



Surprise Baby

FOR DADDY'S

BEST FRIEND

LISA RYAN

SURPRISE BABY FOR DADDY'S BEST FRIEND

A SINGLE DAD BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

LISA RYAN

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KIM

If heaven on earth could exist, it would be here, in Maui. That was the thought I had when I stepped out of the airport and the taxi took me down the lovely, twisted, winding roads, to the Honua Kai Resort.

Once at the resort, I couldn't believe my eyes, Carl and Amanda could not have picked a nicer place to get married in. Everything about it was just breathtakingly gorgeous.

I half dragged; half carried my bag up the few steps of the property and into the resort. The sound of birds calling out in the distance at the beach sang to me like a siren's call. Sweat beaded on my forehead, threatening to drown me before even I got to touch a pool.

"Welcome!" a woman greeted cheerfully from behind the check-in counter. She flashed me a kind smile, then indicated with her brows at a young male attendant.

He hurried over to me, his head downturned, and grabbed my bags with a soft grunt. He was cute, in a younger brother way. His face still had a lot of baby fat, and he was too nervous to look at anyone directly. Nowhere close to eye candy for me. Strike one for paradise.

"Sorry. I can take these up to your room."

I chuckled and waved my hand. "Sure. Let me check in so we can figure out what room I'm in."

I rolled my shoulders, thankful to get rid of the added weight of my belongings, and walked over to the desk.

"I'm here to check in."

The woman behind the counter nodded and typed something on her

computer. "Will you be staying by yourself? And what's the reservation name for the room?"

I wasn't expecting to be asked that. My face flushed as I fumbled to pull my phone out. A sigh of relief escaped my lips as a notification from my brother lights up my lock screen.

"She says it's under his name. Um... I mean it's under Carl."

"Last name?"

"Bryant. Sorry. There should be a room reserved for me. Kimberly Bryant."

I couldn't say when the last time I stayed at a hotel was, especially one this nice. Most of my hotel stays have been in cheap places, just so I had a bed while out traveling.

This time, my brother covered both the trip and my room at the resort, so all I needed to do was bring some cash for food and some fun money.

The desk clerk typed something else into the computer and reached for a small keycard. She slid it inside a machine and a small bell dinged.

"There we go." She pulled the card back out and handed it to me. "The doors unlock when you tap the card on the scanner. So, you don't have to worry about inserting it." She slid a small pamphlet on the counter as well. "This will explain all the amenities we have to offer and how you can use your keycard to its full advantage during your stay."

I take both and shoved them into my pocket. "Thanks."

"It was my pleasure." She turned to the attendant. The friendly look on her face faded into one of mild frustration. "She's on the third floor. Room 308."

"Got it."

"Don't forget the warning I gave you last time."

"I won't," he groaned.

I wanted to ask what the warning was about but decided against it. Better not to get in their business and ruin my day. Not like it was my business anyway.

He lifted my bags off the ground and shuffled toward the elevator. "Is this your first time here?" he grunted between steps.

The question sounded forced, but I didn't want him to get in trouble if I said anything. Besides, he seemed friendly enough to enjoy some small talk with us on our way up.

"Yeah. Usually, if I travel it's for work or to see family."

"So, vacation?"

We stepped into the elevator, and he dropped the bag as carefully as he could manage. He pressed the button for the third floor. I wanted to tell him to just get one of those carts with wheels on it, but I didn't see any coming into the resort.

"Kind of. My brother is getting married. So, they paid for us to come out here for the wedding."

He nodded and averted his gaze. "Weddings are nice." He bit his bottom lip. "So, you'll be staying for a few days? If you want..." he sucked in a deep breath. "If you want, I can give you a tour of some non-touristy places?"

I raised my brow and eyed him up and down. "That an invitation?"

His back straightened. "Ah, yeah! I mean, sorry I should probably stop before I get reported."

I nodded and stared off into the distance. "Yeah, better if you do that." I clicked my tongue a few times. "Sorry, but you're not exactly my type. Maybe in a few years."

"Oh..." His voice trailed off. "I see." He shrugged his shoulders and heaved the bags to get a better grip.

The elevator dinged to signal that we were on my floor. I let out a soft sigh of relief to get out of the awkward conversation.

"Here we go," he mumbled and turned left out of the elevator.

I followed close behind and grabbed the room key. Each door had a small black circle where the doorknob should be.

We stopped in front of my room. The faded 308 plaque signaled for me to scan my card. I tapped it against the black circle as a red light flashed on, blinked a few times, then turned green followed by the whirling sound of the door unlocking.

The room was smaller than I expected. Two queen size beds were positioned near the back of the room. A half wall separated it from the study in the main area.

"Cozy. Guess most people are spending time outside the room anyway." I pointed over to the desk. "You can leave my bags over there."

The attendant nodded and scurried over, dropping them with a soft thud. Before I could thank him or offer him a tip, he scurried out of the room muttering something under his breath.

I slumped into the chair and closed my eyes for a moment. My mind drifted to visions of time by the pool with a drink in one hand and a book in

the other. The cacophony of laughter and talk in the hall pulled me back into reality. I jumped up and looked over at the closed door. I recognized the huge belly laugh. My brother was here.

“Took you all long enough.” I opened the door and leaned against the frame.

My brother and his soon-to-be wife, Amanda, were rolling their bags across the hall. He was already pulling his card out to unlock room 309.

“Oh!” Amanda gasped. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were here.” A slight red tint covered her cheeks as she reached into her oversized purse. “Here!” She handed a folded brochure over to me. “It’s the itinerary for the weekend.” She gave me a sheepish smile. “Sorry, there’s not much planned for tonight. We didn’t expect anyone in until later this evening.”

I shrugged. “My flight got rescheduled for a little earlier. Not going to complain. I’d rather be here early than show up exhausted in the middle of the night.”

“True enough.” Carl smacked the side of my arm. “Already situated then?”

“Yeah. There are two beds in my room though.”

“One of my bridesmaids,” Amanda answered.

I raised a brow. I wasn’t told I would have a roommate out here. Not like I should be surprised. My brother paid for everyone’s travel, so he had to save money somehow.

“Well, either way,” Carl said, bringing me back into the conversation. “Dad’s going to be late.”

“Like usual,” I groaned.

Carl shrugged, “He has work. Thankfully the ceremony isn’t for another few days, so he’ll be fine.”

“So…” I flipped through the itinerary. “You said we don’t have any plans for tonight?” There was nothing written for today. The rest of the week was packed from random meal dates with the other girls, to shopping sprees.

“Nope. We were thinking about getting some drinks. Don’t want to do too much tonight. Maybe meet up with some stragglers.”

I mulled the idea over. I wanted to go to the pool and explore the resort, but it was also my brother’s wedding, and I didn’t want him to get in too much trouble.

“Fine, let me change into something a bit more comfortable and I’ll meet you downstairs in the lobby.”

I stood in front of the tall mirror, half of my clothes strewn across my bed. I wasn't sure what bars my brother intended on going to tonight, but I wasn't going to go out looking like a slob. My outfit from earlier was fine if I had planned to go shopping or walk around, but it wasn't right for going out in the evening. There was the possibility I would become a third wheel the entire time, but it was just as possible that I would find someone to enjoy the evening with. Even if it was just for a few dances and nothing came of it.

It took a little longer than I had hoped, but I finally decided on what would become my perfect outfit. It wasn't anything too special. A dark red bra that I recently bought after seeing it on social media and a short black skirt. I turned to look at myself from different angles before I felt satisfied with everything.

Carl and Amanda were waiting for me downstairs at one of the high tops. Their fingers were interlocked as they talked in whispered giggles.

Carl hadn't changed his clothes and was still dressed in his basic black polo shirt, and a pair of jeans. Amanda, however, had switched into a small blue dress that cinched at her waist, accentuating her curves.

I cleared my throat to get their attention.

"Oh! Kim!" Amanda gasped and stood up.

Her heels gave her a few inches above me, but she still was shorter than my brother who constantly bragged about being over six feet tall. I took after our mom, so I was almost a foot shorter than him.

"You ready?" Carl asked and pushed off the seat.

"Yeah. Mind if I ride with you two?"

He shrugged. "I'm not driving. There are a few bars around the resort we can walk to." He glanced down at my feet. "If you can walk."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, I can walk." I grabbed Amanda's hand. "You can joke all you want here, and I'll take your wife out on the town." I said with a smirk.

"Fine, fine. I'm getting up."

That was one joke I loved having with my brother. While he didn't exactly have problems finding girls, I liked to brag I could steal them from him just as easily if I wanted. I never did, and I never had an intention of doing that either. Unless he somehow started dating an older gentleman, he was safe in my books.

The first bar was next to the pool. Quieter than I expected. Half of the bar was submerged in the pool with a few people sitting in the water while

drinking and chatting. Their drinks floated on small rings next to them, or on the counter while they stood. The other half was above the water, and this is where we got our first rounds. It wasn't exactly the perfect bar for me. I could see why many people enjoyed it if they didn't want to stop swimming afterward, but I hadn't gotten dressed just to get wet.

We bounced from bar to bar after that. Most of them were part of the resort with a few dotting the road across the street. None of them stood out, which led us to move to the next location. Amanda seemed focused on finding the perfect place, instead of drinking. After a while, most started to blur.

Our final stop was the club at the center of the resort. There wasn't a name on the club, just an illuminated sign with an image of a blue mermaid wrapped around a rock. The music inside had deep bass that shook through my body. This place was different from the other bars, and I could already imagine how expensive the drinks would be before I stepped inside.

I took a deep breath. My mind was already swimming. I needed to get some water in me before I continued drinking if I wanted to last through the night.

Meanwhile, Carl and Amanda were behaving as if they were still sober. I already knew he could handle his drink, so it wasn't surprising that Amanda could keep up with him. They were perfect for each other, and I was a little jealous of that connection.

I followed behind them and was instantly blasted with the deep bass of the music. It was like the walls had muffled so much of it, and feeling the true power of it took me by surprise. I didn't recognize the song that was playing. It was more like a combination of usual club music and a robot singing. Nothing bad about it. In fact, a constant steady beat meant I could find myself dancing without worrying about showing my awkward singing skills or losing my balance from the song changing pace halfway through. Multi-colored flashing lights filled the dance floor, with darker hues covering the outer rings where the tables were.

At the front of the club was a DJ, dressed in a silver mask with glowing red eyes. The rest of his body was covered in a black hoodie and sweatpants. No one seemed to notice, or at least care, about how the DJ looked as everyone danced throughout the club, lost in their own world.

Amanda turned back to me and raised a brow. "Are you coming?"

I nodded, "Yeah. Let me grab a drink first, and I'll join you on the—"

She ran off to dance before I could even finish my sentence. I sighed and made my way over to the bar to grab another drink before I decided to dance. The music was different from what I used to, so I needed to feel it out to get into the rhythm.

“What’re you having?” The bartender yelled over the roar of the music.

“Something hard,” I shouted, sliding my ID and card over.

He nodded and turned back toward the drinks. I didn’t bother watching him mix the drinks, instead, I looked out into the crowd of dancers who surged around the stage. Carl and Amanda were deep within the crowd so I couldn’t see them anymore.

“Here you go,” the bartender yelled over the music and tapped me on the shoulder.

“Oh!” I jumped. “Thanks.” I took the drink and downed it quickly.

“Need anything else?”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to get too trashed before I started dancing.

As I pushed off the bar, my gaze fell on one of the tables in the dim light at the edge of the club. The table was overcast with the red tint and pushed away from most of the club. A thick pole blocked the person sitting there from the view of most of the club as he leaned back in the booth. I couldn’t look away from him. It was as if his presence had me entranced. His hair had a silver tint to it on the sides. He turned to me and as our eyes met, he lifted his glass and nodded his head.

I licked my lips and made my way over to him. Something about the way he looked seemed familiar, but I couldn’t place my finger on what it was. I had a decent memory of people I had met, and I knew everyone from the wedding party, so it wasn’t like he was anyone from back home.

Once I reached the booth, I pointed across from him. “Mind if I?”

“Go ahead.” He tilted his drink forward. “I’d love some company in this chaos.” He took a sip of his drink, and I realized it wasn’t alcohol but a soda.

“You don’t drink?” I sidled in and leaned forward a little to get a better look at him.

He shrugged, “Sometimes. It’s been my vice.” He took another sip. “And you?” His eyes drifted off to somewhere behind me.

“I...Well, I’ve had a few drinks already. Trying to enjoy my night out, you know?”

He smiled and nodded. He still didn’t look me directly in the eyes. It was like he was a completely different person from the one I had walked up to

earlier. Like he had discovered I wasn't the person he intended to say hello to originally and I had ruined his night.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I can leave if you--"

"No!" He snapped. His gaze turned back to me. The sharp lines on his face were accentuated by the overcast shadows before softening. "I mean, no you don't have to leave." He cleared his throat, "I get a bit caught up in my thoughts. You're not a nuisance."

"Oh!" I blushed as the intense fire in his eyes focused on me, "So, what's your name?"

"Jared."

I said his name, tasting each syllable as it crossed my lips. "Well, Jared, I'm Kim." I rested my elbows on the table and held my chin up, "I hope you're not planning on leaving me tonight. My company has gone off to dance without me, and it's pretty lonely being the third wheel."

JARED

I closed my eyes and took a sip of the soda. The scent of sweat and alcohol mixed into the club was intoxicating. This week was about my daughter and her friends, but that wouldn't stop me from having my own fun on the side. Too many people half my age were dealing with their own problems. If I wanted to find someone who could fit my desires, I needed to work for it.

Finding someone that wasn't just interested in my money but who I was, had turned into a game for me. Finding a genuine person I could spoil and enjoy the deeper pleasures of life with, was growing more difficult by the day.

I opened my eyes and glanced at the bar to check if it was clear enough to grab a drink. Hard enough ordering special drinks back home, but adding in that I was getting a potential top-shelf drink was an easy signal for most. Instead, I was greeted by someone barely older than Mandi staring at me like I was some animal in a cage. I lifted my drink and nodded in her direction.

As she walked closer to me, I realized something was off about my first perception of her. The smile and saunter in her step were more akin to a woman that had already enjoyed a few drinks and was looking for someone to talk to. Not like I was going to complain about that. She was attractive by every definition of the word, from her beach-wave brunette hair to the spark in her fiery green eyes. Just looking at her filled me with both a sense of excitement and dread. She was going to be a poison I would gladly drink deeply from.

"Mind if I?"

I pointed to the seat across from me at the table. "Go ahead. I'd love some company in this chaos."

My drink quickly became my solace as I indulged myself in her beauty. She was a lot younger than me, but the interest in her eyes made me curious. I wanted to uncover the mystery about her and who she was. Images of her undressing in front of me sent me deeper into my drink.

"You don't drink?"

I swallowed the latest gulp of my soda and shrugged, trying to play it off, "Sometimes. It's definitely a vice." I'd let her figure out the meaning behind that. Reel her in a little more to get interested in me.

We continued talking about nothing in particular which left my mind drift off into the distance. It wasn't like I wanted to ignore her, but if she were all fluff in her talk, then even a pretty face wouldn't keep my interest.

"Sorry, I can leave if you want."

"No!" I said it a little too sharply for my own good. I wasn't sure why I stopped her. I was losing interest quickly, but something about her reminded me of someone, even if our conversation wasn't going anywhere. "I mean, no you don't have to leave."

She blushed and averted her gaze, and for the first time, I saw a softness in her looks that I hadn't noticed before.

"So, what's your name?"

"Jared."

"Well, Jared, I'm Kim." She leaned closer to me. The top of her shirt drooped just enough that I could see the top of her breasts spilling out from her bra. She moved her hands in front of her to hide them again almost as if she was intentionally trying to lure me in. She definitely wasn't as innocent as she tried to pretend to be. "I hope you're not planning on leaving me tonight. My company has gone off to dance without me and it's pretty lonely being the third wheel."

My cock twitched as I listened to her sultry voice dropping and turning more erotic now. I took a deep breath. I needed to play my cards right or lose every bet with her. The way she watched me with a hunger in her eyes was too obvious to ignore. Even if, after the end of the day, she wasn't interested in anything else, I was going to at least give it a shot.

"Fuck it," I growled and raised my hand to signal a waitress over.

A young woman ran over to the table with a small pad of paper. "Did you need something, sir?"

"Whiskey on the rocks." I turned to Kim, "You?" I passed my black card to the waitress.

She waved a hand in the air and crinkled her nose, "Nothing for me right now. I've had enough for a little bit."

Before we could even think to continue our conversation, the waitress was back with our drinks and my card for an extended open tab. I gulped it down in one shot and let out a heavy sigh. That was my only big test to see if the woman I was with, was interested in me or the money. If they saw the card and jumped at the chance of adding expensive drinks to it, I could measure them a little more on their choices. It wasn't the end-all test since I did offer to cover the drink, but Kim was the first girl to say no to me for as long as I could remember.

"I know your friends left you high and dry, but did you want to dance?" I smirked and put the glass down, "I might not be as good as I once was, but I can still dance."

Kim slipped a strand of hair behind her ear and chuckled, "Sure." She slid out from the seat and for the first time, I truly enjoyed the view of her outfit and the way it showed off every one of her curves to perfection. I wanted to slide my hands across her body and breathe her in, but I stopped myself in time. She held a hand out to me. "Let's go before they decide to put some boring songs on again."

The music wasn't exactly what I would call music from what I was used to, but I also hadn't been to a club in a few years either. Still, the rhythm was there, and I could move to it without any problems. I checked it off on a list, to look into adding to my playlists back home to play on the full-house speaker system.

Within seconds, I wasn't sure if it was the music, the energy of those around me, or watching Kim move around me that put me in a near trance-like state. My hands moved against her body, sliding down to her hips, feeling them as she swayed against me. I let out a soft moan as she pulled my head down close to her neck. My lips barely brushed against her soft skin before I pulled back again. I refused to let myself go that easily. She needed to want it as much as I did.

She continued to guide me in a slow exploration of her body as she turned around to face me. I slid one hand down to her ass and squeezed through the skirt. I wanted her. There was no denying it, and I wanted her to beg for me. To want me to breathe every pleasure into her.

I lifted her chin, so she was looking me directly in the eyes. I wasn't sure if it was the right move, or if she was simply looking for someone to be close to. But the way she was pressed up against me, I knew there was no going back now. My cock wanted to be inside her, and I wanted her to know how badly I wanted to taste her very essence.

I leaned in and pressed my lips against hers.

At first, her body tensed, and I dreaded the pullback and slap. Instead, she relaxed once more and opened her mouth to welcome me in. Our tongues twirled around one another as I tasted the alcohol still fresh on her lips. She was delicious.

I pulled away and smirked. She didn't avert her gaze this time either. The hunger and desire that was burning in me were just as fierce as hers. I had won the game between us and there were no losers in the end.

Kim pulled me off the dance floor and stopped at the bar. "Two more drinks, please. Whiskey," she called to the bartender.

"Add it to my tab."

I pressed my body against hers, feeling her ass against my cock, begging to push deep within her. I was tempted to bend her over on the bar and destroy her here and now. Show everyone how easily I could turn her into my little slut for the evening, but there was more than that at stake if I wanted to truly enjoy my time with her. I could wait it out with a drink before bringing her to my room.

The bartender returned with our drinks and gave me a wink of understanding between the two of us. The alcohol went down smoothly, sending my senses into high gear.

I brushed my lips across the side of her neck. She let out a soft giggle and pushed me aside. What felt like a lion inside of me roared to be closer to her again. I wanted to hurry. To get everything started.

"Ready?" I growled in her ear.

"Almost," She gulped the whiskey down and turned around to face me. "Let's get out of here and have our fun."

The curve of her lips made me want to kiss her again, but I resisted as best I could. I wanted us to leave quickly. I had the whole evening to do what I wanted to her.

WE WALKED BACK into the hotel and up the elevator. Her hand moved toward

my inner thigh and up to my throbbing cock before pulling away whenever anyone was in view. The secrecy of it all made everything more interesting. Something about her movements felt like someone trying to explore for the first time. I almost wondered if this was her first time being with someone she had just met.

The elevator dinged to signal that we were on our floor. She grabbed my hand and pulled me out.

“Convenient you’re close to my room,” she winked and tilted her head at room 308. “I’ve got company sharing mine though. Don’t want an audience tonight.”

I guided her toward my room a few doors down. I silently congratulated myself for giving in to my daughter’s demands that we come out here. I didn’t expect I would enjoy being out here in a resort. Better to be somewhere by myself and not in a hotel room, but she convinced me to be close to everyone. I should have paid to at least upgrade my room, but they wanted me in the same block of rooms.

We walked into my room and Kim almost immediately made herself at home. Her shoes were tossed off to the side by the opened dresser, as she leaned on the bed.

Seeing her positioned on the bed, welcoming me to join her brought back the urges. I tossed my shoes off and climbed on top of her. The sweet scent of her perfume was intoxicating.

I buried myself into the crook of her neck, listening to her heavy sigh. My left hand drifted across her breasts, caressing the tops, stopping just before they reached her nipples.

She let out a small gasp every time I moved closer until it turned into a whimper of need. I stood her back up and undid the front fastening of her bra while I pressed my cock against her ass as a reminder of how much I wanted her. Everything about her skin was smooth with a light caramel tan.

She turned to face me with a coy smile, “Sit.”

Before I could follow her directions, she pushed me back onto the bed and knelt between my legs.

I stared up at the blank ceiling and reached for my pants to pull them down.

“No. I can do it,” she purred.

Her hands quickly unbuttoned them. They were tossed off into the abyss to never be seen for the rest of the evening. She slipped my boxers off with

them, allowing my hard shaft to stand fully erect for her to view.

Kim's fingers curled around my shaft as she kissed the length of it with her full lips and lowered herself to my balls before coming back up. Her warm lips wrapped around it with a low humming sound. Vibrations shot through my body as I arched my back and let out a grunt of pleasure. I wrapped my fingers around her hair, holding her in place. Her tongue flicked the tip as she sucked in my cock deeper into her mouth.

"Fuck."

Our groans filled the room. I wanted to come in her mouth and explode but needed to contain myself. The night would last far longer than this and I would make sure she was crying for me to cum in her before I did.

She pulled away from my cock and sat up a little, so her breasts rested against it. The soft flesh was warm and seeing the tops glisten with both her spit and my pre-cum was even more exciting.

I lifted her chin and leaned close to her, "Ready for the real thing?" I asked with a deep growl.

Kim let out a soft moan of acknowledgment. God, she was perfect.

I pulled my shirt off and tossed it on top of the growing pile of clothes. Kim removed her skirt and thong to add to the collection. I almost wished she had kept them on to add to her mystique but knowing what was about to come made me not care.

I climbed on top of her, pressing the tip of my shaft against her, teasing the entrance. Her inner thighs glistened with wetness. She bit her lip and glanced away for a moment.

"Are you alright?" I asked. I wasn't going to take her if she didn't want this.

"Yes, I... I'm fine." Her face turned a deep shade of red, "I want this."

I pressed myself further in and leaned close to her. I whispered so she had to focus on every last word. "Just take a deep breath. I'll make sure you feel more pleasure than you ever have before. I'm going to make you crave more."

With her entire focus on me, I pushed all the way in. Her pussy was tighter than I imagined as I slowly thrust deeper inside.

Soft gasps of ecstasy escaped her lips as she reached up for the headboard. I sped my pace up.

"That's it, baby girl."

I thumbed her clit, swirling it with each thrust.

“I-I’m—”

Before she could even say anything, her pussy clenched around my shaft, pulling me deeper inside of her and refusing to let go. I moved with the orgasm, letting her roll the waves of pleasure. Her eyes fluttered as she reached for something to center herself. This only drove my mind even wilder.

I pulled out slowly and laid on my back, “Come.”

She bit her lip and carefully climbed on top.

“Just lower yourself on. I want you to pleasure yourself with my cock. Use me like you would use a toy.” I sighed and leaned my head back.

My hands clung to her hips pulling her lower against my cock. It pressed against her folds, begging to be let in.

She dropped herself onto my shaft as her pussy devoured the entire length. She was tight and wet. Nothing compared to what I was used to. But her voice as she let out a high-pitched gasp sent my head spinning.

“Oh god. Oh, fuck!” She moaned.

My grip tightened around her waist, following her rhythm. I thrust deeper inside her with each drop, pushing myself as far inside her as I could. Hearing her voice scream out with each pounding made my mind go wild. I couldn’t focus on anything but fucking her.

I moved one of my hands away from her waist and circled her nipple with my thumb. It hardened under my hand as she continued to speed up her motions. Her body followed the rhythm of my hand as if in sync with the pleasure.

“Ja-Jared!” She gasped out between thrusts.

Hearing her yell out my name was too much for me. I sat up and wrapped my lips around her nipple. My tongue flicked across the small nub at erratic speeds. I pushed her down with both hands and pushed deeper inside her.

Her pussy pulsated around my cock as her entire body twitched in my hold. “Please,” she gasped out.

I couldn’t handle it anymore and felt the heat erupt through my cock and explode inside her. My cum filled her pussy as it continued to suck me deeper inside her.

Kim let out a soft sigh as our heightened orgasms slowed down and we could finally breathe. I wrapped my arms tightly around her midsection as we sat, joined together, for a moment longer.

“Damn, I haven’t enjoyed sex that much in a long time,” I muttered.

“You’re really something.”

She leaned into the crook of my shoulder, “I should say the same for you.”

We moved away from each other and lay on the bed in silence. I wasn’t good with after-sex talk. Better to stay quiet and enjoy the moment.

Kim was the first to break the silence. “So, what’s the nice outfit for?”

“Hm?”

She pushed up onto an elbow and pointed to the open closet. “I saw it on our way inside. It’s a suit. Got a fancy party tomorrow?”

I chuckled and shook my head. I pushed myself up a little, so I was seated with my back against the pillows. “No. Nothing too fancy. My daughter is in a wedding party and the groom’s father is one of my oldest friends.”

It wasn’t like the suit was my best one. I had just grabbed one from the closet the day before the trip, one that wouldn’t outshine anyone else.

She raised her brow and fell silent. I glanced at her. She looked stressed.

“You alright?”

She shook her head and covered her face. “What are the odds?” She sighed and dropped her hand. “Let me guess, it’s Amanda and Carl’s wedding?”

“How did you know?”

She took a deep breath as her voice cracked from laughter.

I prayed this didn’t mean something bad after everything that happened. It was just my luck, being connected to a wedding she knew about. It would ruin everything.

“My brother is the groom.” She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Guess I didn’t find my stranger silver fox after all. Must have been fate.”

“Must have,” I muttered and leaned back.

I closed my eyes for what I thought was only a moment, but when I opened them again, the clock was already blaring a bright red five in the morning. A soft groan woke me up a bit more and I realized Kim had fallen asleep next to me.

She blinked sleepily at me as she woke up. A slight red tint covered her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, it’s getting late.” Kim scooted off of the bed. Her round ass was perfectly eye level with me. I watched, as it sashayed away towards her clothes. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Jared. Perhaps another time.”

She quickly put on what little clothes she needed to cover herself and left

without another word.

I closed my eyes and smacked the back of my head against the headboard. “Fuck, I messed up big time.”

KIM

I shrugged my shoes and thong into my arms and scurried out of Jared's room. I hadn't intended to fall asleep. If anything, my mind and body were so wiped from the night before that they refused to think about getting up. It didn't help that Jared was a huge heater and kept me warm all night.

The door to my room was propped open. I hugged my shoes tighter and leaned against the frame. My head was screaming from the alcohol, but I needed to focus. Whoever was there, I didn't know them and I wasn't intending on going in dressed like I was.

"Who's in there?" I yelled as I knocked on the door.

"What? Who?" A soft voice responded. Heavy footsteps filled the hotel room until a shorter girl peeked out through the door. She looked me up and down and frowned. "Can I help you?"

I flipped out my card, "Room 308. This is my room."

The woman's face paled as she opened the door. Her mousey heart-shaped face was a stark contrast to my more angular build.

"The lady at the counter gave me a key to the room. She said my roommate would be here already. I'm guessing you're Kim?"

I nodded, "Yeah, I am."

"I'm Mandi." She opened the door the rest of the way and let me in, "Sorry about that."

"Don't mention it."

As I walked past her, Mandi wrinkled her nose. "You reek of alcohol. And what's with your hair? You might want to shower before getting into

bed. You look like you were partying way too hard.” She closed the door behind me, “You might not mind tonight, but tomorrow when you get in bed, that smell lingers.”

“Probably a good idea.” I didn’t want to admit to her that the messy hair and my clothes were because of my first-ever one-night stand especially not with someone involved in the wedding.

I toss my shoes to the side and put the thong in a pile between the wall and bed. I didn’t need her staring at my dirty clothes tossed around the place like a slob.

My pajamas were still tucked away in my suitcase. I gathered them up and sauntered into the bathroom. The shower warmed my bones to their core. I let out a heavy sigh and the weight of the night before left my body. The alcohol swam through my head, reminding me I still needed to at least get some extra sleep in.

Mandi was already unpacked and lying on her bed in a silk blouse without any pants on.

“So, you’re one of the bridesmaids?”

“Yeah. Not sure how I managed that one. I’m not exactly the type that looks good in a dress next to others.” She pinched her fingers to indicate her short stature.

I shrugged and slumped onto my bed. “I doubt Amanda cares about heights. She’s not exactly tall herself. Carl is a giant in and of itself. He’ll balance out the heights and share a few inches.”

“I’m sure he’s saving those inches for their honeymoon.”

We both burst out laughing before growing silent.

“You went to North High back home?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Hmm...” I closed my eyes and nodded, “Thought you looked familiar. Yeah, I’m pretty sure we were in a bunch of classes together.”

“Oh, yeah like English!”

“Exactly!” I raised my hand listlessly, “We sat next to each other—“

“And cheated off one another with those stupid riddles she gave us to waste time.”

I smiled as I remembered those years. They were like faded memories now, but I still appreciated hearing that someone else had hated the riddles.

My eyes grew heavy, and sleep overtook me one more time. I wasn't sure if Mandi fell asleep after me or not. No noise could wake me up with how

exhausted I was and with nothing to help flush out the alcohol, still in my system.

"KIM!" Kim!" Mandi cried out.

I shot up and scanned the room, "Fuck!" I snapped and slumped back in bed. "What the hell was that for?" My head wasn't hurting nearly as bad as earlier but having someone yell at me was the worst feeling in the world.

Kim tossed a crumpled itinerary at me, "We're running late." Her brown hair which had looked so nice and neat the night before now looked like an untamed lion's mane that circled her face.

I blinked through the exhaustion at the schedule for the day. No scheduled breakfast. Just everyone meeting downstairs if they wanted to in the morning. Not like I wanted to do that after clubbing last night. If Amanda and Carl wanted to, that was on them.

"You going downstairs to say hi to everyone?" I grumbled and held the paper out to her.

"That's already done. It's like ten in the morning."

I crinkled my nose and glanced at the schedule again, at 10:30 we were supposed to all do some fancy brunch. It was like watching an accident in slow motion as my mind acknowledged we were running late for brunch. I couldn't just roll out of bed either. I remembered seeing it yesterday. The brunch was at some fancy place.

"Shit!" I tossed the itinerary to the nightstand and jumped out of bed. "We don't have time." I turned to Mandi who was only half dressed. "Why didn't you wake me up sooner?"

She shrugged and tossed multiple outfits onto her bed. "I just got up too. I slept through my alarm." She stopped on an oversized tan cardigan and white button-up. "Did you pick your clothes out last night?"

I shook my head and clambered to my suitcase. Most of my clothes were separated by events I half expected to attend while out here. I grabbed the bag with my note scribbled on it for Sunday Best and tossed it on the bed.

"Shit, I didn't get the wrinkles out last night either."

"Shower," Mandi shouted. "The steam will help."

I nodded and pulled the white low-cut blouse out of the bag and tossed my jeans onto the bed. The water in the shower turned instantly hot and filled the bathroom with heavy steam. I put the blouse on a hanger outside the

shower and prayed there was enough time.

Mandi was almost fully dressed and pulling out her hygiene bags. She brushed her hair in front of the tall mirror while mumbling something under her breath. I didn't have time to think about what she was saying as I focused on myself.

My hair wasn't the worst it could look. If anything, I just needed to run my fingers through it and put it in a messy bun. I could probably pull it off.

We had already wasted ten minutes, and everyone was supposed to meet downstairs close to 10:30 so we could leave. I took my makeup bag into the bathroom and checked the blouse. Most of the small wrinkles were already gone and it looked presentable enough to wear out. I kept it up for a little longer while I put on my makeup.

"Ready?" Mandi called from the bedroom.

"Yeah, almost done."

I slipped the blouse on and tucked part of it inside my pants. The ensemble didn't look too bad. I grabbed my light tan floppy hat and shoved it on my head. A gift from Amanda's mom to add to our ensemble while we were out here. It wasn't exactly to my taste, but I wasn't going to complain when everyone had their version of it, including Mandi, whose hat had a small ribbon tied on one side. I examined myself behind Mandi one last time in the tall mirror.

"We clean up pretty quick," I laughed.

"Yeah. I could have done better if I had more time."

"I'm sure the others won't notice a thing."

EVERYONE DOWNSTAIRS WAS DRESSED to perfection. All the ladies from the bridal party, plus a few other women that were going to attend the wedding were sitting at a group of tables next to the false fireplace. The older women, including Amanda's mom, wore more traditional clothing that made them look like they had stepped out of a 1950's magazine. Their pale pink and blue dress was gorgeous, but not something I could wear myself. It just wasn't my style.

Mandi joined the group first. "Sorry, we're late." She glanced back at me. "We had some issues in the room with my clothes and Kim helped me out." She gave me a quick smile to let me know she was taking the fall for us sleeping in.

"Don't worry, sweetie," Amanda's mom said. "You arrived just in time." She examined her watch. "The driver should be here in just a few minutes."

"Driver?" I raised a brow, "We're not going to a place on the resort?"

Amanda's mom snorted and waved a hand in the air. "Of course not. I chose a unique place that's a favorite of the locals in the area. I want you girls to enjoy a destination vacation by enjoying the destination too. Not just the tourist traps." She indicated the hotel lobby. "It's too sterilized in here."

A man walked into the lobby wearing a suit and stared at us for a few seconds before moving closer. "Excuse me, miss," he said while looking at me. "Are you part of the Bryant party?" He wasn't as old as Jared, but there was a twinkle in his eyes that spoke of experiences in his life that were far past my own. The sides of his thick, black hair already showed some silver in them.

I blushed and turned to Amanda's mom, "I'm Kimberly Bryant, but I believe she's the one who set up everything."

She stood up and pushed past me to shake the man's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Are you our driver?"

He nodded, "I am. Your ride is waiting for you outside the doors."

The two of them walked arm-in-arm outside followed by the rest of the group.

I stopped dead in my tracks as I realized what the car we were riding in would be. I was expecting a small bus or large van, instead, it was a limo. The driver opened the two doors so we could climb in. He waited for each of us to settle comfortably in the back before closing the doors and sitting in the driver's seat.

"You ladies ready?" Amanda's mom asked. A wide smile crossed her face as if she were a child in a candy store and had just been told she could buy as much candy as she wanted.

I sat back in my seat. The warm leather heated my muscles and relaxed the remaining tension left in my body.

The limo inched forward and I watched as we left the resort and turned into the main city. We passed a multitude of buildings that all looked like they had come from the 1800's and were just upgraded over the years until they slowly morphed into newer, upgraded buildings. Everyone inside continued their conversations from earlier.

"So," Amanda said and leaned close to me. "You disappeared on us last night. Couldn't handle the club?"

I blushed and turned away. I didn't want to tell her what happened. I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to let her know. It wasn't like I knew which of the bridesmaids was Jared's daughter and I didn't want to cause problems this early in the vacation either.

Mandi didn't get that I didn't want to talk about it as she leaned forward.

"You should have seen her. Walking into the room with her panties still in her hand and a smile that wouldn't go away." She winked at me, "Must have been a good fuck if he made her happy afterward."

Amanda gave a fake gasp. "Really? Who was it?"

I sank in my seat and exchanged a look with Amanda's mom who looked like she had a mixture of curiosity but also frustration at the idea of us talking about a one-night stand while in the limo.

"I'd rather not talk about it," I muttered.

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Come on. It's not like I can enjoy those things anymore. You need to share the details, Kim."

The limo slowed to a stop to my relief. We all stepped out into the sunny morning with the smell of bacon and steak drifting through the air. My stomach grumbled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten for a while.

The conversations drifted back to random topics as everyone forgot about my one-night stand once again. Not even Mandi brought it back up.

"Can I get you ladies, anything?" The waitress asked. She eyed us all up and down and then at some of the others at different tables. No one else was dressed nearly as formally as we were.

"Mimosas all around," Amanda's mom ordered.

No one argued with her. She was paying for the meal, so if she was willing to cover alcohol this early, it wasn't our place to deny it. We each ordered our food, I chose a plate of steak bites and hash browns. Nothing too fancy, but I needed the protein to cover my hunger for the rest of the day until dinner if we didn't stop anywhere for snacks.

Amanda's phone buzzed and she pulled it out of the pocket in her dress, "Dang it," she hissed.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" her mom asked and leaned forward as if she could see what Amanda was looking at.

"Carl doesn't know either."

I choked a little on my drink and tapped my chest, "What?"

Amanda turned her phone toward me. "I asked your brother if he saw you last night with anyone, but he wasn't paying attention after we split in the

club last night."

Another text came in from Carl with a picture of George Clooney then another message. *Probably looks like that.*

I blushed and averted my gaze from the phone. "That's not funny," I mumbled.

The other girls leaned closer to look at Amanda's phone.

Mandi let out a low whistle, "Didn't know you were into the silver fox types, Kim."

"They're just more experienced is all." I didn't want to play the game of question and answer. I didn't want any of them to know who it was.

Amanda's mom shot Amanda a glare, "That's enough of that talk," she snapped. "We're here to enjoy ourselves and celebrate Amanda getting married. Not who's enjoying an evening with others."

I let out a sigh of relief. Despite how irritated her mom looked, she was the only reason I could avoid the discussion any further. No one would argue with her today.

"Thank you," I mumbled and took a bite of my steak.

The rest of the brunch went a lot better as I got to know the other girls from the bridal party. One worked in computer science while another was some journalist, who working for a paper I didn't know the name of. Each of them was so different from one another, but while we were sitting at the table enjoying a meal, it was like we had all known each other since we were children and had so many things in common.

JARED

I stared up at the blotched ceiling of the hotel room and let out a heavy sigh. My body ached from sleeping awkwardly last night, and my eyes were still heavy from lack of sleep.

I lifted my hand above my face, trying to remember the night before. It felt like a dream, but Kim's scent was still freshly wrapped in the sheets. I rolled over onto my side and reached for the itinerary. Not exactly what I wanted to do with my time out here since I wasn't involved with the wedding, but there might be some events that interested me.

10 A.M. - *Men's Golfing*

It was already almost eleven which meant they must have all left without me. I didn't mind. Golfing wasn't exactly my thing. Plenty of people at the country club I belonged to, in New York were golfers, but I preferred a game of basketball. That was probably one of the few reasons I got along with people who weren't at my level of income. They understood the fun of real sports, sports that didn't involve hitting a ball with a club and hoping it wouldn't land in some ditch somewhere.

My phone buzzed from a text. I unlocked it and smiled as Mandi's smiling face filled the screen. She was the angel that kept me going.

Did you sleep alright? I got in late so I didn't want to wake you this morning.

Yeah. I went to the bar last night.

Dad! Don't tell me you got trashed.

I rolled my eyes and chuckled, quickly typing out a reply.

I only had a few drinks. I'm fine.

Good. I don't need you throwing cash around and making me stand out while we're out here.

I groaned and rolled out of bed. She was protective, but also very much stuck in her ways of wanting to pretend she was someone she wasn't. I didn't blame her. I didn't exactly show off my wealth to my friends either. Still, it was because of her contribution to the wedding that everyone was even here. So, they weren't completely oblivious that she had money somewhere. But I wasn't going to correct her on that.

My suitcase was stuffed with random clothes mixed together. The chaos was soothing compared to how organized I usually am. Every person that came through the house to help prepare meals, clean or do laundry made sure it was always spotless. This was my chance to just relax.

I settle on a plain black polo shirt and a pair of bootcut jeans paired with a nice pair of sneakers. If I was going to explore the resort, I was going to do it looking decent. I reexamined the itinerary. Kim mentioned she was also involved in the wedding somehow last night. I couldn't exactly remember how, or if it was the same one anymore. The music and excitement of the night were too much for my brain to hold onto, and I could barely remember her face and the smile she had given me. The smile that shaved years off my soul.

If she was part of the wedding party, it meant she was having brunch with Mandi and the other girls right now. It didn't say when they would return, but it would have been better if I wasn't around when they did. The idea of running into her while she was with my daughter made my stomach roll a little. Still, I wanted to meet her again, at least once more before we left the resort. To imagine the two of us as star-crossed strangers who might never see one another again beyond a random night together, made my throat dry up. I could ask her out on a date when we returned to the city, but how could I explain it to her without her feeling inferior? I wanted her to enjoy my company first before spoiling her with what I could provide.

The boys weren't supposed to return until after lunch, which meant I was on my own finding food.

The hours for the restaurants were listed on a small card next to the alarm clock. Breakfast had ended almost an hour ago and the rest of the places wouldn't open for at least another hour. I could hold off for now. I needed to wake up the rest of the way and get ready.

I stepped inside the shower and let the warm water soak through to my

bones as the images and memories of last night continued to flash through my mind. The feeling of how tight Kim was as she rode my cock made me hard again. I squeezed and tugged on it, picturing her breasts bouncing in front of me as her screams of pleasure echoed through the room.

"Fuck," I grunted.

I wanted to touch her again. To do more with her than I could last night. My hand stroked faster until I couldn't handle it anymore and exploded inside the shower. My muscles spasmed as I leaned onto the side of the wall, taking a deep breath. She was perfect in so many ways and I was a mess of a man who got off on imagining her again. I didn't deserve to be around her again, but that didn't stop my yearning to touch her.

THE RESTAURANT I chose inside the resort was quieter than the rest. There was another high-end restaurant around the corner, but a burger sounded much nicer. Not to mention the service. It looked like the servers left you alone after serving you, instead of constantly harassing you about something or another to get a bigger tip.

My watch buzzed to let me know I had a text on my phone. An unknown number.

Are you finally up?

Who's this?

Terrance. Your number was listed on the itinerary but figured you wanted some sleep. Sorry.

I sighed. I hadn't thought to look at the entire thing. It would have been helpful to know everyone's numbers were listed. I could have easily grabbed Kim's number that way to avoid any awkward encounters later.

Yeah, I'm grabbing a burger right now.

Cool. We're on our way back here in a few.

I went to put my phone away to finish my lunch, but another text interrupted me. I wasn't the texting type. Calls were preferable, but so many wanted to just type what they wanted to say instead of just getting the message across in one shot.

I almost forgot. Moe got here this morning too. Day early.

I raised a brow and tried to figure out who Moe was. I didn't know a Moe. *Sorry. He said Maurice.*

"Ah. That explains it." I put the phone face down on the table. Better to

leave it out at this point. "Glad that old bastard made it. Need to see what he's been up to lately." I murmured to myself, digging into my burger again.

I WAITED NEXT to the check-in counter for the boys to return. I had finished eating before I got any messages they were back, so I assumed they were still driving.

An oversized white van pulled up in front of the hotel and multiple men piled out including Maurice. I raised my hand to wave them down and forced a smile. I wasn't exactly ecstatic at the idea of mingling with a bunch of guys I didn't know, but at least I had one friendly face I could turn to. Maurice had been a friend since high school and knew me better than most.

"It's good to see you, Jared," Maurice called out as he walked inside. "You haven't been waiting long, have you?"

I shook my head. "Nah. I enjoyed the quiet without y'all blubbering about and the girls all chattering."

"No, I don't blame you. I know my daughter isn't one to go out in big groups that often either, but she seemed to have closed in on a few friends while she's been here."

I nodded and took his hand in mine. "It's good to see you."

"You too."

"Dad?" A younger man behind Maurice called out.

"Oh! Shit, Jared, it's been a while. You remember my son Carl, right?"

I furrowed my brow. I remembered Maurice mentioning he had a son and daughter, but the last time I saw pictures he was barely out of diapers. "You sure that's your boy? He looks a bit too cleaned up to be related to you."

Carl laughed and put a hand on Maurice's shoulder. "Nah, I just have to look presentable, or Amanda will kill me. Or her mom will. I don't need my future in-laws wanting me dead before I finish the vows."

"You'll finish them and then probably be killed by one of them so Amanda can get some money out of it."

They both laughed.

"So, Amanda and you are the lucky couple this week?"

"Yep!" Carl beamed in pride, "I'm glad you were able to come. I know Dad has talked a lot about you and Mandi is always telling Amanda about what a great dad you've been to her, raising her by yourself and all."

Heat erupted around my ears at the thought of my daughter bragging

about me. I wasn't used to hearing that. Mandi never said many great things about me to my face or to her friends as far as I knew.

Maurice glanced at his watch. "The girls should be back soon. You haven't met my daughter yet. I think the last time we talked, she was barely a few months old and your daughter was toddling around the place."

I cleared my throat. Thinking of how long it had been since Maurice and I really sat down to talk, was a little embarrassing. Almost twenty-two years. I was always too caught up with traveling or some random meetings and rarely took the time out for anyone outside of my family.

"I'm sure she's just as loud as you were back in the day." I pointed a thumb behind me. "Mind if we sit at the bar?"

Maurice raised a brow, "You sure? I don't want to intrude on anything—"

"No, I'm fine. I'm just getting a soda for now anyway. Need to stay on my toes in case anything happens out here that could ruin my reputation." I definitely didn't need some poorly captured photo spreading on social media.

Maurice turned to the others and raised his hand, "I'll catch up with y'all later." He nodded at Carl. "You should come with us too. You'll enjoy talking with Jared. He's a good guy. Even if he's a little thorny around the edges."

Carl looked as if he was about to protest then sighed, "Fine. I was hoping to join them for a few games of pool, but I can do that later."

The bar was quiet. Not too many were looking to drink anything just yet. Those that were drinking were enjoying lighter drinks that wouldn't get them heavily drunk. I imagined they would be drinking until late into the evening.

"So," Carl broke my focus on the alcohol. "How do you know my dad anyway?"

I scrunched my face trying to remember that far back, "Well, we went to high school together. Tried to debate me."

"If by debate you mean you debated me with your fists."

I shrugged and waved it off, "By the by. He wasn't a good fighter, but he was willing to stand up for things, even if I found it stupid. He was also the reason I bought my first property. It's what got me started in real estate and business just grew from there."

Carl leaned over so he could get a better look at me, "And you didn't stay in contact with him after that?"

"No," I shook my head sadly. "When you're juggling multiple businesses, the idea of personal time gets pretty thin. I was divorced and raising Mandi by myself, so there wasn't any time to play catch-up with anyone. Didn't help

that when I did come around, people were pricks about any money I had and called me a sell-out.."

Maurice sighed and shook his head. "They're not pricks. You were just an asshole to them whenever you came back from vacations, completely trashed the entire time. Then your first wife came back and we never saw you again."

"Your first wife?"

"Yeah..." My voice trailed off at the thought of her and how she slandered my name into the mud. Not like all of it was a total lie. A lot of it was true and I wasn't proud of it. "I'm not one to ask for marriage advice beyond don't do what I did. Heck, my best advice at this point is to not find someone to get involved with."

"And that's a lie," Maurice pointed to me with a finger while holding his glass. "I might not have been here last night, but Terrence said you had a lady over. Said she was really enjoying her time."

I turned silent.

Maurice smacked me on the back, "Hey, don't act like that. You're just trying to enjoy yourself. Nothing to be ashamed of." His phone buzzed and he unlocked it to view a text. "Oh shit, the girls are back. Guess I can finally introduce you to my daughter."

"There you are, dad. Thought you had work to get done?"

I recognized that voice and nearly choked on my drink as I turned around and met Maurice's daughter's gaze.

"Oh! You're dad's old friend?" Her smile faltered a little as she stepped closer.

Maurice turned from me to his daughter. "Did you two meet earlier?"

I shook my head, "No. I don't think we've met." I didn't want this to get awkward.

Kim narrowed her gaze. "Yeah, you look familiar, but I don't think we met dad. I would remember."

Maurice waved a hand in the air as if to clear the instant tension, "Well, either way. Kim, this is Jared. We've been buddies since before you two were born."

She held a hand out to shake mine, "It's nice to meet you, Jared."

Hearing her say my name again sent a shiver of desire slithering down my spine.

"Same," I exchanged a look of understanding with Kim. Neither of us wanted to bring up last night. Especially now that her dad knew about me

fucking someone last night and Terrence listening to it. "I need to go to the bathroom," I put my glass down and stood up. "I'll be right back."

I slammed my head against the cold wall of the bathroom stall. I couldn't be so stupid as to want to fuck my best friend's daughter. And yet, the image of her on top of me wouldn't disappear.

KIM

I paced back and forth in the room while gnawing on my knuckle. I wasn't expecting to run into Jared again. And certainly wasn't expecting to hear that he was my dad's best friend! I had been too dumb to put two and two together. We were part of weddings, and he was close to my dad's age. There were too many coincidences.

"I can't believe this!" I groaned in despair.

Mandi jumped from her spot on the bed and stared at me. "What the heck was that for?"

I gave her a sheepish smile, "Sorry. I'm just a little frustrated."

"Did you run into that guy today? I know you left us when we got back." She climbed onto her hands and knees and crawled to the edge of the bed as if she was about to get the juiciest gossip ever, "Did you run off to have a quick fling?"

"No." I rolled my eyes. "I met with my dad."

"And?"

"And nothing. I caught up with him and that was it."

She rolled onto her back and gave a low hum as if not believing me, "Well, you should go find him. Get some stress out of you. Don't want that showing up in the wedding photos."

I turned away. I didn't want to tell her the one who could relieve that stress was my dad's best friend.

"You said your dad was out here?" I tried to change the subject.

"Yeah. He's not that close to anyone at the wedding, but he knows your dad. He needed to get out of the house too. He was wallowing in a lot of

despair," She let out a sigh. "He's probably still lying around in his room. He said he went out last night and grabbed a drink but knowing him he probably grabbed a whole bottle and is chugging it as we speak." Mandi rolled her eyes and sat back up. "I know you said you like the silver fox types, but I can guarantee with how much of a drunk my dad can be, and his anger issues, you'd finally find one you don't like."

I forced a laugh and shrugged, "Probably. Just because I like older men doesn't mean I'm going to fall over for all of them." Her saying that her dad was my dad's friend added more pieces to the puzzle that I didn't like. "Hey... I'm going to step outside and get some fresh air. Are you alright with figuring out dinner for yourself?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking pizza tonight. Nothing fancy after brunch. Just let it all go before passing out with some good sleep."

Something about the way she said it reminded me of the times I was left alone while my friends went out to a party. A part of me wanted to stay, but I also wanted to see Jared again. I promised myself I would stay behind at least one night while we were here. Tonight just wasn't that night.

"Good," I opened the door and glanced back at her, "Don't wait up for me."

She gave a wink and waved, "Don't keep his neighbors up either."

I mumbled my thanks and hurried out into the hall. Jared's room was only a few doors down from mine. I had a split chance of talking to him in private or possibly revealing my secret from the night before.

My heart pounded in my chest as I raised my hand to knock and pulled it back again.

Alright, Kim, you can do this. Just knock on his door. If he's with someone, just say you mixed up his room and my dad's. I can do that.

The room was silent beyond the door. He might not even be there. Maybe he had chosen to hang out with the other men for the evening instead of taking it easy again. I had to knock.

The rapping of my knuckle on the door was loud and thunderous compared to the silent hallway. I shuddered at the thought of someone else opening the door.

I knocked again. It echoed through my body as I tensed up, ready to dart back to my room.

Come on, Jared. Open the door, please.

I stepped back, ready to give up on talking with him, but then the

clacking of the lock inside caught my attention.

“Stupid door,” he grunted. “I’m coming. I’m coming.”

My stomach lurched and I took another step back. I could run away now and ignore the fact that I tried to see Jared. Pretend that everything that happened the night before was just a dream. Perhaps he didn't remember my face either and he thought he had just enjoyed a nice night with a stranger. He might not even want me to visit him again, but I needed to know for certain. We needed to clear the air between us before my desires caused me to do something stupid in front of everyone.

Jared cracked the door open and peeked through the slit in the door, “Kim?” He opened the door the rest of the way. “What are you doing here?” He hissed.

“I needed to talk to you.”

He had clearly just showered and had barely managed to slip on a pair of boxers before opening the door. His chest glistened with water droplets. In the dim light of his room, he was extremely attractive. The idea of continuing our fun again was fixed firmly in my mind. The fact that he chose to open the door while half-dressed was a good sign he felt the same way.

I pressed a hand on his chest, feeling the warmth and his heartbeat against my palm. He grabbed my wrist and pulled me inside and closed the door behind us.

“I get that, but what if someone was here?”

I shrugged, “I thought about that. I had backup plans.”

He sighed and shook his head, “I swear you’re so reckless.” Jared slumped into a chair and leaned his head back. “So, what did you want? Bribing me to not tell your dad?”

“No.”

I rolled my eyes and sat at the foot of his bed. The memories of the night before flooded my mind. There was no way I could ignore that evening. I leaned forward a little.

“I need to know what our plans are going forward. While I’m not exactly a fan of letting everyone know about our night, I’d rather we be on the same page and not surprise each other with the news in front of everyone.”

He crossed his arms and nodded, “You have a point, and I don’t disagree with wanting to let everyone know.”

“So, we keep it a secret and pretend as if nothing happened?”

Jared remained silent.

“Or we could just stay quiet and continue having fun until we have to return to reality, return home?”

His brows twitched as if he was considering the offer for a moment before returning to his stoic nature again. I wished I could understand what he was thinking.

He sighed and pushed off the chair. “It’s better if we just pretend nothing happened for both our sakes.” He reached around me and grabbed a shirt. The scent of his soap drove me wild. I squirmed a little at how close he was to me, “So, we’ll remain as we were when your dad introduced us. Just a familiar friend.”

His voice gave away that what he was saying, wasn’t really what he wanted. I wasn’t going to argue it. I was at odds myself, so having him decide for us was a better option.

Before Jared could pull away from me, I reached for his face and cupped his cheek in my hand. He stayed like that, staring into my eyes.

“I can pretend all I want, but that night will still be fresh in my mind.”

I stretched up to kiss him, parting my lips just slightly so I could fully taste him. He moved his hands to my shoulders and deepened the kiss for a moment longer before pulling away.

“Damnit, no, we can’t do this.” He moved away from me, “You’re really nice, but I just can’t do anything with you anymore. Trust me, you don’t want to be around me more than you need to. I’m...” He bit his lip as he tried to figure out the best word to use, “I’m broken. Every woman that gets close to me, I just fuck it up and hurt them.”

I took his hands in mine and looked him in the eyes, “I don’t think you’re broken. You just haven’t fully healed from whatever has hurt you so much.”

He shook his head and pulled away again, “I doubt I’ll heal. There’s a lot about me that you don’t know and I’m good at keeping it that way. Makes ending this week a lot easier for the both of us.”

His constant pushing was grinding on the back of my mind, but I needed to accept it. I agreed to let him make the decision when I couldn’t make one.

“Fine,” I sighed and stood up. “But I still don’t think you’re as bad as you make it sound.” I squeezed his hands, “You’re not a bad person, you’ve just had some rough patches in life.”

Jared shrugged and pulled away. “Maybe, but I’d rather not hurt you. Especially when it means I’m also hurting my only friend in the process.”

There wasn’t much more I could do to convince him to acknowledge my

thoughts. He needed the time to see he wasn't a bad guy.

"Fine. But life is too short for you to dwell on the past. If you don't do it for me, then do it for Mandi."

His face twitched again, "So, you figured that out, eh?"

I shrugged, "It doesn't take a genius when there aren't very many choices."

He chuckled and shook his head, "Well, you best get out of here before someone wonders. Terrence is already talking to the others about our escapade from the night before." His cheeks had a slight tint of red on them.

"Too bad we can't give them a second show." I chuckled and stood up on my toes to place a small kiss on his cheek. "It was a pleasure to know you, Jared. Perhaps one day we could reexplore this thing once more."

His body tensed as he grabbed me.

"Fuck," he growled and dropped his head.

JARED

Her scent was intoxicating. Everything about her made me want to pin her on the bed and take her then and there. I needed to remember to keep calm. I couldn't show her I was interested anymore.

The final kiss she planted on my cheek sent every part of my body ablaze. "Fuck," I growled.

She pulled away and gave me a quizzical look at me, "Are you alright?"

I shook my head and pressed my forehead into her shoulder. The sweet mix of sweat and perfume on her skin devoured my thoughts. My hands moved to her waist, keeping her close to me.

"God damn it. Why could we not have met in the first place at the club? Things would be so much easier."

I tightened my grip so she would move. She put a hand on my cheek again as she had before. I refused to let her go. She was mine by right. There wasn't any reason to deny me that.

"It's your choice. I'm fine with it."

Her soothing voice had the opposite effect on me as it sent shivers down my spine. I wanted to hear that voice with her bent over the bed.

I gritted my teeth, "You're not the best at helping me stick to my decision."

"Then make the decision you want to make. None of them are wrong."

I pulled her closer to my body. My cock was already hard from being so close to her. It didn't matter what decision I made tonight, I wasn't going to end it with regrets. I would claim her fully.

I led her to the bed and pushed her onto her back. A low growl erupted

from deep within me. Carnal desires were all I could think about. To spread her legs open and take her all night long.



I HELD my arms out for Jared to come closer. I didn't expect him to want this given how much he had fought against it, but there was no stopping it either. This was what we both wanted.

He leaned down, bringing my nipple into his mouth. His tongue rolled over it with occasional flicks. A gasp escaped my lips with every rotation. I folded my fingers through his thick hair, holding him in place.

My pussy clenched and quivered as I ached to feel him inside me again. To fill me. I wanted to be his.

"Please," I begged in a faint whisper. "I want you."

"You can wait a little longer this time," he said. "I want to make sure you're completely satisfied tonight before I have my fun."

He grabbed my hips and slid me closer to the edge of the bed and sat on the floor between my legs. I closed my eyes as the heat rose to my cheeks. I was like an inexperienced girl having sex for the first time with the way he looked at me with hunger in his eyes.

Jared licked his lips and lowered himself onto my clit. His tongue rolled around it, sending shocks of electricity through my body. My back arched as I tried to wrangle through the sensations and maintain some semblance of connection to the present.

My voice echoed through the group as his mouth continued to explore my folds.

"Jared!" I gasped as he finally slowed down.

"Too much? I can stop." Something in his voice told me he wouldn't stop if I said no. I refused to say no either.

"I- please..." It was all I could manage to say.

"As you wish, princess."

He chuckled and slipped a finger inside me, then another. His two fingers curled inward, hitting just the right spot. I moaned, gripping the sheets to steady myself.

"Good girl. Let me do all the work tonight."

He pressed another finger from his other hand on my clit, moving it in

circles opposite the timing of the two inside me. The erratic motions made it impossible to focus on anything. The movements were too much.

Heat erupted in my thighs, moving closer to my stomach as I felt the orgasm inch closer.

“Jared,” I moaned softly.

“Just like that. It’s ok. Let yourself go, baby girl.”

His nicknames for me, along with the gentle voice as he destroyed me were too much. My pussy clenched around his fingers and pulsed as the orgasm washed over my entire body. My legs quivered as I rode the pleasure.

Once my body finally relaxed, he pulled his fingers out and smiled.

“Good girl. Now you can get your dessert.”

He rolled me onto my side and lifted one of my legs onto his shoulder, “Don’t be too loud or we might have someone checking on us.” He smirked down at me, “Unless you want an audience to know how much you want my cock in you.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could utter a word, he pushed himself deep inside me. Whatever I had planned to say changed into a quick scream of pleasure as he hit the back of me.

“Fuck!” he grunted. “You’re so tight.”

I whimpered an acknowledgment between moans as he pounded inside me.

Jared grabbed my wrists to hold me in place and used them to pull himself deeper inside of me. The angle was too much, and another orgasm flooded through me. I clenched onto his cock as I screamed out his name again and again.

He didn't stop moving in and out as my inner walls tried to pull him deeper. As the quakes slowed down, he slowly pulled out.

I let out a whimper, not wanting it to stop.

"Don't worry, baby girl. We're not done yet."

He turned me onto my stomach and pulled my ass into the air. His cock pressed back inside me, once more pushing against me, trying to get as deep as he possibly could. He took one hand and trailed it across my ass before sliding into my asshole. A sudden gasp filled my lungs before I exhaled and rode the newfound discovery. My back arched, inviting him to keep going.

He pulled his hand away and grabbed my wrists so I was hovering in the air with only his strength keeping me upright. He let go with one hand and spanked my ass. My screams grew louder as I clenched around him once

more. I wanted him to cum, to fill me up.

"Please. I want to feel you," I managed to breathe.

"Kim!" he grunted as he came inside me.

He stood me up a little higher, until I was sitting on him. He turned my face closer to his and kissed me. His tongue wrapped around mine as his cock pulsed deep inside me. I wrapped a hand around his neck to catch my breath and hold myself steady. Our bodies were drenched in glistening sweat. His scent sent my mind spinning with a deep desire to continue despite my body not having any more strength to go on.

"I'm going to miss this," Jared whispered. His voice was raspy and out of breath.

"It doesn't have to end."

His face drooped and he let out a heavy sigh, "You're an addiction, I swear."

WE LAY next to one another on the bed. I lay under his arm while he held onto the remote. He flipped through a multitude of channels to find something to watch. None of it caught my eye and it didn't seem like anything was interesting for him either.

"They've really destroyed the idea of something good to watch anymore," he sighed and stopped at a movie from the 90's. "Guess we can leave this on for some white noise."

His fingers stroked through my hair. The tingling sensation relaxed my muscles even more and I closed my eyes. I could sleep like this without a care in the world. It didn't matter anymore how uncomfortable the beds were compared to the ones I had at home. The musky scent of Jared so close to me was enough to set my mind at ease.

KIM

A loud pounding on the door stirred me awake.

“Mandi, can you get that? I need to sleep.”

I rolled over and tossed my arm over one of the pillows. It felt warm. Too warm. My eyes shot open, and I sat up. Jared lay next to me, still in a deep sleep.

“Shit! This isn’t my room,” I shook Jared to wake him up. “Someone’s at the door.”

He groaned and rolled over, “Ten more minutes.”

I rolled my eyes and climbed out of bed and gathered my clothes. There wasn’t enough time to put all of it on so I slid into my shirt and pajama pants while tucking my bra and panties in one of the empty drawers.

“Wake up, Jared!” I hissed and kicked the side of the bed.

The person outside knocked again, “Dad? Are you in there?”

“Mandi!” I squeaked. This wasn’t the best time for her to know I left last night to see her *dad* of all people.

I scanned the room. There weren’t many places where I could hide from her. The beds were flush to the floor and the bathroom would be an easy way for her to walk in on me if she needed to use it. I didn’t have much of a choice and darted into the closet.

With the suit on one side and the ironing board on the other, it was impossible to find a comfortable place to stand. The safe at my feet meant I couldn’t sit down either. Jared would owe me big time for this.

“Dad!” Mandi yelled and pounded on the door a third time. “Are you alright?”

Jared stirred with a loud groan, "I'm coming. I'm coming." His heavy footsteps through the room passed by me, as he opened the door. "What?"

"You look drunk, dad," Mandi sounded concerned.

I pressed my ear against the door and held my breath.

"Didn't get much sleep," he closed the door behind them. "Damn bed is lumpy."

"Really? It's much more comfortable than the rock you usually sleep on."

He grunted. The bed creaked once and then a second time as if both were sitting next to one another.

"Did you need something?"

Mandi didn't answer for a few seconds, "It's about Kim."

My heart skipped a beat. I wasn't sure if I should be listening to the conversation.

"What about her?" he clicked his tongue. "Does she snore or fart in her sleep?"

I wanted to smack him. An audible thud let me know Mandi did it for me.

"No. She left last night and hasn't come back."

He grunted, "Did she miss some big event you girls are going to?"

"No, not yet. But we plan on going to the rehearsal soon, and she needs to be there."

"Well, I'm sure she'll turn up eventually. Did you call her?"

I chewed on my thumbnail. There was no way he would suggest she do something like that right now. My phone was still on the nightstand. If she called it, I would immediately be caught. Or at least, he would be questioned about why he had my phone in his room. I wasn't sure how good of a liar he was.

"I forgot my phone."

A sigh of relief escapes my lips before I can catch myself. Fear jolted through me as I slammed my hand onto my mouth and bumped into the suit next to me.

"What was that?"

The bed squeaked, and the footsteps grew closer to the closet. I wasn't sure if it was Mandi or Jared at this point. My muscles screamed at me as they tightened in fear. I had to prevent myself from breathing too hard and getting noticed.

The door cracked open, pouring light inside and coating my leg in the potential danger zone. Jared slipped his head inside the closet. His gaze first

showed signs of puzzlement as he furrowed his brow and tightened his lips before relaxing once more. Our eyes met and for a moment, we came to the realization and acknowledgment of how dangerous a situation we were both in.

"Just the ironing board. Must have put it at an awkward angle so it hit the suit," he closed the closet and pressed his back to the door. "If I see her, I'll tell her you're looking for her."

Mandi sighed and climbed off the bed. She walked past Jared and opened the door. "Thanks, dad. I appreciate it." She stopped before leaving the room completely. "Oh, I almost forgot. After the rehearsal, we plan on having a small engagement party." She paused, "Don't bring up business, got it?"

"Fine, fine. I'll make sure no politics or money talk at the table," his voice was laced with irritation. "You'll have everyone else keeping an eye on me too."

"I mean it, dad. If you mess this up, I can't save you this time."

"I get it," he growled. "Look, I've been plenty sober for a while now. Stop trying to be a mother and be my daughter for once. I'm not going to get angry at the table."

"That's what you told mom."

"Keep mom out of this!" something in his voice turned cold. I backed into the corner of the closet as if he were talking to me instead of Mandi. "I get enough about her from the anger management classes. Let this just be a nice vacation for me for both of us."

The door closed without either of them saying goodbye to one another. He didn't open the closet door either but shuffled back to the bed and collapsed into it.

I waited a few more seconds before opening the door and walking back into the room. My body ached from standing still for so long in a cramped closet. I felt like a high schooler hiding away at a boyfriend's house, instead of a grown woman. I stretched out my shoulders and glanced at Jared collapsed on the bed.

"She really cares about you."

He rolled his head over to look at me from the corner of his eyes, "You going to lecture me now too?"

"No, I'm not. She means well though. I can tell you both worry for one another, and you've been through a lot." I sat next to him and intertwined my fingers with his, "I can't say much since I'm not a mom, and my relationship

with my dad isn't like what you have with Mandi, but I think you both have something that's truly strengthening. Don't ruin it because of a fight like this, alright?"

He grumbled something under his breath and rolled onto his back, "I'm sorry you had to hear all that." The darkness in the corners of his face deepened as mental exhaustion took over. "You really shouldn't have been involved with that."

I shrugged, "It's not your fault and I'm not upset about it. Not a fan of having to hide in the closet, but that's my fault for sleeping in your room again."

He chuckled and shook his head, "You've slept in here more times than you've slept in your room at this point. I don't think they spent their money well."

We grew silent for a moment, just staying still with our fingers locked together. The quiet of the aftermath was needed for him to process his anger and for me not to show irritation when I was still aching.

Jared was the first to speak the quiet parts of our thoughts out loud, "So will this be the end of things?"

"Maybe. I'm too old to be sneaking around, and you're stressing yourself out too much from it too."

He shook his head and closed his eyes. A sense of youth coated his face as he smiled to himself, "It does give me energy though. Just acting like I was young again. You don't get this much when you're working all the time. There are no college parties to crash or climb into someone's window with the only repercussions being someone yelling at you later that day. Back then, if you did something stupid like that, you lost your income and credibility. That was your livelihood and you had to grow up fast or be chewed up just as quickly."

"Must have been rough," I waved my free hand in the air. "Granted, I didn't go out partying like that when I was younger, but I also didn't have to worry about forgoing a paycheck for it either. More like I might spend the night drunk at someone's house and not remember how I got there or sleeping in until it was almost dinner time."

"So, then this is farewell?"

I shook my head and squeezed his hand tighter, "No. This is fun. We just have to be more careful next time." I stood up and grabbed my panties and bra out from the drawer. My phone was the last thing I grabbed, shoving it in

my pocket so I wouldn't forget it. "Perhaps we can try out some more skills with that tongue of yours again. Or see what else you can do with that experience of yours."

I winked and turned away before I could see his reaction. He would try and argue with me again about how he wasn't worthy of any attention from me, or something else like his anger or previous problems with alcohol. They might have been true at one point, but the Jared I had seen over the last few days didn't seem to be *that* Jared. He was a different person, and the one I truly believed he was deep down, only if he gave it a chance, and not keep it stuck in his own shadow.

"Don't get into too much trouble," he called out as I stepped out into the hall.

I let out a sigh of relief as the events of the night and morning, came crashing down on me. I was ready to call it a day if it wasn't for the rehearsal that was supposedly going to happen later. I probably missed more events on the itinerary by sleeping in too and going missing.

The room was dark when I walked in. Only the light of the television playing some old black and white film gave a sign that Mandi was in here earlier.

"Sorry," I muttered to the room. "Guess I really suck as a roommate." I tossed the panties and bra off on the collection of dirty clothes. I needed to find a laundry bag tonight to collect my clothes in instead of the doom pile I was accumulating. It wasn't exactly like a resort would carry laundry baskets for every room, but it would have been nice, instead of trying to figure out what to do with my clothes every day.

The door clicked and opened, "Oh!"

I jumped and snapped around. A sigh of relief caught in my throat as I realized it was Mandi at the door, "You scared me!" I heaved.

"There you are! I was trying to call you."

I tapped to unlock my phone, but it was completely dead. It wouldn't have mattered if she had tried to call me earlier when I was in Jared's room. She wouldn't have known it was my phone. I cursed myself for getting scared about it earlier.

"Sorry. I forgot to charge it."

She shrugged, "Don't worry about it. We have a rehearsal this evening and we're supposed to go shopping this afternoon." She walked over to her bed and flipped her suitcase open. "We have some time before then. Did you

want to start unpacking with me and get ourselves settled?" She gave me a weak smile. It was obvious her conversation with Jared was still on her mind, but I couldn't tell her I knew about it. "I haven't made myself at home since I've been busy."

"Yeah. Let's do that," I reached into my suitcase and stacked everything as nicely as I could on the bed. Mandi was doing the same, but was obviously trapped in her thoughts. "So, your dad is friends with my dad?" I hoped the question was the right way to go about this. Talking about him in a positive light would possibly change her mood and pull her away from the negative thoughts.

"Yeah, they go way back. Didn't realize it was your dad though until recently. It would have been hilarious to know my classmate was my dad's best friend's daughter. Then again, because of moving with the Navy and my mom fighting over custody, it wasn't like I was in class long enough for us to get that close either."

"Could you imagine though?" I closed my eyes and imagined how dorky I was back then and how socially backward I had been, Like so many other teenagers at that age. "You might have started dating my brother, and instead of it being Amanda, you would have been the fiancée."

Mandi made what sounded like a combination of a choke, gag, and laugh all at once. "Date your brother? As if. I'm sorry, Kim, but between us, I don't think your brother is all that attractive."

I give a mocking pout, "But he looks so much like me. Are you saying I'm ugly too?"

"No!" she said with a sarcastic tone. "But that's my point. You both look too much alike. I'd feel like I was kissing a scruffy version of you."

I laughed and tossed two shirts into a drawer, "Yeah, he was pretty scruffy back then."

"More like trying to grow as much of a beard as he could muster."

"Hey now, he was proud of those baby hairs."

"All boys were. Didn't make it attractive."

I raised a pretend glass, "I can say amen to that."

We both burst out into laughter. Tears welled at the corners of my eyes and my stomach started to hurt from how hard I was laughing, "Alright, I think it's about time we stop talking shit about the groom-to-be. It's probably bad luck or something."

"Probably," Mandi finished putting her last pair of pants inside her

drawer. "Guess you need to take a shower?" she gave a slight knowing smirk. "I'm sure you smell enough like the mystery guy from last night since you were gone all night."

I blushed and turned away, "You're probably right." The idea of smelling like Jared was appealing, but also terrifying at the same time. Especially if she recognized her father's cologne. "Yeah, I'll hop in the shower for a minute. You ok with waiting for me?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

I STOOD in the middle of the racks with arms full of different shirts and dresses. Since none of the clothes fit my style, I became everyone else's assistant while they shopped. So much of it was them deciding it wasn't flattering enough or showing off too much skin. The last part didn't make much sense to me until one of the bridesmaids came out screaming that she could practically glow in the dark with how pale her legs were.

"It's not that bad," I tried to reassure her.

She shook her head and ran back into the dressing room and tossed the dress over the door. "No, I'll stick with something a bit longer."

I sighed and shook my head, "I'm glad you chose for us to wear something long, Amanda. Not sure how we would survive everyone glowing at night while taking evening pictures."

Amanda laughed and took some of the clothes out of my hands. She wasn't spending much on the shopping either since she planned to go on an extended honeymoon with Carl later and they needed to save some of their money.

"I would have paid for everyone to get spray tans if it was needed. Don't worry. I'm not going to make anyone uncomfortable during the wedding."

I could respect Amanda for her consideration of our comfort. This was meant to be her big day with Carl, but she had still made time and room for everyone to feel at peace at the wedding. She was the complete opposite of a bridezilla, who hated if someone even had a piece of hair out of place or gained a few extra pounds before the wedding.

"Amanda!" her mom yelled from across the store. "We need to get going."

We all looked at our watches and phones at the same time, as if we needed to confirm with her the time. At that moment, there was a silent

acknowledgment between everyone. I tossed the clothes I was still holding, onto a rack by the changing room for the employees to sort through while everyone else hurried to the checkout counter to finish paying for the clothes they had picked out.

I met everyone outside in front of the store, still trying to catch my breath. While most days it would have been ok to take our time leaving the store, the rehearsal wasn't something we could be late for. We had a specific block of time for it, before the area would be opened back up to the public. At that point, it would be easier to just play pretend in the ballroom at the resort instead of outside.

Unlike yesterday when we had the limo, today our rides involved an oversized white van that Amanda's mom drove. It wasn't exactly cost-efficient to spend the entire week going around in a limo with a personal driver. The van was more accommodating, especially when we wanted to be more flexible with our time or go off to other places, or if we wanted to park anywhere. You couldn't exactly park a limo comfortably in smaller parking lots, or places that were over-packed.

I sat toward the back so the others could squeeze in after me. Amanda sat in the front with her mom. Her aviator sunglasses hid almost half her face and gave off a look of royalty despite where we were. I was almost jealous she could present herself that way while I was awkwardly stuffed like a sardine with the other girls.

The drive wasn't too bad. Most of us listened to some older music from the 80's and 90's while singing along together. The buildings slowly turned from plain brick buildings to more beach house styles. I stared at them all in wonder, imagining myself staying in one of them, just steps from the beach, and waking up every morning, to almost always sunny weather.

We pulled off into an oversized parking lot and a sigh of relief passed through the van as we realized we were finally there.

"Ok ladies, we don't have much time to rehearse," Amanda's mom turned a little so she could see most of us from the driver's seat. "So we need to get this taken care of so we can leave. I don't need to be attacked by sand from kids running around. Leave that for our beach day." A small smile spread across her face, crinkling the corners of her eyes before she put on her pair of aviators that matched Amanda's.

I didn't let it slip that she was excited about a full day at the beach. If we ended up relaxing on the beach later and she got some sand on her, I'd remind

her about what she said today. She needed to learn to relax when she wanted something and not overstress herself and lie about what she wanted. Not exactly something I was good at either.

We made our way to a small patch of beach next to the shoreline. The smell of saltwater pulled me into a sense of relaxation I hadn't realized was missing all week. Our section was tied off with ropes that stretched to the back of the beach where the parking lot met the sand. The altar where the bride and groom would get married wasn't up yet. Instead, there was a large stick standing straight up out of the sand to symbolize its placement.

"Ok ladies," Amanda's mom called out again. "The boys should be here any minute, so let's make sure we're ready because you know they won't sit still and wait for us to be ready."

"Who is coming here?" Mandi asked.

Amanda's mom shrugged. "They didn't say. If you mean, is your dad going to be here, he probably will. I asked Carl not to let him feel left out during all of this. Even if he's not involved in the rehearsal, he should be here to enjoy some time with us."

My breath caught in my chest. I wasn't expecting Jared to be here today. I thought today was going to be an entire day I could force myself not to think of him. Instead, we were going to be placed in the most dangerous position possible. I had to figure out the best way to acknowledge him. There was no way I could behave coldly toward him without arousing suspicion, but I also couldn't be too friendly and have people wonder what was happening when we had only met for a few minutes the day before.

"Are you feeling alright?" Mandi asked, wrapping her arm around mine. "You look a bit pale."

I shook my head, "No, I'm just..." I needed to think of a good lie. "I'm just nervous for everyone is all. It's a big day and we're expected to remember everything after a few practice rounds. It's intimidating, you know?"

In truth, I wasn't worried about the rehearsal. Almost every wedding was the same. The groom walked out with his groomsmen, and a flower girl sometimes came in with the bridesmaids and the bride followed close behind. Then they had a ring bearer that came in whenever the couple wished him to enter if he did enter. I didn't need to worry about what everyone else was doing. I just needed to memorize what I had to do and if everyone else did the same, the whole ceremony would unfold without a problem.

"Take a deep breath, I'm here for you if you need some water or to sit

down somewhere."

I smiled and patted Mandi's hand. I was lucky to have her here. Even if we hadn't been close friends in school, I almost wished we were. She was a good friend and Amanda obviously saw the same qualities in her, that I did.

Another white van pulled in next to ours and the men poured out as if it was a clown car with never-ending riders inside. Jared and Maurice were the first to come out. Both of them were filled with smiles and laughter. I turned to look away from them and took a deep breath. I needed to keep my cool. It was now or never.

"Sorry sweetheart," Carl called out to Amanda. "Things got a little crazy with traffic on our way out here. We're not too late, are we?"

"No, you're fine," Amanda replied. They hugged each other and gave a quick peck. "We need to finish though. I'm sure the city won't wait for us to finish if we take too much time."

Amanda's mom led everyone toward the back of the beach and lined everyone up, one after the other. She slid a foot through the sand to portray a wall that would be set up here tomorrow. Both parties wouldn't be able to see the other side to give the illusion of separate rooms.

Jared sat on a stone block by the parking lot and watched from afar. I tried not to pay him too much attention. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary either to not focus on him since we were all trying to keep in step with one another. The saltwater mixed with being around so many people I cared about made the moment much more relaxing. I could see why Amanda wanted to have her wedding on the beach.

Unlike other weddings I had attended, the groomsmen and bridesmaids all walked down the aisle at the same time. Each of us had a partner to walk with hand in hand. I didn't know the groomsmen I was partnered with, that well. It was one of Carl's friends, but I had only met him once or twice before.

I wrapped my arm around his and we walked in sync with one another down the aisle. He placed his other hand on mine and gave it a quick squeeze.

"You ok?" he whispered.

I nodded, "Doing just fine." I sucked in a deep breath. "Just trying not to mess up."

"Totally get that. Want to grab a drink later?"

"No, thank you. I'm good."

We parted ways before he could push it further. I wasn't interested in him

in the slightest. He was completely the opposite of my type. He was too baby-faced, and if he was anything like Carl, he was probably more interested in video games than anything I could latch onto, as a shared interest.

As we stood on either side of the altar, pretending we were holding onto flowers, I glanced down at Jared who was staring hard at the groomsman whom I had walked down the aisle with. I wanted to groan at the jealousy he was showing but kept it inside. He could have his jealousy if he wanted. It didn't change how the wedding would be performed.

"You were all perfect," her mom said with a sigh. "Oh, I wish I could be in your shoes. You will look so beautiful during the ceremony."

We all relaxed as soon as she gave the sign that we were done. The staff was already moving the ropes away and people were slowly getting closer to us now that the area wasn't closed off. We didn't have time to have another run out here. Whatever form we were in, that was what it would look like on the day of.

"Let's all grab some dinner tonight and celebrate a job well done."

She said it like we should be surprised about the engagement meal, but we played along with it. It made her happy and made Amanda happy too. Jared joined us now that we were done and gave a side-eyed look of malice toward my groomsman partner, before looking over at me and smiling. Mandi gave him a wave which gave me a chance to pretend he was smiling at her. Staying close to Mandi would give me another reason to hide any looks he threw my way, and let the others confuse his friendliness with him being nice to a friend of his daughter.

JARED

I sipped on my drink as everyone yelled at one another from across the table. The smell of salt was still fresh on our clothes and the itchiness of the sand wasn't improving my mood. They managed to fit me next to Maurice while the rest of the wedding party sat toward the other end of the table.

The restaurant was busier than we all expected. It wasn't exactly my choice of meal for a dinner. I would have covered everyone, but once again, Mandi refused to let me do anything. If it were any other day, I would have ignored her requests, but this was her friend's wedding. Not mine. Instead, they chose a more affordable place that was a combination of a hibachi and buffet-style place I had never been to. I couldn't even recall the name of the restaurant since my focus was mostly on Kim.

Mandi and Kim sat together with the rest of the bridesmaids and Amanda, while the groomsmen sat on the other side. At least they were mindful of sitting them separately. Still, seeing the one groomsman that partnered with Kim earlier didn't sit well with me.

I tried to shove the annoyance deep inside, but it wasn't going well. Instead, it rattled in the back of my mind like a wild animal trapped in a cage.

"Jared? Jared!" Maurice called out and pushed my shoulder. "Are you ok?"

I jumped and shook my head, "Hm? Oh, yeah, I'm good. Sorry, I was lost in thought."

"Don't worry about it. I get it. Being out here has probably been rough," he grabbed an oversized bite of chicken. "Like I was telling them, it's nice we

all got to come out here to enjoy the celebration without being part of the wedding party."

I grunted and took a bite of the strange concoction of noodles and teriyaki sauce with the multitude of vegetables I had chosen for my meal, "Yeah. It's good for my mental health."

Maurice nudged me with his elbow, "From what I've heard, it's been more than your mental health that's had a boost this week." A sly smile crossed his face, "So, you gonna tell us who the lucky lady is?"

I shook my head. There was no way I'd be telling my best friend that his daughter was the one sneaking into my room every evening.

Kim glanced up at us and gave a quick smile and wave. Maurice returned the wave. "Those girls are something else with how much energy they have. Hard to believe they're all growing up. I'm sure you're excited for Mandi to find someone to fall in love with. I know I want Kim to find someone, but she always seems picky with the guys she goes out with." He sighed and shook his head, "I swear, I can never get a firm grasp on what's going on in her head. You get it, right?"

I nodded and refocused on my food. I had a firm grasp on many things when it came to Kim, but they weren't what I wanted to say out loud.

"So..." I tried to steer the conversation away from me as naturally as I could. "Who do you want Kim to find? She's a nice girl, so I'm sure you have some high standards."

Maurice shrugged and sipped on his margarita. His face scrunched up for a split second before settling down again, "I just want her to find a guy she can be happy with. Maybe one with a good head on his shoulders. She's strong-willed and likes to dig her heels in when she doesn't like something." He took another sip, "Not many could keep up with her though. So I'm keeping my standards at a bare minimum for her. You?"

I mulled over the thought. I hadn't thought much about who I would want Mandi to be with. She was a good girl who deserved the best, but I never imagined what the best was. "There was a boy she was dating in college. He seemed to be a good kid. Didn't have her daddy's rage, which I hope she continues to make sure she doesn't find."

Amanda's mom, who found herself close to us instead of the rest of the wedding party giggled and slapped me on the arm. I stiffened and took a deep breath. She wasn't trying to attack me. I wasn't in danger. I continued my mantra to avoid snapping.

"You boys are being too serious," her voice slurred. Too much alcohol. She was supposed to be the girls' designated driver and I wasn't sure any of them would be sober enough to drive tonight. "Girls will go after a boy that reminds them of their father almost every time. Those good traits you showed them, of how a man should be shape their tastes."

"You're right. My wife loves to tell me all the time that I'm almost exactly like her dad." He rolled his eyes. "Not always a good thing though when she wanted me to shut up," he started to laugh again. "Could you imagine Kim choosing someone like me? I don't think I want to imagine a younger version of me parading around. Got enough of that from Carl when he was growing up."

Amanda's mom waved a hand in the air, "From what I hear, Kim's looking more for someone older, so you don't need to worry about a young boy walking around."

I choke on my drink and thump on my chest trying to clear my throat. "What?" I gasped through coughs.

"Mom!" Amanda hissed from across the table. "We can hear you. How much have you been drinking?"

She shrugged and took another sip of her drink, "Maybe my third glass? So what? I can enjoy myself too."

Amanda rolled her eyes and turned back to Carl and the others. "I swear, she gets like this whenever she gets tired of being uptight and then loses all control."

"Better to loosen up after keeping everyone on schedule. I successfully did it."

I turned back to Maurice to see if he had caught what her mom said, "You ok, Moe?"

He raised a brow, "Yeah, I'm good. She must be drunk or something because I don't think I've ever heard her talking about liking older men before. Not sure how I'd feel if I heard her dating someone my age or close to."

I went silent. I was the older man she was into. It wasn't like I minded the age gap. She was a full-grown adult and I never knew her as a kid either, so there wasn't anything wrong with our relationship. But the way Maurice talked about his daughter seeing someone like me, didn't settle well in my stomach.

"I think I'm going to get some air," I muttered and stood up.

"Need someone to go with you?" Maurice grabbed my arm to stop me. "I can come out if you want."

"Nah, I'm good. I think being around so many people is just grating on me."

"Don't go wandering off. We're going to head back to the resort after this."

I nodded and walked over to our waitress. She was stressed by how large our group was. I could see it in her dilated pupils and heavy breathing. Even the way she approached us with a slight reservation in her steps showed how unwilling she was to keep going after a long day. I could understand it. You could only do a good job for so long before the chaos of a wedding party just tipped you over on a social battery and made you want to go scream in a closed room.

"Can you drop off a box for me? I'll be back in a minute." I didn't wait for her to respond and walked out of the restaurant.

The cool night air brushed against my face as I let out a sigh of relief. The sound of cars was distant on the highway down the road. Most of the stores neighboring the restaurant were already closing for the evening. I checked my watch. Close to 8 in the evening. The restaurant would be open for another two hours, and at the rate, everyone was going we were probably going to be there until closing time despite the claims otherwise. I wasn't sure how long I could be in there watching Kim so close and yet so far away while the man who held her close during the rehearsal could stay around her as nothing happened.

I moved over to a bench on the side of the building that was a bit cooler and shaded by the setting sun. It didn't look like anyone would wander around here, so I wasn't too worried. Not like they could do much. I might have retired, but the idea of disarming someone was still a muscle memory that would never go away.

"Jared?" Kim asked from around the corner.

"Over here," I responded without thinking. I cursed myself for saying anything when I should have kept my distance.

Kim walked around the building and sat on the bench next to me. The perfume she had on was different from the night before. More like a flower early in bloom. I breathed in her soft scent and let out a heavy sigh.

"You should get back inside before they notice you're with me."

She shook her head and sidled closer, "They're not talking about anything

interesting. Just about what they're most excited about with the wedding or what Carl wanted to do for the honeymoon," she turned to me. "I'd rather talk with you."

Her hand slid across her lap and brushed against the outside of my thigh. I raised my hand to put it on top of hers but stopped myself. If anyone caught us, I didn't want to be the reason they found out about our relationship. I wanted to be as close as I could to her, but at the same time, there was a distance I needed to maintain for both of us. If she wanted to change that, it was her choice.

"About earlier..." she pulled her hand back and folded her hands together. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Earlier?" I raised a brow and leaned back, trying to think of which earlier she was referencing specifically.

"During the rehearsal. You looked angry about something."

"Oh..." my voice trailed off and I closed my eyes. "No, I'm fine. I'm an old man who doesn't like to share is all. You get like that sometimes and have to learn the difference between sharing and just a person doing what they're supposed to do, is all."

She covered her mouth and let out a small giggle, "Sharing? So you were jealous after all." She nudged me with her shoulder. "I thought you were, but I didn't get a chance to ask. Don't be jealous. He's nothing like the type of guy I like anyway," she made a small gagging noise. "He tried to ask me out for drinks too and I turned him down." She put her hand back close to my thigh again. "You don't have to worry about anything this week. We're our own people and we can enjoy being around one another while out here."

"Yeah," I muttered. "Then once we get back we'll be nothing more than strangers again."

"Or... we could end up being more after that. The fun doesn't have to end just because we don't have a hotel room to hide behind."

My hand slid over to hers without me realizing it and intertwined with her fingers. The soft movements of her chest and the cool silence between us made any thoughts of rage and stress almost immediately vanish again. With her, I was like a new person. The feral beast quieted for the first time in years and I could focus on something I truly wanted.

I lifted her chin with my other hand, so we were looking at one another, "I swear, you will be the death of me with how addictive you are."

"I think you have it wrong on who is the addictive one," she smirked and

leaned closer to me. "I wish we could have these moments last just a little longer."

"We could. I could take you anywhere in the world with me and we would never have to worry about anyone interrupting us. I could take you in the middle of the beach and no one would be around."

I closed my eyes and leaned into her. I lowered my hand, finding her waist to keep her close. The soft touch of her skin under my hands sent my body ablaze and yearning to take her once more. I couldn't recall the last time I felt this much passion for someone and didn't want to let her go.

"Jared," she whispered in a low tone. "Please." Something in her voice made me shiver in excitement.

I moved my other hand to her breast and gently squeezed, "I want you," I growled. My desire for her was overtaking my mind. I couldn't ignore the fact that we were still in public, but I also wanted to feel all of her then and now. The lights were going dark. No one would see us if we were careful and quick. And yet the logical part of my brain fought for control and stopped me from going too far.

"Kim?" Mandi called out from the restaurant.

"Shit," Kim cursed and pulled away. She gave me one final smirk and wink, "Perhaps we can continue this another time?" She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, "I can't wait for us to have some more time to ourselves without interruptions." She stood up and adjusted her clothes. "Coming!" Kim ran around the corner and disappeared into the setting light of the sun.

"Where've you been? Everyone was looking for you when you said you were going to the bathroom and we didn't see you there."

"Sorry. I wanted to check on your dad since I was up. Didn't want to ruin everyone's fun."

"Oh, whatever. You know you wouldn't interrupt anything," she clicked her tongue like I knew she did whenever she was genuinely concerned but didn't want to vocalize her true feelings. She did that so often when I was first breaking my drinking habits and dealing with anger problems. "Is he... Is my dad doing alright?"

"Yeah, he's fine. I think he just really needed some fresh air. Don't blame him. Being out here, the smell of all the food and alcohol isn't nearly as overwhelming anymore."

"You're right. It's not nearly as bad," she sucked in a deep breath. "Alright, fine. But you should go inside. I think your brother wanted to talk to

you about something. I'll check in with my dad."

"Good luck. He might bite your head off with how grumpy he was when he left."

"Don't worry, I've dealt with the worst sides of him before."

They both chuckled as they walked past one another. I listened in as Kim walked back inside the restaurant and Mandi came closer.

"Dad?"

"I'm over here!" I stretched out a little and adjusted my pants to hide the hard-on I still had from being with Kim. I was all too thankful for the darkness of the alley to hide any clues of what happened.

Kim stepped around the building. A crease of concern coated her forehead. "Are you doing ok?"

I shook my head, "I'm fine. Barely drank anything either. You can check my drink if you don't believe me."

She sat next to me and clutched her knees, "About Kim."

I stiffened. I wasn't sure if Mandi knew and had just pretended to be ignorant. I was ready for whatever she had to say.

"She's been running off almost every night to see some guy and I'm worried she will get hurt."

I closed my eyes, trying not to show the relief on my face, "Why do you say that?"

She shrugged, "I don't know who she has been hanging around with and she won't tell me. I humor her and I'm probably encouraging it a bit much, but I wish she would stay in with me for once. I don't want her getting hurt. None of us know who this guy is, so how can we trust him."

I wanted to tell her she could trust the mysterious man because it was me, if for no other reason than to ease her nerves. Mandi didn't deserve to feel so upset about something that wasn't dangerous for her friend. And yet telling her would also mean destroying her trust too because I was hiding it from her.

"You could just ask her to stay with you tonight. I'm sure whoever this guy is will understand."

"You think so?"

I nodded. I understood completely. I might want Kim all to myself, but my daughter's well-being was far more important than any needs I had, "As a man myself, I think I know a bit more about their feelings than you could ever know."

Kim leaned her head on my shoulders and let out a heavy sigh, "Dad, I don't know where you get your wisdom from, but I'm glad you can ease my worries."

I kissed her on the top of her head and rested my cheek on her. These moments were worth more than anything in the world. I was a fool when I was younger to have missed out on all the moments we could have had together.

"You should join your friends. They're going to worry about you and soon everyone's going to come out here chasing one another. I like the quiet."

"Alright, dad," she gave me a quick hug and then stood up. "Don't stay out here too long. We don't need the cops called because some big scary man is lurking in the shadows all night."

I watched as she walked out of the alley toward the entrance and listened as the door opened and closed on her. I let out a sigh of relief at the quiet that engulfed me. I could let my thoughts be their own. If I wanted Kim to spend time with Mandi, then I needed to make sure I didn't cause Kim to want to leave. Even if it meant more stress tonight, I wasn't going to stay in my room for a while. Perhaps I could spend it with Maurice catching up a bit. Easier to keep Kim away that way and push her to spend time with Mandi and the others where she was meant to be.

The feral animal inside me paced back and forth, wanting to fight against the prison I was putting around it, but complied for now because its desires would eventually be met again.

KIM

I face-planted into the bed and let out a low roar of frustration. Everything about the day had been way too stressful for me. This was supposed to be a vacation, and yet I had Mr. Handsome who was definitely out of bounds, always in my eyesight to remind me about the night before.

At least he didn't seem to mind that we shouldn't be so close to one another. The fact that he was my dad's best friend didn't seem to faze him. I couldn't understand how he did it. He could look at my dad one minute and then glance at me with those gorgeous eyes of his, that made me want to purr.

"This is ridiculous," I groaned and rolled onto my side.

"You say something?" Mandi called from the bathroom. The buzzing of her toothbrush filled the air. "I couldn't hear you," she managed to mumble out.

I sighed and curled into a ball, "Nothing."

I couldn't tell Mandi what was going on. I wasn't sure what would happen if she figured it out it was me all along. With how bad I was at acting, it wouldn't be long, before someone put two and two together that I was the one seeing Jared.

Heat filled my cheeks, and I pushed my face back into the pillow to let out another scream. Just thinking about him sent my mind spinning and wanting to be near him again.

Mandi popped out of the bathroom with a towel, towering high on top of her head, toothbrush still stuck in her mouth. "You've been doing a lot of screaming. You sure you're alright?"

I pushed myself up and nodded, "Yeah, I'm fine. Life is just too

complicated sometimes."

"Don't I know it," Mandi pulled the toothbrush out and pointed it at me. "Earlier today my dad was being weird about something and refused to tell me what was going on. He's usually really open about stuff." She hurried back into the bathroom to spit the remaining toothpaste out.

"Speaking of your dad..." I crossed my legs and leaned against the headboard. "What's he usually like? You know, at home."

Mandi sat in her bed and raised a brow, "Back home? I mean I don't get to see him all that often lately. Since his second divorce, he's stayed pretty much by himself and kept his nose in work. Why?"

I shrugged, "Considering everything, I'm just surprised he fits in with everyone." I waved a hand in the air. "I mean I know you're pretty wealthy yourself, but you've been down to earth this entire week, and from what Amanda said, you've always been that way. I guess I would have expected your dad to be more... stuck up at home?"

I wasn't sure if that was the right word for it. Perhaps having rich taste in women was the better question. This trip was a way for him to stay away from business, so it made sense he settled for some random girl instead of trying to find someone with more expensive taste in life. It was likely that when we returned home, I would never see him again and he'd find a woman more aligned with his financial situation. My net worth was closer to negative than his would ever be.

"He's not a snob. He grew up pretty middle-class so it's not like he forget his roots. And he raised me to be the same, he made me go to public school instead of a private school, and didn't always give me everything I wanted or asked for."

"Does he have someone back home then? You said he was divorced, but he doesn't seem the type to be alone for long."

She shrugged, "He doesn't talk much about his relationships after the last one failed. Makes it hard for me to tell him that a woman is bad for him all the time when he doesn't tell me he's seeing someone. Though nothing has really stuck for longer than a couple weeks." She let out a soft groan, "Too many of them use him for his money and run off with their own piece of his business before he realizes it's happening. So, he doesn't get that close anymore."

I bite my bottom lip. I wasn't after his money. If anything, I didn't mind the idea of him being some random guy I found in the club that preferred to

drink cheap drinks versus top-shelf liquor.

"Then what about his interests? You two must share some hobbies together?"

"Are you trying to interview me to be adopted by him or something?" Mandi laid down and tossed her hands in the air. "Sure, he likes his hobbies and I have mine. He's a guy that seeks out adventure when he can in the little time he does get, and I'm good with spending time with friends at home." She suddenly glared at me, "Are we done asking all these questions or did you want to dig deeper into my dad's life?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't--"

"No," Mandi sighed. "Don't apologize. I shouldn't have snapped. I've just been really stressed because you've been gone all these nights and the first night I have someone here, they care more about who my dad is than they do me. It just feels like life back home where all those adults when I was a kid kept trying to get close to my dad for their money." She turned her head toward me, "I know you're not doing that, but you get what I'm saying, right?"

"Yeah, I get it." It wasn't like I was trying to make her feel left out, but the sinking feeling in my gut wasn't going to go away by telling myself that.

"So, what about you?" She turned her head toward me. "We haven't really had the chance to talk much since you're constantly in and out of the room."

"What about me?"

"Well, what are you into lately? What do you want to do in life?"

I pondered the question. I'd thought about doing a lot of things in life. Being a nurse, a teacher, maybe even some fancy businesswoman that wore the next greatest pantsuit in the office but none of them felt like me. The only time I did feel like myself was when I could relax on the beach or some other distant location where I had peace and tranquility.

"Can I just be a full-time traveler?"

We both chuckled at the absurdity. Not like Mandi could fully relate to the idea of wondering about her next paycheck. She had a lot in savings and a leg-up financially, compared to most people. For me, I had my dad to help, but nothing like Mandi. If she wanted to somehow travel full-time, I had no doubt she could accomplish it. It wasn't like I was jealous, but I was definitely envious.

"Maybe we can do it together?"

I raised a brow.

"You know, like those content creators do. Travel the world making videos and taking photos of each other and making money from it."

"And where am I going to get the funds to start that?"

"Good point," Mandi pursed her lips and stared up at the ceiling again. "Well, do you like doing computer stuff?"

"Like coding? No, I know nothing about that."

She closed her eyes and let out a low humming sound. She looked so much like Jared doing that. She had the same features and the creasing around her forehead, when she was deep in thought, like him.

"We could probably teach you. Get a job with my dad's business as a junior. Convince them you have to work remotely too."

"Sure." I laughed. "Let's also add in double the pay while we're at it."

"I'm serious. My dad wouldn't say no to me."

I didn't want to tell her that he probably wouldn't say no to me either if I gave him the right look, but that was better left unsaid.

Mandi let out a deep yawn and grabbed her phone, "Either way, it's getting late."

"Yeah, I'll probably head out--"

"No!" Mandi snapped.

I jumped and looked at her. Her face was turning a deep shade of red.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to yell. I just want you to stay here tonight is all. I'm...I'm worried about you, Kim. You're always going out to see that random guy and staying there all night long. I'd rather you just stay in with me tonight. I don't want something bad to happen to you."

"Mandi, you know the guy I'm seeing. Well, he's..." My voice caught in my throat. I couldn't tell her. Not yet. There was nothing official going on between Jared and me. This was just meant to be a week-long thing and that was it.

"He's?"

"Never mind. Ignore what I was saying. You're right, it's late and I need to shower anyway."

I rolled off the bed and pulled out a silk night shirt and panties from my drawer of clothes. My mind drifted to the idea of Jared walking in on me wearing it and I shook my head. Heat rose between my legs, picturing his hands exploring my body and lifting the night shirt up past my hips. My breath caught in my throat and came out as a sudden shudder.

I glanced at Mandi who was now lying with her back to me and breathing

deeply. I doubted she was asleep yet, but I wasn't going to chance it by spending my time imagining Jared in front of her.

At the very least, the bathroom was on my side of the hotel room and the walls were fairly thick. I turned the shower on and put my phone on a small counter inside with some low music playing in the background to muffle myself some more.

"Damn it," I sighed as I leaned my face against the cool tile walls. "What I wouldn't give for him to be here right now."

I traced the curves of my body down to my inner thighs and back up. Images of Jared holding me from behind cascaded through my mind. His rough hands exploring every inch of me with a deep desire I could never fully quench.

"Please," I muttered to the imaginary Jared.

I shook my head and started washing my hair. The warm water slid across my body, pooling my thoughts into other ideas and concepts. I imagined myself back at the restaurant with everyone having fun and how we were all getting sand all over ourselves while at the beach.

Still, even with those pictures, Jared's face continued to flash in front of me, from his possessive nature at the beach to the thirst in his eyes during dinner. I couldn't escape his stare and I wanted him to keep looking at me.

My fingers stretched down toward my thighs and brushed against the outer folds of my pussy. I let out a soft moan, imagining my hand, was Jared instead. The downpour of water and the beat of the music drowned out any noise I was making.

I continued to move further, pressing my finger against my clit and moving it in slow circles. Heat pooled between my legs and in my lower abdomen. My legs buckled slightly under my weight. I refocused my mind back on standing so I wouldn't fall over.

"Fuck," I grunted.

I leaned against the back wall of the shower and took the detachable showerhead with me. The heat from the water kept my skin warm, as I continued to explore every crevice.

My fingers followed along with the faint music from my phone, swirling at multiple speeds. Each new song was like a different shockwave through my body as I picked up speed and slowed down.

The imaginary Jared leaned closer to me and gently stroked my wrist as he watched me pleasure myself, "That's it, baby girl, just like that."

"I want you," I whispered.

"I know, but you'll need to work harder than that to have me."

I moaned again as the song picked up the pace. I slid my fingers down, pressing deep inside me, and curled my fingers upward. A loud gasp escaped my lips.

"Good girl. Imagine that's my cock pounding in you," imaginary Jared said.

I mumbled in agreement and pressed my fingers deeper inside, spreading myself open. The idea of Jared watching me as I pleased myself sent waves of excitement through me. To have him see me as some slut who needed to have him every day and yearn for him to fuck me.

I moved the shower head lower to angle the water pushed against my clit. The vibrations of the water and the pulsing of my fingers sent me into another dizzying heat. I was no longer focused on matching the music, I just wanted more.

My mind shifted my fingers to Jared's hand as he took over my body. His thick fingers pressed against my walls to reach as deep as he could until I couldn't handle it anymore.

"Oh god," I moaned out.

"How much do you want me?" Imaginary Jared asked.

"I want you to take me right now, please," I begged hungrily.

My fingers moved faster and shifted from his hand to his cock pressing inside me. It pulsed against my folds as he pounded me hard and fast. The water continued to smack my clit in earnest.

"Fuck!" I gasped as an orgasm overtook me.

I rode the wave of pleasure as the walls of my pussy pulsed around my fingers, pulling them further in. The wetness drenched my hand as I continued to curl my fingers and hit my pleasure points. My mind swirled higher with each motion of my hand and I pulled the showerhead closer to my clit for a stronger water power against my body.

My body slowly calmed down, and the image of Jared faded away to the back of my mind. My face felt flushed after the excitement and the heat made it impossible to breathe steadily.

I leaned back against the tiles, and sucked in a deep breath to steady myself. I wasn't sure if this would be the last time I had to do this without Mandi knowing, but I did know I needed Jared to help calm me down. There was no way I could last the rest of the week with him so close without

wanting to fuck him every chance I got.

I WANDERED BACK into the room and collapsed in bed. The cool sensation of the pillow balanced out the heat from my face. I glanced at Mandi who was fast asleep in her bed. I was thankful I hadn't woken her up. I could only imagine the questions she would have for me, had she known.

It wasn't like I was ashamed of doing it, but I also wasn't keen on talking about it, especially with her. Perhaps I would bring it up with Jared to excite him later. To make him want me even more with the knowledge that I fingered myself while imagining him.

I closed my eyes and let out a heavy sigh. The orgasm was still fresh in my body, my muscles were still twitching ever so slightly from the pulsating, sending small pleasurable reminders of my time in the bathroom.

"God I'm going to need a good fuck after this," I muttered to myself and fell asleep.

JARED

I set my phone up to screencast on the TV and stood in front of the large spectacled woman who was beaming up at me. She was adorable, like a doll with the freckles on her cheeks and the tight curls that created a sort of halo around her dark skin. But it was her brain and professionalism that I appreciated the most.

"So, which do you think?"

I put the black polo shirt up to my chest.

"This one?"

I shifted to a white button-up.

"Or this one?"

She scrunched her nose and typed something on her computer, "There's a store nearby that sells ready-made clothes that might be better suited." She cleared her throat. "I can order something and have it delivered to your room before the dinner."

"Let's do that then. Oh!" I snapped my fingers, "Make sure it gives me that look of being 'young' and not too stuffy. I don't want to stand out against the bride and groom, but I don't need to be frumpy either."

She chuckled, "I think if you keep saying stuffy and frumpy you might hurt your chances of being young, sir."

That was something I could respect about Jessica. She was honest about her thoughts, even when my requests sounded more than a little absurd. I had hired her right after she got out of college, as my personal assistant both at work and home. There wasn't exactly anyone I could trust to be honest with me without trying to make me feel better. Even if it frustrated me, I know she

always had my best interests in mind.

"Fine, I'll try and stay hip with the lingo," I rolled my eyes and we both laughed at the sarcasm.

"Black still, sir?"

"Yeah, let's keep it slimming for now."

"Right away. I'll let you know if there are any delays with your outfit." She turned back to face the camera, "And sir, I know I shouldn't push too far into your relationships but be mindful."

I paused and stared at her, "What do you mean?"

She lifted her phone so I could see a photo. My stomach dropped as I saw stills of myself and Kim standing in the club and then us going to the hotel together.

"I don't know who this woman is, but I saw someone try to post these on the work systems earlier. They're no longer with the company and we verified he deleted the photos, but I doubt he's the only one who has these."

I furrowed my brow. I couldn't recall anyone taking photos of us, but I kept it in the back of my mind. "It's probably some reporter trying to get some big scoop and just happened to be close by. I'll be mindful."

"Thank you. Oh, and sir--"

"Yes?" I was starting to get irritated with her trying to give me relationship and safety advice, but I knew better than to let it get to my head. She knew that her opinions mattered.

"Please enjoy the dinner for me."

"What are you eating tonight?"

She didn't answer at first.

"Jessica?"

"Cheeseburger," she mumbled.

I rolled my eyes, "Use the office card and go get an actual meal for yourself. I'm tired of you trying to be so frugal all the time. I pay you enough that I want you to spoil yourself, and if it means your dinner is a business expense, while I'm enjoying some time off, then you need to enjoy some nice meals too."

"Got it. So, a double cheeseburger then."

Before I could snap at her that it wasn't what I meant by something nicer, she ended the call.

"Damn it," I growled. "She better not be buying some fast food on the company card."

I slid on the white button-up and stepped out into the hall. There was still plenty of time before the dinner that I could go explore for the day and hopefully avoid Kim. She needed to spend time with Mandi, not me. Still, I wanted to spoil her and wished we could get a nice lunch together, but it was impossible without everyone noticing we were both gone.

The alone time made the day feel like it wouldn't end. It would be better if I wandered around a bit more and went window shopping. I couldn't stand being cooped up for too long in the hotel room with nothing on TV and nothing to do.

My phone buzzed with an incoming call.

"This is Jared."

Jessica's voice echoed through the phone. "Sir I have great news. They had exactly what you needed in your size. Do you want me to deliver it to your room?"

"No, I'll head over there."

"Are you sure? I can call a car for you if you'd—"

"It's walkable from here. Let me enjoy the nice weather. It's been a while and I don't need more attention brought to me. If Mandi knew the paparazzi were trying to squeeze their way out here, I'd never hear the end of it."

Jessica sighed, "If you say so, sir. Just don't complain."

"Trust me, a walk is far better than being stuffed like sardines inside a van, with a bunch of men."

"I take it you're not enjoying your vacation?" She typed away at something. "I can get your jet out there so you can go elsewhere for the rest of the week."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, "No, let's hold off on that. I might take you up on the offer later with a few extra passengers."

"The girl?"

"We'll see."

She let out a low hum then clicked her tongue, "Just let me know and I'll have whatever you need taken care of as soon as I can."

"Thank you, Jessica. You're great as always."

"You pay me to be that way."

I ended the call and headed over toward the shop. The store smelled of fresh flowers. Not too strong that it bothered my nose, but enough that I didn't feel like I was inside at all. I sucked in a deep breath and closed my eyes.

“Welcome!” a voice broke my focus.

I cracked open an eye and smiled at the clerk. She was dressed more business-like than what I had seen in most of the stores. Though something about her felt still more immature in nature as if she didn't know what she was supposed to be doing.

“I'm here to pick up my order.”

She perked up and her smile grew brighter, “Of course! Right this way, Mr. Jones.”

She guided me to the back of the store where a pair of nice tan slacks and a black button-down hung from hangers. I lifted the tag to check the designer. I didn't recognize the brand. It didn't sound like it was an off-brand either. Especially if Jessica was the one to order it.

“Who made this?”

“A personal designer in the area. She does a lot of work for businesses and also designs costumes for some movie producers.”

“I see...” I flipped the cuff over. The buttons were polished black with silver inlay within it like a galaxy hid within them. “Seems like it's high quality.”

“I can assure you, Mr. Jones, that we make sure every piece is perfect for those that visit us.”

“And you make money from selling clothes at a resort?”

She shifted and averted her gaze. “Well, I can't lie and say we're doing super well, but when we get a celebrity who has used Ms. Mort's clothing before, they tend to buy more or refer us, which is usually enough to keep things afloat.”

I nodded and pulled the clothes down, “Thank you.” I tried to give her a friendly smile to relax her nerves, but she was still jumpy at my glance. “Not used to many customers I take it?”

She shook her head. “I like how quiet it is here.”

“Hmm... guess this would be a good place for someone like you then.” I reached for my wallet but paused before pulling it out. “Did Jessica already pay?”

The clerk nodded. “You're all set.”

“Good. Enjoy your day. I might be back another day to buy some more clothes. Hopefully I won't scare you off too much then.”

Before she could breathe out the generic farewell she was trained for, I left the shop and stepped back into the warm sunlight. Enough of my

colleagues would have berated her for her timid nature, but the way she was, reminded me so much of Mandi when she was young and moving constantly. It wasn't until we settled down and business started growing rapidly that she finally settled into her strong personality. I wished the best for the clerk since she would have to face plenty of people who made the average person nervous, especially if the celebrity rumor were true.

The rest of the day was fairly quiet with most of it taken up by me wandering around and enjoying the sun next to the pool. There weren't many kids around, which kept the place quiet and calm outside of the occasional giggling couple running off to enjoy one another. It made me miss Kim even more now.

My watch buzzed to let me know the rehearsal dinner was coming up. Another benefit of Jessica adding my entire itinerary to my calendar so I received notifications in advance now.

EVERYONE GOT in separate vehicles this time instead of the oversized vans. A compliment from Jessica I imagined after complaining about it to her. Though the driving service framed it as a wedding gift for everyone, so Mandi didn't suspect it had anything to do with me.

I sat in one vehicle with Maurice and another man I didn't know, who stayed in the front of the car talking to the driver.

"So are we sharing a giant table again for dinner?" I asked to break the ice between myself and Maurice.

He shrugged, "They wouldn't tell me where we were going. Said it was a surprise or something."

I nodded. The itinerary just listed rehearsal dinner and didn't provide a location, "Seems they want to make sure none of us complain."

"Something is definitely up," Maurice agreed.

I watched as the drivers led us through town again, past the Mongolian barbecue place and further still until we reached the beach again. Memories of the groomsman holding Kim and flirting with her flooded through me. I gripped the door and gritted my teeth.

I needed to keep myself under control if they planned to sit her next to him again. I wasn't sure I could keep calm in front of everyone at that point. The thought of punching him in the face passed through my thoughts.

"We're here!" the driver called back to us, pulling me from my

frustrations.

I stared out my window at the building. There wasn't much to it, but I recognized the name. *Trinity's*. A steak house I had taken Mandi to a few times to celebrate the bigger milestones in her life, like her 21st birthday. I had also hosted a few dinner meetings there, at the location back home.

"You sure your boy can afford this place?" I raised a brow.

I wasn't trying to be rude, but I knew better than to assume they could afford to pay for everyone's meals and I doubted half of them had ever entered *Trinity's* before. The menus didn't list the prices either. You either had to have gone before to understand, or be comfortable enough financially, that the prices wouldn't faze you.

"No idea," Maurice shrugged as he stepped out of the car and stared at the building. "I know I've never bothered coming. But it'll be nice to have a good steak while we're out here."

Everyone filed out of the cars and gathered in front of the restaurant. Mandi beamed over at me and smiled.

"Dad! Can you believe we're coming here? I suggested it to Amanda before she built the itinerary since I knew we loved it here. I figured they would too."

"Tell me you told them the prices," I groaned. Mandi had the right idea to recommend the place, but she needed to make sure she was aware of people's finances too.

Mandi crossed her arms and gave a half pout, "No, I didn't tell them because it's not their business to know." She pulled out her black credit card. "I'm covering the bill tonight as another part of my wedding gift. I'm just glad the transportation company decided to upgrade us until the end of the vacation. I was about to ask them to do it for me, but looks like they knew we needed better quality."

I let out a half chuckle, "I'm sure they were well aware of the emotional damage they were causing." I gave Mandi a small peck on her forehead, "You did good kiddo."

She smiled again. I hadn't seen her this happy in a while, "Thanks, dad. I also pulled some strings so you can sit next to Kim's dad. I know you mentioned the two of you were old friends."

I blanched at hearing Kim's name, "Yeah. Of course. Thank you." I cleared my throat. "Let's get inside with everyone so they're not lost."

As Mandi had claimed, we were sharing a table with Kim and Maurice,

close to the bride and groom. We were each given our own separate tables to share collectively so we could talk in a calmer voice. There was a longer table that could fit everyone, but I was all the more thankful for not being around so many others.

I was sitting between Mandi and Maurice with Kim sitting across from me at the round booth. Realizing I was sharing a table with them at first was exciting, but now I couldn't stop imagining trying to get away.

"So, you've been here a few times you said, Jared?" Maurice asked.

"Yeah. It's a nice place. Really great food. I don't recommend getting too much though. It's super filling."

"Makes sense," he turned to Kim. "When you finally figure out who you want to be with, I expect him to at least treat you here for celebrations."

"Dad—" she glanced over at me and gave me a sheepish smile.

"Nope, I don't want to hear you complain. A good guy should treat his girl to a nice meal like this at least once."

I smiled and rested my elbows on the table so I could put my chin on my hands, "Yes, I would agree. Spoiling the person you like is a perfect thing to expect from someone even more so when they can do it often.

Maurice turned to me and furrowed his brow, "I doubt this could be a common spoiling. Even that's a little—"

Before he could finish his sentence, the waitress walked over, "Thank you all for the wait. Would you all like something to drink?" She pointed at the wine menu in Kim's hands.

"I'm not too picky. What about you Kim?"

She clicked her tongue and pointed at something on the menu, "Could I get a glass of this and a water?"

The waitress nodded and wrote something on her pad before turning to the others.

"Make her drink a bottle for the table," I smirked at Kim and turned to Mandi. "I'll cover our bill here."

The waitress didn't argue with the request and left to gather everyone's drinks.

"You didn't have to do that, dad."

I shrugged, "Maurice made a point that whomever she ends up with will need to spoil her here at least once. I need to make sure that bar stays high for Maurice's sake."

The four of us continued to talk and enjoy the evening while the bride and

groom sat at their own personal table. The other people in the wedding party were also enjoying themselves at a collection of other booths slightly out of earshot.

Something tapped my foot. I glanced down and saw a red heel next to mine. Mandi's feet were still tucked under her. I tapped Kim's foot back and a small smile crossed her face as she focused on her water in silence.

Kim made an O shape with her mouth and turned to her dad, "You forgot to take your meds!"

"Shit!" he shot me an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I'll be right back. I just need to hop in the bathroom for a minute."

I raised a brow, "Can't you take the pill here?"

Maurice shook his head, "Not an oral medication and I'd prefer to keep it at that."

Kim stood up to allow her dad to get out.

He stretched his back out, and let out a low grunt, "Damn VA making life difficult for me."

Kim sat back down and scooted further into the booth, so she was next to me, "Sorry about that, Mandi. Now I can hear you both a bit better."

She shrugged and took a sip of the red wine, "I'm fine. I just wish dad didn't have to take over my plans." She gave me a sideways glance.

Something slid across my lap, and I froze. I cleared my throat and reached for my glass to try and act casual. Kim's fingers glided across my thigh, brushing against my newly hard shifter before moving away again.

"So," Kim said as if nothing was happening. "You said your dad has taken you here before?"

I couldn't focus on their conversation and reached down to grab Kim's hand. The softness of her skin against my fingers reminded me of our last evening together. I wanted to drag her out of here and fuck her until dawn. I tried to keep my composure about me and not let Mandi know what was happening under the table.

Kim brushed her shoulder against me and played it off as if she was leaning to grab her drink, "I'm definitely jealous. I don't think I could handle coming out here all the time."

"Well, I can take you out sometimes, and we can enjoy a good meal for random celebrations." She glared over at me, "After all, we need to keep your standards high, don't we dad?"

I grumbled something under my breath as Kim moved her hand away

again.

“Yeah. Something like that.” The frustration from wanting to be close to her and also not get caught by my daughter was increasing by the moment.

Maurice returned and sat where Kim was originally sitting. “Sorry about that. I’ll just stay over here so we don’t have to play musical chairs.”

I took advantage of everyone’s attention on Maurice to hook Kim’s leg in mine and spread her legs apart for me. Slowly, I moved my fingers across her thigh and grazed the thin fabric of her panties, clasping her between two of my fingers.

“Are you alright, Kim?” Mandi tilted her head and furrowed her brow. “You look a little flushed. You’re not coming down with something are you?”

Kim bit her lip and brushed my hand aside. “No, I think it’s just my nerves. I’ve never been somewhere so nice, and I might have drank too much on an empty stomach.”

The meal continued with everyone talking as if nothing was going on. The entire time, Kim continued to explore as far as she could without being noticed, and engaged me to do the same before pausing again to catch her breath.

I wasn’t going to let her get away with teasing me so much tonight. There would be a harsh punishment coming her way soon enough.

KIM

I splashed some water on my face and stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. Mandi was already asleep in the room, leaving me feeling sexually frustrated once again, and alone with my thoughts.

“Fuck,” I grumbled.

I had hoped after dinner to meet with Jared and enjoy a nice evening, but Mandi had drunk so much that I needed to stay here with her.

“Kim!” Mandi shouted from her bed. “Where’d you go?” Her voice came out as more of a whine than anything.

“I’m here,” I said with a sigh, and peeked out from the bathroom. “You doing alright there?”

Mandi nodded and closed her eyes again, “Can you keep it down?” She groaned. “My head hurts.”

There went my plan to at least relieve myself with music and the shower again. Nothing was going according to plan.

I sat on the bed and unlocked my phone. The evening was the most fun I had in a long time and dad was right about one thing, if I wanted to keep my standards high, I would have to find a guy willing to spoil me, but also one I could tease a little too.

Overall, it needed to end in us enjoying ourselves afterward so the teasing didn’t frustrate me. It didn’t matter if Jared supposedly had a lot of money. I didn’t care much about that or the exact spoiling that my dad claimed he wanted for me. I would have been fine if Jared just took me to McDonald’s, as long as we enjoyed ourselves.

Still, the nice dinner had been a lot of fun, and I could get used to it as

long as it was with Jared.

I searched for his name online. Most of the results ended with awards he had won throughout the years, or news about his business expanding and growing. Nothing that gave me any information about him specifically though. I turned to Facebook. He was old enough to still be there at least. Nothing. The closest I found was a public page with his name, but it was obvious by the posts it wasn't him. They were too friendly. Too clean. If I messaged the page, it was probably some intern managing the page and not actually Jared.

“How am I supposed to get ahold of you?” I grumbled to myself.

Mandi muttered something in her sleep and rolled over so her back was to me. It was perfect. I could steal her phone and find Jared's phone number that way. There was no way he would give her a fake number or some employee pretending to be him that way.

I smiled and reached for her phone, trying not to disturb her. It wasn't locked which was an extra bonus. Though I needed to make sure she set a lock on it later. If I could easily steal her phone and do whatever with it, then anyone else could do the same.

She had dozens of numbers for different businesses and people with special titles added to them. Some of the contacts even had profile pictures of people in business attire. A stark contrast to the fun photos I grabbed from a person's social media account, or when I snapped a picture of them randomly while they were doing something. I stopped when I saw the name Dad on the contact and clicked on it.

The messages were pretty normal. Stuff a daughter would text her dad to check in on him, or make sure things were going alright. The latest messages were her expressing frustration that he had paid for everyone's meal at the table. I ignored the argument and clicked on his icon so I could see his phone number.

I quickly transferred his contact information to my phone and stared at the blank picture of his initials in the circle for his contact information. I had no fun photos of him. The only thing I could grab was his professional photos online which were out of the question. They didn't feel like him. I put Mandi's phone back on the bed next to her and hopped onto my bed.

The idea of texting him now was exhilarating. Just start sending him messages to make him wonder who the mysterious person was. Perhaps send a few pictures of me with my face cropped out so he had to figure out the

mysterious secret admirer.

Mandi let out a loud snort and turned around. She cracked an eye open and yawned.

"What're you doing still up? It's getting late," she muttered.

"Oh, yeah, I guess it is," I shoved my phone under my pillow as if she could see her dad's name on my screen despite being so far away. I felt like a teenager texting a crush in front of her parents, "I'll head to bed in a minute."

Mandi nodded and closed her eyes again. I waited for her breathing to slow and the night to grow still again. At that point, I realized how tired I actually was from the day and tucked myself under my blankets. I stared at Jared's name on my phone for the rest of the night until I fell asleep, immobilized by the thought of what to send him as my first message, and the all-consuming questions...Did I want him to figure out who I was just yet?

THE AFTERNOON SUN beat down harder than usual today. I checked the temperature. Way over 100 today. I was dying for something to drink, or a way to cool off. Instead, I was stuck out on the sidewalk with the rest of the girls while we waited for the delayed car to show up.

"You're sure they know?" Mandi asked.

"Pretty sure," Amanda swayed where she stood. She fanned herself with the top of her tank top.

Thankfully, because of the planned outing, none of us were wearing anything too stuffy. I had chosen a pair of booty shorts and a crop top, but it wasn't helping much.

A single blue sedan pulled up to the front of the resort and we all crowded toward it before the driver could roll his window down.

"Please," Amanda gasped as she pushed to the front of the group. "Please tell me you're here for us."

The driver picked up his phone, "Party for Amanda?"

"Yes!"

A sigh of relief escaped all of us at once.

"There are others coming, right?"

He narrowed his gaze and then pointed behind him, "Should be following me. Might be stuck at a red light."

As he finished his statement, two other cars pulled up behind him. Each, the same shade of blue. I almost wanted to cry from joy at the thought of

going into some nice air conditioning and prayed the sweat wasn't going to stick on me for the rest of the day.

We all climbed into different cars at random. I chose the one closest to me to get out of the heat as quickly as possible and wipe the sweat away.

"Looks like you lot are planning a fun evening," the driver said and adjusted his rearview mirror to look at the others in the backseat.

I looked back and noted Amanda and Mandi were sitting in the back. I opened my mouth to reply, but Mandi was the first to answer.

"Bachelorette party. Keep your eyes to yourself if you want to keep them."

He chuckled and readjusted his rearview mirror again, "Right. I'll keep that in mind." He cleared his throat and tapped something on his phone. "We'll be there in about ten minutes."

The rest of the ride continued in an almost awkward silence, aside from the older rock music blasting from his radio. I didn't mind it too much and it didn't look like the other two did either.

I turned to play with my phone and clicked my tongue as I realized my contacts were still open with the unfinished message to Jared waiting for me. I started typing again and erased it multiple times before I settled on a basic intro.

Hey, it's Kim.

I groaned. Of course, I couldn't think of anything witty to say to him. I wasn't exactly a great writer of flirtations. Anything I tried to say just came off awkward or forced, so basics were the best I could do.

He didn't answer or read the message. I knew he had the same brand of phone as I did so he couldn't use the excuse that he read it or not when I could see the icon for delivered or read shift. I waited another few minutes and still received no indication that he saw it.

My mind raced, trying to think of why he hadn't seen my message yet. Perhaps he ignored messages with unknown names, or maybe he was with another girl who had finally caught his eye after I denied him last night.

"Hey Mandi," I started without even thinking about how I would explain I had her dad's number.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Um..." I tried to think of something else to ask, "Is this your first time down here? I know you and your dad travel a lot." I let out a sigh of relief at my quick shift.

"Yeah, it is. Usually, he takes me somewhere that's private versus a big crowd. He gets angry dealing with a bunch of people all the time." She puffed her chest and deepened her voice. "These idiots don't know how to behave themselves and are acting like animals. Never turn into one of them, Mandi."

We all laughed at her Jared imitation. My stomach hurt from the sudden shift in emotions, I wiped a tear that was forming at the corner of my eye.

"Glad we could break him from that."

"Yeah, it was definitely a struggle to make him want to be around people, but it looks like he's enjoying himself. Especially with this random stranger, he's been seeing. Must be some woman to keep my dad interested."

I turned away and stared out the window, "Yeah, he seems like the picky type."

"Super picky. I couldn't even get him to go on another date after his marriage with my stepmom failed. I thought he was going to be celibate for the rest of his life."

We pulled up to what looked like a bar in the middle of nowhere. A tall wine glass in lights stood tilted next to the place's name. *Jamie's*. I almost wondered how many places out here were so self-centered to name their business after themselves. Then again, it did make it sound a lot classier than calling it by some generic name like the Drunk Bull or whatever.

None of us said much beyond simple goodbyes and thanks to the driver and I know I prayed we wouldn't have him in our car again on the way back. I wasn't sure I could deal with that awkward experience again.

Everyone gathered around in a large group in front of the bar and gossiped about their drivers. Either they were horrible with trying to beat every red light and failing, or trying to hit on the bride. I started to join in on the conversations when my phone buzzed.

Did I give you my number?

My stomach dropped. Of course, when Jared saw my text he would immediately question it. He probably hated the idea of sharing his number with anyone.

Sorry. I can delete it if you want.

I sucked in a deep breath, waiting for the bad news of him saying to delete him.

No, you don't have to.

I let out my held breath and closed my eyes. Whatever bad luck we had with the driver was the only bad luck I would have.

I stole your number from Mandi's phone.

Does she know? His answers were short and to the point. I wasn't sure how to feel about them. Maybe I was used to texting people my age. I had to keep my mind open to the possibilities and not let anxiety get the better of me.

She doesn't. So let's keep this a secret between you and me.

I added a winking kissy face at the end, hoping he would respond positively to it. He sent a thumbs up and I groaned. I couldn't even complain to Mandi or anyone about how he texted. After a few minutes, he sent another message.

I don't normally text people, sorry. It's not something I'm a fan of.

Could you be a fan for me? Again, I sent another emoji with the question.

We were entering the club now. I followed near the back so I could keep my focus on my phone. Finally, he responded with an emoji of a person thinking. Then another message came in.

I think I can do that if you're willing to pay the price for it.

He added a winking face at the end, and I chuckled. He was trying at least. I couldn't fault him, and I was thankful he was willing to text me despite not liking it. The fact that he didn't text often made sense with the delay in his answer.

It's a deal.

Inside, the bar was completely different from what I had expected. At one end of the building was a casual bar setting with a television playing some random sport and on the other was an entire dance floor. I straightened in excitement. This wasn't what I was expecting at all today.

"Alright ladies. No paying for drinks tonight!" Mandi called out. "Drinks are on me and we get the club to ourselves and a few surprise guests." She smirked and winked at us.

I downed another shot of what the bartender called *Three Wisemen Go Hunting*. It was strong and there was no way I could do another without getting too out of control, but I needed extra motivation to keep going for the night.

Three men on elevated platforms were dancing. Half their clothes were already off and most of the girls were either tossing dollar bills at the men or on the dancefloor themselves dancing.

I snapped a picture of me at the bar and sent it to Jared.

Too bad you're not here to enjoy this.

His heart reacted to it.

I puffed my cheeks out and shoved my phone in my pocket. Clearly, I needed to do better than that to get him to respond properly. I had to figure out something or it would ruin my mood.

"Kim!" Mandi called from the dance floor. "Stop moping over there and come join us."

I sighed and sidled off my chair and made my way to the dance floor. The music mixed with the energy of the others made me forget everything about Jared and his lack of texting etiquette. I swayed with the music, letting my hands explore my body, laughing with everyone else.

"Damn girl!" One of the others yelled out. "Kim out here trying to seduce all of us!"

I blushed and waved over at the group by the strippers. One of them had her phone out recording us, who I assumed was the one that had yelled a moment ago.

"Send that my way!" Mandi yelled out and then pulled my attention back to her. "Ignore them. Let's enjoy ourselves and later we can watch how silly we looked. I know I can't dance very well."

I shook my head, "You're fine."

Mandi pulled her phone out and smiled, "Looks like we're getting it early and damn she's right. If I were your boyfriend, I'd be jealous of us." She turned the phone around and I watched my dancing. It was mesmerizing and sexual in a hypnotic way.

"Can you send that to me?"

Mandi smirked and pulled her phone away, "Gonna send it to your friend? The one you've been meeting lately?"

"Of course. Like you said, get him a little jealous."

We wandered back over to the bar and as soon as Mandi sent over the video, I forwarded it to Jared.

Missing out on all this action.

Mandi leaned over to glance at my phone." So, who's the guy? You keep seeing him, but none of us know who it is."

I shrugged, "Guess it'll remain a mystery."

Mandi pouted and walked away to join the dancing again. I was thankful she managed to snag the entire club for us for the evening. I didn't want to know the cost, but it was well worth it to see everyone happy and not getting harassed all evening though I did miss Jared.

Mmm I would kill to be there with you.

We could always plan our own later.

He wrote back quickly, *I probably wouldn't be able to keep our clothes on long enough to dance with you.*

Oh?

Again he wrote back right away, he was getting good at this texting!

If I was there right now I'd make sure to claim you so everyone knew you belonged to me.

I blushed and put the phone down. I wasn't expecting him to say that, but I also wasn't against it. My phone buzzed again with another message from him.

You'd be begging me to take you as I continue to fuck you until the morning came.

I bit my bottom lip and squeezed my legs together at the thought of him fucking me in front of everyone. My gaze drifted across the dance floor until I spotted the dressing rooms. They were likely for the usual dancers that came in and out of the bar on normal nights, but tonight it would be all my own.

With one last scan of the bar, I darted inside the dressing room and let out a heavy sigh. The room muffled the music, leaving me in the dim quiet with my thoughts. The room was filled with different benches and rows of clothing hung up for people to try on and multiple mirror, both standing and smaller ones.

I adjusted one of the benches so it faced a standing mirror and looked into it. My face was flushed from all the dancing and thinking about Jared's messages. If he was going to cause me to be that bothered by what he said, he was going to get payback real quick.

I pulled my crop top and bra off first and made a face. Too basic. I pulled my shorts down and added them to the pile of clothes, so I was standing only in a thong. I nodded in approval and shifted so I was standing on my knees. I cupped one of my breasts and let out a soft gasp as my mind drifted to Jared and his touch. I wanted him to know I was imagining him. I shifted myself up and snapped the photo as quickly as I could before looking back down.

Already I could feel my pussy growing wet in excitement and anticipation of him seeing the photo.

Just like this?

I asked him in reference to taking me at the bar.

Baby girl, I'd make you have that look all night long just from seeing my cock.

I licked my lips and started typing again, but a knock at the door interrupted me.

"Kim?" Mandi called out. "You ok in there? Do you need me to come inside?"

I scrambled to toss my clothes back on and shoved my phone in my pocket. "No!" My voice cracked a little. "I'm alright." I opened the door and gave Mandi a sheepish smile.

"You're flushed," she put a hand on my forehead. "You sure you're doing alright?"

I shook my head. "No, I think I've had too much to drink." I needed to come up with a lie. There was no way I was going to tell her I was about to start pleasuring myself on video for Jared. "I think I need to go outside and get some fresh air."

"Alright, but call me if you need anything. Promise?"

"I promise."

I sucked in a deep breath of the chill night air. I hadn't realized how long we had been in the club and I enjoyed the feel of the cool breeze as it crept over my skin and calmed my drive. Jared sent another text. This one included a location.

I'll bring a car over.

JARED

I paced around the foyer, trying to get ahold of myself. I had never exchanged that many texts in one evening with someone, let alone talked about fucking someone. It was exciting and filled me with a sense of youth I hadn't felt in a long time.

With everyone suspecting something was going on, I couldn't chance us being caught another time. I made sure Jessica paid for our room under an alias, while I ordered the car to pick Kim up.

I glanced at my watch. She should be pulling up soon, but I hadn't heard anything from her since I sent the location and sent the car to pick her up. I tried to not get anything too inconspicuous, but I also didn't need her coming here in an old car. A Mercedes was the perfect option and one of the only options out in the area that I could trust.

"Maybe she didn't understand the message," I muttered as I stared out my window. I could clearly see the front of the hotel from where I stood on the balcony. But if I saw an incoming car, I could make my way down there, "Fuck." I slammed my hand on the wall. There was no need to be this anxious. She'd feel my pent-up frustrations after all this was done and over with.

I made my way down the elevator to the lobby and stood near the check-in counter. Couples and businessmen alike walked past me to their rooms for the evening. I tapped my fingers on the counter and glanced at my watch again. At least ten minutes past the time I expected her to be here. The idea of someone grabbing her off the street set my blood boiling.

"Jared!" Kim called from around the corner.

I turned around in shock and tried to hide it behind a smile. "When did you get here?"

She pulled out her phone to check the time, "Probably about five minutes ago." She walked closer and gave me a sympathetic smile. "Sorry I didn't tell you. I needed to stop in the bathroom."

I hooked a finger under her chin, "Apologies usually come with actions to show you're sorry."

Kim leaned a little closer, but I pulled back, "Now did I say you could just clean it up with a little kiss?"

She raised her brow and tilted her head, "Since when have you been so demanding and controlling about things." A coy smile crept across her face. "Am I going to have to be a bit naughty to keep your attention all night?"

I smelled the sweet scent of her perfume that had all but faded away and imagined the photos and videos she had sent earlier, "Perhaps you will." I glanced up to where Kim had emerged from. "You said the bathrooms are back there?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes?"

"Hm..." I clicked my tongue. Being so close to her made me want to take her now. To at least get a taste of her before we went up to the room for the rest of the evening. "Good."

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her along down the hall to the bathrooms. None of them indicated any gender, which meant they were single stalls. Perfect. A sly smile crossed my face as I turned to Kim.

"Let's show the rest of the world how naughty you've been."

Before she could respond, I opened the bathroom door and stepped inside. I wasn't sure how I could be so comfortable doing this. If I had asked myself to do this just last week I would have thought myself crazy. And yet, here I was doing the craziest thing I could imagine because of how intoxicating Kim was.

"What are you doing?" Kim giggled.

I locked the door behind us and pulled off my shirt.

"Take off your skirt."

"What?"

"I said take it off. Or do you not want to be a good girl for me and show me you're sorry for teasing me so much today."

She turned her gaze away from me as if deep in thought about the best course of action to take. Seeing her so shy compared to the coy and strong

personality from earlier made my shaft grow with yearning.

"Now," I ordered.

She jumped and stared at me for a moment before pulling her skirt down and tossing it to the side.

I jutted my chin toward the sink. "Lean against that."

She pushed her ass against the porcelain and spread her legs to reveal her already-soaked thong. I licked my lips and lowered myself between her legs. She shivered under my touch and stared at me with a hint of embarrassment.

"This can be the start of your apology."

I pulled the thin cloth away and slid a finger between her folds, teasing her entrance. Her breath became ragged as she spread her legs wider for me. The scent of her made me want to taste the sweetness inside, but I held myself back. This was her punishment and my pleasure.

"Please," Kim moaned out.

"Not yet," I growled.

I slid a finger in and curled it inside her. She grew wetter from my touch, which made me want her more. Keeping myself from fucking her now was just as difficult as it would be for her. I added a second finger, twisting and twirling them inside of her until I found her g-spot.

"Fuck!" she squealed and clamped down on me.

"Don't be too needy," I chuckled.

I slowly pounded inside of her with my fingers and lowered myself to her clit. The sweet taste of her drove me insane, and I focused my attention on making her moan louder and louder.

I pulled back and licked my lips. "If you're too loud, they'll hear you. Unless you want an audience to know how naughty you really are."

Her face flushed and she bit her index finger to keep her mouth closed. She let out a muffled moan mixed with a squeal as I continued licking her clit.

My shaft twitched in anticipation, begging to be inside her with every muffled squeal of pleasure she made.

"Alright, turn around."

A look of relief crossed her face as she turned to face the mirror and leaned forward. Her ass stuck out, ready to welcome me into her. She turned back to me with her hand to her mouth, prepared for the best fuck of her life.

I stood behind her and pulled off her shirt and bra, so she was completely naked in front of the mirror. Her large supple breasts stood ready for me to

squeeze.

“Look at you, acting like this is when you get your prize,” I growled.

I pressed my lips to her neck, kissing her up and down, tasting how sweet her skin was and hearing her ragged breaths. My hard shaft pressed against her ass through my pants, reminding her of what she couldn't have yet.

“I want you,” she whispered.

“I know.”

Another whimper escaped her lips. I gazed up at her reflection and smirked. Her eyes were closed as she drowned in my scent and touch. I cupped her breast, watching as my hand squeezed it tightly and swirled around her nipple.

“Do you want me?”

She nodded and hummed yes.

“Then open your eyes and look at yourself in the mirror.”

She cracked an eye open and then another, barely glancing at the mirror before turning away. I grabbed her chin and forced her to face the mirror.

“See? This is what my little slut gets when she teases me so much. Maybe next time you won't deny me for over a day.”

I pulled away and took my pants off. My shaft stood hard and erect, twitching earnestly.

“You ready?” I pressed myself against her ass, sliding in between her cheeks to remind her of my size.

“Mmm,” she bit her bottom lip and gripped the sink.

“Don't look away from the mirror,” I whispered in her ear. “I want you to see how much you love my cock tonight.”

I lifted her ass higher and pressed myself inside her folds. She was wetter than usual as if her pussy was ready for this exact moment. It squeezed and pulled me all the way in before I could even think to tease her with the tip.

A small gasp escaped her lips, “Jared!”

“That's it, baby girl.”

I pressed myself deep inside her and looked at her in the mirror. The juices from her pussy glistened on her inner thighs. Her mouth moved into the shape of an “o” as she let out soft grunts of pleasure while I pumped inside of her. I moved one of my hands to the front and reached for her clit. She tightened around me and closed her eyes.

“I said watch,” I slammed deep into her.

She opened them again and let out another whimper.

“This is your apology for me, remember?” I grabbed one of her hands and moved it to her clit. “Play with yourself.” I commanded.

Her fingers twirled around her clit as she let out silent gasps of pleasure.

I smacked her ass twice. The sound echoed through the bathroom. She let out an audible gasp.

“Fuck, your pussy is so good,” I grunted and pushed harder inside her. “Tell me you love my cock.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I love how your cock fills me up.”

Her pussy clenched tighter around me and erupted into a flutter of muscle spasms as she orgasmed on me.

“Did. I. Tell.” I pounded faster into her as she clenched harder on me. “You. To. Come. Yet?”

“No,” she moaned out. “No, daddy.”

I couldn’t hold it in from hearing her say that and exploded inside her pussy. Her eyes rolled back as my shaft filled her up.

“Good girl,” I said in a breathless whisper, kissing her neck again. “Now you’ve learned your lesson and apologized properly.”

A knock pulled our attention away and for the first time, I remembered that we weren’t in a private bathroom.

“Excuse me?” A man’s voice called out. “Is everything ok in there? We heard reports of someone in pain.”

I cleared my throat and pulled my pants back on. “I’m fine. Just had some really back muscle cramps. I’ll be out in a few.”

“Ok, please let us know if you need any help. There’s a button by the toilet.”

“I’ll be alright.”

I let out a sigh of relief as the attendant walked away from the bathroom. Kim was already half dressed. With the light gleam of sweat, she looked even sexier, my cock slowly grew hard again at the thought of taking her once more in the room.

KIM

I adjusted my sunglasses to shield my eyes from the deadly sunlight. Thankfully makeup could cure the bags under my eyes. While the night was the best I had ever had with Jared, we barely got any sleep in his private hotel room.

“Kim?” Mandi broke through my exhausted lack of attention. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

I bit the inside of my cheek, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You met up with that mystery guy last night, didn’t you?” A sly smirk crossed her face, “You gonna finally reveal who the man was? He did keep you up last night.”

I glanced over at Jared who was sitting in the chairs for those who weren’t directly involved in the wedding. The glasses hid my gaze which made it easy to admire him.

“No, not yet at least.”

Mandi puffed her cheeks and crossed her arms, “You’re really no fun, are you?”

“Mandi! Kim!” Amanda called out from an oversized tent at the back of the beach. “Come on, ladies.”

We both hurried to the tent and out of the scorching heat.

I took off my sunglasses and let the cool air inside the tent refresh my body. “If I knew we were going to have a heat wave today, I might have asked you for strapless dresses with a long slit. Any less fabric, and it’d be a bikini wedding.”

Mandi gave a wink, “I’m sure Kim’s special someone and Carl would

love to see us all in some tiny bikinis on the beach.”

We both blushed and turned away.

“So, I was right in my assumption!” Mandi exclaimed.

“What?” My mind raced to try and figure out how Mandi knew it was her dad. “No, you got it wrong. I—“

“Don’t hide it.” Mandi put her hands on my shoulders, “I get it. They said you liked older guys, but I saw the way you two looked at each other.”

My face was really hot and I averted my gaze, “I can explain.”

“Explain what?”

“That I—“

Amanda wrapped her arm around my shoulders and shooed Mandi away. “We get it, Kim. During rehearsal he was all over you. We thought it might be something.”

“During rehearsal?” None of what they were saying made any sense. Jared and I were on completely different sides of the beach and had barely interacted with each other even then.

“You know, Brandon?”

“Brandon?” I raised an eyebrow and tried to place the person they were talking about. “Oh, you mean the groomsman that asked me out?”

“Exactly. We saw the way he looked at you. I could practically smell the pheromones and I wasn’t even near you.”

I clicked my tongue and let out a low hum, “Yeah... Brandon... That’s totally who it’s been.” I prayed Jared wouldn’t hear about our conversation. I didn’t need him to get jealous again.

Mandi raised a brow, looking thoroughly unconvinced, “It’s not him, is it?”

I shook my head, “No, it’s not.” I couldn’t lie to Mandi or Amanda. “He asked me out that day but I turned him down.”

Mandi sucked her front teeth and crossed her arms, “Damn it, I thought we were onto something.”

A woman at the back of the tent cleared her throat. “Sorry to interrupt your gossiping, but I’m on a bit of a deadline to get you all done with your makeup and get you in your dresses.”

Amanda turned back to the makeup artist, “Shit, you’re right.” She glanced back at us. “We’ll get to the bottom of this mystery by the end of the night, Mandi. I’m not going to let Kim get away with this for one more day.”

We all hurried over to the makeup artist who skillfully began to prep our

faces, and laying out the different palettes, choosing colors to complement our skin tone and hair. For my eyes, she picked a beautiful shimmery blue eye shadow, and did up my lashes in a dramatic fashion. I could barely recognize myself in the mirror with how amazing I looked.

“Dresses, everyone!” The makeup artist clapped her hands and pointed to a rack of baby blue dresses. “They’re all in order of who is next in line.”

We slipped into our dresses quickly. Besides the maid of honor’s dress, each dress was strapless, and flowed down to our ankles, a slit on the side added a hint of sexiness. They fit us perfectly based on our body shapes and accentuated each person’s body type.

The wedding unfolded without a hitch. Everything flowed smoothly with plenty of crying from everyone. Every few minutes, I peeked over at Jared. When he wasn’t looking at Mandi, he was staring at me.

My mind spun back to last night. I didn’t want it to end, but there was no way we could keep going without at least taking a shower and heading back to our rooms to put on fresh clothes. Even his nice clothes were wrinkled from being tossed into a forgotten pile for most of the night. I squeezed my legs together to try and ignore the yearning to fuck him again while we were out here.

“You may now kiss the bride.”

My attention snapped back to the wedding as I joined the others in clapping while Carl and Amanda gave each other their first official kiss into their marriage.

As the wedding came to a close, I remembered Mandi and Amanda’s warning that they would figure out who I had been with almost every night since arriving here. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep it a secret. My phone was in the basket with everyone else’s phones. One swipe of my phone is all it would take to reveal the truth, the photos and messages I had sent to Jared were right there. And the minute they discovered that, it would be all over.

“We will continue the reception here. Drinks and meals will be provided for everyone. Thank you for coming to this wonderful couple’s wedding,” the officiant yelled so everyone could hear over the crashing waves.

Within the hour, the chairs the guests were sitting on, and the flower arrangements for the altar were all gone. Instead, multiple bonfires dotting the beach along with comfortable benches and tables piled high with food, were scattered everywhere. In the middle was an oversized DJ booth on top

of a trailer playing nostalgia-inducing songs.

They had us all change for the reception as well with the approval to dress in whatever we wanted for beach wear. I chose a bikini top and a pair of my shorts to go along with it to stay cool.

I opted against wearing a pair of shoes for dancing like a few others did. The feeling of warm sand around my feet as the temperatures dropped was too tempting to pass up. Amanda and Carl were thoroughly enjoying themselves, with a mixture of slow dances mixed in with a few group dances. She was the highlight of the evening with all eyes on her.

Most of the songs were from our childhood, but listening to them now remixed to have more beats in them, was like enjoying them for the first time all over again.

Once the sun set, Mandi and I pulled the ropes down around our area to let others join the dancing and food that was left over. The energy was intoxicating, and allowed me to release all the stress left in my body from earlier.

What I was most thankful about, however, was that Amanda and Mandi both seemed to have forgotten that they were planning on figuring out who my mystery man was. I wasn't ready to tell them until whatever connection Jared and I had, came to a close. At that point, it wouldn't matter if they knew or not. Whatever fun we had together would be in the past and I could move on with my life back in the city.

Jared sat on one of the benches, watching the others dance on the sand. In one hand he held his phone and in the other, a small plate of snacks. While the others were gladly in beach wear, he was wearing a sweat-resistant top and a pair of shorts as if he was going to the gym.

I wandered over and sat next to him, "Enjoying your evening?"

He grunted in response and flipped through a few emails.

I puffed my cheeks and leaned closer to him, "You know you're supposed to be on vacation, and not working during a wedding, right?"

He jolted up and turned to face me, "Shit. You startled me." He furrowed his brow. "How long have you been here?"

I shrugged, "A year? Maybe twenty. Who knows."

He rolled his eyes and shoved his phone deep inside his pocket, "Shouldn't you be out there enjoying yourself?"

"Maybe, but it's boring without you."

He let out another grunt and nodded at Brandon who was standing with a

few people, downing another beer. “Seems you have plenty of company out there according to Mandi.”

I raised a brow, “She told you about him?”

“Everything. Said you’ve been seeing him a lot lately.”

I snorted and shook my head, “Of course, she told you that.”

“Seriously?” He hooked my chin and forced me to look him in the eyes, “While we’re here, you belong to me, Kim. Not him.”

My heart skipped a beat as I stared into the eyes. I could fall into him and be the submissive girl he wanted last night, but everything about today made me want to defy him for a little longer. I wanted to see him get frustrated with me and take me in a fit of anger like he had last night. All I needed to do was push a few more buttons.

“Since when did we agree to you not sharing me?”

His face turned an angry red, “I’m saying it now.”

I let out an exaggerated sigh. “It’s too bad. I did enjoy his company all last night.” I shook my head in dismay. “Oh, what will Mandi think when she hears I was actually fucking you last night when she thought it was him.”

Jared sucked in a sharp breath. Every ounce of anger he had evaporated in an instant. I wanted to build it back up, but if he couldn’t hold onto the jealousy to claim me tonight, it was better to tease him and comfort him. This was our last night together, and just being close would at least soothe some of my appetite for him.

“See?” I smirked. “Nothing is happening between him and I. She just assumed because he tried asking me out for drinks during rehearsal.” I took his hand in mine, “You don’t need to worry about him. You’re the only one I’ve been wanting all day.”

He scooted away a little, “You really know how to mess with a guy when he’s down.”

“And you really know how to deny a girl when she wants your attention.”

“Didn’t get enough of it last night?”

I shook my head, “There’s no way I got enough of it to last me a lifetime.”

A slower song played on the speakers. Jared put his plate down and stood up, “Guess I have to give you a little attention tonight too.” He held his hand to me, “Shall we dance?”

I joined him near one of the fires as we spun one another in circles. Everything around us faded into nothingness. All that existed was the music

and Jared.

“So...” He pulled me in closer to him so I could embrace the scent of his earth cologne. “After tonight, we’ll be strangers once again. I’ll be busy doing what I need to do, and I’m sure you will be settling into your life too.”

I closed my eyes and leaned closer to his chest, “I wish it didn’t have to be that way. This week was truly amazing.” I stared up at him. “Does it have to be goodbye?”

“Maybe just a see you soon then?”

I nodded, “A see you around.”

“I think I could do that,” he twirled me further away from the fire into the dim darkness. “I know I could never forget you. You’re something I’ve been missing for a long time.”

I leaned up and kissed him gently on the lips. Before I could pull away, he wrapped his fingers in my hair and pulled me closer to get one final taste.

“This will be our see you around.”

“Kim?” Mandi called out. “Where are you?”

I jumped and turned around, “Coming!” My voice cracked a little.

I joined Mandi and the other girls near the DJ station. Amanda stood in the front with a bouquet in her hands. Next to her was Carl with a garter belt I imagined Amanda had on her earlier.

“Alright ladies. It’s time to catch the bouquet!” The sparkle in Amanda’s eyes filled me with excitement.

She turned around and everyone started counting down from 3. We all yelled toss at the same time and watched as the bouquet went flying in the air. We all jumped up to catch it as it bounced from one hand to the next, until I finally wrapped my fingers around the bushel, held firmly, and pulled it to my chest.

“Kim!” Mandi screamed in excitement. “So, who’s the lucky guy going to be?”

I blushed and turned toward the guys who were now tossing the garter belt from one to the other. Jared stood in the back, a small smirk on his face as if he knew something no one else did. It wasn't like I could ask him to be the lucky guy. We weren't a fit for one another. Outside of Hawaii, away from this resort, we were part of two separate worlds that simply didn't go together. He was my dad's best friend, my *friend's* father at that. There was just a certain boundary you couldn't cross.

“I don’t think I have anyone I can bet on just yet.”

JARED

I stared out into the skyline of New York. Most of my boxes were still piled up in the corners of the condo. I had managed to find a nice one in the Financial District with the help of Jessica and a decent realtor, but the act of moving itself was still such a pain. Hiring movers was all well and good, but I preferred not to have someone touching my stuff and putting it somewhere I wouldn't know about. The last time I moved, I couldn't find my favorite watch for weeks, and had to buy a new one.

I grabbed my phone and hovered over Kim's number. I wanted to give her a call to see how she was doing, but I quickly scrolled past it. There was no way I could call her, not after our last conversation on the beach. We had done our farewells. It was done.

Out on vacation, it had been easy for us to enjoy one another's company. The fact that there were too many familiar faces in New York was a good enough sign that I needed to watch myself. One wrong step and stocks would crash, the business would falter, and I would lose too much money from it.

I scrolled past her name for the third time, and stopped at Maurice's name. "Hello?"

"Hey Maurice, it's Jared. Just wanted to let you know I'm all settled in. Figured I'd call to see when you're free to chat again and maybe grab a few drinks. My treat."

Maurice didn't answer at first. I tapped my foot in anticipation. It was likely Kim told her dad about us after we left and the potential friendship I wanted to rebuild would now be destroyed because of my stupid decisions.

"Yeah! Sorry, dropped my phone. We can definitely meet up. Mind if I

get back to you on a good day? I need to check my calendar."

I glanced at the paper calendar hanging on the wall to check my own schedule. The monthly photos were based on old drawings Mandi had done when she was younger. My week was pretty empty so far. I didn't have anything specific planned.

"Sure, no problem. If I don't answer, just leave me a voicemail."

"Of course."

"Well, see you around, Maurice."

I ended the call with a heavy sigh and sat on the sofa. The TV was on, set to photo mode so it looked like a painting hanging on the wall instead of a television. I reached for the remote but stopped myself. There were far more productive things I could do than binge on tv.

My calendar for the day was empty except for a huge block listed as moving-in duties. I ignored it and left the apartment. There was really only one place I could go to at this point where it didn't matter who I was anymore. We were all blue at the VFW.

I managed to thankfully wear something that didn't make me stick out too much. A basic pair of jeans with small blotches of paint and a white T-shirt. They weren't peak clothing in style, nor were they really any style. Perfect for moving around the apartment and unpacking boxes, but the idea of changing into something else just sounded exhausting. Since returning from vacation, I seemed to have lost every bit of motivation, like something was missing.

The VFW had a few other veterans inside. Most of them were older gentlemen from the Vietnam War or the early years of the Gulf War. For the first time in a long time, I felt dwarfed by others. So often I was the biggest person in the room, but each of them had experiences that I couldn't compare with.

"Hey newbie! Welcome in!" one of the older men near the bar called out. He swung an arm in the air. "Come join us for a drink."

I raised a brow. It was barely after lunch. Not exactly the time to be drinking, but I wasn't going to argue. I sat next to him. His clothes were worn with small patches at the seams, but the warm smile on his face told of all the experiences he had behind him.

"So, what brings you out here? Haven't seen your face here before."

I gave the bartender my order for a soda and turned back to the veteran.

"Just moved to the area...the Financial District, figured I'd check out the nearby chapter."

"Hear that boys?" the old man yelled out over the din of conversations. "Boy here says he lives in the Financial District."

A few of the others let out a low whistle and a few jokes about me being some big shot or something. I chuckle along with them. They had no idea who I was in reality, so in their minds, I was just a big named manager somewhere and not the business mogul I actually was. It reminded me of how Kim looked at me when we first started seeing one another. There was no power imbalance between the two of us, even though I knew better.

I tapped the bar, "Let's pay for a round, on me for everyone. It'll be my welcome gift to the group."

Roars of approval filled the room with a few getting up to slap me on the back.

Once the crowd slid back into the old noise levels, the elderly man next to me leaned closer, "So why are you really here, boy? Someone like you could go somewhere nice, not here with a bunch of old men living in the past."

I shrugged, "Just let my feet take me where I needed to go, and this was where I was needed."

He shook his head, "No, you weren't *needed* here. *You* needed to be here. I know that look. You can take the man out of the military, but you can't take the military out of the man. You needed the brotherhood tonight. So, talk. We're here to listen."

I cupped my glass and stared down at my reflection in the pool of dark liquid, "I've really fucked up a lot lately."

"We've all been there. Bad marriage?"

I shook my head. "Already had two of those. Lost my first wife and the second divorced me," I grunted. I didn't like thinking about it, "She was a stupid bitch anyway and every time I was around her, she just pissed me off." I gripped the glass tighter.

"Lived that one. One failed marriage under my belt as well." He pointed toward a group of four men at the pool table. "Those fellas have at least ten failed marriages between the lot of them."

I raised a brow.

"Marines."

I did a silent ah and took a sip.

"But marriage isn't what's troubling you, if it's already done and over with."

I shook my head and took another sip, "You're right. I met someone

recently. Not sure I could ever be with her. She let a beast inside me come out, and I don't want to hurt her if it gets uncontrollable."

"Did you hurt her yet?"

"No, not yet. I--"

"Then you probably won't. If you know it's there, then you can work to fix it." He downed another shot, "Maybe you need to go see her and talk it out. It might be good to talk with your ex-wife too. God knows they like to be malicious when they see one of us in a successful marriage. Listen to someone who knows."

"Yeah, I probably should smooth things over with Sarah. She deserves that at least. So does Mandi."

"Mandi the girl?"

"No!" I almost shouted in horror, my voice coming out a little louder than I expected. "No, Mandi's my daughter and the woman I like is her friend."

The old man furrowed his brow and leaned back, "This lady friend. She your age?"

I snorted. I knew she was much younger than me, but he was the first to question it, "She's definitely half my age."

"Then there's more fun to be had for you. Plenty of energy to do all the fun, and if you like her, then there's something good about her. The bonus is that your daughter already likes her. Makes it easy to bring her home for dinner."

"Maybe. But first I have to find the courage to speak with her again."

"What branch did you say you were in, boy?"

"Navy."

He crossed his arms and closed his eyes, "I don't know much about you sea boys, but I know your lot was tough back when I was in. So you can handle these rough waters for a little while longer."

"Yeah, you're right," a surge of energy passed through me as I sat up. Speaking with him just made me feel more at ease, like I was back on the ships once more with Maurice by my side. "Thanks. I really appreciate it."

I slammed my card on the counter for the bartender to take it.

"You sure you want to pay for everyone's drinks?"

"Positive. It's the least I can do for the free therapy."

He smiled and tilted his head forward, "Pleased to serve with you, boy. Now go find that girl."

I sat at the lone table, anxiety filling every piece of me. It had been years

since I had spoken to Sarah and even longer since I had seen her face to face. I wasn't even sure I knew what she looked like anymore. I downed another glass of wine and sucked in a deep breath in anticipation for her arrival.

She walked into the restaurant wearing a dark blue dress that complimented her olive skin. She was just as beautiful as the day I married her, but the sneer on her face told me everything I needed to know about how she felt about me. She sauntered to the table and glared at me.

"Well?"

I stood up, to let her sit first. She complied with her nose stuck in the air.

"That's more like it. Maybe these last few years taught you how to be respectful again."

I mumbled something about her not learning to stop being a bitch under my breath.

"What?"

"I said they should be bringing our drinks here soon. I know you like a nice chardonnay with your steak."

She humphed and crossed her arms. "So, what did you want? Ready to start paying alimony?"

"No. We signed a prenup. You agreed that no contact was perfectly fine after the divorce."

"And yet here we are." She spread her arms out, "So, where's my money."

I rolled my eyes and slid over a small envelope with a thousand dollars in it, "Here. As agreed, five hundred dollars for every hour you're forced to see me." I gritted my teeth.

She counted the money before giving me her attention again, "Good. So, what do you want?"

"Well, what I wanted was for us to come to terms with one another." I tried not to raise my voice, I didn't want others to hear us. Having an audience would keep me in check. I knew if I were alone or in a more private area, I would start yelling almost immediately.

Sarah let out a soft grunt and leaned back while turning her head from me, "And if I don't want to come to terms with you?"

I clenched my fists and gritted my teeth. She was getting to be too much, "Then if you don't, I'll accept you came here for a free meal just like how you married me for a free leg up in the world. I didn't have to marry you back then. If anything, you were a nobody and should have stayed that way."

She stiffened. If her eyes could kill me, I doubt I would have survived

uttering another word. "How dare you--"

"No. How dare *you*?" I pointed to her dress. "Just because it has your designer name on it doesn't mean you deserve it. I was the reason that business even became a well-known brand to begin within the city. Be glad I decided to let it slide and didn't run your business into the ground when I had the chance."

She stood up and slammed her hands on the table, "You piece of shit! This is why I left you, and your annoying daughter. All you do is take for yourself and never think about how it might affect other people around you."

"Whatever, Sarah. Just run off to cry into your dozens of fur coats like you've always done." I stood up and walked away from the table, "You can enjoy the meal by yourself. I don't want to be associated with you anymore."

I stormed away to the sound of her stuttering. I smiled to myself as I made my way to the counter to pay for whatever we had ordered, and then some. The waiter who had to deal with her after this deserved the extra tips.

The apartment was quiet when I got home. The only light was a small lamp next to my bed for reading. I switched into a pair of pajamas and lay in bed. A headache was quickly starting to form in the front of my head, at the thought of what happened today. I tried to make amends with Sarah as they recommended, and instead, I had failed miserably because I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

All I had to do was keep my cool. Eventually, her barks would turn into muffled groans about anything and everything and I could tune it out. I had done it for years during our marriage, and now I couldn't do it any longer. Just the thought of trying again made my skin crawl.

"I really suck at this whole being a good person," I sighed and closed my eyes. In my mind, Kim was sitting in bed next to me. I reached out for her hand and stopped as I realized she wasn't actually there, "I don't think I could even be a good person for you."

The image of Kim dissipated into the darkness as I fell into a deep sleep filled with nightmares.

KIM

I twirled my fork around the spaghetti and then dropped the ball of noodles again on the plate haphazardly.

"Are you alright, Kim?" my dad asked, pulling me out of my strange pasta trance.

"Hm? Oh! Yeah, I'm fine," I muttered.

"Kim... You've been quiet since we came back from Hawaii. You're not fine." He took a bite of his fettuccini and pointed the fork at me. "You might have grown up and left the house, but I still know when you're sad. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you found a puppy on the side of the road you wanted to bring home, and then found out it already had an owner."

I rolled my eyes and chuckled, "I was ten, dad. Every cartoon back then made it sound like you could just adopt an animal from the dumpster and call it a day."

"And the raccoon?"

I shrugged, "It looked like a fat cat."

"I just want to make sure you're not getting into any trouble or need some help is all. You're still my baby girl."

"Yeah, I know dad. Thanks." I took a bite of a mini meatball, "So, you said you've been busy lately?"

He nodded and pulled out his phone, "Jared moved, and we've been seeing each other more often."

The piece of noodle I was working on caught in the back of my throat. I coughed and pounded on my chest to try and clear it, "What?" My voice was hoarse.

My dad turned the phone around to show a photo of him and Jared at a bowling alley with a bunch of old men trying and failing at taking a group selfie. Jared stood out amongst all of them with his smoldering eyes, and upscale tailored clothing. He even had a fingerless glove built for professional bowlers.

"He's apparently still trying to deal with being back out here instead of bouncing around the place, so he made some new friends." He tucked the phone back into his pocket, "Apparently they're some guys from his local VFW. They like to call him the big man over there."

The heat rushed to my cheeks at the thought of others calling him big. Though my reasons for knowing that were far different from theirs. "Well, I'm glad you have him back in your life."

"About that."

I put the fork down. Usually when someone said that it wasn't good news. While I wasn't sure how I felt about my dad hanging out with the guy I really liked, I wasn't going to wish them ill will on their friendship. Dad needed the friendship in his life.

"What happened?"

He shook his head, "Don't worry about it. Jared was just asking about you. Seemed like he wanted to spend some time with Mandi and you, but when I pushed it, he backed out. Nothing happened between the two of you, did it?"

I shook my head, and clicked my tongue, "No, nothing happened. I mean, we talked a lot since he never got to meet me before he moved off to do his thing, but I spent a lot of time with Mandi too."

He grunted and took a sip of his soda, "Hmmm."

"You don't believe me, dad?"

"Didn't say that."

I sighed, and drooped my shoulders. "You're as bad a liar as I am sometimes. Just trust me. Nothing is going on between us right now."

"Good," he stabbed the fork at me in the air. "You deserve better than him."

"Oh?" I raised a brow. "Need me to find the richest man in the world then? I mean, I guess I could try, but I doubt he'd want to marry me either. I might be a catch, but I'm not gonna bow to just anyone." I flipped a piece of my hair over my shoulder.

He chuckled and took a deep breath, "You know what I mean. Just don't

be getting with someone who might cause you heartache later on. I don't need to shoot my best friend because he broke my daughter's heart."

"I'll be fine, dad," I reached a hand out, and gently rested it on his. "Trust me on this one. If anything happens to me because of a guy, I'll make sure you're the first to know and get your gun ready for you."

He dropped me back off at my apartment later that evening with a box filled with desserts he demanded I order and take home to enjoy. I wasn't going to tell him no, but the idea of finishing them before they went bad wasn't what I would call a good time.

I collapsed on the sofa and propped my feet up on the worn-out ottoman stuffed with thick blankets and old textbooks. The plain gray of it matched the dust that had managed to collect over the week I was gone. Something else I needed to take care of later this week.

My phone buzzed with a text from my dad.

Made it home safely. Be good.

You too, dad.

I scrolled through to make sure I didn't have any other messages I hadn't responded to yet and paused on Jared's name. I was supposed to delete his contact from my phone while on the flight home. I wanted to forget about him and everything we had done during the wedding week. Just seeing his name sent my legs quivering.

I leave my text messages to get my mind off him, and moved over to Facebook. Most of my timeline was filled with photos from the vacation and wedding itself. A few times I saw photos of Jared and me sitting near one another or staring at one another. It was so obvious that something was happening between us, and no one had even realized it!

"Damn it," I shouted and tossed my phone to the corner of the sofa. "Seriously, why does everything have to be about him?"

I groaned and closed my eyes while listening to the clock on the wall tick away the seconds.

"Whatever," I growled and grabbed my phone again.

There was one surefire way of getting over him. Or at least distract myself from him. Find a new guy. It didn't matter if they were baby-faced at this point. Anything to just forget about who Jared was, and get on with my life. I downloaded the first hookup app I could think of.

"Name: Kim. Interests..."

I bit my inner cheek. I could list something generic like adventures or go

into detail about how I wanted an older man. After a few minutes, I fell back on animals as my interest. At least if someone had pets of their own, even if they weren't a good match I could fall for their dog or cat.

The rest of the profile was easy to fill out. Listing any kinks I had or didn't have. Who I was interested in. And finally, it asked me if I had a specific age range in mind. While I wanted to say men over forty, I opened it to twenty-five just to have more options.

Within seconds, before I could even close the app, I received my first match.

"Seriously?"

I tapped on the notification and clicked on the guy's profile. He was barely older than me, fairly muscular, and it looked like there was a woman in the photo he barely managed to crop out. I hit skip on him. While I wanted to get over Jared, I didn't need to deal with drama from a guy that might still be with someone.

Another ding made me check again. It was like an addiction to see who was clicking on my profile. This guy was in his thirties. He wore a green football jersey and was hanging out at some bar. I flipped to another photo where he was out hiking somewhere. In his hand was what obviously looked like a leash so I flipped to the next photo and was greeted immediately by the snoot of a golden retriever.

My heart instantly melted at the sight of the dog and I let out an audible aww. I clicked ok on him and waited for a response.

Nothing.

Another match came in with a ding.

I continued flipping through the different matches I was consistently getting for another ten minutes before I decided to stop. It was getting a bit much, and I needed a break from deciding if someone might be a creep or not. Instead, I turned my attention back to my messages which were now filled with responses from some of the guys I had matched with. I started with the golden retriever guy.

Sup.

Hey, your dog is really cute!

Thanks. Her name's Rosa.

Cute name.

I waited a moment and decided to go all in. Texting to get to know someone was too cold and heartless to really get a feel for someone. If I

wanted to know more about golden retriever guy, it needed to be face-to-face, so I could determine his character.

*Are you free tomorrow to grab a coffee? You could bring Rosa with you.
Sure.*

I sucked in a deep breath and closed the app. I'd deal with the other guys after the golden retriever guy's date. If something didn't kick in to get me interested, then at least I had others waiting as a backup now.

Sitting outside of the coffee shop was almost unbearable under the hot sun. I cursed myself for not checking the weather forecast last night before offering to meet here. Then again, the iced chocolate was exactly what I needed too. If he didn't show up, at least I got a nice drink out of it. If he did, it would be a bonus.

"Excuse me?" a gruff voice said behind me.

I turned around and was immediately greeted with the soft eyes of the golden retriever guy staring down at me. Wrapped around his waist was Rosa's leash, who sat next to him with a huge smile on her face and flecks of whipped cream from a puppacino.

"You're Kim, right?"

"I... Yeah! I'm Kim." I stood up and offered him a chair. "It's nice to meet you."

He raised his brow and eyed me up and down, "It's nice to meet you too."

Rosa sat between the two of us on the ground. Occasionally she lifted her nose to nudge my hand or his for treats.

"Sorry, I didn't get your name last night."

"Jake."

My heart lurched a little. It wasn't like it was the same name, but the sound of it was too close to Jared's. I wasn't sure if it was to his benefit or not.

"Jake," I let his name roll off my lips to get a better taste of it. The feeling was almost sour. "I saw on your profile that you do a lot of hiking. Do you two hike here in New York, or do you go out to the mountains?"

"Mostly we go to the Poconos during the Summer and Winter. Lots to do in both seasons, and Rosa loves it, it wears her out for a long time." He took a sip of his coffee, "What about you? You mentioned in your bio about wanting to see the world. Are you into philanthropy or something?"

I shook my head, "No, nothing like that. More like, I want to go backpacking and see different countries. Hopefully, with someone who can keep up with me."

A sly smirk crossed his face as he understood the small detail I left on the table about keeping up with one another. While he wasn't the most attractive man, there was something interesting about him. I just had to hope the soft eyes were all for show and he had some grit about him too.

"Well, I'm sure I could provide the pace," he rolled his shoulders. "How about we see which of us lasts longer? Though I have to ask..."

I gulped. The way he adjusted how he sat didn't sit well with me like he wasn't sure how to ask what he wanted too.

"You're on that app. So, I assume you've been with a few guys already. You're not like... you know..."

"What?"

Jake leaned forward and lowered his voice, "Well the beef isn't floppy is it?"

I pushed back from the table. All the air in my lungs escaped in shock at the question. "Seriously?"

"What? I'm big, but I don't want to be shooting hot dogs down a corridor."

"No. No. I can't believe you just said that," I pushed myself away from the table, knocking my drink over in the process. "Shit!"

Rosa pounced on the splattered drink, and I had to push her away.

"Don't drink that!" I snapped.

Jake pulled Rosa back and stood over me, "Don't yell at my dog."

"Well don't have your dog out here trying to drink poison."

"Poison?" he roared and grabbed my arm. "You were going to poison my dog?"

He was stronger than I thought, the squeeze on my arm made me want to yelp in pain, but I forced it down. I wasn't going to give him that satisfaction.

"It was a frozen chocolate, asshole," I stood up and pulled my arm away from his grip. "Or are you also dumb when it comes to food?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" he puffed his chest out trying to intimidate me.

"What I'm talking about," I poked him in the chest as hard as I could, to deflate his lungs just a little. "Is you don't understand any anatomy. Like I'd ever want to be around an asshole like you."

"Well, I don't want to be around a bit like you either," he tightened his grip on Rosa's leash. "Come on, pup, we're going home. Obviously, she doesn't understand that she lost out on an actual nice guy."

I snorted to hold the laugh back and muttered under my breath, "Nice guys don't call it beef." I rolled my eyes and tossed what I had left of the drink. The line was way too long to deal with getting another one. I could handle finding something on my way back home and possibly petting another dog on my way.

I did feel bad for Rosa who glanced back at me a few times before trotting after Jake once more. She would never understand how big of a jerk her owner was. To her, he was the best person in the world. Perhaps for her, he was, but there was nothing that would convince me he was redeemable.

My phone buzzed from an incoming notification. A message from Jake on the app.

Asshole.

A small note underneath it let me know I couldn't respond back to him since he had blocked me. Not like I cared. He wasn't worth giving any more attention to. If anything, he had saved me the time of trying to figure out how to block him.

I stopped near the subway station before turning down another street. The heat was getting to me and making me more irritable. I almost wished Jared was here. At least he would know how to cool me off and make me feel better.

It was possible I could give him a call and see where he was right now, but since it was the middle of the day, he was probably in a meeting or something. I opted instead for texting Mandi. If Jared was in the city, Mandi might have moved out here too and we could catch up. At least she would understand my frustrations with guys.

You free?

She sent a photo of her on the beach with a drink in her hand and a guy lying next to her.

Sorry, I'm in Mexico right now.

I sighed and locked my phone. Of course, she wasn't free either. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs.

"Excuse me," a deep voice said behind me.

I jumped and whirled around. A man with dark hair threaded with grey, towered over me. His hard eyes stared into mine with an intensity that sent a chill down my spine. For a moment, he reminded me of Jared.

"I...I..." no words could form.

"What are you staring at?" he raised a brow. "Look, can you move?" he

pointed behind me.

I turned to see the ATM I was leaning against. I turned back and gave an apologetic smile.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"Better be," he rolled his eyes and moved past me. "Swear all you millennials believe you're entitled to everything in this world."

I opened my mouth to retort, but again nothing came out. My mind continued to play games with me. I shook my head. There was no way the older man was Jared. They were nothing alike outside of their hair. Even then, it looked disheveled and was cut haphazardly, nothing like Jared's clean hairstyle.

He finished using the machine, and walked away muttering something about me being a bitch under his breath.

"Damn it, I'm such an idiot," I grumbled. "Of course, I wouldn't just bump into him that easily. Come on, Kim, you need to get it together."

I pulled out my phone and tapped on the dating app. There were still a few people I could choose from. It was going to take more than bumping into some random stranger to keep me from my goal. Jared was off limits from now on.

JARED

I bounced my leg in impatience. I was supposed to meet someone tonight, they were already half an hour late and I was already two glasses of wine into the evening. I glanced at my watch for the tenth time in the last three minutes. Nothing to indicate that she had canceled on me. Jessica would have contacted me to let me know.

"Would you like some water, sir?" the waitress asked. She shifted in place when I unfairly directed my anger toward her, "Sorry, I can come back--"

"No!" I snapped. I rolled my eyes and turned back to my watch, "Sure, get me a glass of water. I'll probably leave here soon anyway."

The waitress scurried off to the kitchen. I wanted to feel bad for mistreating her, but I could only imagine the whispers from the staff. I was supposedly one of the most successful businessmen in the area and making a name for myself in the news, and yet I was being stood up by a blind date.

I turned my attention to my phone and tapped on the calendar. Nothing else was scheduled for the evening and I had no excuses to call it a night because I had some early morning meeting either. Jessica had made sure I was completely open.

"Fuck," I growled.

Someone walked into the restaurant finally and I perked up to see who it was. I didn't know what my blind date looked like. All I knew was that her name was Danielle.

The woman who came in wore an off-brand red dress with a high waist slit on both sides. It clashed with her appearance. Maybe a purple dress would have complimented her looks better, but I wasn't going to say

anything. I knew better than to tell a woman she looked bad when I was trying to impress them. She was closer to me in age with laugh lines and crow's feet that gave off an eternal look of joy on her face. I was almost envious of how the woman could look so happy in this world.

She immediately spotted me and waved. I lifted my hand in a half-hearted wave back as she hurried over.

"Are you Jared?" she asked.

"Yeah, I am," I stood up so she could take a seat with me at the table.

She gave me a big grin and settled into her chair, immediately reaching for the menu. No apology for being late, and she was already looking at what to eat. This wasn't off to a good start.

"Oh my, these meals are pricey... and it only covers the entree?" she screeched the last part loudly, causing everyone to turn and look at us.

"My assistant gave you the location. Did you not know the price?"

I wasn't planning on paying for her meal as a first-date experience, but with how she had just reacted to the entree prices, I knew I was going to have to cover the entire tab.

She blushed and stared at her menu, "Yes... I mean no... I knew it was expensive, but I wasn't expecting it to be this much." She bit her lip and gave me a sheepish grin, "You'll cover it for me, right? I mean that's what a gentleman does."

I grumbled and nodded my head.

Danielle clapped her hands together and jumped in place, "Oh goody! I was worried for a moment." She winked at me, "Don't worry. I'll make sure I pay you for this in other ways."

I didn't want to say anything to make the situation more awkward than it already was. While she was closer in age to me, something about her reminded me of a teenager trying to act older. Even though Kim was younger, she didn't act like a child in front of me. She had a bit more maturity in how she presented herself.

"Anyway," I sighed heavily to change the subject. "Jessica said you are interested in the stock market?"

Danielle beamed and pulled out her phone. "Well, not the stock market. But I love all these nifty NFTs and crypto-whatsits." She tapped on an app and turned it around to show a picture of a chihuahua, "That's my baby boy, Dodge. I made a photo I took of him into an NFT!"

I groaned and leaned back in the booth. While cryptocurrency and NFTs

were something that caught my eye and I could talk to her about, there was no opening to talk about actual details on the matter.

"Ok... so what about family? Do you have kids?"

She shook her head and made an exaggerated gasp, "Do I look like I could be a mother? No, I hate children. Especially smaller children. What about you?"

"I have a daughter."

"Oh, tell me she's out of the house? I don't want to be a stepmom," she made a grimace. "I don't want to deal with teenagers either."

The conversation was getting us nowhere. While she wasn't at an age to have kids anymore, I also wasn't a fan of someone who disliked children or wanted my child out of the house. There were plenty of times Mandi came to see me and if Danielle was around, I could only imagine what would happen between the two of them.

Danielle leaned forward and interlocked her fingers under her chin, "So why did you decide to come on this blind date?"

I shrugged, "Needed to get out there and give people a chance."

"Well, I for one am glad you did," she batted her eyelashes. "I think we could get along just fine."

"And why is that? We haven't exactly discussed anything that either of us agrees on."

Again, she gave a fake, exaggerated gasp, "But we do have so much in common! I mean, we've obviously grown up with similar childhoods. We're part of an amazing generation!"

I sighed and shook my head. Another person who wanted to act like they were better than others because of their age. At least the VFW didn't care what age you were. A soldier was a soldier, was a sailor, was a marine, was an airman. I wanted to laugh at how absurd it sounded in my head, but with how many branches there were, and how we were all cut from a similar cloth, it made sense to think about them too.

"Look, Danielle."

"Yes?"

"You seem like a decent woman and you're probably fun. But..."

"But?"

I tried to formulate how I was going to word what I wanted to say politely, but nothing came to mind, "But you're not a good fit for me. You're not my type, and you sound dumb when you talk. I need a woman with more

substance."

"Substance?" she said the word loud enough so the tables nearby could hear us. "Are you kidding me? You've barely spoken to me, and you want to say I have no substance?"

I puffed my chest and glared daggers at her, "Yes, I do want to say that."

She deflated like a balloon, and turned to look at the people at the other tables as if they were going to come to support her. "What? But I..." tears welled in her eyes, and she collapsed into her hands sobbing. "I can't believe this. I spent a lot of money on this dress to impress you. How could you do this to me?" her eyeliner was already running down her face.

"Look, I'm sorry I guess, but you need to understand that--"

"I don't want to hear it," she slammed her hand on the table and stood back up. "This was a waste of time. All you men are trash! I should have known better. I'll make sure the papers all know about what a horrible person you are, you sexist pig!"

I flinched at the insult. It would cause problems later if a story like that got published. I needed to smooth things over.

"I'm sorry," I grabbed her wrist and rubbed my thumb across her skin. "Let's try this again. We'll eat dinner and talk. If things go well, we can see about future plans between us. If not, then no hard feelings?"

This was my only chance to get her to change her mind.

"I'm paying after all, and you can get dessert too."

Her eyes lit up at the word dessert and she sat back down. She cleared her throat and readjusted the front of her dress.

"I'm glad you changed your mind. You'll see there's substance to who I am," she snapped her fingers in the air. "Let's get some service so I can get a drink while we wait."

The waitress hurried over with my water and smiled at Danielle, "I'm so glad you could make it this evening. Are you interested in one of the wines?"

Danielle clicked her tongue and flipped through the wine list, "Yeah... let me get..." She clicked her tongue a few more times as if deep in thought. "Ah, here we are," she pointed to something on the red wines list. "Let's try this one. It sounds fancy."

"Of course!" the waitress clapped her hands together. "Shall I get you two an appetizer as well?"

"Mozzarella sticks."

The waitress' smile vanished, "Ma'am we don't have any mozzarella

sticks here."

"What?" she huffed and turned back to the menu. "Alright, let's go with these escargot things."

"Right away. And for you, sir?"

I waved a hand, "Nothing for me. Thank you."

The waitress scurried back to the kitchen to grab the wine and put our order in for escargot. I almost wondered if Danielle knew what she had ordered. The way she said it made me think she had no idea what it was. Once the appetizer arrived, it would be an interesting experience to watch her reactions. At least I would have entertainment tonight with this failure of a blind date.

A text message came in on my phone, and I snatched my phone quickly without even realizing I had done it. My heart sank as I realized it was Jessica. Not like I should have expected anything different. Kim and I had moved on, and Mandi was busy on vacation.

So, how's the new lady friend?

Horrible.

Oh no! Does she eat like a caveman?

Worse. Don't set me up with her ever again or I will take the bill out of your paycheck.

"Is something wrong?" Danielle asked.

I shook my head and shoved my phone back in my pocket, "No, I'm fine. Just my assistant checking on me."

She leaned forward and hovered above the table a little as if she would like to see what I had typed despite my phone being put away. "I hope you told her how much of a lady I am."

"Something like that," I wanted to tell her my assistant called her a caveman and she wasn't far off, but decided against it to keep the peace.

The rest of the dinner went exactly as I had expected. Danielle freaked out when she realized escargot were snails and demanded the dish be taken back, because they were trying to poison her. Then when the steaks came out, she tried to accuse the waitress of undercooking it when she was the one who had asked for blue rare.

We ended the night in near silence. Between the horrible meal and us not having much more to talk about, there was a mutual understanding that we were not made for one another.

I WASN'T sure what to expect from the next three dates Jessica had set up for me. Each was worse than the last, one date even insisted I take her shopping! That was the worst of the three by far. I didn't even want to think of how much money I had spent over the last week just to deal with rejecting each of them in different ways. At least none of them ended with them claiming they would report me to the newspaper.

A call came halfway through my lunch. I almost didn't want to answer in case it was a journalist wanting to follow up on a story one from one of the women. When I checked the caller ID, it was Maurice. I shoved the phone to my ear and smiled.

"Thank god, it's you."

"Well damn, never thought you felt that way about me," Maurice chuckled. "Are you alright? I haven't heard from you lately."

I sighed and slumped in my chair, "You have no idea how difficult it's been. Is everything alright with you?"

"Yeah, things are going well. Actually, I wanted to see if you were up to meeting me tonight."

"What are you planning?" I narrowed my gaze, hoping he wasn't about to offer a blind date as well for me.

"Nothing. I figured I'd stop by your apartment this time. I need to get out of the house. It's way too quiet lately and Kim's been avoiding me."

"What?" I stood back up. "Is she alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, she's fine. Said she's been dealing with stuff, so I figured it's that time of the month or something. She tends to get mopey around this time and I know she's been on some shitty dates lately, that's probably killing her too."

My heart sank at the news that she was going on dates. It wasn't like I wasn't doing the same thing. I needed to remind myself we had both agreed we wouldn't see one another again after the vacation. It sounded like we were both struggling to replace the other.

"Jared?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah! You can come over. I need some help unpacking."

"Sounds good. I'll bring a couple of beers and we can watch a wrestling match on pay-per-view. I hear it's one of the big events tonight."

I didn't want to correct him that they weren't really called pay-per-views anymore. I found myself using older terms too and it wasn't like we usually watched wrestling either. I couldn't remember the last time I watched a

match. Likely when I was still enlisted and it happened to be on in the dayroom. Other than that, I had never bothered to watch it willingly on my own.

"Yeah, let's do that. Get something a bit hoppy if you can."

"I'll do my best to get you one wearing a tuxedo if it will help you get out of whatever funk you're dealing with."

We both laughed. That was always something I could count on with Maurice. He knew when something was wrong with someone before they ever said anything and knew how to make them smile.

"I'll see you then."

I tried to tidy up the condo as best as I could before Maurice got there. Most of my plates were still shoved in boxes and I had no idea where any of the glasses were. I couldn't remember the last time I had willingly enjoyed a meal at home. Most of my meals were either from the cafeteria in the office or through Uber Eats. I still didn't have anything I could cook at home.

Before I could try and decide how I was going to make dinner for us tonight, there was a knock at the door.

"Jared? It's me!" Maurice called out as he opened the door.

"Already?"

Maurice held up the beers. Half of them had small paper bow ties taped to the cans. "Told you they would wear tuxedos for you."

A hardy belly laugh escaped and I wiped a tear from my eye. The sheer absurdity of the promise made me feel instantly better.

"So, you ready to watch some wrestling?" Maurice asked with as strong of a Southern accent as he could muster.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

We sat on the couch and I turned on the television to the wrestling matches that were well underway. I couldn't tell who was who in the tiny ring as dozens of men stuffed themselves inside it while punching one another. Still, the beer and Maurice made it not matter at all.

"You said Kim's not been doing well? Have you gone to visit her lately?"

"Yeah. We met up for dinner. She's been dealing with some huge assholes. Thankfully she knows my rules when it comes to standards. What about Mandi?"

"She's coming back from her vacation any day now."

"Where this time?"

"Mexico. Said she wanted to experience life like a local."

"Sounds like fun. Hopefully, those two can find someone to settle down with."

I lifted my can in the air, "Here's to all of us getting the one we want without judgment from others and happiness all around."

Maurice clinked his can against mine, "I can drink to that."

We chugged down our beers and I could finally settle into the moment. If Maurice was serious, then perhaps I could reach out to Kim at some point. I just needed to find the right opportunity to do it.

KIM

The light just barely reached my windowsill, adding a strange orange, hazy glow to everything. I blinked away some of the sleep, trying to remember everything I could about the dreams I had. But I couldn't remember anything, and it was grinding at the back of my mind. Almost as if I was supposed to remember something important and couldn't recall the exact thing.

My phone buzzed and I scrambled to reach it, hoping to once again see Jared's name. Another notification from the dating app. I groaned and rolled back over. Whatever I was dreaming about, it wasn't as important as I thought it was, but I could at least get another hour of sleep in before I had to get up for work.

Again, my phone buzzed. This time it didn't stop, as if my phone was catching up on multiple notifications throughout the night. I groaned and picked it up to silence my phone, but stopped.

Carl's name filled the screen with a photo of us as the background. I answered the call and tried to push what little sleep was still there away. My head spun from the sudden movement so I closed my eyes to keep myself steady.

"Hello?"

"Kim? Hey, are you free today?"

I glanced at my alarm clock. Monday, "I mean, I have work today, but I get off at five if that--"

"Perfect! We made it back home last night and wanted to sit down and chat. If that's all right with you."

I sat up with a soft grunt and leaned against my headboard, "Sure, I could probably do some dinner. You're paying right?"

"Of course."

"Got a place in mind or do you need me to pick?"

Amanda's voice perked up in the background of the call, "I've got that taken care of. It's this Mediterranean place I haven't tried yet by our place."

"Mediterranean, eh?" I nodded and swung my legs off the side of the bed. "Yeah, I can do that. Send me the address and I can meet you two there after work."

"Sounds good. Love you, Kim."

"Love you too, bro," I replied. A small smile crossed my face. Hearing my brother's voice again made the annoyance of the last two weeks melt away.

I ended the call and tossed my phone on the nightstand. My head was still spinning a little. I needed to take some medicine and splash some water on my face if I planned to exist in the world. If I didn't know better, I would have thought I had had too much to drink the night before, but I hadn't touched any alcohol at all the day before.

My reflection wasn't much different from how I felt. The dark circles under my eyes were a dead giveaway to how exhausted I was, and how little I had slept last night. My skin had a slight paleness about it too. I splashed water on my face and applied some makeup to add some color to my face. There was no way I was going to go out looking like I had spent the entire night drinking instead of sleeping when I went into the office today.

Nothing about my route to work felt right. Every movement gave me an uncomfortable sensation like I was going to collapse at any given minute. I chose to avoid the subways, if I was feeling this bad while walking down the street, there was no way I could handle a train rattling along on a track. The sudden jolting movements and the extreme heat were too much to imagine.

It was quiet inside the office, and I gave a silent thank you to whatever spirit decided to finally bless me with a gift today. I sidled into my small cubicle and got started on work. But the glare of the computer screen and the muffled sound of conversations a few rows down grated on my nerves. Something needed to change, or I was going to snap at someone. I hadn't felt this horrible before or so irritated about the littlest things like I was today.

I grabbed a bottle of pain medication and shuffled over to the water cooler and took two pills. It wouldn't be instantaneous, but at least it would

help. One of my coworkers attempted to wave me down to talk, but I responded with a glare and hurried back to my desk. I didn't want to be bothered by anyone today.

The rest of the day continued like a nightmare. The pain never went away, and I was still dizzy. My temperature wasn't up which meant I wasn't sick, but something was definitely wrong. If it continued until tomorrow, I promised myself I would call in sick at work and get checked out at the clinic.

At five, I shut down my computer and joined the crowds surrounding the door. Each person scanned their badge to operate the rotating doors, making the process of getting out of work slower than I wanted it to be. There wasn't anything I could do about it. The only other exit was on the other side of the building and would add more time to my walk.

Carl sent a text.

You still good to join us?

Yeah. Can you order me water if you get there first?

You doing ok?

Just a little dizzy. Think I didn't get enough sleep.

I can cancel if you want.

The crowd around the door thinned, and I shifted forward a little before turning back to my phone.

No, you don't have to. This is the only highlight of my day.

Alright. See you soon.

It was my turn to scan my badge and walk back out into the scorching heat. I could wait for a taxi, but the time it would take plus the price of the fare, was going to be way too high for my liking. The only way to reach the restaurant quickly, was by subway. Not ideal, but I wasn't going to cancel just because my stubbornness made me not want to get on a train for a few minutes.

The entrance to the subway was only a block down from where I was, which meant an easy walk. And yet, I couldn't catch my breath long enough to make the distance without stopping every few steps. People stared at me as if I was carrying some strange disease and would spread it to them. Not like I blamed them. If I saw some stranger behaving the same way, I'd worry about my health too.

I covered my nose as I made my way down into the subway. It smelled like someone had farted multiple times, and the smell was trapped in a

strange bubble that everyone existed inside within. Graffiti covered one of the walls with a mixture of regular spray-painted tags and a few scribbles with markers. Further ahead, one of the overhead lights flickered, adding to my headache. I turned away from the light as I passed by, focusing on the ground to avoid stepping on someone's shoes.

I turned another corner into the main subway area where the trains would pull in. One rail on each side with multiple pillars dotted the landing. I leaned against one next to the yellow line on the left side where the train I needed would pull in.

The one on the right was the first to arrive, sending large bursts of hot air swirling through the platform. I closed my eyes against the warmth and let out a heavy sigh. Mine should arrive in a few minutes if the signs were correct, and if no kid decided to surf on top of the trains today, or someone caused an accident. Most of the crowd filed into the train on the right, leaving me and a small handful of people waiting on the platform.

I reached for my phone to let Carl know I was still on my way. No signal. I shoved my phone back into my pocket. There were a few stations where I could get just enough bars to send a text, but this wasn't one of them today.

After another five minutes, and the train pulled into the station. The hot air from it pushed me against the pillar I was leaning on. I joined the rest of the crowd and filed into the train. Most of it was packed except for a few seats. One I refused to take, like so many others. That was just an unspoken rule, no matter how tired or how bad I felt. That seat was never worth it.

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

I didn't answer the person right away as I wrapped my arm around the pole and braced myself for the sudden jerk.

"Ma'am?" a girl barely out of high school tapped me on the shoulder.

I wanted to tell her I wasn't old enough to be called ma'am but pushed that aside. No point in causing a scene. "What's up?"

She pointed to her seat, "You don't look so good. You can take my seat." She wrapped her arm around the pole. "I can stand. My stop is coming up next anyway."

"Oh... thanks."

I sidled through the crowd and made my way to her now empty seat. An older woman was sitting next to me, reading a random magazine about country home life. I wondered if she had ever seen the countryside before or was just dreaming about it. I couldn't imagine not living in the city. There

was just so much to do out here and while I hated the trains some days, it was better than dealing with rush hour traffic any day of the week.

The train was quiet, but it was obvious that a lot of people kept looking over at me in concern. I tried brushing it off, but the feeling of being watched made me uneasy. As the train reached my stop, I pushed myself up and joined the others filing out.

It took longer than I had expected to get upstairs and outside. Every few steps felt like agony, and I almost wanted to call off the dinner meet-up with Carl, but at this point, it was too late. The restaurant wasn't far from the subway station anyway. I just needed to get outside and I could see it. The warmth outside was nothing compared to the blistering temperatures underground.

The sign for the Mediterranean restaurant stood out amongst the other signs, half a block away. The words Cafe Mediterranean were shaped to resemble a lime. A few tables and chairs were placed outside the restaurant for people to eat outdoors. Not many chose this option with how hot it was outside. On a nicer day, or later in the evening, it would be impossible to find seats like that to enjoy the weather on.

"Kim?" Carl called out from behind me.

I turned around. The blood rushed to my feet and my stomach churned. The fear on his face was obvious as soon as he got a good look at me.

"What the hell happened to you?" he wrapped my arm around my shoulder and put a hand on my waist. "You look like you just got done getting all your blood pulled out of your body. Are you sure you're all right?"

I nodded slowly and closed my eyes, "Yeah. It's just exhaustion. Once I sit down and get some water I should be fine."

Amanda popped up next to me and clicked her tongue, "I don't think water is going to do it. Maybe you need some food. Something that will go easy on your stomach, and then we'll get you home."

"Thanks," I muttered.

"Don't thank us. We're family," Amanda said brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. "We're here to help. But if I knew you were in this bad of shape, I would have canceled the dinner. Your dad is going to kill us if he finds out what you did."

I shrugged and pushed away from Carl so I could stand on my own "He won't kill us if he doesn't know. Look, I'll be fine. Let's just get inside so I can get out of the heat."

Once seated, I leaned back in the booth and closed my eyes. The noise inside the restaurant, was hurting my head, but the cool air from the air conditioning made up for all of it. I drank deeply from my glass of water, enjoying the hint of lemon.

Amanda stretched her hand out to touch mine, "You really should get checked out."

"I will tomorrow," I huffed. "I don't plan on pushing myself anymore tonight." I sat back up and opened my eyes. "So how was the honeymoon?"

"Great!" Amanda immediately perked back up. "We didn't get to do everything we wanted, but I did get to swim with some sharks."

"Sharks? And you're alive?"

She nodded and showed me photos of their honeymoon adventures. We continued talking about the vacation until the conversation swerved to the wedding.

"So..." Amanda leaned forward. A sly smile crossed her face. "It's been a few weeks now. Have you been talking to Mr. Mysterious?"

"Who?" I raised my brow and sipped on my water.

"You know," she waved a hand in the air. "The guy you were seeing during the wedding. You never told us who it was. I assumed you kept in contact with him."

"No," I sighed. "I haven't talked to him since we left. He's probably busy, and I've been trying to find someone to get my mind off him."

Her brow furrowed as she crossed her arms, "By trying to find, I'm guessing that means you've met some guys that fell really flat."

"You have no idea," I rolled my eyes. We continued our conversation about the guys I had attempted to date and how so many failed at even meeting the bare minimum standards. None of them could compare to Jared.

"Then let me help you find someone."

"What?"

Amanda grabbed my phone and opened the dating app I had been using, "Yeah, we can clean this up a little and I can reach out to a few friends. Set you up with someone good. We'll get you a decent guy by the end of the week."

"I don't know about this," I took my phone back before she could change anything on my profile. "I know you found my brother, but I'm pretty picky about my type."

"The older gray foxes, I know. I've got some contacts," she winked at me.

"Trust me on this."

Before I could retort, the waitress came over with everyone's food. My salad looked crisp, colorful and delicious, but something about it made me feel uneasy. The smell of the salad made me think of rotten meat. I poked around the lettuce but could find nothing wrong with it. No small flecks of white fuzz or anything that wasn't supposed to be in there. I crinkled my nose and pushed the food away.

"Everything all right?" Carl asked through a mouthful of his salad.

"Yeah, I just..." my stomach churned. "I... I gotta go!"

I didn't wait for Carl or Amanda to say anything before I darted toward the bathroom in the back. I pushed past a crowd of women still waiting their turn and burst into the first empty stall I could find.

Everything I had eaten that day came out all at once. My vision turned dark as sweat beaded across my temples. Everything swam around me as if I couldn't keep a tight grip on the ground, not even the toilet.

"Kim?" Amanda called out.

A few women muttered something to her before she opened my stall and knelt next to me. She pulled her shirt up to her nose to block some of the smell out.

"What happened?"

I shook my head and let out a soft groan, "I think I need to go home and lie down."

I hugged the toilet again as more bile came up.

"Shit. You don't need to go home, we need to take you to the hospital." She put a hand on my forehead, "You're freezing."

"What about you... dinner?"

Amanda shook her head. "Carl is getting boxes for it right now and calling an ambulance. We're taking you to the hospital immediately."

The ride to the hospital faded in and out of focus as my stomach wanted to throw up again despite nothing being in there anymore. Everything felt hot and cold all at once. The last thing I remembered was Carl standing next to me while Amanda muttered something, and then my vision went dark.

JARED

I leaned back in the chair as the other board members argued about the next steps in our expansion plans. One group proposed investments in additional real estate and to build a new apartment building in Manhattan while others said it would be better to start expanding our service offerings. None of it interested me. Something about how the day was going made me not confident in anything. I wasn't going to make any final decisions today.

My phone consistently buzzed almost non-stop. I wanted to answer it, but the discussions were so heated, it was difficult to get away. I had no idea who it was, but if they were calling me this much it had to be important. I hoped they would leave a voicemail so I could follow up after the meeting.

The door leading to the hall cracked open. Jessica poked her head inside and raised her brows as if to silently call me over.

I cleared my throat and stood up, "Pardon me, gentlemen."

"But sir!" one of them exclaimed.

I shot them a glare and straightened my jacket, I suddenly knew exactly what to do, "You all can bicker amongst yourselves. I'm not in the mood to deal with childish arguments. When you have a plan prepared, then present it to me. Otherwise, I'm leaving for the day."

Before they could argue with me again, I rushed out of the room and closed the door behind me.

"Sorry for interrupting the meeting, sir. It's just--"

I raised my hand to stop her, "Never apologize for getting me out of those meetings. I appreciate it, truly I do. So, what's the situation?"

She cleared her throat and led me toward her office, "We received a

phone call just a moment ago from a Mr. Maurice."

"Maurice?" I stopped walking. "He never calls the office. What's going on?"

Jessica didn't face me.

"Answer me," I growled.

She sucked in a deep breath, "It's better if you hear it from him."

My blood went cold as we hurried to her office. I didn't wait for her to close the door when I picked up the phone. I prayed he wasn't hurt.

"Maurice? What's wrong."

"Oh thank god you finally answered, Jared," his voice was shaky. "I can't get off work. And I don't know who else to turn to..."

"What's going on?"

Maurice shuddered a breath before continuing, "It's Kim. She's in the hospital right now. I need you to go check on her for me. Carl had to leave. I just..." His voice cracked, "Can you do this for me? Please?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I wasn't sure what to say, "Isn't there someone else you'd rather have out there with her? I mean I barely know her."

"No," he almost snapped the answer at me. "No, I want you to go out there. I trust you. Just be there for her, for me. You can do that, right?"

"Yeah, I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks...She's at Mount Sinai Hospital," he let out a sigh of relief and ended the call.

I stood in the office, feeling more panicked than I was willing to let on. I didn't know anything about Kim being in bad health and Maurice hadn't said anything about her being ill either. Something bad must have happened to put her in the hospital. I wasn't sure how ready I was to see her in that condition.

Images of Kim strapped to multiple machines flashed through my head. Doctors rushing in and out of the room to keep her alive. My stomach twisted in knots. I wanted to throw up.

"Sir?" Jessica's voice felt far away like she was in a completely different realm of existence.

I raised my eyes to look up at her. The fear on her face told me everything I needed to know about how I looked.

"Call my car for me. I need to leave for Mount Sinai. Now."

"Of course!" Jessica lifted a hand to her chest as if sighing in relief and hurried out of the room.

I stood in the room trying to calm my nerves. I was overthinking things. It couldn't be as bad as I was thinking. For all I knew, she had just broken a bone and Maurice just wanted someone there in case they needed someone to be with her when she was discharged. I sucked in a deep breath and counted to ten to calm my heartbeat.

After another ten minutes passed before Jessica returned. The shock on her face was gone which meant either she was used to how terrified I looked, or I had genuinely calmed down.

"Should I call your daughter?"

I shook my head. "No. Let her enjoy her vacation. If I need to reach her, I'll do it at the hospital. No reason to make her worry while she's out of the country." I tugged on the sleeves of my jacket. "My car?"

"We have a driver outside with your car in front of the building. He's been made aware of your destination already."

"Good." I tried to recall if I had even told her where we needed to go. I couldn't remember anything from the moment I ended the call to now.

I sat in the back of the Mercedes and closed my eyes and shut out the noise of the streets. I wondered how many red lights we ran through just to get to the hospital. If the sound of honking and yelling outside the car was any indication, I doubted we had stopped for anything beyond others in front of us.

"Mr. Jones, we're here."

I stepped out of the car quickly, and thanked the driver.

Inside the hospital was quiet. A few people were sitting in the emergency waiting room. Each of them had a mask on. Some of them were masks from home and the others were hospital produced. I grabbed one myself, thankful for the anonymity of wearing one. At any other time, those who knew me would probably try to ask me questions or generally annoy me. With this, I was no different from any other businessman visiting the hospital.

"Excuse me," I said, catching the attention of the woman at the check-in desk.

She glanced up at me and then turned back to the computer. I ground my teeth in frustration and clenched my fist.

"I know you heard me."

Again she glanced up at me before rolling her eyes, "If you're here to be seen, sir, then please take a ticket and we will call you up."

I slammed my hand on the counter which caused her and the nurse next to

her to jump in surprise.

"I'm not here to be seen. I'm here to see someone that has already been checked in."

The nurse glared at me and pointed to another desk on the other side of the room. A large sign above them said INFORMATION. "Then go over there. They'll help you find whomever you're looking for," she clicked her tongue and returned to her computer again as if nothing had happened.

The woman at the information desk was a bit older with large glasses that made her eyes look twice as big as they were. She beamed up at me through her mask. "How can I help you, young man?"

Being called a young man settled strangely in my brain. A person who didn't know who I was nor knew how much power I had, had addressed me with a diminutive name. It almost reminded me of Kim when we first met and she didn't know who I was either.

"I'm here for Kim."

"Last name?"

"Bryant," for a moment my mind wanted to say Jones.

She tapped away at her keyboard for a moment before grabbing a sticky note. "Ms. Bryant is in room 117. Just go down the hall and to the left," she scribbled the room number down and passed the sticky note to me. "In case you get lost."

"Thanks." I pocketed the sticky note and made my way through the double doors to the back.

The halls smelled both like bleach and bodily fluids. I scrunched my nose, all the more thankful for the mask to cover the smell a little. I scanned the doors. None of them followed a pattern I could discern. It was almost like someone was given the room numbers one day and they mixed them up before putting them on the doors.

"Down the hall and to the left," I muttered to myself. I turned left down the first hall that I saw.

Almost all the rooms except for two were empty. The first one was labeled Room 117 with a chart listing Kim's name on it. I sucked in a deep breath and walked inside.

Kim was in bed fast asleep. One hand with an IV attached to it, was raised above her head while the other lay across her chest. Her face was pale and twisted in pain. A nurse stood next to the bed writing down a few numbers before pushing past me.

"What the hell happened to you?" I muttered and sidled next to her. I brushed my fingers against the back of her hand, "Whatever it is, I'm here now. I'll make sure you're all right."

I wanted to kiss her but stopped myself. I didn't want to disturb her and if Maurice happened to walk in, that would be another problem to deal with.

Another nurse poked her head inside the room, "Excuse me, are you Jared?"

"I am," I turned to her and straightened. "Can I help you?"

She signaled for me to follow her out of the room.

"She's talked in her sleep a few times while she's been here about a Jared. I'm glad it's you," she lowered her voice. "Did her brother or father tell you what was going on?"

I shook my head, "No. No one's told me anything."

She bit her lip and averted her gaze, "It's better if they tell you then."

Before I could question her, she took off down the hall to check on another patient, leaving me alone with the accompaniment of beeping in my ears from Kim's room. I turned around to walk back in but stopped. The chart was still next to the door. I could easily grab it and quickly scan it before anyone else noticed.

I snatched it off the hook and flipped through the pages before stopping on the last page. Pregnancy. She was pregnant. It didn't make sense. I had seen plenty of women early in their pregnancy and not once had I heard of someone finding themselves hospitalized because of it. I glanced back down to see if I could get any other clue as to what was going on. I flipped back to the first page and noticed her blood type was underlined a few times.

"RH negative."

I put the chart back on the wall and walked back into the room. I sat in one of the chairs and pulled out my phone to search for anything online. Most of the articles listed mothers needing special treatment, because those with Rh-negative blood could attack their child's bodies and make them increasingly sick as well.

"Damn it!" I snapped and shoved my phone back into my pocket, "You shouldn't be dealing with this."

I could check the chart again to see if there were weeks listed for her pregnancy, but it was starting to get loud in the hall now. I wouldn't be able to check without someone noticing.

"It's mine, isn't it," I muttered to myself. "I can't believe this happened." I

laid my head in my hands.

There was no way I could handle having another child. Not with a woman I wasn't in a relationship with. It was my fault this happened.

I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs in frustration and anger. It wouldn't help any. I got Kim pregnant and because of my foolish actions, she was in the hospital being killed because of it.

Time slipped by until six o'clock hit, and Maurice walked into the room.

"Thank god she's still all right," he glanced over at me and then back to Kim. "Did they tell you what was going on?"

I shook my head, "They haven't told me anything. All I know is she's been asleep this entire time." A lie, but I couldn't tell him I stole her charts.

He continued to stare at his daughter as he made his way next to her. "They say she's pregnant, but the timing doesn't seem right. It would mean she either got pregnant while we were on vacation or right after," Maurice closed his eyes and shook his head. "She's not that dumb to get pregnant from a one-night stand. She knows to use protection and yet it failed her. I failed her," his voice quivered.

"Maurice," I stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. "You didn't fail her. I'm sure she didn't do this on purpose. The guy probably didn't mean to either."

He sighed and nodded in agreement, "You're right, but if I find out who did this, then I will kill them myself."

"I don't blame you. I'm sure if the guy knew what was going on, he wouldn't expect anything different either," there was no way I would tell my best friend I was the guy now.

"You should head home, Jared," Maurice looked up and smiled at me. "I'll stick around for the evening. I appreciate you being here for the both of us."

"Of course. Any time," I patted his shoulder one last time. "You should go home tonight to sleep. You need the energy for work tomorrow."

I left the two of them and walked out of the hospital. As if expecting me, my driver was already pulling up to the entrance. Likely he was waiting the entire time for me and ran to get the car as I was heading out. The driver was silent, and, as if he knew exactly what to do, made his way to the condo.

The encroaching silence of the apartment made me more uneasy than it should have. Kim was still at the hospital pregnant with my child, and I was at home trying to act as if nothing had happened like I was just some family

friend there for emotional support instead of being the cause of the drama. Like my life hadn't just turned upside down. I roared into the darkness of the room, letting every muscle in my body explode with rage directed at myself.

I blinked away the remnants of energy I had left after my screaming fit. The evening was still young, and I could barely face myself or the day any longer.

There was one last thing I wanted to do before I went to bed. I grabbed my phone and scrolled down to Kim's name.

Want me to pick you up after you're discharged?

I didn't expect a response back. She was likely still sleeping. To my surprise, my phone almost immediately buzzed from her reply.

Sure. I know we need to talk. I'm really sleepy though. Tomorrow afternoon I should be good to leave. My dad said it's ok too.

A rush of relief flooded my body followed by the cold dread of Maurice knowing about us. She might have told him after she woke up, or maybe he figured it out on his own somehow. I waited for a call or text from him, but nothing came. If he knew, he would make sure that I knew about it. My time of secrecy was quickly coming to a close all because I had made the biggest mistake of my life.

KIM

Every part of my body hurt. The IV still in my hand hurt. The beeping in my head hurt. The knowledge that I was pregnant and the pregnancy itself hurt. I couldn't pinpoint exactly which part of it was worse at this point.

Dad had left earlier, leaving me alone in the middle of the night with only my thoughts to keep me company, along with the world's smallest TV. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought I needed glasses with how much I struggled to see what exactly was on that TV. At least the sound came out of the remote lying next to me. That was a plus, along with the unlimited juice and jello.

After I woke up, my dad went through the whole eventful day with me. From the moment I was dragged from the restaurant, to being admitted at the hospital, to the positive pregnancy test. It was too much to fully grasp at first, but after he left, I had the chance to truly think things over.

The dates lined up with Carl's wedding. That was what my dad claimed at least. I hadn't slept with anyone since then and before that, I hadn't ever been with a guy. There was only one answer, and I wasn't sure if I was ready to face it just yet.

My phone dinged from a text. The name on the notification immediately forced me to acknowledge the truth of the matter. I was pregnant and Jared was the father. It was as simple as that. Or complicated, I should say, given who he was.

Want me to pick you up after you're discharged?

I STARED at the message for a minute, trying to figure out what to say back to him. He had to know. There was no way he didn't know. But dad hadn't mentioned Jared at all. Only a nurse in passing had brought up that an older man stopped by while I was asleep. I let out a yawn before replying.

Sure. I know we need to talk. I'm really sleepy though. Tomorrow afternoon I should be good to leave. My dad said it's ok too.

HE DIDN'T KNOW Jared would pick me up and I wasn't going to say anything to him either. This needed to remain a secret. I could figure something out about how I made it out of the hospital without someone coming to get me. Maybe I could use Amanda as a cover if she promised not to say anything.

I closed my eyes and put the phone down on the small table next to me. Exhaustion was overtaking me. Not even the idea of Jared responding could keep me awake. Or the idea of seeing him in person again. The pain was too much to imagine anything romantic or sexual about him.

The nurses, as if sensing my urgency, helped push me out of the hospital in my clothes from the day before, along with a bag of random necessities to help me get through the day and prevent myself from getting sick again. I wasn't exactly my most glamorous self, but I was feeling far better than yesterday, and the wheelchair helped me save some energy until I had to finally get up, and walk the few steps to the front.

Jared pulled up a few minutes later in a dark blue Jaguar. He rolled down the passenger window and smiled at me. "Glad to see you're feeling better."

The nurses gawked at Jared, then back at me before helping me get up. I hobbled slightly and took a few tentative steps toward the car. I was still a little dizzy, but not nearly as bad as yesterday. I could handle a few more steps if I needed to. I reached the car door and slumped inside. One of the nurses helped to make sure I was sitting comfortably while also checking out the interior of the car before joining her coworker, to take the wheelchair back inside.

"Now I'm never going to have the chance to ask them to lower my hospital bill," I said sarcastically.

"Lower it? What are you talking about? Is it that--"

I interrupted him before he could assume anything, "A couple of thousand dollars most likely." He had enough money to pay for any hospital visit and his private doctor without ever worrying about it. I almost wondered if he

even had insurance or if he paid everything out of pocket.

He nodded, "I see. Well, if it's that much, I can cover it. It's the least I can do."

"Absolutely not! What if my dad finds out? Do you think he will believe you're doing it out of kindness?"

He shrugged but didn't say anything. I wondered if he genuinely wanted to tell people at this point. I still wasn't sure if *I* wanted to say anything. Being with him at the resort had been a wonderful experience, and even now I still wanted to be with him. But we were in completely different worlds. I wasn't sure if we were really all that compatible. Not to mention he was my dad's best friend and explaining that to my dad or my brother seemed like an impossible feat.

"I know I'm driving you home, but I don't exactly know where home is. So I can take you back to my place if you--"

"Turn left here!" I pointed to the intersection. I wasn't going to give him room to invite me to his house.

"Oh. Alright," he turned left and continued to follow my directions until he pulled into a parking garage across the street from my house. "Let me at least help you up to your apartment."

I bit my lower lip. I wanted to say no, but I knew better. I'd collapse before I made it to the street and get run over almost instantly. I couldn't refuse him either, not after how eager I was to see him earlier.

"Fine, but that's it."

"Not even dinner?"

I closed my eyes and tried to ignore my stomach instantly growling at the thought of food.

"We can order delivery. Nothing fancy. I don't think my body can handle that right now."

"So, pizza?"

I glanced over at him. The concern on his face was evident. There wasn't a way to tell him no. He would just continue to push until he got his way.

"I can do pizza."

I held onto his arm the entire way. The muscles under his shirt tensed as we neared the street. I leaned on him to keep myself steady. All the stress I had had earlier in the car was gone as my mind took comfort in knowing he was there to keep me safe.

We made our way inside the apartment building and into the elevator. No

one else joined us as I hit the button for the fifth floor. We stood there quietly, an awkward silence between us.

"Your perfume," Jared said suddenly.

"What?"

"It smells nice."

I sniffed my shirt. There was a faint scent of my perfume from the day before. I barely noticed it, but I made a mental note to use it again the next time I met with Jared.

The elevator stopped on my floor and I led him toward my apartment door. My heart raced as I unlocked it. I couldn't remember the last time I had someone stop by my apartment, let alone a guy I liked. I leaned my forehead against the door and sucked in a deep breath. I needed to pull myself together. He wasn't here for any fun things. It was just to make sure I got home safe, eat some pizza, and talk about the pregnancy.

Jared put his hand on mine and twisted the key to unlock the door all the way. "Let's get you inside."

I slumped on the couch and put a hand on my stomach. I couldn't feel the baby in there, but I knew the baby was there, growing and thriving despite my body attacking it. I refused to let myself fail the child. I was going to make sure I did my best to prove to everyone that I was worthy of raising the child.

It didn't matter if after everything, Jared chose to leave. I wouldn't blame him. We weren't exactly official and with him being who he was, it would probably be a bad look to have a child out of wedlock, especially with someone so much younger than him.

"So..." Jared sat across from me and folded his hands in front of himself. "You said you wanted to talk." His voice was calm and collected with a hint of seriousness to it.

I groaned and sat up a little, "We do, and I don't care what you have to say about that matter."

He raised a brow as if challenging my statement, but remained silent.

"If I can, I'm keeping this baby. I don't expect you to support it. And I'll sign whatever paperwork you need me to sign, to keep quiet about it too," I let out a heavy sigh. "I want this baby, Jared."

He chuckled and shook his head, "You expect me to accept that?"

I stiffened, "Of course, I do. You're not going to change my mind about that."

"And what if I tell you I disagree?"

"You don't get that choice," I was ready to kick him out of the apartment. He could claim to pay for any of the bills, but I wasn't going to get rid of the baby.

He shook his head, "You don't get it."

"Get what? Just because you like getting your way with money doesn't mean--"

"I'm not against you keeping the baby."

Every ounce of anger I had in my body evaporated in an instant, "What?"

"I'm excited for you," he stood up and walked over to me and hooked my chin with his hand. "You're going to keep our child."

My stomach twisted at the sound of it being called *our* child and not just *my* child.

"Really?"

He leaned closer so I could feel his breath on my skin, "Would I ever lie to you?"

I let out a sigh of relief, and leaned closer to kiss him, but he pulled away before I reached him.

"Be a good girl. You need to rest. Don't get yourself all excited."

I wanted to cuss at him for denying me but bit my tongue. There was no point in arguing about it right now.

"So, then what?" I asked.

He sat back in his chair and crossed his legs, "We have two options." He held up two fingers, "Option one: we don't tell anyone who I am. You can choose if I support you monetarily."

"And option two?" I wasn't sure I was excited about that one.

"Option two: we let everyone know I exist and I help support you publicly."

"I assume you want to keep things quiet?"

He shrugged and tapped his fingers on his knee, "Either option works for me." A smile crept across his face, "Though if we tell everyone, that makes it easier for me to see you. They can't say anything about it or then they're denying a child its father."

I sat on what he said and pondered it for a moment. He wasn't wrong. It was easier to tell them about Jared if it was something stronger than just a fling during a vacation. But that wasn't true. It was beyond infatuation or simply liking him. There wasn't a single guy I had met between then and now

that could equal even a quarter of who Jared was. I wanted to stay with him.

"Thank you for not wanting me to get rid of the baby," I sucked in a deep breath. "I know you don't have to do any of this. I'm ready to do this on my own since it was my fault."

He smiled and leaned on his elbow, "I'm not that much of an asshole, am I?"

I held back a laugh, "No, not that much."

"So, what are you going to do?"

I clicked my tongue a few times, and looked around my apartment. It wasn't exactly what someone would call large. It was big enough to spread out, but it was still a one-bedroom.

"Well, I've heard some people turn a large enough closet into a nursery for a baby." I pointed at the doorway leading to my bedroom, "That could easily have a jumping toy too."

I started pointing at different places and imagining baby items scattered throughout. It would destroy the few decorations I had put up and I'd have to rearrange all the carefully placed furniture, maybe even get rid of them. But it would be worth it. I turned back to Jared to see if he had any thoughts. Instead, he was watching me with a sly smile as if laughing at me.

"What?"

"Nothing," he shook his head. "My question was more about which option you were going to choose, but I enjoyed hearing the designer version of you come out too. It's adorable."

I turned away. My face warmed at the thought of him finding me adorable. He was probably concerned about my mental health and capacity to pay attention if my focus was already on baby furniture and not the present.

"I'm sorry... I guess we could try option..." I wasn't sure if I was making the right choice. I closed my eyes and made my decision. "Option two."

"Then you've made your choice," he pulled out his phone and started calling someone.

"Don't you dare tell my dad yet!"

He furrowed his brow, "You think I'd ruin that announcement with a basic call?" He snorted. "No. I'm ordering pizza, remember? Or did you want it to be something else? I can cook dinner for us if you want instead."

I glanced at the kitchen. There wasn't much in there to make a meal out of. I wasn't going to admit that either. If he knew I didn't have much food in the apartment he'd start lecturing me. I didn't want him to know that I was

struggling financially right now. I wanted to take care of myself and the baby on my own. If that meant getting a side job while I was pregnant to cover expenses after the baby was born, I was willing to do that.

"I'll get just pepperoni."

JARED

I turned the TV on while Kim set the table for us. She stopped putting plates down and started examining different corners of the room and writing something on her phone.

"What are you doing? You should be relaxing."

She shook her head and peeked into her bedroom, "I only have nine months to figure this out. If I don't start now, then I'll never get it done in time."

I sighed and walked over to her, placing a hand on the small of her back, "Kim, you can't stress your body out today. You can start tomorrow on this." I tried to lead her back into the living room, but she stopped me.

"If I relax, then I'll keep relaxing. At least let me do this. All I'm doing is noting things I need to order to baby-proof the place."

"That's not going to change tomorrow." I forced her to walk to the couch and sit down. "Why not just surf on your phone for things people recommend to baby-proof the place and other stuff that will help you? You can even make a wish list of everything you find, and send it to me."

She puffed out her cheeks but sat down, "I can buy some of this stuff you know."

"And I can buy a higher quality for you that might be out of your budget. You chose an option, and that includes me supporting you and the baby financially."

I sat back in my chair and watched as she scrolled through Amazon to look at baby things. I imagined her mentally gushing over reusable diapers and other random things, now that she had an unlimited budget. Seeing the

color returning to her face made me feel better too.

She was like a ray of sunshine after a stormy day. Not even the clouds that overcast my mind could form when she was around. I couldn't deny any of her beauty either. No one could hold a candle to her looks. It wasn't just her outer beauty either. How she behaved and interacted with me was so genuine. From the first time we had met at the club until now, there had never been anything fake about her.

"Kim?"

"Yeah?" she replied distractedly, still buried in her phone.

"This kid..."

She lowered her phone and stared at me.

"I don't think my genes are all that strong, given how Mandy looks more like her mom." I tried to formulate what I wanted to say. It was falling out of my mouth faster than I could think of the words. "They're probably going to look like you more than me, and I'm ok with that."

She sucked on the inside of her cheek and folded her legs under her, "That'll be interesting if it's a boy and is as pretty as I am."

"As opposed to?"

She shrugged, "I mean, could you imagine me having a daughter and her looking more like you? She'd be handsome, that's for sure."

I couldn't imagine anyone looking like me that wasn't my father. I scrunched my nose. "No, better for either of them to look like you."

"And what about the name? Will you be upset if they take my last name?"

I hadn't thought about that. Mandy had my last name, but I had been married to her mom at the time. I wasn't married to Kim. It was her choice how she wanted to name our child.

"While it would be nice, I understand if you don't want to."

"Then you should not make it a choice," she muttered.

"What?" I raised a brow, trying to comprehend what she had said.

"Nothing!" She turned back to her phone, "We'll figure out names after I know the gender."

I shook my head and looked out the window, "You truly are a strange one."

While Kim was imagining how she would decorate the apartment, I wasn't sure how comfortable I was with her being here. It wasn't a bad neighborhood, but it wasn't the best either. I could easily find something better for her elsewhere or move her into my condo. I couldn't offer either

option to her yet. She would outright refuse. Not to mention I wasn't sure how Maurice would take it if he learned that his daughter had randomly moved in with me without explaining why.

Dinner was quiet, except for the TV playing the news. Nothing important was being discussed outside of a few story continuations from the last several days. I wasn't interested in any of them and Kim didn't seem enthralled by it either. That was another piece of the puzzle I didn't know about her. There was too much about her I still didn't know, and yet I was ready to claim this child as my own, without hesitation.

As if a spark had illuminated the darkness of my mind, I accepted what I was missing out on. It wasn't just that I needed to be a good father for this future child, I needed to be a good man for Kim too. She needed someone who understood her, not just someone that lusted over her constantly. I wanted to know what her interests were. What foods she liked and didn't like. Did she have a favorite color? I couldn't determine any of that just by looking around her apartment. It was too generic to see any personality.

Mandy was different. I remembered before she moved out of the apartment how her room had been constantly repainted in different colors. She always had pictures and the latest film posters hanging up on her walls. At her new home, she had added figurines related to her interests in different places. If anyone walked into Mandy's house, they would know who she was instantly. Kim wasn't so easy.

"Do you have any plans this week?" I asked to break the silence between us.

"Not after that hospital visit. That's going to cost me way too much. Diet of beans and rice for a while."

"And I said I'd cover the hospital visit."

She turned quiet again. I cursed myself out. Of course, I managed to mess up trying to learn more about her by shutting down the conversation.

"I heard there are some interesting movies playing right now."

She looked up at me as if confused by what I had said, "I didn't think you were interested in watching films at the theater."

"And what did you expect I did?"

She shrugged, "I don't know. Maybe a personal theater at your house."

I used to have one of those when I lived just outside the city. It didn't exactly play the current movies at theaters, but it sat six people in recliners and was comfortable. I still preferred the idea of going to a theater.

"In the dark, everyone is equal. There's no imbalance of social structure or anything."

She watched me with intent curiosity.

"In a way, I feel like I'm back in my younger years. On the old school dates, you could go on and enjoy the company of others, or just get a good scare with some friends."

"I can understand that," she turned back to her phone. "There's this new superhero film that was released a week ago. We could watch that if you want."

"Yeah, we can do that as long as nothing comes up," she popped a pepperoni into her mouth. "So, who should we tell first?"

"Hmm... Well, that's on you. If I tell Mandi, she's going to make sure everyone knows, so let's have her be the last to know."

"Good idea."

I wanted to continue our conversation and get to know her a bit more, but every question I could think of sounded more like an interview than getting to genuinely know more about her.

Kim let out a long yawn and stood up, "It's getting pretty late and I'm still exhausted from the hospital." She glanced at the clock, "You should probably head home too. You can take a few pieces of pizza with you."

I took her hand in mine to stop her from walking away. "I should stay. You shouldn't be home alone after that incident. It's not safe. If something happened to you when no one was here, then I would blame myself."

"I'll be fine," she narrowed her gaze. "Do you not trust me?"

"I trust you just fine, but I'm still going to worry about you. I can sleep on the couch, but I'd rather stay."

She sighed and shook her head, "Fine. Do what you want, but I'm telling you, I'm fine." She pulled away and instantly started to hobble a little before catching herself, "See?"

I stood up and pulled her close to me. Her breath was heavy and I could see the color in her cheeks start to fade, "You're not fine."

I put a hand on her forehead. It wasn't too cold to the touch. The faint scent of the perfume on her skin made me want to devour her right here and now. But she needed to shower and get ready for bed. I wasn't going to deny her rest after having such a rough night, but I also wasn't going to deny her anything she desired, if she decided to beg for me tonight.

NO MATTER where Kim decided to go in her apartment, I managed to stay close behind her. Keeping her safe was my priority.

"Um..." she opened a small closet in her room and grabbed a towel. She didn't look me in the eyes. "Do you mind? I'd like to take a shower alone if I can."

I shook my head and cupped her face in my hand to force her to look at me, "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

I moved my hand and grasped the hem of her shirt and lifted it above her head. Her soft features were emphasized by how small she appeared in front of me. The knowledge that my child was growing inside of her pulled me closer.

"I can do this on my own," she muttered and turned away from me again.

I grabbed her chin and forced her to look at me again, "You can, but I'm here to take care of you tonight."

Next were her pants. I quickly unbuttoned them and tossed them in the corner with her shirt. I turned her around so her back was to me. My hard cock pressed against my pants, eagerly wanting to be in her, but I needed to wait. With a swift movement, I unfastened her bra, letting the straps fall to her sides. She kept a hand against her chest to keep the bra up.

I wrapped an arm around her midsection and the other on the hand holding up her bra. I leaned close to her ear and growled. "Are you going to make this difficult for me? It's not like I haven't seen your beautiful body plenty of times before."

She gulped and closed her eyes, "This is different."

"Is it?" I pulled her arm down to let the bra slip away, "I don't see any difference, unless you mean it's because I'm not fucking you right now."

Her body stiffened under my hold, "I-I-what?" She shook her head.

I smirked and picked her up, "Very well then. Let's get you to bed if you're so certain it's different this time."

She followed my lead without any fight. Almost as if she was secretly wanting it as much as I did. I pushed her onto the bed, so her ass was up in the air. I pulled her panties down and left them on the floor.

I caressed the curves of her hips down to her ass and watched her quiver in anticipation. Already I could see the small gleam of wetness between her legs. I slid a hand near her folds, brushing against her clit. She let out a slight gasp, and pushed her ass closer to me.

"Tsk ts, don't be too greedy. You were the one that said you didn't want

this, right?"

I smacked her right ass cheek with a loud crack. She let out a combination of a gasp, and a squeak of excitement and pleasure. I spanked her again, harder this time, leaving a faint red mark where my hand hit.

"Now be a good girl and get on the bed."

She obliged without question and lay on the bed on her back. She bit her bottom lip and turned away.

"You're going to be shy after everything we've done?"

I pulled off my clothes and laid them on the floor. I'd pick them up later. My focus was too much on her. As I pulled my boxers off, my shaft that had been yearning to escape stood high in front of me, ready to fuck her for the rest of the evening.

"No. It's just different this time."

"Different?" I cocked my head. "I don't see how." I climbed on top of her and stroked her cheek. "I don't see why you should be shy. You're the most beautiful person I've ever met."

"I..." She stared into my eyes, "Can we be gentle this time? I don't think I can handle our usual evenings."

I smiled and kissed her on the lips, "Of course, Princess. Whatever you desire, I'll make it come true."

I moved back and pressed the tip of my shaft against her folds. She sucked in a deep breath of anticipation. I loved this soft side of her. The side she likely had never shown anyone but me. It was our thing that I wanted to keep close to me. She was my lover and I would make sure she stayed mine for as long as I could have her.

I entered her slowly, pressing myself as deeply as I could before starting to thrust in and out. Her gasps of pleasure filled the room as she reached for the headboard.

"Jared!" She called out.

She tightened around me, "Fuck, you're getting tighter." I leaned forward and pulled her close to me. My cock pushed deeper than before, stretching her out as I drowned in her scent.

She wrapped her hands around me, digging her nails deep into my back. I couldn't handle it much longer. Being so close to her, and connecting with her in such a way felt completely different from any of our times together before. This was no longer simple lust.

"Oh god, Jared. Please," she whimpered in my ear. "I want you to keep

fucking me."

"I'll keep doing it until you beg me to stop. You don't need to worry," I growled and lowered her back on the bed.

I pumped faster this time, pacing myself with her shuddering breath and gasps of pleasure. I pressed a thumb against her clit, circling it slowly at my own pace. Her screams heightened.

My cock stiffened more inside her. I couldn't stop. I was at my brink.

"Fuck!" she screamed.

At that moment, her back arched as she let out a loud audible scream of pleasure. Her pussy tightened on my cock and started to pulsate. I exploded inside her, filling up her depths. The muscles inside her milked my shaft for every last drop, as if hungry for more.

I dropped closer to her, brushing my lips against hers, "I will never let you go."

"I don't want you to let me go. I want to be with you forever. I think I genuinely love you, Jared."

I kissed her deeply, parting my lips to taste her and letting our tongues intertwine with one another. She was perfect. It didn't matter anymore who she was related to, or friends with. She was mine and that was all that mattered.

KIM

My legs shook as I stared at my phone. They would be there any minute and I still wasn't sure what I was going to tell my brother and Amanda. I didn't think they would hate me for what I had to say, but it was still a minor possibility.

I took another sip of my coffee, and made a face. Not only was it decaf, on account of the pregnancy, but it was already cold after sitting in front of me for an hour. I couldn't remember how long I had sat in the cafe. Perhaps I had been there all morning. All I remembered was asking Carl to meet me here at 11. After that, my body went fully automatic from getting dressed to getting here.

"Do you need another drink?" the barista asked after the customers had finally dispersed from the counter.

I shook my head quickly. I would finish my drink, even if it was cold. I couldn't spend too much money. Jared said he would support me financially, but I wasn't going to let him just keep me afloat forever. I needed to be financially stable, and not drown in debt or bills. Jared didn't deserve a failure like that.

My mind drifted back to two nights ago when he had spent the night with me. Even after we made love and I showered, he stayed close to me the entire night. I did not need a blanket with how warm his body felt against me. I had nuzzled into him, and fallen into a deep sleep in his arms. I only woke up late in the afternoon.

He had to leave later that day after making me brunch for work. Though I made him promise to come and stop by soon, or I would track him down for a

surprise visit. The smirk on his face as he left told me everything I needed to know. He was looking forward to seeing me again soon.

I shook my head, bringing my thoughts back to the present. Carl and Amanda still hadn't arrived, and the cafe was quiet.

"Where are you," I half whispered to myself.

"Miss us?" Carl said from behind me.

I jumped in surprise, turned around and rammed my elbow into the table.

"Shit!" I shouted grabbing my arm. The bone reverberated inside from the sudden hit on my humorous bone.

"You ok? Didn't think you were calling us here to take you to the hospital again." He squeezed my shoulder, and sat down next to me at the table, "You were staring off into space, and we didn't want to bother you," he jutted his chin toward the counter. "Amanda is getting our drinks so we can chat."

I waved at Amanda, and turned back to Carl. The smile on his face made my heart sink a little more. I wondered how quickly that smile would disappear once they learned the truth. Would he still be the supporting older brother I loved? For a moment, I wondered if it was better not to tell them. Maybe I should stick with option one, and continue to be Jared's secret mistress. It would make everything easier in the long run for everyone. I would stay out of the news and remain hidden with our child, while Jared could keep his life intact.

"So? What did you want to talk about?"

Amanda sat across from me and put a hand on Carl's. The gentleness of her presence calmed my nerves. I sucked in a deep breath. I needed to get this over with, before I lost my nerve. I had agreed with Jared, and I wasn't going to back down now. I wanted to be with him and that meant I had to face anything that came our way.

"It's about the hospital visit."

Carl nodded, "Dad already told us the pregnancy test came back positive."

Amanda stretched her hand out toward me, "I know we don't have a lot of money, but if you need help, we're here for you."

I shook my head, "No, I don't need any financial support. That's already taken care of, and I'm taking on a few side gigs to save up."

Carl glanced down at my stomach, "Then... are you... you know..." He lowered his voice. "Are you planning to abort it?"

"No!" I said it a little too loud, and shrank back in my seat. "No, not that

either."

"Then what is it, sis?"

I closed my eyes and counted to three to gather my nerves, "I know who the father is."

They both stiffened and stared at me earnestly, waiting for me to continue.

"During your wedding, remember the mystery guy I was seeing?"

Amanda gasped, "Don't tell me."

I nodded and continued, "Well, he wasn't exactly mysterious. He..." I took a sip of my coffee. "Well, he was a mystery at first."

"Was I right? Was it one of the groomsmen?"

"No, that was a completely wrong guess," I forced a smile. "As they said, he's too young for me."

I reached for my phone in my pocket. I wasn't sure how I could word it without everyone in the cafe hearing. I didn't know how many would know Jared by name.

"You remember Mandi's dad, right?"

"The grumpy guy?" Carl asked. "Yeah, I remember him a little. He talked more with dad than anyone else the entire time. I know dad's been meeting with him recently--"

SUDDENLY CARL'S mouth dropped open, as if a lightbulb had turned on in his head.

"No..."

I nodded meekly, "Yeah." I opened my photos app and turned my phone around to a recent photo from the other day, of Jared and me sitting together on the couch, "Ironically the first guy I've ever been with like that, ended up getting me pregnant."

AMANDA LET OUT AN AUDIBLE GASP, and covered her mouth, "I can't--Kim!" She let out a little shriek. "Seriously? Have you told your dad?"

"Not yet," I put my phone away and cupped my mug of coffee. "I figured the two of you were a better option to... test the waters. I don't know how dad will react to the news. Probably yell at me or something."

"I mean, I could see dad doing that," Carl puffed up his chest. "You're going to make me a grandfather and chose a grumpy old man to help make it happen? I should ground you until you're seventy, young lady."

I covered my mouth to stop laughing too hard. It was a horrible impersonation, but it was pretty accurate too. I could imagine dad wanting to make it impossible for me to see Jared again after he found out. If he couldn't stop me, then he might try to fight him instead. That wouldn't end well for either of them.

"You think your dad would be that upset about who the father is?" Amanda made a small pouting face, "He seems like he'd understand if you just told him honestly."

"Who knows," I shrugged. "I've seen him tell me I couldn't have a boyfriend until I was out of his house, and he kept to his word. Anytime I showed interest in anyone he immediately shut it down. Whether it was scaring the guy away or finding something wrong with him, he was determined.

"Sounds harsh..."

Carl forced a laugh, "Yeah, dad was something else with both of us. I couldn't have a girlfriend until I got to college and met you. Even then, it was like pulling teeth to make him accept you at first."

Amanda raised a brow and turned to my brother, "When did this happen? I thought he liked me."

"Oh, he liked you, it didn't mean he wanted me to be with you. Trust me. He tried to make me switch colleges, and even offered to pay for my first semester if I switched. I stood my ground and eventually, he caved."

I remember those moments well with Carl. I wasn't nearly as determined as he was to stick with any of the guys I had met. They weren't worth it and for a long time, I couldn't figure out why. It wasn't until more recently that I learned that I much preferred older men to those my age. There was a sophistication about them, that most guys my age lacked.

"Either way," Carl waved a hand through the air. "I don't think dad will be that ridiculous about finding out. If anything, he'll probably be happy to know he knows Jared. At least he knows the guy is a good person."

Amanda leaned forward and rested her chin on her hands, "So, when's the baby shower? I'm going to need to spoil this kid with as many aunty gifts as I can get my hands on."

I shrugged and laughed at the sudden energy shift, "I mean... I just

learned about everything a few days ago. I don't even remember what the due date is."

Amanda started mumble counting with her fingers and furrowed her brow, "Well, if it happened only a few weeks ago, I'd imagine you're probably due around late winter or early spring. Did your mom have you two late-term or early?"

"Why does that matter?" Carl asked.

"It matters," Amanda sighed heavily and rolled her eyes. "You can guess if you'll have a baby late or early based on your mother. My mom had all of us early, so I'll probably be the same."

A red tint flashed across Carl's face, "You'd be early?"

I wanted to tease him but let the thought of him being a father be the worst he had to deal with. I wasn't going to annoy him, not when he was supposed to be here to support my anxiety.

"Fine, we don't have a planned baby shower, but I think it would be good for us to all sit down and chat. Maybe have a nice dinner at your place and get to know one another? I feel like I should have learned more about him during the wedding, but he was so distant."

A few days later, I was sitting next to Jared at the small table in my dining room. There was barely enough space for the four of us. The only sound came from the clinking of silverware on plates, and the occasional sound of the others eating. The only words any of them spoke to one another were basic greetings at the beginning, and awkward talk about how good the food was.

I couldn't deny the meal *was* delicious. Amanda brought in some chicken wings earlier that day in a crock pot to sit until dinner time. They were glazed with an Italian dressing and a few other seasonings I couldn't place. The mashed potatoes were my gift to the meal, but they were pretty basic. Just the usual potatoes with milk and butter. I wasn't ready to do anything fancy to show off and I couldn't exactly spend a lot of money on something either.

Jared, on the other hand, decided to go all out, and brought a charcuterie board for us to graze off of before dinner. Carl managed to joke about it being an adult Lunch able. Though that didn't go well for Jared. He didn't like having his food equated to a cheap snack kids ate. It became obvious how different our generations were with that simple gesture. It hadn't bothered me before, but now everyone was uncomfortable.

I finished my meal and pushed the plate forward, away from me, "So..." I

needed to break the silence. "Jared, this is my brother and his wife. You met them at the wedding a few weeks ago, obviously."

He cleared his throat and nodded at them, "Yeah, it was a nice wedding. Definitely not traditional."

"You like traditional I take it?" Carl asked. There was a hint of aggression in his voice. I hoped they still weren't upset with each other because of the comments earlier.

Jared shrugged and put his empty plate on top of mine, and moved it in front of him, "I've been through two marriages. At this point, I'm not overly concerned with how a wedding looks."

Carl added his plate to the pile, a little harder than he needed to, "Are you saying you're not into marrying someone again?"

"No. Just that the woman should plan it. I don't have any big dreams about how I want it to look at this point. I'll go along with whatever they want, and make sure it's their dream, not mine."

"And if that means it's something nerdy like a wizard or fantasy theme?"

"Then so be it. Though I'll have no idea what's going on, I'd imagine the person I marry would still love it."

Amanda topped the pile of plates, and cleared her throat, "Well, I don't think Kim's the type to make everything about herself. She probably wants your input too."

I stiffened and stared at Amanda with wide eyes, "Me? Who said anything about me marrying him?"

Amanda sucked in her lips, and flashed me a half smile, "Sorry. I guess I read too much into their conversation." She grabbed the pile of plates and scurried into the kitchen, "Either way, I'm sure whoever you end up with, will want you involved in some way."

"If they do, then they do."

I stood up from the table and rushed toward Amanda, "Does anyone want coffee?"

Carl and Jared both said they did as I entered the tiny kitchen. Amanda was already washing up the plates and stacking them in the strainer. I was thankful for that. With everything going on, I doubted I'd get to them until late tonight.

I leaned against the counter and sucked in a deep breath. The baby was making me feel dizzy again, and the tension in the air made everything that much worse.

"This isn't going how I thought it would," I muttered.

"Nonsense. Your brother is just being protective of you," she gave me a wink. "He's not saying it, but he likes Jared already."

"And you can tell how?" I glanced up at the two still staring one another down. "Because he was the one that couldn't stop talking about this dinner all day," she turned the water off and wiped her hands clean. "You know Carl just as well as I do. If he genuinely didn't like Jared, he wouldn't stick around."

"True. I just wish they would stop being such assholes to each other."

"Dick measuring contest."

"What?" I raised my brow and chuckled.

Amanda sighed and rolled her eyes, "You're moving from being under your dad and Carl's protection to Jared's. He's just testing the waters to make sure he can give any blessings he needs to."

I grabbed the coffee pot and started setting up the coffee filter, "We're not getting married. He's just the father of my kid."

"And he happens to be absolutely infatuated with you," she leaned close to me and lowered her voice. "I could see it with how careful he was when he got too close and made sure you had everything you needed before you lifted a finger."

Heat rose to my cheeks, "He's that obvious?"

"There's no hiding it," she grabbed four mugs from the cabinet. "If he doesn't propose to you, I would be shocked."

"Maybe, but we haven't talked about that and we just started seriously seeing each other."

"Yeah but he obviously gives you a great sex life if you stuck around afterward," she nudged me with an elbow. "Or was the money the big draw."

"No," I scoffed. "I didn't even know he was rich until after our first night together."

"Then it's a win! You know you're attracted to him despite the money, so there's nothing to worry about. That's just an added bonus."

"So, you say," I poured the coffee into each mug. "Can you get the creamer and milk from the fridge?"

The two of us walked back to the table and sat down the four drinks. The intensity in the air had trickled to something a little less ferocious now.

"Well, I'm glad you two are happy," Carl finally said before taking a sip of his coffee. It was almost pure white from the amount of milk inside it. "I

don't see too much of a problem with him, and you seem happy with it."

"Thanks, Carl. I appreciate it," I glanced over at Jared who had a slight smile at the corner of his mouth as if he realized he had won the greatest game of chess in the entire world. "Hopefully the next time we all meet for dinner there won't be as much anger from the two of you."

Jared turned to me and raised a brow, "What anger? I was perfectly fine."

Carl nodded in agreement.

Amanda and I rolled our eyes. It was like the two of them were completely oblivious to what happened during the meal.

"Oh!" Amanda grabbed her phone, "I almost forgot about dessert."

"Dessert? Did you order something --"

Before I could finish my question, she was already running to the door and opening it. My jaw dropped as I saw my dad standing in the doorway with a small cake in his hand.

"Jared?"

"Maurice?"

The two of them stood, staring at one another for what felt like an eternity. Slowly, they turned their eyes to me, and my dad realized what was going on at the same time as I did.

"So, Jared's the father," his voice was curt. "You didn't think to tell me you knew?"

I shrank in my seat, "I was going to tell you..."

He didn't say anything. Instead, he walked up to the table, placed the cake in the middle, and stared hard at Jared.

"The man at the wedding..."

"That's right," Jared answered, looking a little shamefaced.

"And all this time you didn't tell me when we met up."

"Correct. I didn't think it was worth noting."

"Worth noting?!" his voice rose to a thunderous boom. "That's my daughter! I should have you thrown out in the street for touching her!"

Jared slammed his hands on the table, "I didn't know she was your daughter when I met her."

"But you kept seeing her even after you knew!" my dad sucked in a deep breath and closed his eyes. "I trusted you."

"Dad!" I snapped. "This is why we didn't want to tell you." I glared over at Amanda. "Seriously?"

She recoiled, "I thought it would be a good surprise and everyone would

be ok with full stomachs."

I didn't want to argue with her. She had our best interests in mind. I just needed to figure out the best way to avoid any further conflict.

Carl walked over to dad and turned him around, "Look, dad, I get it. But Kim's her own person. They didn't know you knew each other. They liked each other. He's here to take responsibility. Isn't that enough?"

The anger subsided from my dad, and he let out a sigh, "Maybe you're right, but this doesn't feel right."

"It doesn't matter what you feel, dad. This is between Jared and me," I stood in front of him and stared him in the eyes. I wasn't going to back down, "This isn't up for debate, dad."

"Jared," He looked away from the two of us as if we didn't exist. "We need to talk. Just the two of us."

JARED

I followed Maurice out of the apartment and into the hallway. The paint was peeling badly, and I could see signs of mold underneath. This was not a good place to raise a child. Especially my child. I needed to convince Kim to move out of here whether it was moving in with me, or letting me help her find a better place.

"Jared," Maurice growled, and curled his hands into a fist, looking like he was ready to punch my lights out.

I turned my attention back to my best friend. The darkness around him was like a newly formed fire that hadn't sparked in years. Not even my anger could be fueled to those heights.

"Maurice, you really need to calm down."

"I am calm!" he snapped.

I raised my brow and crossed my arms, "Are you? Because right now it sounds like I'm talking to an NCO on a power trip and not an equal."

Maurice ran his fingers through what little hair he had left, and let out an exasperated sigh.

"Just answer me this. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

I shook my head and leaned against the wall. The anger in his voice was slowly fading, but I wasn't going to say the wrong thing and fuel it again.

"Like we said, we didn't know we both knew you."

"And once you realized?"

"We tried to keep our distance," I tried to recall the multiple evenings

together and how much I wasn't sure how to approach the situation back then. "We also decided to call it quits after the wedding too and didn't even see each other again."

Maurice leaned on the opposing wall. We were like mirrors looking at one another with Kim standing between the two of us. I wasn't in the mood to fight for her, but I wasn't going to let Maurice lecture me either.

"She's a good girl. You raised her right."

"Yeah, she always knows what's best for her, even if she doesn't realize it is at first."

I nodded in agreement, "She doesn't slow down either. Look, Maurice, we can argue all day until we both fall over from a heart attack, or you can stop treating Kim like she's a little girl."

"But she *is* my little girl."

I couldn't argue with that. If Mandi was ever in Kim's shoes when she found someone, I knew I would be just as frustrated as Maurice was. It didn't help that we had been best friends since high school. But that wouldn't change my feelings.

"You know about my ex-wives, Maurice, you know how bad they were."

He laughed, "I know enough to know I'm surprised they didn't poison you."

"Exactly. So let me be happy just this once."

He stood there in silence as if contemplating my words. I would let him continue to think for as long as he needed to. If it meant we would stand out here until dawn, then I was ready for that.

"Does she want the child, or are you forcing her to have it?" his voice was softer this time.

"She wanted to keep it. Told me she didn't even expect anything from me. She was planning on sticking the baby in the closet."

Maurice half choked at that, and glanced at the door. "That's actually what we did with her and Carl when they were babies. We had an oversized closet in our room. Took out all the clothes and put a tiny crib in there. Guess the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree."

"It never does."

The door to the apartment cracked open. I couldn't see who was there, but I imagined it was Kim trying to see what was going on after things went quiet out here. I tapped my fingers on the inside of my arm and waited for whoever was at the door to speak.

"Are we done fighting about me?" Kim asked as she opened the door a little wider.

"Define fighting," Maurice chuckled and walked over to Kim. He embraced her in a large hug. "Sweetheart, you know I'm only doing this because I worry about you. I want only the best for you."

Kim pulled away from Maurice and smiled, "I don't think I could do much better than Jared."

Maurice glanced over at me and then back to Kim, "That old man is the grumpiest person alive. Trust me, there are better fish out there."

"And if I want an octopus?"

I snorted a little too hard at being called an octopus. I wasn't expecting the comparison, but I could see how I would be more of an octopus, instead of a fish swimming around aimlessly.

"Look, dad, like I was trying to tell you in the apartment," she grabbed my hand and pulled me a little closer. "I do love him. He's a good guy. Sure, he's a bit rough around the edges, but so were you before you met mom."

I waited for Maurice to respond. I almost expected him to argue again. To tell Kim that she was wrong about choosing me, and that she should forget about me. I wouldn't blame him. I imagined myself in his shoes with Mandi and the idea wouldn't click.

The other three crowded behind the door to listen to the conversation. They weren't sneaky about it, but they also weren't trying to join the conversation either, which I was thankful for.

Maurice sighed, and pulled Kim close to him again, "I swear the more I look at you, the more I see your mother in you. Just as stubborn as she was, and just as beautiful too."

Kim moved a hand between them so it rested on her stomach, "It's not just Jared that's involved in this anymore, dad. You're going to be a grandfather. I don't want you to have a bad relationship with her father. Imagine if grandpa hated you and refused to let you see me or mom?"

He furrowed his brow and turned to look at me, "You promise you will take care of her? And I don't mean just financially. This isn't a problem you toss money at."

I raised my hand and smirked, "I know how to take care of a child, Maurice. You can believe me that I'll make sure she has the best care and upbringing."

Maurice didn't say anything, for what felt like a full minute as he watched

me intently. Even Kim was biting her bottom lip as if nervous about him blowing up again.

Slowly, he moved his hand on top of hers, and a soft smile sneaked up on his face. "My grandchild, eh? Thought Carl would end up giving me that before you did..." He squeezed her hand. "I wish I could say something else. Convince you not to choose him, but I doubt you'd listen to me at this point."

"No, I wouldn't."

I stepped away and sighed, "Fine. This is the choice you're making; I won't stop you. I still don't like it, and I'm going to need time. So give me that courtesy at least."

I grasped his shoulder and squeezed, "Of course. I wouldn't expect you to accept it immediately. I just wish you didn't have to find out like this."

Maurice nodded and moved away from me, "I'm going to get some air and head home. Keep the cake."

I watched as he went down the stairs instead of taking the elevator. His heavy steps echoed through the hall until they faded into muffled noise that blended with the sounds of the building.

"Um..." Amanda spoke up and pushed out of the apartment. "I think we should go."

"You sure?" Kim asked.

She nodded. There was an obvious awkwardness hanging in the air now because of the fight. I didn't blame them for wanting to head home after that. She had expected a positive reunion from everyone, but it had turned sour almost immediately. I had no words to comfort her that weren't going to make things worse. She should have said something instead of shocking everyone with her surprise.

Carl stepped back into the apartment, "I'll grab the crockpot and we can catch the next train back home."

"No," I said it before I even realized I had spoken. "I'll take the two of you home. It's the least I can do."

"You sure?" Carl's face turned slightly pale and he glanced over at Amanda as if she could tell me no.

"I think Kim needs to get out of the house too for a bit, so I might as well drive the two of you home. If I'm going to be useful, then it better not be because I brought a charcuterie board that got compared to a kid's snack." A small smirk crossed my face, aimed at Carl. Better to be on their good side and not deal with a Kim upset later.

Maurice was long gone by the time we made our way downstairs. There were still a few people entering the apartment building after work with eyes glazed over from exhaustion. I wondered if that was how Kim looked every day when she normally got home from work. The idea of her being exhausted just trying to save up to care for our child didn't sit well with me. I refused to let her succumb to a world that wanted to kill her just so she could live.

"So which one of these cars is yours?" Carl asked as he looked up and down the street.

I pointed to the parking garage across from us. "Third floor."

"Let me guess, it's like a Mustang or something fancy like that?"

Kim stifled a laugh, "Something like that."

I forgot how it felt to live in a world that involved income as a stressor. I could easily purchase a Mustang if I wanted to tomorrow, without a second thought. They weren't exactly the most expensive vehicle out there. Then again, I did still appreciate some of the older model years the Mustang had. They were nice for a casual drive if I wanted to enjoy the countryside or a long highway drive on 80.

I led the four of us upstairs to the third floor. Most of it was empty except for a few cars. I had picked it because I could keep my car away from people trying to hit it. The extra camera installed on the sides and ends made it easier to tell if someone tried to break in or hit my car at any point.

"That's..." Kim's voice drifted off as we reached the Tesla. "I swear I thought..."

"I have more than one car, you know," I tapped on the door handle to unlock everyone's doors. "I just decided I wanted to drive this one today."

Carl slid into the backseat with Amanda while Kim joined me in the front. Everything illuminated almost immediately and set the temperature to a nice 65 degrees. A small jingle announced that autopilot was ready for the address.

I adjusted the rearview mirror so I could look at Carl, "Where do you live?"

"Going toward Flushing area. Near the park."

"No, I mean the address," I tapped on the screen asking for a destination.

"Oh um..." he gave me the address and I typed it in quickly.

As soon as everyone put their seat belt on, the car shifted gears and backed out of the parking spot. I leaned back and sucked in a deep breath. I had only let autopilot take control in the city a handful of times, and still, it

made me nervous not having full control. I read it helped with anger problems, but for me, it just added to my frustrations by the end when it refused to take shortcuts or try to beat the light when I knew it could.

"No way! Seriously?" Carl leaned forward, gripping the top of my chair. "Is this like one of those self-driving cars? Wait, we're not going to crash, are we?"

I rolled my eyes, "If we were going to crash, we would have done that already." I lifted his left hand off the chair. "So please don't attach to me like I'm going to kill you."

"Sorry," he muttered and leaned back in his seat.

I peeked over at Kim who was staring out the side of the window. I almost expected her to say something too about the Tesla, but she seemed disinterested in it. Her closed fist caught the corner of my eye and I realized she was softly shaking.

"Kim? Are you--"

"I'm fine!" she snapped and closed her eyes. "Sorry, I'm fine."

I sighed and reached for her hand, bringing it toward the center console, "Don't lie to me."

Her soft, small hand felt helpless under mine. I squeezed to comfort her. I was here to keep her safe.

"If something bad happens, I'll switch to manual immediately. Don't worry."

She stopped shaking a little and her balled fist relaxed under my grasp. I rubbed a thumb across hers. I wanted to wrap her in a comforting hug, but there was no room to move around. If anything, it would stress her out more seeing no one behind the wheel. At least with me pretending to drive, she had some comfort there.

We pulled up in front of Carl and Amanda's apartment after half an hour. Not once did I need to turn off the autopilot, and Kim seemed more interested in the inside of the car instead of what lurked outside it by the end too.

"Thanks again, Jared. I loved trying this out, but I don't want to know how expensive this thing is," he smacked my shoulder as he climbed out."

"I appreciate the ride home, Jared. You two don't do anything too crazy. You still need to rest before you have to get back to work, Kim," Amanda brushed her hand against Kim before stepping out as well.

We were alone once again. With the silence of the ride, it was different from earlier. I had dreamed about being alone with her again after the chaos

of dinner, but now I wasn't so sure. Without Kim talking much, it left me alone with my thoughts. Seeing Maurice as angry as he had been, didn't sit well with me. If he was as upset as he seemed to be, I was worried about what my relationship with Kim would be.

It wasn't like I didn't want to be around Kim or not be with her. I desperately wanted to stay with her. Not even the devil could stop me from that, and yet the disapproval from Maurice was still haunting me.

"Jared?" Kim asked.

"Hm?"

"About what my dad said," her voice was soft and quiet as if she wasn't sure what she was saying was correct.

"About him not liking us being together?"

She nodded, "I was thinking about that, and I was thinking about what my brother said too..."

I waited for her to continue her thoughts. If she needed time to process it, I would give it to her.

"He mentioned weddings and marriage. I'm... well I don't want to ruin your public reputation because of me. I know my family will know who you are, but I don't mind if I'm a secret from the rest of the world."

I shook my head, "No. They'll know. If they want to argue with me about it, I'll fire them. They're replaceable."

"Replaceable!" Kim snapped and pulled her hand away from me. "They're people, not things!"

"And they can be replaced because they work for me."

Her voice dropped to almost a mumble, "That's not right."

"And I'm the person that runs the business, not you," I rubbed my temples. "I don't expect you to understand what it's like to be a CEO, but I do expect you to respect how I run my business."

She said something I couldn't catch under her breath. I held my breath and counted to three to prevent myself from snapping at her. There was no point in arguing about it. Whether she liked my choices or not, they were mine to make. Perhaps one day she would understand and accept it, but for now, I wasn't going to let her get too involved in my work life. My previous ex-wife had gotten in too deep, and she had run off with a lot of my money because of it.

I didn't expect Kim to do the same, because she was so different. But she reacted based on morality and emotions, versus what was best for a company

to thrive. If anyone on the board or other upper management questioned my home life, or changed their attitude towards me, I would remove them. Doubt created chaos in a business, and we couldn't afford to have chaos.

"Just get me home," she sounded tired and defeated like she had so much more to say but couldn't get it out.

KIM

He pulled into the garage and parked on the third floor again as he had done earlier. The eerie silence between us was grinding against my mind. I wanted to scream for him to just say something, but I didn't have the words for it. It was a losing battle that would make everything worse for both of us. Not to mention I didn't want to cause stress for the baby. The self-control I needed was making it hard to think of anything else but him. I wanted to hit him, but I also wanted him to hold me and say everything would be all right.

He got out first and opened my door to let me out. The smell of gasoline and oil mixed in the air from the parking garage was like a brick wall smacking me in the face. I covered my nose with my shirt and cringed.

Jared sighed and reached for my hand, "I'm sorry if I hurt you, Kim. One day I will let you learn more about the company, but there are still things that I can't let you in on. The way we operate is just one of those things. I can't let my emotions or the emotions of others cloud my judgment."

I clenched my fists and stared down at his stomach. I couldn't face looking at him yet. The thought of me causing someone to lose their job made me sick. I didn't want to leave Jared, but I also didn't want him to hurt someone because of me.

"I just don't get it," I said.

"One day you will," he cupped my cheek and forced me to look at him. "I bet with your mind; you could make anything flourish. You could have your own business based on your values and it would succeed. It's just not how my company runs and will never run."

I put a hand against his and closed my eyes, letting the anger slip out from my chest. "Maybe. But I don't think I could do what you do."

"And that's why I love you," he sighed and pulled a hand away. "Maybe it will be good for us to get some time alone. A lot happened, and I know you need your rest."

"Alone time..." I wasn't sure I wanted that. The idea of being alone was daunting. But I didn't want us to fight either. I was torn but needed to accept it, "Will you at least let me know when you get home?"

He took my hand and squeezed it, "Of course, Princess. I won't let you stress more than you need to." He kissed me on the forehead and brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. "If I could, I would stay here, I just have a lot on my mind right now and need some time to think about it all."

"I didn't mean to upset you, and dad will get over himself."

A sad smile crossed his face. "It's not because of you. There is just a lot of darkness in my past that I need to clear up, and I don't need it engulfing you by accident."

I grabbed the sides of his face and pulled him closer to me, "You'll never engulf me in that darkness. You're the best man I've ever met, and I know you wouldn't let it happen. You're a good man, even if you don't see it yourself yet. So let me be that mirror for you."

I forced all the remaining frustrations into one final kiss as I wrapped my arms around his neck. I needed him to understand how I felt. The taste of his lips pulled me in further as I parted my lips just slightly. His arms wrapped around my waist. His shaft pressed against me as if eager for more of me.

Jared pulled away from me, his breath ragged, "Damn it, why does your mere presence do this to me every time."

I tilted my head and smirked. In my head, this was like a superpower I could use to calm both of us at any time, "We can head back to my apartment--"

Jared put a finger to my lips and shushed me. A dark smirk crossed his face, "You really think you can run away after teasing me?"

"I-- what?" heat rose to my cheeks.

He stroked a finger across my cheek and lowered it down to my breasts. "No, I'm going to take what's mine right now," he reached behind me and opened the back door. "Get in."

I sat down with one leg on the seat and faced Jared. He climbed in behind me and closed the door, sealing us inside the car. The sound outside, which

had been loud and filled with the noise of cars and people, turned into a muffled rumble.

He pressed a hand against my stomach and smiled in silence before turning his gaze back to me, "I'm going to make this last as long as I want." His voice was low and pulled me into him.

Slowly, Jared slid a hand up, lifting my shirt above my chest, and exposing my bra. He flicked a finger on the front clasp. My breasts burst out from my bra, and the cold and excitement of him taking me in such a public place hardened my nipples instantly.

He pressed his mouth against my nipple, swirling his tongue around it. A small gasp escaped my lips. He shifted a hand down, and pressed his fingers against my pussy through my pants. Heat emanated from between my thighs as excitement took over my mind. It didn't matter how easily we could be caught. The idea of it turned me on even more.

Jared pulled away and licked his lips, "Already delicious."

I bit my lip and averted my gaze, "You keep saying that."

"Because it's true."

He didn't continue his explanation as he moved his hand away to unbutton my pants. I helped him pull them off and dropped them on the floorboard.

"God, even now you're so sexy." He kissed my stomach and lowered himself until he was just above my folds. His hands squeezed my thighs.

I raised my hand to my mouth and bit down on my finger so I wouldn't be too loud. "Please," I muttered. The heat was driving me insane.

"Please?" he raised a brow. His fingers moved down to my panties, sliding them to the side and pressing against my entrance without going inside me. "You want me that bad?"

I whimpered out a yes.

Jared let out a fake sigh, "Fine, I can appease your needs this time." He pulled off his pants and added them to the pile on the floorboard.

The tip of his shaft pressed against my folds, going in only a little before pulling out again.

My frustrations boiled to the surface as I moaned out my needs, "I want you."

"Is that what you want?" he continued his teasing. "Or do you want more?"

"More," I reached out for him with both hands, trying to pull him in

deeper.

"More?" he raised a brow. "This isn't enough? Then pleasure yourself."

My heart skipped a beat.

"Well?" he took one of my hands and moved it toward my clit. "I want you to pleasure yourself for me before I finish you off."

I pressed my index and middle finger against my clit. I slowly circled it and turned my gaze away. My pussy clenched as Jared watched me. I felt like a slut, and it turned me on even more. My wetness drenched my thighs as he watched and pressed his cock against me, refusing to let me feel the pleasure of him filling me.

"Good girl."

I quivered at his voice.

Before I realized it, he had pushed his cock in all the way. I let out a scream of pleasure that echoed inside the car. My hand slipped away from my clit.

"Don't stop," he growled and put my hand back down near my clit. "I want to see you pleasure yourself."

He continued to thrust deeper into me as I pinched and twirled my fingers around my clit in rhythm with his movements. My voice grew higher in pitch as the pleasure enveloped my entire mind and body.

"Jared!"

"Fuck, keep going, baby girl."

Heat erupted in me as the orgasm overtook me. My pussy clenched against his cock, pulling it deeper inside me. He moved in and out, sending me higher and higher through the waves. I continued to play with my clit and rode through the wave until the very end. I wished he had come with me, but his hard cock made it even better as my body settled into a calmness for a moment.

Jared pulled out and frowned, "That's all? Hmm, guess I need to show you how to properly fuck again. Maybe the long break made you forget."

He flipped me over and lifted my ass in the air. His hand slid against my ass and moved slowly toward the entrance. I sucked in a deep breath and bit my bottom lip. His thumb pressed against the hole without entering.

"Do you want it?"

I squeaked out a reply. I wasn't sure if I was saying yes or not at this point.

"Perhaps we can do that another time," he smacked my ass.

I screamed out in shock which melded into a moan.

He pushed his shaft back inside me as deep as he could, hitting the back. His thickness stretched me as he pumped in and out. It sent me into a dizzying frenzy as I grasped at the seat and door to hold my mind steady.

"God, I love your body so much," he growled. "How much do you want me."

"So..." I got stopped by another scream. "Fuck! God, I want you to fill me up. Come in me, please."

"If you wish."

He thrust harder and deeper inside me before holding himself as deeply as he could and exploding inside me. My pussy quaked in pleasure as another orgasm hit me. I muffled a scream of pleasure as I milked every ounce of his cum into me.

I slumped in the backseat from exhaustion. I couldn't think of anything beyond the muscles in my pussy pulsating still from the ecstasy. I wiped a bead of sweat from my forehead and leaned against Jared's shoulder.

"Thank you," I mumbled in exhaustion.

"For what?" he stroked his fingers through my hair.

"You didn't back down from Jared or my dad. I appreciate you trying to explain and prove that you cared about me."

The calming sensation of his hand on top of my head sent shivers down my spine. The stress of the week sizzled into nothing, like I had only ever been here with Jared the entire time. No businesses were trying to judge him for being with me. No arguments with my dad about whom I chose. No snide remarks from Carl. None of it existed.

"Why wouldn't I stand up for you?" his voice was quiet and still.

"I guess I expected you to think it wasn't worth it, and choose to back out of the choice we made."

He shook his head and adjusted how he was sitting to pull me in closer, "I've been through a lot worse than that, and your dad knows it too. If anything, he's probably at home right now thinking he was a huge ass and feeling he should apologize."

"You think so?"

"I know so," he let out a low yawn. "I've known Maurice for far too long to know how he will react after sitting on the matter. He cares too much about your well-being and wants the best for you, and he knows I'll treat you right."

I intertwined my fingers with his and closed my eyes, "Do you think this will work?"

"Why not? Even if there are some bumps in the road, we'll figure it out."

We sat in the car for what felt like another hour before we walked out and back into the real world. We headed up to my apartment, but instead of coming inside with me, he kissed me goodnight and went back to his car. I wanted to call out for him to come back, but he had work the next day and I couldn't expect him to stay home with me all the time.

I stood in my living room, staring out the small window that looked down at the road. Everyone looked so small on the sidewalk, but Jared stood out amongst all of them with the strength and ferocity of a lion. I continued to watch him until he disappeared and stayed there just a little longer, in case he walked back out.

Images of me standing in the window with the baby waving at him as he left for work or elsewhere filled my mind. Could I even utter the words daddy to the baby when looking at Jared? Would he even visit that often after I had the baby or would he choose to keep his distance until the baby was a little older? I had no idea what his parenting style was like and knew it would be different than before since Mandi was born to parents that were married. We were barely officially a couple, and that was still something I wasn't sure about.

My phone buzzed a few times from a phone call. I didn't bother seeing who was calling. My body felt numb without Jared around. I had to find something to keep my mind focused elsewhere. I wasn't going to act like some teenager fresh in love, and incapable of acting like a human. But I also couldn't deal with someone telling me how to feel anymore tonight either.

I walked over to the table. The mugs were still half-filled with coffee from earlier. After my dad got there, no one had bothered to drink much. I started to pick them up when I saw a piece of paper with a note scribbled on it from Amanda.

Let me know if you need help with the baby shower.

I chuckled a little and added it to the pile of stuff to toss out. Even without her here, she was a huge support in keeping me ready to do something. Jared wouldn't want me operating on autopilot and the baby didn't deserve that either. I had promised myself and everyone I would do whatever it took to take care of the baby, and if that meant planning a baby shower, then that was my first step into the chaos.

JARED

I hobbled over to the long table of snacks. I barely recognized any of the cheese that dotted the plates let alone wanted to know the prices of the other treats. I grabbed a few pieces of meat, cheese, and some celery for my snacks. At the end of the table was a small bottle of hot sauce that I greedily took for myself to bring to my seat.

Most food now made me queasy at the sight of them. The baby refused to cooperate when it came to anything I had loved before. Instead, it was dairy and hot sauce constantly. If I dared to try a smoothie, it would be heartburn all day long.

"Let me help," Jared said and placed a hand on the small of my back.

He guided me over to an oversized recliner near the other women. Most of them were in office-style seats with a few dragging over some plastic chairs from against the wall. Jared took my plate from me and guided me close to the chair. I slowly sat down in the recliner and leaned back with a heavy sigh. The thought of getting back up was too exhausting to think about.

"Here," he handed the plate back and joined the men in another circle.

I placed the plate on my stomach, letting it balance on top of me like a circus act. I felt huge and more like a balloon than any mystical beautiful angel that Jared constantly saw me as. I couldn't wait for the baby to come out. Only three more months left.

"So," Mandi asked with a huge grin on her face. "Are you going to announce if I'm getting a brother or sister yet?"

I chuckled and gripped the plate so it wouldn't tip over, "Not yet. Jared has something planned for that."

Mandi rolled her eyes and glared at Jared, "You're ruining my fun, you know?"

"And you're being a bad older sister," Jared called back.

She sighed and shook her head. "I don't know what you did to him, Kim, but his grumpiness is turning into smartass comments. I don't know what to do with him sometimes." She looked down at my stomach, "My little sibling is going to have a hard time getting that old man to smile."

I shook my head, "No, they're already making him smile all the time." I put a hand on my stomach. "He tried laying on my stomach last night and tried accusing the baby of fighting him because there was a soft kick."

Mandi chuckled and shook her head, "My mom said the same thing happened to me. Said that he almost got in a fistfight because I kicked him in the head so much."

I was glad that after we finally announced my pregnancy to Mandi, and everyone else there wasn't too much drama. Mandi had been the hardest to win over. Though it made sense when her newest friend, was also a pseudo stepmom and about to bring in her next sibling.

Once I offered for her to help plan the baby shower with me and set it up, she was immediately ready for it.

With Jared able to cover any expenses when it came to raising the baby, we agreed the baby shower would be a bit different than the usual ones. People didn't have to bring in any diapers or special items that a baby or I would need. Instead, there was a stack of books on the tables. Each had the person who gifted its name inside and a personalized note too.

Others chose to do more creative things, and bought personalized items including a few outfits they had designed themselves, or purchased from homemade creators. One that stuck out was a shirt with sunglasses on it that said Made For the Beach. I knew immediately it had to be Amanda, since she was one of the few who knew how the baby was conceived. It was a perfect tongue-in-cheek without being obvious and I loved it.

Everyone else was just excited for us. There were a few, like Jessica, whom I had never met but who was completely enamored with me, and those from my side of the family who were challenging Jared to do as many things as they could.

Amanda leaned close to me and added another piece of celery to my plate from her almost untouched one. She looked exhausted like she hadn't slept all night, but filled with energy from dozens of cans of soda.

"Are you ready?" I whispered to her.

"I think so. You're sure you're all right with this?"

I nodded, "If I weren't I would have told you as much."

She sighed and stood up. Slowly, she sauntered over to Carl and took his hand in hers. A slight fear tinged his eyes before he calmed down again. I wondered how often she caused him to get scared because of his insecurities on the matter.

Mandi stood up next and stepped up onto a step stool so she towered over almost everyone. "Excuse me!" she yelled out across the crowd.

Everyone fell silent and turned their gazes to her.

"I wanted to thank everyone for coming in today. Though I know you're not here because you think I'm cool." She glanced at me and winked, "Before we do the gender reveal and play some baby games, there's another announcement I have to make."

Everyone whispered in hushed voices. Mandi waited for them to stop talking before she continued, "Amanda, if you would be so kind."

Carl led Amanda toward the stool. She huffed and took one step up and then another. Amanda hobbled a little on the stool as if she couldn't find her balance properly, but Carl held onto her.

She moved a hand to her stomach and smiled at everyone. Gasps filled the air from those who immediately knew what the news would be.

"I didn't want to steal the spotlight from Kim, but she insisted," she grabbed Carl's hand to steady herself. "I'm only three months along, but I'm pregnant with our first child, making Maurice a grandfather twice in one year."

Claps and cheers filled the room as everyone wished the married couple congratulations. Tears welled in her eyes as she slowly stepped down from the stool and leaned into Carl's arms. Her breathing was heavy as they made their way back to their seat.

While I wasn't doing well for a lot of days because of the RH negative blood type I had, Amanda was being hit harder with constantly being sick. She was barely out of her first trimester and I wondered how much she ever actually ate without it coming up again. Thankfully Carl made sure she was taken care of, and the doctors had her on bed rest which gave her enough energy to get around most days. Once she hit the second trimester, she would get back to normal with energy levels. Until then, I was just excited for her and ready to see who my niece or nephew, would be.

Mandi stood back on the stool and cleared her throat so everyone knew the announcements weren't done, "Who's ready to play a few games?"

Everyone clapped in excitement, still riding the high of the surprise baby announcement.

A few men pushed in an oversized tic-tac-toe board. A large circle covered each square with the words "Boy/Girl" on it. Another came in with multi-colored bean bags in a small bucket.

"All right, we all know the game. Each person gets a turn at tossing a bag. You can place your bets on which it is. We'll see who gets the final toss."

I joined the chaotic line of people. Everyone tossed a bean bag. Some hit the squares, but they didn't turn while others completely missed. As my turn came, I didn't even get my bag to the board. All that was left was one square in the upper right. The top two squares had the word boy on them and the far right squares had girl on them. I needed to know that top right corner.

Jared put his hands on my shoulders and grabbed a bean bag. "No more waiting," he growled. There was a sense of competition in his eyes as he walked up to the board, and slammed the square with the bean bag as hard as he could.

Everyone jumped and stared as the square slowly came to a halt to reveal the word Boy.

Screams filled the room as multiple women surrounded me with congratulations. I tried to get a look at Jared who had a bunch of guys around him slamming him on the back.

Like a wave, everyone started shushing one another. I tried to get a look at what was happening, but there were too many people in front of me to see.

"We have a special game left before we get into the true fun of the night."

Everyone started hollering. The energy of the party filled me with electricity. I wanted to jump in the air, and join the yelling but knew that if I tried, I'd probably fall over like a turtle. The fact that another game was labeled special though made me curious. I knew all the games that had been planned, including the attempt to swaddle a man in an oversized blanket later on that day. None of them I would label as special, just funny.

"May I have the mother of the night join me?"

The crowd parted in front of me like the red sea. I took a step forward and then another as I carefully made my way up to Mandi.

"What's going on?" I asked her under my breath. I didn't want anyone to think I was angry with her, but I still wasn't sure what was happening either.

"Trust me," she whispered back. She stood up again and pointed out into the crowd. "I'm also going to need that grumpy old man I call dad, to come over here too."

Giggles filled the room as Jared brushed past everyone to stand next to me, "Do you know what this is about?" He shoved a hand in his pocket as if reaching for his phone.

I shrugged, "No idea."

Mandi stepped down and pulled out a long blindfold, "Turn around for me, will you?"

I obliged and knelt as far as I could so she could wrap it around me.

"We're going to spin you a few times. The first two times, we want you to name something you like or love."

I didn't recognize the game at all. It didn't sound like something you played at a baby shower, but I played along as my vision fell into darkness. Someone grabbed my shoulders and turned me in a circle.

I hit the first rotation.

"The baby," It was the first thing that hit my mind and felt a little silly saying that.

Another spin.

"A sweet cup of coffee first thing in the morning," I still wasn't sure if I was saying the right thing.

They spun me a third time. As I came to a stop, I had to force myself not to fumble by naming something else I liked. Mandi pulled the blindfold off. Everyone was standing back a little. Many of the women covered their mouths and the guys were beaming at me. I wondered how embarrassing my answers were until I turned back and saw Jared in front of me.

He knelt on one knee and reached back into his pocket, "I hope the third answer will be me." He pulled out a small black box and opened it.

The ring shone brilliantly against the black velvet. The center jewel was a brilliant sapphire with a dozen diamonds surrounding it like a robin's nest. I brought my hands to my mouth and let out an audible gasp of surprise.

"I know it's a bit late, but I wanted to make it memorable for you. Six months ago, I wouldn't have believed, I would be standing here right now. In love with someone as beautiful as you, and yet here I am." He sucked in a deep breath as if trying to figure out what words to say. "I was in a dark place when you decided to see me that first night. I didn't think you were an actual person either, just a figment of my imagination. And yet, every day you were

still there just as beautiful as the first night I laid eyes on you. I chose you to have my child, and today I want you to have the choice. Will you marry me, Kim?"

I didn't realize how big my smile was until I felt how sore my cheeks were. I wiped a few tears welling at the corners of my eyes and nodded.

"Yes," my voice cracked a little. "Of course, I'll marry you, Jared."

He slid the ring on my finger. It fit perfectly and barely weighed anything on my hand as if it was made specifically for me. He stood up and embraced me. I turned my head up and kissed him gently on the lips. Butterflies fluttered around inside me, as I fell in love with Jared all over again.

My dad walked up to us and slapped Jared on the shoulder, "You might be my friend, but don't make this a thing where I have to clean a gun on my doorstep when you don't treat her right."

"Trust me, I know she'll might hurt me if I ever do anything wrong, long before you ever find out."

Maurice sighed and shook his head, "I never would have imagined that my best friend would be the one to meet the high bar I had set for her, but glad you could meet her standards."

"Thanks, dad," I stared up at Jared and kissed him again. "I love you."

"I love you too."

The End

SNEAK PEEK OF BOSS'S FAKE FIANCEE

N ever fake date a silver fox... especially when he's your boss.

TAKE IT FROM ME, never bang your boss, don't agree to fake date him, and damn sure don't get pregnant.

MY SMOKING hot boss is too high and mighty with a massive ego and an even bigger... wallet.

HE REFUSES to notice my talent at work until he needs a favor.

BE his fake date for 2 weeks so he can prove a point to his family.

THAT'S my chance to knock him down a couple of notches.

I WAS DOING SO WELL KEEPING my heart protected.

UNTIL HE UNEXPECTEDLY SWOOPS IN as the hero I didn't know I needed.

SUDDENLY MY HATE turns to hunger.

NEXT THING I KNOW, I'm waking up next to my frenemy with benefits after a hot mind-blowing night.

THE REST SHOULD BE HISTORY.

EXCEPT THINGS HAVE GOTTEN a little complicated.

I NOW HAVE to explain this growing baby bump to my co-workers.

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CHAPTER ONE – OWAIN

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FUCK THIS. I do not have time for this. What is this boring guy even talking about? "...so, then we can use this pre-launch as a way to get some PR from the local papers..." Even his voice is monotone. I curl my hands into tight fists, my knuckles tense and white, what the hell is all of this? "My marketing team is supposed to be special." Uh oh. Keeping my anger in check, clearly hasn't worked. It's shooting off my tongue, splaying accusatory bullets all around the room. The worst thing is I can't stop now. "This is the dulllest presentation I have ever listened to in my life, and this is my business. My company, so I'm already excited about the products. But if you can't get me all fired up, then how the hell are you supposed to get customers fired up?" My father's marketing team is something else. No wonder he's so successful. Fuck, I need that! "Where is the creative thinking? Where is the excitement? What are you all doing?" I scrape my chair back, the sound echoing through the now silent room. I shake my head as crushing disappointment sets in... "Wait." Who is that? Oh... her. The blonde with a big mouth. Always talking and never saying anything. I can't even remember why I hired her. Maybe because she's hot, but that shouldn't be my criteria. "That's just one idea," she insists. "One idea from Dan, who seems to be the only member of the team you respect. The only one you'll listen to anyways. What about the rest of us?" I narrow my eyes at her. "You trying to tell me you have something

better?” “I’m trying to tell you that we might all have better ideas, but you never bother to listen to us.” She narrows her eyes right back at me, refusing to back down. “But you just listen to Dan and that’s the end of it. There’s never any time for anyone else.” She’s getting right under my skin. “Come on then, let’s hear it. You say you have good ideas? Put your money where your mouth is.” “I don’t have a whole presentation like Dan, because when I have put stuff together in the past you didn’t give it a chance.” Ha! Backing down. This feels like a victory, and I really need a God damn victory right now. I don’t know who else I’m supposed to take my frustration out on. “So, you don’t have any ideas. Just as I thought.” “You’re going to walk out on that remark?” Ooh, I guess not now. “The way you behave is totally sexist sometimes. This isn’t the way to run a company.” Too much. Too far. I won’t stand for that. “Everyone else, get out of here. Back to your desks, and for the love of God, come back to me with some better ideas. I don’t want to deal with any more wasted time.” I don’t take my eyes off of Raven as she flicks her ashy blonde hair over her shoulder defiantly. She knows she isn’t to go. Good, we’re gonna have this out now before she pulls any of that shit again. Sexist, how dare she? I’m definitely not a sexist man. I’ll take good ideas from anyone. Maybe she has tried to show me ideas in the past, but if they had failed to capture my attention, that was her fault, not mine. I don’t know why it seems to take an age to get everyone else out of here, I get the impression a couple of them are pointedly being slow in the hope that they can lap up some gossip. Not a chance. No way I’m going to give them anything to go on. Let them come up with their own bullshit. I have enough to worry about. Raven remains completely unfazed as we wait forever. No nervousness, no fear. That’s what really gets to me. I keep expecting her strong stance to falter or her eyes to move off of mine, but she doesn’t flinch. Not even once. Fine, she wants to challenge me? So be it. I can play that fucking game. “Right.” I jut my chin out. “So, you want to explain what the hell that was all about?” “Me calling you out?” She cocked a brow. “If that’s what you want to call it, fine.” “I think it’s time someone calls you out on the way you run things, because it’s crazy. You really do only listen to Dan’s ideas, and his are always the worst ones...” “Well, at least we agree on something. His idea was shitty as fuck today. But you are the one who stood up and acted like you had a million ideas to throw at me. But you don’t.” My one shoulder shrug should send her running, but it doesn’t. How embarrassing is this for her? Can’t she see she’s humiliating herself? “No, of course I

don't. Because I have wasted more than enough time trying to get the attention of Mr. Baker." "You have it now." I edge closer to her. "You have my eyes and ears on you. But it turns out you don't have anything to say. Only accusations of sexism without anything to back it up." "Oh, I can back it up," she snaps back. "But you'd probably fire me for it. Not all of us have rich fathers to hand us everything on a silver platter. Some of us actually need our jobs." My teeth grit together. This is the worst shit someone can throw at me. Assuming I only have the life I have because of my dad. I know he's wealthy, I know I came from privilege, but this business hasn't been born out of that. I started it from nothing, I gave it my all, I brought it up to what it is today, and still feel like I have to prove myself every single God damn day. I could really explode with this. Seriously, I could lose my mind. It takes every scrap of self-control I have not to make this any worse than it already is. Although I don't yell, I can't stop myself from getting in her personal space. Big mistake. Her citrusy scent floods my nostrils which sparkles weird zinging electricity in the air. I won't react though, I refuse to. "Look, I think this company is at the stage now where we need to start taking risks with the marketing," Raven continues, slightly diffusing the tension. "It's time to get the press to come to us, rather than reaching out to them all the time. It's time to go viral." I scoff. "So, you want to do a stupid online thing?" "We are a tech company, aren't we?" She smirks. "I know you don't use social media much, but I really think you should. It's the fastest way of getting all eyes on you. For free. And if you do it right, you'll end up with tons more business in an instant." I have to admit, it sounds a bit more exciting than Dan's rubbish. I can't let her know that though. The moment I back down, she wins. "What sort of stunt? You need to give me more than that to go on." "I don't know yet..." she admits. "The electric car in space, the energy drink's new moon, the fast food restaurant logo you can see from space. That sort of thing." "I thought you said this would be free. It's starting to sound pricier by the minute." "You get the right campaign; it will be worth it. Trust me." She's smug. I need to bring her down a peg or two. "Fine," I snap, shocking the pair of us. "Come to me Monday morning with a complete idea. If it's a decent one, I'll do it." "You'll..." Raven steps away from me with wide, surprised eyes. "You'll do it? Just like that?" "I'll do it," I confirm. "I wouldn't want any of my staff members feeling unheard, and I certainly wouldn't want to be seen as sexist." My God, she doesn't even look embarrassed that she had said that. I won't allow her to stick by that, I refuse.

“So, if you have a full presentation of a decent idea by then, we can make it happen.” I can almost feel the nervous excitement rolling off her in waves. She isn’t going to back down, is she? I keep thinking she’s going to back down. Raven is one fiery, determined woman. Well, fine, whatever. I didn’t actually believe she would be able to pull anything half decent by Monday. “Monday morning, first thing,” she promises. “I’m going to blow you away. You’ll never want to listen to Dan’s crappy ideas again.” Raven doesn’t take her eyes off me as she gathers up her things, almost as if she thinks I’ll give her whiplash by quickly changing my mind. I’ve said it, I’m nothing if not a man of my word. “I guess I’ll see you Monday then.” “You will, Boss.” I think that’s the first genuine smile I’ve ever seen her give me. “You are not going to regret this.” “I already might be,” I mutter to myself as she slides out the room. As soon as Raven exits the room, the whole energy changes. The intense heat zaps away, leaving me a little lost. I’m sure I have lots of stuff to do before the end of the day, but truly I can’t think of a single freaking one. What the hell was that? I shake my head, unable to stop myself from smiling just a little bit. I don’t know what dangerous game Raven thinks she’s playing, but she won’t win. I never lose. Hell, either way I win, right? Either I’m right and she doesn’t know what she’s talking about, or I get a decent PR campaign, which will be the first time in a while. Ring, ring... Ring, ring... I groan. Only one person would bother calling my personal cell phone in the middle of the work day because he has very little respect for the hours I need to work. I really can’t be dealing with him, but I know from experience if I don’t answer, he will only call over and over. “Dad, hi.” “Owain, are you finished in the office yet? You need to come home for dinner.” Home. My parent’s house hasn’t been ‘home’ to me for years. I moved out sixteen years ago, just after my twentieth birthday. But whatever, I guess we don’t need to argue semantics. “I’m not done yet, but...” “Well, come as soon as you can,” he interjects, blowing right over my answer. “Your mother has a wonderful meal organized. Tom and Katie are already here, and they have some great news, and they want us all together to hear it.” Oh great. Tom and Katie, the golden couple. The golden girlfriend for the golden child. Of course, they have great news to share, and we all have to be there for it. Why? Because Tom is perfect. He always was, the good kid at school with the best grades, the one who never stayed out too late or went to parties, the guy destined for greatness. Then, to add to it, he was the one who joined Dad’s company, in my mind that was taking the easy route, whereas I had dared to venture out

on my own. That was going to be rammed down my throat tonight for sure. “Fine, whatever,” I sigh. All the anger bubbling within me ebbing away and sliding into disappointment. “I’ll be there as soon as I can, okay? I just need to finish up here.” I cut him off before he could respond with some sarcastic comment. If I’m going to face that tonight, there’s no point now. “Fuck,” I hiss. “This is going to be a shit show.” Going alone, I was sure to be faced with a ton of questions about my love life as well. Yay, I can’t wait...

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CHAPTER TWO - RAVEN

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“OKAY, so a PR stunt. I need to find a decent PR stunt.”

My heart thunders so hard against my rib cage, I fear it might burst free. But with excitement, right? Not nerves. Well, maybe a little bit of nerves because obviously this is all super unexpected, but mostly I'm just happy that I can finally make Mr. Baker see that I'm worth it. I *will* make that grumpy ass man smile.

I swing around in my desk chair before reaching down for my binder filled with previous ideas I had almost turned into presentations in the past, wondering which one to pick.

Obviously, I can't go for something as dramatic and expensive as the electric car in space, that had only been a suggestion, but I do need it to be right.

“To be fair to Owain,” I mutter to myself as I flick through my ideas. “He isn't the only sexist pig in this place. Dan loves being the only one in the spotlight as well.”

It felt good to knock him off his pedestal for once. I freaking loved it when Owain called him out for being so boring because I was bored as all hell as well. Dan is a dull man who gets duller by the day.

I bet he's not boring tonight though, I bet he's raging. I chuckle to myself. He'll have to hold on to that anger all weekend, and even Monday morning

because I won't be at my desk to hear him rant. I'll be in Owain's office, knocking him off his feet.

I pull out some of my most promising ideas from my binder and lay them out in front of me so I can really take a look at them and try and work out how best to present them.

Knock, knock.

I whip around and stare at my front door, wondering who the hell is here. I'm not expecting anyone, and I don't answer the door if I don't know who's on the other side.

"Raven, open up, will you?" My pulse slows down once I realize it's only Cara, my bestie. "It's only me, not some crazy serial killer. I know that's what you're worried about."

I shove all my work to the side for a minute while I let her in. "I don't think you're a serial killer," I chuckle as I throw my arms around her and embrace like I haven't seen each other in months, rather than just a few days. "More than you might want to sell me something."

She pushes her way in and drops her bag on the floor before shooting me a critical look. "Why are you still in your sweatpants?"

"Erm..." I glance down at my scruffy clothing. "Because I'm at the computer..."

"No way." She tuts and shakes her head. "You are not wasting a weekend working, and especially not tonight. Not when you promised to come out with me."

"I did? I don't remember that."

"For our double date, remember? You're going to hang out with Vinnie's friend, while also scoping him out for me, letting me know what you think of him before I get in too deep."

I groan, agony ripping through my body. "Oh my God, I totally forgot."

"That doesn't mean you're getting out of it, Raven. I need you tonight. I like Vinnie a lot, but that means I might be missing his red flags. You have to tell me."

I throw my hands in the air to surrender. "Okay, alright, you don't need to guilt trip me. I'm going to come, I just forgot in all my excitement because some good stuff is happening at work."

"Tell me all about it while you get dressed. A nice dress," Cara adds, throwing a pointed look at my sweats. "I want to hear it, I do, but I don't want to be late. Vinnie has been sending me sexy texts all day and I can't

wait to see him.”

“Urgh, really?” I cringe. “Please tell me I won’t have to watch you and your new beau sucking face all night? While trying to make awkward small talk with...”

“Taylor. And don’t worry. You’ll like him a lot. He’s a cool guy, really interesting. I really see you guys hitting it off.” She nudges me and smirks. “That’ll be romantic, won’t it? Falling in love on a blind date. A good story for your kids.”

I roll my eyes. “Only marginally better than meeting on a dating app, I guess.”

“Hey! Me and Vinnie met on a dating app, don’t forget.”

Oops. “I didn’t mean any offense by it. You know what I mean.”

“If you stopped watching so many soppy movies, then you wouldn’t have this wild, romantic notion of how love is supposed to be. You might let more guys in then.”

I grab a couple of dresses out of my wardrobe, which Cara immediately shoots down with a frown. I guess I’m going to have to try and match her a little. She’s in something super tight fitting and sexy though. It’s blood red and shows off her legs for days.

I don’t think I have anything like that.

“Just because I want a bit of romance, Cara, doesn’t mean I’m asking for too much.”

Although I can spit that out as much as I want, like it’s a mantra or something, doesn’t make it true. I really think I might be asking for too much, because I haven’t had anything *like* the sort of romance I’d like.

But I’m only twenty-six years old. I don’t think I’m expected to have it all figured out yet. Am I?

“That one.” Cara grabs for a little black dress I was just about to discard. “Come on, you look hot in that one. Taylor will absolutely love it.”

I stifle a sigh. There’s no point in showing my disdain for the night because it won’t change a thing. Cara will get me out on this double date regardless. If she wants me to wear this, then so be it. Tonight wasn’t about me anyway.

“Okay fine.” I snatch the dress back. “But I can’t promise I’ll have a good time.”

“You will,” Cara insists with a laugh. “I have a really good feeling about you and Taylor. He’s a self-employed carpenter with a nice smile, and being

friends with Vinnie works in his favor as well.” She sighs dreamily. I honestly don’t think I’ve ever seen Cara this giddy over a guy before. It’s weird. Nice, but weird. “Vinnie is amazing. I hope you think so too.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will.” I struggle to get the dress over my head. This is definitely a tighter dress than I would have chosen for myself. “But if any red flags pop up, you’ll be the first to know.”

I check out my reflection in the mirror with a frown. I’m definitely going to have to do something with my hair to make this work for me. A messy bun is fine for sweatpants and working at home, not so much with this dress, but I suppose it’ll be fine. Who knows, it might even end up being a whole lot of fun.



I SHUFFLE my dress down as it rides up my thighs, making me more uncomfortable than I already am. Cara promised that I wouldn’t have to witness her public displays of affection with Vinnie all night long, but of course that’s exactly what was happening.

I haven’t even had much of a chance to get to know Vinnie, I don’t know how I’m supposed to make any kind of judgment on him. I shouldn’t be here, but it was too late to skip out.

“...your boss sounds like a right douchebag!” Taylor throws his head back and laughs. “This is why I work for myself, because I wouldn’t be able to stand someone like that, looking down on me and making me feel like shit all the time.”

“Huh, yeah.” I can’t force a laugh out, and I don’t know why. “Well, I’m going to show him that I’m not to be treated that way. I have a plan.”

“Seems, unnecessary though, don’t you think?” He cocks his head to one side curiously. “To have to prove yourself to someone who hired you in the first place. Don’t you think you should just walk in with respect? I don’t get it.”

He’s rubbing me the wrong way. He knows nothing about me and my life, yet he thinks he gets to have an opinion? I’m allowed to think what I want about Mr. Baker because I deal with him all the time. But Taylor... no way.

I catch a glimpse of Cara smiling my way for the first time in hours. I

need to keep the peace. I grit my teeth together and change the subject rapidly.

“Let’s not talk about work anymore. Why don’t you tell me more about what you do in your free time?”

“Oh well, I do have a soft spot for vintage cars...”

I smile and nod at all the right moments, wanting to scream at Cara. I *know* she thinks my desire for romance is stupid and unrealistic, but so was this.

I could be working on my presentation right now, getting it right. I still need to work out just what PR stunt will blow Owain away and *really* put me on the map.

“Taylor, come with me to get some drinks from the bar.” All of a sudden, Cara reaches across the table and takes his hand. I have to admit that I’m relieved for a moment of peace. “We’ll leave Raven and Vinnie to get to know one another a little better.”

Oh God, I’m up. It’s time.

I straighten up and clasp my hands together, needing Vinnie to see how serious I am. Already I can tell he isn’t sure how this is going to go. I’m protective of Cara and I want to ensure he only wants what’s best for her, but I’m not a monster.

Mostly because Cara has way more romantic experiences than me. I’m sure she knows what she’s looking for much better than I ever could.

“So, Vinnie.” I cough awkwardly once we’re alone. “How are things going? You know, with Cara? You seem to have a really great connection.”

Urgh, I feel like her mom. This is dumb.

“Oh yeah, I like her a lot.” His face lights up and a joyful pinkness stains his cheeks. He really does like Cara. I can see it radiating through him. “I think she’s amazing. I know we haven’t been dating for that long, but I like the way she’s so passionate and fun loving. I love the essence of her, she’s like sunshine.”

Raven

I CAN’T HELP but melt. “Yeah, she does have a really great warmth about her, doesn’t she?”

Vinnie laughs. “I just can’t believe she likes me. I don’t feel anywhere near good enough for her. But she really seems to.”

Holy shit, my chest constricts with jealousy. I want someone to look at me that way. Maybe I do need to start considering dating apps if this is the sort of romance that can come out of it. I just can't picture myself setting up a page and messaging total strangers to see if there is any kind of connection to be found through a screen. But maybe with Cara's help...

Not yet, I tell myself decisively. Let's get through this presentation first.

By the time Cara and Taylor join us once more, Vinnie and I have fallen into a natural, joyous conversation. This only makes it more obvious that there isn't a scrap of anything resembling a connection between Taylor and me. We can't even talk without it feeling weird.

I didn't come into this tonight expecting there to be a spark, but I still felt disappointed. Why can't I ever have a spark?

I suppose it'll come someday. I just need to be ready when it does.

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