, allowing my eyes to fall closed just long enough to conjure the image of Trey.

And when I turned my vibrator up, my toes started curling. “Holy fuck, just like that,” I groaned.

It never took long when I was at the reins. I knew exactly where to massage and where to pivot. I knew exactly how to buck against my toy to hit all those lovely spots. I knew how to make my toes curl from the very beginning, and I knew how to pucker my tits as my orgasm crashed over my body.

And as I choked back my sounds, chanting Trey's name at the back of my throat, I settled heavily against the bathtub as bubbles slowly trickled down the side and onto the tiled flooring.

"Shit," I whispered.

I felt sweat dripping down the nape of my neck. I felt my face flushed with redness as I stared at the shower-head diagonally above me. The smell of pizza and ranch was what got me to move, and I moved just enough to nab a slice before dipping it into some dressing. Then, I closed my eyes.

I had no idea what the hell I was going to do about bills. I mean, being laid off wasn't the first thing I expected from my day when I waltzed into work this morning. And yet, I should have seen it coming. The way people started talking to me as if I didn't matter, and the way my boss kept stealing glances at me throughout the week. It was almost as if everyone else knew *but* me before the firing truly happened. And that pissed me off more than anything.

"Fucking assholes," I murmured.

In about a year, the savings account I had managed to save up would be depleted. Between food and bills and rent, I was lucky if I'd even have that long. Aurora and I would have to find a cheaper place to live if I couldn't find a job within the next few months. I had to make this money stretch as much as I possibly could.

You know you can find a job that you won't hate if you put your mind to it.

I sighed as I reached for my Dr. Pepper. Why didn't anyone tell me that having an art history degree was practically worthless unless I wanted to teach? Or obtain a higher level of education? For a moment, I turned over the

idea of enrolling in teaching classes at the local community college. That would enable me to take out student loans to keep myself and Aurora afloat in this place, at least until I graduated.

Then, what?

I'd have mounds of debt to pay back on a teacher's salary?

"Hell, no," I murmured.

The only good thing that came from my degree was the fact that I could remake myself into anything. You know, since it was fucking worthless. And over the past eight years, I'd done just that. I'd played the part of a cashier, a manager at a gas station, a full-time lunch lady, a bus driver, and a secretary. So, surely there was something out there that would enable me to have a steady nine-to-five without compromising my time with Aurora.

I finished my dinner and stayed in the tub until I was wrinkly and unsightly. Then, I drained the tub and got out. I washed my toy down and stored it away from the prying eyes of my offspring, then I dried off and fell into bed without any clothes on. I was much too tired to get into pajamas, so I wiggled beneath my down comforter and wrapped myself up tightly in it.

I needed a good night's sleep for my full day of turning in applications tomorrow.

Getting fired from a job was always a terrible fucking day. And as much as I wanted to think otherwise, this wasn't the first time I'd been let go. I took my work seriously, whatever I was doing, and I didn't take kindly to people not taking things as seriously. I hated it when people joked around on their job. I hated it when their actions put others at risk. I needed a serious workplace for serious adults who wanted to do serious work.

"You can find something. Just take deep breaths," I whispered to myself.

This wasn't the first time I'd struggle on behalf of myself and my daughter, and I knew it wouldn't be the last. Still, though, it felt like these struggles always came sooner rather

than later. Maybe I needed to be a little less abrasive while doing my job. Perhaps I should try to be nicer to people, even though they pissed me off in droves. Hell, I had struggled most of my life, and I always seemed to find a way to come out on top.

Why change that simply because someone hadn't seen my worth just yet?

And dammit, this was the nicest place Aurora and I had ever lived in. I had to fight for it. I couldn't let that go. Aurora was finally blossoming in school and making friends, something I never thought I'd see from my daughter, who didn't start using words until she was almost three. She had come through shit in leaps and bounds over the past year, and I wasn't yanking her out of that simply because I was a fuck-up.

No. Even if I had to starve, Aurora would eat. Even if I had to take out loans and destroy my credit, this roof would stay over my daughter's head. And even if I had to go back to school—only to be stuck in debt for the rest of my life—I'd do it if it meant keeping Aurora in the one place she liked.

So, with a full day of application-submitting ahead of me, I finally closed my eyes and allowed myself to sleep while thinking of the hot man from the bar and how he could've rocked my world had I not been a piece of chicken-shit.

I

Tray

Present Day

“**N**ope. No. Uh-uh. Hell, no. Eh, maybe, I’ll read it later. No. Nope. Definitely not.”

As I flipped through the mound of resumes that had come my way in the past month, I tossed out over half of them. Well, maybe close to three-quarters of them. Now that Joanne’s husband had retired, she wanted to quit so she could travel with him, even though it left me in a bind.

Guess it’s nice when you actually have someone to do shit with.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek as I kept flipping through pointless resumes. No, I didn’t have time to take on someone that had no secretarial experience. No, I didn’t have time to deal with the bobble-headed nature of freshly graduated-wannabe-adults. And no, I certainly didn’t have the sanity to deal with interns looking for internships for their last year of graduation.

I needed someone with experience.

I needed someone with oomph.

And I needed someone who could get shit done.

In some respects, I hated losing Joanne. That petite little gray-haired woman reminded me of my grandmother, and I missed that hard-ass woman. My Nannie would sit outside

with a lit cigarette dangling from her lip. At the same time, with a BB gun in her hand, she bitched out kids about crossing over into her lawn and terrorizing the habitat of squirrels and cats she had cultivated over the years.

That woman was as eccentric as they came, but she owned it. She lived her life fast and to the fullest until the day she died. And even though she smoked like a freight train, drank like a fish, and shoved fried foods into her mouth for every single meal, she somehow lived to be the ripe old age of ninety-two with a mouth to match.

“God, I miss that woman,” I murmured to myself.

She understood the value of hard work. She understood the importance of getting stuff done. She and my grandfather—God rest his soul—owned and operated a dairy farm of over two hundred and fifty cows. Just the two of them with their six spoiled-brat children who, according to her, constantly complained about the hard work—all of them, that was, except my mother.

Who drilled into me the fine art of dedication and reaping what one sowed.

Nevertheless, I knew that losing Joanne—this beacon of familiarity that kept me going throughout my days—was something happening sooner rather than later. And I should have been prepared. I should have started taking resumes with no end date in sight so that I had a curated list of people to call up when she was ready to step down.

Insert lecture from Nannie here.

The thought made me chuckle as I came across a particular resume that caught my eye.

“Now, here’s something,” I murmured.

I leaned up in my seat and placed the resume against my desk. I needed someone who could keep up with me and travel with me for work when it was required, and right there at the top of this resume was “can and will travel.” I also needed someone who could juggle my small businesses’ needs, and right below “can and will travel” were the words “great multi-

tasker.” And with every beautiful skillset this resume boasted of, there was a number with the name of a reference for me to call.

So, I decided to try out one of them.

“Hello?” a gruff man on the other side of the phone asked.

I leaned back. “Yes, hello. This is Trey Cataline from TC Public Relations.”

“Uh, okay. Whaddaya need? Kinda busy here.”

Charming. “I’m calling on behalf of a woman by the name of...” I peeked over the resume and found the name I was looking for. “Leslie Popovich.”

The man chuckled. “Oh, man. You lookin’ to hire her for a job or something?”

I nodded. “It says here that she’s a great multi-tasker, and I need someone who’s going to juggle things well. Your number was listed in reference to this particular character trait?”

He barked with laughter. “Then, you’ve called the right number. That woman is rough-as-hell around the edges, but she can get a laundry list of shit done in less time than it takes for me to take my morning shit.”

I clicked my tongue. “Great.”

“Oh, yeah. I was sad to see that one go. Pretty easy on the eyes, if I do say so myself. But, she really was one of the best employees I hired, other than the talking back.”

“She talks back?”

“Don’t they all?”

He laughed like he had told the most hilarious joke of all time, but I wasn’t buying it. “What kind of back-talking?”

His laughter died down. “Ah, you know. Calling me out on shit and keeping me in line. Stuff that probably needed to happen anyway.”

Now *that* sounded like someone I needed to interview. “Perfect, thank you for your time.”

“A word of caution, though?”

I paused. “Yes?”

“Be careful with her. She’s got a great head on her shoulders, but that daughter of hers always comes first. She ain’t got no issues calling out even when she knows she’s needed on that day to do what she has to do as a mom. Now, family men like me appreciate that. But, businessmen like you might not.”

I wasn’t sure whether to cuss him out or punch a hole through his face. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“She’d be a great addition, though. Can you tell her Buck said ‘hi’? I’ve been meaning to—”

“Thank you for your time,” I said quickly.

I hung up the phone and shoved myself away from my desk. I needed a bit of fresh air. I snatched Leslie’s resume off my desk and had half a mind to throw it in the damn trash can simply for that asshole’s comment.

And her name.

Why did this woman have to have that name?

I shoved all thoughts aside of the woman at the bar as I marched out of my office. I walked down toward my conference room and slipped inside before I went and opened one of the glass windows. And after drawing in a few deep breaths of fresh air, I started reading over more of this Leslie woman’s resume.

I found a lot of things that made me curious, too.

Like, how many jobs she had held over the past decade. I mean, there were multiple places of employment. Some of them, she hadn’t even lasted a year, and I wondered what the reason for it was. She could obviously lead, though, or at the very least give off that kind of impression. I could tell that simply by the titles she had been hired to fulfill.

Manager.

Head Advisor.

Lead Point.

At one point, she was even considered for a district management position in one of the companies she had hired on with, and less than a year into the job to boot! I was so entranced with the quality, and yet randomness, of her resume that I hadn't even stopped to give the cover letter a read.

And when I flipped that page back over, I wasn't disappointed in the treasure trove of information there was on the front page.

To Whom It May Concern,

Typically, cover letters are used to introduce oneself. However, I feel that my resume gives enough of an introduction. I'd like to point out why I've had so many jobs as of late in the hopes that it won't count against me.

Fair enough, I'm curious myself.

Even with the rise of HR intervention in some businesses, there are men in positions of power that have very archaic notions when it comes to the role of women in their department. And I, for one, wasn't going to stand for any of it.

Nice, nice. Progressive. I can support that.

So, in an effort to combat the ineffectiveness of how those men viewed my roles, any time one of them made a pass at me, I reported then to HR. Apparently, this wasn't the "adult" way to deal with things, and I was either demoted—which led to me quitting—or fired outright.

"Fucking pigs," I hissed.

That is why I've held so many positions. I refuse to quit reporting men who can't keep their married—or single—hands to themselves, and I refuse to work in an environment where I don't feel safe.

"Good for you," I whispered.

I hope you enjoy the rest of my resume's contents with that point in mind, and I hope to hear back from someone soon.

L. Popovich

I liked her. I liked her so much that I raced back out of the conference room and stormed into my office. I slammed the door behind me before I practically bounded over to my chair, dropping as forcibly into it as I could.

And after pulling my desk phone toward me, I started placing some phone calls.

“Hello, this is Trey Cataline, and I’m calling on behalf of a resume that has your number attached to it.”

“Hello, Trey Cataline speaking, I was wondering if I could pick your brain about a former employee, Miss Leslie Popovich?”

“Hello, yes. My name is Trey Cataline, and I was hoping—ah, hello. A fan. Yes, I—I just—yes if I could—oh, you’re too kind. I appreciate it. Yes, uh-huh. Your boss, yeah. I just—thanks. Thank you. Yes, I’ll hold.”

After going down the list of all her references just to confirm what was in her resume, and after satisfying my curious urges, I pivoted toward my laptop. I plucked her email from her resume and shot off a message, asking her if she was free in a couple of days to come in for a preliminary interview.

Then, after sending the email, my eyes dropped to the corner clock on my laptop as it ticked over to six in the evening.

“Jesus,” I said with a sigh.

I’d been sitting at my desk in some form or another since five this morning, after a restless and sleepless night of bullshit. I raked my hands down my face and leaned back against my buttery-leather office chair as the silent sounds of my headquarters creaking around me kept me company. I closed my eyes and drew in deep breaths. I chewed on my lower lip as I gripped the arms of my chair. And after hoisting myself to my feet, I settled on the idea of getting a pre-celebratory drink in honor of my first interview to replace Joanne.

After all, what the hell else was I going to do after thirteen hours of work?

Leslie

Me: Are you sure I can't pay you anything for this?

I shot the text off to Suri as I reached for the margarita I was nursing. Yet again, I had found myself at a bar when I should have been at home, making dinner for Aurora and myself. But, Suri had charged through my front door, demanded that I take the evening to myself again, and scooped my daughter into her arms before proclaiming tonight a "pizza and cartoon" night.

I had half-a-mind to stay there and enjoy it with them. But, after six months of putting in resumes and walking out of interviews with no callbacks, I needed a stiff drink.

Even though, my brain chanted a very harsh truth that was swirling around in the back of my thoughts.

You could be saving this booze money for more important things.

You and Aurora will be out in less than six months, and you're drinking?

You could have at least brought your laptop to keep placing resumes.

Are you nuts? You need to be packing. Looking for a different place to live. Not drinking your time away, you idiot!

While I was glad I had someone in my life who cared about me the way Suri cared about myself and Aurora, my

mind plagued me with thoughts that I couldn't shake. My daughter and I were less than six months away from not having anything, and none of my applications had gotten any bites. If people from the businesses I had applied to bothered to call me to come in for an interview, the interviews were less than ten minutes long before I was dismissed.

Even I knew that a ten-minute-long interview was never a good thing.

I threw back the rest of my margarita and signaled to the bartender for another one. I had just enough money allotted for three of them and a cab ride home, so that's what I wanted to limit myself to. However, as the bartender handed me my second drink, I heard my phone's email sound dinging from the bottom of my purse.

And when I checked the notification, only one thought crossed my mind.

Tonight requires a celebratory drink.

I checked my email only to find that someone had messaged me personally, asking me to come in to speak with them about a job. And that had to be good, right? It was good when they contacted someone personally instead of through the resume website, right?

"Yes," I hissed.

The title of the email read "Possible Interview for Friday," and I was ready to message back and proclaim that I was free to do whatever was necessary to get this job. I mean, anything, too. Not that I condoned office trysts or shit like that, but I was at a point where I could have sucked my way into a job if someone had offered it to me.

"Fancy seeing you here again."

The second I heard his voice, I froze. I'd know that timbre anywhere, even only after one night. I had used that voice for months as I rubbed one out every night. I conjured that cheeky little grin and those long, strong features to help throw myself over the edge whenever I felt a little too feisty for my own good.

And as I slowly swiveled around, I was met with those same amber-shaded brown eyes from months and months ago.

“Mind if I have a seat?” he asked as he sat beside me.

I watched his movements as a shiver rushed down my spine. “Evening.”

He raised his hand and nodded. “Evening.”

My gaze dropped down his form. “Rough day?”

The bartender came over to us with a drink in his hand for the man. “Can I get you anything else?”

He pointed to me. “Another one of whatever she’s having for the lady. I think it’s time I treat her this time around.”

I waved my hand in the air. “I’m good. I can’t afford another drink right now.”

Then, I felt his eyes whip in my direction. “I didn’t say anything about you paying, now, did I?”

I narrowed my eyes as I studied him while the bartender got to work. I didn’t like how arrogant he seemed, but there was something behind his cheeky little smile that struck me directly in my gut. I wasn’t sure what it was, and I sure as hell didn’t have the sanity to take the time to figure it out. But, the way his body heat reached out to me caused my toes to curl against my heels.

“Hard day at work?” he asked.

Being a mom is always hard work. “Seems like that’s the going rate for living nowadays.”

He chuckled. “Truer words were never spoken. Cheers.”

I picked up my fresh margarita and clinked my glass against his. “Cheers.”

He threw his drink back as I sipped on mine and the bartender quickly brought him another. He eyed my empty glasses on the bar that hadn’t been picked up yet and quickly threw his second one back, then gestured for a third. Which was, as he probably wanted to make it, the numbered drink I was currently on.

“There,” he said as he held up his whiskey, “all caught up.”

I nodded. “Cheers.”

He clinked his glass against mine. “Cheers.”

I cleared my throat. “Rough day on your end, too?”

He snickered as he gazed into his drink. “I don’t know, you tell me. Do thirteen hours in a stuffy-ass office seem like a rough day?”

I blinked. “Seems like a rough life, to me.”

He chuckled. “And they say money can’t buy happiness. Who can’t be happy in a leather-bound room with high-tech bobbles and gadgets?”

“Is there booze? That’ll always make things better.”

He clinked his glass against mine again. “Got a mini-fridge full of it behind one of my bookcases in my office.”

I sipped my margarita. “A regular, modern-day James Bond. I can get behind that.”

“Just less blood and shooting and more paperwork and papercuts.”

“Hey, it’s a tough job, but someone’s gotta do it.”

I clinked my glass against his before I drank down the rest of my margarita, and soon the bartender placed another one in front of me. Our conversation was stunted at best, but the more I drank, the more I wanted him face-planted between my legs. He could talk to my clit, for all I cared. I just needed to know what the hell was beneath that suit of his.

I was tired of using my imagination on a regular basis.

“So,” the man said as he slid his empty glass down the bar, “what does a beautiful woman like you do while she hangs around at the corner of a bar in a place like this?”

I shrugged. “Drink, like everyone else.”

He nodded slowly. “Are you hungry?”

I shook my head. “Not particularly.”

“Do you want more drinks?”

I peeked into my margarita. “I really should stop at four. I might not be able to stand if I do much more than this.”

Then, I felt him lean forward as his warm breath pulsed against my ear. “Are you wanting someone to help you relieve the tension in your shoulders?”

I shuddered at the heat of his words before his nose nuzzled the shell of my ear gently. And dammit, I almost blew through the fucking roof. It had been years—years!—since I’d had enjoyed the salacious company of a man. So, maybe it was time to break that streak. Maybe it was time to grease up the old engine, take it for a spin, and finally get my rocks off the proper way.

Even Suri had told me to text her if I ever found myself in another bind like this.

So, I turned my face toward his and smirked. “That depends on what you feel you can contribute in terms of ‘help.’”

His eyes grew dark, and my gut clenched. My toes curled so deeply just with looking at this brooding slab of meat that my calves almost started to ache. I swallowed hard as the man whose name I couldn’t remember leaned back and tossed back the rest of his drink. He even plucked the margarita I had in my hands and threw that back as well, despite the obvious fact that I would have finished it on my own.

But I didn’t give a shit about his manners. I wasn’t going to date the man.

I simply wanted a ride on what was between his legs.

“Come,” he said as he slid off his barstool, “I’ll pick up the tab. My driver’s waiting for us outside.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Waiting for us?”

He offered me his hand. “Are you up for a little bit of stress relief or not?”

The strong part of my gut told me to kick him in the gonads and walk my tipsy ass out of there. But, the pull I felt

to scratch an itch I'd had for years was much too strong. I slipped my hand against his palm and watched him grin from ear to ear, and the wicked smirk that settled against his face fluttered my heart.

I wasn't sure what the hell I was about to get into, but the thrill of it was unprecedented in my life.

I never took risks. It wasn't in my nature. I always went for what I knew was a given, and the night my daughter was conceived was no different. The man I had slept with was a guaranteed thing—a one-night, set-it-and-forget-it kind of thing. How the hell was I supposed to know our condom had broken? The man wasn't in the hotel room with me when I woke up.

Thank fuck, birth control is a thing in my life now.

I wanted to ask the strange man his name, but I didn't want to detract from the thrill of it all—or admit that I'd forgotten it but not his deep voice or the way he made me wet just thinking about him. He opened his car door for me, and I dropped down onto the most comfortable, plush leather seats I'd ever experienced. He slid in next to me before beckoning for his driver to head home, and for the life of me, my curiosity started to grow.

So, I pulled out my phone and shot Suri a text message.

Me: Gonna be home a bit later. I'll check in with you in a couple of hours.

The only thing that settled my brain was the fact that I didn't feel threatened at all by this man. He was arrogant, sure. He probably thought way too much of himself, too. But, he didn't seem angry or mean, and he wasn't overbearing in any way. He didn't have any of those red-flag sort of traits that I looked for whenever men approached me. I mean, other than him thinking he was the bee's knees and everything.

However, once we pulled through a set of wrought-iron gates and started up a winding driveway that ascended to what looked like a miniature castle in the middle of the fucking state, my jaw hit the floor.

No wonder he thought so highly of himself. Because dammit, if I lived in a fucking castle, I'd think highly of myself, too.

What in the world have I gotten myself into?

Trey

I couldn't believe it. What a fucking night. As we slowly drove up my driveway, nearing my estate, I watched as her jaw slowly sank toward the floorboard of my Town Car. I watched as her eyes stared out into the night, watching the dark, chiseled outline of my home come quietly into view. The stone façade had always been intimidating to people, and I liked it that way. It meant that no one ever came to my door with bullshit, and it meant if someone had the guts to get up my driveway and knock, it was probably worth listening to. Plus, the twenty acres I owned sat back off a smaller road that had very little traffic to begin with. Even though I worked at the very center of one of the biggest, most bustling cities this country had to offer, there was always peace.

It was like my home away from home.

You know, if *home* were my office and not the fucking place where I laid my head at night.

Nevertheless, I wanted to get this lush woman up to my bedroom. I didn't want to know her name or where she came from. I couldn't have cared less about how her day had gone or what had driven her to the bar in the first place. All I wanted was to rip off her clothes and show her what she had turned down the first time all those months ago.

Finally, I'd get a shot at this gorgeous woman.

My driver pulled right up to the steps that led up to my front door, and I slipped out of the backseat. I wrapped around the trunk and didn't quite get there in time before this woman opened the car door herself and stepped out. But, I arrived at her side in time to offer her my arm before I escorted her up the steps. I threw open the massive double doors of my home, exposing the lavish foyer with a hanging clear-and-red crystal chandelier that had cost me a quarter of a million dollars simply to have made. But, the comment that came out of this woman's mouth froze me in my tracks.

"I could never afford something like this."

She shook her head softly as she walked into the middle of my foyer. She gawked at the chandelier hanging above her head before she bent down and let her fingers drag across my pristine marble floors. She looked at her fingertips as if she were expecting dirt or grime, and when she found nothing, she simply shook her head and giggled breathlessly.

Then, she made another comment that stunned me. A remark that didn't seem as if it were meant for my ears. But, with the acoustics of the foyer, it felt like she was talking right beside me.

"Why me?"

I watched her as she stood in the middle of my foyer. The expensive fixtures around her seemed to almost dwarf her, and it was the first time I'd ever felt guilty for bringing someone back to my place. It was clear to me she was way out of her element, and I almost felt bad for dropping her into such excess when it was evident from her comments that she didn't have much to spare at all in the way of money.

You worked hard for that money. Don't let anyone make you feel guilty for it.

I wanted to ask this woman so many questions. Never in my life had I ever been ashamed of my wealth or the things I possessed because of the hard work I had put into my businesses. And yet, in less than five minutes of standing in my home, this woman had managed to make me feel as if I should have been ashamed of what I had. I wasn't sure what it

was about her that had gotten beneath my skin, either. Maybe it was the fact that it felt like she was about to turn me down again. Perhaps it actually was my wounded pride getting in the way of things. But dammit, I'd have this woman tonight.

I'd show her that I was a man fully fit to have what I did.

"Would you like a tour of the rest of my place?" I asked.

The woman's striking blue eyes finally found my own. "What was that?"

I walked up to her with a grin on my face. "I said, would you like a tour of the rest of my place?"

She held my stare. "No."

I held out my hand. "Let me at least show you where you'll be unwinding for the evening, then."

Without hesitation, she slipped her hand into mine, and I led her up the steps. We walked down a long hallway with a set of double doors at the end of it, and when I threw them open, my master suite was revealed. I had decorated it myself, from top to bottom. From the four-poster California king-sized bed down to the black marble baseboards that contrasted the crisp, clean white walls, I was proud of how this room had turned out.

But, my bed wasn't the feature of the room any longer, not when this woman stood inside of it.

"My entire townhouse could probably fit into this place," she murmured.

I really needed her to shut up with those comments.

I rushed over to her and scooped her into my arms, crashing our lips together. And the second she threaded her arms around my neck, I knew it was game on. It probably wasn't the most romantic introduction into an evening of festivities, but I didn't care. I had my lips against a luscious pair that moaned down the back of my throat. My dick hardened before I could even strip her out of her clothes. But, once we were finally clad in nothing but our skin, we both

collapsed against my bed before I stood to my feet and pulled her voluptuous ass to the edge of the bed.

“There we go,” I growled.

I gripped my cock and teased her entrance, watching her juices glistening in the moonlight for me. My floor-to-ceiling windows allowed the stars to be peeping Tom’s as I slid deep into her warmth, feeling her walls pulsing around me. I grunted as I sank against her. Our hips connected, and it felt as if we had been carved out for one another. And when her back arched, bouncing those oversized titties against her chest, I knew damn good and well I’d become addicted to this woman.

I need her number before she leaves.

I tossed her legs over my shoulders and pounded against her, watching as her entire body flushed with desire. I felt my dick thickening against her walls, causing her jaw to unhinge in silent pleasure as she grasped for any part of me to cling to. I bent her in half, settling my hands against the mattress, and instantly I felt her palms wrap around my wrists.

“Holy shit,” she managed to choke out. Then, she fell over the edge and sucked me tightly inside of her body.

“Fucking hell,” I growled.

When she collapsed against my bed, I eased out from between her legs and dropped to my knees. I slid her thighs against my cheeks, feeling her clench around me as my tongue effortlessly found her swollen nub. I lapped at her deeply, her hands flying into my hair. And as I sucked her mound between my lips, I flicked its oversensitive tip until she cried out in ecstasy.

I didn’t relent, though.

I shot back up to my feet and flipped her over, raising her ass into the air. She panted against my white bedsheets, fisting them with her trembling hands as I slid back into her from behind. I couldn’t get enough of her. I wanted her to coat the whole of me, lubricating me for an easier ride. My balls smacked against her protruding clit, causing her walls to collapse around me as she groaned against my mattress.

“Holy *fuck*.”

I panted for air. “That’s it. Squeeze that dick. Take what you want from me.”

“Oh, shit,” she whimpered. “I can’t. I can’t anymore. It’s too—you’re so—I need—”

I slid my hand down her back, gripping her hair with my free hand. “Come for me, gorgeous. Make me explode.”

“Holy God!” she exclaimed.

When her walls pulsated around my girth for the third time, she finally pulled me over the edge. I felt my balls pull up into my body as I fell against her back. I pinned her to my bed, our legs dangling over the edge of the mattress, and as threads of come shot from the tip of my cock, I growled against her skin while nipping at her bare shoulder that was just beyond my lips.

The world went black after that. I didn’t remember crawling into bed, I didn’t remember pulling out, and I sure as hell didn’t remember falling asleep next to her. But, when I went to shift, I felt the urge to curl up against her, drawn to take her into my arms, kiss her forehead, and slide my fingertips through her knotted hair I had surely mussed around a little bit.

But, when I rolled over, I found nothing but a cold, dark emptiness on the other side of the bed. “Huh?” I asked.

I opened one eye before I shot out of bed, my eyes looking around for the beautiful woman I knew I had fallen asleep against. I mean, she’d just been there a few minutes ago. Where the hell had she gone?

Maybe she’s in the bathroom.

“Hello?” I called out.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, readying myself for round two. If she were in the shower trying to clean up, I didn’t have any issues proving to her just how dirty a shower could get. But, as I stood to my feet, my blinking cell phone caught my eye. I was sure I had at least a dozen messages

from someone who worked for me over some asinine bullshit I had to fix, but I didn't want to deal with it right now. However, I didn't hear the shower running, so I decided to check on the time.

And I found that it was four in the fucking morning.

“Oh, good God,” I groaned.

I raked my hands down my face. Holy shit, I had fallen asleep right after sex and she had left.

Forever.

Without me even getting her number.

“Fuck!” I roared.

I picked up my pillows and threw them at the wall. I picked up a stale glass of water and threw it against the hardwood floors of my bedroom, watching and listening as the glass shattered into pieces. I'd just had the most amazing roll-around in bed, then I had to fuck it up with my idiocy.

I'm just as bad as Mom always said I was.

I felt myself growing sick with anger. The walls started to melt, and my vision started to tunnel. I hadn't been this angry with myself in a while, and it almost scared me, so I slipped back into bed and lost myself in the comfort of my silken bedsheets. I pulled the comforter over my head and closed my eyes, trying not to imagine myself jabbing holes into every punchable surface in my damn bedroom. And after drawing in a few well-intentioned deep breaths, I felt myself slip back off to sleep before that beautiful woman invaded my solace in my dreams.

Leslie

I felt my covers shifting, and I drew in a deep breath. I smiled to myself as the small little creature I had loved since the day she got pulled out of my body climbed into bed and snuggled against me. I lazily turned over, shifting myself until I felt Aurora's ear press against my beating heart. I giggled as I wrapped my arms around my tiny little daughter, a girl that had been five weeks premature and still somehow developed into the loud-mouthed, bull-headed child I loved with all my soul, even if her attitude would be the death of me.

“Morning, Mommy,” she said through her yawn.

I yawned along with her. “Hey, not cool. You know that's contagious.”

She giggled. “Auntie Suri said you had a good time last night.”

I peeked my eye open and looked down at her. “She did, huh?”

My daughter nodded. “She said whenever adults come home late, it's because they're playing lots of board games and eating lots of snacks.”

I blinked. “Right. Exactly. Yes, the board games were fun.”

She sat up. “Did you play Sorry!? That's my favorite board game. Can we play Sorry! after we're done eating breakfast?”

I giggled. “Of course, we can. Let me wake up and get downstairs, then we can settle breakfast before we start running around. How’s that sound?”

She leaped out of bed. “Yay! Mommy and I get to play today! Yay!”

I shook my head as I rolled over, reaching for my phone, and it wasn’t until I saw I had an email that I remembered the one from last night. I turned onto my stomach and brushed my ratty hair away from my face before I opened my inbox. And after trashing all of the junk mail I had, I finally opened the email I meant to read last night.

Before my jaw fell open. “Oh, shit.”

Miss Popovich,

Your resume has come to my attention, and I have a slot open for Friday at noon. Come by my office at the following address and expect the interview to take around an hour.

The email went on to list the address as well as a very detailed explanation of where his office was located within the building before a man by the name of Trey Cataline signed off. I threw the covers off my body and bounded into the bathroom, ready to shower so I could still play a board game with my kiddo before I had to leave for this interview.

But, with it being summertime and Aurora not being in school, it didn’t occur to me that I had slept in because of my late night. And by the time I got downstairs, it was almost eleven.

“Shit,” I hissed.

My daughter giggled. “*Oh*, I’m gonna tell Auntie *Suri*.”

I slid my hand through my hair. “How do you feel about reheating some pizza in the oven for breakfast?”

She threw her fists into the air. “Yeah! That sounds—wait a second.”

Then, I watched as reality dawned on my daughter’s face. “You have to go do something, don’t you?”

I sat beside her at the kitchen table. “You know how Mommy’s been searching for a job?”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

“Well, I have an interview I need to go to promptly at noon.”

She sighed. “Okay.”

I crooked my finger beneath her chin and rose her disappointed gaze to my own. “But, I promise you that once I get back, we will play as many rounds of Sorry! as you want. Okay?”

She shrugged. “Sure. That’s fine.”

My heart broke with the disappointment laced within the tone of my little girl’s voice. But I didn’t have a choice. I quickly called Suri and asked if she could come over and babysit for the interview, and she was more than happy to oblige. I guessed having a best friend that worked from home did have its perks. I only hoped that I could nail this job interview so I could finally start paying Suri again for the time she spent with my daughter.

After heating some pizza for myself and Aurora, I inhaled a slice before I bounded back up the stairs. While brushing my teeth, I heard Suri enter downstairs, and Aurora started squealing with delight. The sound made me smile, but I hoped to be the one who made her that happy again someday. I was tired of disappointing my daughter every time I opened my mouth.

I rushed through my shower and blow-dried my hair for once. Then, once I had finished, I piled it on top of my head and secured it with one of the many sets of chopsticks I had gotten from Aurora over the past few years. I threw on the best work outfit I had to make sure I gave the best impression. After slipping into a matching navy-blue set of heels, I slid on some powerhouse red lipstick to make my face pop.

“Well, well, well, don’t you look ready to tackle the day,” Suri said.

I turned to face her as she stood in the doorway of my bedroom. “I can’t thank you enough for coming on such short notice. I got the email last night, but with everything that—”

She held up her hand. “You and I are going to talk about last night over some wine after Rori goes to bed tonight. But, right now? You need to keep your head in the game.”

I sighed. “I know, I know.”

“Do you know what company you’re interviewing with?”

I paused. “No.”

“So, you don’t know anything about what they do or what they sell or what they provide for people?”

I already felt myself becoming deflated. “No.”

Suri walked over to me and gripped my shoulders. “Then, I suggest you go give your daughter a great big kiss, then take your time getting to this interview. GlassDoor is your friend, and it’ll look good on you to have at least a modicum of information on the company at your disposal.”

I puffed out my cheeks with a sigh. “Okay. Yes. That sounds like a good plan.”

“And don’t forget what you’ve overcome. Don’t forget what you’ve been through. You’re a strong, powerful, independent woman. You can do this.”

I nodded. “Yes. I can do this. I can do anything if I can raise a daughter on my own, put a roof over her head, and still be home in time to help her with homework.”

She smiled brightly. “Hell yeah, you are.”

I sighed. “Thank you so much for this.”

She hugged me tightly. “No thanks needed. Now, let’s get you out of here. You’re going to need all the time alone that you can get to do some research.”

After hugging my best friend one last time, I scooped up my purse and made my way downstairs. I found Aurora cleaning up her plate and cup from the table before she turned to me and smiled.

And the words that came from her lips melted my heart. “You look awesome.”

I walked over to her and dipped down. “You think so?”

She nodded. “I wanna dress like you someday.”

I blinked back tears. “You can be whatever you want and wear whatever you please. You know that, right?”

She nodded. “Mhm.”

I cupped her cheeks. “You can be an astronaut or a part-time temp worker, and you know I’d still be proud of you, right?”

She smiled. “Mhm.”

“And you know that no matter what, I’m always going to love you. Always. You know that, right?”

She kissed the tip of my nose. “Don’t forget about Sorry!, okay?”

I snickered. “I could never forget a date with my most-favoritest person in the whole widest world.”

She giggled. “Those aren’t words, Mommy.”

I stood to my feet and pulled her in for a hug. “When did you get so big on me again?”

“Mom. I’m seven. Of course, I’m big.”

I barked with laughter. “Just know you’ll always be my little girl, even when you’re old and gray.”

She gawked. “As old as you?”

My voice fell flat. “Thanks, kid.”

She giggled with delight. “You’re welcome, Mommy.”

I shook my head and winked at her before I gave her one last smile. Then, Suri came bounding down the steps and announced the first of many rounds of hide and seek. Suri started counting, and my daughter scrambled to find the best hiding place in our little home, and I snuck out the front door before heading out to my car. Then, I punched the address of the building into my phone’s GPS.

Nice, only ten minutes away.

It didn't even take me that long to get to the building since I blew through every yellow light just to get here. And once I parked in the parking garage across the street, I plucked my phone from the mount on the dashboard. I looked up and saw the name, TC Public Relations, sprawling over the top of the building, and GlassDoor was the first website to open up with the search. Well, the second website beat out only by the company's professional website. And I was pleasantly surprised by the reviews I found.

“Great place to work! Awesome yearly bonuses. Just make sure to negotiate for more time off. The owner is stingy with vacation time.”

“Great starting salaries. Plenty of ways to work your way up the ladder. But, beware of the owner. He's a bit rough around the edges.”

“The work is okay. The people make it worthwhile. But, I'm not sure about the PR practices. I really don't agree with some of them.”

“Can't win 'em all,” I murmured to myself.

Once the clock struck 11:45, I grabbed my phone and my purse, and I slipped out of my car. I gripped my parking ticket so someone could validate it—hopefully—and I started across the street toward the towering brick-and-cement building. I walked through the doors and saw signs that said, “Interviews, This Way,” and it pointed to the elevator that practically smacked someone in the face once they walked inside.

“Take it all the way up to the top floor. You'll see the signs after that.”

I turned toward the man's voice that sounded behind me and found a security guard facing me.

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” I said.

“A word of advice, though?” he asked.

I giggled. “I'll take all I can get right now.”

He smiled kindly. “He’s not as hard to get along with as people paint him to be.”

I blinked. “He?”

He nodded. “The owner. That’s who you’re interviewing with. The secretarial position, right?”

Oh, boy. “Right.”

“Yeah, that’s him. Joanne was great, but she quit once her husband retired. Just keep an open mind. So long as you don’t try to bullshit him in any way, you’ll be just fine.”

Great, I hope. “Well, I’ve never been in the ‘bullshit’ field, so hopefully that will play to my advantage.”

The man chuckled. “Good luck.”

I turned toward the elevator. “Thanks. And thank you for the advice.”

I walked over to the sliding metal doors and pressed the button to summon them. The doors opened wide, and I stepped inside, pressing the number for the top floor. I backed out of GlassDoor on my phone and flipped over to the company website, ready to read up on who the hell owned this place. Mostly, because I wanted a leg-up on the competition. If I could do some research on who ran this place and whose secretary I was interviewing to become, I might be able to nudge out the competition with a basic source of knowledge they might not have had.

Unless that security guard is friendly with everyone.

Nevertheless, as the elevator doors parted, I stepped onto the top level of the building. The plush carpet squished like a pillow beneath my heels as I navigated through multiple pages just to get to a section that had the information I was looking for. And as I sat in a chair outside the door, the email had instructed me to find, my jaw dropped open.

My heart stopped in my chest.

My eyes blinked a few times as I hoped and prayed the man’s picture beside the role CEO changed.

Holy shit, that's who runs this company?

And as I scrambled to put away my phone—trying to get my feet beneath me from the shock that had just rushed over my system—I heard the door to the office beside me unlatch.

Trey

I watched the clock, waiting for this woman to show up for her fucking interview. I mean, it was five minutes to noon, and no one had come knocking on my door yet. If she couldn't even make it to her interview on time, I didn't care what she had to bring to the table. First and foremost, I needed someone punctual.

Maybe she's sitting outside.

I didn't know why the hell someone would be sitting outside instead of knocking on my door, but I figured I'd give her the benefit of the doubt. After all, I needed help, and I needed it two days ago. I stood from my desk and buttoned my suit coat before booking it for my office door. And when I turned the doorknob, I heard shuffling around outside.

However, it didn't prepare me for the sight that caught my eyes when I pulled the door opened.

Oh. My. God.

It all made sense now. The name on the resume. The familiarity and awe I felt at simply reading the words she had crafted on a piece of paper. I ran my eyes down her body as she stood there in front of me, her purse gripped in her hands as she donned a navy-blue pencil skirt that hugged her curves in ways my hands had last night.

"Leslie Popovich," I said.

My gaze slid back up her body before our eyes met, then her beautiful voice sounded against my ears. “You’re Trey Cataline.”

I nodded. “The one and only.”

She held her head high, but even I saw the panic behind her eyes. “I was unsure of whether to knock or wait.”

I held out my arm to usher her into my office. “I prefer people who take the reins and knock.”

She walked into my office. “Then, allow me to be the first to express my shock at the fact that you’re about to interview me for a position after seeing me naked last night.”

I grinned. “I don’t think shock is quite the word on the tip of my tongue, but it’s understood.”

I closed my office door and resisted the urge to lock it as I studied her from behind. The globes of her ass bounced softly with every step she took while her skirt cinched in at her waist. Her white, ruffled blouse poured forth from her tits that were painstakingly shoved into a shoulder-padded skirt-suit coat that matched the color of her heels.

And those ruby-red lips looked stunning on her.

I felt my cock stiffening with every step I took toward my desk. Her floral-and-candy-scented body spray overwhelmed me, and it made me want to take a bite out of her once more. I unbuttoned my jacket and perched myself against the corner of my desk, crossing my legs so my thickening girth wouldn’t be so damn noticeable in my pants.

After all, I didn’t want to showcase my damn erection. That would make me no better than the other bosses she’d had throughout the last few years.

“So,” I said.

She nodded slowly. “So.”

I grinned. “Tell me why you want this job.”

She leaned back and crossed her legs at her ankles. “Other than the fact that I need a paycheck to eat and live?”

I nodded. “Other than that fact, yes.”

She paused for a second before speaking. “The last job I held was a secretarial position, and in all the jobs I have held throughout my lifetime, it was the one I enjoyed the most. I figured that was as good of a place as anywhere to begin, so here I am.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “What did you enjoy about it so much?”

“I think it was the constant interaction with people. There was always a problem to solve and always something to do. I never got bored, and the days never seemed long.”

“So, you enjoy keeping busy.”

“Among other things, yes.”

I wanted to ask her what “other things,” but I resisted the urge. “Were you fired from your last job? Or did you quit?”

She drew in a deep breath. “I quit.”

“Why?”

She furrowed her brow. “Is that pertinent to the interview?”

“It is when I ask.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay... I quit because my boss kept coming on to me and HR didn’t want to do anything about it.”

“How many times did you report it to HR?”

She quipped back quickly. “Why? Because it’ll be my fault if I didn’t file a certain number of times?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I’m merely curious.”

Her eyes flickered around my office before settling on my face again. “Five.”

What kind of incompetent, bullshit HR— “Well, rest assured that you won’t have that issue here. Unfortunately, most workplaces have complaints like that. However, we have strict protocols and investigations that occur whenever a complaint of that nature is filed. Everything is checked out, the

offending parties are given a strict set of rules to live by, and if they break those rules, they're gone."

"That's very good to know. Thank you."

"No thanks needed. That type of behavior should never be tolerated in the workplace."

"I'm glad we're on the same page, then."

I drew in a sobering breath as my cock finally decided to calm down. "Your resume said you got your degree in college in art history?"

"I did, yes."

"Yet, you want to be a secretary."

She sighed. "Yeah, well. No one told me at eighteen how useless an art history degree would be without higher education. So, after digging myself into serious debt for my bachelor's degree, I didn't have a choice but to graduate and get a job to pay it off."

"What was the big plan, then? You know, with your degree."

She clicked her tongue. "I wanted to be a college professor and have my own art museum on the side. I paint and sculpt for my hobbies, and I wanted to build a place where those like myself and other community artists could have a space to not only rent out rooms to create their art but also have it displayed in the hopes of bringing home a little extra cash."

I wasn't sure what I expected from her answer, but I was thoroughly impressed. "Why don't you do that, then?"

She sighed. "Oh, you know, money's sort of a thing that people need to use, and I seem to be lacking in it."

I grinned. "Hence this job interview?"

She snickered. "You know, I think you're catching on now."

The two of us laughed together for a little bit before I slipped back around behind my desk. I eased myself down into the chair as I felt Leslie's eyes following me. And while I

knew I needed to be asking her questions about her availability to work and the hours she could devote to the job, I found myself taking another route with my questions.

“So, you’re a mother?” I asked.

The smile that spread across her face could have powered the whole city block. “I am, yes. My daughter’s seven.”

“What’s her name?”

“Aurora.”

I nodded. “That’s a pretty name.”

“Thank you.”

Come on, get back on track. This isn’t you two getting drinks. “What will being a mother due to the hours you can work?”

She blinked. “Well, being a single mother has its disadvantages. During the summer and school breaks, I can work whenever you need me to work. But, while my daughter is in school, my hours of availability are eight in the morning until two or so in the afternoon. My daughter gets out at three, so I need to be at her bus stop by then to pick her up.”

I nodded. “Okay, okay. What about being on-call on the weekends? Is that something you can do?”

“Yes, I can handle that no problem.”

“What about traveling? I’ll need a secretary who can make my work trips with me. Do you have someone to help you out during times like that?”

“I do, yes. Aurora’s godmother works from home, so she can easily come and go as I ask her.”

I grinned. “Wonderful. One last question.”

“Shoot.”

I leaned forward and rested my arms against my desk. “You said you had a lot of debt from school.”

She blinked. “I have a fair amount, yes.”

“How much?”

She paused. “Sorry, what?”

“How much debt do you have from your schooling?”

She drew in a deep breath. “I’m not sure how that pertains to—”

“How. Much?”

Her eyes danced between mine. “I’ve got about sixteen thousand more to pay off.”

I ran the numbers quickly in my head. “Assuming they’re federal student loans at an interest rate of around three percent, and assuming you’re paying the bare minimum every month, you’re probably paying around two, three hundred every month?”

Her voice fell flat. “More like five.”

My protective instincts quickly kicked in. “Five hundred? What are your interest rates?”

Her tone of voice grew defensive. “I’m sorry, is there a reason why this is pertinent to whether or not I’m qualified for this job?”

Slow down; you’re ruining things. “I just enjoy knowing things like this about my employees. It better enables me to tailor things like bonuses and raises to what they need.”

She relaxed a bit. “Oh.”

I leaned back in my chair and studied this breathtakingly strong woman in front of me. A single mother, juggling all sorts of jobs, dealing with men who couldn’t keep their dicks in their pants while on the clock, and she still held her head high and met me toe-to-toe with answers to my questions. This luscious woman, who had dropped right into my lap three times now, had an obvious need I could help with.

Well, she had many needs I knew I could fulfill. But that was beside the point.

“So, let’s say I offered you the job. When could you start?” I asked.

She shrugged. “As soon as you needed me to, I suppose.”

I peeked down at her resume. “You put your starting rate at fifteen bucks an hour. Does that still hold true?”

She nodded. “I can do as low as fourteen, but anything below that isn’t worth the time away from my daughter for me.”

“Good. It’s good to have lines and stick to them. Have you given any thought to the kind of vacation time you might want?”

“I have actually, yes.”

My eyes held hers. “All right. What were you thinking?”

“Are we speaking hypothetically still?”

I shrugged. “Does it matter?”

Her gaze dropped down my body before she cleared her throat. “I’d ask for three weeks of paid vacation and one week of unpaid medical leave for fifteen bucks an hour. And if for some reason that pay is too much, I’d be willing to negotiate more paid time off and more medical leave in exchange for the dropped hourly rate.”

Wow, what shitty jobs she’s had. “How about this: you won’t be an hourly employee, you’ll be salaried. And for a secretary that I’m going to run as much as I’ll run you, the starting salary I offer for a full-time position such as the one you’re interviewing for is seventy-thousand a year, plus end-of-the-year bonuses depending on productivity levels. You’d have your choice of three top-tier health insurance programs which you and your daughter would be covered under, and you’d also get a work laptop as well as a work phone. I’ll give you fifteen business days of vacation, five business days of unpaid medical leave, all of which will reset yearly.”

She swallowed hard. “Are we speaking hypothetically still?”

I smirked. “No. We aren’t.”

Her face paled. “Oh.”

“So? How does all of that sound?”

Then, after a few beats of silence, she stood to her feet and offered me her hand. “It sounds like you have a deal if you’re offering me the job.”

And before I could catch my breath, I stood to my feet and shook her hand. “Congratulations, Miss Popovich.”

I felt the urge to tug her in for an extravagant kiss, but I resisted the pull. We shook hands for a bit longer than necessary, but when she dropped my hand, it ripped me out of my trance.

So, I made my way for my office door with her in tow behind me.

“You’ll start your training this coming Monday. You’ll train for two days, from ten to two, then Wednesday will be your first full day. I’ll have a packet ready for you with all of your health insurance information as well as our formal workplace booklet. By Wednesday, I’ll have you set up with your work laptop and phone. Any questions?”

I opened my office door and turned around to find her smiling up at me. “No, no questions at all.”

I nodded. “Wonderful. You can leave the same way you came, and I’ll see you at ten o’clock Monday morning.”

“I look forward to working together, Mr. Cataline.”

And as her thick, mouth-watering hips swayed with every step she took toward the elevator, I smiled to myself.

At least I have this luscious lady within arm’s reach now.

Leslie

I stood at my front door, unable to move. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I didn't know whether to smile or frown. And for fuck's sake, I had no damn clue whether or not I should have accepted that job. But, I needed the paycheck badly, especially since it was such a good one, too.

"Leslie?"

I heard the door open, and I sure as hell heard Suri's voice. But I couldn't move. I was so stunned I didn't even remember the drive home or getting out of my car to come to the front porch. I didn't remember any stoplights or stop signs. I didn't remember walking to my car after the interview. Hell, I didn't even remember shedding the tears that made my neck feel damp.

I didn't come to until I felt Suri's hand in mine as she stepped out onto the porch.

"Rori's napping. Why don't we sit down, yeah?" she asked softly.

I nodded mindlessly. "Yeah, sounds good."

I felt my ass touch against a chair, and I leaned heavily against the cushioned back. I knew I needed to speak with Suri, but my tongue couldn't seem to form the letters to the words swirling around in my head. The raking of plastic against concrete sounded before I looked up from my feet and

found my best friend staring back at me with concern wafting behind her eyes.

And when my lips finally moved, the words followed in a seemingly unfashionable manner that painted a picture of just how bad this was. “I fucked my boss, Suri.”

She blinked. “You mean... instead of... interviewing?”

I swallowed hard. “The night you want details about. Remember?”

Her jaw fell open. “Wait, the guy you went home with from the bar the other night is now your boss?”

“Yeah.”

“So, he interviewed you and gave you the job anyway?”

I paused. “Yeah.”

She puffed her cheeks out with a sigh. “He probably wants to fuck you again, then. Did you take the job he offered?”

I swallowed hard. “He offered me seventy grand a year, salary. For starters, Suri. What the hell do you think I did?”

She grinned. “Now she’s coming back. Like fucking smelling salts after a good faint.”

I shook the cobwebs out of my brain. “My God, what in the world am I going to do?”

“I mean, we could celebrate.”

I groaned. “Celebrate my fucking my boss?”

She giggled. “No, you idiot. Celebrate you getting a job.”

I froze. “Holy shit, I got the job.”

“You got the damn job, Leslie. Seventy grand a year, health insurance, yes?”

I smiled softly. “Health insurance, yearly bonuses, and weeks—not days—of paid vacation.”

Suri leaped to her feet. “Woohoo! My best friend just found herself a big-girl job, you guys! Yeah!”

Then, as I laughed at her antics, she scooted her chair even closer to me before sitting on the edge of it. “Now, you need to tell me about this night that you two shared.”

I rolled my eyes. “It doesn’t seem nearly as palatable now.”

She swatted at my knee. “I don’t care! Girl, let me live through you. Was he kind?”

I thought back to the night we shared together. “Yeah, he was kind. If a bit pompous.”

“Was he any good?”

I grinned. “Oh, yeah. He was fantastic.”

She squealed. “Ah! I’m so jealous. Okay, okay, okay. Did he kick you out? Or did you leave of your own volition?”

My guilt settled in a bit. “He fell asleep beside me pretty much right after, so I just got up and left.”

She bobbed her head from side-to-side. “Not the best that he falls asleep right after, but he works hard, right?”

I blinked. “Yeah. I’d say since he owns and operates the business that just hired me. I’d say he’s kind of busy.”

She clapped her hands. “You might just make it out of this life alive and in one piece.”

I furrowed my brow. “I’m not following.”

“Girl, are you crazy? Did you like spending time with him?”

I saw where she was going with it. “No.”

She sighed. “Come on, Leslie. Live a little with your life.”

I stood to my feet and pointed at her. “I’m not pursuing my fucking boss simply because he’s a good lay.”

She shot to her feet. “But, those are the best guys to pursue! Come on, Leslie. Have a little fun.”

I charged through the front door of my home. “I’ve had enough fun in my life. Fun is how I got Aurora. I’m good in terms of fun.”

She huffed. “You’re no fun anymore.”

I murmured to myself. “Kids will do that to you.”

“You know what you need?” she asked as she followed me inside.

I lowered my voice since Aurora was napping. “A nice glass of wine in the shape of an entire bottle?”

She snickered as she closed the front door. “No, stupid. You need Guadalupe.”

I reached for a regular glass. “Am I supposed to know this person?”

Suri stood behind me as I poured the wine. “She’s a wonderful friend I made right after I graduated from college. She gave me this job at a spa she owns, and she sort of helped guide me through life until I nailed the teaching job I have now. I think you could do with a bit of Guadalupe in your life.”

I shrugged. “As long as I can have my wine. Want some?”

“Are you using a coffee tumbler to drink it?”

I peered over my shoulder. “Wine, or no?”

She shook her head. “Nah, I’m good.”

I turned back to my glass. “More for me, then.”

Suri got on the phone with whoever the hell this person was, and I flopped onto the couch with my glass. The rest of the day sort of passed in a blur, with Aurora curled up against me watching cartoons on a re-run on Hulu. I kissed the top of her head every so often, and she’d burrow next to me, reminding me exactly why I was about to endure this professional hell. But eventually, a soft knock came at my door, and I thought Suri was going to lose her head.

“It’s her! She’s here! Guadalupe, I’m coming!”

I scoffed. “Not like she’s Michael Jackson.”

Suri popped her head around the corner. “I heard that. You sit right there; she’ll come to you.”

I held up my glass that was almost drained of wine. “Sure thing.”

Aurora looked up at me. “Mommy, who’s here?”

I peered down at my curious daughter. “Someone that means a lot to Auntie Suri, so you be nice, okay?”

She nodded. “Can I keep watching TV?”

I kissed her forehead. “Of course, you can. I’ll even watch it with you; how’s that sound?”

She beamed with pride. “That sounds good.”

I winked. “Good.”

Suri singsonged as she came into the room. “Guess who brought pizza?”

Aurora leaped off the couch. “Pizza?”

My head fell back against the couch cushions. “That snuggle didn’t last long.”

Suri ignored my quip. “Guadalupe, this is my best friend, Leslie. Leslie, this is Guadalupe.”

I held up my wine glass again. “Set the pizza anywhere, and hello.”

Suri swatted the back of my head. “Get up and hold out your hand, you doofus.”

I got to my feet and glared at her. “I’m not the one who asked to have company over. Remember that.”

Suri giggled. “She’s a hoot, isn’t she?”

But, this Guadalupe woman didn’t seem impressed. “That bad, huh?”

I blinked. “What’s that bad?”

Suri sighed. “She thinks it’s that bad. But it’s not that bad.”

I held out my arms. “What’s not that bad?”

Aurora scooped up a piece of pizza. “Mom, can you get me a plate?”

I didn't even look at her. "Just eat it off the empty cardboard top. Sorry, what's not that bad?"

Then, Guadalupe came to stand beside me. "Suri says you've found your *alto, oscuro, y guapo*, but you are uncertain where to go from here."

I cocked my head. "Suri?"

She scurried up to my side. "Yeah?"

I slowly looked over at her. "Am I having a stroke? What did she just say?"

Suri smiled from ear to ear. "I told her that you'd found your tall, dark, and handsome man that you seemed to enjoy, but you won't do anything about it."

I threw my hands into the air. "Because he's my boss, Suri!"

Aurora shoved pizza into her face. "No yelling, Mommy. That's not nice."

I clenched my teeth together. "I'm sorry. I'm not sure what my best friend has ingested to make her hallucinate such a thing, but I can assure you—"

This Guadalupe woman held up her hand, silencing my words before she sat down. I furrowed my brow tightly as she sat on the edge of an oversized chair that faced the television that I fell asleep in more than my bed. She offered for me to sit like I wasn't in my own damn home, but for some reason, I obliged and sat down anyway. And after draining the rest of my wine, I crossed my legs so I could settle in for whatever insanity Suri had signed me up for tonight.

"So," Guadalupe finally said, "you slept with your boss before you knew your boss might be your boss."

I licked my lips. "Can we keep this down? My daughter is kind of over—"

I looked toward the pizza, but I didn't see Aurora. And when I heard giggling filtering down the steps, I knew she had gone upstairs to play.

“Maybe not, then,” I murmured.

Suri leaned into my ear. “I put her in your room so she could watch more cartoons while we talked.”

Yet another thing I didn’t witness due to my dazed mind. “I don’t know whether to thank you or slap you.”

Guadalupe grinned. “Did you take the job?”

I shrugged. “I need the money, so yeah.”

“And did he make the interview weird at all?”

I thought back on it and... “Honestly? No. He seemed to be very concerned about making sure I had everything I needed from his job offer.”

Suri snickered. “No man does that with a new employee unless he cares.”

I ignored her quip. “Are you here to try to convince me that I need to date my boss?”

Guadalupe shook her head. “No. I’m here to convince you that, sometimes, life works in very weird ways, and the bosses who care about us are the ones we need to keep around.”

I leaned against the couch. “If the only thing he cares about is getting laid, I might not be at this job long.”

Guadalupe turned toward me. “Did he give off the impression that he only cares about that?”

I blinked. “No.”

“Did he speak with you inappropriately at all?”

I paused. “Actually, no. He didn’t. He’s... assertive. Abrasive, maybe. But, he never talked himself into disrespectful territory. If anything, he tried to make the interview less awkward.”

“So, maybe what you’re saying about him is what you’re concerned about when it comes to yourself.”

Her words struck me hard, and I found that they had a comforting presence. I saw—and felt—why Suri took to this woman. Why she seemed to garner such faith and strength

from her. She kind of reminded me of a wise old grandmother, with a home where everyone was welcomed no matter their walk of life.

I heard something sliding across the coffee table at me, and it ripped me from my trance. And when I looked down, I found a string of numbers on it.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Guadalupe giggled. “It’s my phone number. Use it if you ever need it. Sometimes, we need an unbiased voice in our ear to tell us what we can’t see because of our own emotions and trials and tribulations. But, promise me one thing.”

I picked up her number. “Shoot.”

“If this man is your *alto, oscuro, y guapo*, don’t let him pass you by. Even if it feels weird or awkward, don’t let him get away.”

Then, Suri whispered into my ear, “Your tall, dark, and handsome.”

I snorted. “Yeah, right. Okay. Sure.”

Guadalupe cocked an eyebrow. “Promise me.”

I turned to murmur at Suri. “You know I wrote off men after what happened with Aurora’s father, right?”

“Just promise.” Suri pinched my side.

I hissed with pain before I plastered on my best smile. “I very much so promise.”

Guadalupe shook her head with a smile on her face. “I know you might think you’re just fine without a man in your life, but I promise you, having a man in your life doesn’t make you weak, which is why it’s important to have the *right* man in your life.”

“Preach,” Suri said.

I stood to my feet. “I promise that, if something does end up happening, I’ll try to let it ride instead of kicking him in the balls. That sound good?”

Guadalupe stood with me. “Good enough for me.”

And when she extended her hand to shake on it, I slipped my palm against hers, knowing damn good and well I’d never have to cash in on this insane, tumultuous, ridiculous promise.

Trey

I stood by Leslie's new desk, perched right outside my office, as the elevator doors dinged open. I heard her heels first, plucking against the carpet as she strode down the hallway. With her black pencil skirt clinging to her hips and her ruffled blouse attempting—and failing—to detract from her prominent bosom echoed sentiments of a phrase that had rattled around in my mind for days.

It was a big mistake to hire her.

Somehow she looked even sexier than the last time I'd seen her. With her perched outside my office in those fucking tight-ass clothes of hers, I knew I was in for multiple practices of the idea of self-control. Nevertheless, I was determined to make this as professional of a setting as possible for her.

So, I forced myself not to drink her body in with my eyes. "Good morning, Leslie."

She set her stuff down on top of the desk. "Good morning, Mr. Cataline."

I almost growled at the sound of my name on the tip of her tongue. "I was able to pull some strings and get you all set up with your technology. You'll be able to take this laptop home with you regularly, which will enable you to work from your house if your daughter is ever sick. Or, if there's a teacher workday at school or something and you don't have a babysitter."

She sipped her coffee. “I appreciate that. Thank you so much.”

I pointed at the headset. “I’ve also got you one of these to use with your phone. My last secretary loved having one because she didn’t constantly have to keep propping the phone against her shoulder that way. And right there, in the middle, is your work phone. I haven’t set it up, but the number is written down on the back. Only use it for work phone calls. My home number, cell number, and office number are already pre-programmed into it. You can also sync it with your laptop so our schedules can be seen across the board.”

She paused. “Our schedules are synced?”

I nodded, clasping my hands behind my back. “Yes, they are. That’s so if you make shifts in my schedule, or you need to shift your schedule, we both see it in real-time and can stay up-to-date on things. It’ll also help when you need to schedule some vacation time. All I ask is that you schedule out two weeks in advance. Other than that, just put it on the schedule, and I’ll keep track of how many vacation and medical leave days you have left.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Wow, that’s efficient. Thank you for that.”

I nodded curtly. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll give you the quick guided tour of the other seventeen levels below us. They each serve a function, and being my secretary means you’ll have to make yourself familiar with all of them to be just as efficient as the tech I’ve just shown you.”

“Lead the way, then, Mr. Cataline.”

I started for the elevator. “You’ll work closely with floors three through eight, but that’s because most of the office spaces are there. If you need to transfer a call, they’ll be on one of those levels.”

“That makes sense.”

I slipped inside the elevator, feeling her stand beside me. “And before I forget, once you open your laptop at your desk, you’ll find a numbered sheet of paper with some names on it.

Those are the transfer numbers for those offices. There's a column with their titles, names, office numbers, and extension numbers to transfer a call from your phone. Keep it somewhere safe until you have it memorized."

Relief washed over her face. "Wonderful, that'll make things a bit easier than simply punching in random numbers and hoping one sticks."

The satisfaction that washed over her face at my words was the cutest thing I'd ever seen in my life, and I enjoyed the fact that she wore her emotions on her face. Her eyes were expressive, and she had no idea how to mute the way her face contorted with some of the things I said, which meant I would never have to try to decipher her like most women I'd come across.

I cleared my throat. "Now, the floor directly below us—"

"Shit," Leslie hissed.

I blinked. "Something the matter?"

She quickly put her phone away. "No, my apologies."

The elevator doors opened. "If I can't depend on you to pay attention through a basic tour, then we are going to have issues with you going forward. I need someone who's attentive, someone who's punctual, and someone who understands that when you're at work, you're at work. Unless, of course, it's an emergency."

She quipped back quickly, too. And in front of some of my staff. "Well, how would you know if it's an emergency if you don't even bother asking what's going on?"

I felt all eyes on me as the elevator doors closed behind us. I glared down at her and watched as she squared her shoulders, digging her heels into the mound she had just created for herself. I drew in a sobering breath, unsure of whether or not to be turned on. I'd never had someone mouth off at me like that, and while the abrasiveness was shocking, I enjoyed her spunk a lot.

However, people were watching. "Let me put it this way: unless there's something on the phone you can share with the

class, keep your phone out of your hands when you're on company time. Understood?"

Then, she smirked. "How will you get in touch with me, though, if I'm always working and don't have my phone?"

I heard a few people snicker off in the distance, and I didn't like it. I took a step toward Leslie, looming over her as my shadow cloaked her body. I slid my hands into my pockets to keep from white-knuckling my own hands behind my back because, dammit, I wanted to wrap my hand around her throat and kiss that fucking sass right off her lips.

But, I controlled myself. "I won't be made a fool of in my place of work, Leslie."

She shrugged. "Then, don't get pissy with me when I realize I have a bill to pay that I can't, because that's all that happened, Your Excellency."

I felt my eye twitch. I didn't like the idea of her struggling financially in any way, shape, or form.

I should up her base pay to help her out some. Or possibly get her some sort of advance.

After all, if she had this kind of kick and could throw this kind of energy into her work, she'd be worth the investment, plus some. So, with one more glare, I turned on my heels and beckoned for her to follow me.

"Keep up, Leslie. We have much to discuss before lunch."

Leslie

The man was as insufferable as they came, but this job had offered me more money than I'd ever been given in my life. So, it wasn't as if I could turn down the work. I was excited to sit down at my desk after the tour, though. I'd had enough of Trey chirping in my ear for one day like he was the baddest piece of ass around town.

But, the second my butt hit my seat, the phone started ringing.

"Better get familiar with things," Trey warned.

And when he disappeared into his office, I drew in a deep breath before I slid the headset on.

"TC Public Relations Firm, how may I direct your call?" I asked when I answered.

I opened my laptop and quickly taped the piece of paper with everyone's extensions right in front of my face. The phone calls weren't too brutal, either. I mean, as long as they had the name or the title of who they were calling for, it was easy enough to find the extension. Hell, by the time lunch came around, I already had a fourth of the list memorized.

And when we hit a lull in the phone call traffic, I turned my attention to the calendar on my laptop.

"All right, let's fill this bad boy in," I whispered.

I started with plucking out the random Fridays coming up that Aurora had off school. She started second grade in about a month, and I had no idea where in the world the time had gone. Somehow, over the course of seven years, my daughter had grown into a smart, beautiful young girl who wanted to do nothing but laugh at cartoons, play games, and socialize with friends.

My eyes teared up as I jotted down every teacher workday from the beginning of the school year up through Christmas break. And after taking a few days off around Christmas and New Year's, I noticed something.

Trey hadn't come out of his office once.

In fact, he didn't come out at all until it was time to dismiss me at two-thirty. He popped his head out of his office and whistled to get my attention, which was something we'd have to correct sooner rather than later. And when I looked up at him, he nodded his head toward the elevator before disappearing back into his office like he was some sort of mole-rat.

Still, I didn't have time to lollygag or needlessly fool around with anything. Suri had a doctor's appointment she needed to get to, so I needed to race home and retrieve her as quickly as possible. I packed up my laptop, promised myself I'd get an actual laptop bag, stuffed my work phone into my purse, and headed straight for my car before I raced home just in time to excuse Suri from her babysitting duties.

"Aurora's napping right now," she said as she darted for her car, "and I have something in the oven for dinner! Three-fifty for forty minutes and it'll be done, okay? Make sure you eat something, girl!"

I waved at her as I stood at my front door. "I owe you a huge one!"

"Just buy me a nice steak dinner once you're rolling in the money, girl!"

I giggled as I waved her off, then I slipped inside. Aurora's soft snores echoed from the couch as I locked the door and

crept up to my bedroom. I wanted to slip out of these clothes, splash some water in my face, and get my new laptop and cell phone set up.

But, the second I turned my phone on, a flood of messages started coming through.

From Trey.

“God, what does he want already?” I asked with a groan.

I checked my messages to make sure it wasn't an emergency, and when I saw the list of things that could obviously wait until I got out of my work clothes, I set my phone back down. But, as I started undressing, I heard an oddly-piercing ringtone screech out in the middle of the room.

Dammit, the man's calling me now? Seriously?

So, my half-naked ass thought it was a good idea to pick up the phone.

“Yes, Mr. Cataline?”

His curt tone of voice filtered through the cell phone. “You forgot to sync your schedule with mine. I have notifications that you made changes, but you didn't hit the ‘sync’ button.”

I slid myself into some pajama pants. “Give me a few minutes, and I'll open it up and do just that.”

“Did you get any of my emails, by the way?”

I blinked. “Emails?”

He sighed. “You have a work email. Did you not find the notebook I left for you in the top-right slot of your desk?”

I sat on the edge of my bed with my pajama pants dangling around my knees. “I was pretty much thrown into phone calls the second I sat down at my desk, and you want to know if I had enough time to rummage around and find stuff you hid for me like an Easter egg hunt?”

He fell silent before his tone grew harsh again. “If this isn't a job you can handle—”

I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t have time to check an email I didn’t know I had or rummage around through the desk. I’ll be in an hour earlier than necessary tomorrow to give myself time to go through it.”

“Good, because I need you to be abreast of what’s happening. We have a business trip in two weeks that we’re taking, so you’ll need to book our tickets as well as a place to stay. Also, I need you to get your schedule synced up and confirm a few things I’ve already put on there. Namely, I need to know if you can work later than scheduled Friday evening because I need you for a yacht clean-up.”

I stood to my feet and pulled up my pants. “Yes, I can stay later Friday. I’ll make sure my—ugh—babysitter—shit. I mean, crap.”

“What in the world are you doing over there?”

I laughed breathlessly. “Just hard to listen to you whine and complain while I’m trying to get dressed.”

The second the words fell from my tongue, I wanted to melt into a puddle and die. I’d never done well with people who were naturally condescending to others, and I had a natural knack for getting them to shut up. But, since this man just so happened to be my new fucking boss, one would have figured my mouth would’ve reeled it in a bit.

And yet, here we were with me cursing and spouting off bullshit in my hot boss’s ear while he debated on whether or not to fire me on the spot.

But instead of firing me, he simply drew in a deep breath that even I heard through the phone. “This yacht appointment is important. It’s a good friend of mine who happens to be a top-notch A-list Hollywood star. He’s invested a lot of money in my rental business, so it needs to be special.”

The care in his voice caught me off-guard, and it softened my heart a bit towards him. “I’ll make sure I’m there for it, then.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

His words startled me. “Uh, you’re—you’re welcome. Yeah. Of course.”

“I’ll see you bright and early at nine in the morning. And remember, it’s your last day of training before you start full-time Wednesday.”

Shit, I have to call Suri. “Yes, I won’t forget.”

“And make sure to sync your calendar before you go to bed.”

I snatched my tank top off the floor. “Will do.”

“Great. Have a good evening.”

“You too, Mr. Cataline.”

And when we hung up, I tossed my phone onto the mattress so I could pull my shirt over my head.

Then, I sat against my mattress, pulled my laptop into my lap, and decided to chisel away at some of this stuff while Aurora was still napping.

Trey

As I waved Gavin and his growing family off on their luxurious yacht for the weekend, I felt Leslie next to me typing away on her cell phone. No doubt, she was probably updating our schedule with something that had come through her phone, but I had other matters to tend to. With her attitude, I was shocked that I hadn't already canned her by this point. But I kind of liked it.

Plus, she had been incredibly efficient with changing over the yacht at the last minute.

"Cancellations are a bitch with you, aren't they?" she murmured.

I grinned. "They can be rough, yes."

She lit a fire beneath my ass that no secretary had been able to do, and it made me more productive. I was more productive with her around, and other than her fucking mouth, she seemed to be taking to the job quicker than I figured she would have. Now, if only I could keep my hands off my cock at night while dreaming about her.

"Okay, so," Leslie said as she held up her finger, "I've got a crew scheduled to receive the yacht and clean it before Monday morning, and I've already confirmed another three-day trip on the boat. The copay has been deposited already on their part, so I'm going to use that to tip the guys who helped

us switch everything around on this current yacht before I hire staff for the next yacht trip.”

I nodded. “Sounds like you have it under control.”

“Also, there are a few changes I think you could make to all of this that would make things run much more smoothly. For example, your company doesn’t have a timetable for cancellations. This is the kind of cancelation where they should have forfeited all of their money since they canceled within twenty-four hours of their rental coming to fruition. If we changed that policy and implemented—”

I waved my hand in the air. “I’ll give you the number of who to speak with to get it done.”

Her fingers stopped typing away. “You want me to simply do it then?”

I peeked down at her. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Are you confident in your ability to keep up customer service while implementing these new standards?”

“Yes, and I believe I can raise things up even more.”

I licked my lips. “Then, I’ll shoot you the number of who to speak with.”

Her phone dinged, but when she looked down, a frown took over her face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She sighed. “Like you care.”

That’s enough. “Contrary to the icy frontier of my face, I do care about those I employ, Leslie.”

She closed her eyes. “My apologies for the attitude, Mr. Cataline. It wasn’t in good taste of me to insinuate something other than the truth.”

I clasped my hands behind my back. “Apology accepted. Now, what seems to be the issue?”

She looked up at me. “It’s Suri, my babysitter. She says that Auro—my daughter, is running a low-grade fever.”

“Do you need to leave? I can have my driver take you straight to your place.”

Her gaze fell back to the screen of her phone. “It’s probably just her allergies. They kick up around this time of the year. But, it always makes me worry when she gets a fever anyway.”

I couldn’t relate, but I tried to sympathize. “I can only imagine. My mother was the same way. Every time I got a scrape or a cut or something, she was there to hold me and clean it up and get me a popsicle.”

She giggled. “That’s very sweet. Are you close to your mother?”

“Not since she died, no.”

Her eyes slowly rose to mine. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t—”

I shook my head. “Nothing to be sorry for. She chose what she did, and all I can hope is that she was happy with her decision.”

Her jaw fell open. “Wait a second, your mother commit —?”

I held up my hand. “If you need to leave, take the car. I’ve got some things I want to check up on with the yachts anyway. But, if you aren’t leaving, follow me. There’s still much for you to learn.”

I had no idea why in the world I was attempting to sympathize with this woman when I knew damn good and well I couldn’t. For some reason, though, my gut tried. My heart tried. Hell, my fucking soul tried. I didn’t like where the conversation was headed, though. I didn’t like talking about my childhood, so I wasn’t sure what prompted me to bring it up in the first place.

So, with my hands swinging at my sides, I started toward one of the rental yachts.

Before I heard Leslie rush up behind me in her heels. “How many yachts do you have to rent out?”

I drew in a deep breath of the salty ocean air. “About half the marina.”

“You’re kidding.”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“Half of these hummers are yours?”

I grinned at her choice of words. “They are, yes.”

“Do you have multiple businesses? Or just the yacht and the PR stuff?”

I darted over toward a black and red yacht that people were always willing to shell out money to rent. “I’ve got multiple little things I dip my hands into that don’t bring me much money. Those small things are what keep me sane when the yacht rentals and the PR firm get out of control.”

“Will I be dealing with any of those smaller businesses?”

“In time. But for now, you have your hands full. By the way, what are your dinner plans?” I stopped abruptly and gazed down at her, and she almost ran into me.

Almost, at least.

“Uh, well. Since Aurora isn’t feeling very well, I’ll probably just go home and make us up some soup,” she said.

I nodded. “I’ll need you for a business dinner before you head out if you aren’t leaving to tend to your daughter.”

She crooked an eyebrow. “A business dinner? What for?”

I blinked. “For business, of course. Don’t worry, the company card will be utilized for something like this.”

She took a step back, almost as if she were on the defense. “Did you always take your prior secretaries out for ‘business dinners?’”

I didn’t like her use of quotes. “Yes. Usually, every Monday and Friday evening. Why? Is that an issue?”

Her face almost seemed deflated. “Oh. Well, I’ll have to text Suri—”

I waved my hand in the air. “Text whomever you need to. We have much to discuss over dinner, though, so I hope you’ll find a way to make it.”

After checking out the yacht and making sure my newly hired cleaning crew had done a job fit for my reputation, I came back to find Leslie still standing there. I smirked to myself as I beckoned for my driver to pull up, and together we made our way toward my favorite dinner spot.

A surf-and-turf restaurant right on the edge of the ocean.

“What does this place serve?” Leslie asked as we pulled up.

I pointed. “Just pull us up to the front, Daveed, and you can head home for the evening. Leslie and I will catch cabs home.”

My driver spoke. “Are you sure, Mr. Cataline?”

I nodded. “It’s your daughter’s birthday tomorrow, go home and enjoy it.”

“That’s sweet of you,” Leslie said.

I peeked over at her before I slipped out of the car. “Follow me. They always have my table ready right out on the balcony over the sloshing waters.”

I walked inside, and a pathway cleared as I made my way out back. The restaurant had bought a special license back before they banned things like this, so it was one of the four restaurants in the entire state with a back deck that sat out over the water, like its own little pier. Our waitress for the evening ushered us back to my usual table, sitting right where the waves broke against the pier-deck legs. And when Leslie sat in front of me, I found that the moonlight hanging over our heads really illuminated her gloriously soft features.

Cut it out. You’re staring.

“May I get either of you something to drink? Some water? A nice glass of wine?” the waitress asked.

Leslie looked up at her. “Just water for me, thank you.”

I nodded. “I’ll have the same, along with some coffee. Thanks.”

Our waitress left to retrieve our drinks, and I watched Leslie watch the ocean. I never felt the need to stare at it while I ate, but I very much enjoyed the sounds of the waves crashing against the wooden legs of the dock. I sat there in what felt like the closest thing to comfort I had experienced in quite some time. But, Leslie’s voice soon pierced the night with a question that caught me off-guard.

“I hate to ruin the moment, but are we ever going to talk about what happened between the two of us?”

Our waitress walked up to us. “Here you go. A glass of water and a coffee for you, and a glass of water for you, ma’am. Are we ready to order?”

I held Leslie’s stare. “I’ll take your surf and turf, with the shrimp scampi on the side along with steamed broccoli and asparagus.”

“And for you, miss?” she asked.

Leslie blinked. “Yeah, that sounds great. I’ll have the same.”

My eyebrows rose. “That’s a lot of food you’re ordering.”

She shrugged. “Good thing I enjoy eating, then.”

The waitress walked away, leaving us alone once more. But, I found Leslie still studying me, as if she expected me to simply start talking about the fact that we’d had some of the greatest sex I’d ever experienced in my adult years.

“So?” she asked.

I folded my hands in my lap. “So, what?”

She scoffed. “Are we going to talk about it or not?”

“If by ‘talk,’ you mean ‘rehash it physically,’ then I’m sure we can discuss it. Otherwise, I’m not prone to talking about such sensitive subjects verbally and while out in public.”

She didn't skip a beat, though. "And what if we were in private? Would you speak about it, then?"

I blinked. "I suppose you have a fifty-fifty shot as to how I might react to such a topic."

She looked around at the empty deck before getting up from her chair. I watched her carefully as she came over to my side of the table and bent forward, placing one hand on the arm of my chair and another on the top of the table. She leaned in so close I felt her breath pulsing against my face. And as her eyes danced between my own, her perfume enveloped me, stiffening my cock as she spoke.

"We're technically alone out here, correct?"

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "Leslie, I will not speak of such a topic while we are enjoying a business dinner."

She snickered. "Do you honestly expect me to believe that we're out here sharing a romantic steak meal with waves crashing beneath us, and it isn't a date?"

Do something. She sees right through you. "And if I were to say no?"

A strand of her hair fell into her face, and I reached up without a second thought. I tucked it behind her ear, watching her eyes as her eyes tried to watch my movement. I allowed my fingertips to grace her skin softly. I watched as a flushed trail followed the direction of my fingers until they fell away from her jawline. I enjoyed watching her react to me. I enjoyed the blossoming of wanton lust behind her eyes as her pupils blew themselves wide for me.

And when I stood to my feet, I took her hand in mine and tugged her away from the table.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

I pulled her toward the restaurant door. "The bathroom."

She giggled. "And what do you suppose we're going to be doing in a bathroom, Mr. Cataline?"

I turned around just outside of the restaurant and wrapped my arm around her waist. I growled softly, listening as she squealed. She placed her hands against my chest as I captured her lips, kissing her with as much passion as I had the first night we had spent together.

Then, after coming up for air, I nuzzled my nose against hers. “Why don’t you follow me and figure it out for yourself, Miss Popovich?”

And she sure as hell didn’t have to be asked twice then.

Leslie

I had no idea what the hell possessed me to play along with his little game, but something about the way he devoured me with his eyes made him even more enticing. He was a tried-and-true asshole at times, but there was a softer side to him that simply needed a little bit of coaxing to come out of that rugged shell—and maybe a bit of lube only I could provide in the process.

Trey led me through the restaurant and down a darkened hallway that seemed to have an abandoned set of bathrooms. He tugged me into the women’s restroom and pressed me against the wall, gazing into my eyes as he flipped the lock to close us in.

“Trey,” I said breathlessly.

His hand cupped my cheek. “Tell me ‘no,’ and it goes no further.”

But, I couldn’t utter the word.

His hands gripped my waist, and he hoisted me against the wall. One of my heels slipped off, shivering me to my core as my legs mindlessly wrapped around him. I watched his eyes as they danced over my body. My face. My curves. And when his hand slid around my throat, I gasped as his thumb trailed slowly up my pulse point.

“Such a beautiful woman,” he murmured.

My cheeks tinted at his words. “Been a while since I’ve heard something like that.”

His eyes snapped to mine. “Well, it’s true, and don’t you ever let someone say differently.”

His words filled me with delight, but his kiss filled me with need. I slid my arms around his neck as he fiddled with his belt buckle, shoving his pants down his legs. The idea of feeling him fill me again dampened my panties. Our tongues moved together in salacious bliss as his palms rolled my skirt right over my fucking thighs.

And when I felt him pull my panties off to the side, I gasped as he entered me.

Inch, by thickened inch.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned.

He sucked on my lower lip and growled. “So wet for me, holy shit.”

My jaw quivered. “*Now*. I need you now, please.”

His hand wrapped around my neck once more. “My pleasure, gorgeous.”

He pulled his hips back and jerked them close, filling me to the brim as I went to cry out his name. But, before I could get the sound out, his hand moved from my neck to my mouth. He clamped it against my lips, causing me to cry out and mumble against his palm. And with every stroke of his cock, I felt myself falling deeper into his endless abyss.

“Oh. Yes. Trey, good God. Please, don’t stop. Holy fuck, you feel fantastic.”

He swallowed his growls as his eyes studied me. I felt mine roll into the back of my head as his tightly wound curls caressed my protruding clit. Never in my life had a man filled me like this before. Never had I felt so enamored and so flushed with pleasure and anticipation. I didn’t care if anyone found us. I didn’t care if they judged me for fucking my hot-ass boss. I wanted Trey, and it was clear that he wanted me.

All of me.

Every curve, dip, and crevice of my body.

“I’m so close,” he growled.

I bucked ravenously against him as my legs trembled. My muscles contracted and released, pulling me closer to the edge as his hips began to stutter. The sounds of wet skin slapping against wet skin filled the space around us, and soon the abandoned bathroom smelled like our debauchery.

And when his hips finally stilled, his dick stroked against that beautifully pebbled spot deep within my body, pulling me over the edge as I collapsed against him.

“Oh, shit,” I whimpered.

He rutted against me like a wild fucking animal. “That’s it. Milk that dick, beautiful. Holy fuck, I’ve dreamt of this. Oh, shit.”

God, at least I wasn’t the only one having my dreams infiltrated.

When his body collapsed against me, pinning me to the wall, I laid my sweating brow against his clothed shoulder. His cock fell from between my legs, coated in my juices as my legs grew weak. His quaking hands gripped my thighs, keeping my legs around him for a little while longer before he backed up and helped me stand.

Then, without another word spoken, we pieced ourselves back together and found our way out to our table.

“They have a wonderful soup selection if you’d like to take something back for your daughter,” he said.

I sat in my chair and stared at him. “Are you sure? This is technically a business meal, right?”

His gaze met my stare. “I’m sure. Get whatever you wish to take home to her. I hope she feels better.” His words sounded empty, but I saw something more behind his eyes.

“I appreciate that, thank you.”

Dinner was quiet, and I was grateful for it. I knew whatever conversation we might have attempted to have

would be stunted, at best, and I didn't want to wade through that awkwardness when we still had food to eat. Our waitress came out in record time, setting down plate after plate after plate.

And when all of the food was spread out before us, my eyes widened. "Wow, you weren't kidding."

Trey chuckled. "Hope you're hungry."

My eyes fluttered up to his. "I think I've worked up enough of an appetite. You?"

His eyes darkened. "I've always got a bit of an appetite."

Our waitress giggled. "Is there anything else I can get you two?"

I drew in a sobering breath that hopefully served to calm my puckering nipples. "Do you have any broth-based soups, by any chance?"

The waitress nodded. "Oh, yes. If you aren't a creamy soup fan, we have a nice brothy mussel soup as well as a lobster noodle soup."

I blinked. "Lobster noodle?"

She nodded. "It's my favorite. It's made exactly like chicken noodle, but with lobster instead."

I pointed at her. "I'd love to order a to-go portion of that soup and a side of this lovely bread you have."

"I'll have it ready for you when you're all set to head out, then."

I smiled up at her. "Thank you."

"And anything for you, sir?"

Trey cleared his throat. "Nothing to-go for me, no."

The waitress nodded. "Then, I'll leave you to it. I'll pop back around and freshen up drinks in a bit."

That was the most interaction I had with Trey throughout the rest of the dinner. We ate our stunningly good food in silence. I snatched up my to-go order for Aurora, and he paid

without another word spoken. I walked with him out of the restaurant, and we made our way for the main road, where he quickly flagged down a cab for me. And after he opened the back door to usher me inside, I slipped in before peeking back up at him.

“Are you sure you don’t want to share a cab? I have to go back to get my car from work anyway,” I said.

He shook his head before speaking with the driver. “Get her to TC Public Relations, please.”

I watched him hand the cab driver some money before he closed my door and tapped the hood of the car. And I hated to admit that I turned around to watch his body fade into the darkened horizon of the night sky. I’d never felt so conflicted in all my life, sitting there with soup for my daughter and an ache between my legs that had yet to be fully satiated.

What am I getting myself into?

Still, once the cab driver dropped me off, I sped home in my car only to find Aurora perched on the couch watching her favorite Disney movie, *Sleeping Beauty*. I fixed her soup and placed some bread on a small plate, then went and sat beside her as Suri kissed the top of my head.

“Thank you so much,” I whispered.

She smiled down at me. “Not a problem. Same time tomorrow?”

“Nope. I start full-time tomorrow. Can you be here around seven-thirty?”

She nodded. “You know it. I’ll be here. But, if you need me at all tonight—like if she gets worse—don’t hesitate to call.”

I sighed. “I love you so much. Thank you for everything you do.”

She giggled and squeezed my shoulders. “I love you, too. Don’t forget to get some rest yourself tonight. Okay?”

I leaned forward and set Aurora’s soup and bread down on the coffee table. “I’ll get some rest, I promise.”

“Good.”

Aurora stirred next to me. “Mommy?”

I leaned over and kissed her forehead as Suri quietly left. “I’m right here, princess. I’m home.”

She sat up and cuddled close to me. “Is that mine?”

I kissed her warm little forehead as I pulled her into my lap. “Yes, it is. Wanna try some?”

She nodded softly. “Yes, please.”

I fed my poor, tired, snotty little girl a few bites of soup before dipping some bread into the broth. I was happy with the few bites she took, but it worried me when she passed right back out. Something in the pit of my gut told me this was a little bigger than just her allergies, and part of me was prompted to work from home tomorrow so I could get her to a doctor.

Then, as if the heavens heard my whispers of worry, Aurora sat upright as if she’d been struck by lightning before she whimpered.

“Sweetheart, what is it?” I asked.

Aurora gagged. “I don’t feel so good.”

And as I scooped her into my arms, scrambling to get her to the kitchen sink, she projectile vomited all over my clothes. All over the floor. Even all over the counter before I got her over the kitchen sink to catch the last of the remnants.

“Mommy?” she asked through her tears.

I scrambled to find my phone. “It’s okay, honey. I need you to stand here, all right?”

She nodded but continued dry-heaving into the sink as I stripped my clothes off my body. I threw them onto the piles of throw-up that had accumulated from the couch to the kitchen, and I practically threw myself at my purse. I scrambled to get out my phone. I shot Suri a quick text message asking her if Aurora had thrown up at all today. And

when Suri called me instead of messaging back, I knew it was bad.

“Suri, just answer the question,” I said.

I heard Suri’s car engine on the other end of the line. “No, she hasn’t thrown up all day. Just the fever. She had an appetite and everything. Is she throwing up now?”

“Mommy!” Aurora cried out through her tears.

I drew in a deep breath. “I need you to get back here. I know this is gonna be gross, but she’s thrown up everywhere. She needs a doctor, and I can’t be in two places at once.”

I heard the squealing of tires before the phone call went blank. I shoved my phone into my purse and rushed to scoop my daughter into my arms as I made my way for the front door. I plucked my robe off the wall next to my coat, wrapped my almost-naked body up, and then slid into my house shoes.

And when Suri burst through the front door, she picked Aurora up into her arms. “Let me get you guys in the car. I’ll clean, then I’ll be right behind you.”

Aurora started gagging. “Mommy, where are we going?”

I palmed my keys. “We have to go to the hospital, honey. Nowhere else is open.”

“No,” she whined.

And despite the complete and utter chaos unfolding around me, one truth rang loud and clear. A truth that might inevitably cost me the most lucrative and most confusing job I’d ever taken in my lifetime.

I’d have to call out of work tomorrow on what should have been my first fucking full day on the job.

Trey

I held my hand up and flagged down a cab as I drew in the cool evening air through my nose. My suit smelled like sex, and I made a mental note to have it dry-cleaned as quickly as possible. The cab pulled up, and I slipped inside, mindlessly rattling off my address before I handed the man some cash. I wasn't sure how much, though, and I didn't care, either.

“Sir, are you sure this—”

I sighed. “Just drive. I need to get home and sleep this off.”

I felt... off. Something inside of me had kicked up, and I needed it to settle back down. It felt like the world around me was still tilting. I closed my eyes and paid attention to the blood beneath my skin. It bubbled and sizzled as if my entire body had kicked up a tsunami within my soul that threatened to wash over me. And for some reason, what I felt blossoming deep down in my soul was something akin to... relaxation? No. Relief? I had nothing to be relieved about.

Happiness.

I could've sworn what I felt almost resembled happiness.

“Sir?”

I opened my eyes. “Yes?”

“We're uh... at a gate? Of some sort?”

I cleared my throat. “Pull up to the intercom and roll down my window.”

The man did as I asked, and I punched in my code to open the gate. The gate squeaked and groaned as the driver pulled through, dropping me right off at my doorstep. I tipped him a bit more money for his troubles and waved him off. Then I eased myself through the massive front doors of my estate, where the sounds of absolutely nothing greeted me.

And anger set back in.

“Fucking idiot I was for this place,” I grumbled.

I made my way up the steps, my shoes clicking and echoing off the bare walls that had hardly been decorated since I had the place built. I slipped into my bedroom and walked into my closet before I took a seat and started winding down for bed. With every piece of my nighttime routine, I felt the anger inside of me softly calming the ebbing and flowing of my soul.

My shoes slipped back into their slots.

My suit made its way downstairs for someone to take it off to the dry-cleaner.

Then, everything else went into a hamper before I hopped into the shower.

I closed my eyes and let the hot water rush over my aching muscles. I couldn't remember the last time I didn't feel some sort of tension in my body, somewhere. I gritted my teeth as I cleaned myself off for the night and quickly slipped out, allowing myself to air-dry as I enjoyed a piping hot cup of tea on my private balcony. I spread myself out on the lounge chair, watching the steam rise from my lonely cup, even though I had purchased two sets when I saw them online.

And just as I finished my tea, I heard my phone ringing in my closet.

“Goddammit,” I murmured.

I walked back inside and slipped into some flannel pajama pants before I hunted down my phone. I scooped it up,

watching as my screen flashed with an unopened text message. It was from Leslie, and I swiped my finger up to open it before my eyes scrambled to devour the words.

But, her words didn't bring that bubbly feeling that had confused me and enchanted me earlier.

Leslie: I have to call out for tomorrow. Family emergency. I am so sorry.

I ground my teeth together as I quickly shot back a message.

Me: That isn't how you call out. You need to put it on the calendar, and then I need to approve it and get it tallied. And it won't be approved. Tomorrow is your first full-time day. If you can't even make that, then I need to make other arrangements.

I knew the message was harsh, but I didn't give a shit. Call out on her first full day? Was she nuts? What kind of business did she think I was running? I watched my phone, waiting for the message to be read. Waiting for those three little dots to start bouncing up and down. However, the message was never read, and the dots never appeared.

So, I called.

“The number you have reached does not have a mailbox that is—”

I hung up the phone and stood to my feet. I gave her the benefit of the doubt and tried calling again, but when my call went unanswered, I felt my anger swallow me whole. If that woman didn't want to speak face to face, then I'd go to her place and fire her in person to show her exactly how she needed to communicate with her fucking boss.

So, I threw a T-shirt on, wrapped myself up in a robe, and made my way for the front door.

I didn't even bother calling a cab. I needed to burn out some of this anger on the road, so I grabbed the keys to my Audi convertible. I revved the engine and sped out of my driveway, peeling away so quickly that burnt-rubber smoke kicked up into the air. I raced to my place of work before I dug

her address out of my employee files, and the next thing I knew, I was standing in front of her door, and the damned thing was wide open.

“Leslie?” I gripped my keys between my fingers as the hair on the nape of my neck stood on end. “Leslie? You here?”

I eased myself into the small townhouse and wondered how in the hell anyone could move around in this place. It was so tiny, and the furniture was so massive that I felt myself bumping into corners that I felt shouldn’t have even existed in the first place. I was definitely an open-concept kind of guy, and this place had a wall for every fucking room and then some.

“Leslie!” I called out.

I checked every room and found no one there, except for the heavy stench of vomit. It curdled my stomach and dredged up a fear inside of me that I’d never experienced before. I walked back to the front door and peeked around outside, trying to see if some sort of intruder was attempting to escape the premises. But, when I didn’t see anything suspicious, I ripped my phone out and called Leslie once more.

And that’s when she picked up.

“Yes?” she asked breathlessly.

I barked my words at her. “Where are you?”

“What do you mean, where am I?”

“I’m at your place, and the damn door’s wide open. Where are you, Leslie?”

She paused. “Why the hell are you at my place?”

I scoffed. “Why the hell aren’t you answering my calls? Where are you? We need to talk.”

“Look, Trey, I really can’t talk right—”

Then, an intercom came on in the background, and I knew exactly where she was.

“Dr. Campbell, you are needed in the OR. Dr. Campbell, please report to OR 2 immediately.”

My heart dropped to my stomach. “I’ll be there soon?”

Leslie spoke quickly. “Trey, seriously. I don’t need you here. I can bring my laptop to the hospital tomorrow to work so I don’t have to miss any—”

I hung up on her, closed her townhouse door, and sprinted for my car. I hopped inside without even closing the door all the way, and I sped off toward the closest hospital. I swerved into a parking space and charged through the emergency room doors, trying to figure out where the fuck I was supposed to be.

And after speaking with three nurses and one very tired resident, I found Leslie sitting in a waiting room.

While she cried into her hands.

“She’s gonna be okay,” a woman beside her murmured, “Rori’s strong. She’s got this, and so do you.”

I blinked, pulling myself out of my disarmed trance. “Leslie.”

Her head whipped up, and her reddened eyes broke my heart. “Trey?”

I walked over to her and sat down. “What’s going on?”

She furrowed her brow. “Why in the world are you—”

I placed my hand on her knee. “Stop fighting me and answer my question. What’s going on? What happened?”

“Who is this?” the woman asked.

I answered her without moving my eyes away from Leslie. “Trey Cataline. Now, is someone going to answer me? Or, do I need to track down a doctor?”

Leslie’s eyes searched mine before she sighed. “It’s my daughter, Aurora. She’s having an allergic reaction to something, but they don’t know what.”

I nodded. “Have they tried medication? An Epi-pen?”

Her friend scoffed. “Uh, yeah. I’m pretty sure the doctors have already tried those avenues before they rolled the girl

downstairs to run some tests. They have to sedate her first.”

Leslie hissed. “Suri, cut it out.”

I stood to my feet. “What kind of an allergic reaction?”

Leslie leaned back in her chair and sighed. “That’s the issue. They think that whatever she’s having a reaction to is lodged somewhere in her system. Possibly her throat or her lungs. She’s having tests run so they can figure out exactly what’s going on.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “How long has she been in—”

Then, Leslie started crying again. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to pay for this, Suri. I haven’t filled out my insurance stuff. I just started this job. I’ve drained my savings account for this townhouse, and I just bought groceries, and my credit card is maxed out, and I—”

I couldn’t take it any longer. “Stop!”

Her friend, Suri, slowly stood to her feet. “If you’re going to continue to be this way, you can exit the same way you came. You’ve already overstepped your lines as a boss; don’t make me throw you out a window because you’re upsetting my best friend further. Got it?”

The tall, slender woman staring up at me had the most striking hazel eyes I’d ever seen on someone, and they were filled with the kind of determination that almost made me jealous. It had been a long time since I’d considered anyone a friend, much less had someone who defended me with the kind of fervor she showed for Leslie.

“She’s lucky to have you,” I said, trying to calm my voice.

Suri blinked. “Well, thank you. I know she is.”

I turned my attention back to Leslie before I crouched down. “I’ll make sure this is taken care of, all right?”

Leslie’s watery eyes met my own. “What?”

I placed my hand on her knee and squeezed softly. “Don’t worry about money. We’ll figure it out, okay? So long as I can

prove that you were under my employ before this happened, I'll make sure the insurance covers what they should. And whatever else is left, I can handle."

Her jaw dropped open in shock. "Trey, I can't let you—"

A pronounced voice interrupted us. "Leslie Popovich?"

She shot to her feet. "That's me?"

I stood and turned around to find a black man in a white coat standing behind us. "May I speak with you privately, please?"

Leslie drew in a broken breath. "Whatever you can say, you can say it in front of Suri and my—"

I peeked down at her and watched her swallow hard. "—Trey. It's okay."

The doctor shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid I can't do that. Could you follow me, please?"

I stepped to the forefront. "You heard what the woman said, and you'll do everything in your power to abide by what she's asking of you. And in the meantime, I want to get Aurora in a private room. You can bill me for the expense, or however that works."

The doctor blinked. "Uh-huh. Right."

I tilted my head. "Or, I can fly my doctors in and have them use the equipment here and bypass you completely. Aurora will need a private room where she's comfortable and can get some rest, and I have a doctor I keep on-call if your staff here at the hospital is spread thin as it is. So, take your pick, and we can go from there. But I can assure you, I'm much more productive when people aren't fighting me over stupid shit."

The room was completely silent as the doctor and I stared off. I heard Suri gasp behind me as Leslie placed her hand on my back, gripping her robe as she searched the doctor's face. I had no idea what the hell was going on, but I knew one thing was for certain: Leslie and her daughter deserved the best, and I was in a financial position to give it to them.

So, I needed people to stop fighting with me and simply do what I said.

Leslie

“**G**o to sleep, Rori girl. Go to sleep and have sweet dreams. May you always find your place, and may the sun shine in your heart. Go to sleep, Rori girl. Go to sleep and be safe. Go to sleep, Rori girl. And Lord, please keep her safe.”

I sang the song I made up for her on the dot when she was only three months old. As I cradled her hand within mine, flashbacks of her first-ever hospital trip bombarded my mind. She hadn't been much more than twelve weeks old, and I had heard her wheezing from across the room. I got up and sprinted over to her crib, only to find that her lips were blue and her eyes were bright and wide with panic. Sinus issues had already taken over, and she had so much mucous build-up that it was impeding her ability to breathe.

We spent almost a week in that damned place trying to get her lungs to open up and her airway to expand.

“You've got this, sweet girl. I know you do,” I whispered.

I stood and kissed her pale, sweating forehead. She hadn't come to since her procedure, at least not enough to hold a coherent conversation. The doctors said it would be touch-and-go for a little while since she had somehow, beyond all stretch of the imagination, inhaled a pea. Suri felt the worst about it. She remembered Rori coughing and retching to try to get the pea up, but she thought it had come up because once the coughing was done, Rori continued eating.

But apparently, one lone pea had slid down into her lungs and lodged itself into one of the air sacs and couldn't get back out.

I heard a shuffling noise from across the room, and I whipped my head up. As I made my way back to my perched position on the edge of Rori's hospital bed, I questioned so many things. Like, why Trey had come searching for me in the first place. And why in the world he had decided to stay and sleep in some sorry excuse for a chair in the corner instead of heading back to the comfort of his massive mansion. It wasn't as if he were family or anything. All he was doing in that corner was snoring and shifting around whenever his ass fell asleep.

Then again, the sight of him still over there was a bit endearing.

I'll have to thank him big-time for this one.

"Especially if he's serious about paying," I murmured to myself.

The room that the doctors had settled us into had to be one of the most pleasant hospital rooms I'd ever been in. The room was easily the size of my kitchen and living room combined. It had a three-cushioned couch over by the window that Suri occupied while she slept, and Trey was in a rocker-recliner off to the side. The en-suite bathroom had all of the attachments and hook-ups of a regular hospital bathroom, but it had to be—at the very least—three times as large as any bathroom I'd ever seen in traditional hospital rooms.

And don't even get me started on the bed they had Rori in.

The damned thing was almost more comfortable than the bed she had at home.

I have to thank him for this.

"I feel you staring."

Trey's voice ripped me from my trance, and that was when I realized I had been staring at him in the first place. I blinked and tore my gaze away, pulling myself out of the recesses of

my mind. I cleared my throat and looked around the room, trying to find Suri in my moment of absolute embarrassment.

But, she wasn't on the couch like she had been a couple of hours ago.

"Where's Suri?" I asked.

Trey groaned as he stood from his chair. "She had to go home. She's got work in the morning."

I blinked. "Oh."

He looked down at his watch. "Well, I suppose it's a good thing you've got the week off because, at this point, your lack of sleep would impede your ability to function on the job."

I furrowed my brow. "The week off?"

He walked toward the bathroom. "I said what I said."

I smiled softly. "Thank you, Mr. Cat—"

He waved his hand into the air as he slipped inside. "Bah, don't mention it."

I watched as he closed the door behind him, and I felt myself still. Trey was easily one of the strangest human beings I'd ever come across. Yet, he had more heart than anyone I'd ever come into contact with. He painted himself as this hardened, angry, spiky creature from hell, but deep down, he had a kind and giving soul that only wished to help.

I wondered why he covered it up with such a rough exterior.

I wondered who had taken advantage of him and hurt him so badly.

When he came out of the bathroom, I expected him to head back to his seat. I expected his snoring to kick up in a few minutes and for Rori and myself to be alone again in the hospital room. But instead, he pulled up a chair beside me. He folded his hands in his lap, acting as if he weren't still in flannel pajama pants and a robe that was probably made of solid mink or some shit like that.

Then, he cleared his throat. "We need to talk."

I shook my head. “Whatever it is, it can wait.”

“This will probably be the only time we have alone for a while.”

I snickered. “We aren’t alone. Rori’s right here. And I’d like to not address anything sensitive while she’s in the room if it’s all the same to you.”

He stood to his feet. “Then, come with me to the cafeteria. She’s sleeping, and I heard your stomach growling an hour ago from across the room.”

I slowly looked up at him. “Even if I wanted to admit to that, I’m not leaving my daughter. She’s in a vulnerable state, and the last thing she should be is alone.”

He sighed. “They have her on morphine, for starters. She’s not waking up anytime soon. She won’t know you’ve gone to nourish yourself, which is what you need to be doing if you’re going to be single-handedly taking care of her. You both can’t be sick, so worrying yourself to death isn’t going to do your daughter any favors.”

I hated that he was right. “No longer than an hour, okay?”

He offered me his hand. “I’ll make sure we’re back in forty-five minutes.”

I fluttered my eyes up to his before I bent over and kissed my daughter’s forehead. I whispered in her ear that I’d be right back, just in case she could hear me and was aware of everything going on. Then, I took Trey’s hand, and we eased our way out the door. We walked toward the elevator and rode it in silence, our hands slowly slipping away and falling back to our sides.

I found that I missed his touch, though, as we walked through the door of the cafeteria.

The place was practically empty, but the coffee smelled fresh. I got myself a massive cup and dumped as much sugar in it as I could stand, then I decided to pick out some fruit for myself. Trey insisted that I get myself a sandwich as well, so I snatched up the last tuna melt from the griddle station. And of course, after he flexed his muscles and paid, we went and sat

in a corner booth away from the few doctors and nurses who were on a break with their piping hot coffees.

But, when Trey spoke, it pulled my attention to him. “So, we’re sleeping together, and I’m your boss.”

I blinked and took a big sip of my coffee. “Just jumping on in here, huh?”

He shrugged. “What better way is there to do anything?”

I sighed. “I suppose as such.”

He leaned back and chewed on a french fry. “I want to be upfront and say that I don’t do this kind of thing with employees. *Ever*. I’ve never been in this situation before, and I’m trying to step as respectfully as possible.”

I took a bite of my sandwich and choked it down. “I know.”

“Protocol at my business states—”

I held my hand up. “I don’t care about protocol.”

He chuckled. “You should. You work there, too.”

I took another bite of my sandwich to appease him before I pushed it off to the side. “The only thing I care about is that you, *A*, understand that I’m not that kind of person, either, and *B*, I’m not hating what we’re doing.”

He blinked. “Those are two very good things to know, yes. Which brings me to my next question: do you feel we should stop?”

I considered his question for a few moments. “I mean, if it doesn’t get in the way of work, what’s the problem with a bit of stress relief?”

“Is that all it is for you? Stress relief?”

My eyes met his. “Is it something more than that for you? Because we should talk about that as well if it is.”

He held my gaze within his own for a long time before he spoke. “Monday. Dinner. Plan for it. We have some things to talk about with the upcoming business trip, and it sounds like

we have more to talk about on a personal front when both of us are a little less tired.”

A shiver worked its way up my spine. “All right, I’ll get it on my calendar.”

He reached for another fry. “Wonderful. Now, eat up. I want half of that sandwich gone before we head back upstairs. You’re going to need your strength.”

I smiled softly as his eyes dropped back to his food, and not another word was spoken between the two of us. The more I got to know Trey, the weirder he seemed, but not in an odd sort of way. The more time I spent with him, the more his rougher layers kept peeling back. And with every layer that exposed itself, I found a little more compassion beneath the anger. I found a little more emotion beneath his stoic eyes. Trey Cataline was much more than met anyone’s eyes, and I found it invigorating as I silently munched on my tuna melt.

And I also found myself eagerly awaiting our planned dinner at the beginning of next week.

Trey

“U h-huh. Yes. Two dozens of white roses, separated. Yep, that’s correct. ‘A-U-R-O-R-A’ is the spelling. Make sure it’s right. Uh-huh. Yes. One with a teddy bear, and one with the chocolate. That’s correct, tomorrow is blue. Yep. And you as well.”

I hung up the phone with the florist and quickly got back to work. I had way too much to field on my own without Leslie here, and I couldn’t spare much time in any direction. But the one thing I wanted to make sure I set up was regular deliveries of flowers to both of the girls. A dozen, freshly cut each morning, for both Aurora’s room and Leslie’s townhouse. Plus, I wanted to get each of them treats that I thought they might enjoy.

One different present for each of them, every day during Leslie’s week off.

I didn’t want to bombard them too much, especially with my presence. I knew Leslie had a lot on her plate, to begin with, and her daughter probably had no idea who the hell I was. And it sure as hell wasn’t my place to insert myself into their lives like that on a whim with Aurora as sick as she was, so I kept my distance.

However, I still wanted them to know that they were being thought about.

The week crawled by in agony, and I was thankful when the weekend came around. Pulling twelve-hour shifts with nothing even close to a break was rigorous, at best. It showed me, more than ever, how much Leslie was needed in this place. More than ever, it showed me that I needed to make sure I treated her with the respect she deserved, lest I be working these kinds of hours until the day I fucking died.

But, when Monday finally came around, I heard those heels scraping against the carpet.

I smelled her candy-laced body spray as she came down the hallway.

And when I heard her humming as she sat at her desk, I looked up to find Leslie smiling at me.

It's going to be a damn good day with her here.

She looked almost relieved to be sitting at her desk, and that washed a wave of relief over me that I didn't even know I needed. And I couldn't wait for our dinner date that evening.

I couldn't wait to get her alone again and make her feel like the Queen she had become to me.

“Mr. Cataline?”

I looked up to find Leslie standing in the doorway of my office. “Come on in. Close the door behind you.”

She nodded and did as I asked. “Mr. Cataline, I have a few mess—”

I crooked my finger. “Don't yell at me from across my office. That defeats the point of having a door. Come stand beside me.”

Again, she did as I asked, and her body heat stiffened my dick against my pants. “Mr. Cataline, I have a few messages that were on my voicemail for you, and they seem pretty urgent.”

I leaned back, peering up at her. “Who are they from?”

She perched against the edge of my desk, allowing the outside of her leg to fall against mine. “There are three from

someone named Matt Harrison, with two Ss. He was very adamant about that part.”

I grinned. “He’s adamant about a lot of things that don’t matter. What did Ol’ Matty Matt want?”

She crooked an eyebrow. “*Matty Matt*? Is that really what you call him?”

I shrugged. “Behind his back, yeah.”

She giggled, and the sound filled me with pride. “Well, Ol’ *Matty Matt* Harry over here needs you to call him about—”

I sputtered. “Matty Matt Harry? Seriously?”

She shrugged. “Hey, if you can have nicknames for people, so can I.”

“It’s a great nickname. I kind of want to change his information in my system so that people from my company start addressing him that way.”

Her jaw dropped open in shock. “Why, Mr. Cataline, I would have never taken you for a prankster.”

I winked up at her. “What can I say? You bring out the good in me.”

I wasn’t sure what possessed me to say something like that, but it wasn’t as if I were lying to her. For some reason, Leslie brought out a side of me I had stuffed down and away from the rest of the world. A part of me that I didn’t want to expose to the hurt and the pain I had dealt with for the majority of my life.

Somehow, Leslie had become this balm of comfort, and it was because of that comfort she provided that I felt able enough to expose a part of me that the rest of the world didn’t get to see.

“Is there something the matter?” I asked.

Leslie shook her head as if she were ripping herself out of a trance. “No, not at all. But, I *am* glad I can bring out a little bit of the good in you.”

I wanted to settle my hand against her knee, but I resisted the urge. “I feel the same way.”

She smiled before clearing her throat. “So, Ol Matty Matt Harry over here wants you to call him about distribution issues. That’s all he’d say on the matter, though I’m unsure as to what distribution services have to do with your PR firm. I figured that was more an issue for your—”

I nodded. “He works closely with the same warehouses I do, yes. He’s probably wanting my opinion on something he’s trying to push that I won’t let him. I’ll make sure to give him a call later on in the day when I can stomach his tirades. Are there any other messages?”

And when Leslie sighed, I knew I was in for it. “A Mrs. Voyich called as well.”

I groaned. “Oh, boy.”

“Yeah, it’s about as good as that, too. She says you’ve been dodging her requests for video conferences and telephone meetings you two set up. Is that true?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “She’s the other investor in my yacht rental business. She wants me to expand to other coastlines instead of keeping things local where I can keep my hands on it at all times.”

“Let me guess: she wants you to make sure she’s the head of the next coastline you tackle.”

I pointed up at her. “Bingo.”

She placed her message notes on my desk. “Well, she called a few times and left you a few messages that ranged from genuine to curse-filled. I think it’s time you stop dodging her and just talk with her.”

I closed my eyes. “I suppose you’re right.”

“And think of it this way, the sooner you can get this stuff done, the sooner we can get off to dinner. Right?”

My eyes slowly eased open. “You’re absolutely right.”

She slid off my desk. “Which means I should leave you alone, right?”

I leaned up and reached for my desk phone. “Right.”

She giggled. “I’ll see you in a few hours, Mr. Cataline.”

The way she purred my name made me swallow a growl as her hips swayed deeply with her steps. She teased me with her curves as she walked toward my closed office door, tossing me a playful wink over her shoulder. I had half a mind to slam my phone down, grip her hair, and bend her over my fucking desk. However, I resisted what my cock wanted as she slipped out of my office, carrying with her the only shred of peace I’d ever come across since my mother had killed herself.

So, I placed phone calls quickly in the hopes that I could still keep my evening free.

I should have known better, though.

In my line of work with the kinds of businesses I ran, there were always snags. Once someone started placing phone calls, there was always a reason to stay late, and that day was no different. I didn’t get but about fifteen minutes into a conversation with Ol’ Matty Matt Harry before he had my ass in a warehouse checking out some pretty serious distribution issues, and by the time I got to a point where I could call Mrs. Voyich, she had already spelled out a pretty convincing argument that led to me agreeing to expand my yacht rental business.

Which meant I had to stay late to get some shitty paperwork done.

“Knock, knock.”

Leslie’s voice filtered through my office door, and I sighed. “Come in, Leslie.”

She cracked the door open before she sighed. “I take it you’re about to have a late-night?”

I pointed to the chair in front of me. “Have a seat. I’ve already ordered us steak to be delivered.”

She slipped into my office. “Now, I’m never one to turn down a nice steak, even if we have to eat it in a dark, cold, dingy office.”

I whipped my eyes up. “My office isn’t dingy.”

She giggled. “Made you look.”

A grin ticked my cheek. “Come and take a seat. The food should be here any minute.”

She sat in front of my desk in the chair I had offered her. “So, what’s keeping you attached to your desk?”

“Mrs. Voyich convinced me that there was no harm in opening up another space for the yacht rentals.”

She giggled. “What beach are you tackling now that you already own Miami? Myrtle? You heading west to the Gulf?”

I placed my pen down. “Actually, I decided to tackle the West Coast of Florida first. I figured if I’m putting Mrs. Voyich in charge of something around here, it might as well be in a place where I can easily get to things if she fucks it up.”

“Do you think she’s going to fuck it up?”

I shook my head. “No. I think she’ll do a great job, though she might need help.”

“Is this where you segue to tell me you’re transferring me to help her?”

I answered a bit too quickly. “Not when I need you here, no.”

Our eyes met, and I felt my heart skip a beat before Leslie drew in a deep breath. “So, what’s this about a business trip we’re taking? The only thing you’ve sent me thus far are the requirements for our living situation and the fact that it’s going to be in Honolulu.”

I stood from my chair and walked around, perching in front of her against my desk. “That’s right, we’re heading to Hawaii for a long weekend of conferences, speaking engagements, and mindless meetings. Sounds thrilling, right?”

“Depends on how close we’ll be to the water, I suppose.”

“We’ll be at Waikiki Beach for most of the conference, so any oceanfront villas or penthouses in that area will suffice.”

She smiled. “Fantastic. Being that close to the water will make for some wonderful views after listening to people mindlessly talk all day.”

“It’ll also make for some nice memories.”

The second the words flew out of my mouth, the mood in the room changed. I wanted to talk with Leslie about dates, plans, and expectations for the conference I was hosting before the food got here. But instead, Leslie placed her purse on the floor, tossed her notebook on top of it, and stood to her feet.

Before closing the distance between our bodies. “What kind of memories?”

I swallowed hard. “The kind that makes for decent-enough stress relief, I suppose.”

She smirked. “Ah, those kinds of memories.”

I nodded curtly. “Possibly. Depends on how busy we are.”

Her fingertips graced my silken black tie. “So, you mean you want to bend me over the bed while we gaze out at the ocean?”

My cock pulsed. “Maybe.”

She snickered. “And you want me to sit on your lap with my legs spread while you try to have your morning cup of coffee on the balcony?”

“I’m sure we’d have separate balconies to enjoy our morning coffee.”

Her eyes fluttered up to mine. “Then, do you mean pressing me against the glass while the sun sets over the water so you can fuck me into oblivion before I swallow your entire cock down the back of my throat?”

I couldn’t abate the growl that worked its way through my lips. “The things you do to me.”

Then, she pressed her hand over my clothed, engorged dick. “Why don’t you tell me the things I do to you, Mr.

Cataline.”

I blinked. “What if I show you instead?”

In the blink of an eye, all thoughts of the food were gone. All thoughts of planning this business trip and hashing out details of this new rental station fell from the forefront of my mind. I gripped Leslie’s hair and whipped her around, hearing her gasp as I bent her over my desk. I kicked open her legs with my foot as her pencil skirt rolled up the backs of her thighs, exposing a lovely excess I wanted to mark with my teeth. My hand fell away from her hair. I grabbed at her skirt, shoving it up the rest of the way until her dampened panties came into view.

I wasted no time in pulling my dick out, stroking it as her ass pressed back toward me.

Until a piercing sound filled the room and stopped us in our tracks.

“Shit, that’s Suri. Can you hand me my purse?” Leslie asked.

I took all of the strength I had to pull away from her glorious body long enough to root around for it. I tossed it onto my desk and massaged her ass cheeks, pulling them apart to take a peek at her puckered, virginal asshole. The idea of her lovely curves tightening around me while those things jiggled for my viewing pleasure made my cock leak with a need for her. I licked my lips, thinking of all the ways we could make room for our delivered dinner before we worked our food off with a lovely little round two.

But then, Leslie stood to her feet. “Are you sure that’s what’s happening, Suri?”

The worry in Leslie’s voice pulled me out of my heated trance, and I quickly stuffed myself back into my pants. She was quick to roll her skirt down and slip out of her heels before she turned her back to me and walked off into a corner. I strained to try to hear what she was talking about with her friend, but she had lowered her voice so much that I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

However, once Leslie hung up and came back toward me, the sorrow in her eyes was apparent.

“Trey, I’m—”

I held up my hand. “Your family always comes first. Is Aurora okay?”

She looked surprised, and I wasn’t sure why. “She’s, uh... coughing a little more than normal. The doctor wants me to bring her in.”

I nodded. “Then, go. And keep me updated once you have an answer.”

She snatched up her purse from my desk. “I will. I’m sorry about this.”

I shook my head. “Never be sorry for being a good mother. Not all of us are so fortunate.”

She furrowed her brow. “We’re touching on that eventually; I hope you know that.”

I blinked. “Good luck.”

She swallowed hard. “I’ll call you the second I know something, okay?”

“I’d appreciate that, thank you.”

Then, I watched as she quickly made her way out of my office, leaving me with a feeling in the pit of my gut that I hadn’t felt in, well, ever it seemed.

I missed her. I missed her presence and warmth. Her smell and her body. I missed her beauty and her laughter and the way we were beginning to freely speak and laugh with each other.

I missed Leslie as she left me alone in my office, fielding food and phone calls all by myself.

And I knew, more than ever, that I was fucked because of it.

Leslie

I heard something plop against my desk, and I peeked over. As my fingertips whizzed across a keyboard I had practically memorized, with my headset dangling around my neck, the warm smell of coffee filled my nostrils before I heard Trey's chuckle grace my ears.

"Figured you could use a bit of a pick-me-up," he said through his grin.

My knees weakened as I reached for my drink. "And when did you find time to make a caffeine run?"

He leaned against my desk. "Believe it or not, I took my lunch break today, unlike someone who shall remain nameless."

I sipped my coffee and groaned. "It makes for very long days when you want to plan all of your business trips for the year at the drop of a hat."

He smiled. "And that's why I pay you the big bucks, Leslie."

I giggled. "Well, Mr. Cataline, remind me to get some food before this coffee goes right to my head."

And without another word spoken, he dropped a sandwich as well as a cinnamon bun directly in front of me. "You're welcome," he said as he made his way for his office."

My jaw dropped open. “But—why—how—where were you keeping this when we were talking?”

As my stomach rumbled with a need to be fed, I leaned back in my office chair. I had been with the PR firm for a month now, and things were going splendidly. Trey had finally warmed up to my presence. I had finally memorized all of the transfer numbers, so answering phone calls while I was typing away on my keyboard was no longer an issue. And as much as I knew people were talking, Trey and I made it a frequent habit to share lunch in his office. Not to mention, he smiled more, which accented his breathtaking brown eyes.

Get back to work, beautiful. Can't daydream during work hours.

I pinched off a small sliver of my sandwich and tossed it into my mouth. I refreshed my computer screen, ready to go over my schedule as well as Trey's before I started making any necessary changes. I quickly figured out that he was terrible at double-booking his time, which left me with messes to clean up and cursing to field whenever I called on his behalf to change something.

However, when the screen popped up, I noticed a change in the schedule. A change that was highlighted in pink for my viewing pleasure.

“Another business dinner,” I whispered to myself.

The fourth one in as many weeks.

I pulled out my phone and quickly texted Suri, making sure she could stay late to babysit. I hoped and I prayed as I watched her typing back that she could watch Rori for me. But, when her text message rolled through, it harbored the one word that destroyed my hopes for the evening.

So, I declined the invitation to dinner on our calendar before quickly shooting an email to Trey.

Hey,

Suri can't babysit late tonight. I have to head home right after work and take care of Aurora. Maybe we can make something happen Friday evening?

Leslie

I wasn't sure what I expected after I sent that email. A bit of kickback, possibly. Trey attempting to hire me a last-minute babysitter, most definitely. But, what *actually* happened still leaves me shocked every time I think about it.

Mostly because I knew deep down that it was a turning point for him and me.

“Why don't you just bring her?” he asked.

I looked up slowly from my desk and found Trey standing in the doorway of his office. “What?” I blinked. “You want me to bring my daughter to dinner.”

He shrugged. “Sure. Is that a problem?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “It's just—our dinners usually aren't simply... well, you know.”

He grinned. “Leslie, are you insinuating something debauchorous and uncouth of me?”

My face fell. “Possibly.”

He slid his hands into his pockets. “Look, we need this dinner to hash things out for our upcoming Hawaii extravaganza. It's only two weeks away, and we don't have time to do it in the office.”

Disappointment filled my gut. “This is a growing truth.”

“So, bring Aurora. She won't be an issue, and we can get the talking out of the way over appetizers if you feel she's going to be a distraction.”

I was hoping we'd have more time to do things other than talk, but it also sounded like we needed this time to be strictly professional anyway. So, after taking in some deep breaths, I nodded.

“Yeah, yeah. Sure, I'll bring Aurora. Just let me know where we're going for dinner and what time to be there.”

Trey nodded. “Excellent. I'll let you know.”

Then, he disappeared into his office, as if the man who had become my only source of stress-relief suddenly meeting my daughter wasn't such a big deal.

“Shit,” I hissed beneath my breathing.



“SO, AURORA. I TAKE IT YOU ENJOY COLORING?” TREY asked.

My daughter nodded as she reached for something in her glitter backpack. “I wanna be an artist someday.”

Trey grinned. “Taking after your mother?”

My daughter looked up at him. “Huh?”

Trey cast me a look. “Your mother paints and sculpts. That’s what I meant.”

Aurora gasped. “You do, Mom? Where’s your stuff? I never see you do it! Why do you get to paint in the house and I don’t?”

Trey blinked. “Oops.”

I sighed and reached for my daughter’s hand. “Rori, we can talk about it later, all right?”

“But, Mom. If you get to paint inside—”

I cut her off quickly. “I don’t. I haven’t in many years, okay?”

I felt Trey staring at me as Aurora leaned back in her chair.

“Okay.”

I patted her knee. “Right.”

I tossed Trey a look and knew I’d hear about this later. But, for some reason, Aurora didn’t want to engage him in conversation. Usually, she was the first to speak and the last to have a word. Yet, she didn’t communicate until either Trey or I addressed her directly.

“Sweetheart?”

“Hmmm?” she hummed between bites of her soup.

“Mr. Trey asked you if you had a good day at school.”

Aurora swallowed hard. “Uh, yeah. It was good.”

Trey nodded. “What’s your favorite topic?”

Aurora shrugged but didn’t say anything, and it shocked me. Who was this girl, and what had she done with my daughter?

“Sweetheart,” I whispered, “he wants to talk with you.”

Trey held up his hand. “It’s all right. She’s uncomfortable, and I get what that’s like.”

That was news to me, though. “Rori?”

She looked sheepishly up at me. “Yeah?”

I took her hand in mine. “Why haven’t you told me you’re uncomfortable if you are?”

She shrugged softly. “I don’t know.”

I drew in a breath to say something, but Trey interjected, “Why doesn’t your mother let you paint in the house?”

I glared at him, but he simply ignored me as Aurora cocked her body slightly toward him. “She says I’ll make a mess.”

“Well, do you make a mess?”

“Sometimes.”

“And do you clean up that mess when you’re done?”

My eyebrows shot up as Rori sighed. “Not really.”

Trey nodded. “Then, that’s why your mother won’t let you paint inside. If you make the mess, shouldn’t you clean it up?”

My daughter clicked her tongue. “It’s not like she told me that, though! She just thinks I’m supposed to know things.”

I shook my head. “Honey, I’ve told you that several times.”

She folded her hands across her chest. “Well, not like he did.”

Trey chuckled. “Why do you want to listen to me instead of your mother? That seems a bit counter-intuitive.”

My daughter wrinkled her nose. “I dunno what that means.”

He grinned. “It means that you want something she can give you, but you aren’t listening to her when she tells you what you need to do in order to get it. It’s counter-intuitive to what you want to accomplish. What you want to get from her.”

“*Oh.*”

I stepped off my pedestal and watched as Rori talked with Trey more than she had ever spoken with me before. I mean, I felt like I was close to my daughter, but during those times that we butted heads, she usually shut down. I watched Trey talk freely with her as if they had been friends for years, and I learned scores of information about them both simply sitting there and listening to the two of them go back and forth with one another.

He’s surprisingly good with kids.

He spoke with her in a very practical way. He didn’t dumb down his language to fit hers; if anything, he defined words she didn’t recognize and taught her while they talked. It was a sight to behold, and it made me wonder if Trey had ever considered the idea of fatherhood. Because he’d make a pretty good one, from what I was witnessing.

“Hey, Mom?”

Rori’s voice pulled me from my trance. “Yeah?”

She looked up at me with little puppy dog eyes. “Why don’t you paint anymore? We could paint together, you know if you wanna.”

I felt Trey watching me like a hawk as I rubbed her knee beneath the table. “I just haven’t had time for it, honey. Raising you is a big job, and I still have to work a big-girl job,

too. So, whenever I get some free time to myself, I just like to rest and relax, you know?”

Rori’s brow furrowed together. “What if I start making breakfast in the morning? Can we do some painting, then?”

I sighed. “Honey, it’s not that easy. It’s—”

“I could cook dinner if that helps. Then, we can paint something before we go to bed!”

It felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders. “I promise it’s okay. We’ll find a way to get you painting inside again. Maybe we can paint the hallway walls or something, yeah?”

“But, Mom, I want you to paint with me.”

Trey’s voice sounded from across the table. “Just let me know what you guys need in terms of paints and brushes and easels, and I can have it shipped to wherever you need it.”

Rori pointed up to him. “See? Even he wants you to paint again. Come on, Mom. Please?”

I clicked my tongue. “Is it that important to you?”

Rori clapped her hands together. “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.”

I closed my eyes. “Then, I’ll talk with Mr. Trey and see what we can come up with, but no promises.”

She shot her hands into the air, her fingers balled into fists. “Yes! I knew she’d come around, Mr. Trey! You were right!”

He quirked an eyebrow. “And what did you have to do in order to get what you wanted?”

Rori’s head fell back. “Talk to her like an adult and not act like a child.”

Trey nodded. “Right. Remember that for next time, okay? It’ll save you and your mother a lot of time and heartache.”

I was stunned at how well he handled my daughter. Absolutely stunned. But what left me speechless was when they started cracking jokes with each other. Every time I tried to start in on the conversation about Hawaii coming up in a

couple of weeks, Rori would interject with something that would make him chuckle. And then, he'd fire back at her with something that made her giggle as well. Before I knew it, our entire table was taken up by laughter instead of conversation, and the beauty of their intertwining sounds brought peace to my heart.

I'd never heard my daughter laugh like that with a stranger before.

And as I sat there, stunned in my seat, I gazed into Trey's twinkling eyes as his smile ricocheted across his cheeks. He was a visually beautiful man, but his inner soul was even more stunning than I had once given him credit for.

Which fucked me over in more ways than I could count on my fingers and toes.

Trey

I stared at my phone, my eyes drinking in the numbers that made up my friend, Gavin's, phone number. All night after dinner, I lay in bed, thinking about Leslie. All night, I wished for her to be at my side, intertwined with me while we made love against my soft, effervescent mattress. When I closed my eyes to sleep, I could've sworn I heard the life-giving laughter of Aurora as she rushed down the hallway toward us, ready to climb into bed and bounce around until the both of us woke up.

But, when I opened my eyes that next morning, I found myself alone. "I don't want to be alone anymore," I murmured.

As I fixed myself a morning coffee and sat at my empty kitchen table, my mind flew back to Gavin and his little family. I wondered how the weekend yacht trip they had taken together had turned out. I wondered if he and that beautiful woman on his arm were still together, trying to figure out how to fuse their lives in ways that I knew that man wanted for his life. And as I stared at my phone, polishing off the last of my second round of coffee, I finally dared to dial him up.

Before his voice came hopping through the phone. "Hey there, stranger! I can't even remember the last time you called me. What's up? Everything okay?"

I leaned back and closed my eyes. "I have a quick question for you."

“Shoot.”

“That woman who was with you at the docks, she’s still with you, right?”

He chuckled. “You don’t even know the half of it. But, yeah, she’s still with me. Why?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Is your daughter fond of her?”

“Oh, they’re two peas in a fucking pod, let me tell you.”

Hope blossomed in my chest. “That’s great. I’m happy for you.”

“So... what’s on your mind?”

“I’d like to know what this woman of yours did to get in your daughter’s good graces?”

He paused. “I’m not following.”

“Like—I’m sure there was a way she bonded with Asia, you know?”

“Yeah, they just spent time together and clicked. There wasn’t anything special that happened.”

“So, there wasn’t, like, a toy she bought? Or a certain activity that brought the two of them closer?”

He clicked his tongue. “Why do you ask?”

I shrugged. “Just curious.”

“Curious enough to call me out of the blue for the first time in a months?”

I sighed. “Okay, maybe a bit more than curious.”

“Question, does this have anything to do with that short, demanding, headstrong secretary of yours that we briefly met at the docks?”

The hairs on the nape of my neck stood on end. “Why? What are you thinking?”

He barked with laughter. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

I scoffed. “See what day? This sounds halfway insulting, and I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Dude, is she the mother of this daughter you’re randomly talking about getting to know?”

I rolled my eyes. “That obvious?”

He cackled. “Man, you couldn’t be more obvious if that were the task at hand.”

I shook my head. “Fine. Sorry I asked.”

“No, no, no, no. Don’t hang up and do that defeatist thing you’re known for. That’s not going to get you anywhere with anyone. Now, what’s this secretary’s name?”

“Leslie.”

“Great. And her daughter?”

I chewed on my lower lip. “Aurora.”

“Beautiful name. Okay. So, you want to get in good with the daughter so you don’t fuck it up with her. Right?”

I nodded. “More or less.”

“Great. All right. So, with Asia? There were two things I needed for her that Eva provided right off the bat: stability and kindness.”

“So, I give that to Aurora and I’m in, right?”

He chuckled. “Not so fast. No two children are ever the same in what they need from someone who isn’t their biological parent. The bond is different, see? Asia knew she could trust me. Asia knew I’d be a staple in her life when I was there. But, she needed constant stability and kindness. You know, around-the-clock kind of thing.”

“You mean, Asia could always go to Eva and get those two things every time.”

“Bingo. Now you’re catching on. What you need to do is figure out what Aurora needs because that’s the only way

you're getting in with Leslie. If you are a good match for her daughter, she'll be more open to making things work."

It made sense. I'd be the same way if I were a father. Not that I'd ever be one, since I had already worked away my better years trying to build these fucking companies.

"Oh," Gavin said quickly, "gotta go. I'm needed back on set. Do me a favor and call me tonight, will you? Say, around ten? We can talk more then."

I nodded. "I can do that, sure."

"Great. We'll talk this evening. And Trey?"

I licked my lips. "Yeah?"

"Don't overthink it. Kids are easier than we give them credit for. They want love, they want to feel safe, and they want to feel accepted for who they are, even if who they are is always morphing."

"Easy enough to remember. Just treat her like a person."

I heard someone call for Gavin in the background, so I straightened my back. "Thanks for taking my call. You get back on set, and we'll speak this evening."

The smile was prevalent in his voice. "Wonderful. We'll talk soon. And hey! Maybe we can get together for a drink soon, too. I miss our Wednesday whiskeys."

I grinned. "Same."

"Okay, I gotta go now. Talk soon!"

"Talk soon."

I hung up the phone and immediately got myself a third cup of coffee. If I were going to come up with a foolproof plan on how to woo both Aurora and Leslie to my side of life, I had to make sure I was at peak capacity. After all, the two best women I'd ever met in my life deserved the best version of me they could get.

I simply hoped my plan worked.



I MURMURED TO MYSELF. “LESLIE, BEFORE I ASK YOU something, I want to make sure you know that you can turn me down at any point in time. I just thought this would be a fun thing for Aurora and myself to go do, and of course, you can come if you’d like.”

I rehearsed my lunchtime speech in the mirror before I shook my head.

“That still sounds like she doesn’t have a choice. Come on, Trey, you’ve talked to several women before. You can do this.”

I drew in a deep breath as my watch counted down the minutes until my lunch break. Leslie and I had plans to share a sub from the deli up the road and talk about some things that were on my mind. Specifically, I wanted to ask her if I could whisk Aurora away for an evening and take her to an art gallery upstate for its grand opening.

I thought it would be a good way for the two of us to bond so I could show Aurora that she wasn’t only safe with me but that we could also create good memories together.

I cleared my throat. “Leslie, I want to ask you something, but just know that you always have the power to turn it down at any point in time. Okay?”

But, the door to my office burst open, and Leslie’s frantic voice sounded. “I have to leave during our lunch break.”

I turned to face her and registered the panic in her features. “What’s going on?”

She drew in a shaking breath. “It’s Rori. She’s struggling to breathe again. Her school just called. She’s headed to the hospital in an ambulance.”

Without hesitation, I strode for my desk and started shutting everything down. I reached for my wallet and my cell phone, texting away to let people know I’d be away from my desk until further notice. I rushed out into the hallway with

Leslie on my heels, watching her scoop her things up and shut down her phone and laptop for the night.

And after she was done gathering everything in her computer bag, we started for the elevator.

“You know you don’t have to come, right?” she asked.

I jammed my hand into the button for the garage floor. “I’m aware, yes. Now, where are we headed? I’m driving.”

She didn’t skip a beat. “Same hospital, same doctor. They know we’re coming.”

I pulled my keys out of my suit coat pocket. “Good.”

When the elevator doors opened, dumping us out into the garage, I strode for my BMW I8 convertible. I opened the door for Leslie, and she slipped inside while I slid across the hood of the car and leaped in without so much as opening the damn door for myself. I cranked the engine without a moment to lose and kicked up burnt rubber, skidding onto the main road, then we took off toward the hospital.

Soaring as quickly as I could legally go so we didn’t get held up by an overzealous police officer.

“What kind of car is this?” she asked.

I grinned. “A BMW convertible. I8. One of the best on the market in terms of speed and practicality.”

She gripped the door handle tightly. “I would’ve sprung for a nice mid-size with a mid-price, but that’s just me.”

As I careened into the emergency room parking lot for the hospital, I tried to stuff my smile down. She was the only woman I’d ever come across who wasn’t impressed by my money. If anything, she always had a quip or a comment to bring my egotistical head out of the clouds and plant me back on planet Earth.

I enjoyed that about her.

But, once we got inside, the wolf inside of me kicked up. “I need someone to tell me where Aurora Popovich is!”

A nurse turned to look at me before she eyed me up and down. “And who are you?”

Leslie stepped up to the plate. “I’m her mother, and this is one of her guardians. Where is she? I was told she was brought from her school on an ambulance.”

The nurse nodded. “With me. She’s being looked over by a doctor before she’s admitted.”

“Ma’am, I want your best people on this. None of us are leaving until we have an official diagnosis as to what’s going on. And I expect her to be in a—”

The nurse held up her hand. “Sir, I don’t know who you are or why in the world you think you can speak to me this way, but I can assure you that we are doing the best we can—”

I cut her off and pinned her with a glare. “Let me be very clear about this: I respect this hospital and its establishments. But, we were here for tests a month ago, and we thought we had this figured out. So, now we’re back because apparently, that’s not what happened, and that means that you can either have this hospital get their best staff on this case, or I can fly my own doctors in to take over and do the job this establishment should have done a month ago. Your choice.”

Because if Aurora died from this hospital’s inability to properly diagnose her when I had access to the best of the best, I’d sue the damned thing into the ground.

Leslie

I stared up at Trey like he had lost his damn mind, but I felt something warm growing in my chest. The way he took charge and put the staff of this hospital in their place was kind of hot, if not completely rude at the same time. I felt conflicted, though. On the one hand, Aurora wasn't his daughter; she was mine. I was the one who needed to be laying into the doctors with all of my teeth bared.

But, on the other hand, he did make a hell of a guardian...

It's almost like he cares what happens to Rori.

Everything happened in such a blur after that confrontation that it almost spun my head out of place. Rori had to be admitted again, so per Trey's demands, we were whisked back into one of the top rooms the hospital had to offer. Another battery of tests had to take place, and most of them scared my poor little girl to death. But, with me holding one of her hands and Trey standing guard, making sure the doctors didn't hurt her any more than necessary with the needles, she began to relax a little bit.

Until she started gagging.

"Mo—oh, no."

The second Rori opened her mouth, I heard her gagging. Her face turned pale as I raced to get her hair out of her face while Trey shoved a small bowl right up against her chin. She doubled over in bed, tossing the sheets out of the way as her

petite little body shook and quaked with a fury I'd never seen before.

“Just let it up, don't fight it,” I whispered.

Trey rubbed her back. “We're right here, but you gotta get it up, Aurora.”

After vomiting twice, her gagging stopped, and I helped her lay back down. Trey set the bowl off to the side and ran to get a washcloth before he started cleaning off her lips. And as I watched him dote on and take care of my daughter, I saw a completely different side of him that I would have never thought existed.

In some ways, he was better with my daughter than I was. “You need anything?” he asked.

Rori shook her head softly. “No. Just some ice, maybe.”

He nodded. “You sure you don't want any water? It's pretty good here. The hospital has gigantic sterilizers that filter the water before it even comes out of the tap.”

My daughter paused. “Maybe just a little bit? But, not in the ice.”

Trey grinned. “A cup of water and a cup of ice, coming right up.”

He ruffled her hair softly before Aurora hunkered down in bed, and I resisted the urge to go over there and check. I settled onto the couch, allowing Trey to take care of my little girl while she watched his every move. It was nice, having help like this. It felt really good not to be dealing with this alone, for once. However, one question remained.

What in the world was triggering all of this shit with my child?

A soft knock came at the door, and it caused both Trey and me to say “come in” simultaneously. And when the door opened, an older man in a bright-white coat came slipping in.

“Well, well, well. You must be my patient, laying here in this massive bed.”

Rori eyeballed him but didn't say anything. So, the older man with salt-and-pepper hair walked over and perched on the edge of her bed.

"I'm Doctor Dale. What's your name?"

Rori looked over at me, and I nodded, which caused her to speak back. "Aurora."

The doctor smiled kindly. "A pretty name for a very pretty girl. I like it."

She giggled, but then her face fell flat. "What's wrong with me, Dr. Dale?"

My heart broke at her words as Trey came over to sit next to me. He eased himself onto the couch and patted my knee, but he didn't move his hand. So, instead of combatting against him for once, I took the hint and stayed seated, allowing the doctor to interact with Aurora without hovering around her. And as if Trey felt my nervousness, he took my hand in his and started stroking his finger against my skin. Almost as if to comfort me.

"Well, that's what I'm here to find out, Miss Aurora. Do you remember much about what happened with the procedure we did the last time you were here?"

I swallowed hard as Rori shook her head. "No, sir."

He smiled. "Well, when they were working on you to make you healthy again, they found a little pea lodged in your air sac in your lungs. Remember that?"

Recognition washed over her face. "Oh, yeah! From the shepherd's pie that we ate."

He chuckled. "Right, from the shepherd's pie you ate. But that wasn't the real issue going on. That was just that issue. Make sense?"

She wrinkled her nose. "So, this is a different issue?"

He nodded. "Exactly. And that's where I come in. Want to know what I specialize in?"

"What?" I asked from across the room.

The doctor chuckled and peered over his shoulder. “I’m an allergist. People come to me when they have allergic reactions to something, but they don’t know what it is.”

Rori took the reins. “So, I’m gonna have an allergy test done?”

The doctor nodded. “Right, you are. I won’t make it hard on you, either. We’re going to start with one right on your upper arm, and it’ll be a series of pin-pricks that have certain things on the tips of them. After we touch your skin with them, we watch and see if any of them get raised or welted or red or itchy, or generally irritated. And if they don’t, you’re not allergic.”

She nodded slowly. “But if they do... that’s what’s wrong with me?”

The doctor patted her arm. “That’s the gist of it. It’s a good place to start, especially since your recurring episodes point in the direction of being exposed to something that creates this reaction. So, what do you say? Ready to take the first test?”

The hours passed by in a blur. One test morphed into two, and when they still didn’t have an answer after the second test, they let Rori sleep before the tests were continued. Two at a time, with five hours of downtime in between to sleep and rest. And not once did any of the common triggers, or even uncommon triggers, give her any sort of reaction to explain what was happening.

Then, the fifth test happened.

“Well, there’s a reaction,” the doctor said.

I rushed from the bathroom and right to my daughter’s side. “What is it?”

Rori whimpered. “Mommy, it’s itchy.”

Trey cupped her hands. “You don’t want to touch it. Just let the doctor look, okay?”

I saw the doctor quickly switch over the little slider of things he was using before he exchanged needles as well. I wasn’t sure what he was doing, but when he started pin-

pricking Rori again, her skin lit up like wildfire. She wiggled around, and Trey had to hold her hands to keep her from scratching. And by the time that swatch was done, my poor daughter's arm was lit up like a fucking red stop sign.

“Can I itch now?” Rori asked with tears in her eyes.

The doctor pulled out a white cream. “Give me three seconds with this stuff, okay? This should help.” And the second he started slathering it against her skin, Rori relaxed. “Better?” Dr. Dale asked.

She nodded. “Much better.”

I shook my head. “What in the world is going on? She's obviously allergic to something, so what is it?”

The doctor finished lathering up my daughter's arm before he smiled. “Dust.”

I blinked. “Sorry, what?”

He capped off the salve and put it away. “Dust mites, actually, and everything that comes with them. She's deathly allergic, and that explains just about everything that's going on with her.”

Trey's voice piped up behind me. “Just about?”

The doctor shrugged. “There's no definitive way to know if this is the only allergen until we flush her system and get her in a dust-mite-free environment, but yes. This explains most—if not all—of what she's experiencing.”

I slowly stood to my feet. “But—but I clean my place from top to bottom at least twice a month. I-I-I—I wash her bedsheets every week. I even have the carpets cleaned—”

The doctor chuckled. “Ma'am, dust mites have absolutely nothing to do with the cleanliness of your home. They happen as a byproduct of other factors that come into play, such as not moving furniture around enough so you can vacuum underneath and things of that nature. But, Rori isn't just at your house, correct? She goes to school with other children?”

I blinked. “Yeah, she isn't homeschooled.”

The doctor shrugged. “Well, then there’s yet another source of dust mites, possibly. You don’t know how clean her fellow students are or what’s being carried around on—and in—their backpacks. Her pillowcase could also have static-cling, so the dust mites are being attracted while she sleeps.”

My shoulders slumped. “You’re making this sound like a losing battle, Doc.”

He walked over to me and shook his head. “It’s not a losing battle. You’d be surprised how common a dust mite allergy is, but it’s the last thing we look for because dust mite allergies also present as more serious issues, such as sinus infections, or ear infections, or migraines, or—”

“Hey,” Rori said as she chewed on some ice, “I’ve had those before.”

I nodded slowly. “A lot, actually.”

The doctor put his hand on my shoulder. “This doesn’t make you a bad mother, and it certainly doesn’t mean your house is dirty. It simply means there are things you’ll have to add to your cleaning regimen to make sure your house is dust-mite free. For example, moving your furniture and vacuuming underneath it. You can also get her some special pillowcases that repel dust and don’t attract dust mites. They also make bedsheets out of the same material, so you might want to pick her up a few sets of those.”

As the doctor continued to rattle things off—all of which cost more money on my part—the situation quickly grew hopeless. Every time I thought I was getting ahead in life, something set us back. The entire situation seemed bleak, and yet I found myself wondering if I was eligible to apply for yet another credit card just so I had access to the money I needed immediately.

“So, here’s the plan. I want to keep Miss Aurora here one more night just to make sure we can get her allergies to calm down. And while she’s here, I want one of you to go back to her home and start cleaning as much as possible. There’s a place in town I’ll jot down for you that sells these sheets. Tell them Doctor Dale sent you, and they’ll give you a bit of a

discount on things. Those sheets and a nice clean-down will help tremendously when we discharge her tomorrow. Okay?"

I felt my stomach bottoming out, so Trey took the reins.

"Of course, Doctor. Thank you for helping us."

The doctor shook his hand. "My pleasure. I'll also leave my number and email in case any questions pop up. And from now on, if you find yourself here because of another attack, have them call me immediately. Okay?"

Trey nodded. "We will most certainly do that. Right, Leslie?"

I swallowed hard. "Right. Yes. Thank you."

The doctor's eyes grew sympathetic. "It feels like a lot now, but I promise you'll get into a routine just like you do with everything else. Okay?"

I blinked back tears. "Oh, yes. Of course. Always. Thank you."

I managed to shake his hand before he left, and I walked toward Rori in a haze. I sat on the edge of her bed and brushed her hair back, watching as her eyes slowly fell closed. I ran my finger through her hair, untangling the knots the sheets had already created in her hair. And just as she started slipping off to sleep, I heard the familiar cadence of someone rushing down the hallway.

"Trey?"

"Hmmm?"

I pointed to the door. "Can you get Suri? She's outside letting the nursing staff have it."

He chuckled. "On my way, beautiful."

Somehow, I went from watching my baby girl sleep to standing in the middle of my townhome. And as I stood there, I thought about all of the things I'd have to change. I clocked all of the corners and saw a few cobwebs growing. I looked down at the baseboards and saw that the corners were coated in dust.

This place is gross.

“Yes, uh-huh. Once a week, top to bottom. Yep, dust mites, that’s what they said. By the way, do you guys have any connections with a laundry service in town? Wonderful, I’m going to need their number.”

I furrowed my brow and turned around, watching as Trey stared out the back windows of my living room. He hung up the phone and quickly dialed another number, only this time he lowered his voice so much that I couldn’t make out what he was saying. I crept closer, straining my ear as I slowly approached his side.

And when I caught wind of who he was talking to just before he hung up, my jaw gaped open in shock. “A maid service? Really?” I asked.

He slid his phone into his pocket. “You’re going to need help, and it’s not the kind of help I can provide. So, I’m going to find someone to provide it.”

I blinked. “I can take care of my own house.”

He turned toward me and looked down. “I never once insinuated that you couldn’t. But, you are only one person, and there’s a reason why it takes a village to raise a child.”

“Well, I—it—you can just—fuck.”

He cupped my cheek with his hand. “What can I get you?”

I nuzzled against his palm. “A moment to breathe.”

He closed the distance between our bodies. “What can I get you that’s obtainable currently?”

I peeked up at him. “Will you kiss me again? Just... just kiss it all away for a little while?”

His gaze fell to my lips. “My pleasure.”

He captured my lips in a tender kiss, and I felt the entire world fade into the background. I had no idea how in the world he could do that to me, but he did, and I loved every second of it. I slithered my arms around his neck, standing onto my tiptoes as our kiss deepened. I felt his hands caressing

my body, sliding down my torso until his hands perched against my blossoming hips before he backed me up and pinned me against a wall.

“She’s going to be okay,” he murmured.

Tears rushed to my eyes as I kissed him again. “My God, I hope so.”

He pinned my hands above my head. “I know so. And I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure that.”

A tear streaked my cheek. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

He pressed his knee between my legs, immobilizing me against his body. And as he gazed into my stare, allowing them to dance side to side in a small show meant only for me, his lips crooked up into a soft smile that ignited the stars behind his amber orbs.

“Not as amazing as you, Leslie.”

Then, he captured my lips once more, causing all of my worries and fears to fall to the wayside as we sank to the carpet of my living room floor.

Trey

Our clothes came off in a flurry as we rolled around, sinking the outlines of our bodies into the carpet. I kissed every crevice and sucked on every peak, tugging on Leslie's puckered nipples with my teeth. Her legs spread for me effortlessly, like a warm knife cutting through butter, and as my hands explored her body, I buried my face between her breasts, allowing her curves to fully encompass me.

"Oh, Trey. Good God," she groaned.

I growled against her skin as I kissed down her stomach. Finally, after what seemed like years of only exploring parts of her, I'd finally be able to taste her. I perched just beyond her dampened pussy, watching it pulse for me as her legs slid over my shoulders. The heat of her thighs warmed my ears. I felt trapped against her softness, and I never wanted to leave.

I wrapped my arms behind the backs of her legs and drew her forward, causing her to squeal and giggle before I lapped all the way up her slit.

"Oh, shit," she hissed.

I lapped a little deeper, feeling her wet skin come into play against the tip of my tongue. She shivered for me as I pierced her folds with my tongue, seeking out that swollen nub as her juices coated my stubbled cheeks. I licked and sucked, exploring her wondrous pussy before I finally found that

beautiful spot that made her entire body jump. And I sucked that fucker between my lips as her body flushed with red.

“Oh, fuck. Oh, yeah. Right there, Trey. Right there. Don’t stop. Holy fuck, don’t stop.”

I pinned her hips to the ground and moved upright. I pinned her knees to her stomach as I rested my forehead against her juicy skin. I lapped deeply, allowing the roughness of my tongue to do its job. And as I felt her lubricate my chin, the idea of that puckered asshole of hers baring itself for me was simply too much to bear. So, I slid my tongue down and paid it a bit of attention as she wiggled around for mercy.

“Oh, my God. That’s—that’s new. Oh, shit. That’s—holy fuck, Trey. What the—you just—oh, yes. Oh, yes. Holy shit, fill me up. Please. I need to feel you.”

I slid my tongue back up to her clit and flicked its tip endlessly. Her body shivered for me, her legs quaking as her thighs clamped around my face. I growled deeply against her pussy as she rocked back and forth. She bucked with a wild, ethereal motion that stopped my heart and restarted it, all at the same time. My cock stiffened with every sound she made. I felt my precum dripping onto her carpet as it longed to be buried inside of her.

I wanted her to come for me first, though.

I wanted to feel her climax against my face and on my tongue—to taste her excitement.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! Trey! I’m coming! Don’t stop! Oh, fuck, don’t stop!”

I slid my fingers quickly inside of her pulsing pussy and crooked them against that pebbled spot I knew she had. And as her eyes flew open, her entire body locked out as her tits vibrated for my viewing pleasure. Her hands flew into my hair, gripping my tendrils so tightly that I thought she might rip them from my head.

Then, I felt it.

I felt that warmth as she coated me in her mark.

“Oh, my God,” she whimpered. Her body collapsed against the carpet as her legs fell away from my cheeks. “Trey, I can’t. Oh, God, it hurts so good.”

I chuckled. “I’m glad I can deliver such a rush of satisfaction.”

Her body settled heavily against the carpet as I kissed and licked at the inside of her thighs. I loved those little dollops of excess I could softly chew on with my teeth, and I marked her as many times as she let me. But, when she found her strength, her hands pulled me up her body by my hair, forcing our lips together in a bombastic kiss as she licked her juices off my skin which gave me enough time to line up with her entrance and push myself inside.

“Shit,” she hissed.

I grunted down the back of her throat. “So tight for me. So fucking perfect.”

Her warmth overwhelmed me, and the feeling of her nails holding onto me as I pounded against her glorious body filled me with a sense of... well, I wasn’t sure what I was experiencing. All I knew was that nothing felt the same anymore. Not when I was around her. Sex had never felt so amazing, and a woman had never tasted so outstanding, and the cries of a beautiful girl orgasming because of me brought me no greater pride than watching pleasure wash over Leslie’s features.

I never wanted it to end.

“Come for me,” she gasped.

I pinned her hands above her head. “You want me to fill you up, beautiful?”

She nodded quickly. “Yes, I need to be yours. Mark me, Trey. Make me yours.”

Her words were thrilling, and they stole my heart away. I pounded against her like a wild animal, growling and gnashing my teeth together as I quickly climbed to my precipice. I felt her pussy collapsing around me. I felt it milking me for all I had as her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

And when her body finally popped, my cock exploded.

“Trey!”

I planted my hands into the carpet and rutted against her. “Oh fuck, Leslie. That’s it. Milk me. I’m com—I’m com—what the fuck?”

She giggled as her body collapsed against the floor, her forehead glistening with sweat. But, me? My orgasm was only beginning. Thread after thread of come shot from the tip of my cock until my balls were completely empty. And yet, somehow, with every movement I made, it somehow seemed to keep going. My eyes bulged as Leslie squeezed her pussy around me. I collapsed against her softness, my still-hardened dick sheathed inside of her warmth. I placed my face between her breasts, allowing her body to comfort me and cloak me away from the rest of the world. And it wasn’t until she started running her fingers through my knotted hair that I rolled off to the side before bringing her tightly against me and holding her close.

“Wow,” she whispered.

I kissed the crook of her neck. “I could go for a possible round two if you’d like.”

She snorted. “I don’t think I have round 1.5 in me, to be honest.”

I was the opposite, though. Leslie had stoked a fire within me that still hadn’t softened my cock. Even as we laid there, sweaty and panting from our efforts, I still wanted her. I still craved her.

I still needed her.

I kissed her shoulder, and it prompted her to turn around. And when her eyes met mine, I knew the conversation was about to take a turn. So, I took my attention off my cock and placed it onto her lips as she murmured a question that broke my heart.

“Why are you doing all of this for Rori and me?”

I tucked a strand of damp hair behind her ear. “Because sometimes people need help. And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Well, you’ve done a little bit more than help; don’t you think?”

I grinned. “Maybe just a bit.”

She leaned forward and kissed my lips. Just a soft, little kiss that any woman would have given any man in such a vulnerable position. But, for some reason, that soft, little kiss unlocked something deep within the darkened pit of my gut. And when the words rolled off my tongue like raindrops off blades of grass, they seemed to fit everything I was feeling for Leslie.

“You’re perfect for me,” I murmured.

My words made her blush. “Does that mean our *business* dinner trips aren’t business-related at all?”

I chuckled. “I’m just shocked you didn’t notice I was running my personal debit card for those dinners instead of the business credit card.”

Her jaw fell open. “So, we *were* on dates!”

I smiled brightly. “Hey, you were enjoying yourself, at least.”

She swatted at me playfully, and I quickly rolled her over, pinning her beneath my pinning body. Her eyes sparkled with mischievous delight and happiness, and all I wanted for the rest of my days was to make sure she smiled just like that. But all too soon, the smile fell from her face, and she sighed.

“We should get back to the hospital and relieve Suri. I don’t know if she’s working today or not.”

I eased myself off her. “You up for a shower before we head out?”

She held up her hand, and I helped her off the floor. “Only if it’s a shower we can take together. That’s my only stipulation.”

I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her against my naked body. “I didn’t realize we were talking about any other kind of shower.”

And as my hand slipped down to her ass cheek, patting it softly as she smiled up at me, my heartfelt fuller than it had ever felt.

Which made me wonder if things could ever stay like this between us.

Leslie

I woke up with a start on the couch in Rori's hospital room and found that Trey was already at her side. The sun streamed heavily through the windows, and I sat up, feeling a little queasy in my gut. I held my head in my hands and felt my stomach ebbing and flowing as if it were waiting for me to stand up so it could project all of the contents of last night's dinner onto the floor at my feet.

"Damn stress," I murmured to myself.

Rori's voice sounded on the far side of the room. "Wanna see if there are any cartoons on?"

Trey chuckled. "Only if I can snag a spot in bed. Cartoons are always better when in bed."

"Yeah!"

I smiled at their interaction as I slowly stood up. I felt a little off on my feet, but I blamed that on my aching back. Between Trey blowing it out yesterday and that couch being completely unforgiving in its firm cushions, it was a wonder I could even move. And as I made my way for the bathroom, I heard both my daughter and Trey giggling at something on the television.

"Since when do you watch cartoons?" I asked.

I peered over my shoulder, but Trey didn't pull his eyes away from the television hanging down from the ceiling.

“Hey, a man’s gotta have his outlet somewhere.”

Rori giggled. “Yeah, Mom. Let him have his outlet.”

I snickered. “All right, you two. No ganging up on me today. Momma’s a bit tired.”

And when Trey winked at me, a flood of warmth wrapped around my heart before heating up the rest of my body.

A nurse came around and took Rori’s and Trey’s breakfast order, but I wasn’t very hungry. The queasy feeling in my stomach still hadn’t gone away, so I ordered myself ice water with some hot coffee to go with it. The past few days had been a whirlwind, especially with Rori being back in the hospital.

Once I got us home and settled in, I knew my appetite would come back. “You guys mind if I take a hot shower real quick?” I asked.

Trey shook his head but still didn’t look away from the television. “Enjoy yourself.”

Rori leaned against him. “Take your time, Mom.”

I gave them both a thumbs up. “Great. I’ll be out soon.”

I closed the door and stripped away my clothes before turning on the shower as hot as I could stand it. I stepped into the glistening streams of water and groaned as they battered my back. A nice, hot shower to sweat this shit out was exactly what I needed.

However, when I rose my head up to gurgle some hot water and rinse out my mouth, I doubled-over with my nausea.

And threw up right onto my feet.

Okay, something isn’t right.

After gagging and heaving before throwing up again, I heard Trey call out for me. I tried to disguise my voice as much as possible because I certainly didn’t want anyone busting in on me while my feet were covered in vomit. But, I needed to figure out what was going on.

“Good thing I’m in a hospital,” I murmured to myself.

After cleaning myself up and getting back into my clothes, I eased my way out of the bathroom. I walked over to my cell phone charging on the floor by the couch, and I quickly unplugged it, then pulled up my text messages with Suri. I wanted her to come by and stay with these two overgrown children while I went in search of an answer to my nausea. But, as I started typing, my period tracker sent a notification to my phone.

And it stopped me in my tracks.

You are now eight days late.

My jaw hit the floor before Trey's voice sounded across the room. "Leslie?"

My eyes snapped up, and I jumped to my feet. "I'm so sorry, I forgot about something. I need to step out and make a phone call."

Rori's eyes met mine. "Everything okay?"

I nodded quickly. "Once I make this call, it will be. Trey?"

He held up his hand. "I've got this. You go. And let me know if there's anything I can do."

I rushed toward the hospital room door. "I will, I promise."

My stomach sank to my toes as I made my way out into the hallway. I closed Rori's room door before I shot off an emergency text to Suri, telling her to get to this hospital immediately. Then, I gripped my phone and bolted for the nurse's station, where a very young-looking resident stood to her feet with a smile on her face.

"Can I help you with something?"

I leaned in and lowered my voice. "My daughter's in Room 611 over there."

She nodded. "I'm aware. Do you want to see her chart? Nothing's changed as of right now, but—"

I sighed. "I kind of need something, and I need it to be kept away from the two people in that room."

The young woman blinked. “All right, what seems to be the issue.”

I looked around before I started whispering. “I need a pregnancy test. Is there anywhere in this hospital where I can buy one?”

Her eyes widened before she came around to my side of the desk. “Follow me. I can quickly run your insurance and get you tested down in the emergency room.”

I followed quickly beside her. “You’re a Godsend, thank you.”

And as another wave of nausea bubbled up my throat, I swallowed it down as best as I could as I made my way to the emergency room, hoping and praying that life wasn’t about to do this to me right now.

Especially since things were on the up and up with Trey.

Trey

Aurora threw her head back in laughter. “He dropped an anvil out of nowhere!”

I chuckled. “That’s pretty silly, isn’t it?”

She took a bite of her mixed fruit. “I mean, how did he even get it up there? What did he drop it off of?”

I pointed my finger at her. “These are the types of questions the American public needs.”

She pumped her fist into the air. “Yeah! Someone like the president!”

I laughed alongside her, and for the life of me, I couldn’t remember the last time I had laughed like this. Aurora had an outgoing personality, and her love of old school cartoons poked at the small part of me that still wanted to relive my childhood. I peeked down at the small girl nestled against me, and I couldn’t help but notice how much she looked like Leslie. They had the same color hair and the same shape for their eyes. She had Leslie’s petite yet strong nose. She even had Leslie’s broad shoulders.

I wonder if our kids would like her, too.

“Mr. Trey?”

I blinked. “You can just tell me Trey if you’d like.”

She smiled. “Okay, Trey. But why are you staring at me?”

I winked down at her. “Don’t you know? I’m helpless in the presence of a beautiful girl.”

She smiled even brighter than before. “Thank you. That’s nice.”

I nudged her softly. “No thanks needed for the truth... kiddo.”

We paused before she wrinkled her nose at me. “Maybe just say my name next time.”

I nodded. “I’m not a *kiddo* kind of guy, am I?”

She shook her head. “Nope. You’re a first-name kind of dude.”

I turned my attention back to the television. “Well, then I guess you’ll have to put up with me calling you Aurora.”

“Or you could call me Rori. All of my friends do.”

I swallowed hard. “Are we friends?”

She slid her small hand into mine. “Why wouldn’t we be? I like that we’re friends.”

I squeezed her hand softly, trying not to cry. “I like that we’re friends, too.”

As I sat there, watching cartoons while holding the hand of the most precious girl I’d ever come across, I wondered if I would ever have a daughter of my own to dote on and protect. I wondered if she’d look like me or if she’d look more like her mother. And I wondered if she would be just as headstrong and as brave as Rori had been through all of this chaos.

But, the hospital door bursting open caused me to jump to my feet as my fists balled up at my sides. Whoever the hell thought they could come in that hot and ruin mine and Rori’s moment together had another thing coming.

Until Rori gasped. “Auntie Suri!”

I watched Leslie’s best friend practically throw herself at the little girl. “Oh, my goodness. Are you okay? How long have you been here? What happened? Where’s your mother?”

I cleared my throat. “She’s going to be okay now. We’ve been here since last night. She’s allergic to dust mites. She had another allergic reaction, and Leslie hasn’t come back from slipping out into the hallway.”

Suri’s eyes met mine. “She just left you with Rori?”

I nodded. “We’ve been watching cartoons for the majority of the morning.”

“Yet, you have no idea where Leslie has been all morning.”

I blinked. “I know she took a shower, but then she—”

Out of nowhere, Leslie popped into the room. “Suri, out here.”

I pointed. “There she is. Everything okay, beautiful?”

Suri wrinkled her nose. “What did you just call her?”

Leslie groaned. “Out here, now.”

Suri pointed at me. “We’re talking later.”

Rori giggled. “*Oh*, Trey’s in *trouble*.”

I sighed dramatically. “A man says one thing and all of a sudden, he’s in the doghouse.”

Rori shook her head. “Tragic.”

Suri giggled. “The two of you are much too dramatic for your own good. We’ll be right back, okay?”

I nodded. “I’ll be here with Rori. I’ll make sure she’s taken care of.”

Suri kissed Rori’s forehead. “You better.”

Then, the two girls disappeared out into the hallway as my curiosity piqued.

“What do you suppose they’re doing?” I asked.

Rori shrugged as her eyes turned back to the television. “I don’t know. They always sneak off and giggle about stuff.”

But I wasn’t too sure about things. “Rori?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to go snatch one of the nurses to come in here with you for a little bit.”

She whimpered. “But why?”

I walked toward the room door. “Don’t you want to know what your auntie and mom are up to?”

Her eyes twinkled with delight. “Are you gonna go spy on them? Can I come?”

I shook my head. “You need to rest. But, I can do the spying for us and report back, General Rori.”

She got up onto her knees and saluted me. “Godspeed, Sergeant Trey. Make us proud.”

I barked with laughter before I slipped outside and beckoned for one of the nurses to come and check up on Leslie’s little girl. I saw Leslie tugging Suri around a corner, and I made my way down the hallway, trying to silence my footsteps as much as possible. I peeked around the corner they had turned only moments ago and saw Suri’s foot disappear into a hole in the wall. As I approached, I noticed that the two of them were crammed into a waiting room restroom.

So, I perched outside the door and folded my arms over my chest.

“Are you gonna take two tests?” Suri asked.

My eyes bulged as Leslie responded in a hushed whisper, “Don’t talk so loudly. I don’t want anyone to hear.”

I drew in a quiet, sobering breath and knew I needed to back away. This was one of those moments I didn’t need to be privy to, so I eased myself backward. I turned on my feet, my mind spinning at a million miles a second as I tried to still the anxious rumbling of my gut.

But then, I heard a door rip open behind me.

“What are you—Suri! What the hell?” Leslie asked.

I whipped around, standing only a few feet from the door, and saw Suri glaring at me.

“How much did you hear?” she asked.

Leslie gasped. “Who is that? Rori? She shouldn’t be out of bed.”

Suri shook her head as her eyes narrowed. “You don’t want to know who it is.”

I cleared my throat. “Have you taken it yet, beautiful?”

And at the sound of my voice, Leslie started crying. “Close the door, dammit! Come on!”

Suri shook her head as she slipped back into the bathroom, and the sound of the closing door broke my heart. But, the sound had nothing on Leslie’s muted sobbing behind it. I wanted to rush in there, take her in my arms, and tell her it would be all right. I wanted to kiss her tears away and let her know that I wasn’t going anywhere, no matter what that test said.

But, I did as they both wanted, and I made my way back to Rori’s hospital room, where I perched on the bed and waited anxiously for them both.

Rori continued to laugh and snack while she watched her cartoons, and for once, I was glad that no one was paying attention to me. Usually, I commanded the room because I knew I could provide the very best this life had to offer if people would simply listen. But at that moment, it was a completely different story.

What if Leslie is pregnant?

We’d need a nursery and baby-proofing items for my estate. I needed to put a playground in the front yard and start researching doctors for Leslie. I needed to make sure my chef understood how to make fresh baby food, and I needed to teach the staff how to clean my house since Aurora—and probably this baby, too—was allergic to dust mites.

My mind spiraled out of control with all of the things I’d have to accomplish in the next nine months. But, Suri’s harsh voice quickly ripped me from my trance.

“You’re needed out here.”

I leaped to my feet. “Rori?”

“Hmmm?”

“Auntie Suri is going to watch you for a bit, okay?”

I peered over my shoulder and watched her nod mindlessly. “Okay.”

Then, I switched places and slipped out into the hallway, where I found Leslie sitting on the edge of a bench. Her face was red from her crying. Her eyes were puffy from her sorrows.

I sat down and took her hand within mine as she started to speak.

“I’m so sorry, Trey. I-I-I—I’ve been on the pill for years. I still don’t know what the fuck is going on, but it has to be a false positive. There’s no fucking way I can be—”

“Stop,” I commanded. I stood to my feet and pulled her upright, taking her into my arms. “Just stop, okay?”

She sniffled. “You don’t have to do anything. I just got done taking a blood test with one of the nurses, and I swear I’m not going to come after your money or anything.”

I kissed the top of her head. “Everything’s going to be okay, I promise. We’ll get this all figured out once those test results come back.”

A door opened and closed behind me before Suri’s voice sounded. “Has the nurse come by yet?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s just been us out here.”

She sighed. “I took two tests, and both of them came back positive.”

Leslie cried against me as I held her tightly. “It’s okay, sh-sh-sh-sh.”

Suri flopped down onto the bench. “I take it the child is yours?”

Leslie scoffed. “Cut it out, Suri.”

She shrugged. “I’m just asking.”

I looked down at her. “It is, and whatever comes of this, I want you to know that I’m not going anywhere. I’m seeing this through, whatever Leslie’s choice is.”

Her eyebrows rose. “That’s—better than what I expected.”

I kissed Leslie’s forehead as she continued crying against me. “I also want you to do something for me.”

Suri snickered. “Sure, why not? What’s up?”

“I want you to tally up all of the hours you’ve spent helping Leslie and Rori out since she’s been in my employ. That would be six or so weeks of work. I want to make sure you’re getting paid for your time.”

That caught Leslie’s attention. “You don’t have to do that.”

Suri nodded. “She’s right. I don’t watch Rori for the money. She’s my goddaughter. I’d watch her anyway.”

I shook my head. “Doesn’t matter. You should get paid for your time. And before you fight with me, Leslie, nothing you can say will change my mind. She’s been invaluable to you since you started working for me, and she should be paid as such.”

Leslie shook her head softly. “I can’t even pay her to take care of one child. How the hell am I going to do it with two?”

I cupped her cheeks in my hands. “First, stop talking as if you’re alone because you’re not. You’ve got Suri, and now you’ve got me. So, let’s take this one step at a time, all right?”

Tears streaked her cheeks. “Promise?”

I kissed her salty lips softly. “Promise.”

A voice wafted over from the nurses’ station. “Miss Leslie Popovich?”

We both turned and looked at the same time before the nurse held up a thin manilla folder. “I have your test results.”

I wrapped my arm around Leslie as she looked back at Suri. “Can you watch—”

Suri waved her hand in the air. “Yes, of course, I’ll stay with Rori.”

I pointed at her. “Count up those hours. Otherwise, I’m liable to simply throw money in your direction.”

Suri grinned. “I could get used to that.”

Leslie sighed. “Ready?”

I looked down at her and held fast to the strength her grip against my hand gave me. “Of course, I’m ready. Let’s go speak with the nurse.”

Then, the two of us set off hand in hand, readying ourselves for what might come. And as we slipped into an empty hospital room and our fingers intertwined, I knew things would be okay.

Even if Leslie were afraid now, I knew we’d find a way to work it out.

Just like we had up until that point.

Leslie

A *lto, oscuro, y guapo.*

I stared at the bottle of prenatal vitamins that now sat on my bedside table. The colors swirled together as I perched on the edge of the bed, my hand mindlessly resting against my stomach. Pregnant. My God, I was pregnant with yet another man's child that I had hooked up with.

You know Trey is more than a hook-up.

"Yes, all week. Uh-huh, working from home. I know it's unusual, but some personal things have popped up and—"

Trey's voice filtered into my bedroom from the hallway, and I swallowed hard. Suri was napping with Rori downstairs on the couch with the television on. Trey hadn't once left my side since the nurse had announced that we were, in fact, pregnant. I closed my eyes and drew in deep breaths. I had to try to calm myself down. I mean, there was no way in hell I was lucky enough to have a guy who would stick around this time—not with my shit-ass luck.

"Hey there, beautiful."

I smiled softly and opened my eyes as Trey sat on the bed next to me.

"How are you feeling?"

He rubbed my back, and I yawned. "You're going to end up giving me a back massage if you keep that up."

And without another word, he scooted behind me, threaded his legs around my body, and started rubbing my shoulders.

“Oh, yeah,” I groaned.

He chuckled. “You feeling okay?”

I sighed. “As good as I can, I guess.”

“You’re not feeling nauseous?”

I shook my head. “Not after that shot the nurse gave me. Cleared it right up.”

He chuckled. “Well, that’s good. You also have some Zofran tablets in the bag she gave to you if your nausea kicks up that badly again.”

I leaned against him, and he threaded his arms around my body. “I still don’t understand how this happened.”

He kissed the back of my head. “She did say that birth control pills, when taken right, are still only ninety-one percent effective.”

“I’ve been on them for years, though. That stuff messes women up hormonally. I’ve heard it’s damn near impossible to get pregnant after regularly taking it for so long.”

His hands cupped against my stomach. “I guess we’re just special, then.”

I almost snickered at his words, but when he kissed the shell of my ear, I melted against him. And as I closed my eyes, allowing his warmth to swallow me whole, I heard Guadalupe’s voice in my head again.

If this man is your alto, oscuro, y guapo, don't let him pass you by. Even if it feels weird or awkward, don't let him get away.

“I can feel you thinking,” Trey whispered.

I giggled. “You’re insane, you know that?”

I tilted my head back, and he kissed my forehead. “Insane about you.”

I furrowed my brow. “Is that... a good thing?”

He shrugged. “It sounded better in my head.”

I smiled as I curled my legs against my chest and started lying down. And just as I suspected, he followed my every movement. I snaked beneath the covers of my bed, and he tucked me in before snuggling up beside me. He brushed his fingers through my hair and held me close against him, my back falling effortlessly against the smooth rising and falling of his chest.

I felt his steady heartbeat hammering against my back, and it helped me relax. “I don’t know what to do, Trey.”

He sighed against the crook of my neck. “I don’t know, either. But, I know you won’t be doing it alone.”

I turned around in his arms and faced him. “Even if I decide not to keep the baby?”

His stare held mine for a long time before he spoke. “I would hope we’d have multiple conversations before we made a decision like that. But, if that’s what you wanted, then yes.”

My eyes fell to his lips for a split-second. “So, you want to keep this baby.”

“Even if you didn’t want to keep it, I’d take the child off your hands and raise the baby myself.”

My eyes widened. “Wow, you really want to keep this baby.”

He crooked his finger beneath my chin. “A lot of people don’t know this about me, but every day that goes by that I waste away in my office, I become more concerned that my home life is going to be just as silent and as lonely as its always been. And don’t let this sway your decision, but I have been thinking about what it might be like to have a child of my own.”

I swallowed hard. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

His finger fell away from my chin. “I don’t know. It’s a pretty recent development. For a while there, I was content with the silence and the emptiness of my place.”

“But, not so much anymore?”

He puffed his cheeks out with a sigh. “I guess not, no.”

I stroked my hand through his hair. “You know I won’t be able to keep my job if I’m going to be a mother of two children. I can’t possibly ask Suri watch them both, not when she’s got her own career.”

He gripped my chin, causing me to focus on the sincerity of his words. “I don’t want you worrying about that now. We’ll figure it out, even if it means you working from home for a while. All right?”

“I just—I can’t be a single mother of two, Trey. I can’t handle that. I love Rori, but juggling her homework and her school schedule and then having to work and make sure I take off when she’s off, and now this dust-mite thing which is going to resort in a great deal more cleaning that I’ll have to take on, it’s all going to be too—”

He placed his finger against my lips, stopping my words in my tracks. “I want you to listen to me closely, Leslie. Are you paying attention?”

I nodded but didn’t say anything. So, Trey proceeded. “Good. Because I need you to hear me when I say that you won’t ever—beyond any stretch of any imagination—ever do this alone. Not anymore. Not as long as I’m around. Understood?”

Tears of relief rushed to my eyes. “Do you mean that?”

He cupped my cheek and brought my lips in for a soft kiss. “With all my heart.”

I cried tears of relief as our lips kept connecting. I rolled him over, straddling his strong body as his hands slid up my back. Our tongues collided in a familiar tango of passion and lust, the same passion and lust that had put us in this position in the first place.

But it felt different with Trey.

I wasn’t sure how to explain it, but the way he touched me sent shivers throughout my body. The way he kissed me seemed to have the calmest intent behind it, even if his hands quickly ripped my shirt over my head. He rolled me back over,

and I didn't feel used or whipped around. On the contrary, as he gazed into my eyes, there was something behind them.

Something that triggered a word to run through my head.

Love.

My God, I had fallen in love with this man.

"Trey," I whispered.

He kissed the tip of my nose. "Am I being too rough?"

I smiled softly and snickered. "Not at all. I just—"

His eyes danced between mine. "You just what, beautiful?"

I love you. "I..."

He captured my lips softly. "Whatever it is, you can say it. You're safe with me. Always."

I love you, Trey. "I... would like you to stay over tonight. If that's okay with you, of course."

I could've sworn I saw disappointment behind his eyes, but it quickly turned into deviousness as a cheeky grin spread across his face. "I'd love nothing more, beautiful. I just need to go home and get a change of clothes."

I cupped his cheeks in my hands. "I'll let you go in a few minutes. But, not right now."

He chuckled. "Might take us more than a few minutes if we continue."

I kissed both of his cheeks. "You think a nice, hot shower might cover things up?"

He growled. "I think seeing you naked with water running over those curves might drive me wild."

"Then, why are we still in bed?"

After we both smiled at each other, Trey helped me stand up before making our way into the bathroom. I closed the door and locked it for good measure while he got the water running, and soon steam filled the air. I stripped off my clothes and turned around, already finding that Trey was naked behind me.

And as my eyes scanned his body, I drank him in for the first time.

His chiseled abs were something to be admired, but the lean musculature of his legs and arms lent a softer aspect to the brooding eyes he had that raked up and down my body. His engorged cock made me lick my lips, but his tousled hair made me want to grip it and shove him to his knees. His sun-kissed skin looked beautiful against the pale-blue walls of my master bathroom, and the steam that wrapped around his body somehow accented the etched lines and bulging veins of his muscles.

“Wow,” I whispered.

Trey cleared his throat. “You’re more beautiful than I could have ever imagined.”

I blushed at his words. “You flatter me.”

He walked over and cupped my cheek. “I speak nothing but the truth every single day. So, I mean it when I say that you’re more beautiful naked and in the light than I could have ever imagined on my own.”

I grinned. “Got a little practice imagining me up there?”

He winked. “I’ve had my fair share of naughty thoughts.”

“Mmmm, why don’t you tell me about some of them?”

He led me toward the shower before we both slipped inside. “Why don’t I show you instead?”

As water rushed over my skin, I felt his warm, wet lips pressing open-mouthed kisses along my shoulders. His arms snaked around my waist, pulling me tightly against him as his thickening dick seated itself in the small groove of my lower back. I bucked my ass against him, hearing Trey strain and groan as he nibbled on my earlobe. And as my nipples puckered, drenched in the rainfall of water battering us both, I felt my heart skip a beat with every kiss he gave me.

I loved this man without a shadow of a doubt, and I prayed what he was telling me was genuine. Because right now, it felt

like a fairytale. Like something straight out of a movie I sometimes watched during the Christmas season.

And we all know those never happen in real life.

Trey

I propped the phone against my shoulder as I started typing away on my laptop. Yet again, Mrs. Voyich was in my ear about the plans to expand my yacht rental business into another port along the Florida coast. After signing the paperwork with her stating that she'd be the head overseer of not only the project but that facet of the business, I heard from her more times during the day than I wanted to hear from her all fucking year. But, she was on top of things, and I had to admire that.

“I know that we decided to do the same number and types of yachts for this installation that we have at the original one, but I was looking at the numbers—”

I blinked. “Sorry, where did you get those numbers?”

“Oh! Your wonderful secretary helped me obtain them. I told her that if we could double up on the yachts that bring us the most profit, we stand to turn a bigger and better dime with this outlet. That seemed to convince her to show me the numbers from the past three years.”

I nodded slowly. “Uh-huh. And what did you find?”

I heard papers flipping about on her end of the line. “So, you were right in the fact that the smaller yachts are being rented out more regularly than others, but you failed to mention that the behemoth yacht you reserve for your upper-echelon clientele is booked just about every week of the year.”

“Yes, because there’s currently only one.”

“I propose that we do away with one of the smaller yachts, two of the mid-size, and throw that money into obtaining two more of those massive ones. Can you think of what you’d rake in if you had three massive yachts instead of one fully booked out through the year? We could purchase those and tap into the wait-list of people you already have going!”

“Those come with more upkeep, though, Mrs. Voyich. I’d have to hire two more full-time cleaning staffs and a handful of other standby employees to make sure we could juggle two more of those massive boats.”

“You leave that to me. It’s my job, after all, right? Just take a look at the numbers I emailed you and get back to me. I spelled out the math as plainly as I could.”

I clicked around until I found my email inbox. “Got it. I’ll get back to you before the end of the day.”

“Can you make it before lunch? I’m kind of on a tight—”

I cleared my throat. “End of the day, Mrs. Voyich.”

She sighed. “Yes, yes. Of course. Okay. I’ll be waiting!”

And I didn’t even get the phone call hung up before a knock came at my door. Only this time, it was someone I wanted to speak with.

“Trey?”

Leslie’s voice filtering through the door made me smile. “Come on in, Leslie.”

She slipped inside and quickly closed the door. “So, I take it no calling you ‘Just Trey’ while at work?”

I ushered for her to sit. “We can cross that bridge once we have everything in place. People will ask a lot of questions, and I want to make sure we’re ready with answers. Come, sit, and talk. I can tell something is on your mind.”

She walked over to the chair, but instead of sitting down, she simply plopped the folders she was carrying against the cushion. I quirked an eyebrow as she walked around, and she

quickly dropped into my lap. I chuckled and grinned as I held her against me, watching as her lips came closer to mine.

And after she captured mine in a searing kiss, I felt myself instantly relax.

“Oh, the things you do to me,” I murmured.

She giggled and kissed the tip of my nose. “Trust me, I understand completely.”

I leaned back, gazing into the face of the most beautiful woman on the planet. “So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

She giggled. “Work, unfortunately. I just thought I’d dampen it with something we both might enjoy a little more.”

I winked. “I suppose it isn’t every day that I get to hold and dote on the woman carrying my child.”

I watched as panic rushed behind her eyes, and I quickly changed my tune. “No one is going to know until you’re ready for them to know. I promise you, I haven’t said a thing, and I won’t unless I’m positive that it’s just the two of us.”

She sighed. “It isn’t that I’m ashamed, it’s just—”

I sat up and captured her lips, stopping her sentence in its tracks. “I understand, trust me. People are more forgiving of men in this situation than they are of women.”

Her voice didn’t rise above a whisper. “I just want you to know that I’m not ashamed of you.”

I smiled softly. “You forget that I know your past with other bosses.”

Her forehead rested against my own. “I know you’re not like them. It’s just...”

“You don’t want your reputation ruined when you’re still not sure if this is the real deal.”

She sighed. “I’m sorry, I’m just trying to protect myself. Rori’s father and I were nothing but a—”

I rubbed her knee softly. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to, okay?”

Her eyes found mine. “But I want to. I want you to know why I’m like this.”

I leaned back, bringing her with me as her head tucked beneath my chin. “Then, by all means, fill me in.”

She drew in a deep breath. “Rori’s father and I were nothing but a hook-up. It was the night of graduation. We were drunk and celebrating, and we had ourselves a little fling. Then, a few weeks later, I was pregnant, and I didn’t even know where to find the man. Until I ran into him at a coffee shop when I was seven months pregnant.”

“I guess he didn’t take it well?”

“I mean, he congratulated me at first. Until I practically blurted out that the child was his.”

I didn’t say anything as she drew in another deep breath.

“We had a rather frank talk in the corner table of that coffee shop that basically ended with his telling me that he wasn’t ready to step up and be a father and that I struck him as the kind of woman to understand that.”

I shook my head. “What an asshole.”

She shrugged. “I mean, I can’t blame him. We were drunk, and it was only a one-night sort of thing. He was gone by morning, and that was that.”

I paused. “Wait. Is that why you left me that one time before the sun came up?”

She swallowed hard. “I’m sorry about that. I just—I just thought it was what it was, you know?”

Leslie looked away from me, but I gripped her chin and pulled her gaze back to mine.

“You don’t have to apologize to me for that. I get it, I really do. And I’m sorry that Rori’s father wasn’t enough of a man to step up and do what needed to be done. But, what I need you to understand is that I’m not him. I won’t ever leave

your side unless it's something you demand of me, and even then, I'm still going to be there for our child, even if *you* don't want me around."

She sniffled. "I could never not want you around, Trey. You're amazing. You treat me better than I even dreamed possible."

Her words filled me with pride. "And that won't ever change. Got it?"

She smiled softly. "Yeah, I got it."

I winked. "Good. I'm glad we're on the same page because I have something I want to show you."

She tilted her head off to the side. "Oh?"

I pointed to the chair in front of my desk. "I know you were coming in here to question me about the file folders you found on your desk after lunch. Why don't you open them and see what's inside?"

She stood to her feet. "That's what I was coming in here to ask you. I opened them up, but all I see are pictures of some office and schematics for something or other. It doesn't make sense."

I stood to my feet and pointed to them. "Open them up. We can go through them together."

The confusion on her face was evident, but I almost couldn't contain myself. I wanted to surprise her with something that showed her that I was serious about staying. That I was serious about her keeping her job. That I was serious about our lives melding together if that's what she wanted. She sat down and opened the folders in her lap as I leaned against my desk. And as I slid my hands into my pockets, I tried my best to contain my excitement.

"I still don't get it," Leslie said as she shook her head.

I chuckled. "That's because you're only looking at what I have right now. The rest will be finished up by the end of the week."

She sighed. “Trey, I’m really tired. Can you just tell me what these are?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, fine. But, you only get this one pass because you’re gorgeous and I can’t contain myself around you. All right?”

She giggled. “Deal.”

I walked over and perched above her head, looking down at the folders. “So, these are the schematics for your new office.”

She gasped and looked up at me. “You’re giving me my own office up here?”

I placed my hands on her shoulders. “Not just up here; that will be finished by the end of the week.”

Her eyes fell back down to the schematics. “Then, where’s this office?”

I smiled brightly as I crouched down, my lips hovering against her ear. “My place.”

She paused. “Wait, what?”

I stood up and walked around in front of her. “Isn’t it genius? I have so many rooms in that house that I’m not using, and one of the rooms is massive. Just gargantuan. And it’s got its own little side entrance. I figured you could have your own office right next to mine with a private door where we can access each other at all times. Then you can also have a home office in a space where you can spread out where Rori can be with you, too, if she’s not in school.”

Her face kept falling flat with every word I said, though, instead of the smile I expected. “Wait, this office is in your house?”

I nodded. “Yep. It’s going to have your little kitchen station and a place to sleep if you need to take a nap. You’ll have your own restroom and a massive desk, and it’ll have all of the latest technology, too. I’ll have you hooked right into the system here at work, plus you’ll still keep your laptop if you want to work from the townhouse. Then, you can

essentially work wherever you wish, if you can't make it to the office but don't want to call out."

She blinked. "An office in your home."

I crouched down in front of her. "I mean, eventually, it'll be your home, too. Then, you'll have this wonderful home office already outfitted for you, so you won't have to worry about it. Pretty nice, huh?"

She stood to her feet, her head shaking. "I can't accept this, Trey. It's too much."

I slowly stood as my brow furrowed tightly. "What?"

She handed the folders back to me. "I can't accept this from you. It's way too much."

I took the folders from her and tossed them back into the chair. "I mean, it's not completely for you, but it's mostly for you."

She scoffed. "Oh, that's wonderful. Thanks."

I furrowed my brow. "Are you feeling sick today?"

Her eyes filled with anger. "What? Just because you decide to grace me with a bit of your money, I'm supposed to straighten my back and smile? I didn't ask for any of this, Trey. You just went out and did it without even talking to me. And who the hell made the decision that I was moving in with you? Why aren't you considering the idea of moving in with me?"

I snickered. "You can't be serious. The place where you live barely fits you and Rori."

She clenched her teeth together. "Well, I'll be the judge of that one. Thank you very much."

She started marching away, but I reached out and grabbed her arm. "Look, if you don't like it, then I don't have to do it. I'll tell them to stop building and halt everything that's going on. But, if you decide to keep the child, of course, we're moving into my place. It just makes sense."

She wrenched away from me. “First of all, don’t you dare grab me like that again. I’m not just some item you’ve bought and paid for that you can simply whip around whenever you’d like.”

“I—I’m sorry. I just—”

She pointed her finger up at me. “And secondly, you’re moving much too quickly. I haven’t even decided if I’m going to keep this baby, much less move in with you.”

I blinked. “I already told you I’d take custody of—”

She threw her hands into the air as her voice grew louder. “That’s not the point, Trey!”

I raised my voice alongside hers. “Then, tell me what the damn point is because all I’m doing is trying to make your life easier with this pregnancy, and all I’m getting in return is a bunch of wishy-washy nonsense from your direction!” The second the words flew out of my mouth, I knew I had fucked up. The pain that washed over her features punched me in my gut, and I found myself at a loss for breath. Or words. Or decent common sense.

“Well,” Leslie said as she brushed her tears away, “I wasn’t the one who asked for any of this. You’re assuming I want it. So, you can stop assuming whatever it is you’re assuming because you’re on the wrong track, *amigo*. And if you’ve already put this office together? Then, you can take it down because I have no use for it.”

I took a step toward her. “Leslie, I’m sorry. I’m only trying t—”

She held up her hand. “And as for that little stunt with Suri at the hospital? Offering to pay her? I’ve got that on my own. Thank you very much. So, you can stop trying to ride your cavalry of horses in to save the day because I was doing life just fine before you came along.”

I bit down onto my tongue to keep myself from firing back, and instead, I watched her turn on her heels and march out of my office. She left a residual trail of anger that stoked a fire in my gut I had felt for far too many years. And as she

slammed my office door behind her, I swallowed my anger back down into my stomach.

But, that didn't stop my mind from spinning.

Of course, you'd screw it up. Just like your father always said you did.

And as I walked back toward my desk to ease myself into my chair, I focused on the tasks ahead of me—the only things in my life that I could control. Because if I kept this shit up with Leslie, I wouldn't just lose her.

I'd also lose access to my one and only child.

Leslie

I stormed out of Trey's office and scooped my cell phone off my desk. I made my way for the elevator at the end of the hallway and quickly made my way down to my car in the parking garage. I had to get away for a few minutes. I had to piece myself back together before I took any other phone calls. And as I wiped my tears away, I unlocked my car before I flopped down into the seat.

Then, I messaged as quickly as I could, too, through my obscured vision of my tears.

Me: Atre yoiu free rigght now?

The typos alone made me cringe, but I didn't care. My crying mounted, and my chest heaved with my sobs as I sunk deeply against the musty cushions of my car. My phone dropped to the floorboard, and I leaned forward, placing my forehead against the steering wheel. And as I cried alone inside the disgusting car that my daughter had to ride around in day in and day out, it only served to enunciate the one truth that had been running through my head ever since I cradled Rori for the first time in my arms.

I'm never going to be able to give her the life she deserves.

I felt my phone vibrating against my feet, and I bent down to pick it up. But it was just out of reach. I gritted my teeth together and roared out into the cramped expanse of my car as my fingers just barely graced the screen.

“Shit, come the fuck *on!*”

I raised my head up and slammed my fists against the steering wheel. “Why the fuck does my life always end up this way?”

I shrieked like a madwoman in need of a straight-jacket until I felt my stomach rolling over onto itself. With the vibrating of my phone backdropping my angry tirade, I threw open my car door and leaned out. With my hair in my face and my eyes pointed toward the ground, I started dry-heaving through my anger as my stomach tried to turn itself inside out.

Then, I felt something gathering my hair at the nape of my neck.

“Who’s—*oouck*—who’s there?”

“Sh-sh-sh-sh, calm breaths.”

I barely recognized the voice as a hand came down against my back. It rubbed my shirt softly, coaxing me down from my high as my mouth began to salivate. Threads of saliva dripped to the parking garage floor as I heard quick footsteps rushing toward me.

And when Suri started talking, I realized who had found me. “Gee, thank the Lord. I thought maybe she was upstairs in the bathroom by her office.”

Guadalupe spoke softly. “Nope. She’s down here in her car. I think she could use some water, though.”

I sniffled so hard that snot ran down the back of my throat, and before I knew it, my stomach heaved again. The massive wad of snot touched my tongue, and it made me retch until the fucking thing flew to the parking garage floor. I wrinkled my nose in disgust. I felt someone helping me upright before tucking my feet back into my car.

Then, Guadalupe’s face came into view as she wiped my tears away with a small handkerchief. “You need some water and some deep breaths.”

My breathing was shallow. “How did you—where—I don’t understand how you found me.”

Suri popped out of nowhere and handed me a bottle of water. “Find Your Friends. I used it on your number when I got your text message. You never send messages with typos, so I knew I needed to find you.”

A sob heaved my chest. “What am I gonna do?”

Suri went to speak, but Guadalupe stepped between us. “Why don’t you come with me for a little bit? I think we should talk.”

I didn’t know what to think at this point, so I simply stepped out of the car. Suri closed the door and said she’d wait right there, then Guadalupe threaded her arm with mine. She led me over to a massive van, where she popped the trunk and sat down on its edge. Then, she patted a seat next to her and beckoned for me to sit.

So, I did, because I was done fighting with people for the day.

“Suri tells me you’re expecting,” she said.

I rolled my eyes. “Remind me to thank her for telling everyone my business.”

She pointed at me. “There. That’s the first thing you need to change.”

I blinked. “Sorry, change? It’s my fault when someone is spreading my business around when I don’t want them to?”

“It is your fault when you’re upset with a friend for helping you the best way she knows how, yes.”

I shook my head softly. “Yes, I’m pregnant.”

She nudged me softly. “Does this have anything to do with that *alto, oscuro, y guapo* we talked about once?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “Possibly.”

“Let me ask you this: why does it anger you when people try to help?”

I scoffed. “Because most people only want to help if it benefits them. Not the other way around.”

She nodded slowly. “I see. So, you think someone will do something nice, then hold it over your head. Right?”

I shrugged and looked down at my lap. “Essentially, yeah.”

“Well, does Suri do that to you?”

My eyes whipped over to her. “Hell, no.”

“Have I done that to you?”

I blinked. “I mean, no. But, I also haven’t known you for very long.”

“Has this tall, dark, and handsome man of yours done it to you yet?”

My shoulders slumped a bit. “No, he hasn’t.”

“So, what are you afraid of? No one’s given you any indication that they’re going to do what you fear. Why are you still scared of it, then?”

“I just want to protect my daughter from people who could possibly do that to her. That’s all.”

“Ah, so you use your child as a human shield.”

I snapped at her. “You take that back. What an awful thing to say.”

She clasped her hands together. “What do you think you’re doing then? Because it sounds to me like you’re using your daughter as an excuse not to get close to people under the guise that those people may or may not hurt her.”

“And I think that’s a valid enough reason.”

“Even if it keeps you so isolated that you can’t even trust the man you love?”

I furrowed my brow. “I never said anything about—”

She cut me off. “You didn’t have to. No woman ever gets this worked up unless there’s a man involved, and she’s never this worked up about a man unless she loves him. Do you love him?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t like how you can break me down so easily.”

She grinned. “People aren’t as different and unique as they’d like to think. We live in this world where unique somehow equals ‘more special.’ Like, someone who’s lived a terrible life is somehow more worthy of fame and fortune than the kid up the street who comes from a decent background and didn’t have to work three jobs by the time he was fifteen just to help his mother make ends meet.”

“That... was very specific.”

But, Guadalupe only smiled and cupped my hands within hers. “People aren’t as different as they’d like to think, and that isn’t a bad thing. What’s different about you doesn’t make you special, Leslie. In fact, other people can’t even deem you as special. Only you can do that.”

“I’m... not sure I’m following anymore.”

She scooted a bit closer to me. “What I’m trying to get at is this: if you love him, then stop fighting with him. Instead, talk to him. Express to him how he’s making you feel and why it’s happening. It might not make sense, but I think you’ll come to realize that if you walk him through it, you’ll find yourself walking through it as well.”

“And I might realize just how ridiculous it is.”

“Now, I didn’t say anything about it being ridiculous or not. You might have a completely good reason to be upset with him. But, if you can’t even articulate what’s wrong with him, then he has no way to try to fix it. And that, Leslie, is the mark of a good man. A man who tries to fix his mistakes, even if he doesn’t understand them.”

I slumped forward and pulled my hands away from hers. “He took away my control.”

“Over what?” Suri asked.

My best friend perched on my other side, and I leaned against her. “He started going on and on about my eventually moving in with him, and it was all too much. He just assumed it would be that way, and I don’t like that. It just sort of spiraled from there.”

Guadalupe settled her hand on my knee. “Did you tell him that?”

I sighed. “No.”

Suri clicked her tongue. “Then, maybe you should try telling him first.”

I groaned. “You two and your effortless sense-making. You’ll be the death of me.”

Suri giggled. “You know I say it with all of the love in my heart.”

I sat upright and turned to face her. “Do you think he’s a good guy?”

Suri studied me closely. “I think he’s got some power-tripping issues that come with always being the hotshot around here. But I also think he’s trying to work on it now that the table has turned. And that’s always a good thing.”

I peered over my shoulder. “Guadalupe?”

She patted my back. “*Si?*”

I puffed my cheeks out with a sigh. “Mind if I give you a call tonight so we can talk for a bit longer?”

“I’d love nothing more than that. If you’re feeling up for it, you can even come over. I’ll give you my address, you can bring your daughter, and I’ll make us all some tea and snacks.”

Suri leaned into my ear. “You should take her up on that. Her food is amazing... and so is her advice.”

I smiled softly. “I’ll give you a call tonight, then, if I’m feeling up for it.”

Then, Trey’s voice sounded across the aisle. “And if you’d rather go alone, I don’t mind watching Aurora.”

My gaze met his stare, and I found him standing there with his hands clasped behind his back. He was waiting patiently and without an ounce of anger etched into his features. I felt Guadalupe rub my back one last time before Suri helped me down to my feet. And as I made my way toward Trey, the

words dripped from my lips as effortlessly as I had fallen in love with him.

“I’m sorry for my outburst,” I said as I hugged him tightly.

He held me close and snickered. “I’ve got the most to apologize about, you know.”

I peeked up at him. “I’m scared, Trey.”

His gaze met mine. “So am I.”

I furrowed my brow. “What are you scared of? You haven’t seemed scared at all.”

He chuckled. “I’m scared of losing you, for starters.”

I blinked. “Really?”

He kissed my forehead. “Really. I’m scared of chasing you off and never seeing my child again.”

“I’d never do that to you, Trey.”

“Doesn’t stop me from worrying about it.”

I nestled my head against his chest. “Just don’t make decisions without me, okay? I want to make these choices *with* you. I don’t expect you to simply throw things together, even if that’s what you want to do. I want to have input on where my life is currently going. It all feels so out of control, and I need something I hold the reins on. Okay?”

He squeezed me tightly. “Trust me, I understand that concept completely. I’m sorry I took that away from you.”

“And I’m sorry for yelling at you and getting defensive instead of simply talking to you about it.”

“I have to admit, it’ll be different for me to not take care of everything. I’m used to paying and placing phone calls to get things done so no one has to be burdened with it. Just give me some time to adjust.”

I kissed his clothed chest before looking up into his face. “Well, it’s not like that with me. I want to be your partner, not just some person who leeches off of you.”

He grinned. “I guess we have a lot to work out before this baby comes. I mean, if you’re keeping it, that is.”

“Do you want me too?”

He blinked. “It’s your body, Leslie. I won’t tell you what to do with it.”

“I love you so much,” I whispered.

He furrowed his brow. “What was that?”

“What?”

He paused. “What did you just say?”

My cheeks blushed deeply. “I said... uh...”

He gripped my chin as his face came closer to mine. “Say it again, Leslie.”

I swallowed hard. “I love you so much, Trey.”

He smiled brighter than I’d ever seen, and his eyes lit up like stars in the nighttime sky. “I love you, too, Leslie. And no matter what you decide, I’ll be here supporting you the entire time.”

“So... if I chose to keep it, you’d...?”

He captured my lips softly. “Of course, I’d stay. I love you. That should be a given when you love someone.”

I threw my arms around his neck. “My God, you’re perfect.”

He hugged me close. “We’ll make it work, I promise you. For both of our sakes and our child’s sake.”

And as we stood there in the parking garage of the business that had changed my entire life, I hoped and prayed that we could both stand by our word. I hoped and prayed that Trey and I became better at our communication skills and that he wouldn’t leave me the second it got hard. I prayed that he stuck around not just for our child but for Rori as well. Because I wanted her to experience the idea of a whole family. A man she could count on and grow up around, a man who could show her what a real, true man did for his family.

I wanted that for her, and I wanted that for myself.

I wanted a future with this amazing man, and I knew I'd do whatever it took in order to make it happen.

EPILOGUE

Trey

One Year Later

“**C**annonball!”

I bolted upright out of bed quickly and wrapped my arms around a flying Rori. “Gotcha.”

She squealed. “Oh, no! The big, flying spaghetti monster got me. I need help!”

I rolled her over in bed and started tickling her as I quickly came out of the foggy haze of sleep. She had made it a habit to wake me up every Saturday morning like this: by flying face-first into the bedroom that her mother and I shared before she tackled me awake. I had come to love our Saturday morning ritual, especially since it involved cereal and morning cartoons while Leslie slept in.

But, after I tickled Rori half to death, she caught her breath and looked up at me. “Mommy needs you in the nursery.”

I paused. “Did she need me in the nursery when you came flying in here fifteen minutes ago?”

She blinked. “Maybe.”

I bent down and kissed Rori’s forehead. “We’re going to have a talk later about how Mommy needs her messages delivered immediately, okay?”

She giggled as she wiggled beneath the covers. “*Oh*, it’s all warm in here.”

I slipped out of bed and reached for my robe. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about our cereal and cartoons, though. Let me go figure out what your mother needs, and I’ll be right back.”

After slipping into my house slippers, I eased myself down the hallway, listening as the beautiful sound of Leslie’s soft singing voice filtered through the doorway of the baby’s nursery. I stood outside for a few seconds, stealing a little slice of aural paradise for myself.

Especially since I had convinced her to move in with me.

It had been a fight, for sure. Leslie had it in her mind that moving in with me somehow meant giving up her independence. When really, all I wanted was to share what I had with someone. I gave her the keys to one of the cars, and it took two days of convincing her to take them before she finally relented.

But, I knew the only thing I could do was show her I’d never hold any of this over her head. Once I gave her something, it was hers. Just like the car she drove and just like the clothes I filled her closet with and just like the bedroom I let Rori design the way she wanted—these things were as much theirs as it was mine. I didn’t care that it was my card we were using. I didn’t care that this estate once used to be “just mine.”

It wasn’t “just mine” any longer.

It hadn’t been since the moment I had fallen in love with Leslie.

“I can hear you, you know,” she said.

My beautiful Leslie stopped rocking our daughter, Angel, and she peered over her shoulder. The morning sunlight streamed through the window, catching the breathtaking highlights of her hair, and it left me speechless. She had never looked more beautiful to me as she sat there, cradling our almost three-month-old little girl.

I walked over to her and kissed her forehead before I gazed into the sweet, chubby little face of our newest addition.

“Can you take her for a little bit? I have to pee,” she whispered.

I chuckled as I scooped our daughter out of her arms. “It would be my pleasure. You take your time. Get cleaned up and everything, if you want to.”

She stood to her feet. “You telling me I stink, Old Man Trey?”

I grinned at the sarcastic nickname she had bestowed upon me. “I’m telling you to take time for yourself. That’s all.”

She kissed my cheek as I sat down. “I’ll be back soon. She’s already fed and burped, but she does need a bit more sleep. She was up early this morning.”

I gazed down into Angel’s sleeping face. “When were you up?”

Leslie squeezed my shoulder. “About four this morning.”

I made a mental note to switch out the wooden rocker by the window with a nice rocker-recliner, so she had a comfy place to sleep if our daughter was going to be such an early riser.

I heard Leslie pad out of the room before a quick set of small footsteps scurried up behind me. I smiled from ear to ear as I reached around, offering Rori my hand. She slid her soft palm against mine, and I ushered her from around the back of the chair, then patted my lap so she could climb up.

Then, the three of us slowly rocked back and forth as we gazed out the window into the side yard.

I saw the pristinely kept lines from the landscaping crew who came by every week to mow the grass. And yet, I could see a sprinkle of Aurora’s footprints scrambling between the mow lines. It brought me so much joy to see those little feet stamps on my lawn. It brought delight into my life whenever I tripped over a small set of shoes or stepped on a fucking Lego,

or even crashed my knee into a toy that didn't belong in the corner Rori had pushed it into.

It was a constant reminder of the chaotic joy my girls had brought to my empty, listless mansion.

And I didn't want to have it any other way.

As I cuddled Rori and cradled Angel in the crook of my left arm, I thought back to a time when they weren't in my life. A time when I honestly thought this massive piece of property would stay as clear-cut as a magazine picture and be filled with nothing less than all of the anger I carried around in my heart daily. There had been a time in my life where I thought I'd live alone, be alone, and die alone with nothing to leave the world except my pathetic businesses.

But, my girls had changed all of that for me.

I promise to give you all the world for what you've given me.

"Trey?"

"Hmmm?" I asked as I peeked down at Rori.

"Can I ask you something weird?"

I grinned. "You can ask me anything you want."

She chewed on her lower lip before she spoke again. "So, I have a friend at school, right?"

I nodded. "I'm glad you do. Friends are very important."

"Oh, yes. Very. And, well, she has a Daddy that's not her real-real Daddy, like you."

"Okay."

"And, well... um..."

I pulled her close against my side. "It's okay to ask. Whatever it is, I'll answer it the best way that I can."

She looked up at me with puppy dog eyes, and my heart melted. "Well, even though he's not her real Daddy, she gets to call him Daddy. And I was wondering if I could do that someday, you know, with you."

I swallowed the knot forming in my throat. “You want to call me Dad?”

“Dad-*dy*,” she corrected. “But, yes. Maybe one day, if it’s okay?”

I closed my eyes and kissed her forehead. “You can call me whatever you want, whenever you’re comfortable. How’s that sound?”

She laid her cheek against my shoulder and sighed with content. “That sounds good, Daddy.”

“Sweetheart, what’s this?”

Leslie’s voice pulled me from my trance, and I patted Rori’s thigh. She stood from the chair, and I turned around, trying to blink back the tears her question had rushed to my eyes. Rori tugged on my hand, and I bent down, only to feel her lips press against my cheek in a long, warm kiss.

“Love you,” she whispered, “I’ll go turn on *Tom and Jerry* for us.”

I nodded and patted her back, but I was afraid to speak for fear that my tears would overcome me. Rori rushed out of the room, and I turned my attention to the love of my life, wondering why in the world she had such distress in her voice.

Then, she held up a small red box that I had been moving around the house for weeks.

“Where did you find that, sweetheart?”

Leslie walked mindlessly in my direction. “It was, uh, just out on the bathroom counter.”

Shit, I forgot to move it. “It’s just a—well—I mean, if you really...”

After all of the weeks I had spent moving that thing around so she wouldn’t find it, I couldn’t believe how careless I had been to simply leave it out like that for her to stumble across.

Or, you could take the opening.

“Trey,” she said softly.

I offered her our daughter. “Want to trade?”

She scooped our daughter from my arm, and I plucked the box from between her fingers, and the weight of what I was holding almost pinned me to the floor. In that tiny box I had picked up from the jewelry store nearly two months ago was my entire future. Everything I had ever dreamed about and everything I had ever wished for Leslie and me to have. It all sat there, inside that little box with red-velvet covering.

“Better now than never,” I murmured.

Leslie scoffed. “What in the world are you going on about?”

I ushered for her to sit. “Take a seat. You should be sitting for this.”

She did as I asked. “You’re freaking me out a bit. What’s going on?”

Then, I got down onto one knee and took her left hand in mine. “Just a little something I’ve been thinking about.”

She gasped. “Oh, my God.”

I smiled as I cracked open the box and revealed the massive diamond ring I had picked up for her. I heard the pitter-patter of quick footsteps up the staircase before Rori made a beeline for my side, probably wondering where I was and why we weren’t already having our morning cereal.

But, when Rori laid eyes on the ring, she squealed with delight. “I’ve seen this in movies!”

Leslie shushed her. “The baby’s still sleeping, sweetie.”

Rori lowered her voice to a whisper. “Have you asked yet?”

I winked at her. “I’m getting to it. With your permission, of course?”

She nodded. “Yes, you have my permission.”

Leslie giggled as her free hand cupped itself over her mouth. “That thing is massive.”

I chuckled. “Leslie, you have brought more joy and more passion and more wonder into my life than I ever thought possible. You’ve given me a family I never thought I’d have, you’ve made this place a home when I didn’t think it was possible, and you’ve shown me that this world is no place for someone who holds onto the kind of anger I was carrying around. You are the billboard definition of someone not allowing the past to hold them back. Until you came into my life, I didn’t even think it was possible to move forward. You’ve changed me in every positive way, Leslie Popovich, and for the life of me, I can’t see my future without you in it.”

She sniffled. “Oh, Trey.”

I plucked the ring from the box and took hold of her left hand. “My life would be empty and fruitless without you in it. You, and Rori, and Angel... the three of you are my world now. And I don’t want to fall asleep and allow another day to pass by without asking you the one question I can’t seem to spit out without worrying about whether or not I’m going to fuck it up.”

Her eyes widened. “Trey, there are kids around.”

Rori fell apart in giggles as I peeked over at her.

“Don’t say that word. That’s a grown-up word.”

Then, Rori kissed my shoulder and smiled at me. “You’re doing a good job.”

I lowered my voice. “You think so?”

She nodded. “Now, ask, you crazy-head.”

I turned my attention back to the center of my world. “Leslie Popovich.”

She smiled as a tear-streaked her cheek. “Yes?”

I poised the ring just beyond her left-hand ring finger. “Will you marry me?”

And when she nodded, my heart burst with ecstatic glee. “I’d love nothing more, handsome.”

I slipped the ring onto her finger as Rori ran out into the hallway, clapping and screaming that her parents were getting married. I stood to my feet, bringing Leslie with me as I kissed her with just as much passion and lust as the first time our lips had ever met. My heart hammered against my chest with delight. I cradled our infant daughter's head as Leslie's free arm wrapped around my waist tightly.

And after our lips finally parted, our beautiful daughter finally woke up.

"I feel someone sucking on my robe," Leslie whispered.

I smiled. "Might want to do something about that, then."

She eased back down into her rocking chair. "Do you mind getting me something to eat? She's cluster-feeding, and I haven't even had breakfast yet."

I bent forward and kissed her forehead. "Anything for my future wife and the mother of my child."

She tilted her head back, giving me an upside-down kiss. "I love you so much."

I nuzzled my nose against hers. "I love you, too, Lizzy."

She giggled. "You know, I usually hate it when people call me that. But, I don't hate it from you."

I picked myself up. "I'll take that as a win. How do hot tea and a breakfast sandwich sound?"

"Oh, that sounds amazing. Can you put some of that horseradish sauce you have on it, too?"

I chuckled. "Anything for my queen."

"Daddy!" Rori exclaimed.

Leslie gasped. "Since when is she calling you that?"

I walked over to the doorway and peered over my shoulder. "Let's just say it's been an interesting morning with all of my main ladies."

Her eyes glistened in the morning sunlight. "And you're okay with it?"

I furrowed my brow. “Why wouldn’t I be okay with my daughter calling me Daddy?”

She wiped at her tears. “You’re just incredible, Trey. Sometimes, I can’t even convince myself that you’re real.”

“Hmph,” I said as I stared out into the hallway, “that’ll make our sex life a bit more difficult, don’t you think?”

She snorted. “Get out of here and get me some food, funny man.”

I patted the doorway. “Anything to put a smile on your face.”

I made my way toward the stairs, and Aurora came rushing up to my side. She slipped her hand into mine as we walked down together, then she accompanied me into the kitchen. I hoisted her up onto the kitchen counter and let her help me put together breakfast for her mother. And as I taught her how to make her first-ever breakfast sandwich over the stove, I heard *Tom and Jerry* re-runs rolling in the background.

This is all I’ve ever wanted.

“Here, take this up to your mother, and I’ll make our bowls of cereal,” I said.

Rori hopped off the counter and took the tray into her hands. “I can definitely do that. Can I have some Fruit Loops like you?”

I smiled. “Only if you don’t drop that tray. Make sure to walk very carefully, all right?”

She nodded slowly and spoke with elongated words. “I... pro-mise...”

My cheeks hurt with my smile as I watched Rori slowly make her way down the hallway toward the staircase, and as she disappeared out of view, I let the smell of fresh coffee waft up my nostrils. I heard Leslie’s soft singing filtering through the ceiling, gracing my ears as my heart skipped a beat. I folded my arms over my chest and closed my eyes, drinking everything in.

A Saturday spent with family and not in the office.

A Saturday spent with a woman who had become my fiancée.

A Saturday spent with Rori on the couch, watching cartoons until we fell back asleep.

A Saturday where I'd get to take Angel for the entire afternoon so Leslie could have some time alone with Rori.

And finally, a Saturday that would end with all of us in the kitchen, cooking together instead of calling up a chef to throw something together for us.

I found the life I had been striving for in a sassy little secretary that I hired on the spot.

And I swore, at that moment, to protect and cherish it and upkeep it, no matter what it cost me. No matter what it took.

Because my newfound family was worth it.



I hope you enjoyed Rude Boss' Secret Baby and will leave a positive review. If you would like to follow

the characters in Billionaire's Accidental Marriage, the next book in the Tall Dark and Handsome Billionaires Series, click [here](#) to grab your copy on Amazon.

