

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS BOOK 201



THE CEO AND THE
Wedding
PLANNER

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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THE CEO AND THE WEDDING
PLANNER

AN OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 201

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

THE CEO AND THE WEDDING PLANNER

I'm only supposed to be planning his sister's wedding, but when I run into Mason Mackendale at the company he owns, I feel like my world is going to change forever. He's a wealthy billionaire with silver-fox hair and a body that could make Adonis jealous and I'm an orphan who doesn't know a thing about love and is living under a fake name.

What could go wrong? Or maybe I should be asking what could go *right*?

I don't dare to think that this iron-haired alpha would want a thing to do with me. He's a thirty-nine year old billionaire, routinely called one of the 'Sexiest Men Alive' in magazines. I'm a twenty-one year old wedding planner just happy that my best friend and mother figure, Gertrude, let me work at Eternal Bond without knowing the truth about my past.

But when he tells me that I'm his and his alone, I find myself swept up in the primal passion. I know it's dangerous and that eventually my past will catch up with me and blow everything to smithereens, but his possessive jealous lust is just too tempting to ignore.

I've told myself countless times that I can't get too close to people. I've done things in the past I'm not proud of. I've had to move cities, change my identity, and yet with Mason it's like I'm finally discovering who I really am.

So what if I'm a virgin? So what if I don't know the first thing about love?

Maybe it'll turn out that Mason and I aren't that different after all.

But that's only if Mason's company, Spark, can get through the biggest PR screw-up in its history, all while I try and plan his sister Natalie's dream wedding. But love and lust find a way, and ours is hell hot, so sultry that every time he lays his possessive dominant hands on me I feel powerless to resist.

But what happens when he finds out who I really am, what I've done? What if I ruin his sister's wedding? What if his company goes bust? What if this all blows up in my face?

Maybe girls like me should just accept that Eternal Bond wasn't made for us after all.

*The CEO and The Wedding Planner *is an insta-everything standalone instalove romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Mason

“Do we have any idea who did this?” I snap.

I stand at the window of our high rise office building, looking down upon the city, the skyscrapers, and then the streets laid out like ants’ huts.

Everything looks so small up here, and even after over a decade in this business, I still have to remind myself that I earned this, I worked damn hard for it.

I’m thirty-nine years old and one of the richest, most successful men in the world.

Which makes failure all the more bitter.

“Well?”

I turn to find Natalia, my sister, and PR manager, with her hands laid on her lap and a patient expression on her face.

In the old days, coming up, I’d been known to fly into rages when the business flagged. I had – have – a responsibility to my employees and investors. But age brings experience, and now I just let my rage seethe patiently.

Natalie is not as tall as I am, but she is taller than most women, with a sophisticated way of holding her height. She has a bob of jet-black hair and dark-painted fingernails, matching her sleek suit.

“We can’t find the culprit,” Mathewson mutters, my second-in-command.

He winces when I turn my gaze to him. He’s been here since the beginning, too, and remembers how fury-filled I used to be.

I’d *had* to be like that.

You don’t become the leader of the pack without baring your teeth.

“Keep looking,” I tell him.

He nods, relaxing in his baggy blue suit. He has a thin mustache that he cultivates almost obsessively, and a crown of deep brown hair that is going patchy at the back, but his eyes are smart and incisive, the eyes of a man I can trust.

“I will, Mason. You know I will.”

I sigh and wander over to my desk, sitting down opposite my younger sister as Mathewson leaves us.

“How bad is it?” I ask.

Although I think I already know the answer.

One of our cellphones spontaneously blew up on stage as I was giving a demo at a tech convention. Perhaps *blew up* is an exaggeration. It was more of a pop followed by a fizzle, with the on-screen projection wavering and then disappearing like a busted VHS tape.

“It’s not good,” she says.

“Is it salvageable? What the fuck are we supposed to say? *Hello, folks, we’re the most cutting edge tech company in the world but we don’t even know why one of our phones malfunctioned.*”

“It’s only been a few hours, Mase,” Natalie murmurs quietly. “Give the diagnostics team a chance to work.”

“I was on that production team myself, Nat,” I say. “There was nothing in that code that could’ve made it do that. No fucking chance. Which means it was something hidden, invisible. Which means we’re talking corporate goddamned sabotage.”

“Relax,” she says, reaching over and giving my hand a quick squeeze. “There’s nothing we can do until we know for sure.”

I groan, sitting back and closing my eyes, feeling my body pounding like a war-drum calling me to battle. I picture all the CEO’s of my rival companies, wondering which of them would have the stones to try some shit like this.

“Mason,” Natalie says, pulling me out of my reverie.

“Yes?” I reply, opening my eyes.

“I said that unless you need something else, I need to go and get ready to meet with my wedding planners. Don’t worry, I’m just taking my lunch break to do it.”

“You’re meeting them here?” I mutter, glancing out of the window, a cloud drifting by so close I feel as though I could reach out and touch it, the sky a sheet of unbroken blue apart from that blemish.

“Busy, busy, busy,” she sings. “No time for a fancy bar halfway across town. What are you going to do?”

“Well, I’ve got two choices. Sit here and seethe until the diagnostics team comes back to me, or go and hit the gym and beat my body into such an exhausted, fucked-up state that maybe some of this won’t seem so bad after all.”

She laughs, shooting me a look.

“I’d advise the latter.”

“Yeah,” I grunt. “No shit. Alright, sis, go plan your dream day. How are they, anyway, the folks at Eternal Bond?”

“Oh, they’re great,” she says. “It’s early days, but already Lyle and I are glad we went with a smaller shop. The owner, Gertrude, she’s such a sweetheart. She sort of reminds me of Mom.”

“Hmm,” I mutter, not wanting to leap headfirst down that rabbit hole.

She stands, head bowed a little as it always is when she mentions Mom and Dad.

She reminds me of Mom.

But Mom was gone by the time Nat was six years old. I doubt she even remembers much about her. But then I can't blame her for trying to claw onto some sense of parenthood.

Natalie leaves and I stand up, wandering across my open-plan office to the room that leads to my private changing and shower area. When I'm working three days in a row on a new project, it's good to be able to sweat out my tiredness in the sauna ready for another round of business.

I get changed into my gym gear and roll my shoulders as I leave my office, nodding to Jennifer, my receptionist, and ignoring the way she twirls her blonde curls and eyes me with what I guess is supposed to be a seductive gaze.

I'm too damn busy for women, that's the truth.

And I've never been interested in the casual stuff so many CEO's indulge in.

When I think of a woman – in the abstract – it's always with the knowledge that I'd only take one if I could put a child in her, claim her, make her mine.

But that's just pie-in-the-sky stuff.

So many women have made it clear over the years that I could basically do what I wanted with them. An off-putting sentiment. But once you hit the billionaire mark, that's how life works. But I don't give a damn, not even slightly, not unless I feel ... *something* when I look at her.

I nod to my employees as I stroll to the rear of the office, where the gym is located. I don't pause long enough to get drawn into any long conversations, because right now the only thing I want to talk to is a bench and a stack of weights big enough to cave in a jeep's roof.

I turn the corner that will lead to the final corridor when I stop mid-stride.

There's a woman walking toward me, a woman who for whatever reason has made me stop and just gaze at her, and just keep gazing until I feel the hammering in my chest morph from blinding rage to blinding something else.

My manhood twitches as she slows her pace, watching me watch her, perhaps wondering why Mason Mackendale is glaring at her like she's done something wrong.

Her hair is a deep brown, but lighter in places, or maybe it's the way it catches the light from the windows dotted all throughout the airy rooms. Her face is full and brimming with character, her oaken eyes sharp and yet somehow friendly. Her body – *fuck* – her body is a childbearing oasis, her white shirt doing nothing to hide the bulbous beauty of her breasts, her prim suit trousers hugging tight to the curvaceous glory of her hips.

Savage thoughts enter my mind.

Grab her, bend her over, take her by those hips and dominate her right here, pound her until your seed is gushing out of her pussy, and then paint those round cheeks with it.

I'm stunned.

I'm never normally a slave to carnal thoughts like this.

But this sexy, young-looking, intelligent seeming woman has triggered something atavistically unstoppable inside of me.

"Um, hello?" she says.

She's clearly saying it because I've been staring at her for what must be ten seconds now, wordlessly, maybe even salivating like the wild beast she's threatening to turn me into.

I need to put my seed in her.

Jesus Christ, that thought comes quickly, and yet it thuds into me with the certainty of fire-hot truth.

I need to tear those clothes off and sink my hands into her full-bodied sexiness, and then trail my come-slick manhood up her thigh until she's wet enough to take me hard and deep right away.

I thrust my hand out toward her, smirking.

"Mason Mackendale," I say. "I take it you're new here?"

It's a big company and I don't always have time to meet every single one of my thousand-plus employees.

“I know who you are,” she says, giggling slightly. “I don’t work here. I’m just here to meet your sister, actually.”

“You’re the wedding planner?” I ask as she takes my hand, soft and slightly sweaty.

“Yes,” she says. “Well, assistant to the wedding planner. I’m Melody Smith.”

Nerves dance across her features as she gives me her name.

Fuck, what I’d give to lick those nerves away, one tongue stroke at a time.

A silence hangs between us as my mind continues to assail me with primal take-her vignettes.

I imagine her on her knees, unbuttoning that shirt slowly, revealing more and more of those bulbous creamy tits, and then I’d bring my come-soaked hot cock to her breasts and start fucking them like the sex goddess she is, pinching her nipples lightly as I push them together, tighter, closer, and then drive my manhood into those cute lips and explode until she gulps down every drop.

But no.

Would I truly waste a drop of my seed in her mouth, when she’s got a pussy so perfect for filling, where my seed could take root and flourish in that wide-hipped body, a body made for fucking and giving life?

“How’s the planning going?” I say, having to force the words out.

It takes all my self-restraint not to pounce on her like a jungle cat right here.

“Oh, well enough,” she murmurs.

I can scent her perfume in the air, and, underneath that, her just-her smell. It smells tangy and real, and so alluring my manhood won’t stop pulsing.

“Natalie’s a great person to work with,” she says. “I mean, maybe a little indecisive at times, but that’s all part of the job ... Oh, God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult your sister.”

Her face flickers with mortification.

I shake my head, moving closer to her, so close I could loop my arm around her waist and squeeze her round bouncy ass.

“No, you’re right,” I say, with as light a chuckle as I can manage. “And I appreciate people who can speak their mind. It can get pretty boring having ‘Yes Men’ around you all the time.”

“What about ‘Yes Women’?” she teases.

“Well,” I growl. “It depends what you’re saying *yes* to.”

A blush creeps into her cheeks, a gorgeous crimson, and for a few moments, I contemplate just kissing her right here, right now.

I don’t give a damn if we’re surrounded by my employees.

I don’t give a damn if it’d be unprofessional.

But then her eyes widen and she glances behind me.

“Oh, there’s my boss,” she says.

I turn to find an elegant looking older lady glancing at us. She wears a knee-length black skirt with tights and a blazer that emphasizes her no-bullshit shoulders. Her hair is dignified silver and her eyes are sharp.

“I’ll see you again, Melody,” I say, watching her walk down the corridor, the way the fabric clings to her ass almost causing me to erupt right here.

I spin and quickly walk toward the gym, full of frenetic energy.

Because if I don’t go and punish my body a thousand times over I’ll follow Melody’s scent through the office and take her like the beast she’s turning me into.

CHAPTER TWO

Melody

“You did very well today,” Gertrude says when we’re back in the Eternal Bond offices, a small boutique-style place on the other side of the city from Spark, Mason’s company.

Gertrude leans back in her office chair, the walls surrounded with photos taken at the various weddings she’s planned over the years, the couples smiling and radiating happiness, and puts her hair into a ponytail.

“Though there was that *business*, wasn’t there?” she says, shooting me one of her I-miss-nothing looks.

“Business?” I say innocently, standing up and wandering over the window.

It’s almost the end of the business day but the sunlight-dappled city is still as bustling as ever, the sidewalks packed shoulder-to-shoulder with pedestrians, horns blaring into the air like a siren song as the cars sit hood to taillight.

“Before we went to meet Miss Mackendale,” Gertrude says, a smile in her voice.

You evil old crone, I think, but really a note of endearment strikes in me.

But it’s followed by a quiver of guilt.

Gertrude doesn’t know the truth about me, so maybe it’s unfair that I look to her as a mother figure.

Just because I never had a mother figure growing up – or a father figure for that matter – it doesn't mean I should unfairly thrust that responsibility at her.

I'm twenty-one years old now, for Pete's sake, way past the age where I should still be longing for a mother. But if you've never had one, well, heck, it's kind of hard to turn that instinct off.

But what would Gertrude say if she learned I'd purchased fake identification when I came to this city to start my new life. If she knew what I was running from, *who* I was running from?

I shiver, remembering that night, remembering the blood and the fear and the pain.

"Melody?" she says, close to me now, her hand sinking softly into my shoulder. "Are you okay, dear?"

"Yes, yes," I say quickly, turning what I hope is a convincing smile to her. "Sorry. I was just thinking."

"About Mason Mackendale?"

"What?" I say, a blush creeping into my cheeks despite myself. "Of course not. That was just a friendly conversation. I was networking, Gertrude, that's all."

"Is that why you looked so smitten afterward, hmm?"

"You're evil," I laugh, shaking my head and returning to my chair with a sigh. "Anyway, as if a man like Mason freaking Mackendale would be interested in me. It's a silly thing to even think."

"And why's that?" Gertrude says fiercely. "You're intelligent, you're beautiful, you're fierce ... need I go on?"

I sigh, deciding to let the matter drop.

When Mason was looming over me in the corridor, all six-foot-seven of him clad in his tight-fitting gym clothes, his stark blue eyes like shards of ice biting into me and his body hulking and seeming to pulse muscularly – with his silver peppered hair slicked to the side, and his clean-shaven jaw shaping his smirk – something crazy and ridiculous hammered through me.

For a second as I breathed in the heat of him, I thought he was going to grab my shoulders and push me up against the wall.

I imagined what it would feel like to have those pectorals pressed right up against me, solid and rock hard, pushing into me firmly, irrepressibly.

I actually *felt* his rough lips all over my body, phantom sensations that caused extremely real tingles to dance over my skin.

But he looked almost angry, his jaws tight, his eyes hard.

Even as we bantered – *it depends what you're saying yes to* – I sensed that I'd done something wrong.

Somehow.

Even if we've never met until now.

"I never had children," Gertrude says, pulling up a spare chair and sitting down next to me. "All these years spent planning weddings, and my dear Markus was taken from me before we got the chance to plan ours. And yes, maybe I'm just a silly old romantic for never moving on. But with you, Melody, working with you these past six months ... it's like finding the daughter I never had."

Tears prick my eyes as guilt swirls nastily through me.

If she knew the truth, all of it, would she feel this way?

Would she be able to say these loving, touching words?

If she knew the danger I was putting her in just by being here, she might throw me to the curb and spit in my face.

"I love you, Melody," she whispers. "And any man would be lucky to have you."

"I love you, too," I sob. "Thank you so much for everything."

She smiles and reaches across, smoothing my tears away with her thumb.

A few days later, I'm riding the silent glass elevator up to the Spark offices again. Lately, Gertrude has been sending me to more and more client meetings alone, entrusting me with a responsibility that makes me feel intimidated, but also invigorated.

I've never had time to even think about my passion in life, but the more I work with Gertrude, the more I think wedding planning might be it.

I love the sense of reward I feel when I get to see a bride and groom happily married, confetti flying through the air and their smiles wide and beaming.

I love the frantic pace of it, always keeping me on my toes as another bridezilla changes her entire plan at the last minute.

I love having a purpose beyond simply *surviving*, and I love being there for Gertrude and making her proud.

The Spark offices are extremely modern, with an open-plan design and so many windows it feels like we're floating in the sky. I pass a beanbag area, a games room, a theater, and even a bowling alley as I try to remember my way to Natalie's offices.

I'm normally good with directions, but something about the run-in with Mason has thrown off my compass, and somehow I end up near the gym again.

I check my phone, thankful that I gave myself an extra forty-five minutes.

When I look up, I see a giant swaggering across the gym, his tight-fitted t-shirt soaked in sweat. The muscles in his back are rippling and as Mason leans down to pick up another weight disc, his shirt lifts up to reveal a slice of marble carved muscle.

Everything about him is hard and unyielding, and I can't help but stare like the biggest Peeping Tom in the world. My heart hammers in the back of my throat and my mouth goes dry as I watch him lie down on the bench and lift a ridiculous amount of weights from the brackets.

Everybody talks about how Mason Mackendale doesn't fit the usual mold of a so-called tech geek. He's devastatingly

handsome with his steel hair and his easy smirk. He's as smart or smarter than every single one of his competitors, but with the aura of a hunting jaguar and the eyes of a man who'd break your heart.

How many women does he have per month?

The thought stabs unfairly into my mind.

Women must throw themselves at his feet like sacrificial lambs, ready to do anything he commands them to, and it's just self-torture for me to even indulge any silly thoughts.

And yet as he grunts and grits his teeth, his shirt riding up higher to show an enticing slab of hard-packed belly muscle, my whole body tingles, and I wonder what it'd be like to stride in there and sit on his lap.

Just sit on it like a confident woman, not like the shy girl circumstances have so often warped me into.

Sit on him and drag my fingernails down his sweaty chest, grinding against him, make him moan and growl like he is now, but deeper, in pleasure this time.

Mason finishes his set and then sits up, looking straight at me.

I flinch and almost leap out of the way to hide.

But it's too late. I stare back at him and wonder if I should mouth the word *sorry*, but then that would be admitting that I was basically just ogling him.

He smirks at me, his glistening blue eyes unreadable, and then swaggers over to the door and opens it.

I turn to him, my nose filling with his sweaty, somehow alluring scent.

It's crazy, it makes no sense. But I feel something deep inside of me thrumming and screaming at the sight of him, as though my womb is begging me to somehow get this man into bed, to drink in every drop of his seed he's willing to give me.

It's a deep, primal urge.

It's the sort of urge women must've had tens of thousands of years ago when they saw the alpha of the tribe, their body's

telling them, *Him, now, get him, hold onto him, he'll protect you from the wolves and the dark and the cold and the hunger.*

“Are you lost, Melody?” he asks, still smirking, looking so handsome and cocky I want to slap and kiss him at the same time.

“No,” I lie, hoping I imagine the quiver in my voice. “I was actually thinking of getting in a quick workout before I met with Natalie.”

“Really? Because the only thing it looked like you were working out was your eyes.”

“Yeah, keep dreaming,” I sass, rolling my eyes, masking nerves with banter. Or trying to, anyway.

Am I flirting with Mason Mackendale?

No, no.

What a stupid thought.

“Anyway, I won't keep you,” he growls after a moment, that same look of fury flickering across his face again.

“Um, okay,” I murmur, but he's already turned around and strode back into the gym.

I stand there for a moment, feeling foolish for thinking there was ever a spark of chemistry between us.

Of course there freaking isn't.

He's Mason Mackendale.

That's like some peasant in medieval times thinking the prince was interested in her.

Maybe it happens in fairytales, but not in real life.

I still can't work out what I'd said to make him angry, though, as I navigate through the office and finally find my way to Natalie's door.

Maybe he's just having a bad day, I assure myself.

It probably has nothing to do with me. He's got a lot on his mind, especially with the newspapers enjoying an absolute all-you-can-print buffet over the malfunctioning cellphone.

I take a deep breath and knock on Natalie's door, trying to push Mason from my mind.

And then I have to laugh under my breath.

Yeah right.

Like I'm going to be able to stop thinking about him just like that.

Already my mind is going over how he looked in the gym, his sweat-slick clothes, the spark in his fjord-colored eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Mason

I let the shower water blast over me coldly, my manhood still rock hard even after ten minutes of standing under the icy flow. I try to tug my mind away from the way Melody sassed me, the spark in her expression, the vivaciousness imbuing every part of her.

When I saw her watching me in the gym, it took everything I have not to charge out there and drag her over to the weights' bench.

Bend her over.

Strip her bare.

And take her, take every part of her.

I've never had this level of lustful captivity over a woman before, never even knew it was possible, but as my mind returns again and again to Melody I just can't help myself anymore.

I grab my cock and picture her in her tight-fitting black skirt, hugging closely to hips that were made for grabbing and for bearing me beautiful, intelligent children, whilst hammering into her sweet wet heat.

I imagine spinning her around and hiking her skirt around her hips, taking her dirtily right there in the hallway, tearing a ...

Fuck, oh, fuck.

Tearing a goddamned hole in her tights and then yanking her panties so they snap, revealing the precious pinkness of her pussy. I imagine the way she'd moan and writhe and beg for more as I pumped my cock inside of her, crushing those round full ass cheeks.

I grunt as my come shoots all over the wall of my private shower, already regretting wasting the seed on the wall when the only place it belongs is inside her greedy womb.

I finish my shower and then get dressed in a sleek silver-colored suit, trying to make myself think about the hacking, which the diagnostics team has now confirmed it was.

Somebody planted malware on the phone. But it's advanced stuff. It's going to be a while until we know more.

What was the point of being one of the most advanced tech companies in the world if people could pull shit like this?

"They'll get it, bro," Nat said to me last night as she cut into her steak, Lyle nodding his support. "Just give them time."

But more time is the last thing I need, with the press hounding me, and with Melody hounding my thoughts.

I need to focus on this PR hell-storm and yet I can't *not* think about Melody, as though my mind is pure metal and she's a magnet, pulling me to her again and again.

I end up at my desk, logging into the CCTV feed and rewinding to about forty-five minutes ago when Melody would have been arriving.

I navigate to the garage footage and see her walking toward the elevator with a harried, cute-as-fuck look on her face.

If I thought the self-indulgence in the shower was going to douse my flame for her, I was dead wrong, because the second I see those wide alluring hips again I turn feral.

I have to bite down to stop from letting out a carnal groan.

There's a hungry need inside of me, an urge I've never felt before and know I can't ignore, not even if I wanted to.

I close the CCTV footage and open the internal Spark messaging system.

Sis, can you ask Melody to swing by my office before she leaves?

My finger hovers over the ‘send’ button, and then I stand up and walk to the window, putting my hands behind my back as though that will stop me from making this play.

I’ve always told myself that entanglements will only lead to complications, that I have to be completely focused on the business unless I want to open a Pandora’s Box of relationship crap I have no desire to deal with.

But when my mind flows over Melody, her sassiness, her fieriness, the nerves hiding behind her mask, and a body that would be hot even in the most furious fire, I feel my attitude toward it all shifting.

I look down over the city, this city that was once my prison and is now my playground, and then I turn and walk back to my desk and hammer the *send* button so hard I’m surprised when the keyboard doesn’t snap in half.

Natalie fires back after a couple of minutes.

Of course, I will, lover boy.

I groan, rolling my eyes and yet smirking despite myself.

So Natalie has sensed something, perhaps a change in me since I ran into Melody the last time. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. My little sister knows me better than anybody.

We were all each other had growing up, after Mom and Dad
...

I shake my head and grit my teeth.

Why the fuck would you want to go there?

I return to my computer and get some work done, but my gaze keeps straying to the door, and instead of wearing headphones and blasting music like I normally do, I keep my hearing clear to listen for Melody’s knock.

It comes about forty-five minutes later, an uncertain tapping, as though she's wondering why the CEO would summon her.

"Come in," I call, my voice far snarlier than I'd intended.

But she just brings this out in me, this long-dormant desire, so that I feel like an animal stalking my prey.

The door opens and immediately my manhood rushes with blood and desire, turning as hard as a fucking promise in a matter of milliseconds.

I swallow as she shuts the door and walks across my cavernous office, her hands worrying at each other, and yet she wears a combative smirk as though she's hoping to sass her way through her anxiety.

I can respect that.

"You wanted to see me?" she says.

"Yes," I say, standing up and walking around the desk.

I pause, wondering what exactly my excuse is for summoning her. I just wanted to see her again, in the most basic sense of the word, to let my eyes roam over a body made for craving. Then I gesture to the leather couches at the far end of the office.

"Take a seat, please," I say. "Would you like a drink?"

I swagger over without waiting for an answer, remembering the moment outside the gym, and how I had to get her to leave before my restraint snapped and I mauled her right there.

I drop down and put one hand over the back of the couch.

I'm aware that I must look like a cocky asshole.

And I'm also aware I don't give a damn.

"No, I'm fine," she says, sitting opposite me across the glass coffee table.

Every time she fidgets, her breasts jiggle slightly in the prison of her shirt, and her buttons tug open just a tiny bit, revealing the pinkness of her bra.

Fuck.

And if I look closer, I can just about make out the outline of her bra through the shirt.

I wonder if her nipples are the same shade of pink or if they'll turn red as I suck them, suck them hard, as though I'm teasing the milk from them that will only gush out when she's getting ready for our children.

"I suppose this is pretty odd, eh?" I say, trying for a laugh.

She smiles with relief at the sound of my laughter.

"Well, I do sort of feel like I've been summoned to the principal's office."

"Why? Have you done something wrong?" I banter.

Her cheeks flush as though the joke hasn't landed, and briefly, I wonder if she *has* done something wrong.

A crazy, absurd thought strikes me.

She's involved with the sabotage.

I banish it a moment later.

As little sense as it makes, I just *know* that that isn't true. Melody isn't like that.

The future mother of my children isn't like that.

She finally places her hands in her lap, with conviction, as though she's decided to stop fidgeting.

"This office is amazing," she says, glancing around. "I mean, it's just so *big*. I guess that's the best statement you can make in a city where real estate is so expensive, right?"

"Right," I agree. "That's exactly it."

I'm finding it hard to talk, to focus, when this sex goddess is sitting across from me.

Fuck it.

"Melody, I want to take you to dinner."

Her mouth falls open and she stares at me for long moments, as though trying to make the words fit in her head.

When they won't, she blinks several times, looking so cute I almost let out a lion's roar.

Does she not know how beautiful she is? Does she have any clue?

"What?" she gasps. "I'm sorry. Um, why?"

"Why?" I mutter, leaning forward now, elbows on my knees as my eyes take in every inch of her. "Because you're beautiful, that's why. Because you're interesting."

"Really?" she whispers, lips trembling slightly. "Because nobody's ever said any of that to me before, Mason. And it's a little hard for me to believe that—well, let's just be honest—that a man like you would think any of that about me."

Something in my belly drops.

And something else flares.

I want to find the person who convinced her she isn't deserving of praise, of worship, and crush their head like a watermelon. I want to make them beg for her forgiveness, bow at her feet in supplication.

"Let me make it simple then," I say with a smirk. "If you don't come out to dinner with me, I'll tell Natalie to fire Eternal Bond and find somebody else for her wedding. There. You're being blackmailed. Now you have no choice."

My wolfish grin lets her know that I'm joking, I'd never actually blackmail her or get involved in the wedding planning, and I'm glad when she smiles broadly and leans forward.

"Oh, is that so?" she says with an ironic note in her voice. "Well, I guess if I *really* don't have a choice, then I have to endure dinner with you, Mason."

"Endure?" I chuckle deeply. "Is that really the word you want to choose?"

"I think that's the perfect word," she fires back, even if there are still shimmers of anxiety glinting in her eyes. "And, you know, it's pretty convenient. If this turns out to be some horrible trick, I can say I was forced into it."

“A trick?” I growl, angrier than I intended. “Melody, this is no fucking trick. This is—I’ve never asked a woman to dinner, not once. Because ...”

I trail off.

Words fail me.

Code is so much simpler, sometimes.

“Because what?” she mutters, glancing at the table, perhaps as inept in the realms of romance as I am.

Because they weren't you.

“Because a wizard cast a spell on me a long time ago, that’s why.”

“Oh yeah?” she giggles.

“Yeah,” I laugh. “He told me that I could only ask women on dates named Melody, and you’re the first Melody I’ve met.”

“Oh, lucky me,” she laughs sassily.

Our eyes meet and a feeling floods into my chest, something I’ve never experienced before.

Its warmth, *contentment*.

All of a sudden, the office falls away and I imagine looking at her like this over a dinner table filled with our happy, laughing children, and for an insane moment, I think I see the exact same image reflected in her eyes.

“Tonight, then,” I say. “I’ll send a car for you.”

She smiles, even if it’s a little shaky, even if I can tell she still thinks there’s some ulterior purpose to the invitation.

“Tonight,” she says.

CHAPTER FOUR

Melody

I stand in front of the full-length mirror in the dress I bought on my way home this evening. It was only when Mason asked if I wanted to go to dinner with him – or, rather, gave me the get-out-of-jail-free card of pretending that he was *forcing* me – that I realized I don't actually have any going out clothes.

The dress is black with lace over the chest, revealing my bra, and as I gaze at myself I can't shake the feeling that I look like a complete idiot.

I've had to be tough in my life, to develop a shield of banter and humor to make sure that nobody gets too close to me. I've never had much interest from men, but when I have, I've always politely said no.

I don't want *that* to happen again, the mess I got myself into last time.

Yet when Mason asked me, I felt a stirring deep in my belly, almost like I was a teenager again and he'd just asked me to prom.

Sitting in his office, I started to imagine what it would like to be normal, whatever that means.

What would it be like not to have to look over my shoulder all the time?

But the truth remains that I *do* have to look over my shoulder, and by getting in deeper with Mason, I'm putting him in

danger the same way I'm putting Gertrude in danger.

I should leave town.

Tonight.

I should run and go somewhere quiet and lonely and far, far away.

Then the buzzer to my apartment goes off and a wave of nerves and excitement crash through me, flooding me with tingly hope.

Just one date.

Don't I deserve that, after all the years of running, of heartache, of pain?

Just one date with the best man I've ever met.

The man of my dreams.

I just hope it isn't a trick.

I feel out of place as the host leads me to an elevator in the marble lobby, bypassing the restaurant as he gestures for me to go inside.

The elevator is lined with plush red material and smells of vanilla, the cleanest, most welcoming elevator in the whole freaking city.

I ride it up, butterflies swirling in my belly, clutching my bag tightly as though it's a life raft and will save me if I go adrift.

That's true, in a way.

I don't have any floatation device in there, but I do have my pepper spray, and I've practiced using it for hours to make sure my aim is good and my reflexes sharp. I don't even know how many canisters I've gone through.

The thing is, I don't think that Mason wants to meet with me for any nefarious reason.

And yet my instincts tell me to be suspicious, always, to never let my guard down.

I let my guard down before and it resulted in a hell of blood, violence, and pain.

I shiver, close my eyes, and counting backward from ten slowly.

I'm at six when the doors slide open with a beep.

Mason is standing just outside the elevator, looking dapper and handsome in a black shirt and trousers, the tucked-in shirt showing the V-shape of his muscled body.

His shoulders look somehow broader as he steps forward, offering me his hand.

"Melody," he says, in a husky voice. "You look absolutely incredible."

A shiver dances up my spine as he lays his hand against the flat of my back and leads me down a plush carpeted hallway and then into a massive ballroom, so large it has three separate chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. One side of the room is dominated with floor to ceiling windows that overlook the city, rose red with the setting sun.

In the center of the hardwood ballroom floor sits a single table and chairs, the open space making them seem special. As we get closer, his hand a warm imprint on my back – *God, is he doing that on purpose?* – I see that the table and chairs glimmer with small diamonds.

A candle flickers in the center.

"Wow," I say. "Do you do this for all the girls?"

I feel his hand tense against my back and immediately regret the comment.

"There aren't any others," he growls. "Please. Sit."

"What a gentleman," I say, trying to keep my voice light and teasing.

I take a seat and then he sits down opposite me.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t eat downstairs,” he says. “But we wouldn’t get any peace. Ever since this cellphone debacle, I can barely step outside without somebody wanting to give me their opinion on Spark. I—Sorry, Melody. I’m ranting.”

“No,” I say quickly, reaching across to touch his hand ...

And then stop, wondering why the heck I’d feel comfortable enough to do such a thing.

Is this a date?

I end up toying with the candlestick instead.

“I mean, I don’t mind if you want to talk about work. It’s interesting. And everybody needs to vent. And this is amazing, Mason, really.”

Secretly, I wonder if the real reason for him wanting to meet me here is shame. If he’s embarrassed to be seen with the plus size wedding planner from the wrong side of the tracks.

Old feelings dwell darkly in my belly, the inbuilt embarrassment that comes with being born unloved, poor, and ignored, as though I’m always trying to prove myself and never can.

“I mean it,” he says, pulling me back to the present moment. “You look unbelievable, Melody. That dress, that lace, it’s enough to drive a man insane.”

My body gets hot at his words, not just my face, my cheeks flushing as my sex aches, and my clit gets tight and sultry.

Suddenly, my panties feel too tight, the fabric grinding against me suggestively.

I can’t stop my overactive mind from imagining that it’s his hand instead.

“Thank you,” I manage to stammer. “You look dashing, too, but then that’s nothing new.”

He waves a hand and, a moment later, a small mechanical device starts humming toward us. It’s about four feet tall with what looks like a tablet on top. It wheels right to the table and then stops, seeming to watch us even if it doesn’t have eyes.

“Sir, madam,” it says in perfect English, its accent a soothing Mid-West tenor. “I hope you’re having a lovely evening. May I start you off with some drinks?”

“What the heck?” I giggle.

Mason’s eyes light up, clearly happy with my response.

“Rudimentary robotics and artificial intelligence,” he says. “Not for public viewing, but there’s nothing wrong with a little test run.”

“What do I do?” I ask.

“You can simply tell me your order, madam,” the robot says, swiveling slightly as it ‘speaks’, as though imitating the movement of a person. “Or, if you prefer, you can select from the above menu.”

The tablet blinks and comes to life, revealing a dropdown restaurant menu.

I laugh, almost clapping my hands together, the technology is so novel and interesting.

“Wow, Mason, this is great,” I say.

“My board wants me to roll them out ASAP,” Mason says. “But the idea of potentially putting thousands of waiters and waitresses out of business, well, it doesn’t exactly appeal to me. But for us, it’s perfect. I don’t want to share you with anybody else, Melody.”

Warmth surges through me, my panties getting more cloistered, steamier, my nipples rubbing against my bra, as though my womb is screaming at every part of me to reach across the table and grab onto any rock hard part of Mason I can grasp.

“So what, I can just order anything?” I ask.

“You can have anything you want,” he says, with a weight to his voice that makes me think he’s talking about more than food.

“And then a horde of robot manservants will presumably make it for me?” I laugh, feeling myself getting whisked up in the

majesty of this all even if I know how dangerous it is.

He's out there, always. Searching. He'll never stop searching.

“No, the Michelin Star chefs will handle that,” he smirks.

“You know, Mason, I really want to tell you I’m not impressed. I’m a down-to-earth girl and none of this stuff means a freaking thing to me. But that’d be a lie. Because this is really awesome.”

His lips twitch and his eyes glint, and when we meet eyes I feel my resolve shattering inside of me.

“This is beautiful,” I whisper, looking out over the city as the sun finishes its final descent, the gorgeous reds replaced with just as startling yellows.

“Not as beautiful as you,” he whispers, so close, at my side now, his breath painting my cheek with a heat that is both intoxicating and confusing.

I just can’t believe he’d really be interested in me, not like that, not somebody as rich, and powerful, and handsome, and muscular, and downright hot as him.

“Ha ha,” I murmur sarcastically. “I guess next you’ll tell me you’ve figured out how to make pigs fly. Or, I know, you’ve discovered the formula that’s going to cause hell to freeze over ___”

I gasp as he grabs my shoulders and spins me toward him, his grip tight and yet oh-so-welcome, sending shivers down my arms all the way to my fingertips.

I can’t help but bite my lip as I stare at him, his eyes blazing blue flames melting any self-control I mistakenly thought I was holding onto.

“Melody,” he growls. “I don’t know what moron told you that you weren’t absolutely fucking gorgeous, but they’re wrong, dead wrong. You’re the most beautiful ... fuck it, words don’t do you justice, and there’s no point even trying.”

A whimper escapes me as he leans forward and presses his lips against mine.

I feel myself tensing up, feeling the roughness of his lips, and then something smooths through me and I collapse against him with a moan.

I'm braced by his stony body. I can feel his manhood against my belly, a massive solid sword, and he makes carnal growling sounds through the wetness of our kiss.

My body screams at me to go with the flow, to finish this gorgeous night off with the union of our bodies.

The dinner was incredible, the conversation flowed easily even if it was mostly bantering surface-level stuff, and now *this* – giving myself to this man – surely it would be the tingly cherry on the quivering cake.

But a thought stabs into my mind.

Nasty.

Unwelcome.

You are not good enough.

I break off the kiss and stumble backward, anxiety hammering a morbid tune directly to my soul.

“Melody?”

“I have to go,” I say, a manic quality to my voice. “Please, don't follow me. Tonight was great. Really. But I have to ... Bye. Thank you. Bye.”

I duck my head and flee the balcony, rushing across the cave-like ballroom and directly to the elevator.

I hammer the button and then interlace my fingers, my palms sweaty, terrified that any moment my meal is going to surge up my throat and paint the sleek metal doors.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mason

I stand behind my desk, my hands behind my back, trying my best to focus on this moment and not let my mind stray to Melody and last night. The only thing that stopped me charging after her was the desperation in her voice when she asked me not to, and even if she's mine and always will be mine, that doesn't mean I don't respect her.

I force professionalism to exude from my pores, but my body is weary with sleeplessness and my mind is a prisoner to Melody.

I don't know why she ran. I don't know if it was something I did or something unrelated or something, something. I don't fucking *know*. And not knowing is like taking a knuckle-duster straight to the teeth.

And now, on top of this, Mathewson has just told me that it was one of our employees who hacked the phone. Apparently, they were threatened and blackmailed, but it doesn't change the fact that they betrayed the company, that they betrayed me.

"The man didn't give his name," Mathewson sighs. "So even though we know it was hacked, we don't know who. All we have is this."

He places a playing card on my desk, except that instead of a heart or a club, there's a small drawing of a builder's helmet

drawn onto the paper, with the words beneath, *Hardhat, call only when absolutely necessary.*

I gesture to the cellphone number.

“I’m guessing it’s dead?”

“Yep.”

“Shit.”

Mathewson sucks in a short breath. “Yep.”

“Okay,” I say, pacing up and down. “I want you to hire a private detective, somebody veteran, somebody who’s spent their whole life working in this city. Make sure they know the local gangs, because the motherfuckers behind this, there’s no damn way they’d get their hands dirty, not with blackmail. No, not if they made one of ours do it through sheer brute force, then they hired a criminal and he might be known to a vet.”

“You got it, boss,” he says, standing up and taking out his cellphone already. “You’re thinking Hardhat is a nickname?”

I nod. “Sounds like it.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of this,” he says, and then strides from the office.

I drop into my seat and try to lose myself in work for a while. A light drizzle falls against the wide, tall windows, distorting the skyline, and imitating my thoughts.

Hazy, confused.

Why did she run out like that?

The meal went well, we bantered, we had a good goddamn time.

Perhaps she could sense that the kiss wasn’t just a kiss, that I wanted – fuck that, needed – to take things to the next level.

But then she did, too. I could read her body. I could scent her womb filling the night air, screaming at me to take her, to fill her until she was overflowing with my seed, my seed that belongs to her and her alone.

She wanted it.

And yet still she ran.

Or am I wrong? Have I imagined this connection?

No.

It's something else.

I just fucking know it.

I sit down and pick up my phone, calling through to Natalie's office.

"Hey, bro," she says. "You're going to ask me if I'm seeing Melody today."

I smile despite myself.

"How the hell did you know that?"

"Because you went on a date last night and you're a man."

"And?"

I hear her grinning. "And men always need their hands held in matters of love, dumbass. If you haven't heard from her, go and *see* her. There's this really awesome thing men and women sometimes do. It's called talking. You might want to try it."

I lean back in my chair, glad Natalie's on the phone and not in here so she can't see the uncertainty in my expression. Not uncertainty about my carnal possessive need to claim every inch of Melody, to strip her naked and palm the gradations of her flesh, to soak her in my come and leave her aching and begging for more.

No, I could never be uncertain about that.

But I've spent my entire life focusing on my business, not talking to women. I've had chances, of course, but never any want. Now my want is overflowing and I know that if I don't find out why Melody stormed out, I'll never forgive myself.

"Mason?" Natalie says. "Are you there?"

"Yeah, just thinking," I sigh. "Jesus, Natalie, I don't even know how to explain it, but I really think Melody might be the one."

Natalie gasps. “Holy crap. Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean ... you’ve mentioned over the years that you’d just know if you saw her, but I guess I just thought that was you being you if you know what I mean. You’ve always been certain in business. I supposed I thought it was just a kind of extension of that, you know?”

“It’s not. It’s the real deal.”

“Then that’s all the more reason to go talk to her, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” I say, sitting up. “You’re right.”

Because this is the future mother of my children we’re talking about.

I ride one of my sedans across the city to the Eternal Bond offices, because their windows are tinted and the last thing I need right now is to deal with the vulture-like press. I’d hate to expose Melody to them, to have her infected with the bullshit that sometimes characterizes my CEO lifestyle. I sent out a decoy Lamborghini, driven by one of the interns, and predictably the hovering paparazzi swarmed that, leaving me free to glide away.

The Eternal Bond office is a small storefront with a mural of a lady in a wedding dress painted on the glass window. Inside, it smells of scented candles, and the glazed windows cause the light to dance pink and red.

My breath catches when I spot Melody behind the counter, biting her bottom lip as she types something on a keyboard. Her typing stops mid-tempo when she looks up at the sound of the bell above the door.

Her eyes widen.

She shakes slightly, and fucking hell, she’s only wearing a pale blue t-shirt and her breasts jiggle so alluringly already my

manhood is instantly a thrumming impulse in my suit trousers.

“Mason,” she mutters.

“I had to come and see you,” I growl, striding to the counter and looking down at her, her hair tied in a ponytail made for grabbing, a readymade handle to guide her to all the sweetest sinful places. “Is Gertrude in?”

“No,” she says. “Why?”

I smirk like the savage fucking beast she turns me into.

“Because I want to know if we’re alone.”

Her lips twitch into a glorious smile at that. She stands up, nodding toward the back room, which is filled with cardboard boxes and photos of weddings.

“I can make us a coffee or something if you want?”

“Sure,” I say. “Lead the way, beautiful.”

“You’re unstoppable, aren’t you?”

“Always,” I smirk.

I watch as she walks into the back office. She’s wearing jeans today, baggy, but that just highlights her natural curvaceous sublimity all the more. I need to feel through that denim, searching for the flesh beneath, flesh that needs to be kissed and bitten and spanked, spanked until it’s *red*.

We’ve barely step foot in the office when I can’t contain myself anymore.

I take her hand in my mine and guide her toward me, alert for any sign that she doesn’t want this. But I can feel her body crashing down on the same shores of lust where I’m shipwrecked.

She sighs breathily as I push her up against the wall, sliding one hand down her side and the other to her back, all the better to push her close to me.

“Fuck, you’re too hot,” I snarl. “I came here with the intention of being a gentleman, Melody, of asking you if I’d done anything wrong. But right now all I can think about is how

perfect you'd look creaming all over my hand. Do you want that?"

I smooth my hand from her hip to the outside of her denim, palming her crotch, filling with savage intent when she twitches and writhes against me.

"Do you want to cream for me, Melody?"

"Y-yes," she stutters, burying her face in my chest as her hips gyrate and grind. "I do. I do. So badly."

The way she writhes against me is enough to make me drunk with the closeness of her. I can feel her wetness through the denim, the close and clammy heat.

I grind my palm against her quicker, moving my whole arm now, pumping it as her moans rise into the air and she opens her mouth to cry into my chest.

Her stifled cries are somehow still loud, the power of her desire and scream punctuating each moment with an intoxicating ... fuck, yes ... an intoxicating *melody*.

"I need to feel your jeans fill with your squirting cream," I growl in her ear, pinning her against the wall with the force of my hand. "I need to feel you empty everything you have to give me. Are you going to come for me, Melody? *Come for me, Melody.*"

"Ah, ah ..."

She whimpers and then her whole body goes slack, except for her thighs which vibrate as though there's something about to explode in them. I feel her crotch getting clammier and I can smell her sugary tanginess in the air, her womb sending sweetened scents to tempt me into her warm depths.

I press forward, my manhood an outline against her belly.

She gasps and leans back, and then bites down when she remembers where we are.

"Freaking hell," she exclaims. "Oh my God, Mason. We shouldn't have done that here."

“I can’t help myself with you,” I smirk. “And soon I’ll be doing more than grinding denim, against your perfect wet pussy, Melody, not that it wasn’t perfection to see you quiver and cream for me like that.”

She bites her lip, gnaws on it, so determinedly I wonder if it causes her pain.

“It’s not like—it’s not so simple—I’m not ...”

She slides away from me, walks to the window, turning, walks to the desk. Restless energy marks her and it’s clear that she’s walking nowhere, just trying to find an outlet for—something.

I don’t know.

There’s something in the intense gorgeousness of her eyes that eludes me.

“This isn’t what you think, Mason,” she says. “*I’m* not who you think I am.”

“Enlighten me, then,” I say passionately, grabbing her by the shoulders and forcing her to face me.

We stare into each other, through each other.

“Whatever you think is happening here, I’m not the right woman for it. Because I’m not some crazy experienced society girl. I’m not some CEO slayer. I’m not ... I’m nothing when it comes to the bedroom.” She gestures at the room with a hollow laugh. “Or the office, I guess.”

“What is it, Melody?” I ask, softer now.

She sighs gravely and looks at me as though she’s debating whether to tell me or make a Melody-shaped hole in the wall.

“I’m a virgin, Mason,” she says.

“Oh,” I mutter.

“Yeah.” She snorts. “*Oh.*”

CHAPTER SIX

Melody

So this is it.

The end of this strange, incredible road I've found myself on.

As I turn away from Mason and pretend to correct one of the picture frames on the wall, I blink back the most absurd tears in the world. Really, Mason and I are nobodies to each other. We only met a few freaking days ago.

My past is bound to catch up with me eventually.

Maybe this will be the motivation I need to finally do the right thing and fade away like a ghost, disappearing so that the skeletons in my closet can't spring back to life and come wreaking vengeance.

I glance at the couple in the photo, at their beaming smiles, and remind myself that even fantasizing about such a picture-perfect ending with Mason was just plain girlish madness.

Mason is looking for a quick fuck, an experienced woman to do the dirty with, and then he'll move on, he's too busy for girls like me.

And now that he knows I'm a virgin and won't be able to deliver the goods, he'll leave.

Maybe he'll let Eternal Bond still plan Natalie's wedding.

Or maybe he'll find it too awkward to be around the silly virgin girl who led him on.

“Melody,” he whispers after what feels like a long time.

“Hmm?” I say, pawing at my eyes, cursing myself for a complete idiot.

After all, I’ve been through, the hardships I’ve faced – the orphanage, the streets, the hell – am I really going to crumble because a man I met a few days ago doesn’t want me anymore?

But the really warped thing is that I don’t feel as though I’ve only known him for a few days.

When I first laid eyes on Mason Mackendale, I felt as though something clicked into place, a long-awaited puzzle piece finally finding its home.

Stupid girl.

After all this time, how can you still be such a stupid girl?

“Melody, look at me.”

I turn slowly to find him standing inches away from me, a glimmer in his eyes that I almost mistake for glee, or relief, or something positive.

But of course, it’s probably sadistic intent, the same hateful glint that would spark in the eyes of high school jocks when they saw the plus size nobody walking by their locker.

“This makes me want you more, Melody,” he growls.

“Yeah ... right.”

“Yeah,” he says fiercely, and then kisses me so passionately it’s like there’s a miniature sun in my chest even after he breaks it off. “Right.”

I gaze at him, lips tingling, part of me daring myself to believe him, the rest roaring not to be so stupidly naïve.

“So you don’t care that I’ll be next to useless in the bedroom, especially compared to your high society girls?”

“Melody,” he sighs, wrapping his arms around me, kissing my forehead with something akin to tenderness. “I haven’t made it clear, have I? I don’t just want to fuck you. Don’t get me

wrong. I do *need* to fuck you. To taste you. To make your body mine. To feel your pussy go tight around my cock as I slide inside of you.”

My body is suddenly filled with a wave of pounding emotion, my skin tingling, and my womb pounding the walls of my consciousness as though trying to possess me. And I’ve got no doubt what *she’d* do if she had control of my body right now.

“But it’s not just that,” he whispers, smoothing hair from my forehead and tucking it behind my ear. “The second I laid eyes on you, I knew that you were it for me, Melody. I knew that I had to have you. I knew that you were the woman who would finally crack this beating thing in my chest I’m told is called a heart.”

He smirks and another wave of emotion crashes through me.

“I don’t just need to be with you, I need to put my seed in your belly. I need to be at your side as our children grow inside of you, and be with you every step of the way. I’m claiming you, Melody, your body and your soul. I’m claiming you for the rest of our goddamned lives. And that’s why I’m so damn happy to hear that you’re a virgin because that means I get you all to myself, truly.”

Tell him the truth. Tell him about your past. Now.

But the words won’t come. Shame jabs at me and taunts me and threatens to dethrone this moment and leave it lying in the dirt.

“After a few days?” I murmur.

He chuckles, leaning close and kissing me at the edge of my mouth.

“You need to work on your poker face,” he says. “You feel the same. You can’t explain it. You never expected it. But you feel just as inexplicably captivated as I do.”

My hands tense on his arms, which I didn’t even realize I was clutching onto until I feel the muscles pressing against my palms.

I squeeze harder and then stare at him wide-eyed.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” I whisper. “But when I saw you in the Spark offices, well, I guess it’s fitting. Because there was a *spark*. But I thought I was just being silly. The silly girl with the silly dream of the CEO wanting anything to do with her. I feel it inside of me, Mason. I don’t know what it is. It’s this desire, this need, the way you described it. But I’ve never believed in fate before. I don’t understand.”

“Does it scare you?” he whispers.

“Y-yes,” I admit, voice breaking a little.

“Why?” he asks firmly.

Because if I told you the truth, you’d run for the hills.

Being close to me is dangerous.

“Because things like this don’t just happen,” I blurt, wrapping my arms around him and pushing my body right up against his, as though if I let go he’ll drift away and so will this revelation. “People don’t just *know* the second they see somebody. Maybe in the movies. But in real life? Come on, Mason, it just doesn’t happen.”

“No,” he says, his fingers making tantalizing patterns in my hair. “It doesn’t. Not usually. Except it did, it has. To us. Which makes us the luckiest people alive. I’m not going to pretend I know how to explain it, but the second I saw you, I just knew. I knew I’d lie in a vat of lava for you. I knew I’d fight off a bear. I knew I’d do anything, any fucked-up thing you can think of, to keep you and our future children safe. I knew I’d never let anything happen to you because you’re mine, I *own* you, now and always. Forever. Do you understand, my virgin sex goddess? You *belong* to me now.”

“Oh, God, that sounds good,” I whisper, pressing my face into his chest, smelling his musky cologne, the rain pattering lightly on the window. “Would you really sit in a tub of lava for me, huh?”

He laughs, leaning back and touching my chin, guiding my gaze to his.

“For as long as it took for you to realize you’re perfect,” he growls. “I can scent your womb, Melody. I can smell how

badly your body wants to give me a child. But if you look me in the eye right now and tell me this isn't what you want, then fine, I'll do my best to drag myself out of here and I'll never bother you again. It'll be the hardest thing I've ever done. It'll be like forcibly removing a part of myself. But I'll try."

"No," I whisper fiercely, shocked by the sudden ferociousness in my voice. "I want it, Mason. I'm scared. I'll admit that. But that doesn't mean I don't want this as badly as you do."

"Good," he says, striding to the door.

"What are you doing?" I say, mouth dry, heart pounding with victory and excitement and anxiety.

"How long until Gertrude is back?"

"She's gone all afternoon."

"That gives me a chance to taste you, then," he says, voice shaking. "It's been driving me insane, Melody, imagining what your sweet pussy must taste like. The pussy that's going to give birth to our children. And now that I know you're a virgin, my seed has gotten all the more urgent. Lie on the table for me. Lie on the table and get ready to paint my lips with your thick juicy cream."

"Are you s-serious?" I whisper.

"Deadly," he says, closing the door and then turning the lock.

The force inside of me guides me to the table. I push aside a few stacks of paper and then squeal when, as quick as a vampire, Mason leaps across the room and lifts me up. He handles me as though I'm one of those weightless cheerleaders from high school, soaring bird-like through the air.

But with Mason, I feel about ten times as special.

He places me down and even if I know that Gertrude isn't going to be back for hours yet – she's in the suburbs with a client – I can't help but feel a thrill of tingling nerves dance through me.

I feel like we're doing something *bad*, and somehow that adds to the sizzling fervor blasting furnace-like around my body.

“Oh, Jesus,” I whisper when he pulls down my jeans with a savage motion of his hands.

He leans back and stares at my pussy.

My bare pussy.

I gasp in shock as I realize my panties got all twisted up with my jeans, and now I’m just lying here bottomless. He pulled my *shoes* off with the same motion, his lust is so irrepressible, the hungry freaking beast.

He stares and I can see the unstoppable want in his eyes, the fascination glimmering in those icy irises as he takes in the sight of my naked sex.

“It’s perfect,” he whispers, leaning forward and smoothing his hands up my legs, leaving a trail of goosebumps in his wake. “You’re perfect, Melody. So fucking *wet* already. I need to taste that wetness. I need to feel your come soaking my tongue.”

He moves his hands right to the top of my thighs, the flesh around my sex dancing a tune of need as he leans down, his breath warm against my lips.

I have to bite down when he buries his face in my pussy and starts licking, moving up one lip and then the other, skirting teasingly close to my clit.

My vision blurs and sweeps across the wedding photos, and then I have to focus on Mason instead, afraid I won’t be able to lose myself in the moment if I keep reminding myself of the fact that we’re in the office, at work.

Jesus, this is bad, this is so freaking ...

Right.

It feels so right when his tongue finally finds my clit, needy, and engaged as he licks it quicker and firmer, his tongue making frantic patterns.

I reach down as my euphoria threatens to burst out of me and slide my fingers through his hair, pushing him closer, stunned by the infusion of forwardness that would let me do something so brazen.

But the pleasure has taken on a life of its own, and I can't stop now, my hips twitching against his mouth.

It's like my hungry womb has taken control of my body, guiding me in the best way to get the most pleasure from Mason, my silver fox, my iron-haired freaking *alpha*.

He's claimed me.

I'm his.

These revelations repeat on a loop in my mind. *He's-made-me-I'm-his*, over and over and over as the orgiastic tempo reaches a breaking point.

"Do it," he snarls, voice muffled with the closeness to my pussy. "I can taste how close you are. Cream for me, Melody."

"Ah—ah—aaaah—"

Words fail me as I feel my body gushing with the pleasure, all of it pouring out of me in shimmering, twitching motions that I can't control.

The office falls away and it feels as though this table is floating on top of a volcano, the heat blasting us and filling up every part of me, every sultry inch feeling as though it's going to explode.

I can barely keep the screams from escaping my lips.

I have to bite down, moaning in a stifled warble.

Mason licks and makes swallowing noises, a snarl sounding from far back in his throat, full beast now.

"Fuck," he breathes, leaning back when I'm done, his lips glistening with my offering. "You just let go. You just fucking let go for me. It was perfect. *You're* perfect."

I'm not who you think I am.

I clench my fists, anger flitting through me that this thought would choose now to attack.

"I don't know about that," I whisper noncommittally, finding it difficult to speak with my chest hammering madly.

“I do,” he growls, leaning across and brushing a sweaty strand of hair from my face. “And tomorrow I’m going to make one of your dreams come true.”

“You’re right,” I giggle. “Losing my virginity to the man of my dreams has always been a fantasy of mine.”

He smirks. “Yeah, but I wasn’t talking about that.”

“What, then?” I ask, curiosity sparking.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” he says. “But I guess I’ll be making *two* of your dreams come true tomorrow, then.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mason

I look across the private jet's luxury seating area to Melody. She's wearing a light fitting shirt and jeans that do nothing to conceal the made-for-sex curves of her luscious body.

Trying to get to sleep last night after the closeness in the Eternal Bond offices was almost impossible.

I couldn't stop my mind from reliving the way she'd twitched and twerked those fucking hips for me, or the taste, the sweet tangy glory of her come as it flowed over my tongue and into my body, as though my seed was willing me to take a piece of her early.

But why the fuck do I need to take a piece?

She's *all* mine.

And now she knows it.

But as I stare at her – the plane gliding smoothly through the late summer sky – I can't stop myself from thinking of the note that was delivered to me late last night.

Leave Melody Baston alone.

She's not who you think she is.

It was written on the same playing card that Mathewson showed me before. The card that the blackmailer had left with my employee, the one who hacked the cellphone and caused a PR shit storm for Spark.

Why the fuck would the man who was behind *that* want me to leave Melody alone, and why had Melody given me a fake name? Or maybe it was this motherfucker using the fake name.

I could look into it myself, scouring the various electronic databases and search for both names to find out which one is real.

But that would mean going behind Melody's back and I have no desire to do that.

"Are you okay, Mason?" she asks, folding one leg over the other in a way that causes the denim of her jeans to tug toward her crotch, igniting a blaze inside of me that threatens to erupt any moment.

"Yes," I tell her.

Because it's the truth.

I am okay.

I know that if Melody has concealed her true name, there's a reason behind it, even if this puzzle is making me curious. And it *is* making me curious. But to the point where I want to ruin today by opening a can of putrid worms she clearly doesn't want opened?

Perhaps it's selfish of me, but right now I'm more concerned with our day ... and our evening.

Melody is mine.

Always fucking mine.

And the rantings of some jackass maniac on a pretentious playing card aren't going to change that.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going yet?" she says.

I smirk, leaning forward, any thought of the playing card already drifting to the wayside.

"If you come and sit on my lap, I might think about it," I laugh.

She grabs her seatbelt, tilting her head at me sassily.

“If you promise you’ll tell me, then we might have a deal.”

My manhood floods instantly like it always does when she gets that sassy, confident look on her face. It comes in rushing moments, as though she has to forget to be nervous to allow her natural self-assuredness to flow through. It’s like the sun behind the clouds, when it emerges, vivacious and so attractive I feel my seed surging through me, hungry to be inside of her.

Where it belongs.

“If you do, I won’t be able to stop myself,” I say.

“Come on.”

She rolls her eyes.

“I’m serious,” I growl. “Why do you think I only gave you a quick kiss on the cheek on the runway, eh? It’s because all I’ve been able to think about is you in that office, Melody, how goddamn beautiful you looked when you creamed for me— Jesus, see? Already I feel like a wild beast about to break out of his cage.”

“God, you’re going to be crazy later aren’t you?” She smiles, but then her smile wavers. “What if I can’t ...”

I lean forward, looking into the meaningful depths of her eyes.

“What is it, Melody?” I ask. “You can always talk to me. We can always be honest with each other.”

Except about our real identities, a cruel voice jabs.

She picks at the armrest of the plush black leather seat. The décor in here is sleek, with the wood-paneled walls and the dark-wood-colored surfaces and seats, the carpet plush as it leads to a separate dining area that then leads to the cockpit. We have complete privacy, the only sound the light Jazz playing through the speakers, and Melody’s breathing, her breathing which is getting quicker and more anxious.

“What if I’m not good enough?” she whispers.

“Good enough?” I mutter, confused.

She shoots me a look and then it hits me.

Despite the ravenous need inside of me, I unclip my belt and move over to her, kneeling down and placing my hand on her leg. I force myself to keep it there, near her knee, even though every fiber in my animalistic being is roaring at me to slide it higher and take what's mine.

"Maybe I should tell you something that'd put you at ease, eh?" I whisper.

"I don't think there is anything," she mutters. "I'm going to be fumbling all over the place and you're—"

"A virgin, too," I growl.

I feel a weight flowing off of my shoulders.

"That's the first time I've ever admitted that to anybody," I say in wonder. "Natalie doesn't even know. She knows I don't go on dates. I've never had the time. No, fuck that. I've never had the *need*, not before you, Melody. But not this. So you see? You don't have to be nervous. Because we're in this together."

"You're a ..."

She narrows her eyes at me and her hand – placed atop mine – tremors.

"Okay, I'm not saying you'd lie about something like that," she says. "But, God, Mason ... you do see how difficult that is for me to believe, right? When we were getting Natalie's contract at Eternal Bond, I did a bit of research on Spark. You know, just getting some background. And I saw the way the press talk about you. I saw how women faun over you. Do you have any idea how many 'Sexiest Men Alive' lists you appear on? If you wanted you could have a line of supermodels ten blocks long waiting for you to do whatever you wanted with them. And you're saying you waited for *me*?"

"Yes," I say with passion, leaning over and bringing my face close to hers, looking right into the soul of my queen. "You're right. I won't lie about that. I could've had any woman I wanted. But I never wanted them. I never wanted to just rut for the sake of it. I was waiting until I knew, and I fucking *knew* the second I laid eyes on the curviest, sexiest, shyest, sassiest, most interesting woman alive."

She bites her lip, tears pricking her eyes.

“You’re not lying?” she whispers.

“Never,” I say firmly. “I’ll never lie to you. You’re my woman now, Melody. We’re going to be together for a damn long time. We’re going to have children together.”

She sucks in a short breath as I lean in for an excited and enticing kiss. I kiss her lips softly at first, and then a beast wakes up inside of me and I lean in harder, sinking close to her, savoring the way her body trembles against mine.

“So you’ll never lie to me?” she whispers, her lips brushing mine as she speaks, the closeness unstoppable.

“Never,” I growl.

But are you lying, Melody?

Are you lying about who you are?

I shut that voice up with a boot to the face, deciding to ignore that thorny issue until later, when we’re back in the city. I don’t want it intruding now, here.

Her smile turns knowing and playful, and I already know what she’s going to ask before she says it. A note of something like pride twangs in my chest. Our children are going to learn to be on their toes quickly around their mother or she’s going to run circles around them.

“So then, Mr. Never Lies, where *are* we doing?”

“Niagara Falls,” I laugh.

“What?” Her face lights up and her eyes sparkle. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” I tell her. “Natalie told me you’d mentioned it was one of your dream destinations. What better place for a second date?”

She blinks away tears. “It’s not just one of my dream destinations,” she whispers. “It’s ... special to me. The only photo I have of my parents was taken at Niagara Falls. I’ve *always* wanted to go there, Mason. Thank you so much.”

She flings herself at me and catching her feels like the most natural thing in the world.

It always will.

I stand, picking her up at the same time, and then carry her back to my seat and sit her down on my lap.

My manhood surges against my pants, trying to break free and claim its rightful home.

“I still can’t believe you’re a virgin too,” she whispers, her hands smoothing over my hair, tickling alluringly. But not as alluring as the closeness of those milk giving breasts. “It’s just that you seem to know what you’re doing. Especially yesterday, in the office.”

I shrug. “It was the first time I’ve never done that. But that’s the thing, Melody. These days, people forget that we’re animals. They try to treat sex like code, as though if you do A, B, and fucking C you’ll get pleasure as the result. But spending time around you, I’m learning that it’s nothing like that at all. We’re *beasts*, and the only thing we have to do is give in to our primal urge to claim each other, to truly be together, to devour each other. Everything else is just background noise.”

This time, it’s her who leans in for the kiss. I brace her back and press her up against me, feeling her heartbeat hammering through her breasts, making them quiver gorgeously.

As we soar over the world, I wrap my arms around her and let out a carnal growl, letting all my concerns drop to the earth below.

Later.

There will be time for that note and that bullshit *later*.

But this day belongs to us.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Melody

The presidential suite of the hotel is like something out of the crazy fantasies I used to have as a kid in the orphanage.

I'd curl up at night and imagine these wide-open rooms, these plush unrealistic – it seemed to me then – havens. With its marble floors covered in thick rugs, its couches and chairs that look straight out of a palace, and huge paintings hanging from the walls, I feel like I've floated into a reverie.

I walk to the fireplace, which is as tall as me, staring up at it in wonder.

“How do they even have a fireplace up here?” I gasp.

Mason walks up behind me, moving quietly for a man his massive size. He wraps his arms around me and leans close, lips brushing tantalizingly against my skin. “They must've known you were coming and wanted to impress you.”

“Ha ha, mister,” I giggle, but really more warmth smooths through me.

Today has just been absolutely heavenly from start to finish.

When he told me he was a virgin on the private plane – the *private freaking plane* – I didn't believe him at first. It just made no sense. I thought he was just telling me to try and make me feel better.

But when I looked into his eyes, I saw the truth there, and I saw something else, too.

He'd never lie to me.

My man will *never* lie to me.

I want to tell him the truth about who I am, which is in itself easily the closest I've come to ever wanting to be open with anybody.

Even with Gertrude, the need has never felt this overwhelming.

And yet there's also a part of me that wants to enjoy this evening, my body and soul full of glee after the wonder that was the Niagara Falls, standing in the same spot as my parents' picture and getting snapped with Mason at my side.

"You haven't seen the bedroom yet," he says, his voice deep and husky, letting me know that this is it, he can't hold himself back any longer.

And neither can I.

My mind wants to come clean about who I really am, my past, that evil night with the blood, the violence, and the pain.

But with Mason's hand on the small of my back, softly and yet determinedly guiding me down the wide hall to the bedroom, the door ajar so that I can make out the hardwood floor and the four poster bed, I find that those concerns drift away.

My body has entirely different concerns.

Later, later.

Because right now my womb is screaming at me to just be in the moment, to forget the pain of the past and drift indulgently into the pleasure of the present.

Mason closes the door behind us, showing the fanciest bedroom I've ever stood in. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling, its lights sheathed in glistening diamonds, making the room sparkle magically.

The bed's sheets are silk and red, inviting, the closed curtains the same color, hanging from a golden rail.

“I feel like a princess,” I whisper, and then curse myself for being the biggest dork ever.

I feel like a princess.

Lame.

But Mason just grabs my shoulders and turns me so that I’m facing him, and there’s nothing in his beast’s expression – his smirk showing his canines – that tells me he thinks I’m lame.

He looks at me like I’m the only woman alive, as though a bomb could decimate the world outside and we’d still be safe in here, just him and me, my man, my savior.

Don’t get ahead of yourself.

To save me, he’d have to know the truth.

And even if I’m planning on telling him, I haven’t yet.

Maybe when I do, everything will change.

“Fuck, you look so perfect right now,” he growls, leaning close to me, closer. “But I can’t be romantic, not with my manhood roaring at me to take you, to plunge hotly into your virgin pussy and fire my seed straight into your womb. So I’m sorry, Melody.”

“Sorry for what—”

I giggle crazily when he picks me up, something I’ll never get used to no matter how many times he does it. It’s the ease with which he handles me that always surprises me, as though I don’t weigh so much more than the so-called regular women.

He cradles me close to his chest and then places me down on the red silk sheets.

I turn so that I’m lying on my back, just in time for Mason to lower himself atop me, supporting himself with one hand and smoothing the other up my jeaned thigh. His palm burns through the denim with his passion, leaving a trailing mark the closer he gets to my sex.

I feel my nerves draining away as we kiss, our tongues swirling, sinking deeper and deeper into our enflamed passion.

And then something snaps in us and we can't hold ourselves back anymore.

Through the kiss, our hands are all over each other, stripping away clothes. As I tug at his shirt buttons, and then eventually lose patience and just tear them free, I realize that Mason was right.

All we have to do is let go.

Our bodies know what to do.

All those times I've felt anxiety creeping into me at the thought that I'm a twenty-one year old virgin, all the self-doubt, all the insecurity, none of it matters with our bodies pressed close and our passion steering into the storm of our lust.

I gaze at him as he stands up to tear his pants off, the only part of him that is still clothed.

His body looks as if it's carved from stone, every line of muscle cut hard and certain, his abs a giant block of muscle with each pack a solid gradation.

Then he pulls his pants down and his manhood springs up, so large and throbbing my hand flies over my mouth to stop a shocked scream from escaping.

He's *huge*.

I don't have a freaking measuring tape with me, but ten inches, eleven? The head is engorged and he's so hard that his entire weighty length points almost straight up. A vein runs up the side, pulsing, *needing*.

I lie here, naked, the air pricking at my bare, soaked sex, staring between my open knees at my giant-cocked man.

"Fuck, Mason."

He smirks cockily.

"Yeah, that was the plan."

"Dick," I giggle.

He nods down at his manhood as he steps forward.

“Aren’t you observant?”

Our mirth drains away and things get serious again when he lies over the top of me, moving one hand to my breasts, and then twisting my nipples softly, but enough to make it buzz and tingle.

The sensation causes tendrils of sizzling euphoria to whisper through me, smoothing down through my belly, into my *womb*, as though by rubbing my hardening nipples he’s getting my body ready to greedily swallow up his rushing seed.

“These fucking tits,” he snarls, leaning down to suck one into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it. “They’ll be heavy with milk soon. Will you give me a taste?”

“Maybe if you ask nicely,” I whimper, voice catching under the force of the pleasure.

“I don’t know if I can,” he growls. “Not with you so naked and wet and sexy. Fuck, I can’t hold back anymore.”

He leans up, his shoulders large boulders as they catch the glittering chandelier light.

Reaching down, he grabs his manhood and guides it to my aching, soaked opening.

But even aching and soaked I feel a sweet kissing stab as he slides up inside of me, the walls of my pussy twinging as his giant girth fills me. I bite down, staring up at him through hazy eyes, terrified that this is it, the moment it all comes crashing down.

I won’t be able to take him, and really, that’s a pretty big problem in a relationship – *are we in a relationship?* – as passionate as ours.

He stares into my eyes, his lips a tight line as he inches deeper and deeper, his eyes swirling with the tightness of my body around his length.

“God,” he groans.

“Oh, oh,” I say, at the same moment.

We both feel it, the instance my pussy relaxes, as though my womb is letting me know that it's time to take him, all of him.

He slides out and I let out a moan, the sensation like nothing I've ever experienced, as though we're melting into each other, as though the heat between my legs is the first stage of a transformation.

I reach up and grab his shoulders, holding tightly onto the muscle, feeling my fingernails bend against the hardness of them.

He thrusts into me with more force, making a groaning sound near the back of his throat, like a wild wolf who's finally found his long-awaited mate.

Me.

The silk sheets rub smoothly against my ass as I begin to shift my hips, sinking into the rhythm, any sense of discomfort completely disappearing with the movements.

We stare into each other's eyes as he begins to pump with the fury of a warlord, as though this is three hundred years ago and he's just conquered my village.

And now he's taking what's his.

Me.

His prize.

I clasp his face in my hands, framing those penetrating icy eyes, and grind my hips down the length of him, feeling every inch, every heated point of contact between us.

He was so freaking right before – it's sizzling, burning, flourishing within me now, pleasure, everything, our worlds colliding – when he said I didn't have to think.

Thought drops away.

It's just our instincts, honed down to this moment.

He smirks and I feel his face shifting in my hand, hard jawed, his eyes flitting down to my breasts.

“Play with them,” he commands, his voice changed, as though his inner animal has completely taken control now. “Pinch your nipples like you’re trying to squeeze milk out of them. Now, Melody.”

A shiver runs through me at the commanding note in his voice. It feels so perfect to do what he wants, to see the way his face twists as I lightly touch my nipples between my thumbs and forefingers. All my life, I’ve seen my breasts as too ungainly, as too *not-normal*, but the way he looks at me tells me that he finds them as glorious as everything else about me.

I feel beautiful.

I feel wanted.

And it’s intoxicating, my pussy tightening now, the pressure building as I tug harder and harder on my nipples for my man.

“Fuck,” he snaps, leaning down and biting my neck softly, gnawing at it like a beast. “Cream. Come all over my dick. Come now, Melody. Do it. *Do it.*”

I gasp and throw my head back, my arms falling limply as everything in me channels to the fireworks of hunger in my pussy.

Sparks battle and war inside of me.

Pressure breaks.

Something pours like lava over my lips and my clit and inside my pussy, the deep space that his unbelievably massive cock keeps hammering into.

My eyes snap shut and I stare at the redness of my eyelids, my pleasure a wildfire scorching through me.

My pussy gets tight, tighter, so that he makes a grunting noise, and has to drive inside of me with more force.

The slapping of our union fills the air with its down-and-dirty sounds, my pussy singing for him, his cock thundering into me now as helpings of my cream wash down right to his balls.

“Fuck, you’re doing it,” he snarls, staring down at our joined sexes. “It looks so fucking tasty. Keep going. More. *More.*”

“Ahhhhh,” I cry, his words triggering another orgasm inside of me, hot on the heels of the last one.

I don't know if this is normal, one coming so quickly after the last, but I'm utterly at his mercy as he pommels into me with his powerful body.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he gasps.

“Come inside me, Mason,” I manage to breathe, my words warbled with the shuddering motion of our sex. “My womb wants you. I need your seed.”

“Ah, keep saying that,” he gasps, voice catching, turning almost hollow.

“Your seed,” I cry, slamming down against his balls.

Another.

It shatters through me and is more intense than the last two, spreading whispering hands and clamping tight to every part of me. I have to work hard to force the words out as I squirt buckets of thick white cream all over his cock.

“Y-your seed,” I whimper, my vision blurring with tears of pure pleasure. “I want your seed. My womb wants your—your —”

He throws his head back the same way I did, but he howls like a wolf as he empties his seed inside of me.

I wish I could snap a picture of this moment.

Every muscle tight, sweat sliding down his sculpted form and making him glisten.

My orgasm shimmers and squirts as he shoots more and more of his seed inside of me, both of us climaxing at the exact same moment, frozen in time.

Then time resumes and he collapses on top of me, panting, giving me a sweet mouthful of his sweaty chest muscles.

“Fuck,” he growls, rolling aside and pulling me toward him, cradling me to his chest. “That was ... You're ...”

He trails off, grinning like a wild beast down at me.

“You’re everything, Melody.”

I smile and touch his face again, deciding that I’ll tell him now, right now, that my name is not really Melody Smith, that I have a past that might make him run.

But then I imagine this untouchable moment being ruined.

Ruined by the truth.

But still ruined.

And I say nothing.

CHAPTER NINE

Mason

The following afternoon, I sit in my office staring at the photograph of Clive Jameson, otherwise known as Hardhat.

The image on my computer screen shows a tall, bald man with dead eyes. His bald head is covered in razor-wire tattoos, giving him the appearance of wearing a twisted version of a crown.

My private investigator informed me he used to work in the neighboring city, a scumbag who'll do any number of fucked-up things as long as the pay is right. Somehow, he found his way to this city and was paid – most likely by one of my competitors – to sabotage our cellphone reveal.

What he's doing in my goddamned city isn't clear, but I'm guessing it has something to do with Melody.

Leave Melody alone.

“Keep wishing, asshole.”

All yesterday, I tried to get myself to broach the topic of her surname, her identity, but I couldn't because I know the hell who she is.

She's the woman who made me feel something yesterday I never dreamed I would.

And it wasn't just the sex.

The sex was incredible, life-changing, fucking soul-shaking.

But just as important was how close I felt to her afterward, cradling her to my chest and feeling the emotion pouring from her. I've spent so long stomping down on any positive emotion, focusing on the lines-of-code world of my business.

Or turning on the fake smile for the press conferences, playing the grinning CEO.

But with Melody, it's like I can finally be myself, let go of all the other stuff and just sink into the authenticity of our relationship.

And this *Hardhat* motherfucker thinks he can ruin that.

It's time I spoke to Melody about her past.

It's time I let her know that she doesn't have to be afraid to be completely honest with me.

Even if she's done things, lived through things, that she's not proud of.

I'll always be there for her.

Forever.

Because she's fucking mine.

She strides across the room in a flowing summery dress, made of the kind of material that settles over her like mist. Her blonde hair is down, cascading, and she looks fresh, full of life, like a woman whose womb has awoken to the possibility of carrying a child.

Even as she sits and I see she's frowning, her eyebrows furrowed, but she can't shake the look of unashamed life flourishing through her.

I'm about to remove my palm – where I've got the playing card – when she places her hands on the desk and lets out a shaky sigh.

“Mason,” she says, “I've got something to tell you. It's going to be hard for me. I promised myself that I'd never tell

anybody, as much for their safety as my own. But – heck – I care about you. I care about you a lot. And I want to be honest. Please? Just let me talk?”

She must've seen I was about to say something, to tell her it's fine, I'll always care about her no matter what.

But I can't ignore the genuine plea in her voice if I wanted to.

“Of course,” I say.

She nods and lets out a shaky breath, jumping up and walking over to the window, fingers interlaced, worrying at each other.

“It's like this,” she says, turning to me.

She doesn't sit.

She paces up and down in front of my desk, and it takes a herculean effort to ignore the way her dress flutters temptingly around her body.

“My name is Melody Baston. I'm an orphan. I think you already know that. Well, I had a tough upbringing, I guess you could say. I've never been one for self-pitying, but it was hard. Because of some of the crap that went on at some of the places I was staying, I was on the streets at seventeen. That's a different world, Mason, the streets, struggling just to survive. I did some embarrassing, humiliating things, like stealing food from restaurant tables after people had paid their bills.”

She hangs her head.

I stand up and move over to her, wrapping her in my arms and smoothing my hand through her hair.

“Whatever you did, you had to do,” I say. “You're a good person, Melody. Don't ever let your past make you doubt that.”

“I never committed any serious crimes,” she murmurs, voice heavy with tears. “But I did steal when I had to. I stole cellphones off park benches. Stuff like that. I'm not proud of this.”

“It's okay,” I whisper. “You were a child. You were scared.”

“Anyway,” she says. “After some time, I got a job as a courier for this small-time crook. It was easy. Carry stuff from one part of the city to the other. Never look in the packages. That was the rule. And I stuck to it. But one time I delivered a package to this crazy man called Hardhat. Hardhat, he’s ... everybody on the street had heard of him. He’s one of those people who just snaps for no reason. He has his own code of ethics. That’s how *he* sees it. But really he’s just freaking insane.”

I keep stroking my hands through her hair, letting her talk, the pain in her voice makes me want to find every bastard who’s ever been cruel to her and shatter their spines.

“So I deliver this package,” she whispers. “And Hardhat tells me I’ve opened it and looked inside. I didn’t. I swear I didn’t.”

She stares at me, eyes shimmering.

“I believe you,” I whisper, smoothing a tear from her cheek with my thumb.

“But he *said* I did. I later found out he was just having a bad day. Another lowlife had stolen from him. And then even later I found out that he’d caved that man’s head in with a sledgehammer. That’s his preferred method of killing people. That’s why they call him Hardhat because not even a hardhat can’t save you, he hits so hard. Get it? Very freaking clever, right?”

She pauses, taking a bolstering breath.

“When I told him I didn’t look inside, he started calling me all these names. Then he said I was a good whore and I’d earn him money doing just that. Being a whore. He went to grab me and—I just reacted, Mason. It was a reflex. I’d spent too long on the streets to just let a man grab me like that.”

“Whatever you did, he deserved it,” I whisper fiercely.

“I cut open his cheek with my keys. I already had them in my hand. I sliced him right open and he was bleeding, there was blood everywhere ... and then I ran. And I’ve been running ever since. Hardhat *never* lets anybody get away with anything. This was two years ago and he’s still chasing me. I

changed cities. I started going by Melody Smith. Silly, keeping the same first name, but I couldn't let him take everything from me, could I?"

"No," I snarl. "You couldn't. Because you're strong. You're fierce. You're the best-goddamned person I've ever met."

"But don't you get it?" she cries, spinning away from me and returning to the window, glancing out at the city as though searching the tiny-looking roads below for Hardhat. "This puts everybody in danger. You, Gertrude, everybody, because sooner or later he's going to catch up with me. And then what? You don't get it, Mason. He *never* forgets. It's his whole freaking thing."

"Melody," I say quietly, walking over to the desk and picking up the playing card. "He's already targeted me."

"What?"

She spins, staring at the card.

A shiver moves through her when she sees what it is, but not the sort that captivates her when we're on the verge of falling carnally into each other. This is a tempest of uncertainty, fear, her eyes flitting here and there as though searching for an escape route.

"What do you mean?" she whispers.

I tell her about the espionage and the note, starting with it being an employee who laid the sabotage and ending with the intimidation, and it being Hardhat who initiated it all.

"So what?" she whispers, dropping into the seat with the card in her hands, gazing at it. "You think he targeted your company because of me? Because I was working with your sister?"

"Maybe," I mutter. "But I don't think so. If he knew you were here, surely he would have made a move? I think it's just a fucked-up coincidence."

"Maybe the same fate that led us together led him to me," she mutters sadly.

I wheel my chair around the desk and sit down next to her, placing my hand on her shoulder, squeezing and letting a sense of support flow through me.

“I’ll always protect you,” I growl. “I’ll never let anything happen to you. I’m moving you into my penthouse apartment. It has personal security and you’ll be safe there. And I’ll put a security detail on Gertrude, too. I’ve already had a personal detail on you since I got this card, but I know you’ll feel better with one on her as well. I won’t let this bastard hurt you or the people you care about. I’m here for you, Melody. For now and for the rest of our goddamned lives. You’re mine.”

She turns to me with tears glistening like pained jewels in her eyes.

“So you already knew I was lying to you? And you still want me?”

“You weren’t lying,” I say passionately. “You were working your way around to telling me the whole truth. In your own time. And I respected that because I know, deep in my bones, that you’re a good person.”

“Thank you,” she sobs, throwing her arms around me so that the playing card flutters like an autumn leaf to the floor.

Where it belongs.

Because Hardhat is one low motherfucker and there’s no way I’m letting him spoil what we have.

“You’re not angry I’ve secretly had security trailing you?” I mutter, chest tight.

“No,” she says, and immediately the tension relaxes. “Because I trust you. I know you’ll always do what’s best for me.”

“Always,” I growl fervently.

“Every time I imagined telling somebody this, that I have a psycho killer following me, I never thought I’d get *support*. You’re amazing, Mason. I... I really care about you. I know it’s crazy and everything, how quickly this is happening, but who the heck cares?”

“Not me,” I snarl, my chest hammering like a stampeding horse. “Fast or slow, we can’t fight fate, Melody. Not us.”

I ... I really care about you.

That stutter, that pause.

Was she going to say something else?

I wipe the warm tears from her cheeks and kiss her softly, hoping I can push away the pain.

CHAPTER TEN

Melody

Natalie walks just in front of me, looking around the wide-open grounds, the lawn as tended as an English aristocrat's in a Jane Austen novel, the castle looming up before us, up a row of cobblestone stairs.

"So this would be where I enter?" she asks, her face full of delight.

"Yes," I tell her, mirroring her smile.

And not having to try very hard to do it.

It's crazy, I reflect as the midday sun blazes down on us, but ever since I told Mason about Hardhat if anything things have gotten *better* between us.

Staying in his penthouse that overlooks the city, to falling asleep every night with his warm reassuring presence at my side, it's been like a slice of heaven transported down here to earth.

Even with that madman still out there, searching, always freaking searching, I've found myself relaxing into the magical upward flow that is our life.

Every day, better than the last.

Fine, it's only been three days, but still.

Our lovemaking is always red hot and beautiful, and the more we come together in carnal embrace the more confidence I feel

flowing inside of me, as though I don't have to be a prisoner to my nerves for the rest of my life.

"Melody?" Natalie says, an indulgent smile on her face.

"Sorry," I say.

Crap.

Remember she's your client, not just Mason's sister.

"I was away with the clouds, Natalie. I'm sorry."

She laughs, shaking her head.

"I'm not mad," she says. "It's sweet, how close you two are. I've never seen Mason like this. He's like a changed man."

"Really?" I ask as we walk down the grounds.

I feel like we're two insects on a planet of stone, the path is so wide.

"Really," she says with conviction. "He's always been laser-focused on his work. Which is a good thing. Obviously. Look at what he's achieved. But even on his off time, he's never been able to relax. I've always sensed there was this sort of sadness in him, you know? Like he wished he could have what other people had, but never thought he would find it. And then he found you."

My chest beams emotionally.

I find myself grinning like I'm playing for the World's Cheesiest Smile Award.

"How much has he told about our childhood?" she asks.

"A little," I say. "I know your parents passed when you were young. I'm sorry about that, Natalie. Really. I know how hard that can be."

"But nothing else?" she asks.

I shake my head.

"That's typical Mason. He's one of the hardest workers in the world, but he hates to brag. He never talks about his donations to charity. His volunteer work. Anyway, when Mom and Dad passed, he was only sixteen years old, but he took it upon

himself to care for me. He always made sure we had food on the table, working double shifts at jobs he hated. And studying in his spare time, always studying. When he founded Spark, nobody thought he would succeed. Well, nobody but me. And then he did, and he gave me a job. Don't get me wrong. I work damn hard and I'm good at what I do. But I never would've been given a chance at this kind of life if it wasn't for my big brother."

"He'll make an amazing father," I whisper, my voice wavering a little, heavy with emotion.

Natalie laughs in delight and clasps my hand.

"You two are so crazy and cute," she says. "*Crazily cute*. You're already talking about kids. I love it. I'd love to be an aunt before a mother, you know, get some practice in."

"You don't think it's too fast?" I ask, giving her hand a squeeze.

"Well, do you?" she says.

"No. No freaking way."

She beams. "Then you've got your answer, sister."

Sister.

I've never had a sibling before.

Later, Mason and I sit in his rooftop garden, the scents of the plants dominating the air around us as the setting sun casts hazy rays through the heavy-leafed trees. I lean back in his enveloping arms, savoring the feeling of security, my man so close that it seems as if nothing in the world could ever bother me again.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asks breathily, his voice still carrying that carnal possessive note it always does after we make love.

I told him earlier that it's the anniversary of my parents' death tomorrow.

"Yes," I whisper.

I feel tension run through him, and I know he knows I lied, or at least just shielded the truth.

"No," I say a second later.

Truth, always.

As a street kid, that's going to take some getting used to.

But it's worth it.

For him.

For us.

"I never knew them, so I guess it's silly that I even care. They were junkies and everybody I ever met was keen to remind me of that fact. My parents were dirty junkies who had a little legend about them because they died of an overdose two days apart. I don't know, some people think my mother committed suicide because she loved my dad so much and couldn't go on without him. Others think junkies are incapable of love. I was already in social services, just ten days old."

He reaches up and wipes tears from my cheeks with hands that still carry the smell of our passion, which somehow comforts me, like were animals smothering each other with our scents, proclaiming to the world that this is it, we've found our one.

I grab his hand and kiss his fingers, one by one.

"You can still care about that," he whispers. "Natalie never really knew our Mom and Dad. She was too young to remember much, I mean. And yet she still talks about them all the time. It's natural, to want to belong."

"I do feel like I belong," I whisper. "I feel like I belong to you."

"That's because you do," he whispers with fierce passion flaring fire-like in his voice. "And I belong to you. Because I —"

You what? Why have you stopped?

Then I hear my cellphone ringing, realizing it's interrupting the moment.

I think about ignoring it, but then I glance over at the table and see it's Gertrude. She rarely calls me after hours unless we've planned to do something and immediately I feel a horrible pounding in my chest.

"Something's wrong," I whisper, hands shaking as I pick up the phone.

"You don't know that," Mason mutters, but uncertainty quivers beneath his words.

I answer the phone.

Silence for a few moments.

And then his voice, a voice I will never forget, the voice that screamed after me and into the street, panting in terror.

"I'll get you, whore. I'll never stop searching for you. You're mine. Nobody disrespects Hardhat and gets away with it."

"So here we are," he says. "You're a slippery one, I'll give you that. And can you believe, my sweet Melody, that your old surrogate grandma didn't put a password on her phone? That's not very security conscious, is it?"

"Where is she?" I whisper.

"She's here waiting for you," he says, and I can hear that he's grinning proudly.

"How do I know that?" I say, somehow not breaking down in tears.

Everything feels like it's spinning a million miles per second.

But I have to keep it together.

I have to hold on.

"Fine, have your way. Here, Grandma, it's for you."

Some rustling, a pause, and then Gertrude's voice comes whispering across the line.

“Don’t do what he wants, dearie,” she wheezes. “Live ... live your life.”

“Where the hell is she?” I yell, when the phone rustles again. “You bastard. You evil bastard. This has nothing to do with her.”

“I agree,” he says. “This is between us. So be a good little whore and come and get her, and she’ll go free. I’ll text you the address. It goes without saying that if you don’t come alone, I’ll put a bullet in old grannie’s head. Don’t fuck with me, Melody. I’ve got nothing to lose here. I’m tired of being called *Scarface* behind my back. Tik-tok, Melody, you haven’t got long.”

The line goes dead.

And my world plummets.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mason

“He said I had to come alone,” Melody says, glancing at the building where this fucking monster Hardhat is keeping an innocent older lady who’s the only motherly figure Melody has ever had.

I stare at the building, squeezing the steering wheel as the gulls whine in the air around us, the sun almost completely set now, turning the rocking waves the color of muddy melting ice.

“It’s not enough that he’s done this to you,” I snarl. “But of course he has to do it here. I guess he thinks it makes him clever. I guess he thinks it makes him big and powerful and will give him some goddamn credibility on the streets as if there’s such a thing as that on the fucking *streets*.”

“Here? The docks?” Melody whispers, eyes glued to the small office outhouse-type building at the far end.

I’ve parked down the way, just behind some shipping containers, and we can just about make out the worn, rundown looking building.

“It’s Spark’s first office,” I say. “The only real estate I could afford back then when everybody thought I was just another kid with another stupid dream. He thinks we’re powerless, Melody. Well, fuck that. I’m going in there and I’m getting

that innocent lady out. I'll return her to you. You just need to stay here."

"What?" she gasps. "No, Mason. I can't stay here. And I *can't* let you go in there. I shouldn't have even let you come this far. If he sees you—"

"He's going to kill you," I snarl, the words producing a Big Bang of fight-or-flight hell inside of me.

And everything, all the clattering stars exploding and imploding inside my body, settle on fight.

Fight for my woman.

I'm going to fight for our future.

And that future doesn't involve a day when I let a lowlife scumbag hurt an innocent wedding planner.

"And he's going to do it either way," I go on, watching waves of anxiety flicker across her face. "Listen to me, Melody. This bastard doesn't let anything go. He can't allow you to scar him and then—and then what? Give you a slap on the wrist? No, if you go in there, you're dead. If we send in the police or my security detail, Gertrude is dead. But if I go in alone, if I make him feel powerful long enough—"

"Long enough for what?" she snaps.

"For me to get close," I snarl, venom shooting through my veins.

She buries her face in her hands.

"Oh God," she moans. "Oh my God."

"Do you trust me?" I say, touching her face and subtly moving her chin so that she's looking at me.

"Yes," she says without missing a beat. "Of course I do. We're going to have children together, Mason. I trust you with my life."

"Then trust me with this," I say. "I swear to you, I will always protect us. I'll always protect our family. And from what you've told me, Gertrude is becoming like family to you. So let me do this."

Tears bead in her eyes but then she hardens her face, making a conscious effort not to cry.

She paws at her eyes and stiffens her lips.

“Please save her,” she whispers.

I push open the door, grinning grimly when I hear the familiar squeak, the same damn squeak the landlord said he was going to get fixed and never did. The place is abandoned now and has clearly been home to squatters and junkies, the carpet picked apart and littered with bottles and paper wrappers and other detritus of the street.

It’s easy to find Hardhat.

I just walk into the room that used to be the main office.

It’s no longer home to a few small desks and a filing cabinet. Not that we ever filed anything. Now, it’s just a wide-open room, a few chairs huddled around a burnt-out fire of charred newspapers.

Gertrude sits in the center of the room on a plastic lawn chair, her hands bound and her feet tied to each leg. Duct tape over her mouth stops her from speaking. My chest lightens when I see that she’s unharmed and that she still has a fierce glint in her eye, the one Melody has described to me more than once.

Last night, she told me, “She might be getting older, Mason, but she’s like a lioness. I once saw her chew a client out for trying to squirm out of paying. It was a real Jekyll and Hyde moment. But in a good way. She’s incredible.”

Now, she’s just the same, even as she sits there powerless.

I read the message in her blazing gaze easily, *Is Melody okay?*

I nod shortly, proud that a woman as strong as Gertrude has taken such a liking to my woman.

The rest of the room is a cesspit for scumbags. I count seven goons standing at the other end of the room, two of them

smoking, one holding a lead pipe.

All of them are covered in tattoos and one is even taller than me, and wider, though his muscles have that puffy doughy look people get from too many steroids.

I search the room for guns.

Nothing.

Except for the one that Hardhat casually tosses from hand to hand as he emerges from the shadows and stands in the light of the naked, flickering bulb.

He's wearing a combat jacket, cargo pants, and boots, clearly thinking himself some sort of militiaman or soldier and not just a two-bit crook.

"You, my friend, are not Melody," he says, flashing a grin that displays golden canine teeth.

He wears the evidence of Melody's ferocity like a badge of dishonor, a jagged pink scar from just under his eye down to his lip.

"Getting a good look?" he snaps, causing the men behind him to bristle. "You know how stupid it is you coming in here, pretty boy? You can't code your way out of this one. What, you gonna offer to make us an exploding toaster next?"

His goons laugh like the obedient little fucks they are, stepping forward so that they're closer to their master.

"Well?" Hardhat moans. "Are you really shitting your britches so bad you can't even talk? How much are you offering us?"

"Offering you?" I say, unable to repress a smirk.

"Yes, yes," he says, gesturing with his pistol, half-aimed at me and half-aimed at the floor. "You came in here to offer us some cash to spare the old cunt and the cunt's adopted daughter, right? So how much? And don't forget, I know your net worth. That's public information."

He scratches at the razor-wire tattoo on his bald head with the barrel of his gun.

"What is it, fellas? Two billion?"

“Three,” a man says, stubbing his cigarette out on a tattooed forearm as if that’s supposed to intimidate me.

My heart is hammering.

My nerves are sore and alive.

But that’s just a human response, a mammalian reflex, and not my instincts.

Because my instincts are fucking *ready*.

To defend my woman.

And everything that matters to her.

Hardhat blows out air through his teeth.

“*Three*,” he says. “Now that is impressive. And it all started here. I’ll tell you what there, slugger. You give me a cool billion and we’ll be on our way.”

“Sure,” I say.

He narrows his eyes, his shit-eating grin wavering.

“Sure?” he says.

And I see it in his eyes, the suspicious hunger, the look that says he knows this is ridiculous and I’d never agree to that, but he’s interested despite himself.

Because he’s a lowlife and he tried to make my woman into his sex slave.

All he cares about is money, money, and his fucked-up code that really is just an excuse to inflict more pain.

“Absolutely,” I say. “I’ll have to move some things around, but that’ll be fine. There’s just one condition.”

“Let the grannie go, yeah, we get it.”

“No, not that,” I say, and with each syllable I stalk just a little bit closer, projecting an aura like I’m just talking like I’m not coiling all my energy and strength like a spring ready to erupt.

“What, then?” he says, even if part of him knows this is all bullshit.

“All you have to do, Clive,” I say, watching him flinch at the use of his name like I knew he would, “is get on your hands and knees and beg like the pathetic fucking worm you are.”

“You mother—”

I leap forward as he raises the gun, moving far quicker than he thought I would.

Or could.

He yells when I grab his wrist and, with a violent wrench, twist it upward, the gun falling from his hand and clattering metallically on the floor.

He swings at me with a wild punch and I take it, I can't move out of the way quickly enough.

But I roll with the motion and then spin around, my elbow finding his jaw.

Something goes *snap* and he reels backward, roaring.

I kick the gun and it slides across the floor, and then I leap at the nearest man and drive my fist up into his nose. I feel something crush and then wobble like jelly as if I've dislodged his naval cavity, and then he falls to the floor in a shower of blood and screams.

I jump at the gun again, slamming my elbow into one man's back and then grabbing another man and lifting him clear off the floor by his shirt.

I bring him down on my knee, violently, savagely, hitting him so hard he goes unconscious immediately.

I grab the gun and tuck it into the back of my pants, turning to find Hardhat and the three of his men I haven't yet injured standing there uncertainly.

I glance at the one with the lead pipe.

“Well?” I growl. “Aren't you going to use that thing, tough guy?”

He yells and throws it at me, which is probably the stupidest thing he could've done.

I catch it mid-air and then leap forward, smashing him across the jaw and then taking out another's legs. I drop it and grab the third, lifting him off his feet and pounding a head-butt in between his eyes, dropping him like a sack of potatoes.

I stomp on Hardhat's hand as he tries to pick up the pipe, twisting my shoe, making him wheeze and gasp.

"All of you, out," I snarl.

They groan and writhe and gasp as they clutch their injured bodies.

I grab the gun from my waistband and fire twice into the air, and that clears the bastards pretty damn quickly.

I'm glad to see that they rush out of the back exit, meaning they won't come into contact with Melody or see the car. Not that they would anyway, not where it's parked, behind the natural camouflage of the shipping container where they're unlikely to look.

"What's the plan now?" I snarl. "No women to abuse. No lives to threaten. What the fuck are you going to do now—"

Behind me, I hear a gasp.

I glance and see Melody stumbling into the room, her eyes wide as she takes in the scene.

"Gertrude," she gasps, leaping across the room and carefully removing the duct tape from her mouth. "Oh my God, Gertrude. I'm so, so sorry. I never should've put you in this position. I never should've even been around you long enough for this to—"

"Hush," she says, as Melody starts removing her bindings. "If I never met you, Melody, I'd count myself the unluckiest woman alive. You're the daughter I never had. Do you really think a silly little man with a silly little head tattoo – which, frankly, does nothing to hide the fact that you're bald, by the by – is going to change that?"

Melody laughs and sobs at the same time.

"How fucking cute," Hardhat snarls.

I kneel down and grab the back of his shirt, lifting him up like he weighs nothing and then giving him a stiff jab to the throat, making him choke and splutter and kick around pathetically.

“Apologize,” I snap. “To both of them. Now. Or I’ll string you up and use you as a punching bag until the police gets here.”

“Apologize?” he cackles. “Do you really think—”

This time I smack him across the mouth with the gun, the metal causing his jaw to dislocate. Any pity I might feel is burned away when I think about the women and children this man has probably sold into sexual slavery and the fact that he was going to do it to *my* woman, stopping me from having *my* children.

“The next one might kill you,” I growl, the beast within me in control now.

“I’m s-sorry,” he gasps, his voice distorted with his messed-up jaw. “Jesus, I’m sorry. Just stop. Please. I’m sorry.”

I look at Melody, waiting to see what she wants to do.

Because she has power over this man, not the other way around, and she never has to be afraid again.

“Let me get Gertrude out of here and I’ll call the police,” she says. “I’m done with this pathetic little man. And she’s right, *Clive*, that tattoo is the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen. Are you going to be okay watching him until the police arrive, Mason?”

“Oh,” I say, and then reel back and hit him so hard in the stomach he doubles over and crumples into a ball on the floor. “I think I’ll be fine.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Melody

As I ride the elevator up to Gertrude's new penthouse apartment – with round the clock security – I clutch the newspaper in my hand, the headline still singing through me.

Hero CEO Saves the Day: A New Dawn for Spark Industries?

The photo on the front is of me and Mason, taken at an industry function a few days ago. I remember how nervous I felt as we strode into that ballroom together, my ball gown feeling faintly ridiculous as it trailed behind me and the flashing camera lights so intimidating I felt like I might run out at any moment.

But then Mason put his hand on my back and leaned in, whispering softly.

“You’re doing amazing,” he told me.

“I’m not doing anything,” I giggled.

“Exactly,” he smirked. “That’s the point. You’re being yourself. Your beautiful, charismatic, interesting self. Just keep doing that and we’ll be okay.”

His words gave me the confidence I needed that night, the first time Mason had been out in public since the phone mishap.

The elevator door beeps and opens onto Gertrude's apartment, moving boxes stacked everywhere as I walk down the corridor

toward the kitchen that overlooks the park, even if the park is several stories below.

I find Gertrude at the kitchen island, chopping tomatoes for an omelet, which just so happens to be one of my favorite dishes.

It's been two weeks since the craziness at the docks.

Hardhat is in jail awaiting trial – everybody agrees he's going to get life after the sadistic criminal life he's led – and Mason's business is glowing after it was made public the cellphone mishap was the work of a rival company. Now, everything is sparkling brightly, the trajectory of our lives a comet that keeps shooting up, up, *up*.

Gertrude is unchanged, though, still the same fierce woman I met when I first walked into the Eternal Bond offices, hoping she'd give me a shot.

"Morning," she says. "And may I say how lovely you look in the paper?"

"Urgh," I say with a laugh. "I only brought it because I knew you'd want to see it ..."

I trail off when I see that she's framed the front page and hung it from her wall.

"Oh, I get it," I laugh. "You haven't got time to unpack your clothes but you've got time to do *that*. At least your priorities are in order."

She laughs as she chops expertly, shooting me one of her wide grins.

"Really, Melody, I'm so happy for you. You're doing an incredible job with Eternal Bond. You've found the man of your dreams. Everything is looking up."

"I'm still surprised you don't hate me," I murmur. "I lied to you, Gertrude. I put you in danger. I could've—"

I bite down when tears threaten to well in my eyes.

I could've gotten you killed.

Gertrude sets the knife down and walks around the counter, placing her hands on my shoulders and looking at me sternly.

“Melody, I’ve got something I need to tell you,” she says, her lips serious but her eyes playful.

“Oh?” I say.

“Yes,” she says somberly. “You see, *I* was behind the kidnapping. I asked that man to kidnap me so that your lover boy would feel so guilty that he’d buy me this lovely apartment. I’ve been planning it all along.”

I giggle and give her a playful shove.

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you?”

“No,” she declares proudly. “And nor will I. Yes, you lied to me, but how could you not? You’ve lived a life where it was necessary. But that’s in the past and now it’s time to look to the future, *your* future.”

I look at her closely, at the way her age lines crinkle lovingly, making her look full of character and spirit.

“Gertrude,” I say. “Why do I have the feeling that you know something I don’t?”

She tsk’s and returns to her chopping, shaking her head in a none-too-convincing way.

“Now, dearie, let’s say I do know something. And let’s say it’s something momentous and quite wonderful. What good would come of me spoiling the surprise?”

“Fair enough,” I say in a bantering tone, laying down the newspaper and leaning forward to get a closer inspection of her definitely-hiding-something face. “But let’s also say that you do know something, and instead of keeping completely quiet, you let me know that you know something but don’t tell me. Isn’t that just plain cruelty?”

“Okay, I’ll tell you.”

“Really?”

She rolls her eyes.

“No chance, dearie.”

I give her a mock scowl and then sit down, pouring myself a glass of OJ.

“Oh, Melody, there is one thing. It’s quite silly, really, considering my age, your age—*our* ages. It’s just ... well, no, it’s really quite silly.”

“What?” I say, stunned at the way her cheeks are turning red, something I’ve never seen her do, even when the biggest bridezillas in the industry have gone full mayhem on her. “Gertrude? You know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

“It’s just I’ve been thinking, well, that I could legally adopt you. You’re already a fierce and beautiful woman. You’re already *raised*, is what I mean to say. But it would mean something, wouldn’t it?”

I can’t speak.

A sob of pure joy escapes me and tears start flowing down my cheeks in irrepressible waves.

“Really?” I gasp. “You’d really do that?”

“Of course,” she beams, walking back around and folding me into her arms. “I already consider you a daughter. This just makes it official.”

I feel like I’m floating in a cocoon of happiness as I sit in the back of the car Mason sent for me, gliding through the city on my way to the Eternal Bond offices.

I’m not even sure why Mason wants to meet me there. Over the past two weeks, we’ve been working out of temporary offices since there’s been a water leak and we’ve been getting some repairs done.

I still find it hard to believe that in a matter of weeks I’ve found the man of my dreams and now that Gertrude knows the truth about me, she wants to be closer to me, to be my freaking mother, not push me back to the gutter like I always feared.

I smile like a loon as I step from the car and walk across the sun-dappled parking lot into the offices.

“Mason?” I call.

“Back here,” he says, from deeper into the offices than I knew they went.

I walk into the back room – the framed wedding photographs watching me – and then through the rear door that has always just led to an alleyway area behind.

But when I cross the threshold, I instantly know that the offices haven’t been closed for *repairs*.

Rather, *improvements*.

A luscious garden flourishes, soft grass beneath my feet and trees rising up all around us, our own private paradise. But the thing that really takes my breath away, that causes my heart to pump at the back of my throat and tears to prick and sting my eyes, is the miniature Niagara Falls that rushes soothingly in the corner of this private paradise.

A sign proclaims *Melody’s Falls*.

I approach, the smile on my face so broad I feel my cheeks aching. Mason stands off to one side of the rushing water, his eyes holding the same glimmering quality as the shimmering pool.

He’s dressed in a silver suit that clings tightly to him, and his jaw is freshly shaven, square and sharp, and strong.

He’s my man.

My freaking man.

And he’s built me my own haven.

“Wow,” I gasp, turning slowly from the water to him. “Mason, this is just...”

“What you deserve,” he cuts in, moving forward and enveloping me in his arms. “Less than you deserve. Because you deserve the world, Melody, and for the rest of our lives I’m going to do my best to give it to you. I love you.”

I gasp and he smiles, letting out a breath of relief.

“I’ve wanted to say that for a long time. I love you. I love you more than food and wine and business and life. I love you more than words could explain. I love you more than fucking *air*. The first time I saw you, I knew I loved you, but I had to wait, I had to be ready. Because I wanted to tell you now, here, before I asked you the most important question I’ve ever asked anybody.”

“I love you,” I whisper, my voice heavy with emotion and breathy as I watch him.

I watch my man step back and fall to one knee.

I watch him reach into his jacket pocket and take out a ring box and aim those intense blue-flamed eyes up at me.

“Melody *Baston*,” he says, and we share a private joking glance over my surname.

Happiness floods me when I realize that we can joke about it because it doesn’t have to hang like a threatening cinderblock over my life anymore.

“I love you and I can’t wait for us to have children together. I can’t imagine a future without you in it. Will you make me the happiest man alive and be my wife?”

“Yes,” I squeal, as he opens the ring box to reveal a shimmering, elegant diamond set in a band the same color as his silver-moon hair. “Oh, God, yes. Of *course* yes, Mason. I love you so freaking much it hurts. I love you so much I could puke.”

I giggle as he slides the ring on, and then stands up, smirking.

“Well, don’t puke yet,” he says. “It might make this a little difficult.”

He leans in and I leap forward with him, needy for the taste of him, not just my man and my partner anymore, but my freaking fiancé.

“Wait a second,” I say, gasping as I break off the kiss. “Is this why Gertrude was being so coy earlier? Did you ask her blessing?”

“Of course I did,” he grins. “She’s going to officially be your mother soon, right? What sort of an animal do you think I am?”

I giggle and wrap my arms around his shoulders, standing on my tiptoes and guiding the kiss myself this time, guiding us toward a crescendo of lust and closeness that feels like it’s never going to stop.

All this time, I was scared of who I was.

I was scared nobody would want me.

But I was wrong.

And it’s never felt so good.

EPILOGUE

TWO WEEKS LATER

Mason

I wake to the sound of bacon frying from the kitchen, a soft sizzling that makes my nose wrinkle and fills me with hunger.

The first thing I do, the first thing I always do, is reach across for Melody so that I can feel the soft curviness of her body.

But of course, she's not there.

She's the one making the bacon, dumbass.

I laugh and sit up, rubbing sleep from my eyes and smiling like the happiest man on the planet.

No, not *like* the happiest man on the planet.

I am the goddamned happiest man on the planet.

These past two weeks with Melody have been like a fever dream, one I never want to wake up from.

Watching her take the reins of not just Natalie's wedding but several others, too, has been a sight to behold, as though the confidence from our relationship is spreading like life-giving light to every part of her being.

It's the same with me, too, the love she's given me and which I'll always give her in return allowing me to savor the little things in my life like I never have before.

I sit up and pop my neck from side to side, grinning widely as I feel the sex sore points all over my body.

Then I walk in my boxer briefs through the penthouse apartment, across the wide open-plan living room, and to the kitchen with its sleek shiny metal surfaces.

My queen is standing at the frying pan, biting her lip, looking like the fuckable goddess she is in a pink tank top and shorts that leave so little to the imagination my manhood tries to spring free from my briefs.

“Are you trying to drive me insane?” I tease, walking up behind her and sliding my hands up her shirt, over her belly, toward those breasts that are made for squeezing and touching and pleasing.

But then I pause.

I feel something in her, a subtle change in her body.

It’s hard to pinpoint exactly what.

A tension that wasn’t there before, a nervousness moving through her.

A *scent*, almost.

Something’s different about her.

“Melody?” I whisper.

“Hmm?” she says.

“Why are you acting so strange?” I say, trying for a laugh, but it comes out all hollow. “And why won’t you look at me, eh? Don’t say you’re still angry about the spanking I gave you last night. Because, as I recall, you gave as good as you got.”

“No,” she giggles, putting the spatula down and turning off the burner.

She turns and loops her arms around my shoulders and gazes up at me, her face fresh and unburdened with makeup, showing the natural vivacity of her unshielded skin, the genuine beauty of her eyes.

“I’d never be angry about that,” she says, looking as bright as the sun with her dark hair all tousled from bed. “I’m not angry at all. I just couldn’t sleep and I’m scared if I look at you for too long I’ll just start jumping around like a maniac.”

I pause.

I stare.

My mouth goes dry, and my hopes soar, and for a moment everything goes silent except for the pounding of my glee-filled heart.

“I took a test, Mason,” she says. “Three tests, in fact. I wanted to be sure. And they were all positive. We’re pregnant, Mason. We’re freaking pregnant!”

I let out a laugh like a madman and sweep her into my arms, running into the living room as she giggles – yep, like a madwoman – and we spin and spin and spin.

Happiness blooms between us like a physical force and my love for her gets even deeper and more certain, something I thought impossible. Finally, I put her down and fall to my knees, laying my ear against her belly, clutching tightly onto her thighs, her thick juicy perfect fucking thighs.

“I can hear them,” I whisper.

“Don’t be silly,” she laughs, smoothing her hand through my hair. “It’s probably only been a couple of weeks.”

“I don’t care,” I smile, squeezing her, *them*, closer to me. “I can hear them, Melody. And they’re telling me you’re going to be the best damn mother in the world.”

I don’t have to look at her to know that she’s smiling.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

ONE AND A HALF YEARS LATER

Melody

I sit at Gertrude's side in the ballroom, the dance floor full of laughing, happy people, and the Jazz band playing their hearts out.

All around the cavernous heavenly room, the servers circulate skillfully, doing their jobs with grace and ease. I find myself scanning the trays to make sure that they're all clean, adequately filled, pleasingly arranged, until I notice that Gertrude is shooting me just-relax daggers.

"The planning is over, dearie," she says, looking dignified and pristinely beautiful in her long pale blue dress, her hair done up in an interwoven pattern inlaid with small beads that enhance the silver. "This is the time to sit back and enjoy the fruits of our labors. The ceremony went off without a hitch. They've had their first dance and nobody fell down. I'd consider this a success."

"I can't wait to see the pictures," I whisper, unable to stop smiling.

This is the biggest wedding I've planned so far, but not the biggest I mean to plan, no way.

I've got big ... well, big *plans* for the future of Eternal Bond.

"Yes, that will be nice," Gertrude agrees. "There's nothing like framing a moment like this, is there? I still can't believe you and Mason got married before Natalie, though."

I giggle.

“What the heck were we supposed to do? We just couldn’t wait.”

I feel a warm glow inside of me, lighting up every part of me when I think about Mason. Even after a year of being together, that glow hasn’t left.

And then, as if by magic, I turn to find my husband standing there with Lacy in one arm and Jacob in the other. He cradles them close to his chest, whispering soft soothing words, and of course, the little bundles just sleep soundly with his giant strong handsome frame to protect them.

He looks dashing in his suit, so solid and reliable and *mine*.

“See?” he said, grinning warmly. “I told you a little walk around the grounds would work beautifully.”

“You’re a showoff,” I tease, pouting at him jokingly.

“If anybody’s a showoff, it’s you,” he says, sitting down next to me.

I reach over and take Lacy, rocking her softly and kissing the top of her head, smelling her just-Lacy smell, and then I reach across and nuzzle Jacob’s cheek with my hand so that he knows Mommy loves him too.

“Oh, really?” I banter. “And how’s that?”

“Because you did an incredible job with this wedding, that’s how,” he says. “And you’re clearly aiming that sassy-as-hell pout at me so I’ll shower you with compliments. You see, Mrs. Mackendale, I can see right through you.”

I hug Lacy closer to my chest, feeling her little heartbeat against mine, glad that we’re sitting at the furthest table at the back, where I specially checked it was safe for the children to be noise-wise. I wouldn’t risk them. Not my little bundles. My treasures.

“So where are they?” I ask.

“What?” Mason smiles.

“Don’t play dumb, husband,” I giggle.

“The compliments, boy,” Gertrude laughs. “She’s asking for the compliments.”

Mason smiles widely, his eyes flowing with love, his lips proclaiming serene happiness.

“I don’t have to try very hard to compliment you, Melody. You’re the best person I’ve ever met. You’re smart, funny, loyal, beautiful, talented—”

“Okay, okay,” I say, cheeks blooming red. “You’re embarrassing me now.”

He grins and I smile, and then he leans across and kisses me. We pause forehead to forehead, our precious twins between us, a tight ball of happiness as the Jazz music plays in the background, with my adopted mother sitting right there, watching, happy and carefree.

And just when I think life can’t get any better, I feel it, a subtle twitching in my womb.

It’s too soon.

But it’s unmistakable.

Another life.

Another slice of happiness.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

NINE YEAR LATER

Mason

“But Dad,” Jacob says, jumping up and down in the computer chair and nodding at the lines and lines of code on the screen. “I don’t understand why it isn’t working. I used all the solutions and everything and it’s *still* not working.”

“Oh, you’ve tried everything?” I say, grinning down at my son, who everybody says looks exactly like I did at that age.

He’s got the same thick brown hair and the same eyes, but when I look at him I don’t see myself. I see somebody completely unique, a little man who’s fast becoming his own person.

We’re in my home office which overlooks the garden and outside Gertrude, Natalie, Lyle, and their two children – Casey and Benny – are sitting around the table.

Beyond them, tending to the barbecue, stands my wife, my beautiful goddamn wife who I can barely look at without losing my mind and my control. The years have added luxurious gradations to her curves, her face becoming light and full of loving energy with motherhood, her eyes always sparkling even when her work throws her a curveball.

My wife who runs Eternal Bond now, that Gertrude has retired, and who has turned it into the go-to wedding planner for the stars.

I watch as she and Lacy exchange a few words, Lacy grinning up at her mother, her hair in the same dark bun that Melody wears. Closer, wrestling over a football, are our two rambunctious nine-year-olds.

Twins twice in a row.

What are the odds we'd get so lucky twice?

Liam and Tyler go at it like little maniacs, and maybe they have a slice of their father in them, too.

"Dad?" Jacob says, pulling me back to the lines of code we're working on. "You're staring at Mom like a weirdo again."

My laughter booms through the house, free and happy. I reach up and move my hand through his hair, which he hates or at least pretends to hate. But he laughs the whole while before finally slapping at my hand.

"Like a weirdo, eh?" I say.

"Yeah," he laughs. "You get all googly-eyed over her."

"You'll understand one day, son," I tell him.

"Gross. What about the solutions?"

"Do you remember how I told you that when you got really good I'd set traps in the problems for you?"

Realization dawns on his face. He grins, which fills me with pride, knowing that he *wants* to be challenged.

"Really? I'm that good now, Dad?"

"You're that good now," I smile. "Now you better get cracking, because Mom's making burgers and you know how cranky your old man gets if he has to miss a meal."

"Awesome," Jacob says, turning to the computer.

I go to the corner of the room and pick up Harmony from her bassinet, clutching her to my chest and rocking her softly as she makes singing cooing noises.

I look over her head and see Melody watching me, and so much love flows between us I'm shocked it doesn't send our house flying to the moon.

I mouth, *I love you, wife.*

And she mouths right back, *I love you more, husband.*

I kiss Harmony's sweet-swelling head and close my eyes, savoring this moment, as I savor every moment with my family.

And always will.

Because I'm the luckiest man alive.

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